

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Fathers, stepfathers, and complex families

"Well, I may be her stepfather, but as far as I'm concerned a father or a dad is someone who's there when you're crying, when you're happy, who picks you up when you fall down, who takes you to school, who feeds you, who fights with you, who cuddles you, who talks to you, who doesn't talk to you, who's there . . . this other man who gave birth to her through sperm is nowhere near her father . . . the only influence he must have on her is a genetic influence . . ."

(Eddie, 1997, personal communication)

This chapter considers some of the ways that "reordered" families interrelate, both practically and emotionally, with families that have both preceded them and continue to develop alongside them, and the complex and often conflicting positions that men as fathers and stepfathers can find themselves in. My conversation with Eddie, nearly twenty years ago, raised questions not only about stepfathers, but also about contemporary expectations surrounding the role of father. What are fathers for at a time when economic, gendered, and generational roles are increasingly fluid. The wish for a strong father is often expressed by children experiencing change:

"Fathers are meant to be strong and solid people . . . a dad is meant to stay loyal and committed to his family no matter what, but when he goes, there is a break and other people are allowed to come in that call themselves father, and you might not like them" (Sukie, 2012, personal communication). The different positions for stepfathers, as repartnered fathers often separated from children by a former relationship, and concurrently positioned as social or "stepfathers" (often becoming second time biological fathers), offers unusual opportunities to talk about complex fatherhoods with fathers themselves. Open conversations that acknowledge uncertainty and complexity can facilitate the development of new approaches to negotiating hazards and facing conflicts of interests, exploration of a complex social identity aspects of which a man might not have thought about. The role of stepfather is both chosen and fallen into. Within a wider family, there will be separate subsystems, where different wishes and expectations of him will be held. These might not be chosen or recognised by him, but are, none the less, held on to and determined by other family members. Stress can be conceptualised within a context of conflicting demands from multiple perspectives at different generational levels.

*"Going under": failing as stepfather and father  
at the expense of a second partner*

The Bennett–Simons network consisted of Susan Bennett and her three children, Matt, Seth, and Rose, in their late teens. They visited their father, John, every alternate weekend. John had remarried and had two small children under five. Susan had recently repartnered with Kevin, who had two teenage children, Romana and Miguel. Kevin's children initially lived with their mother, Clarissa, after she broke up with Kevin, and had a complicated relationship with her due, in part, to her drinking, as well as neglectful, highly irrational behaviour. There was often no food in their fridge, and their home deteriorated to a point where they suddenly decided to move out. Both children had become unused to parental supervision, having largely looked after themselves during their later childhood and early teens. Susan Bennett was unexpectedly faced with accommodating five teenagers rather than three in her household. She managed this by dividing two rooms into smaller sleeping cubicles and made house

rules about what moving in would involve. Subsequently, she coached Kevin's children through their A-levels by insisting on a homework schedule as part of the condition of their living in the house. This caused resentment and rowing from all parties: from her children because they felt they lost out on time with her, when they also were doing exams, and from Kevin, her husband, because he believed she had succeeded with his children where he had not.

Kevin had been without work for over a year and worried continually both about his children and what he chose to frame as the different resources offered to the children who came from his side of the family. His own failure to provide economically, as a key construct of his definition of what a father should do, kept him in a state of irritable unavailability. This meant he did not provide other aspects of fathering, like emotional care, practical assistance, or help with planning their lives. His constant arguing with Susan over her "management style" escalated to angry rowing, most of which the children could hear. Kevin appeared to be trapped in a version of fatherhood in which he could not enjoy his partner's competence or thank her for all the daily work she put in. The Bennett children came to consult together, without their mother, to explain the distress these rows, and their stepfather's angry presence, were causing them: "We hate the fact that Kevin is so hostile . . . it's our house, too. Mum seems able to forget the rows once they are over, but we can't do that. We can hear every single word they say in the kitchen and out in the garden, their fights seem to be uncontrollable. I don't think he's nice to her anyway. She wants everything to be so much better: she wills it to be better but it's not." The boys amplified the story by reflecting on the effects on their mother of dealing with constant resentment from her partner: "She doesn't absorb enough of *our* distress. She takes our distress seriously for a bit, then there's an explosion and she can't think. She cries more and she tries to keep everyone happy, which is hopeless."

*Constructing a whole family meeting: airing grievances, making acknowledgements, and children gaining permission to tell their fathers what they need from them*

All members of the household agreed to a "whole two-family meeting" and each of the young people was given an opportunity to discuss their concerns about what was happening and to reposition

themselves in the eyes of the others. Kevin's children were able to explain their stress in relation to concerns about their mother's mental health, a preoccupation which they carried at all times, and their fear that, due to the rowing they had witnessed in Kevin and Susan's household, *this* family might also break down. Susan's children explained more about their difficulty in going back and forth to their own father John's house and feeling that they had been "ousted" there by his new family of young children, and they now felt doubly "ousted" by Kevin's children coming to live with them in such a precipitant manner. Susan and Kevin were confronted about the effect their rowing as a couple was having on her own children, which took them by surprise. "We don't want Kevin going out of your life 'cos then you would be more upset, but we don't want him so much in our faces in his grumpy way." The meeting challenged them to take their marriage more seriously and to undertake major rethinking about how to structure parental time, household management, and shared responsibility.

Whole family meetings around issues of "unfairness", which can be both complex and raw, also make it possible for children to experience their step-siblings as real young people like themselves, negotiating or fighting for similar needs to be met. Such meetings, and sharing and highlighting direct ongoing troubled experience, can diminish persecutory ideas and fantasies about one another and construct more empathic understandings of what is going on. Step-siblings might not love one another, but they can develop understanding about each other's lives that enables them to get by in the context of the new family their parents have formed. Talking together in a therapeutic context, as well as talking with their parents in front of all the others, can help individual children manage the confusing emotionality devolving from loss, change, and the skewing of former relationship patterns. The sibling subsystem can also provide a protected space where the more "alien" aspects of adult behaviour can be put into a shared intergenerational perspective, without the children fearing being accused of disloyalty. Joint meetings allow each child to put his or her personal sense of unfairness in a wider context and can also free them to become more active in mobilising their own parent to meet their needs. Kevin remained a father who could not take initiative in mobilising his resources for his children, but he responded bit by bit to being told by them what they required of him. His own children felt more secure in organising him to recognise that they needed

his ongoing attention and positive regard, even if he did not “do” anything active on their behalf without them prompting him to do so.

### *Conflicts of role and expectation*

Common expectations, simultaneously held in different relational groups in the family, can pose extreme conflicts for stepfathers unless openly faced and then mediated. Conflicts revolve around love, both romantic and paternal, family economics in more than one family, as well as fathering “jobs”. Outer conflicts around what a father or a stepfather should be doing can be regularly voiced, and inner conflicts might also be held by a father himself at the level of personal guilt created by his own competing wishes and desires: what he should do with his own children, how they see him within his new coupledness, and how he should respond to the unhappiness or demands of a former wife. He might fail to recognise the conflicts of interests and role in the context he is living in, or to understand the confusion or depression he is experiencing. One man might have to carry out numerous paternal positions simultaneously and, in addition, be seen through various lenses: by the mother of his children as ex-husband or failed partner, and by second (or third) partners as current lover, potential husband, and future father of as yet unborn children. In many situations, a new partner already has children from a first relationship, and he will have to work out his part as stepfather from the start of the relationship. Children see “fathers” in diverse ways that also depend on the multiple narratives about fathers they hear in their families and schools (“mum’s new boyfriend, friend, bloke”, etc.) (Brannen & O’Brien, 1996, Gorell Barnes et al., 1998).

### *Stepfathers’ attunement to their stepchildren*

The question of a stepfather’s attunement to stepchildren is a difficult feature of step-family living, specially where maintaining good relationships with his children from a first relationship is his highest preoccupation. He might find his “paternal self” divided in ways that he cannot always sustain. Step-families who look for professional assistance are increasingly complex. They might involve three or more

sets of relationships that need to be considered, and a father might have less clear expectations of which responsibilities belong to a current partnership and which belong to a former relationship. Sub-systems could be collaborative or acutely competitive for his time and love. Expectations and wishes devolving from different partnerships, and any children born within them, might, at times, become irreconcilable. This can lead to further disruption or break-up. In clinical work, we can also explore richness in the development of family attachments across larger family groupings, with multiple relationship possibilities for children with half-siblings and step-siblings. The question of when “rich complexity” collapses into a disconnected “heap” with insufficient structures to support the children appropriately at their stages of development always has to be borne in mind. Flouri (2008), studying adolescent adjustment in relation to father involvement, children’s residence, and biological fatherhood presence, found more conduct problems and hyperactivity in stepfather families. The aetiology of stress in step-family life requires further subtle understanding, as families form and reform across cultural and continental boundaries. These might, in themselves, bring new forms of emotional burden through factors such as civil war, violence, and migration trauma.

### *Fathers and the Holy Grail of family life*

For some fathers, patterns of gender-related expectations and roles derived from previous generations might also be playing a relevant part in current difficulties. These hidden “drivers” can often be bizarre and lead to strange requests of children. In one family, for example, a father expected his son to dress “like a gentleman” at all times and provided him with specific sets of “gentleman’s clothes” to wear while on contact visits. Another father expected his nine-year-old daughter to host “literary soirées” for him while she visited. A further father in this more unusual group continued to try and run his “family” of four children aged from four to eighteen, by four different women, as though they were an intact first family and the children were all of primary school age. The search for the “Holy Grail” of a good family life in which a man can feel he is being a “proper father” is one that might be driven by inner longings or ideals of what a “proper family” should be that lead to abandoning one partnership and taking up

another. While this “tribal” approach to serial monogamies is often simplified and ridiculed within the publicised domain of “trophy wives”, there might be less obvious reasons why men “move on” and find it hard to settle within one relationship—reasons that they do not understand themselves and might be unwilling to explore unless some aspect of discord in the family forces this upon them.

*Threats to new partnerships: death, divorce,  
former wives, and children*

In a complex step-family, where both parents bring children from former marriages, it might be the strength of the father’s attachments to his biological children and their competition for his time and attention that threaten the new partnership. Step-parents support for the parenting efforts made on behalf of one another’s children is central to making the new system work, but many step-parents are not understanding of their partner’s children and the harmful effects of any current life experiences these children might be having.

*Davina, Imran, Dino, and Soraya*

A young couple, originally from Iran, contacted me to sort out these conflicts between them. Each brought children from their first marriage: Davina, two daughters (nine and six) who were still living with their grandmother in Iran, and Imran a son, Dino, who was also six years old. Davina’s husband had died in an unsolved killing a year before she and Imran got together, and her own children had lived in a close household with her mother since that time. Imran was the eldest of three brothers and was raised by a family of traders as the first university-educated boy in his family. He was a boy who always had to get 95% “or more” and met his family expectations by achieving a Master’s in Business Studies. He had separated from his first wife, Soraya, saying it was because she was equally ambitious and he wanted more tenderness and less strife in his life at home. However, her volatile and unpredictable behaviour entered strongly into the conversations between Davina and Imran during our three consultations, suggesting that she would be an ongoing troubling presence.



Davina was anxious about the intermittent closeness Imran, Dino, and his mother Soraya maintained. Her own husband being dead, she stated that she found it “almost too much to manage at times . . . he is preoccupied with him more than he is with me and will talk to her about him all the time. He never says ‘don’t do this’ to Dino, he calls it ‘picking on him’ and fears the child will not love him.” Soraya had equal parental care of Dino and took him on business trips to many parts of the world, but would rarely look after him herself, hiring local helpers who spoke no English. Sometimes she would ring Imran and say, “I can’t manage him, you take him.”

It was clear that Dino’s insecurity of attachment and his resulting attention-seeking behaviour was affected by all the changes and inconsistencies in his life. This had to be discussed with Davina, who found aspects of Dino’s behaviour very threatening. Her mind had not previously been open to understanding the possible impact of the complex relationships and the multiple non-attached carers Dino had to manage. She said of Dino, “He will come and stand beside his father and ask to be told what he should do; but then will often take no notice and continue to do what he wants himself. . . . sometimes he gets into a rage and throws things about because he doesn’t know what to do of his own accord. If we are sitting and talking he comes and interrupts us . . . he should realise he can’t get attention straight away. He also made suggestions to his dad that meant he could spend time with him on his own.” In this joint conversation, Imran also noted that much of Dino’s time was spent with non-English-speaking carers. He suggested that in those situations Dino often had to take care of the grown-ups in his life and take charge of what he wanted to do because the carers had not been helped to think about how to fill in the time in his mother’s absence. He pointed out how Dino had had more than seven different carers in his life since the separation eighteen months before. Davina challenged this observation, giving it a different frame: “I think it is you who have taught him to take charge, not these girls . . . you want him to grow up and run the family business.” Imran concurred with this, saying, “You are right to say I am training him right from the start to think for himself and to take charge of situations, but I am also right in what I say.” Being right was very important to each of them.

Setting up a structured plan for exploring both points of view and then introducing a framework for incorporating these through



discussion and negotiation, their preferred problem solving approach, moved forward the development of a shared plan about how to integrate two different sets of children, and their experiences, into their lives.

*Marrying into the extended family: further variations  
on too many commentaries—Asad and Samirah*

In Chapter Three, the impact of wider family relationships on a father's freedom to construct a relationship with his partner and new baby, as variables a father has to take into account, was discussed. In a second partnership, where a prior family of elders travels with one of the partners, the vigilance of a kinship network might be further heightened by anxiety, resulting from the failure of a first marriage: "will she make it this time". Patterns of elders can exacerbate tensions in the couple already managing each other's children. In a complex step-family from Pakistan, with a history of high emotionality and mental illness in the grandparental generation on mother's side, each parent brought their own parents home on a weekly basis. Asad, the father, described the mother, Samirah's, relatives "sitting about like a huge committee meeting where nothing gets decided". His daughter from his first marriage, Reena, was living with them while she completed her university education, and she became particularly incensed at the "relatives gang", feeling herself vulnerable and over-scrutinised by her stepmother's side of the family. Feeling that they intruded into any possible intimacy that might develop in the family, she had several extremely angry outbursts, expressing to her father fears that she would never be allowed to find her own place. Reena explained to her father, Samirah, and myself, "I feel a little tired trying to keep everyone together . . . daddy hates your mummy, Samirah, your mummy hates my daddy when he hates her, and then you and daddy don't get on . . . I could get to love you, Samirah, but if it isn't the little children, then they [the elders] are always in the way". Asad also became exhausted by Samirah's elders, described them as watching him vigilantly as the "second husband" to make sure he did not commit offences like the first—"so busy that they forget to look after their grandchildren". The emotional tone of Samirah's family was high and intense, and the effect of their criticism on her was volcanic, in that she

would flare up very quickly and decide to leave the marriage. Her parents and aunts would be terrified of a second marriage breakdown and for a while would be nice to the couple, and then the cycle would start again.

In the face of so many different concerns, it was hard to know where best to develop new thinking. Samirah and Asad decided to work on some typical interactions between them, and take charge of themselves before addressing the issue of the grandparental presence. Reena reminded them of an episode that had taken place the previous week. Samirah was “trying to be a good mother” by bathing her baby, and Asad was trying to “be a good stepfather” by getting his stepchildren their tea. While he wished to “be seen as good” in Samirah’s eyes, the activity of tea making was in conflict with an “important” presentation he had to prepare for the morning. He reconciled his inner tension with the mantra “it will only take a minute”, but he was unable to find the agreed-upon fish fingers in the fridge and shouted up the stairs to ask where the packet was, thus disturbing Samirah and the baby. She shouted back, “It’s in the fridge as I already told you” (the first trigger). He suggested something else to the children, which they rejected, saying, “Mum says it’s bad for you to eat too many samosas.” This was a meaningful reference to his waistline, which he and Samirah were in conflict over as she said him putting on weight was ruining their sex life. When he asked her again, she added, “Why can’t you ever find anything?” (second trigger). One of his stepchildren found the hidden “tea” in the fridge at the bottom where he “had not bothered to bend to find it” (third trigger). At this point the granny rang to ask how the baby was and Asad heard Samirah saying, “I’ve only asked Asad to do the tea this once and he’s making a hash of it.” Asad gave up and roped Reena in to take over the tea duty, while he went to do his presentation, now feeling discredited by both the younger and the older generations as well as by the voices of women in his life.

For this couple the humour generated by this detailed discussion enabled them to overcome the tension. Careful analysis of their communications and the meanings embedded in the minute zones of high emotional tension, the moments when the “fog of unreason” overcame the clarity they were struggling for, were entry points they accepted for taking back their lives from their elders. They made a contract with each other to limit the number of weekends on which

grandparents were allowed to visit. They asked for a “take-home therapist” in the form of a letter spelling out the intentions they were aiming to achieve, and they included Reena as the “third person” who had permission to point out any potential escalation of rows if she was present. Although this gave her too much responsibility in the family as a whole (reversing the notion that it was her father’s job to look after her as his daughter), she was already carrying this responsibility and was pleased to move towards having her role as peacemaker and mediator given a formal status while the attempted changes consolidated.

*The deterioration of relationships with one’s own children in the context of a new partner*

When an older father has left his wife and teenage children to live with a younger woman and her children, becoming an instant stepfather, the transition might not be the wished-for romantic life he envisaged. Managing the social and emotional adaptations such a transition requires, without acknowledging and discussing the pain caused to his older children who find themselves only a few years younger than his new partner, might also expose a younger child on overnight visits to an experience of a father reconstructing his life unsuccessfully. This experience of “failing father” can become a significant emotional burden to the child who is going between two households.

*Example:* Posy, aged eleven, who was going through the double transition of her father, Norman, and then her mother, Maggie, repartnering, had not spoken aloud for a year. Her mother explained to her father that Posy found it hard to be in his house as she felt a constant atmosphere of hate expressed toward her mum by Marina, her father’s new partner. When I met her on her own, Posy explained that she felt “very unsafe”. In a tiny whisper, with me sitting up close to her on the sofa, she explained that she had thought her parents might get back together because she had seen them hugging each other (a year before) and neither of them had actually told her they were not getting back together. She said that dad is “now living with Marina, and her two little kids”, and mum has just had Luke move into the house: “. . . my eyes feel tight all the time, as though I am about to cry, I don’t

feel safe out of the house and actually I don't feel safe in the house either, except with my sisters or with mum. I don't really feel safe with Luke, though he's nice to mum. Everything has changed." She did not want to go to dad's house because dad sits on her bed and talks for hours about how unhappy he is with Marina's children . . . "sometimes it's better just to stay quiet".

In a meeting with her father, Posy, and her older sisters, they told him about the difficulties they were all experiencing spending any time with him alone now he was "being a dad" in another family. This made Posy feel bolder. All the girls felt Marina (only five years older than Norman's eldest daughter) had hijacked any intimacy in their relationship with their father, stealing him away "to look after her own kids". "We don't want to be forced into the wrong family." Norman was fearful of how Marina would take it, but he agreed to construct some special "father times" with his children rather than ignoring their feelings. While he was furious at being "told" things by his children, he had to hear the fact that the new "instant" family did not feel as perfect to them as he had wanted to believe. This opened a more realistic way in which his daughters felt they could get to know Marina very slowly and at their own distance.

*Generational difference in couple relationships:  
changes for fathers and their internal equilibrium*

There are numerous complexities in fathering when a mother moves in with a younger man or a father's second partner is only a few years older than his oldest child. The parent from the first marriage might find themselves disapproving strongly of changes that the other parent is making. What is "normal" in a step-family has diversified since step-families became a subject for wider research, with new models of parent partnership upsetting biological, generational, and gendered roles, as described thirty years ago (Gorell Barnes et al., 1998; Hetherington, 1989). Where an older woman repartners with a younger man, children might dislike the "younger mother" who emerges, and their father might have no way of responding to her either. Her new partner is more like "bad brother", one teenage son reported. His father said, "I am seeing devastation in our family; she's out every night, they smoke dope together, it's back to a teenage

lifestyle.” The generational shifts in perspective this induces might then lead a father to choose a second partner who is closer to the “conventionality” of his own inner family style. Contrary to stereotypes that fathers marry younger and more beautiful women the older they get is an alternative systemic pattern where a father seeks to rebalance an internal family equilibrium that he has held on to all his life, but now experiences going out of control in the wake of his ex-wife’s post-divorce behaviour. A new partner, chosen to “rebalance stability in his life”, in turn has to deal with the disturbances brought about through the children’s conflicted experience of parenting style and household expectations, in terms of which standards they are expected to adopt and live by. As one stepmother said angrily, “The boys show no respect, he won’t condemn them because he doesn’t want to lose them and I am driven mad.” Expectations of what a stepmother *should* be can produce unrealistic ways of living, to the extent that new partners who hold high expectations of themselves about what they can achieve where an earlier wife “failed” become frustrated, angry, and feel they are failing in turn.

*Father holding many roles: conflicts  
of belief and lived experience*

Concurrent relationships, in which a father commits to a second partner and any children he has with her before ending a prior relationship, have always been with us. Adults who have grown up in hidden families, who felt they were “disallowed” in the public eye, have borne witness to the injustice of not being acknowledged (in biography as well as in therapy). Despite the way he is living in two households, a father might still hold on to the value systems supporting monogamy and the ideal of one family and household.

*Dot, David, Flo, and Roxie: wife or mistress—  
whose children are the “real thing”?*

Dot, who had been in a “secret” relationship with David for several years and had two children by him, was determined, now the children were three and one years old, respectively, to make sure David did, in fact, divorce his wife, Flo, and marry her. She had two children by her

first marriage, whose father was failing to maintain a strong relationship with them and they looked to David as their social father. David continued to care for Flo in what Dot experienced as too committed a manner. In David's mind, Dot was well supported, whereas he feared that Flo, who still had three teenage children living at home, would collapse unless he continued to be a strong presence in family life. To prevent collapse, he would have supper with his first family twice a week and go to all the family birthdays and festivities (without Dot). He would spend much of the time over weekends, Christmas, and New Year phoning Flo as well as his children to make sure they were all right. Flo's daughter, Roxie, aged fourteen, became her emissary and brought the troubled feelings from her mother's household into the second home.

It took David a couple of meetings with Dot to be able to think consciously about his behaviour without "sliding away" and to verbalise to Dot, who was furious with Roxie, the idea that he was, in fact, still the father to Roxie and his older children as much as he was a father to his young children with her. David recognised that Roxie's jealousy of Dot was not only on behalf of her mother, but was also her own. Whereas Dot, not Roxie or Flo, was now the primary love relationship in his life, none the less Roxie remained his *child*. This seemed to allow him to separate the two families in his mind and allow more thought about his own responsibility as father and partner in each case. David noted, "Since we have been thinking about getting married, Roxie barely speaks to Dot." Flo had told her children, "When Dad has a baby with Dot he won't have time for you any more," but three years on she changed the warning to "Once they are married he won't have time for you any more." Flo's words continued to act as a powerful controlling higher "moral" order in David's mind, organising his behaviour and preventing him thinking things through for himself.

When provoked by Dot to take a position that put their own children first, David always feared that, if he gave his second family more time, his older children would turn on Dot and their household as "'driving their mother, Flo, mad": "She's the bad woman who enticed dad away . . . got nothing to do with us . . . *we are the real thing* . . . the rest is background." When overwhelmed by the complexity of his life, David would fall back on the dramatic rhetoric of "dedicated fatherhood" in relation to his first set of children to stabilise himself: "I'll walk over hot coals to see my children even if it means having dinner

with Flo. I will still be there for them . . . everything else has gone 'boom' in their lives."

*Constructing a developmental frame with David*

The paradox for David, and other fathers in unclear partnership definitions for a second time, is that they have simultaneously positioned themselves as "successful lovers and potential husbands" as well as "good enough" social fathers, in distinction from uncomfortable positions as "failed" husbands or fathers. In realising the degree to which they remain rooted in their original family life, where their strong attachments to their older children lie, the necessity of embracing both families as different aspects of themselves is key to their longer-term emotional survival. Finding that Dot was able to explicitly recognise his commitment to his older children while facing him simultaneously with his responsibility to his younger ones moved him to focus more strongly on the future rather than his failures of commitment in the past. Over two years, he moved towards seeing the two parts of his life as "family", within which he had different commitments. He moved towards a legalised commitment to Dot and the smaller children and worked out a new balance with Roxie, in which he acted more as her father and less as though she was her mother's "twin".

*Mediating behaviour between fathers  
and social fathers: "Who is my 'real' dad?"*

A major accommodation that has to be made within many larger second family systems is the relationship between a biological or "first-time father" and a social or stepfather.

The larger commentaries on good and bad social behaviour offered by television, comedy, and film have sensitised many parents to the foolishness of continued "bad behaviour" in front of their children. However, other parents remain unable to contain themselves, and children as young adults have to choose how they will "manage" these events. One father, now in a second relationship with small children, reported of his older daughter at her school graduation, "Suki is used to being in the middle of family rows now . . . the only way she can escape from the madness of her family when we are all



together is to bring her loyal friends along.” The effect of such troubled patterns in all families who have experienced adversarial divorce can be an important component of inner disturbance in an adult individual later presenting for therapeutic help. Young adults might experience relief in subsequently reviewing these childhood experiences in the light of their own maturity, or at the point where they experience relationship difficulties with a partner of their own.

In families where a biological father has had an “out-of-house” relationship with his child during the larger part of the child’s lifetime, a mother’s decision to repartner might lead to unexpected difficulties in a child continuing his former visiting relationship, especially if he feels their mother is now being “protected” in a new relationship. Saul, aged twelve, asked his father why he had been unable to adapt to his mother remarrying so that he had a second father, a stepfather. He said, “When mum and Julian got married, I said to you ‘I have got two dads now’ and you said, ‘No you haven’t, you’ve only got one’ and you could have said ‘Yes, but I am your *real* dad’.” Fathers and stepfathers might be actively competitive, rather than co-operative. Suki said about her social father, Paul, “I might like Paul . . . I didn’t want to choose him *over* dad but just wanted some time where I didn’t have to choose at all. It’s always one ‘father’ person or another. Dad pretends he doesn’t care about Paul, but he really does care and he’s always checking out, and I don’t know which of them I should belong to. Dad says ‘when I decide to forgive mum things will be better’ but I don’t know when that will be, and the worst thing for me is that mum and dad are not together and they don’t talk.”

### *Sorting out “fatherhood”*

The most difficult questions for Suki at that time were who was her *real* father, and was she really loved for herself. The family work with Suki and her competitive fathers involved all the intimate members of her three family network and had three related aims:

1. To improve the negative interaction between her mother and biological father to diminish the quarrelling in her life (which was making her feel suicidal).
2. To establish an agreed idea about “family life” that her “multi-parent group” and her “social” father could subscribe to, so that

Suki could see she had a loving family, even if it was not what she called a “proper family”.

3. To work on diminishing her anxiety about her mother’s relationship with her second long-term partner, which Suki feared might undermine her own relationship with her preferred “dad” if it became a solid, long-term relationship. In all this, the goal was to help Suki keep a clearer head, not a head that was full of quarrelling adult voices.

I worked with her father, Ted, on the phone as he “didn’t want to travel”. I had a long conversation with his partner (“sort of step-mum”), at Suki’s request, to talk about the arrangements and dynamics of Suki’s visits. I met with “*quasi*-stepdad” in a joint interview with Suki’s mother to review the conflicts, including his openly competitive relationship with her “bio-dad” around his “lifestyle and inadequate provision for his daughter” (his words). The main body of work was with Suki and her mother, as well as Suki alone. Her constant concern, based on astute observation, was whether the caring that she was being shown was, in fact, care through love for her, or “performances of competitive care” to show each other who was being the “better parent”. Suki feared, in particular, that Paul was only “acting concerned” to make her mother like him more.

### *Negotiating healing conversations: responsibility vs. happiness*

Working with an alienated two- or three-household family system involves careful work with both individuals and subsystems. It might never involve bringing the wider family system together. Bringing the original parental couple and their children together on behalf of a suffering child might become possible if other parts of the family are rebalanced in their post-separation lives and there is some sort of equal emotional tone between them. Conversations between older children and their fathers about the effects of his choice of second partner on the rest of the family can be hard for a father to listen to. They are likely to bring about greater closeness between parent and child only when there is a willingness on both sides to talk from the heart and not from positions of recrimination and justification.

*Example.* A thoughtful teenage boy, Ramon, who acted as a carer to a mother who had become deeply depressed when his father left,

refused to see his father and his new partner and her children for a year. Following the birth of their joint baby, his half brother, he agreed to a meeting with his father with me as “witness” to his thinking. He engaged his father in a profound conversation about the meaning of “responsibility *vs.* happiness”, which left his father, normally a quick-witted thinker, perplexed but impressed. “You broke her heart, you know. It’s three years on and mum still comes home in the evening and cries: it’s quite shredding for us children . . . for me it’s easier not to see you, not to be part of a re-created family . . . even talking on the phone feels wrong . . . for me thinking with your emotions is bad: a lot of what goes wrong in the world stems from this . . . it’s better to live with less contact and fewer emotions.” His father, struggling to engage at the right level, said, “It’s something I have to work on, putting myself in your shoes . . . moving your point of view alongside my point of view. I can understand it, but I have to work out how to live with it.” His son continued trying to work out the balance of justice, including me as clarifier of points he was struggling with, but finding the fluency of his own thoughts which had obviously been distilled over a long period: “Of course, I don’t know how unhappy you were before . . . it seems as though the happiness of one person has been traded for the unhappiness of four people. I’m struggling with [contrasting ideas] ‘live as happily as you can’ *vs.* the question of being responsible, ‘living as conscientiously as possible’.”

His father, racing along to keep up with the speed of his son’s thinking, answered from the heart: “I did put myself first, but I had spent months trying to make things work . . . my unhappiness and dissatisfaction would have led to breakdown.” His son replied, “It may have been the right choice for you but I can’t entirely come to terms with the consequences. Over the summer I have been able to separate my emotions from mum’s emotions . . . I think I was feeling hers too much. I have had to detach myself from lots of emotions ‘cos it’s easier to live my life like that . . . others say it’s not good to put emotions in a box labelled ‘do not touch’, but for the moment that’s where I am going to keep them.” Following these conversations where he had aired his moral dilemmas and had them seriously respected by his father, he began to visit his father, see the new baby, and “take a turn around the block”. His father reported, “He has warmed up from not talking to being pretty mature and insightful and agreed to continue to visit but not to stay over . . . not make plans but take it step by step.”

*Abusive legacies from earlier family experience:  
fathers who are no longer present and  
stepfathers who manage the legacies of violence*

Two brief examples follow of ways violence experienced in an earlier part of a boy's life can become distorted attachment legacies for a stepfather to manage when he enters the emotionally charged union of mother and son. Each of the boys below had a close relationship with his mother in the context of violent or inappropriately authoritarian relationships with their fathers. The resources that second partners can bring to address disturbances shown in the context of the step or social father relationship might not always be capable of encompassing and standing up to these. Social fathers, chosen for calmness or relative stability by partners to mitigate their own earlier disturbed experience, often explain that they do not believe they have the strength, authority, or problem solving skills to work with troubled adolescents.

*Jo, Lana, and Rory: confusions of role—father, son, or rival partner?*

Jo was less than a year old when Lana left her husband, Rory, who had been in and out of prison for selling drugs. The closest relationship in his life was with his mother. Jo got into trouble in school, but Lana described them both as “muddling along” until she met a very “good”, straight man, Robert, an accountant, who wanted to live with her but did not want to live with Jo, who was now fifteen. He felt he shared no social values with him and was also a little bit scared. Jo was highly rivalrous to Robert and showed openly that he believed his mother belonged to him. Jo lived in a tiny room at the top of Robert's house where he spent a lot of time being depressed, failing to go to school, and smoking dope. When Lana tried to help him, he would shout at her until she cried. He would then try to provoke Robert to hit him so he could say to Lana “Look what he's done; are you going to stay with a man like that?” A redeeming feature for Lana was Jo's apparent love for the baby she was expecting to have with Robert, but it seemed probable that Jo and Robert would not be able to compromise. Jo displayed a belief that if he got a job, he and Lana could live together without Robert and look after the baby—“I'd like to be on my own at home with mum.” Jo could not see that it might not be in his own best

interests if such a dream were fulfilled. As his mother pointed out, "I want you to be a brother to this baby, not his father." His rivalry with his "stepdad" was accentuated by the intimacy that the coming baby produced in the relationship between Robert and his mother. Jo felt doubly excluded from this intimacy, both as a rejected partner and as the less preferred child. "I don't want Robert's child to be better treated than how he's been treating me; it's no good saying I'm not old enough to think like its dad, I'm the same age now that mum was when she had me. Robert 'made it', like [the baby], but, I mean, any idiot can do that." Robert did choose not to manage the challenges posed by Jo, and Lana had to face a choice between her coming baby being able to live with his father and continuing to offer a home to her older child.

*Longer-term effects of civil war: Julian, Roberta, and Marek*

In the second family, longer-term shadows of former civil war amplified the fears of violence experienced by a stepfather, Julian, on behalf of his stepson, Marek. Marek was self-harming and often threatened to kill himself. In Marek's country of origin, his biological father had beaten him and his mother, Roberta, until, in the confusion of the war, she escaped to England, her home country. Julian was a stepfather who wanted to offer his new family peace and financial security, but the family Roberta had recruited him into was beyond his normal emotional threshold in every dimension. Roberta had strong views about women's independence and not being a financial burden, and worked extremely hard, often until her teenage son's bedtime every night, leaving Julian with a stepson who did not wish to do his homework, was depressed about his lack of achievement, and obviously needed his mother. The degree to which Roberta, in the context of her first marriage, had become alienated from the possibility that a father or husband could be a resource for her as well as for her son, but that he needed her support, was the beginning of a new conversation.

*Coming out as gay: father and stepfather dilemmas*

It is only in the second half of my lifetime that gay men have openly had their children living with them. Golombok and Tasker, in reviewing the research on gay fatherhood in the first decade of the twenty-first

century, conclude that it is still the case that most gay fathers who no longer live with the mothers of their children do not have their children living with them (Golombok & Tasker, 2010). As the number of children raised in gay father families has increased—through adoption, co-parenting with lesbian couples, and surrogacy arrangements—so patterns of living in gay families have diversified, as have the notions of “fatherhood” within them. However, gay fathers who come for consultation to think about their children might still hold rigid ideas about performances of fatherhood, just as heterosexual fathers do, sometimes bewildering their more flexible new partners with their ideas about discipline and nurture in what it takes to bring up a “man”.

In the minds of many people in different societies and different religious groups, gay relationships continue to be seen as a threat to “normative”, heterosexually constructed family life. “Some people are gay: get over it”: an NHS equal opportunities poster displayed in many NHS facilities carries a positive injunction that cannot always be applied to the former wives of fathers who come out as gay. For a deeper understanding of this, we have to look to the domains of both loss and conflict of interests, as we would with any couple divorcing where one of them has already found a second partner, as well as considering the aspects of “seeing dad as gay” that children go through. The largest group of gay fathers researched in the UK are those who had children in the context of former heterosexual relationships. The decision to “come out” remains stressful and, at the start of the new millennium, was associated with increased risk to mental health. Whereas most fathers move out of the marital home, some continue their fathering relationship in-house, with the mothers of their children acting as a front to the sexual preference of the fathers. Some gay fathers formerly in heterosexual marriages still fear that disclosure might cause rejection from their child, or that their child might suffer by association with their father’s new open identity.

### *Freedoms and constraints in post-divorce parenting*

How flexible a society is about incorporating different models of sexual relationships and new structures for family life still varies greatly. Despite this, the passing of laws on civil partnership, and now marriage, and the much wider discussion of family created by these

changes in law, will, over time and between generations, change the way that couples can consider their own freedoms. All professionals need to be aware that life in gay families offers the same possibilities for healthy child development: models of intimacy that attend to the attachment needs of adults for mature peer-based relationship, models that attend to the attachment needs of children, the ability to offer secure loving bonds and responsive relationships to children, and adult minds that consider a developing infant. The reflections developed in these new contexts will further dissolve prejudice in future generations as children themselves challenge former ideas about “proper family” and the role of father.

The decision to come out by a father who has been in a heterosexual marriage none the less still remains more fraught for the family members concerned than a father who leaves for a heterosexual relationship. The downgrading of gay relationships in the minds of society in earlier generations has inevitably contributed to the internal downgrading of self within a father who has been concealing a gay identity in a heterosexual marriage. It has contributed to precarious self-esteem and terror about what might happen if a father reveals his true sexual identity. At the time of deciding to come out, this is often positioned against a tremendous rush to show the new identity as well as to integrate into the gay world. The tension between what is received wisdom about sexual relationships and the higher organising rules within a society will also affect the inner space of all adults concerned. Coming out acts as a perturbation to a particular society’s sense of cohesiveness: the image of “normal” itself becomes elaborated, as is happening in the UK in this decade.

*For a former wife, how might the experience of being left for a man be qualitatively different to being left for a woman?*

In addition to the shock of parental separation, mothers who have been passed over for a man have described the rejection in complex ways affecting her view of her own sexuality. In changing the frame of the relationship to accommodate a new social partner to her children’s father who is gay, there are also issues of “telling and timing” deriving from her own readiness. How soon does the husband, now he is “out”, expect everyone, wife and new partner, to be friends? How quickly does he want his children to meet him in the context of



a new partnership or lifestyle? Fathers can be very keen for children to meet a new partner or reconcile to a new lifestyle and might be torn about whether to place their new love or their child as the higher emotional priority. Hinting at meanings the child cannot comprehend can create new anxieties unless an explanation is on hand that the child is ready to hear; for example, exposure to new groups of gay friends too soon without a clear introduction or letting a child know about desires: "Bob and I sleep together". In turn, a child's readiness to hear will be affected by the degree of upset a mother is feeling and showing. Whereas some of these anxieties equally take place when a father leaves for a younger woman, the additional change is about the unknown quality of the other lifestyle a father is moving into.

*How does a mother's positioning, with regard to the new relationship, affect the child's readiness to accept it?*

A mother's web of upset and concern can include some of the following: a double rejection experienced by her body being set aside for that of a man; rage at being used for the production of children before being set aside for "true love"; concern about the health risks a man has been bringing into the family through "cruising" prior to choice of a committed relationship, "Why is his desire more important than the health of his family?", and the mourning for the loss of the marriage compounded with the question of whether its love was ever "real". Fears for the children include questions about whether they will be bullied at school due to prejudice, fears about a teenage son's identity, and a concern that there might be risks through a son's future involvement in a homosexual world, including that the son could himself become solicited into relationships with men: "It is important that they know their father, but do they have to know his friends?"

Some of the above preoccupations also relate to the degree to which a man has brought his alternative sexual identity into the marital home and his wife's mind: "Soft porn: images that really upset me infiltrating the safety of my home . . . a website where, at the click of a mouse you could enlarge the penis of your imaginary lover 'do you want a bigger one . . . just click here'." Seeing this "turned me against him and his sexual practices . . . I want to remain friends but feel I am being tricked into something I do not agree with . . . I do not want the

boys staying with them.” The fear of father’s new partner as a sexual being can be in conflict with the social experience of getting to know another adult parent figure. Alongside coming to terms with her repositioning in the life of her husband, a woman might experience herself angrily as being repositioned as “mother to the relationship” (“best friend to the boys”). It is not uncommon to be told about the husband’s love of his new partner: “He tells me about his dependence on Juan and his need for him . . . ‘I yearn for the sound of his voice on my voice mail’ . . . I don’t need to know that.” It is important to remember that many of these feelings are also experienced by women whose husbands leave for another woman. However, some of the more subtle differences that may interfere with the father’s subsequent relationship with his children can be heard in the nuances of the difficulty a mother is struggling with, which is associated with the degree of difference she can process while also dealing with her own loss.

Children, in my experience, also go through different stages of acceptance. Often, there is an avoidance of telling anyone followed by a selection of key “safe” others to tell. There might be a request to the father not to perform “gay” around the school and often not to come to school with his new partner. There might be a temporary loss of trust in the parent’s love, “he is not what he seemed to be”, a rewriting of the family past, and increased attempts to control parents’ behaviour in different contexts. Some of these are similar to any child hearing of his or her parents’ divorce, but the added uncertainty is around the quality of relationship with his or her father and the new partner. Questions to a father from a child include: how do you know you are gay? When did you decide? Can’t you try harder? Does that mean you don’t love mummy any more? Does that mean you won’t love me any more? [from a girl] Will you love Dean more because he is a boy? Does that mean I will be gay? [from a boy].

### *Monitoring with the sense, not the brain alone*

In trying to specify the quality of difference a child experiences, I have drawn again upon on the idea of inner working models carried from childhood in which a parent and their interactions with others have been represented at varying levels of specificity in the mind. An attachment-behavioural system is initially maintained through an infant’s continuous monitoring of the proximity of the attachment

figure. In contexts of unpredictability and insecurity, this monitoring can redevelop or intensify. Behaviour in their parents that children have accepted/adapted to when very young might no longer be considered acceptable by them as their critical faculties develop. Following a father's news of change of identity, in addition to the loss of role as formerly constructed, a child's perceptions are heightened and they might dislike subtle changes that they experience—a father's hair, the way he carries his hands, his smell, the way he walks, and his “new” voice being some changes that pre-adolescent children have mentioned.

If we understand that the transformation of the inner representation of “father” suffers a fracture, and confuses the child's representation both of family and of gender role at the point of coming out, acceptance by them in turn requires time, patience, and commitment by a father as well as understanding from his new partner. Things that fathers do without thinking, like hugging their partner (now in potential role as step-parent) can accidentally create new fears in a young child who has not yet processed the idea that their father now “belongs to Bob” and not to mum.

### *Normal post-divorce processes*

Following separation, unpredictability and unacceptable behaviour are often cited by children as reasons for not wanting to pursue contact with a parent. Where a dad has come out, the absent father, when he is present (on visits or shared events), might be experienced as too different from the “wished-for” parent in a child's mind to be tolerated at a time when a mother is still suffering from this experience herself. A mother can be unwilling to help her child process her own new experiences. As in all contact dilemmas, the child acts as a loop in the process connecting parents' post-divorce adjustment to one another, when they are likely to be at different stages of developing new lives. Bringing back observations, comments, or complaints can retrigger high emotional arousal and the desire to protect the child from feelings similar to those the mother herself is experiencing. However, all the principles of a “good divorce”—telling the children together once an acceptable formula has been worked out, joint planning about the care arrangements for the children, management of the future, minimising children's disruption and pain, co-parenting, his

house, her house, and “we can still be a family”—seem to have worked in couples I have seen where goodwill has prevailed over pain and anger. I have found imagining scenarios to be helpful: what hazards might trigger you away from goodwill and co-operative parenting?

*The new couple want their own child*

Issues might later present to a family therapist around the differential longing in a couple to have a child of their own. One partner, possibly the man who does not have a child from a former relationship, might want it more than their partner. The “magic” of assisted fertilisation and surrogacy in childbearing has created the possibility of children for all family arrangements, which was previously unimagined. However, the tensions of different couples, and threesomes or foursomes, in relation to negotiating shared parenting issues around children, require therapists to attune their ears to the particular differences that each new construction of family involves. A further issue raised in the context of therapy has concerned the question of openness about insemination: the possibility of discussion with all the children currently involved, and how a model of family that fits children’s understanding will be developed in the family. (With older children, this is usually redundant as they will be ahead of the couple.) While it adds further complexity to the life of a half-brother or half-sister, if they are participants in the new baby’s construction, to my mind it can only lead to more open thinking in the future.

*“A stepfather can make you feel safe: but Brett, not Zak”*

Mel’s parents, Flora and Abe, had co-habited for the first two years of her life before Abe came out and went to live with Zak. Mel said she always felt closer to her mum than her dad but had continued to visit him most weeks during her childhood. In recounting her earlier childhood, she found herself crying unexpectedly and her own tears surprised her. She said, “I don’t like having a divided life, you miss things out. His house is really different. It’s confusing, and strange.” She made the point that she regarded Abe and Zak more as friends than as family, distinguishing the kind of warm emotional feelings she felt for her mother, the dog, and her mother’s new husband, Brett,

whom she had now known for two years, from the feelings that she felt for Abe, whom she had known since she was born, and Zak. After her mum married Brett, she stayed at home much more. Mel said, "When they got married it was really settling . . . it was absolutely wonderful to feel settled", and that made her think she did not want to have to be in the other household.

Mel also did not think her father appreciated her own developing outlook as a girl of twelve years old: "He loved me as the six-year-old that I wasn't any more." She became very tearful describing the experience that she named as her dad trying to interfere too much with her new life with Brett. She said, "It felt as if I might have to actually choose my Mum against my Dad." Sometimes I would have to say to him, "I'm not living with you, so just leave me alone." She thought that she had also become more attached to Brett and described him as extremely kind and thoughtful. She said, "Just because I'm living with him I got closer and closer", and "Mum is the one who brought me up, who taught me how to behave. I could always talk to Mum and she'd always make it all right." She explained, "It was really hard to take the decision about not being divided, not going to Abe and Zak, but it was easier than going backwards and forwards." She said several times that this was a very happy time in her life, saying, "Brett's happy, Mum's happy, and I'm happy."

Mel made Abe a list of how future arrangements might be better managed: "I don't want to stay the night with him . . . at least not for now . . . I'd like to go on my own and not take a friend . . . I want to keep friends separate from this . . . I'd like to do some sort of planned activity, so that we went out for the day and did something together . . . I think maybe twice or three times a year." She also told me that although Abe was her biological father, "He has never really acted as a dad". She added, "I really want to settle down and have local roots and friends, and not have so many different parts to hold in my mind."

It seemed clear that the advent of Brett into Flora's life, and the settling down through marriage, had created a sense of security greater than Mel had previously experienced. Brett, recognising Abe's upset, met up with him and talked it through so it was clear that, although "put second" for the time being, he was not excluded from the mind of the family in the other household as Mel's father. Abe said, "I will try to understand and deal with her as a teenage girl."

Recalibrating his daughter's difference in terms of her teenage development allowed him not to feel ostracised on the basis of being gay, but more on the basis of not being her mum's partner.