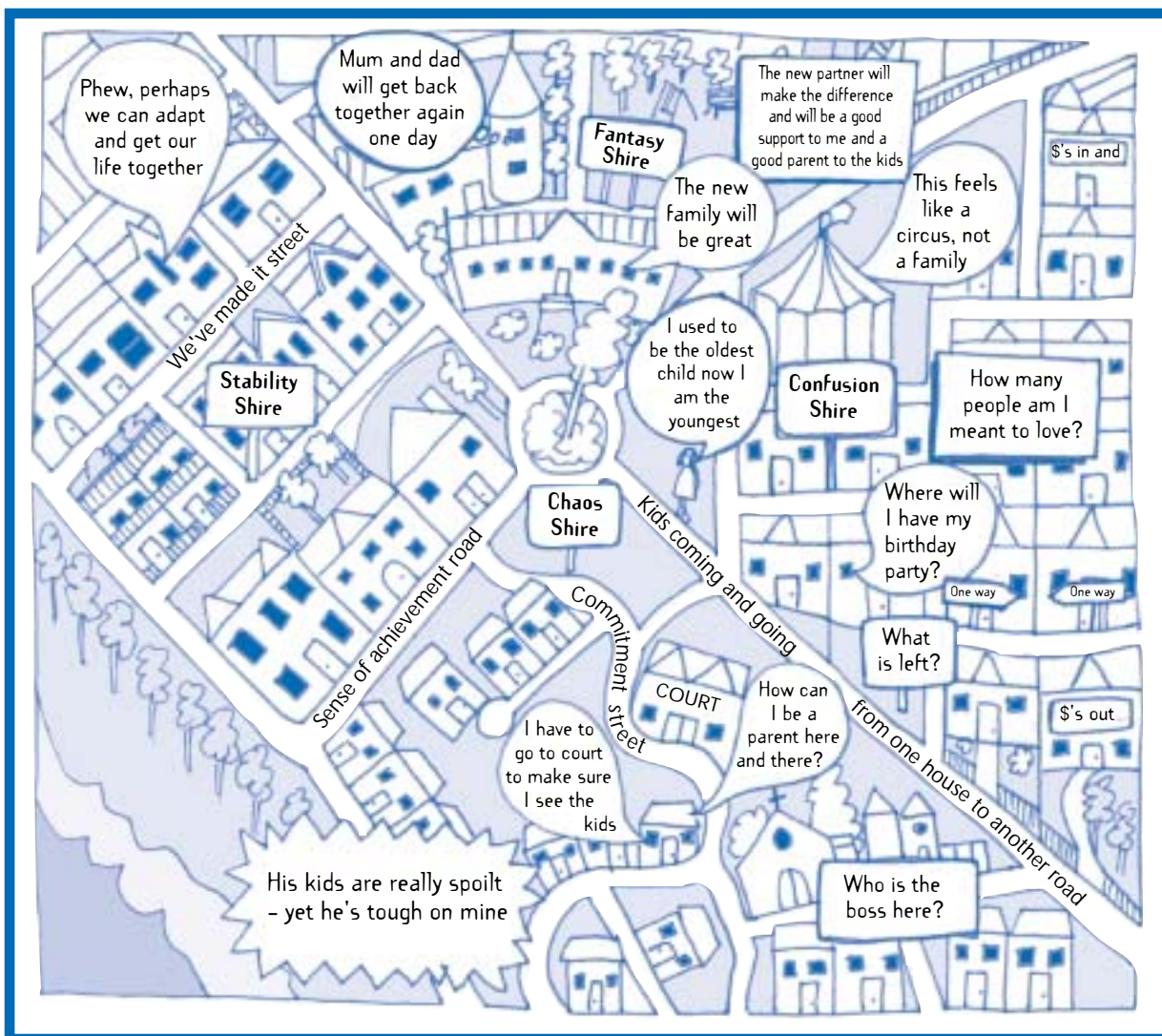


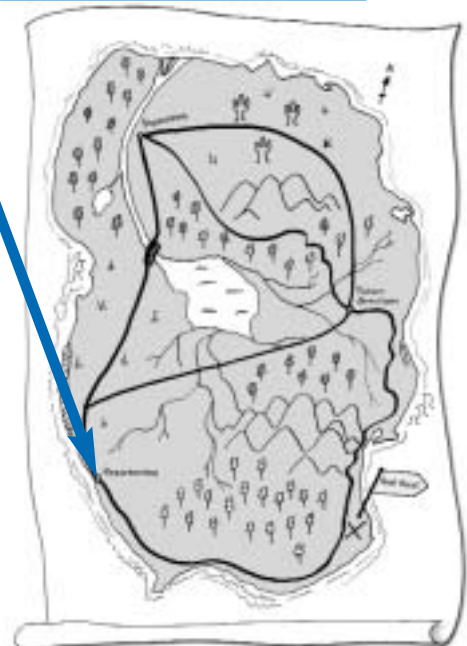
Repartnering



This stage refers to the period in people's lives when they repartner after the break-up of a previous relationship, with the intention of establishing an ongoing relationship.

It needs to be acknowledged that this might also happen when a previous relationship has not yet concluded. It is not uncommon for people to seek hope — or even a way out — through a new relationship and this situation is much more complicated for everyone, especially for children.

The repartnering process includes preparing for, establishing and consolidating a new relationship. *Back on track* focuses specifically on circumstances where one or both partners have children from a previous relationship.



Repartnered families are also referred to as step or blended families.

This section covers the developments that are part of establishing a repartnered family. It addresses the phases of fantasy, confusion, and chaos which characterise the transitions and adjustments required of all family members. This includes the adults (the new partners and their ex-partners), the children (of both families and in time, of the new family), the extended family (now the multiple extended families).

Research and studies indicate that it can take anywhere between two to five years for the pieces of a repartnered family jigsaw to 'fit'. It takes time for everyone in a repartnered family to face, and resolve, the challenges and complexities of forming a new family unit.

It is important to emphasise that repartnering will be different for each member of the family. They will each interpret events in their own way. The experience will be influenced by where they are in their individual lifecycles. For example, one adult may have children, the other none; one adult may have adult children and the other toddlers.

'This family will be great because we love each other.'

As with each of the preceding stages, repartnering happens in a wide variety of circumstances. For some people, repartnering occurs immediately following separation, for others it occurs many years later. Some people plan the process as carefully as possible and for some it evolves more chaotically.

The repartnered family may also be created at a time when adolescents are preparing to lead independent lives. This might mean that the adolescents in the family are not as interested in being involved in the new family unit.

'You can call me mum/dad.'

Exploding the mythology of the stepfamily

There are many myths about ‘stepfamilies’. Most of them are untrue and all of them are unhelpful to repartnering families.

Myths develop culturally as a way to understanding how things operate. They may allow people to make superficial sense of an issue without analysing the situation. People are often unaware of how their belief in these cultural stereotypes affects them. They can feel pressure from within themselves or from others, to conform to expectations of what it means to be a stepmother or stepfather. Unexamined beliefs in myths can lead to unrealistic expectations, which in turn can foster feelings of guilt, inadequacy and failure when the expected outcomes are not achieved.

Common community beliefs about how families function are based on the social construct of an ‘ideal’ nuclear family. This idealised version of a family is not appropriate for stepfamilies because it imposes many unrealistic expectations.

The reality is that there are often higher levels of conflict and tension within a repartnered family because of the complexity of that family. The sheer impact of bringing together two already existing families to become one family demands a flexibility and tolerance far greater than the demands made of a biological family.

The fairytales we all grew up with, such as *Cinderella* or *Hansel and Gretel*, describe a wicked step-parent and these negative stereotypes can often lead to confusion about the motives of a step-parent. In reality, the majority of step-parents are concerned and caring about their stepchildren but the term itself and the historical connotations of

the term add to the difficulties inherent in the role.

Another prevailing myth is that families which form after one parent’s death, when the surviving parent repartner, have fewer problems than those forming after a separation.

This situation can become a long-term problem if the death of the parent is not mourned ‘properly’, particularly in the eyes of the children. A failure to acknowledge this grief can result in children (and even the surviving partner) idealising the dead parent. This situation can paralyse a new relationship; there is no way a new partner can overcome these feelings on their own — even if they do recognise them for what they are.

Many parents feel that they may be damaging their children forever if they separate or divorce from their partners. This can also be true of step-parents who may believe that their stepchildren (regardless of whether they have any children of their own) will be emotionally scarred and therefore difficult to manage. Research does not support this but many parents still believe it.

The idea that stepchildren are always scarred by the experience and never get over it means that many step-parents make unnecessary exceptions for the children or leave themselves open to manipulation. Few people go for long periods being manipulated without recognising it and resenting it. While it is important for

‘Children of separated or divorced parents are damaged forever.’

children to set the pace for the development of a relationship with the new step-parent, it is important that the new partner is also allowed some freedom.

It is known that what is harmful to children is not the actual separation or divorce, but the level of ongoing conflict between the parents. The painful reality is that there can be ongoing conflict for many years and it is important it is managed.

If parents cannot resolve their differences and manage the conflicts there may be no other option but to sever ties with the ex-partner at this point. This does not necessarily mean that the children must also sever ties. Arrangements can be made for the 'handover' of children by a person — often a family member or friend — who is acceptable to both parents. This is the most extreme position but not unheard of or even unusual. Many communities have a community house or agency that can function as neutral territory for the drop-off and pick-up of children where it is not possible for parents to come face-to-face with each other without conflict.

The severing of all contact with a parent should only be considered in extreme circumstances, where abuse of the children is the issue. In the case of violence or any kind of abuse, there is also the possibility of supervised access for the children. These situations are normally the subject of a Family Court order.

Conflict is often only seen as distressing and undesirable. However, children will always have to deal with conflict in their lives. The younger children are when they see or experience positive ways to resolve conflict, the more likely they are to handle their own conflicts positively and non-violently.

Handout 12: Conflict

resolution notes suggests

some strategies on how participants can assist their children in this process. Modelling good ways of conflict resolution is an invaluable resource for a child. It enables them to see that violence and aggression are not the only ways. Children need to experience different ways of resolving conflict, where everyone's needs are taken into account.

Key issues

- Understanding the phases of development of a repartnered family.
- Assisting children to move comfortably between two homes.
- Beginning to build family traditions.

Myths

The kids will accept you faster if they call you dad/mum.

All the children in a repartnered family will get on well together.

Part-time stepfamilies where children 'visit' have an easier time than full-time families where children 'live in'.

Background notes

One of the confusing aspects of being a member of a repartnered family is the reality that the boundaries are not clear. Another is that each member has a number of roles, some of them new.

The range of configurations in repartnered families is very diverse and can include:

- Families where one partner has no children and the other partner has children from a previous relationship, (the partner without the children may or may not have been in a committed relationship before and may be experiencing for the first time a partnership and 'ready-made' children).
- Families in which both adults have children from previous relationships.
- Families in which some children live full-time and some live part-time.
- Families in which some children are from previous relationships and some are the biological and/or adopted children of this couple.
- Same-sex couples with children from previous relationships.
- Families where the new partner has little age difference from the children.
- Families where the new partner is considerably older than the children and the children's biological parent.
- Families where both partners have children from both the previous and the current relationships and the children's ages span from early childhood to adulthood.

The characteristics of a repartnered family are:

- The intimate adult relationship is not formed prior to the advent of children (although they may have known each other through social contacts).
- There are no blood ties between some family members.
- The repartnered family has experienced loss in:
 - relationships
 - community
 - unfulfilled hopes for previous relationships and family.

- All individuals come into a repartnered family with previous family histories.
- Initially there are no shared family history or traditions.
- There is a biological parent and their extended family outside the repartnered family (which may exert an enormous influence).
- The boundaries of a repartnered family are not clear:
 - children may be members of two households
 - parental authority, decision-making and financial arrangements are often shared between two households
 - the legal status of the family may be married or de facto.

Phases in establishing a repartnered family

Understanding some of the recurring themes for repartnered families will assist service providers to deal effectively with family members. Understanding the themes

will also assist family members to make sense of the dynamic intensity (and confusion) that is inevitably part of establishing a repartnered family.

The repartnered family does not stop evolving

after its formation. There are phases, which if not understood, can be misinterpreted as heading towards disintegration. These phases are not linear and for some people they feel repetitive and circular. A repartnered family may jump from one phase to another, but each phase indicates a

new point in establishing the repartnered family.

The key phases are:

- fantasy
- confusion
- chaos
- stability
- commitment.

These phases overlap in a variety of ways and are part of the process of unifying a group of previously unrelated individuals, as they each:

- Refine their individual identities
- Draw boundaries around their roles, personal space, shared space, loyalties, and need for privacy.

This process is an essential part of developing:

- A new sense of identity for each individual
- New rules for the new family
- A shared sense of responsibility
- New rituals for the new family
- New relationships within the new family
- New relationships with family members now outside the household
- Ways of handling conflict within the new family and with family members now outside the household.

It is part of the process whereby the repartnered family develops its own identity as a family and creates its own social history.

For most repartnered families it's a stormy and turbulent time in previously uncharted waters.

'It took me four years before I felt comfortable in my repartnered family.'

Fantasy

Refers to the tendency family members have to idealise the new family and its possibilities which can lead to them seeing an idealised family without the sharpness and challenges of reality.

Families see no need to change, or underestimate the requirements of change.

The family is different for adults and children. Adults hope for a family that will be bigger better than a nuclear family.

The children may still be hoping that the original family will get back together.

Adults are therefore looking forward to a fantasy future and the children are looking back to a past they wished had been able to continue.

Confusion

This is the phase where adults fear the demands of change.

Adults recognise that the family is not working out as they expected (that is, like a biological family).

The step-parent can feel a failure, as they have been unable to create a happy family.

The confusion is made worse by feelings of not knowing what needs to be done to make it different.

Chaos

The need for change is recognised but often is not clear what sort of change or how to make it happen.

This can be a time of crisis and turbulence when members think the new family is disintegrating.

Members are likely to experience a sense of disappointment that the family is not working. They may also feel very discouraged.

Loyalty is often split along biological lines which makes it feel as if integration of the two families will never happen.

It is a time when families often recognise the difficulties and seek assistance.

Sometimes families need help to recognise that they need professional support.

Stability

The family becomes more open to change. This tends to occur when there is a growing acceptance of what is realistic for this family, and a growing acceptance and tolerance of the differences.

Commitment

Refers to the growing recognition and acceptance that change does not necessarily mean disintegration, but is a necessary part of successfully establishing the new family.

For most repartnered families, elements of the above phases are woven into various (sometimes repetitive) episodes as the new family and the respective family members make the necessary changes and adjustments. This period may last for several years in some repartnered families. Being able to recognise patterns, having an understanding of what is happening and having relevant navigation skills is therefore critical to members of repartnering families.

Adults



For both adults there is a myriad of roles in a repartnered family and the adults may at times wonder, 'Who am I in all of this?'

The question, 'Where do I fit into the various smaller groupings within the family?'

'It is the biological parent who can include and reassure the step-parent, so that the step-parent can make a healthy choice rather than a choice based on hurt feelings or uncertainty.'

also looms. If a partner has been in a previous relationship there will be questions and comparisons: Is this relationship the same or different to the last one? How? Do I like it this way? Will the fact that it's different or similar mean it will work better?

The new partner will wonder where they fit in, especially if they have no children of their own.

They may have an idealised notion of what a

partnership with someone who has children is like. Experience in working with repartnered families suggests that non-biological parents can often underestimate the time and attention that children demand. Friction can arise from this, with the non-biological parent feeling neglected or used by the biological parent.

It is common for a step-parent to feel out of place at traditional family celebrations, for example, Christmas, birthdays, weddings and funerals. Some step-parents cope with this by withdrawing and allowing the biological family to take part in these events on their own.

It is also important to think about how the partner with children might feel when they meet their new partner's family. If the new partner does not have children, or has never been married, there may be some discomfort — the new partner's parents may be concerned that their son or

daughter is taking on 'baggage'. The new partner's parents may worry about how to respond to the children, and they might not be ready to be grandparents, let alone to children they have just met. Other family members might be suspicious of the motives of the parent-partner and may be concerned that they will return to their previous relationship.

All these things will probably be keenly felt by the partner with children — and they may fear that these things are being thought about — even if they are not.

It is essential that the repartnered family begins to build its own family traditions. A sense of family takes time to develop. Outside influences, and the changing composition of the family, (as children move between homes) can make it difficult in the early stages, but building family traditions is what cements the family's uniqueness.

In creating family traditions, it is important to respect histories, loyalties and the traditions from previous families. It is also important not to push family members to participate if they are unready to be part of family activities.

Traditions need not be big things. They may be favourite foods, special ways of doing things, undertaking new activities together.

To celebrate and reinforce new traditions it can be helpful to record family events, by:

- Keeping a diary
- Taking photos
- Using a pin board to display children's drawings
- Keeping momentos from family outings
- Planting a tree to commemorate an event special to the new family.

A new baby in the family — the child of the new partners — usually changes the dynamics of a repartnered family.

The baby's birth has the ability to do many things:

- Create bonds within the family
- Alienate children so that they withdraw
- Bond the couple but alienate the children.

Problems are more likely to arise if a step-parent has not had any children previously and is unaware of the special bond between parent and child and the time and energy involved in caring for a new baby.

The arrival of a new baby means that the biological parent needs to reassure their children that they are still much loved, and always will be, and that this baby will not change the parent's ongoing love and concern for them. The fantasy of the positive impact that the new baby will have on the whole family gradually fades. It is often the step-parent who recognises that there are problems for the other children which are related to the new baby.

The biological parent may resolutely deny that there are contentious issues, while inwardly fearing the possibility of the relationship failing.

Alternatively, many parents worry that the birth of a new baby will cause many

'The fantasy of the positive impact that the new baby will have on the whole family gradually fades. It is often the step-parent who recognises that there are problems for the other children which are related to the new baby.'

problems with the children and prepare themselves to deal with any number of terrible possibilities based on jealousy and insecurity. Many parents can be surprised at the enthusiasm and love existing children have for a new baby.

Children



Children who have grown up in one family will wonder how this new relationship and the new family is going to be worked out, and what their place in it will be.

The key questions for them are:

- Who am I?
- What is my role in this family?

The questions will need to be answered by them in terms of both households. The experiences from one house to another may change. A child may be the oldest in one family and then move to the other house where they are a middle child. For example, they may know in one household that they should clean the bath but be uncertain about whether this is expected in the other household, particularly if they are no longer the older 'responsible' one.

It is confusing to children if the ways of doing things in each household are not clear. Children can cope with different rules, behaviours and ways of living in two houses, so long as the expectations are clear.

Territory can however be an issue. If a child has never shared a room before and is now expected to share with a step sibling — or even their own brother or sister

— they might feel overwhelmed. This might be compounded if they are expected to share a room with a stepsibling who is quite comfortable about sharing space and who does not understand the other's need for privacy.

A child who visits one household might feel as if they do not have a space of their own at that house. Even if space is limited, the allocation of a drawer or a cupboard that is exclusively theirs can indicate to a child that they are valued and have a place in the family. It is important that all the children have a sense of where their space is in each house they visit or reside in.

Households can be different and ex-partners can often want to know what happens in the 'other' house. To gain this information children are often asked questions about what happens in the ex-partner's house. Typical questions (that might sound familiar to couples) range from the innocent to the more probing. Some examples include:

- Who picks up the kids from school?
- Who sleeps where in mum/dad's house?
- What do you eat for dinner?
- Does X cook? Well?
- Do you go out much?
- Do they spend a lot of money?
- What time do you go to bed?

'It is confusing to children if the ways of doing things in each household are not clear.'

While some of these questions may reflect general (and genuine) interest, parents need to be reminded not to use children to gather private information. Children will know that what is happening is not right, and will feel compromised.

Tension in either home can affect a child. The child may experience difficulties in one house and then have to return to their other household which is also experiencing tension, thus having to cope with two sets of domestic tension. For example, if there is tension between adults in the repartnered family and the child visits the ex-partner, it will be the ex-partner who has to manage the child's reactions to changing residence and the conflict at the other house. The ex-partner can resent this, as it is an intrusion into their time, and can lead to friction between biological parents.

Children may also be feeling some sense of guilt or discomfort if they like their parent's new partner. They might feel this is an inherent betrayal, even if their unpartnered parent is unconcerned about the new relationship. The problem is compounded if the child knows that their unpartnered parent does not like the new partner, whatever the reasons.

Finally, it is important that new partners and biological parents do not pander to their children — or bribe, cajole and force them into liking their new partnership. Children know when adults are trying to sweeten them up and they are likely to resent it, be confused by it or use it to their advantage. It's important for everyone to be themselves.

Extended family



For grandparents, particularly those who have been involved with the grandchildren, their concerns are also related to where and how they will fit into the new family arrangements and whether or not they need to terminate relationships with their child's ex-partner, who is now their ex son-or daughter-in-law.

Grandparents can offer a great source of stability to their grandchildren. They have known them all their lives, and will always be their

grandparents. Both of these things should be pointed out to everyone concerned and grandparents should be allowed permission (and even encouraged) to prioritise their relationship with the grandchildren over and above their relationship with the new partner.

The quality of the grandparents' relationship with their new (or potential) son- or daughter-in-law, will be the key to a good relationship with the new family. The attitudes of the new partners to including or excluding the grandparents will be influential in forming the ongoing relationship.

If the new partner has children, they will need to develop links with those children, while maintaining the closer and special relationship they have with their own grandchildren. Doing this in an even-handed way can be challenging.

Grandparents need to realise that it will take time for new patterns to be established.

'Children may also be feeling some sense of guilt or discomfort if they like their parent's new partner.'

Exercise 1 – Eggs in the basket



Aim: To highlight how family members manage their time in a repartnered family.

Materials: *Handout 20: Baskets* for each participant.
Fifteen coloured adhesive dots for each participant.

Method: Explain that we distribute different amounts of time between different subgroups within our family. For example we may spend a lot of time with the children or we might have very little time for ourselves as individuals, or as a couple.

In this exercise we are going to distribute our time (represented by eggs) between the different baskets (repartnered family subgroups). There is no need to use all the eggs or every basket.

The time participants should consider is what is available outside normal work time.

Ask individuals to place their eggs in baskets according to how they think their time is spent in the repartnered family.

Working in pairs, ask participants to discuss the following:

With the knowledge you now have of the way you spend your time in your new family, share what you would like to remain, and what you would like to change.

Discussion with large group:

Ask participants to share with the group, something which may have been highlighted for them, about which they were previously unaware. This could be something that they are happy with or something they would like to change.

Exercise 2 – Strengthening family traditions



Aim: To introduce the importance of developing unique family traditions in the repartnered family.

Materials: Paper, textas, pencils, *Handout 21: Family shield*.

Method: Display an example of a family shield.
Introduce this segment by talking briefly about the kinds of traditions repartnered families can develop.

Encourage participants to:

- Draw their own family crest using any shape they would like
- Think of a family motto for their new family
- Write the names they use or will use
- Illustrate some of the traditions they have developed as a family.

Explain that spaces can be left for future additions or for the children to fill in.
Group discussion in relation to the above.

Couples take turns to talk about their family crest.

Exercise 3 – Stages and phases



Aim: To encourage participants to recognise their experience of the different phases common to repartnered families.

Materials: None required.

Method: Divide the group into men and women and then ask participants the following.

Ask participants to consider their experiences of being a biological or non-biological parent at each of the different stages common to repartnered families, that is, separating, future directions, and repartnering.

The whole group then has a discussion focussing on the non-linear nature of these stages.

Exercise 4 – Understanding children's feelings and behaviours



Aim: To stimulate discussion on children's reactions and behaviour so that parents can think about how well their children are doing in adjusting to the demands of their new families.

Materials: *Handout 22: Stresses for children in a repartnered family.*

Method: Generate discussion by explaining that children's behaviour is often the observable expression of their inner thoughts and feelings. For example, a child who hits a sibling may be having thoughts about feeling left out and may feel angry about this. Ask the following questions to prompt discussion.

- (a) Ask participants to give examples of children's behaviour (positive and negative).
- (b) Ask parents to think about things from the perspective of their children and in light of their behaviour.
- (c) Ask them to consider how clearly the children understand their new arrangements and expectations in the new family.
- (d) Ask about what in particular the children may be finding difficult.
- (e) Ask the group to share some ideas about how they may help their children to cope with that difficulty.

Find solutions for each person in the group, so that they can support their children to make the changes necessary to be part of the new family.

Use *Handout 22: Stresses for children in repartnered families*

- (a) Ask participants to consider whether their children may be exposed to these stresses.
- (b) Ask participants to think about the effect on their children.
- (c) Ask participants to discuss ways of alleviating this type of stress for children.

Exercise 5 – Family meetings



Aim: To introduce participants to the value of having regular family meetings as a way of unifying the repartnered family.

Materials: *Handout 23: Guidelines for family meetings*

Method: Ask participants to list two things that seem to be causing difficulties in their repartnered families.

Look at the list and group similar issues together.

Lead a short discussion on the usefulness of having regular meetings with the whole family so that a range of issues can be discussed, contribute to and agree on solutions to difficulties.

Give each person a copy of the handout.

Discuss the rules and guidelines and encourage people to adopt and use them in their own families.

Discuss the ways in which this idea might be incorporated in each family. It might be that the principles are applied to dinner times or weekend breakfasts or any occasion when the family is together on a regular basis.

Task 1



Keeping in mind the phases of

- fantasy
- confusion
- chaos
- stability
- commitment

discussed in the group. Pay attention to the issues being experienced by different family members and try to understand your issues in light of the phases.

Task 2



Think about whether there are any roles that you feel uncomfortable with, or resentful of, in your family. For example, nurturer, disciplinarian, school taxi service.

Are you able to negotiate around these roles?

Task 3



Discuss with your partner the differences the children might be experiencing between their two households. For example, different bed times, household chores, allowing friends over.

Task 4



Identify which expectations at your house (in regard to your children) are clear, and which need further clarification with your partner and children.

Task 5



Talk with your family about the usefulness of having a family meeting. Encourage them to give it a try. Plan and hold at least two family meetings in the next two weeks. Discuss with your family whether or not they are finding the meetings constructive.

What is your view of them?

Are they helping the family?

Key issues

- Recognising that different family members will have different perspectives on the new relationship.
- Understanding that different family members may not welcome the new relationship.
- Discovering the instant nature of a repartnered family, with no time for the adults to develop a relationship before the advent of children.
- Developing relationships in a repartnered family.
- Recognising the differences and importance of relationships where there are blood ties and where there are no blood ties.
- Acknowledging sexuality in a repartnered family can be problematic.

Myths

We will be just like the Brady bunch.

This family will be great because we love each other.

I look after my kids and she'll look after hers and that will make it straight forward.

Background notes

When a repartnered family comes together, people are optimistic and hopeful. They want to settle down. They hope that all the family members will be happy so that they can become a new family.

Adults



There is no right time to decide to repartner. The age of the children, the length of time between relationships, the number of relationships a person has had, will all determine how different family members react, accept and adjust to a new family.

There are a variety of repartnering solutions:

- Some couples repartner soon after separation
- Some people may delay repartnering until their children reach a different age
- Some people decide to 'live together but apart' because the transition to a new family seems too complex.

Adults living in a repartnered family have multiple relationships, all of which may demand attention at the same time:

- partner
- biological parent
- step-parent
- parent with ex-partner
- supporter of new partner (as they take on the role of parenting business partner with their ex-partner)
- adult child to their own parents
- in-law to their partner's parents
- changed relationship with ex-partner's parents

- all the ongoing and new relationships involved outside of the new family.

Trying to juggle all these roles can cause exhaustion and a sense of confusion. It is important that people make conscious decisions about where individuals are going to spend their energy. Regardless of the end of an adult relationship, adults need to maintain a business relationship with their ex-partner for the sake of the children.

Early in a new relationship it is not uncommon for the biological parent and the step-parent to discourage involvement from the former partner. This can happen whoever has the full-time care of the children involved. This may change over time as the couple recognise the value of the ex-partner remaining involved or accept that it has to be that way.

This will require negotiation as the ex-partner may have made adjustments to their life to cope with the rejection, and may not be willing to be involved in the way the new couple would like.

For some, this is resolved and over time it sometimes becomes possible to have joint celebrations. This can, however, have complicated consequences for the step-parent.

This means that there needs to be a high level of communication between the new partners, which will require that they have time for each other without their children.

The couple relationship is central to the repartnered family but there may have been little time to develop their relationship, therefore the couple needs to give priority to the multiple relationships generated by their coming together.

They need to set aside time to develop the 'us' relationship by doing such things as:

- Going for a walk each night
- Meeting for coffee in town
- Meeting at lunchtime when the children are at school
- Having a definite 'date' once a month.

The 'us' relationship in a nuclear family usually develops over time, before the arrival of children. In a repartnered family where there are already children that live for most of the time in the repartnered household, there is little time for the 'us' relationship unless it is given priority and planned.

Introducing the new partner to the children can be problematic. Often children are confronted with a *fait accompli* and are then expected to be happy about their parent's choice.

A new partner may be keen to develop a relationship with their stepchildren, but this enthusiasm may not be reciprocated, and pressure from their partner to adopt a carer role might push the child and make them uncomfortable.

New partners frequently feel ambivalent about becoming step-parents and this can cause strain in the early phases of repartnering.

A gradual introduction of the new partner is usually the most effective, with the adult taking cues from the child about how quickly to develop the relationship.

'The 'us' relationship in a nuclear family usually develops over time, before the arrival of children.'

It is important not to ask the child to divide their loyalty between the new partner and their biological parent, just as it is important not to ask the child to choose between their parents when they separate.

Consideration needs to be given to how well the child has come to terms with the loss of the first family. For example, if they are still actively mourning the loss of a parent they will not readily accept another adult.

The step-parent's experience of parenting will also influence their ability to make a ready connection with their stepchild. If this is a person's first experience with children and parenting, they will feel inexperienced and might be overwhelmed by the constant demands of children.

Depending on how the children react to the new partner, the new step-parent may also be underwhelmed by the demands from the children who demand nothing from the new partner in silent protest about the new relationship.

The children may not want to accept the step-parent and might do everything in their power to ensure that the adult relationship flounders — the silent treatment is a common tactic. They may refuse to speak or respond to the step-parent, they may even criticise them. They may demand to live with the ex-partner even if this is not feasible.

The step-parent's response needs to be consistent and respectful regardless of the children's provocation.

It may be that a love relationship between the step-parent and the children never develops, but a respectful relationship can be established, with consistent effort.

'When we got together I busted my gut to make this family work. One day it just got too much and I walked out. I decided I had had enough of the kids' attitude towards me. It was then, when I stopped trying that the family thing began to work.'

If a child does not seem to accept their step-parent, it is important to:

- Allow the child to set the pace in the relationship without demeaning the new partner
- Reasonably lower expectations in relation to the child's behaviour, although civility need not be abandoned
- Try to accept the child's non-involvement
- Ask for civil and respectful communication between the two.

Forging these new relationships in a repartnered family is challenging. It is important for all participants to maintain other interests in life so that they are able to sustain some uncomplicated ongoing relationships. These things might be in the form of work, hobbies and friends.

It needs to be recognised that it can feel like a tightrope act to try to maintain and develop current friendships and maintain links with those from the past.

As the repartnered family begins life with children, adults can be confused about sexual behaviour and the limits of privacy within the household. Each adult might have different rules about sexuality and privacy and be offended by the behaviour of their partner and their children.

As unpalatable as it might be, it needs to be said that there may be situations where

some adults are sexually attracted to their stepchildren, who may be seen as an attractive, younger version of their partner. This may occur particularly where children visit, and are not resident in the home. It can also happen in reverse, where adolescent children may be attracted to their step-parents. While this clearly does not happen in all families, it is an issue which some families may need to address.

Rules need to be established about behaviour and privacy to avoid incidents, which can occur deliberately or inadvertently. Examples of rules might be: no walking around in the nude; expecting underwear to be worn; rules about who showers with whom.

It might be helpful to call on a trusted friend or family member (one that is particularly trusted by the child or adolescent) and ask them to broach the issue with the adolescent — or at least open the door to speaking about issues related to sexuality. Many adolescents would not feel comfortable ‘confessing’ these things to their parents without the added awkwardness of the situation involving their parent’s partner.

The aim of ‘opening the door’ through a friend or family member would also be to ensure that the adolescent has someone to talk to. This person can be a reliable guide and can appropriately convey the parent’s idea of acceptable behaviour without

‘It is important not to ask the child to divide their loyalty between the new partner and their biological parent, just as it is important not to ask the child to choose between their parents when they separate.’

embarrassing or accusing anyone.

With the onset of adolescence, a child can be hurt when a step-parent no longer allows physical contact for fear that there could be a sexual component in it. Similarly a parent can feel rebuffed when an adolescent no longer freely gives hugs and kisses.

Parents may need assistance to understand that this is part of normal and healthy adolescent development. The

adolescent is developing their own personal independence and sexual identity. This has to be managed in a repartnered family, as it does in any family. It involves instilling family-specific expectations and values about acceptable sexual behaviour that will influence children’s behaviour inside and outside the family.

There is an added dimension of complexity in the repartnered family because this issue may have to be faced relatively immediately, before there has been an opportunity for the relevant attitudes and expectations to be developed.

Children



Children’s loyalties are usually to their biological parents, regardless of how the parents behave. Children do not like being put in the situation where they are forced to divide their loyalties. It is not fair to do this to children.

Often a parent may be so keen for their child to like a new step-parent, that the child may interpret this as the parent asking them to favour this person above their biological parent (the ex-partner).

As a way of deciding what they think and feel about a new step-parent, the child may test the step-parent to see if they are worthy.

Questions which dominate a child's thinking at this time are:

- Who does my parent love more, them or me?
- Who makes the rules in this family?
- What do I call my step-parent? Do I have any choice?
- How do I refer to them when I'm talking to my friends?
- If I like them, does it mean I don't love my mum/dad?
- If I like them, does it mean that my mum/dad will think I don't love them anymore?

It is not unusual for stepsiblings to be sexually attracted to each other. As with adults and children, clear rules need to be developed as to what is acceptable and safe behaviour in the household. Some of these rules might include: no sitting on each other's laps, no going into stepsibling bedrooms without permission, no scanty clothing in main rooms. Again, it might be useful for a trusted family member or friend to communicate what is acceptable behaviour to the adolescent — and also to provide a mechanism by which the child can confide their own fears or unease.

Even if sexual attraction is not present between stepsiblings, sexual experimentation between stepsiblings and friends may occur and clear messages about

acceptable and non-acceptable behaviour needs to be established.

Extended family



Grandparents may not like their adult child's choice of a new partner but they do have a choice about how they can react to the new relationship. It is not positive for grandparents to make comparisons between the new partner and the ex-partner. Making this comparison to a child is dangerous as it raises issues of loyalty and seems that they too are being asked to make judgements about which person is better, their parent or their step-parent.

The grandparents will have to determine what sort of relationship they are going to have with the ex-partner as well. As there are no social 'rules' about this some people find it difficult to know what to do. They might decide to maintain a relationship purely on the grounds of being supportive to the children, or they may prefer to sever links altogether.

Consideration will need to be given as to what relationship the grandparents are going to establish with the step-parent and their children.

Common questions grandparents need to know the answers to include:

- Do they all receive Christmas presents from us?
- Do we make any distinction between our biological and our step-grandchildren?
- How will this be perceived by others?
- Do they all get invited over to stay?
- How are family festivities celebrated, for example: Christmas, 21st birthdays?
- Who gets invited to these events?

In some stepfamilies there could be four sets of grandparents involved!

Exercise 1 – Building a couple bond



Aim: To assist participants to build a strong couple bond.

Materials: Butcher's paper and pens.

Method: Ask the participants in the group to think of ways they could spend time together as a couple.

Make two lists in the group: activities costing no money and those costing money.

Then in groups ask participants what arrangements would need to be in place in order to do these things.

Group facilitators should emphasise the importance of spending regular time together as a couple, highlighting that the relationship between the couple is the foundation of the repartnered family. A strong relationship ensures resilience during hard times, and provides a positive model of a caring, workable relationship, to the children.

Exercise 2 – Looking after the children



Aim: To consider issues related to the development of the step-parent/stepchild relationship.

Materials: Butcher's paper and pens.

Method: Divide page into two. Write barriers and strategies. Divide into small groups.

Ask the participants to discuss the barriers they have experienced or noticed in the step-parent when developing a relationship with their stepchild.

Develop a list of strategies for the biological parent and non-biological parent to help make it easier.

Facilitator should highlight strategies that are respectful and reflect mutual interest.

Remind the group that children need to move at their own pace in this area.

Task 1

Think about how you can build ‘us’ time into your new life.

Remember that the strength of the couple relationship will provide the foundation for your repartnered family.

Make an arrangement with your partner to have at least two segments of ‘us’ time – this week.

Task 2

Discuss with your partner what you are noticing in relation to the development of the stepchild/step-parent relationship.

Indicate your willingness to support the development of the relationship by asking what they would like you to do to help with this.

Ask what they are experiencing as unhelpful.

Discuss how you would both like things to be within a few months.

Task 3

Have a discussion about your children – especially in relation to sexual matters.

What might be different for them now?

Have you noticed any different behaviours?

How are considerations of privacy being taken care of in the household?

Do either of you have any concerns?

Do you need to discuss some things with your children?

Do you need to develop some new rules in the household in relation to sexual behaviour?

Task 4

Think about your parents.

How do you think they are doing in relation to your new family arrangements?

Ask your parents how it is for them now there is a new partner.

Key issues

- Understanding the complexity of emotions experienced by family members within a repartnered family, and their ex-partner's family.
- Acknowledging and learning to accept the presence of strong emotions, including anger.
- Finding ways to deal with these strong emotions.

Myths



Background notes

The concepts in this section will be addressed by considering each of the myths relevant to emotions.

'All stepfamilies should and will love each other.'

This myth assumes that in the end, the people from the different families will all automatically love each other. This may not always be the case.

While the couple themselves will probably love each other, other members of the family may realistically only be able to show courtesy and respect for each other.

It takes time to create and develop good and healthy relationships. The repartnered family is made suddenly (compared to a biological one), so there is little or no time for people to adjust to each other. It takes a considerable level of tolerance and compassion to accept another family's oddities.

The repartnered family asks a great deal of its members in relation to patience, acceptance of difference, respect for other ways of doing things, and respect for different values.

Members of repartnered families are expected to show levels of tolerance and compassion while adjusting to lots of changes in relationships, households and new and different demands made by new and different people.

Love is not automatic, but it may grow from tolerance, acceptance and respect.

Adults



Repartnered adults often report being surprised by the intensity of their emotions, which range from excitement and optimism to sadness, anger and despair.

'We'll never get it together.'

Biological parents can experience guilt that there are tensions in the adult relationship due to children. They may also experience guilt that they can't make it work.

During this time it is not uncommon for people to experience a sense of failure and then fear the possibility of experiencing another family breakdown.

'The kids don't want to have anything to do with me.'

The new partner can wonder where they fit in, and resent the time constraints that children impose upon their partner.

Jealousy and resentment can arise from the fact that an adult wanted to be with their partner, yet they had to 'take on' the children to achieve this.

After the fantasy stage has waned, a biological parent with children who repartners a person with no children often experiences guilt. They wonder where the

emotional trade-offs for the partner are, and feel helpless about being unable to reciprocate in a meaningful way. They feel the new partner is burdened by being a partner and a step-parent to children they did not want.

Jealousy can also arise if one partner still has close emotional ties (healthy or otherwise) to their ex-partner. The step-parent can again feel left out of an alliance that seems pitted against them.

To cope with these feelings of jealousy a new partner will often lay all the blame on the ex-partner and claim that they are intruding in the new relationship. This can be very unhelpful especially if the contact is about ongoing shared parenting responsibilities.

'They're always keeping secrets from me.'

Step-parents often feel that they are expendable. They feel that they are expected to be a parent most of the time, but as soon as the other biological parent is present (in person or on the telephone), they are expected to become less visible. This too can give rise to jealousy and resentment.

'I'm instantly expected to be their mother'

The new partner can also resent the way an ex-partner appears to intrude in the current family, bringing baggage from the past with them. This is particularly true if the new partner perceives the ex-partner treating the children unfairly or negatively.

The ex-partner often experiences painful feelings of:

- sadness
- hurt
- resentment
- powerlessness
- loss of control
- doubts as to how well their children are cared for

'The new partner can wonder where they fit in, and resent the time constraints that children impose upon their partner.'

- fear that the step-parent will replace them in their children's affections.

In such a potentially vulnerable state it is easy for the parents to make the children the vehicle for finding out information, acting as messengers, and attempting to punish their ex-partner.

Children



Children in repartnered families commonly feel resentment, frustration, bewilderment and sadness as they struggle to find a place and understand how to feel about the changes they face in their lives.

Having two homes, (and in some cases two new step-parents) can be confusing and unsettling for children, unless they have things clearly explained to them. Feeling obligated to like the new step-parent/s because this seems to be what the parents expect, is very difficult for children, who may be wishing the new partner did not exist.

Children often resent and feel jealous of their parent's new relationships, but don't always understand that jealousy is the uncomfortable emotion they are experiencing.

Children struggle with confusing feelings.

'If I love my stepdad, does this mean I don't love my dad?'

'Will I hurt my mum if I don't love her new partner?'

'Who are these kids who are meant to be my family? I hate them.'

'I don't feel good about this, it must be my fault.'

Uncertainty and tension in the household can cause a child to feel apprehensive about the future.

For many children, the wish that their parents would reunite persists and can lead to a pervasive depression which can last well into adulthood.

Extended family



A common concern for grandparents, particularly if they have been involved with their grandchildren, is the possibility that contact with them will be reduced.

They may worry about how they can maintain contact with both the ex-partner and the repartnered biological parent, who are the parents of their grandchildren, and they may be concerned that they will be asked to choose between them.

They can also experience sadness about the end of the first family with the beginning of the repartnered family. Grandparents also report feeling anxious about the way the new partner will treat their grandchildren. They also worry about how the relationship with the new partner might affect their child's relationship with them.

If they can be included in the new family and they are open to change, they may have feelings of hope for the future for the new family, and feel empowered to continue being supportive, although it may take years for their new relationships to consolidate.

Family friends may feel that they cannot remain friends with both adults, and feel pressure to choose which parent to support. This can be particularly difficult if a family friend has a special role in a child's life, as they may feel obliged to withdraw from that role because of the changes.

Exercise 1 – Emotions in a repartnered family



Aim: To explore emotional responses to the experience of being in a repartnered family, and to develop strategies to manage them.

Materials: Butcher's paper

Method: Working in groups of three – four, ask participants to think about:

- Areas in their lives where they have some direct control
- Areas in their lives where they have little or no control.

(a) Ask participants to identify the emotions that they feel in each of these areas.

(b) Ask participants to form pairs for the next part of the exercise and work together to develop ways of responding to, or managing, the emotions listed, especially those areas where they felt they had less control. These are likely to be related to anger, sadness and powerlessness.

(c) While still in pairs, ask participants to apply the strategies to a particular situation of their own.

Working in pairs provides the support needed in this exercise.

Exercise 2 – Sentence completion



Aim: To encourage participants to name their emotions and share these with their partners.

Materials: Pen and *Handout 24: Sentence completion sheet*.

Method: Handout the sentence completion sheet to participants.

Participants are to complete these sheets individually.

Participants then share their responses with their partner.

Exercise 3 – Understanding children’s emotions



Aim: To consider children’s emotional experiences and to develop ways of corresponding.

Materials: *Handout 22: Stresses for children in repartnered families* and *Handout 25: Children’s feelings in repartnered families.*

Method: What positive (for example, happy, excited) and negative (for example, angry, sad) emotions they observe in their children.

List these. Then select one or two and brainstorm how parents could help children to deal with them.

Ensure that participants understand that there is no such thing as good and bad emotions, all are natural human responses.

Give participants a copy of *Handout 25: Children’s feelings in repartnered families.*

Ask participants to think about their own children’s behaviour in recent times.

Work through each statement and ask parents to recall an example of their child feeling the emotions listed:

- resentment
- grief
- confusion
- sadness

Encourage parents to acknowledge their children’s feelings.

Emphasise the importance of parents talking about feelings with their children.

Task 1



Keep a journal.

Record the times you feel angry/jealous and write down the context for these feelings, what you did and how you feel about your response.

Task 2



Take notice of your children's behaviour. Talk about it with your partner.

Think about what emotions they may be expressing at this time.

Task 3



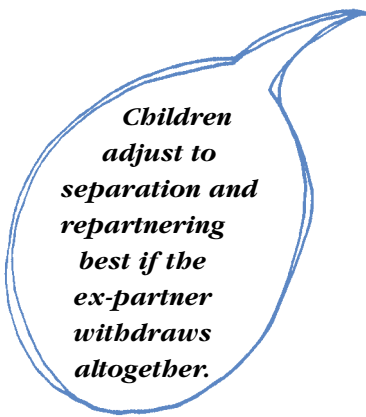
Discuss with your partner which emotions are acceptable and which are taboo in your household.

Is this the same as or different to your previous household?

Key issues

- Discovering the impact of past parenting experiences on the current relationship and parenting style.
- Differences in parenting between the biological family and the repartnered family.
- Understanding the need for step-parents to develop relationships with children before exercising parenting authority, setting limits and disciplining children.

Myths



Children adjust to separation and repartnering best if the ex-partner withdraws altogether.

It can take time for a child to adjust to the new reality of a repartnered family. However the presence of a concerned and involved biological parent is often a key ingredient for a child to settle into new and unfamiliar surroundings.

Knowing there is a stable and loving presence from the past allows a child to feel less fearful, and more able to cope with the present.

They need to know that their parents will always be their parents, no matter what the circumstances, and that they will always be there for them.

Background notes

Parenting in a repartnered family is different from parenting in a biological family due to the addition of another adult, whose ways of doing things are an unknown quantity both to the adults and children involved.

Parenting is never the same in any two situations. Although an adult may have parented children in one family, the circumstances and situations in another family will require parenting behaviours to be tailored to that particular situation.

Adults in a repartnered family have had little time to develop their joint parenting style, yet they are immediately faced with daily parenting issues that require resolution.

Parenting is often the source of conflict in a repartnered family because of the complexities involved. The establishment of a good parenting partnership or coalition is vital to achieve parenting goals and to minimise conflict.

To achieve this takes time, energy, and goodwill between partners and may require the learning of new skills.

The fact that a child has a history with only one parent is significant. The relationship formed since birth is unique and is usually stronger than any bond that may subsequently be developed with a step-parent, who has no shared history with the children.

It is the responsibility of the biological parent to inform the step-parent of the children's particular needs and what, to date, have been effective ways of parenting.

The biological parent will certainly remain, in the first instance, the key person to provide discipline.

The step-parent may contribute and gradually begin to assume a parenting role by doing such things as:

- Making going to bed a game (rather than issuing orders)
- Allowing the child to do something by themselves (then offer assistance)
- Acknowledge that one child in the family may need closer supervision than another.

The step-parent's experience of children may be very different to the biological parent's; they may never have had children, or they may have grown up children, and have forgotten what it is like to have the insistent presence of younger children.

Adults



It is important that the couple talk about how discipline is to be achieved.

This will be determined, in part, by:

- The different parenting styles of each partner
- The age of the children (particularly if both partners have children of very different ages)
- The extent of the ongoing involvement of the ex-partner/s in parenting.

Handout 11: Positive discipline techniques highlights various positive discipline strategies.

Many couples decide that the biological parent will exercise discipline, while the step-parent devotes their energy to

developing a relationship with the children. This may last for some time, and the step-parent will need to be encouraged to see the value of the back-up support role to the biological parent.

When both parents bring children into the repartnered family, they will need joint rules for the family and the children.

The step-parents may be able to take on other roles

to their partner's children such as:

- friend
- mentor
- confidante.

Children are usually reluctant to accept discipline from a step-parent unless (and until) a relationship is clearly established. When children do not live in the household full-time, and there is not daily contact, the biological parent can find it difficult to set and maintain firm limits. Instead they may try to make every visit special, courting their approval and affection at each visit. This can cause resentment from their partner and those children who live in the household full-time, and leave them feeling less special.

‘Children are usually reluctant to accept discipline from a step-parent unless (and until) a relationship is clearly established.’

Developing routines and rules that fit both resident and non-resident children really becomes a challenge. The rules of the household need whenever possible, to be the same for all. This helps to make life manageable and minimises feelings of jealousy.

Achieving an equitable and workable parenting coalition and partnership between the biological parent, the ex-partner and the step-parent can take time. Jealousy of someone else taking over a role deemed to be theirs can disrupt this. For example, an ex-partner may resent the step-parent for being in the house, but also for being able to exercise a parental and disciplinary role in relation to their children.

It is important to emphasise that only the role of partner is relinquished at separation not the role of parent, and so a 'business partnership' is vital in order to focus on effective parenting of their joint children.

This may not be possible if there has been prior violence and abuse or where there is ongoing conflict with the couple. Having specific parenting strategies in place, can reduce conflict between adults, and ensure that little issues not become the beginning of a major battle.

If a new female partner has children, it is likely that the children will be residing with her, and that the male will spend more time with these children than his own. This may raise ongoing loss and grief issues and strong feelings about financial issues and legal responsibilities for the stepfather.

'The need to balance parenting and financial survival may also affect decisions about which partner takes the primary caregiver role.'

Men who re-partner are most likely to have a contact parent role with their children.

Some separated men (13% ABS, 1997) will be in the residential parent role. It may be a large adjustment for them to take on a primary caregiver role and to develop their parenting skills. The need to balance parenting and financial survival may also affect

decisions about which partner takes the primary care-giver role.

Similarly the 54% of women with dependent children who repartner may also need to juggle between parenting and work roles (McDonald, 1993). Their households may receive financial and emotional support from a man who also has parental and child support responsibilities to children from a prior family.

Children



Children in a repartnered family can still yearn for their first family, and may not readily accept a new adult in their lives. Unless a relationship with the new partner is established, the authority to discipline will not be granted or heeded by children, even if the step-parent tries to use it.

For children the issues of parenting are clear.

They may want to know:

- How is my step-parent different from my biological parent? That is, can they tell me to do things and tell me off ?
- Who can I ask for what?

- Who makes the rules about pocket money and treats?
- Who signs my school forms? (That is, to what extent does my step-parent have the authority to act as my parent?)
- Who has to know what?
- Do I have to tell my step-parent where I am going, or can I just tell my mum or dad?

Extended family



The establishment of a repartnered family shows to grandparents and friends that this is a new beginning and also the end of the former family. They may have some ambivalence about the new relationship and not know what will now be expected of them.

The role of the extended family at this time is to provide sensitive support, seeking to recognise gaps in parenting. This will require flexibility as they adjust to the

possibility of the new partner taking up roles that they had previously performed.

A step-parent may decide that they wish to have no role in parenting. This can come as a surprise and an affront to loyal grandparents. The grandparents may have been waiting for a new adult to come into their adult child's life so that they could reduce their involvement in some of the parenting tasks that they

had undertaken simply to help out in the short term.

Grandparents may disapprove of, or dislike, the parenting methods of the new partner, and some grandparents may need support to understand and acknowledge that there are different styles of parenting which are quite legitimate.

'The establishment of a repartnered family shows to grandparents and friends that this is a new beginning and also the end of the former family.'

Exercise 1 – Parenting practices



Aim: To assist participants to recognise their parenting style and the fact that one can choose to change styles when needed.

Materials: Butcher's paper, pens, whiteboard.

Method: Break into small groups.

Answer the following questions.

- (a) What are the strengths of the way you parent your children?
- (b) What would you like to change?
- (c) What are the hurdles in your way?
- (d) What are the important things you want to keep?
- (e) Do you have any 'bottom line' issues that you refuse to change?

Exercise 2 – Involving children in decision-making



Aim: To assist participants to recognise the need for children to be involved in decision-making.

Materials: Butcher's paper, pens, whiteboard.

Method: Break into small groups.

Ask participants to make a list of the areas in which they think their children could contribute to decisions.

Ask participants to list the areas in which the responsibility for the decision-making should rest exclusively with the adults.

Ask participants to list areas in which it may be appropriate to involve children in decision-making.

Ask participants to consider how they would handle decisions about:

- (a) Where a child should live.
- (b) A wedding in the family.
- (c) Which friends can sleep over.

Report back to the larger group.

The facilitator needs to validate the diversity of views and highlight the fact that each family needs to form their own views on these matters and convey them to the children.

Exercise 3 – The perfect step-parent



Aim: To help participants become aware of the common pressures felt by step-parents.

Materials: Large sheet of white paper.

Method: Place the large sheet of paper in the middle of the room.

Ask participants to take off their shoes, stand up and form a circle around the sheet of paper. Give each person a texta.

Ask for a volunteer to lie on the paper while several participants help draw an outline around the person.

Encourage the group to imagine the qualities a perfect step-parent would have. Then ask that each person express these qualities by drawing them on the body outline. If unable to be drawn they can write instead.

Join in by contributing occasionally putting in your own ideas and by drawing ideas from people who are less outgoing.

A few suggestions:

- Ballet shoes for stepping carefully
- Protective helmet to ward off the blows
- A big heart for giving generously without expectations
- Dark glasses as they don't notice what goes on
- Thick skin to withstand hurts
- A big smile is a sense of humour to help you get through
- Big ears for empathic listening
- Fig leaf for modesty and new sexuality
- Big purse or wallet to meet increased demands
- Eyes in the back of your head to be on guard
- Well-developed muscles to support your partner or the children
- Taxi driver's hat for chauffeuring stepchildren
- Egg shells underfoot — for step-parent to tread carefully
- Caring hands for holding your stepchild's hand.

Ask participants to choose and stand on the feature which they feel is most important to being a perfect step-parent. Ask individuals to briefly explain why they have chosen that particular attribute.

Exercise 4 – A parenting coalition between ex-partners

Aim: For parents to consider the merits of establishing arrangements between households as a way of conducting the shared business of parenting.

Materials: *Handout 19: Developing a parenting coalition between ex-partners.*

Method: Have participants read and discuss the handout.

Divide the group into small groups to discuss the following:

- What do they think of the idea?
- What do they particularly like about it?
- What if anything seems unrealistic?
- What would get in the way of them developing a coalition?

Use the exercise to emphasise that parents, even after repartnering, have responsibilities as parents and that even though the previous couple relationship has ended, the parenting relationship needs to continue. The idea of a coalition provides a structure and process to support the ongoing responsibilities.

Exercise 5 – Feedback loop on parenting behaviours

Aim: To demonstrate the way biological parents and step-parents can become polarised when parenting.

Materials: Whiteboard, whiteboard marker pens.

Method: On either side of the board write headings 'biological parent' and 'step-parent'.

First ask the biological parent, 'What words do you imagine the step-parent might use to describe your parenting of your children?' List their answers under the heading 'biological parent'.

Next ask the step-parent, 'What words do you imagine the biological parent might use to describe your parenting of their children?' List their answers.

Then indicate a circular motion by drawing an arrow from the biological parent to the step-parent and another returning. Describe how it is possible that if the biological parent sees the step-parent being too hard and unforgiving, the biological parent might become more understanding and soft with their children.

In a large group discuss and make a list of successful ways of slowing down or breaking this cycle.

Exercise 6 – The fish bowl



Allow at least 40 minutes for this exercise. See page 215 for notes.

Aim: To explore the differences between parenting for a biological parent and a step-parent.

Materials: Chairs, *Handout 26: Parenting roles in the repartnered family*.

Method: Arrange the chairs to form an inner and an outer circle. Divide participants into two groups: step-parents and biological parents. Where an individual is both, allow them to choose the group they want to join. Ask step-parents to sit in the inner circle and biological parents to sit in the outer circle.

Explain that the participants sitting in the outer circle are only to listen.

The facilitator asks the 'step-parent group' questions to stimulate discussion.

Questions:

What has gone as well or better than you thought it would, in your repartnered family? What has been more difficult, or gone differently from what you had hoped or expected?

Ask participants to move to the other circle so biological parents are in the inner circle and step-parents are in the outer circle.

Repeat the exercise asking biological parents questions while the step-parents remain silent.

After this ask the question: Why is it sometimes difficult for you to let the step-parent handle the children?

This is a powerful exercise. It is often the first time a parent or step-parent has been able to understand how it is for their partner.

Move out into the larger group and develop a list of strategies that will work when parenting in a repartnered family. Ask participants what they need to surrender and what they need to take up, in order to parent more successfully.

Following the fish bowl exercise, give participants *Handout 26: Parenting roles in the repartnered family* to take home and discuss.

Task 1



As a

- a) biological parent
- b) step-parent
- c) ex-partner

plan how you would like to continue to parent your children.

Be specific about:

1. What would you be doing if you were to do this?
2. How would that make you feel?
3. What needs to happen to enable you to continue this role?
4. What needs to be talked about between you and your ex-partner/the step-parent/the biological parent?

Task 2



Consider the things that your children have not been told about their new situation.

Do they need more information about any aspect of the repartnered family?

Are you sure you can talk about this with your children without blaming other adults?

Task 3



If you are a new step-parent, or a contact parent who sees your children infrequently, it may be difficult for you to get started and sustain conversations with your children.

Read *Handout 18: Tea Time Topics for Families* and see if there are suggestions there that may help you with this. Talking with children is the best way to get to know them and build a relationship.

Try out at least one of these topics the next time you see the children.

Key issues

- Developing strategies for handling finances in the repartnered family.
- Understanding the link between psychological well-being and financial considerations.
- Clarifying the financial responsibilities of parents, new partners and ex-partners.
- Recognising the importance of revisiting financial arrangements, including the division of resources between two families.

Myths

Now that we're together we will be better off financially.

I don't have to pay for my kids — I don't see them.

She's okay, she's repartnered. They've got plenty of money, I shouldn't have to pay.

I can't afford to keep paying child support for my kids now that I have stepchildren to support.

Background notes

A shortage of money can be a real issue in the new, repartnered family. There may be real and perceived inequities in the repartnered family income.

For example, in a repartnered family where both partners are parents of children from a previous relationship, one partner may receive little or no maintenance/child support from their ex-spouse while the other partner is committed to paying a relatively large sum of maintenance to their ex-partner.

Both new partners may be paying child support and their issue will be how to start their own family on depleted finances. The financial situation is so tight for some people they may see no possibility of being able to have children with their new partner.

Repartnered families may have to accommodate children who usually live in the household as well as children who visit. Then there are fluctuating expenses such as transport, food, clothing and entertainment.

Household budgeting can be difficult as people try to meet the needs of more children.

There is the additional stress of the expectations of financial and lending institutions, which have strict guidelines on loans for houses and cars. These organisations are often not flexible or accommodating about the uncertainty of the household budget (such as clothing expenses or grocery bills that fluctuate depending on where children live at different times of the year). Nor are they

structured to understand the complex financial incomings and outgoings of the repartnered family budget, including maintenance/child support income, Centrelink assistance, one-off or special financial support from ex-partners for children or any regular salary/wages payment.

If either partner has their own business, this equation becomes even more complex.

In addition to these expenses are the changing life circumstances of returning to the workforce, moving house to accommodate more children and changing or obtaining work.

Facts about families and money

Following separation, children reside with their mothers in 87% of families, and with their fathers in 13% of families (ABS, 1997). This means the father is usually the parent liable to pay child support.

Nearly three quarters (74%) of these fathers and just over half (54%) of mothers eventually repartner (McDonald, 1993).

Forty-one percent of families with a biological parent living elsewhere do not receive any child support (ABS, 1997).

The importance of financial support for children in repartnered families is highlighted by the fact that, in 1997, one in three marriages in Australia was a remarriage (ABS, 1999).

Forty percent of women and 39 percent of men who remarry have children under 16 years of age from a previous marriage (ABS, 1999). These figures do not include de facto relationships.

In Australia there are laws that encourage and ensure that both parents accept their responsibility to provide financial support to their children. However, there are situations where one parent is not contributing to the financial support of their children because the location of a parent is unknown, or when a parent has no income.

Adults



The new couple will need to talk about their values, priorities and commitments as a basis for deciding how to manage their money.

Discussions will be guided by original family experiences and the couples' experiences in other relationships.

Issues that need to be considered:

- Will all our money be combined?
- Will some be combined and some kept separate?
- Will we keep all our finances separate?

Parental responsibility is not affected by any change in the parents' relationship whether parents separate or repartner. Each parent continues to be responsible for making decisions about their child's welfare, unless a court order specifies differently. This includes matters such as where the child will live and who the child will have contact with.

'The importance of financial support for children in repartnered families is highlighted by the fact that, in 1997, one in three marriages in Australia was a remarriage.'

A parent's residence or contact with their children determines their eligibility or liability for child support. The reality, according to the statistics, is that the majority of fathers who repartner will be contact parents and therefore liable to pay child support, whereas most mothers will have children living with them and will be eligible to receive child support.

Child support may be reduced if parents share care of their children equally, or where one parent has substantial contact with a child. Government agencies such as Centrelink and CSA have a range of payments and services to suit a variety of family situations.

There are a variety of flexible choices available to parents in the way that they pay and receive child support. Where possible, parents are encouraged to work together to manage their child support responsibilities.

Parents can arrange to make their own private child support arrangements or seek guidance from CSA. These private arrangements can be spoken or written. They can cover the amount of child support agreed on and how and when it is paid. A parent's right to agree on amounts of child support is limited if the carer parent is receiving Centrelink benefits.

CSA can advise on how to organise private arrangements or provide a number of options that best suit individual circumstances. Even if the amount of child support is set by CSA or by the courts, parents are encouraged to make payment arrangements that suit them both without

'Feelings of resentment can be strong if financial commitment to the first family means the new family misses out.'

going through CSA. If private payments are not a suitable choice then appropriate collection by CSA can be arranged.

Repartnering often increases the level of dissatisfaction about financial arrangements between ex-partners, as one parent adopts changed priorities and new commitments.

A parent is responsible for supporting his or her natural children, whether or not they live in the same household. Some may feel 'squeezed' and pressured by the demands this imposes.

For some families it means a reduced standard of living, and a need for the new partners to negotiate who will pay and/or be responsible for what. Fathers may feel a tension between continuing to share the cost of raising children from their previous relationship and their commitment to starting a new family.

Feelings of resentment can be strong if financial commitment to the first family means the new family misses out. This can lead to putting off the decision to have children.

The arrival of a new child can cause an increased awareness of and a resentment about, money 'going out', at the very time when there is usually less money coming in.

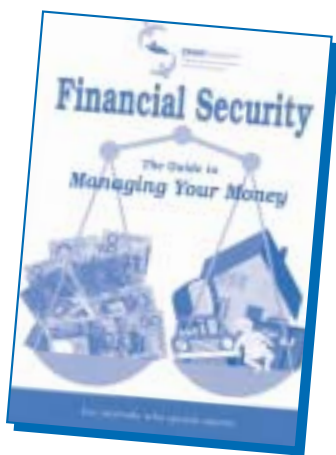
This situation is even more difficult when a step-parent is paying for their children who do not live in the repartnered family, or where no money is coming in from the biological parent of the other stepchildren.

When CSA is involved, it looks at a number of factors to determine how much child support should be paid. If any of these factors change, it may mean that the child support needs to be recalculated.

If circumstances change, parents may be collecting or paying the wrong amount of child support. Parents paying child support through CSA may also be accumulating an unnecessary debt if CSA has not been notified of any change in circumstances. CSA provides a number of services that support parents in working through options to reflect their change in circumstances.

A booklet titled *Financial Security: The Guide to Managing your Money* is available from local financial counsellors or by calling CSA. The book is intended to help parents take steps to control and stay in control of their financial situations.

CSA has a range of services and information products available to help separated parents manage their child support responsibilities.



Some of these services include arranging things so that parents can agree to make payments to a third party for items such as school fees, non-cash payments in lieu of child support, or prescribed payments (prescribed by law) such as child care costs can be credited as a child support payment. Parents should discuss their different

circumstances and possible options with CSA before making any arrangements for paying and receiving child support.

It annoys Mike when his ex complains about not having enough money. He says, 'Don't worry about the money. I'm happy to have Josh full-time. I'll sort out the money myself. It will be a real struggle because Megan (his new partner) isn't working now that we've got our new baby, but I don't care how much it costs. I just want my kid.'

Some parents become very angry with arrangements when they are suffering financial hardships. This is particularly common when the ex-partner perceives the other parent as being comfortable financially.

When feeling 'trapped by the system' some parents believe the only solution to their problem is to stop working and receive a government benefit. There are other solutions, local services and support groups in the community (particularly for fathers in this situation), that offer practical guidance and strategies for managing money and emotions.

Placing emphasis on the child's welfare rather than on perceptions of unfairness is helpful and necessary when working with people in these situations.

'The other day my four-year old son said to me 'Mummy says I can't have new skates because you don't give her enough money.' After that I couldn't do anything right for the whole visit. I get so wild that she uses him to get at me. I try not to show it, but I feel like punching walls.

Resolving these money issues is enough to test even the most committed couple and the most competent problem solvers. It is even more difficult when child support is used to play-out other unresolved conflicts from the past relationship. Unfortunately everyone loses from such battles, especially the children.

Mediation services can help people sort out these issues. Mediation offers cooperative problem solving and decision-making and a trained mediator helps people discuss issues so that they can find some answers.

Often the new partner is the first to be aware that necessary financial decisions made earlier have an emotional impact on the relationship and the whole family.

Decisions such as: to live in the marital

home and to keep the former marital bed. It helps to acknowledge this from all points of view since everyone is likely to be uncomfortable and/or resentful about it, even though they know it has to be that way.

In the situation when a former partner has died, there may be resistance and reluctance to adjust to change in the family.

In these circumstances, it

can be particularly difficult for a new partner.

It is also difficult for childless partners who join men or women with either residential or non-residential children. Resentment can also develop where there are expectations about how, or indeed whether, the step-

‘Resolving these money issues is enough to test even the most committed couple and the most competent problem solvers. It is even more difficult when child support is used to play-out other unresolved conflicts from the past relationship.’

parent contributes financially to the stepchildren.

Children



Children are sensitive to the emotional impact of financial conflict between their parents, and between their biological parent and step-parent.

Children may experience difficulties in adjusting to the differences that exist in the two households of which they are members.

These differences are likely to include

- Attitudes to money
- Entitlements to money
- Pocket money
- Inheritance rights for adult children
- Ways of managing money
- Lifestyle expectations.

‘Often the new partner is the first to be aware that necessary financial decisions made earlier have an emotional impact on the relationship and the whole family.’

Children are acutely aware of financial and social inequalities between families and between sets of children in the repartnered family.

Likely differences, inevitably perceived as inequalities, could include:

- One group of children going to private school while others go to state school
- Differences in clothes, holidays, toys
- Differences in rates of pocket money
- Types of outings.

Clarifying rules about money and the reasons for these rules help children to understand and accept these differences.

Children can feel like pawns in a money game where parents have ongoing disputes about money. They may learn to play the game themselves, for example, playing one parent off against the other, about pocket money, clothes or outings.

Older children may also change residence from time-to-time and this affects household budgets, parenting agreements and financial planning. Frequent reviews of financial arrangements are usually needed. For this reason it is important to establish constructive and non-emotional ways of raising, discussing and meeting changes related to money matters.

Extended family



When there are financial difficulties, grandparents and other members of the extended family may be asked to contribute financially to the support of the children.

The willingness of members of the extended family to provide money is dependant on many factors including:

- Their own financial position
- Their relationship with the children
- The amount of time they spend with the children
- Their perception of the level of support being provided by both biological parents
- Their views on the appropriateness of step-parents providing money for the support of their stepchildren.

‘Children can feel like pawns in a money game where parents have ongoing disputes about money.’

Exercise 1 – Managing money

Aim: For participants to think creatively and share ideas about ways of managing money. Be sure to include all households/people for whom you are financially responsible.

Materials: Whiteboard or butcher's paper, pens.

Method:

1. As a group, brainstorm a list of possible ways to manage money in a repartnered family.
2. Ask group members what they find works, doesn't work and why.

Exercise 2 – In the interest of the child

Aim: To encourage parents to move from 'rights' based thinking, to 'responsibility' based thinking as parents (including the legal responsibility to provide financial support for their natural children).

Materials: Whiteboard or butcher's paper, pens.

Method: Brainstorm with group members the kinds of conflicts they have with ex-partners regarding financial issues. List these in column one.

In column two ask them to match up the outcome they wanted against each conflict.

In column three encourage them to devise outcomes that are 'in the best interests of the child'.

Summary discussion is to focus on 'responsibilities' as opposed to 'rights' and to highlight which approach is likely to lead to outcomes in the best interests of the children.

Exercise 3 – What do I bring with me

Aim: To raise participants' awareness of how the past influences the present.

Materials: Paper, pens.

Method: Ask participants to write down who made decisions about budgets and handling money in (a) their family of origin, (b) past relationships, (c) as a single person and (d) their preference now.

This can be discussed with partners, in small groups or in the large group.

If this exercise is used with couples, areas of potential conflict should be noted. The group leader could model the use of a conflict resolution strategy to address the issues, or alternatively, the group could brainstorm strategies to address the issues.

Exercise 4 – Guest speaker



Aim: To provide participants with current information about financial arrangements.

Method: Invite a financial counsellor to address issues around handling assets, liabilities, superannuation and joint purchases.

Brief the speaker on issues which are likely to arise from the group, or things you know they would particularly like to hear addressed by the guest.

Give the speaker a brief outline of the group's participants so they can construct their presentation accordingly.

Allow time for questions and discussion.

Task 1



Read *Handout 27: Finance and feeling*. Discuss with your partner during the week.

Task 2



Discuss and decide on how you will handle the finances in your repartnered family: all joint?; some joint?; all separate? (this includes bank accounts, paying bills, child support, holidays).

Task 3



Plan how you will bring about one change needed in relation to finance and the house, furnishings and belongings. In the next week begin to implement this change.

Task 4



In the next week identify perceived financial inequalities. That is, what do you think the differences are? Plan how you will begin to handle one situation arising from financial inequalities and responsibilities in your family.

Task 5



Discuss together what steps you will take to help children understand and accept the reasons for differences and inequalities between the different sets of children in the family.

Key issues

- Recognising legal issues from the previous relationship, including divorce and child support.
- Understanding the legal impact of repartnering (for example, new de facto partner or remarriage) on each family member.
- Developing awareness of related legal issues which may require follow-up.

Myths

We just want to get on with our lives — we don't need any legal advice.

We don't have any assets between us, so we don't need to make a will.

I made a will years ago, so it's probably still okay.

Background notes

Issues about which parent the children will live with are likely to resurface at this time. It is not uncommon for children to make residency shifts at this stage if they feel uncomfortable or threatened by their parent's new relationship.

Children may express a wish to spend more contact time with their other parent, or even to change residence. Parenting agreements may need to be renegotiated and Centrelink entitlements reassessed.

Child support responsibilities for children of a prior relationship are not affected by repartnering. However, spousal maintenance may be affected by repartnering.

Sometimes one or both of the adults in the new relationship may want the children and the new partner to take the same family name. This is often part of an attempt to give an instant sense of family identity, but it can cause distress for children and the other parent if they are not consulted and feelings and preferences are not taken into account.

Unresolved relationship tensions with an ex-partner may flare up again at the time of repartnering.

Where a parent has experienced family violence or had concerns for the safety of the children with the other parent, the impact of these tensions may need to be addressed.

Some interesting facts:

- Nearly 1,000,000 children have a parent living elsewhere
- Seven out of eight children live with their mothers following separation
- Seven out of eight payers of child support are men
- About three-quarters of separated men repartner within four to six years, compared with about half of separated women.

(Australian Bureau of Statistics 1997)

A marriage relationship ends legally with divorce. This allows the ex-partners to

remarry, but it does not end their responsibilities as parents. If repartnering occurs soon after separation, before property settlement and divorce have been finalised, the beginning of the new relationship may be complicated.

When a parent forms a new relationship it may change parenting arrangements but it doesn't change parental responsibilities. If children change residence at this time, or if the couple have a child together this will generally have some impact on child support.

'When a parent forms a new relationship it may change parenting arrangements but it doesn't change parental responsibilities.'

Many couples live together before remarriage without necessarily considering the legal impact of this. The Family Court can only deal with disputes about the property of married partners. State and territory laws apply to property disputes if a couple is not married and these vary in each

jurisdiction. (The Family Court website at www.familycourt.gov.au is a useful reference on this issue.)

When repartnering occurs it is likely that wills may require revision by all adults in the immediate and extended family. Family consultations about parental intentions may be useful at this time to prevent future disputes. Wills are governed by state and territory laws, and legal advice is essential regarding the effect of:

- divorce;
- remarriage;
- the differing legal implications for de facto and married partners; and

- children from different relationships.

As a rule of thumb, legal practitioners recommend wills be reviewed every five to ten years or whenever significant changes occur.

Legal advice is also essential regarding updating beneficiaries of superannuation and insurance policies.

Adults



The Family Law Act emphasises that although couples may choose to separate, all parents are 'parents for life', and parents must share full responsibility for each of their children.

CSA acknowledges that the emotional, financial and legal circumstances of many parents who repartner may create difficulties (for example, in managing the competing needs of first and second families). CSA can assist parents with identifying what child support options are available.

Parents can choose to make private child support arrangements. CSA can advise on how to organise these private arrangements or provide a number of options that best suit individual circumstances. Parents' right to agree on amounts of child support is limited if the carer parent is getting Centrelink benefits. If private payments are not a suitable choice then appropriate collection by CSA can be arranged. Even if the amount of child support is set by CSA or by the courts, parents are encouraged to arrange payments that suit them both.

Fact Sheets are available from CSA to provide information on options available to parents.

Obtain and provide as handouts to participants the fact sheets called *Information for Separated Parents* (Handout 16 provided in this resource) and *Changes you need to tell the Child Support Agency about* by phoning 131272.

Joe, aged 42, has been separated for two and a half years, and has been living with Anna (age 40) and her three young children for one year in their small rented home. Joe has been slowly developing relationships with them. Anna works part-time during preschool. Her children rarely see their father and are looking to Joe for 'fathering'. Their father is in and out of work and his child support payments are infrequent. Joe pays child support to his ex-wife for their two teenage children who live in the formerly-owned joint home, in a different part of the city. Joe sees his children as often as he can. Overnight visits are crowded and sometimes tense and his children are coming less often. Joe and Anna are both finding their new family tough-going. They would like to have a child and buy a home together, but are struggling to make ends meet already.

Some parents with whom the children live may link prompt payment of child support with the other parent's 'right' to contact visits. While this is an understandable reaction, parental responsibilities are not conditional on money. There are other actions open to a carer parent such as to renegotiate contact arrangements or apply for CSA to collect the payment.

A parent is not legally entitled to refuse or frustrate a child's contact with the other parent when child support payments are late.

For some people, the new partner's legal relationship with their partner's children is unclear. The facts are that:

- The new partner/step-parent has no legal duty to maintain children from his or her partner's prior relationship, unless that duty is imposed on them by a Family Court order
- If a person adopts a child, they have the same parental responsibilities towards that adopted child as they would towards their natural child
- They may find their income subsidising household costs especially where their partner is paying child support
- If one or both partners in the new household is paying child support, Centrelink will deduct the amount of child support paid in the financial year from their income when assessing any family allowance entitlement for that year
- Centrelink includes the new partner's (married or de facto) income in assessment of family entitlements for benefits
- A step-parent does not automatically have parental responsibilities. In the absence of a court order, the child's natural parents share parental responsibilities. Unless specifically

'A parent is not legally entitled to refuse or frustrate a child's contact with the other parent when child support payments are late.'

authorised in writing by a biological parent, a step-parent cannot sign a medical consent for hospital procedure or legal consent for a school trip. (This may present dilemmas where a step-parent takes on the role of primary caregiver.)

Parents should discuss whether to authorise step-parents to assume certain aspects of caring for stepchildren. For example, taking children to the doctor, collecting children from school.

One day my stepson's school rang me at work. They had been unable to contact his mother and he needed medical attention for a badly injured thumb. I had to take him to hospital where I signed the medical form for his treatment. I guess this was not questioned because he had the same family name as mine. I realised later that I had no authority to do this.

State and territory laws apply to many issues relating to families, including wills, changing names, medical powers of attorney and family violence.

State and territory laws rather than the Family Law Act apply to property disputes between unmarried couples, including those with children.

State and territory laws also apply to couples in same-sex relationships.

These laws can differ in each jurisdiction and legal advice is essential.

Children



Children can easily feel caught in the middle of disputes about residency and contact, which could lead to feelings of distress and powerlessness. Any decisions must have the best interests of the children in mind. This includes discussing with the children any arrangements made, taking into account their age, feelings and the circumstances of each child.

Adoption has been used as a means of changing a child's name. Following adoption, the child and the adoptive parent have the same legal relationship that a parent has with a biological child. Particular care should be taken to ensure this is in the child's interests. Adoption changes a child's legal identity permanently, which affects other things, such as inheritance.

Adult children may be apprehensive when a parent repartners, as they see that their potential inheritance may be changed by their parent's new commitment. Again, it is important to urge people to seek legal advice.

Extended family



A step-parent, grandparent or anyone concerned with the care, welfare and development of a child may apply to the Family Court for a parenting order for contact with the child. This situation may arise after separation, divorce or the death of the child's biological parent, or after any subsequent separation and divorce.

The significance of the 'social parent' role is growing as the number of repartnered families increase. The role refers to situations where an adult who is not biologically related to a child, assumes some of the responsibilities of a biological parent. It is a complex area of the law and these arrangements are often informal. In many cases the child's parents have not discussed and agreed upon the extent to which the new 'parent' may assume responsibility for the child, or make decisions about the child's welfare.

Adults in the new family may want to change the children's names in an attempt to fast-track family consolidation. This may be counterproductive if it ignores children's wishes. It is not a decision to be made lightly on a child's behalf; children often do not understand the significance of the decision to relinquish their family name until they are adults. It should be recognised that for some children, one of the few tangible links they have with an absent father is the shared surname.

It may also harm the relationship between the child's contact parent the residing parent, the new partner and extended families. The Family Law Act makes it clear that the main consideration must be the best interests of the child.

'It should be recognised that for some children, one of the few tangible links they have with an absent father is the shared surname.'

'About a year after I had met my stepson William, he asked if he could call me dad. His own father had gone to live overseas after he left William and his mother three years before. A few months later when his mother and I planned to marry (she was pregnant with our first child) she decided to take my family name. William then asked if he could change his name to be the same as the rest of the family. We thought this was a great idea. Not only would William be part of the family but it would also give us a real sense of unity. I didn't anticipate the reaction we got from his paternal grandparents. They were devastated. Ever since that time they have continued to write to William using his biological father's name.'

Exercise 1 – Current legal issues



Aim: To name and share the legal issues currently confronting group participants.

Materials: Whiteboard, pens.

Method: Brainstorm family law issues, which group participants have experienced or are currently experiencing.

Use a suggestion circle to problem solve particular issues that are current.

Ask group members what they have learnt from these experiences.

Note: It is important to make clear that group advice has no legal status.

Exercise 2 – Sharing resources



Aim: To encourage participants to share their knowledge of useful community resources.

Materials: Whiteboard, pens.

Method: Brainstorm together all the resources that you have used/heard about in the community.

Which have been useful?

Are they relevant to both men and women?

Exercise 3 – Guest speaker



Aim: To provide participants with current information with regard to legal issues.

Method: Invite a legal practitioner/family lawyer to address the issues relevant to the group.

Allow time for questions and discussion.

Exercise 4 – Suggestion circle



Aim: To name and share the legal issues of children.

Method: Use a suggestion circle to suggest possible solutions to dilemmas, with a focus on the best interests of the children. (See page 215 for further details about this technique.)

Make or obtain an up-to-date checklist of all the fact sheets and brochures from CSA. Hand it out. Ensure participants have accurate up-to-date information. Ask CSA for a speaker. Organise a community information session and use it as a springboard for promoting further group education sessions.

Exercise 5 – Last names



Aim: To identify the impact of changing family names.

Method: Ask group participants how many different last names family members have.

Ask for a positive and a negative experience with names and how they have dealt with this.

Task 1



Clarify any unresolved legal issues or unclear obligations from previous relationships.

Task 2



During the next two weeks, find out about one legal service for separated men or women who are single parents that might be useful to you. Make an appointment if appropriate.

Task 3



Talk to your new partner about your ongoing legal commitments to children from your previous relationships. Follow up any facts that you are unsure of.

Task 4



Revise your wills, or make one for the first time. Make a start by writing draft wills in the next two weeks. Talk with your partner about what resources you bring, what provision you would want to make for existing family, and what each of your priorities are for your new relationship. Make an appointment with a lawyer to finalise your wills.

Task 5



Discuss with your partner the extent to which they will be involved in the day-to-day care of the children. Seek legal advice when considering whether to give them authorisation to make certain decisions for convenience or in case of emergency.

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