

MAKING SENSE OF STEPFAMILY RELATIONSHIPS AND NEW FAMILY FORMS IN CLINICAL WORK AND PERSONAL SITUATIONS

Supporting stepfamily members from a Gestalt and integrative perspective

With Claire Asherson Bartram

Date and time

Sat, 25 May 2024 09:30 - Sun, 26 May 2024 16:30 GMT+1

Location

Don Bosco Center (Eircode V94 DK44)

Salesian House Plassey Park Road, Castletroy Limerick Ireland

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Stepfamilies can bring out the worst in people and challenge them to find the best (Papernow 2016)

Abstract

Stepfamilies are those where one or both adults have children from a previous relationship and one parent (or more) lives somewhere else. These families, often arise after the loss of a previous relationship. In this situation, adult partners have contrasting responses and priorities in relation to the children and therefore each other.

This part experiential, part didactic workshop will explore the contrasting relationships in stepfamilies. We will consider what supports individuals and couples in stepfamily and similar situations to move towards becoming an integrated family 'body'. The workshop will be a confidential space for experimentation, exploration and learning and we will consider ways to support stepfamily members to get over themselves and find ways through difficult situations.

Through a combination of presentation, experiential exploration and with opportunities for personal work and supervision, we will explore the challenges and possibilities of living in a stepfamily. Together we will consider what supports individuals and couples in stepfamily and similar situations to move towards integrating as a family group, what sort of a family that would be and how practitioners can support this. The workshop will be held within a confidential framework so that we can draw from examples in our lives, and therapeutic practices.

We appear to have hardwired tendencies to favour and love our children in a fiercely protective and possessive way. In healthy situations, on the birth of their child, parents find themselves feeling loving towards and viscerally connected with them, in their bodies, often feeling that their child is part of them, and that they identify closely with them. As parents they take on the shared task of nurturing the child into adulthood, providing the physical and emotional environment necessary. If one parent is absent or dies, the other parent takes on the task as a lone parent. If parents separate, the task often becomes split between households.

Intimate partners coming into such situations - whether they view themselves as stepparents or not - are outside of the parent/child relationship and can be seen as a threat to that relationship. These circumstances can bring about painful, confusing feelings for all concerned, evoking emotions that are beyond reason with a primitive power.

There are several levels in which therapists and counsellors can help people (and themselves) in these situations. These include understanding the relational dynamics of a stepfamily (different from a biological family), the role of parents, and insider outsider dynamics that can be so difficult, developing members' interpersonal skills to manage difficult conversations, and recognising the influence of each partners' individual histories and tendencies, and supporting them to challenging themselves to recognise and move beyond unhelpful responses. With this approach, being in a stepfamily offers the possibility for members to learn to 'get over themselves' so that their stepfamily can become a cohesive and loving network.

Claire Asherson Bartram DPsych.

Biography.

Claire Asherson Bartram qualified in 1991 as a Gestalt therapist and works in London as a therapist, supervisor and group facilitator with individuals, couples and groups, and has been facilitating groups for over 20 years. She was a founding member of UKAGP (United Kingdom Association of Gestalt Therapy) and is on the editorial committee of the British Gestalt Journal. She is one of a team of tutors teaching research and supervising dissertations at the Minster Centre (Integrative training). She has additionally run many process groups at IAAGT conferences and is a member of their Process Group Committee.

Claire's interest in stepfamilies and parent/child relationships began with her own experience of raising a family and she has continued to develop this strand of her work. In 1991 she worked as a telephone counsellor for National Stepfamily Association's helpline, and co-wrote a book with Cheryl Walters, 'Altogether Now; What to expect when stepfamilies get together'. Her doctoral research dissertation, completed in 2012, focussed on Mothers in Stepfamily Situations. Over the years she has run numerous workshops and groups on Gestalt and Stepfamilies for organisations and at conferences and she features in a podcast 'Step Life'. Her therapy practice includes many couples and individuals who are living in Stepfamily Situations.

Among the influences to her work built over many years, Claire integrates Gestalt with Ruella Frank's Somatic Developmental Psychotherapy, Bert Hellinger's constellations, development, attachment and evolutionary theory. She favours experiential, relational and creative methods of working, and describes herself as an improviser.