SCHOOLS AND STEPFAMILIES

Teachers and schools have a vital role to play in the life of a child who is experiencing the trauma of entering a new stepfamily. It is important that teachers understand the particular nature of stepfamilies and appreciate some of the problems that children may experience. Children may be ashamed that they are no longer living in a ‘normal’ family and will need assurance that stepfamilies are ‘real’ families and are acceptable. Teachers generally try to make children feel accepted and acceptable, but it is easy in a busy classroom for a teacher to inadvertently cause a child in a stepfamily distress. For example, one teacher did not correct a member of a class who told another child who lived in a stepfamily that she did not have a real family because her dad did not live in the same house as she did. This was particularly distressing for the child who would have benefited from some validation of her position as a member of a stepfamily. It is only natural that teachers feel that their task is made more difficult because of social problems like marital disharmony, however, it is crucial that they remain supportive of children through this period.

SURNAME

The mother usually takes the new husband’s surname and in doing so appears to have a closer connection to her stepchildren than her own children. Teachers and other professional people need to be aware of the embarrassment it causes the parent, and especially the child, when a step-parent is incorrectly referred to by the title of ‘mother’ or ‘father’. One child, called Sharon, was delighted when the teacher told her that her father was waiting to pick her up after school. Sharon raced outside with great joy as she had not seen her father for four years, only to be bitterly disappointed to see her stepfather waiting for her. This happened despite the fact that the mother had notified the school about her remarriage and had introduced her new husband to the teacher. Maybe this incident might have been avoided if the stepfather had reintroduced himself at the door. However, this teacher’s simple mistake undermined the relationship which was beginning to build up between Sharon and her stepfather. Teachers cannot know the family backgrounds of their pupils unless they are told. It is helpful to the teacher if a parent can notify the school of any major changes in the family. It enables them to be more sensitive to the child.

A simple note, a phone call or a short prearranged visit is all that is required. If the teacher then writes down the mother’s new surname on her class records, she will at a glance be able to remember this important fact during interviews and other meetings.

Notes that are sent home from school about school events, school interviews, camps or general information leaflets seem to assume that children all live in intact families. This creates embarrassment and discomfort for children in stepfamilies.

RESENTMENT

Many parents are devastated by a separation and react with anger and malice towards the spouse who has left. Such a parent may try to involve the teacher in criticism of the other parent. A teacher should avoid becoming involved in this sort of discussion even if she or he has reservations about the competence of one or other parent. The parent may be trying to get evidence to suggest that the other parent is not able to adequately care for the child and therefore should be deprived of access rights or custody.

STEPSIBLING RIVALRY

It is especially difficult for children if their stepsiblings go to the same school and even more so if they are in the same grade. Children who may be regarding the school as their only safe and predictable place in life can find no escape from the pressures of
the new family if a stepbrother or sister is in their grade as well. In such a case it is a good idea to separate the two children and either have them in different grades or send them to different schools. Stepsiblings are often very jealous of each other and children may fear that the natural parent will begin to like the stepchildren better than themselves. This is especially true if one child is seen to have more skill or valued qualities than the other. If one parent did not want the divorce and has not accepted the situation, she or he may encourage the child to dislike the stepsiblings in the hope that the other parent may see the effect of his or her actions on the child and return to the family unit. Children find it stressful when they are asked by one parent to get involved in conflict with the other parent and members of the new stepfamily. The school, being the only haven that the children may have, can assist in their emotional wellbeing by continuing to provide stability.

BEHAVIOUR AND DISCIPLINE

Teachers need to be sensitive to the pre and post-tension periods in children who are about to go or have been on an access visit. Monday morning after access weekends could be a difficult time in schools. Homework or projects may not be done because the child has not been in his or her usual environment.

It is also useful for teachers to see the relevance of applying the stages of grief to children suffering from the loss of the original family. Children who have experienced marital breakdown in their family react in different ways according to their age, gender and stage of grieving. In general, the younger the children the more difficult it is for them to see that the cause of the marriage breakdown was not their fault.

DISCUSSION

Teachers may help children in stepfamilies to feel accepted by promoting classroom activities designed to show that a variety of family types are acceptable. The sensitising of the grade to a variety of family situations helps the children see that many other children have similar families to them. Reading the grade stories of children who live in other types of families helps in the acceptance of other family types. A genogram based on one of these stories helps the class to see that other family types are acceptable. The children could then do their own family genogram. Showing films of children who live in stepfamilies but who are doing the normal things children like to do also helps to validate stepfamilies. Make sure that such films do not have an evil stepparent in them as this would not be at all helpful.

Schools should provide the opportunity for both parents, if they request it, to have access to the child's reports, photographs and teacher-parent interviews. Teachers should be aware that some children may want to buy two mother's or father's gifts in order not to offend either parent or step-parent. School record forms also need to be modified in many schools so that they do not discriminate against these families by failing to provide room for the information about stepfamilies and thus by default appearing not to recognise them as an alternative family.

Acknowledgment: Webber R. (1986) 'Living in a Stepfamily'