

# Evidence-Based Treatment of the Reconstituted Family

CHAPTER

12

## INTRODUCTION

A second marriage is structurally and psychologically different from the intact nuclear family that normally results from a first union. This necessitates viewing the structure and functioning of this unit in a different way than we view the family generated by the initial union. This “second” family has a beginning that is different from the nuclear family of the first union; thus it presents a different set of problems. Understanding the structure of this new family, as well as its development, functioning, and struggles to reach a cohesive existence, is the therapeutic task (Smith, 1991). We assume that all families, regardless of how they are constituted, operate as a system, and the best understanding of the structure and functioning of reconstituted families is reached by the application of a family systems approach when considering the adjustment problems of this group.

In keeping with this position, the remainder of the chapter presents the reconstituted family from a family systems perspective, with consideration given to descriptions of various family patterns, assessment issues, and the interventions necessary to facilitate appropriate family functioning.

## POPULATION DESCRIPTION AND DEFINITIONS

When considering the family created by the coming together of two people, one or both of whom have experienced a previous marriage or cohabitation with a partner, the first concern is what to call the new family. Since these families are made up of individuals from various lifestyles and experiences,

we have chosen a definition with sufficient breadth to include people from all walks of life. We believe *the reconstituted family* is an appropriate definition for families formed under these conditions. Therefore, throughout our discussion we shall refer to this union of individuals as the reconstituted family. We also realize there are other labels and definitions applicable to this group—for example, blended family, stepfamily, remarried family, and recoupled family—and our choice in no way denies the appropriateness of different definitions used by other authors. While our discussion may not always reference all the different types of reconstituted families specifically, we wish to point up the fact that the skills, techniques, and processes we discuss are generally applicable to a wide range of different families, including the nontraditional family constellation consisting of a union of two adults of the same sex. This family composition is becoming more prevalent in contemporary society, yet it continues to struggle for acceptance of the right to serve as parents. We believe the suffering of all families deserves the full attention of professional helpers, and this will be reflected in our discussions. We will also refer to all relationships involving cohabitation by adults as *unions* instead of identifying their existence by legal definition.

## ASSESSMENT ISSUES

The complexity of the reconstituted family is reflected in the many different compositions resulting from the joining of individuals who bring to the new family various pre-established and continuing nuclear and extended family relationships. We will describe these and the issues surrounding each, followed by a discussion of the tasks reconstituted families must complete to successfully integrate.

### Issues of Family Composition

To consider a few patterns of the reconstituted family organization, there are divorced men and women who have children from previous marriages, all of whom live together in a single household; divorced men without children married to women with children; women without children or previous marriage married to men with children; men without previous marriages and divorced women with children from the previous marriage; reconstituted families composed of widows and widowers, both with children, who live together part or all of the time; same-sex couples who have experienced previous unions; and, finally, divorced parents with children from previous marriages and children from the present marriage.

While all reconstituted families go through varying periods of adjustment, a number of situations can be anticipated (Jongsma, Peterson, & McCinnis, 2000). For example, the household with children from previous unions most likely have to struggle with sibling jealousies centering on attention from

the biological parent, resistance to the authority of the new parent, and turf battles over sharing space and possessions. In the case of the woman without children or a previous union who joins with a divorced man with children, the lack of experience in being a mother may well be a handicap, as she does not know what to expect from children, who are likely to react in a hostile manner to what is perceived as her intrusion into their lives. The opposite may be true as well, with an inexperienced new stepfather. Children who spend time with both a stepparent and a divorced biological parent might experience some difficulty with a perception of divided loyalty or, in most cases, might struggle with feelings of resentment toward the stepparent, especially in the early phase of reconstituted family development.

**Impact of Past Experiences** Reconstituted families are created out of a past union experience. Many of these experiences have been unhappy due to incompatibilities between partners, which have ended in dissolution of the partnerships, and other unhappy experiences have come as the result of losing a mate by death. In any case, a reconstituted family begins under the weight of what might be described as a long cast of characters. This is to say that a number of people are likely to be involved. Both partners may bring positive or negative relationships from a previous union as well as friendships developed in different contexts over time. Children from previous unions bring to the new family current relationships with grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and other acquaintances (Hobart, 1990). Stuart and Jacobson (1985) refer to beginning a reconstituted family under these conditions as not joining just a mate but joining a family, and this can put a strain on new relationships. This is especially so as there are new sets of grandparents, in-laws, and other relatives with whom to interact, which increases the possibility of conflict around divided loyalties, jealousies, and inappropriate expectations. For example, the biological grandparents may think they have first call on the grandchildren's attention and behave in such a way as to discourage the development of an amicable relationship with the stepparent or stepgrandparents. On the other hand, the new "steprelatives" may embrace the new family and expect its members to become a part of their network. This places the children in the uncomfortable position of being expected to maintain loyalty to established relationships while at the same time entering freely into new relationships with "steprelatives."

Children are not the only ones affected by previously established relationships. In cases where members of the family of origin enjoyed good relationships with the former spouse, the new spouse may find acceptance difficult. Instead of being accepted by reason of position in the family, by becoming the partner of a family member, new partners may be required to earn their way into the family, and comparison with the former partner is likely to make this a very difficult process. Past experiences may also contribute to the reconstituted family in positive ways. If both partners have parenting experience, they will enter this new situation with knowledge of what it is like to be a parent as well as some understanding of the behavior of children and the strategies they use

to gain attention and protect themselves against the hurt of rejection. This should be useful in negotiating some of the conflicts they are likely to encounter.

**Myths and Other Expectations** Perhaps the most prevalent myth associated with the reconstituted family is the “wicked stepmother.” The belief that stepmothers do not function in the best interest of stepchildren is exemplified in the case of the biological parent who always manages to find a way to interrupt all efforts on the part of the stepmother to discipline the children or have sustained meaningful interaction with them. In this case, the belief regarding the “wicked stepmother” has been internalized and will likely remain as part of the couple’s interaction until change in the biological parent’s belief system is effected. However, it should be noted that most stepmothers do not fit the “wicked and cruel” model that has been perpetuated nor do they experience serious problems in relating to stepchildren.

Another common myth about reconstituted families is that of instant love (Bray & Berger, in DeGenova & Rice, 2005). The assumption is based on the belief that stepparents are the same as natural parents and, therefore, feel no differently toward stepchildren than they do toward their own natural children. In other words, when new partners take on the role of stepparent, they are expected to feel instant love for children with whom there is no shared history or bonding experience, and, in return, these children will show love and admiration for the new stepparent. This is certainly a myth because it implies an instant relationship between people who are for the most part strangers. Relationships between them will require time to build and grow. To expect anything different from people who suddenly find themselves living together as the result of a union by two adults is to invite feelings of insecurity, disappointment, and anger. Cherlin and Furstenberg (in DeGenova & Rice, 2005) estimate that restabilization in stepfamilies takes from five to seven years. It is well to remember that building new relationships between stepchildren and stepparents will involve adjusting to new rules and new roles as well as adjusting to each other over time. And this process is usually made easier if the stepparents can refrain from forcing themselves on the children. Stepchildren must be given the opportunity and time to test out the new situation and move closer to the stepparent at their own pace.

In contrast to the myth of instant love, some stepchildren hold a belief that “step is less” (Wald, 1981). This means that the stepchildren cannot be loved in the same way as natural children can and that the children cannot love the stepparent as they love the natural parent. However, more recently, Amato and colleagues (in DeGenova & Rice, 2005) found that level of conflict in the family of origin prior to the divorce influenced children’s behavior problems after the divorce, with children whose parents had a conflictual relationship faring worse. As in the case of all these myths, these allegations about the reconstituted family are unverifiable and should not be taken as a logical starting point from which to view this new family. In addition to the unverifiability of myths, holding on to these beliefs denies the presence of individual strengths and the fact that positive relationships can be developed within the structure of the reconstituted family.

**Reconstituted Family Structure** The organization of the reconstituted family can be best understood when viewed as a social system in the same manner as the nuclear family. It operates from a set of functional demands that determine and guide the interaction of its members. It adheres to a power hierarchy that gives different levels of authority to parents and children. It is composed of subsystems and protected by boundaries, and it passes through stages of development, all of which is common to the nuclear family formed by the initial joining of two adults for the purpose of creating a family. However, the reconstituted family frequently encounters difficulty in its development because of a number of circumstances peculiar to its origin. Among the things that interfere with the various developmental tasks is the composition or makeup of the family, which brings together individuals with different lifestyles, different values, and different worldviews (Hobart, 1989). In spite of the prevalence of reconstituted families in society, we have not established a clear set of guidelines that can be applied to this family. This handicaps not only family members but also practitioners who seek to help this group negotiate developmental tasks. If we are to be successful in this undertaking, we must be informed of the makeup of the subsystems and something of the history of those who participate in them.

**Couple Subsystem** As architects of the reconstituted family, the couple subsystem carries major responsibility for family development. As mentioned earlier, these two people may come together from a variety of statuses to form the new family. For example, the union may bring together two people who are divorced from previous marriages; one divorced and the other single; one widowed and one divorced; both widowed; one widowed and the other single; or a couple of the same sex who have ended their previous relationships. This is important information for practitioners, as it provides a history and some notion of where knowledge and common experiences may or may not exist.

To these unions, each partner may bring children, only one partner may bring children, or neither may bring children. In some cases, children may become permanent members of the stepfamily or divide time between the stepfamily and the natural parent. This is also useful information for practitioners, as both partners must accommodate each other and differentiate the couple subsystem by developing clear boundaries. These tasks may become more difficult when children from previous unions are brought into the family. The presence of these children may stress the functioning of the couple subsystem, which exists primarily as a workplace for the couple in negotiating a complementary relationship. Under normal conditions of beginning a nuclear family, children would not be present, and the boundary of the couple subsystem would allow the couple an opportunity to focus on their own interest as it pertains to sharing space, developing mutuality, and establishing individuality within this new relationship. The presence of children from the beginning limits the time the couple can spend together in defining what their relationship will be, as some time must be spent involving the children within the context of the parent-child subsystem. Further complication is likely in the

relations of the stepchild and stepparent around a number of experiences. For example, if both parents bring children from previous unions, there is the potential for a "we/they" complex, with children vying for the attention of their biological parent to the exclusion of the stepparent and her children. There is also the problem of how much and in what ways the demands of children affect the perception both parents have of each other. If one parent perceives the other as caring more for her natural children at the expense of neglecting the stepchildren, this will create tension within the couple subsystem, which will interfere with the normal processes of this subsystem. As a result, each parent may not only be drawn closer to her natural children but see the other parent as disliking the stepchildren. And, out of a need to protect her own, a parent will allow the children to invade freely the boundaries of the couple subsystem, thereby preventing the development of an appropriate (permeable) boundary that controls the children's access to this subsystem.

In cases where only one parent brings children to the reconstituted family, a satisfactory adjustment may well depend on the experience of the other parent in child-rearing and the expectations these parents have of each other and the children. This understanding can be quite helpful in negotiating with the child in relation to developing trust and gradually giving up some of the closeness to the natural parent and moving into a relationship with the stepparent. This is not to say parents with child-rearing experience are always successful in effecting an adjustment in a reconstituted family situation with children. If the experience causes the parent to assume expert status in dealing with children, leaving no room for error, the stepparent will likely behave in such a way as to demand too much from himself and in turn expect too much from the child. In this case, the stepparent must be helped to reassess his role and allow the child to remain closer to the natural parent while gradually developing trust and comfort in relating to the stepparent.

The stepparent who has no experience in parenting may find the stepparent role very frustrating. The lack of knowledge of how to proceed in fulfilling a role already established with the child, who is likely to resent an outsider attempting to take the place of the natural parent, can reinforce feelings of inadequacy and cause the stepparent to withdraw or, in some cases, react negatively toward the child. Such experiences often create tension within the couple subsystem. The natural parent is not likely to understand or accept the stepparent's negative reaction, while failure in relating to the child causes the stepparent to feel inadequate and in need of support from her partner. However, to ask the natural parent for help would further damage the stepparent's self-esteem, and if support is not volunteered, she usually chooses to remain silent and resentful of the other's failure to come to the rescue. In this situation, priority should be given to work on improving communication between the parents and helping the stepparent to a better understanding of the parenting role.

**Parental Subsystem** This subsystem is composed of the same two people as the couple subsystem. However, it is child-focused and requires the parent to reach a delicate balance between exercising control and promoting independence

among family members. When compared to the parental subsystem of the nuclear family, this subsystem in the reconstituted family clearly deals with some of the same problems but also deals with a set of problems quite different from those experienced in the initial family. In the first place, the parents in this new family do not have the opportunity to experience the couple subsystem role and effect a beginning adjustment to each other. Instead, they are faced with the necessity of moving into the couple and parental subsystem roles at the same time. This is to say that at the same time the couple is undertaking an initial adjustment to each other, they must also be concerned with responding to the demands of a sibling subsystem composed of individuals without kinship ties or shared experiences. As a result, the parental subsystem is likely to be stressed in carrying out executive responsibility for the reconstituted family.

Among the areas of stress are likely violations of boundary structures. For example, children should experience freedom in moving back and forth across the boundaries of a parental subsystem to receive guidance in self-development and assimilation into the wider society. However, in the case of reconstituted families, care must be taken to prevent children from seeking and receiving unilateral guidance from the natural parent (except perhaps in cases where unalterable dislike exists between stepparent and stepchildren). In any case, unilateral guidance by the natural parent tends to divide family authority and create tension within the parental subsystem. And with increased tension, boundaries between natural parent and child may become blurred and lead to involvement of the child not only in the functioning of the parental subsystem but in problems of the couple subsystem as well. Such involvement may seriously interfere with the carrying out of appropriate parental subsystem tasks.

Adolescence is a time at which balancing control and promoting autonomy is perhaps most difficult for parents of the reconstituted family. This is the point at which parents' demands are likely to be in conflict with the children's desire for age-appropriate autonomy (Minuchin, 1974). Parental demands in the reconstituted family are not always the result of consensus between the parents. In many cases, the marital pair have not discussed their similarity or difference with regard to what represents appropriate behavior or responsibility for the children. Nevertheless, failure to communicate does not mean an absence of firm conviction on the part of each parent about how children should behave and how much autonomy they should be given. In the absence of agreement about what will be expected of the children, different messages are likely to be given that will reflect the past experiences of each parent. For example, a parent from a family that tended toward enmeshment would likely be reluctant to allow children to move freely outside family boundaries, which would increase opportunities for developing autonomy. In contrast, the parent from a family that tends to be disengaged would not be comfortable with close family ties but would be interested in the development of independence. These opposite views signal the need for increased communication within the parental subsystem, and change efforts should be directed toward open discussion of parenting issues and mutual accommodation

between parents on the matters of child-rearing, and between parents and children with regard to effecting a healthy balance between autonomy and control. Hetherington (in DeGenova & Rice, 2005) reported that even in long-term stepfamilies, bonding is difficult between stepparents and stepchildren, and warm, close relationships usually do not develop as they do between biological parents and their children.

**Sibling Subsystem** In this subsystem within the natural family, children are customarily afforded their own turf and the opportunity to develop and experiment with behaviors in learning to relate to peers and adults in the larger contexts of the family and society. This subgroup is normally composed of individuals with kinship ties who share common parentage, rules, and values. The sibling subsystem in the reconstituted family may exist in many forms. Children from one union may be joined by children from another union, only the children of one parent may be included in the subsystem, or the children from the new marriage may be born into the family and join children from previous unions of one or both parents. In each case, a complex group is brought into existence, and a crisis may be precipitated by the failure of old roles and old boundaries defined within the context of a previous family structure.

If the reconstituted family assumes residence in the home of a parent with children from a previous union, these children may perceive the children of the other parent as intruders into their territory and react by attempting to exclude these new members. From a systems perspective, rejecting the new members is their way of safeguarding the boundaries of the old subsystem by closure, which will control the input of new energy from the new group. If this new energy is allowed to enter the system, it may threaten the existence of the old subsystem in which the previous occupants have found comfort and that they wish to preserve.

Sibling rivalry, common to all sibling subsystems, is likely to be more stressful in the reconstituted family as members seek changes in coalitions and alliances generated by losses experienced in the breakup of the nuclear family. Jealousies may be acted out in rather destructive ways as children attempt to hold on to natural parents and reject stepparents and siblings. For example, children with a natural parent living elsewhere may attempt to move back and forth between this parent and the reconstituted family whenever they choose not to abide by the rules established in either household.

The development of the sibling subsystem in the reconstituted family is not always characterized by continuing conflict. If the parents of this family have sufficiently resolved their own adjustment problems and are able to pursue relaxed relationships with the children, their behavior will serve as a role model for the children and help them develop a sibling subsystem that will promote the growth and development of its members. However, when intervention is necessary, attention must be given to what the children bring to this new subgroup experience from past associations. Losses and expectations should be dealt with and assurance offered, where possible, that further losses are not



likely to occur as a result of developing new relationships with stepsiblings, and that old relationships that are important to children need not be abandoned.

**Parent-Child Subsystem** This subsystem is characterized by interaction between parents and children. Clarity of boundaries and lines of authority are important factors in the successful functioning of this subsystem. In the nuclear family, the parents have shared with each other in a relationship before children are born or adopted into the family. And all children in this case belong to the couple, forming a nuclear family that customarily lives together until the children reach the appropriate age for separation. This is not the case with the reconstituted family. At least one parent has shared a relationship with the children, who are now a part of the new family, before joining the other partner in this union. In many instances, both parents have experienced ties with some of the children but not with others prior to joining and forming the new family.

For these reasons, the stepparent begins at a different point than the natural parent in interacting with children. The parent who brings children to the reconstituted family has close ties with this part of the sibling subsystem but must begin to establish new relationships with everyone else. Such an entry into the family system may cause an imbalance in relationships. One of the difficulties in building relationships is that stepparents are often cautious in attempting to establish a relationship with stepchildren out of concern for how they are perceived in this role by these children as well as by other members of the family. At the same time, the parent-child relationship from the previous union is in place, and the interaction within this relationship is likely to be viewed by others as closing the boundary around this part of the subsystem and denying entry to others. As a result, tension increases and family homeostasis may be disrupted until an understanding is reached regarding new roles and new ways of relating among family members.

The perception of the parenting role by stepparents and stepchildren is an important factor in determining how they will interact in forming a viable family relationship. Some adults who enter into a new union after the breakup of a previous one expect too much of themselves and other family members. For example, many stepparents try too hard to be exceptionally good parents in order to please their mates and expect in return to gain love and respect from the children. Yet, stepchildren are likely to be hesitant in responding to the overzealous efforts of these "superparents" who want to receive instant love from them and immediately enjoy a happy family. Stepparents must learn to relax and allow positive interaction with stepchildren to occur gradually. Immediate acceptance of a stepparent is difficult for stepchildren, who are likely to be grieving the loss of the natural parent. In most cases of children of divorced parents, accepting a stepparent is further complicated by the fact that there is an ongoing relationship with the natural divorced parent. And the thought of replacing this parent with another creates feelings of guilt and disloyalty. In the case of deceased parents, many children experience similar feelings, especially in the early stages of the stepparent relationship, as interacting with the stepparent is likely to rekindle painful feelings of this previous loss.

Another problem in the parent-child relationship in reconstituted families may be brought on by the stepparent's immediately attempting to assume the authority formerly held by the absent natural parent relative to family rules and discipline. In most cases, this not only causes anger and rebellion among the children but also creates tension between the parents. If the stepparent continues to carry the instant authority role, the natural parent and her children will likely be drawn together against the stepparent, and professional help is usually needed if the family is to become a viable unit. Change efforts should be directed toward the natural parent's taking a more active role in setting rules, disciplining the children, and sharing her thoughts and wishes about parenting with the stepparent. At the same time, the stepparent should be helped to accept a lesser role in parenting until appropriate rules governing family conduct are established and the role of the hierarchical structure is agreed upon.

### **Tasks and Issues in Reconstituted Family Development**

The tasks and issues facing the reconstituted family are slightly different from those faced by the natural family as it proceeds toward realization of basic goals. Thompson and Rudolph (1992) and Visher and Visher (1982, p. 343) point to the need for the new family to address previous losses, develop new traditions, preserve important old alliances and form new ones, achieve integration within the current family unit, and deal with such issues as financial power and sexual boundaries.

**Recognizing Losses** Members of a reconstituted family have experienced a number of losses that may prove devastating in establishing the new family if they are not recognized and dealt with by each individual. The partner who has experienced a previous union and has lost a mate experiences a sense of loss. In the case of divorce, regardless of how unsatisfactory the relationship may have been, there is a sense of loss over failure to have made the marriage the success that was envisioned at the beginning, and the personal investment in trying to make it succeed cannot be recovered. There are always feelings of sadness and loss associated with the death of a mate; the good times spent together and many old friends that were a part of that experience will not continue to be a part of the new life being fashioned. As for the children, the death of a parent is one of the most painful losses possible. And disruption of the parent-child relationship by divorce is also a serious loss, together with the disappearance of familiar surroundings such as friends and extended family members who may no longer be readily available due to relocation of the reconstituted family.

These losses contribute to feelings of sadness and anger that may be displaced in the reconstituted family relationships. In this case, help is usually needed to assist family members in sorting out feelings, identifying sources of sadness and anger, and looking at the new family as an opportunity to develop and share meaningful relationships without being disloyal to friends and relatives or desecrating pleasant memories from previous experiences.

**Establishing New Traditions** Reconstituted families may come together from very different places, bringing values, goals, and traditions established through previous experiences. Although reconstituted family members may have been served well by these structures in the past, it is highly unlikely that they will work effectively to bind the new family together. It is well to remember that family relationships are built around shared experiences, and reconstituted families have usually had few, if any, shared experiences. Therefore, it is necessary for family members to establish new goals and traditions through engaging in activities of interest to the new family and deciding together what the family likes and values and how it will go about realizing desired objectives.

**Forming Alliances** We agree with those who suggest a relaxed and gradual formation of alliances in the reconstituted family. Forming a new family from members who bring experience and traditions from a previous nuclear family always reactivates old memories and often introduces conflict. Efforts to expedite this process by exerting pressure on family members, including showing excessive amounts of affection or increasing interaction within the family at the expense of eliminating contacts with friends and relatives outside of the new family, will most likely fail. It is appropriate for the parents to spend time together without interference from real or imagined demands of the family. Stepparents also need to spend some time with stepchildren. This should be done without the natural parent being present; however, care must be taken to keep this time between stepparents of the family casual and of short duration in the early stage of family development (Visher & Visher, 1982). A useful strategy might begin by complimenting the child on something he likes to do, such as coloring pictures or working with building blocks, and later participating briefly in this activity with the child whenever the opportunity is presented.

It is very important while developing new alliances to allow reconstituted family members to continue important old alliances established through previous associations. For example, children should be expected to continue communication with grandparents with whom they share close relationships and with friends whose company they enjoy. Stepparents should also continue to be in touch with relatives and friends whose associations they value. By continuing important old alliances, the pressure to become totally engaged in the immediate development of a new family is lessened. And with this lessening of pressure to become completely involved in the processes of the reconstituted family, both stepparents and stepchildren can gradually move toward getting to know each other, which sets the stage for development of a viable reconstituted family. When there is total commitment to instant success in becoming a new family, the members experience tremendous pressure to interact positively, and this often leads to anger, frustration, and failure.

**Integration** Integration within the reconstituted family is an important task that is facilitated by knowing what to expect. The primary responsibility for achieving integration rests with the parents, who must create conditions conducive to family organization. Since the parents are the architects of the family,

they must clarify what is expected and reach consensus on important rules before attempting to involve the children in forming a new family. The relationship of the new couple will need to be strengthened, and new relationships must be developed between parents and children. This will enhance the development of a sense of membership in the new family (Visher & Visher, 1990). This is supported as well by Duncan and Brown (1992), who also posit a necessary family connection with supportive institutions in the community. This agreement between the parents should help with involvement of the children and provide some support for the stepparent in dealing with them around the issues of roles and expectations.

In addition to arriving at an understanding between the parents, integrating the reconstituted family requires nurturing children and setting limits that will allow them to continue appropriate development while the parents remain in control. This is not an easy task for the natural family and a very difficult one for a new family. Stepparents inherit a family already in existence, where controls are needed, without having carried out the nurturing elements of child-rearing of the stepchildren. As a result, these children are without the experience of having received, at an earlier age, the giving aspects of a relationship with the stepparent but are now faced with accepting the limits this stepparent imposes. This is tantamount to having missed the initial phase of the parent-child relationship in which a basis is established for the child's wish to please the parent. Therefore, stepchildren are likely to resent limits imposed by the stepparent, and this will complicate integration of the family.

Time is also a factor in achieving integration, as members of the reconstituted family must get to know each other before the trusting and sharing needed for the family to function as a cohesive unit can develop. A time period of from two to five or more years is required before a satisfactory state of integration is reached. And stepparents should not become discouraged by the gradual pace at which relationships are developed.

**Complex Issues** The development of the reconstituted family involves a number of roles, tasks, and issues related to family relationships that preceded the start of this new family. It begins with the coming together of the couple, at least one of whom has experienced this process before. In many cases, both have experienced it previously. One of the most important considerations for those repeating the process is how well they have resolved issues relating to their experience in the previous family. It is not uncommon for individuals to enter a reconstituted family with very strong positive or negative feelings about their former mate, which may be reflected in a number of ways. Feelings of guilt over the breakup of a relationship may interfere with the sharing of one's self with the other or cause one to invest too much in trying to make up for past mistakes by becoming the perfect partner. In some situations, unresolved positive feelings may surface as divided loyalty between past and present mates. On the other hand, unresolved negative feelings may contribute to distrust in relating to the new mate or an overinvestment in trying to make life difficult for the former partner.

Visher and Visher (1982) speak of the exaggeration of power issues in reconstituted families. For example, if the wife is divorced and successfully carried family responsibility as a single parent prior to joining the family, she may enter the new family with confidence in her capability to provide for herself and her children. This self-sufficiency represents power and control of her own life, and sharing these through a union with someone new may threaten a return to an unsatisfying pattern of dependency. Divorced men who remarry after experiencing difficult financial settlements with previous mates may feel they have unjustly lost their power and control and become vulnerable to future attacks on their finances, ergo their power. In such cases, they may be unwilling to share information about finances with the new mate or may live in a miserly fashion in order to prevent further erosion of their power and control.

Sager and associates (1983) suggest that in-laws and former in-laws sometimes have a strong influence on the reconstituted family system. If in-laws have played a major role in the life of a partner, especially between the breakup of the previous relationship and uniting with a new partner, during which time the support and assistance they gave was crucial, they may find themselves seeking a decision-making role in helping to establish the new family. This is likely to prove disruptive to forming appropriate relationships in the new family system. Former in-laws who enjoy good relationships with their grandchildren may have difficulty accepting the replacement of their son or daughter by someone else who will assume the role of parent.

When children from previous families are brought into the reconstituted family, there is a parent-child relationship that precedes the relationship of the new parents. This prior parent-child attachment is likely to create an emotional imbalance in family relationships, with the child favoring the natural parent while having only minimal contact with the stepparent (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). Unlike the family situation where the couple has time to accommodate to each other before turning their attention to the needs of children, the presence of children in the reconstituted family makes it necessary for the parents to assume both couple and parental roles simultaneously. This makes it more difficult to accomplish marital tasks, as it limits the time, privacy, and energy available to stepparents.

In all families, boundaries play a significant role in family development and family homeostasis. In reconstituted families, issues around boundaries take on a special significance due to the unique structure of these families. Boundary violations may occur at many levels, as indicated earlier in our discussion of subsystems. Children may violate the boundary around the couple subsystem as a result of the previous close association with the natural parent and the lack of experience in relating to the stepparent. This makes it easy for children to turn to natural parents for support and guidance in the same manner as before the new family was established. If the natural parent is ambivalent about the stepparent's relations with his children, a closer relationship is likely to be encouraged by the natural parent's own reactions to this situation. Repeated transactions between these principals while excluding the stepparent will interfere with the performance of normal couple tasks and represent a

violation of the boundary that should limit the children's access to the private domain of the parents.

A blurring of boundaries may also occur when children share the homes of both the reconstituted family and the other natural parent. This often centers on arrangements for the children visiting and spending time in both households. Each household must recognize and respect the boundary of the other, thus allowing for a clear separation of the households, with each unit free to exercise control over what takes place within its domain (Visher & Visher, 1982). In this way, boundaries remain clear and children are able to function within the boundaries established by each household.

Another problem facing practitioners who work with reconstituted families is the issue of sexual boundaries. Sager and associates (1983) describe a loosening of sexual boundaries in the new family that is related to "the heightened affectionate and sexual atmosphere in the home during the new couple's early romantic bonding period" (p. 293). The inclusion of teenagers of the opposite sex in the new family tends to intensify the sexual climate. This, together with the fact that members of reconstituted families have not shared close emotional ties and are without biological ties, makes possible a complete breakdown of sexual boundaries. The extremes of a breakdown of sexual boundaries may be reflected in sexual relations between stepsiblings and sexual abuse, usually between stepfathers and stepdaughters.

One of the mistakes frequently made is to assume there is no difference in family functioning between the reconstituted family and the natural family. This occurs largely out of a lack of knowledge about the complexity of this family, its structure, and its functions in carrying out various tasks. The confusion begins with the variety of names used to identify this family unit, which we have chosen to refer to as the reconstituted family. Neither society, by tradition, nor research efforts have as yet developed a widely accepted set of norms for this family. Many myths, some of which we discussed earlier in this chapter, still exist relative to what should be expected from the members of a family that begins without biological ties. Nevertheless, research and experience in working with this type of family have provided some information regarding the processes in which it engages that should be recognized by family members and social workers engaged in helping with family adjustments.

The couple who joins to establish a reconstituted family should realize that adjustment among all family members will not automatically occur as a result of bringing family members together. Adolescent children are likely to be resentful of the stepparent and openly demonstrate preference for the natural parent. Efforts to force the development of relationships between stepmembers of the family will result in frustrations and defeat. In most situations, children will be relating to at least the biological parent outside of the reconstituted family and, in many cases, extended natural family members as well. This does not mean a problem will develop; however, the potential for family boundary disputes and conflicting loyalties is always present in these interactional processes.

When both parents bring children into the reconstituted family, they should be aware that a difference in feeling toward biological children and stepchildren may exist and that a display of this difference in affection might create tension throughout the family. Disciplining children is another potential area of tension, and unless there has been prior discussion and agreement on how authority will be used in this respect, problems are likely to develop.

Disagreement over the use of money is not uncommon in the reconstituted family, where alimony and/or child support payments are likely experiences. In many instances, new couples have never discussed such expenditures, and in such cases misunderstanding regarding old and new responsibilities may occur. And finally, as previously indicated, it must be recognized by everyone involved in dealing with reconstituted family processes that good family relationships are not an instant accomplishment and must be given an opportunity to develop over time.

**Successful Reconstituted Family Functioning** In spite of the difficulty under which these families begin, not all of them struggle for identity and adjustment in relationships throughout the family life cycle. Some families are able to develop sound relationships between family members early in the new family's existence. A number of conditions contribute to successful development of reconstituted family structure and functioning. For example, the ages of children who are brought into the family may have impact on the stepparent-stepchild relationship as well as on the functioning of the sibling subsystem. Younger children usually have less difficulty in forming intrafamilial relationships in the new family than adolescents, who are more likely to have a stronger attachment to the biological family by reason of a longer association and a deeper appreciation of the fabric of this family and their role in it. Another factor is the individual life cycle of the adolescent. This stage of development is characterized by the adolescent's struggle with issues to identify and the desire for independence, which are demonstrated by rebellion against authority and disagreement with measures of control. The preferred posture of adolescents is freedom and autonomy rather than forming a new attachment to a stepparent with whom, in most cases, they are totally unfamiliar. This would involve not only giving up freedom but also being placed in the position of being controlled by an unfamiliar adult who is taking the place of the natural parent. This usually contributes to the difficulty in establishing relationships that is experienced in many reconstituted families. When the stepchildren are adults who do not occupy the reconstituted family household, the possibility of establishing acceptable working relationships is usually good. Additionally, adolescents have more adjustment difficulties to stepfamily living than do younger children; and adolescent girls have more difficulty adjusting to the stepparent than do adolescent boys (Hetherington et al., in DeGenova & Rice, 2005).

Parenting experience by the new couple is useful in developing the family in cases where children from previous families are involved. Parents with

experience in dealing with children bring to the new family some knowledge of what to expect from children and how to relate to them in a number of circumstances. While this does not guarantee instant adjustment, it adds a positive dimension to the process.

**Good Relationship between Partners** As architects of the family, the couple must maintain a good relationship if they are to guide the development of the family successfully. This takes on added importance in the reconstituted family, where bonding between the couple is more difficult to achieve than in the case of the natural family. In order to achieve and maintain a good relationship, the new couple must be able to communicate with clear messages that spell out their wishes, expectations, joys, and fears as related to their lives together and the establishment of the new family. There must be agreement on matters pertaining to family functioning and their roles in this process. They will also need to support each other in the performance of their respective parental roles. A good relationship between the parents, together with mutual support and cooperation, is among the necessary ingredients for successful family functioning.

**Relaxed Atmosphere for Children** Children from previous marriages who enter the reconstituted family often resist establishing relationships, especially with stepparents. A major factor in this resistance is their attachment to biological family networks and the difficulty they experience in relating to a reconstituted family network at the same time. The greatest conflict is experienced in relating simultaneously to biological and stepparents. This problem can usually be overcome if the stepparent does not insist on instant positive relations with the child and allows the relationship to develop gradually. It is also important that children be given the opportunity to continue relating to both natural parents. In this kind of relaxed atmosphere, children usually learn to respond positively in reconstituted relationships, which enhances the functioning of the family.

**Mature Relationship between All Parental Figures** Much of the difficulty experienced in reconstituted family functioning can be ameliorated if a mature relationship exists between the parental adults. Such a relationship requires abandoning attempts to both avenge previous wrongs and to compete for the affection of children. For example, no adult should demand total loyalty from children who must divide their time and attention between two sets of parents. Instead, they should be encouraged to relate to both natural parents and stepparents. Children's visits with the natural parent outside of the reconstituted family should be made as easy and convenient as possible. If negative feelings still exist between the natural parents, this should not be a topic for discussion with children nor should family boundaries be interfered with by criticism of rules and expectations of stepparents or natural parents. If these adults can relate in a civil manner, children will enjoy their time with them and the families will more likely function in a satisfactory manner.