



Status Issues in Stepfamilies

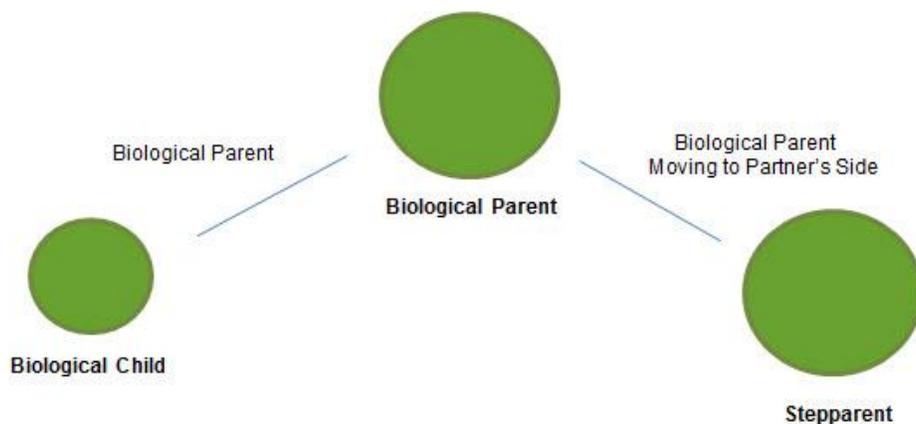
by John Mariner, L.C.S.W.

A fair amount has been written in the stepfamily literature on the subject of couple bonding. The importance of the biological parent and the stepparent developing a strong, healthy relationship can hardly be overemphasized. Status issues in stepfamilies stand directly in the way of healthy couple bonding. In this article, my intention is to illuminate the problems caused by unrecognized and unresolved status issues in stepfamilies. I write this in respectful acknowledgement of the many couples I know in stepfamilies, and out of deep gratitude to my wife Suzanne and our son David for my own stepfamily experience. It is my hope that others beyond my immediate circle of family, friends and clients will find this information useful.

I believe that a perspective on status gives one a map — a useful picture of the initial “lay of the land” of a stepfamily. This map can be illustrated in a few simple diagrams or by demonstrating a family sculpture in a workshop. When all the pieces of the new stepfamily settle and fall in place, a quite understandable and dysfunctional pattern is usually established. With some variations, it appears as follows:

The person in the original relationships, the biological parent, winds up being in the middle with his or her child(ren) pulling on one arm and her/his spouse pulling on the other. The biological parent often describes how they feel in the middle, pulled first one way and then the other. This pulling causes the stepparent to look like and often feel like a child. It seems that she/he needs to get down to the level of the child(ren) literally and figuratively in order to get the attention of the biological parent.

Illustration I



In this initial settling out, which may seem natural or inevitable, the stepparent's status is being seriously violated. The seeds of the destruction, or the major dysfunction of the stepfamily, are sewn in the ground. It is not surprising that, without support, 65% of second marriages break up (often in the first two years), and many of them are stepfamilies.

One of the things that's important to realize in this picture is that no one is to blame. While status is a simple concept, it is by no means easy to grasp or even to recognize in the newly formed stepfamily. By STATUS, I mean relative position of each person in the stepfamily to each other person with corresponding rights, duties, privileges and responsibilities. There are not good or bad or higher or lower statuses. It is essential that each person have his or her status recognized and respected. Status most simply stated means relative position. Every person in the stepfamily needs to be addressed with love, dignity and respect. Each person's relative position or status in the stepfamily is different and valuable.

Significantly when a stepfamily is formed, each person's relative position changes with respect to all the other family members. One of the problems with this change of position is that often the unclear status is that of the stepparent. He/She is the newcomer to this group. The other members have much more history together, dating from the birth of the child(ren). The stepparent comes into a grouping that has all kinds of conscious and unconscious agreements or rules about how things get done and how relationships are supposed to work. The unconscious or covert agreements between the biological parent and child(ren) and ex-spouse are usually the most onerous and difficult to get a handle on, much less to change.

I am talking here about unconscious agreements or rules about rights, duties, responsibilities and privileges that exist in the original historical grouping or mini-family. This is the arena the stepparent has entered and is now the occasion for major upheaval. When the apple cart is upset by the formation of the new stepfamily, the "apples" often land in a somewhat predictable pattern. The stepparent feels angry, upset and possibly crazy for feeling angry and upset. The children are angry and scared because their familiar historical position is changing or threatened with change. The biological parent feels that they are in the middle, pulled one way by the stepparent and in other directions by the children and former spouse.

It is the stepparent who is usually the first person to feel uncomfortable if not downright furious with the new stepfamily arrangements. This is because the biological parent, child(ren) and even ex-partner are still operating according to most of the historical agreements. These covert operational rules haven't been uncovered yet.

One of the ways I support stepparents to begin to become aware of status issues is to pay attention to when their back goes up and they don't know why. Often it is this reaction of anger or outrage over a seemingly unimportant issue that signals a status violation. I remind them that they are not crazy. Their reaction probably indicates that they have bumped into a covert agreement between the biological family members that is unchanged and violates their status.

It is the biological parent who is faced with the tasks of first recognizing and then renegotiating or changing the covert agreements between themselves and their historical counterparts, especially biological children and former spouse. This is usually a much more difficult process than it may appear, especially to the stepparent. Even to begin to recognize the covert agreements, the biological parent needs to decide to BELIEVE THEIR SPOUSE

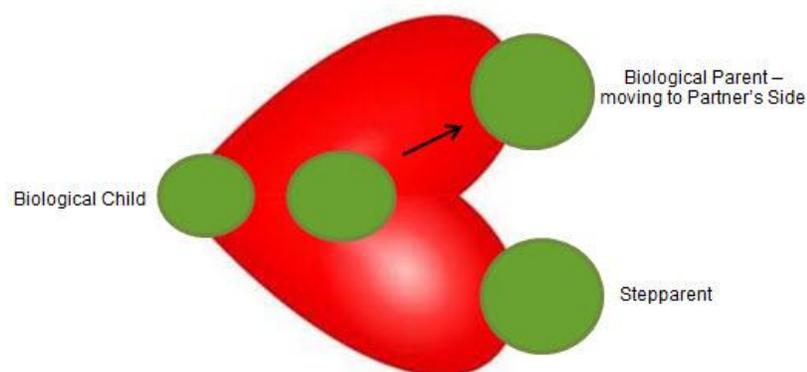
that there is a problem, because their partner SAYS so. This is because initially the biological parent may feel only minor discomfort in the new stepfamily or may be totally unconscious of status issues. The stepparent is likely to feel more uncomfortable than the biological parent, because it is their status that is being violated. The stepparent needs to be believed and validated by the partner! They are not crazy and they are not lying. Something is going on and it probably is a status violation.

Here is where the biological parent classically feels in the middle (Illustration I) of the situation. He/She begins to feel pulled in different directions by the stepparent and biological children and the spouse. The biological parent may not know which way to turn or may go first one way and then the other depending on who is pulling the hardest, yelling the loudest or exerting the most pressure at any given moment. The biological parent's internal dialogue may go something like this: "What am I to do? I can't challenge my ex-wife, because things would get too nasty. How can I deny my kids what they want? They have already suffered enough because my first marriage failed. Why is my wife always so angry with me and why doesn't she back me up and just go along?"

Until the biological parent makes a significant shift to do something about the above situation, they cannot get the support they need from the stepparent. This is because the stepparent is being treated like a child. They still have to pull on one of the biological parent's arms for attention and recognition. This is the major status violation that the biological parent unconsciously perpetuates. The misalignment of biological parent and stepparent insures the discomfort and dysfunction of all of the family members. This "natural" unconscious positioning prevents healthy couple bonding and is one of the most significant causes of the break up of stepfamilies in our culture.

The biological parent, hopefully at this point, or finally at some point, must make a significant shift to allow the stepfamily to become a functional unit (i.e. a unit that works for the maximum potential benefit of all members). The biological parent must move out of the middle and move consciously to the side of the stepparent:

Illustration II



Current literature on stepfamilies strongly emphasizes the importance of the couple bonding. Without this shift by the biological parent to the side of the stepparent and the recognition of his/her appropriate status (i.e. – not a child but a partner), the couple bonding as stated in the beginning of this article can only develop dysfunctionally (i.e. parent-child) or not at all. This move on the part of the biological parent may seem simple, but it is far, far from easy. For when the biological parent makes this shift physically,

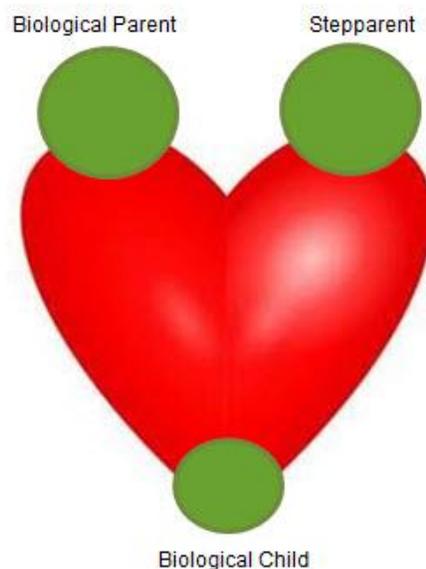
emotionally, mentally and spiritually to the side of the partner, the whole universe of the stepfamily may be thrown into disarray.

When the biological parent begins to move to the side of the stepparent, the child(ren) may feel a sense of abandonment. At the very least, more unwelcome, unfamiliar change is about to happen. The biological parent may correspondingly feel that they are abandoning or rejecting their child(ren). What actually is happening is a major shift in position that must be initiated by the biological parent that more accurately reflects the status of all the stepfamily members. The biological parent is now standing side by side with the stepparent. This may possibly be the first time since the formation of this stepfamily that the stepparent's status is being appropriately acknowledged. It is usually a time of great vulnerability for all concerned. From this new alignment, both parents can begin to face and address the challenges of their stepfamily. This includes their joint adult responsibility to become the primary definers of status for the children in the stepfamily.

As the biological parent makes this shift to the side of the stepparent, the stepparent is now faced with "stepping up to the plate," so to speak, with their spouse as an adult partner of relatively equal status. They need to let go of their previously unconsciously assigned child status and move into an adult or grown-up position. They need to accept that in a stepfamily their partner's children and ex-spouse come with the territory and are not going to go away. Especially for a first-time parent, this full embracing of adult status may be a difficult task and requires lots of support.

Finally, however, the structural impediments to side-by-side relating and parenting are being removed by the shift on the part of the biological parent. This makes it possible for the stepparent to move into their appropriate status with their spouse as partner, lover and co-parent. From this new position it is now possible for them to reach out as adults to their partner's children. Previously, they were tugging with both hands on their partner's arm for their own recognition and could not be there very effectively for the children (see Illustration III below).

Illustration III



Now, both parents, biological and step, are able to support each other and support the child(ren) in the stepfamily. Now the stepparent truly has "an arm free" to reach out to the child of the biological parent from a position of being supported by their partner and able to give support, both to their partner and to the child(ren).

This is very important. In the original position (Illustration I), the biological parent and the stepparent could not readily support one another. By moving to the side of the partner, the biological parent is now enabled to give and receive support from their partner and to support the child(ren). Correspondingly, the stepparent is freed up to support their partner and the child(ren) also. Both are finally able to function as equal adults in the step family. They are both much better able to address the problems and opportunities as they arise.

This realignment is also essential with regard to former spouses. The biological parent must move to the side of their new spouse. This gives a clear message to the ex-spouse that their status vis-a-vis the new couple has changed forever (not necessarily for better or worse—just different). The new couple makes the decisions together that will probably affect in no small way parts of the life of the former spouse. Now, it is possible for all three (or all four) of the adults to relate as grownups together. This was not possible previously when the status of one of the adults (the stepparent) was consistently being violated by the biological parent! The biological parent, the person with the longest historical connection to the child(ren) and spouse, consciously or often unconsciously, sets the standard for how the stepparent will be treated by the children and the former spouse.

This is not to say the biological parent can make the children or the ex-spouse behave in any particular way. The children and ex-spouse often have emotional interests in keeping things the way they were. It is the clarity of the biological parent in moving to the side of their partner that casts light on the more real issue – the accurate status representation of the stepparent.

Once the biological parent has moved solidly to the side of the stepparent, many of the pieces of the stepfamily puzzle can, as we have seen, fall into place. The stepparent can take on their appropriate status as mutual partner with the biological parent with corresponding respect and acceptance of adult responsibilities. More and more now the stepparent can truly support the biological parent in parenting the children. The children have two parents side by side, learning how to work together. Now both of the parents can reach out to them. The biological parent is investing the stepparent with the respect and dignity that is appropriate to their status and the children, of course, -see this honoring. The former spouse or spouses, more and more, have two adults to relate to rather than a parent and a child (the old position of the stepparent). The opportunity to do more conscious, caring parenting by all the adults now exists.

Couple bonding is now a real possibility as well as a necessity for healthy stepparent family living. All adults concerned are now in a functional position to work on their relationships, as well as support each other in parenting the children. The children need to see and be in the presence of a healthy couple relationship, even if they say they don't like it. They do not need to experience another family breaking up even if out of conflicting loyalties they may try to wreck the new stepfamily. They need to see this stepfamily be successful and experience the benefits as well as the pain of this new creation. (In the next chapter of this work, I will address how to support couple bonding once the basic status rearrangements have taken place).

Once the basic shift has taken place and the fallout has somewhat settled, it does not mean that status issues have been forever resolved in the stepfamily. Status, remember, is relative position with corresponding rights, privileges and responsibilities. This means that statuses change—e.g. as babies become children and then become teenagers, and then young adults, the latter often still living at their parent’s home. All families are faced with these changes. Sometimes children and former spouses will fight status changes tooth and nail; but a journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. The conscious stepfamily journey gets underway with the biological parent moving to the side of their new spouse — their lover and partner. Then this challenging adventure of stepfamily living can proceed on solid footing!

About John Mariner, L.C.S.W

For over 30 years as a philosopher and licensed psychotherapist, John has counseled couples and individuals on their journeys of awakening and growth. He has led men’s groups and facilitated couples’ workshops for the last 15 years. John has many years of experience with stepfamilies – both personally and professionally, and this is one of his main areas of expertise. He has been deeply committed to his own psychological and spiritual work in all of his relationships – in his marriage of over thirty years, with his children, colleagues and friends. As a result, John is an exceptionally qualified guide on many levels, for couples and individuals who find themselves depressed, anxious or confused by the challenges of their life’s journey. John may be reached at 303.321.1108 x3 or at john@relationshipresourcecenter.com

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