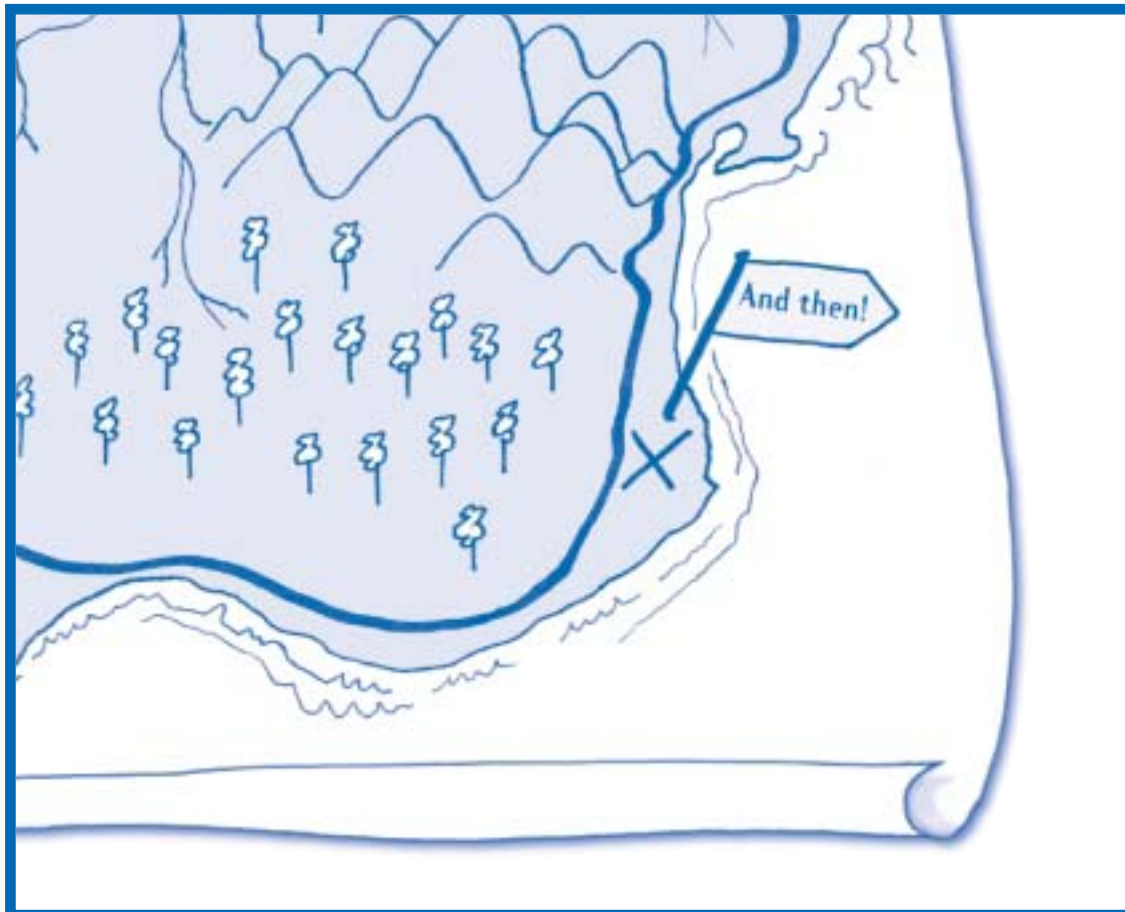


And then!

...Epilogue



This stage refers to the period in people's lives when they adjust to the reality of their new family arrangements.

The purpose of this short section is to provide hope and encouragement to service providers and repartnered families.

This section presents the realities and the ongoing challenges. Its purpose is to encourage persistence and to present a realistic picture. It could be given to participants as take-home reading at the end of a course.

It may be adapted to help repartnered families:

- reach their goals
- recognise and value their periods of stability
- anticipate likely pressure points and plan ways of managing these.

And they all lived happily ever after...

In time, repartnered families develop their own patterns of commitment, stability and

resilience. It is important that service providers and members of repartnered families do not lose sight of the likelihood of achieving a settled and stable family life.

For most, it is a long, hard road, requiring stamina and persistence.

No family ever lives happily ever after! All families experience

growth, change, conflict, adjustment, compromise, periods of relative calmness and periods of relative tension.

This is particularly the case for repartnered families.

Nevertheless, repartnered families in time begin to experience longer periods of equilibrium more frequently. Each member of the family feels more comfortable; individuals' needs are met, and the sense of previous losses begins to be replaced by a sense of stability and durability.

Reaching a point where individuals begin to feel and show commitment to the repartnered family is a hard-won milestone. At this point, a real sense of achievement and confidence begins to emerge.

This provides the repartnered family with the capacity to endure and respond constructively to the ongoing changes, challenges and complexities of family life, such as conflict in relationships, financial

difficulties, unemployment, absent parents and other crises.

This growing sense of stability eventually provides the repartnered family with the resilience necessary for its future well-being.

With the passage of time, adults usually develop tolerance for the differences in each other's parenting. They accept the parent's pivotal role in the family and their partner is usually able to tolerate the levels of distance required if they are to fulfil their role adequately.

Given the degree of complexity in the repartnered family structure, the couple gradually work out appropriate strategies for setting limits and usually learn good problem solving and conflict resolution skills, even though previous issues can still be difficult to resolve.

Many families experience recurring patterns of conflict which are always upsetting, but they begin to be recognised and no longer throw things into turmoil. These patterns of conflict are frequently not resolved until the children leave home.

'I realise I was hard on my stepson. I used to accuse him of being a mummy's boy and of course his mother ran to protect him at these times. He's an adult now and we have a strong relationship.'

Good parenting is more easily attained where children have been able to maintain relationships with both their parents and step-parent, and the ex-partner has been able to maintain a committed relationship with the children. Generally, by this time, the logistics of children moving between homes is no longer a source of major conflict between the adults.

'All families experience growth, change, conflict, adjustment, compromise, periods of relative calmness and periods of relative tension.'

The tolerance levels of adults have usually increased, leading to acceptance and respect for differences.

Repartnered family members can experience a sense of achievement about the relationships that have been forged and can enjoy the richness that comes with the complexity of their new family structure.

Ambivalent feelings of happiness, trust, sadness, and fear, particularly at times of family celebration, can still be experienced. Now that the sense of family is stronger, the effect of these upsets has fewer ramifications. For example, a step-parent may feel sad, but may choose to miss a family event if it is felt that their presence would cause some upset.

At an earlier stage this would have precipitated a major family crisis and would not have been accepted or respected as a reasonable choice.

Children and adolescents may still experience a range of emotions about their step-parent, especially when their other parent is absent or has died.

'My mother died when I was seven and my stepmother came on the scene when I was an adolescent. I used to feel so confused. I wanted to bug her but at the same time, I pushed her away.'

Boundaries

The couple has by now achieved enough solidarity to maintain the couple boundaries at events where extended family members are present. For many people in repartnered families, maintaining the boundaries is an ongoing challenge. This can be done by allotting time between the couple, individuals, family and various parent/child combinations within the family.

It is important for parents to keep in contact with their children and for children to know their parents.

It is not uncommon for children who have grown up in a repartnered family and lost contact with their father or mother to seek out their 'absent' parent when they become young adults.

A child's relationship with a step-parent can become closer when the child (particularly when they are in their twenties) begin to talk to their step-parent in order to resolve past issues, and in some cases, express their appreciation.

The 'step-parent role' of the non-biological parent can often be a very satisfying one, especially when they are able to take on the role of an intimate outsider (intimate enough to be privy to important details of their stepchild's lives, and distant enough to be a confidante).

Often the step-parent cannot choose how much they 'put into' the repartnered family. Their partner's work commitments and gender role expectations, may mean the step-parent feels obliged to assume the

'Many families experience recurring patterns of conflict which are always upsetting, but they begin to be recognised and no longer throw things into turmoil.'

primary care-giver role. Step-parents often have a high level of commitment to making the repartnered family work.

Loss and Change

This phase in the repartnered family's life is characterised by an increased acceptance of change. Change is no longer seen as threatening, as the family members have learnt skills for dealing with change. There is also an appreciation of family member's previous losses and how and when this tends to be expressed. Individuals now recognise this and their understanding usually leads to supportive behaviours, or at least acceptance.

Particular situations or specific events may provoke a wave of emotions arising out of a past sense of loss (for example, seeing an 'intact' family enjoy a continuous, close relationship) but there is now a shared sense of understanding about the memory this represents and why it may trigger such a response.

Some family members may still have fantasies about the original family and these may become apparent at special events (for example, the step-parent may be excluded from wedding arrangements and may not be included in wedding photos).

In relation to money and legal matters, members of repartnered families eventually develop workable approaches to managing

these. Issues tend to arise around events in the life-cycle of the repartnered family, the life-cycle of the couple, and the life-cycle of the individual family members.

These transitions may be predictable, for example children marrying, or unpredictable, such as children changing residence, further separation, and the death of a partner.

'Particular situations or specific events may provoke a wave of emotions arising out of a past sense of loss but there is now a shared sense of understanding about the memory this represents and why it may trigger such a response.'

If there is ongoing tension between ex-partners this may lead to heightened tensions around particular legal and financial issues.

Throughout their life-cycle, repartnered families continue to be dynamic entities. In each area of family life, their preceding efforts eventually lead to stability. Many families then experience and benefit from the confidence that comes from having developed a solid foundation for dealing with issues as they arise.

This is their reward for the energy and effort they have expended in working through issues during previous phases.

References – And then!

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