

by Paul Freedman



*how to survive in a*



# **STEP FAMILY**



## A CONVERSATION WITH MICHAEL CARR-GREGG



Think about families in today's world, and, most likely, you won't be visualising just Mum, Dad and two-point-five kids. You'll probably be thinking of Mum and Mum's ex. And Dad and his ex, too. And Mum's new spouse, plus his child (or children) from his former relationship/s. And any number of other possible

permutations or combinations.

Blended families, step-families, call them what-you-like: they're not just commonplace today, they're almost the **NORM!** Michael Carr-Gregg – psychologist, best-selling author and founder of *CanTeen* (the high profile support group for young people with cancer) – is a step-dad himself, and he knows firsthand about the ins-and-outs of step-families. More than this, he's just published a great new book on the subject: *Surviving Step-Families*.

In the UK and the USA, step-families now outnumber traditional nuclear-families. And it won't be long before the same is true in Australia and New Zealand. So the chances are high that you're living in a step-family, or have close relatives who do. And if that old TV sitcom *The Brady Bunch* springs to mind, we don't blame you. It spring's to Michael's mind quite often, too. We asked him about the pitfalls and promises of step-family life ... about the challenges and rewards: what hinders, what helps? And, even more basic, what exactly do step-families look like these days?

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**MICHAEL CARR-GREGG:** Well, most people my age, when they think of step-families, think of *The Brady Bunch*. And that, frankly, hasn't advanced the image of step-families very much. There are so many different combinations these days.

My personal situation is this: I married a Kiwi who has a child that isn't mine. The reciprocal version is where you've got a bloke with his

biological child and a new partner who's not the child's biological mother.

Those are the two most common.

Then you get the his-and-hers mixture (as in *The Brady Bunch*). And, given time, that often becomes a mixture of his and hers and then *theirs* – with the children they've had together all added in. This one's often referred to as the 'blended-family'.

There are other versions, too. You can

have foster children or adopted children (rather than biological children). You can have families co-habiting rather than married. You can have the same thing, but with gay rather than straight parents. And, finally, you can have children living with legal guardians – like aunts, uncles, grandparents and so on.

**GRAPEVINE:** How common are step-families? We seem to be seeing more of them than ever ...

**CARR-GREGG:** Demographers say that step-families will outnumber nuclear families by 2020. They've already reached that point in the US and the UK. And I'm not surprised. Our attitudes to marriage have changed so much – we see marriage now as a disposable thing. And separation and divorce are more acceptable these days. When I was growing up in New Zealand there was a huge stigma attached to divorce – but not any more.

**GRAPEVINE:** What on earth made you want to write a book about such a complex topic?

**CARR-GREGG:** Well, I inherited a step-child when I got married. And despite the fact that I'd had some training, the PhD didn't help much! I think I made all the mistakes that most well-meaning people make. You try and be an 'instant dad'. Or you become the 'disciplinarian'. Trouble is, your lines of communication aren't as open as they should be.

Step-families can work really well, but they're born of LOSS. And the relationships are more complicated. You can't expect someone to become an 'instant parent'. In my case, there was no 'daddy-gene' in me – I just didn't know how to do it!



**GRAPEVINE:** You mean there is a 'daddy-gene' in biological parents?

**CARR-GREGG:** Maybe not. But they get more time to develop those skills.

**GRAPEVINE:** Okay. So how do you survive in a step-family?

**CARR-GREGG:** For starters, you need to walk into the situation knowing that you can't create a carbon-copy of a nuclear family. If you accept that right off, you'll be ahead of the pack.

The second thing is, you have to be patient. These families have their own natural life-cycle. It takes several years to become a smoothly-running unit. And the greatest risk during those first two years is that you won't allow this growth to happen.

**GRAPEVINE:** Do children coming into a step-family cope better if there's just a new step-parent – or is it harder if they have new step-siblings as well?

**CARR-GREGG:** It's much harder with new siblings. And it's even harder again if they're teenagers. Their desire for independence and autonomy is so strong that all the wrong buttons can be pressed. They

didn't ask for this to happen. They've had no say in how it happened.

So step-parents have to be very, very gentle and very, very patient with teenage step-children. They will quite often issue an emotional *fatwa* on the step-parent – which can be incredibly unpleasant. The trick for the step-parent is: don't personalise it.

Easy to say. But, my goodness, it isn't easy to do!

**GRAPEVINE:** Step-parents have had bad press, haven't they ... the 'evil step-mother' and all that. Does that myth just echo the

**GRAPEVINE:** One of your best lines is, "*Poor communication is to step-families what the iceberg was to the Titanic!*" Can you explain?

**CARR-GREGG:** I think you've got to put the adult relationship first – and that means really doing a very clear 'relationship autopsy'. You need to work out what went wrong the last time so you don't repeat the same mistakes. And you need to spend time together talking about all the issues that come up from time to time.

Not listening ... rushing in and trying to mind-read or fix the problems ... not



difficulty of creating a new family out of the chaos of divorce, separation, whatever?

**CARR-GREGG:** It's just one of the things that makes it difficult ... especially for the step-mother. She's often a lot less appreciated than step-dads. It's very difficult for step-mums to overcome the myth, and find a balance between the *active* role she'd like to take and the fact that her step-kids may want her to have *minimal* involvement.

being open about things like finances – those are just recipes for disaster.

**GRAPEVINE:** That 'relationship autopsy' sounds hard. Where would you start?

**CARR-GREGG:** You have to basically look at each other – and look at yourself too, of course. The thing is, you've entered into this new relationship, and you've involved other people. It's not just you and her, or you and him. And you owe it to those others – never mind yourself

– to do everything possible to get it right this time.

For example, all the research says that in families that work, hobbies help around the house – they do some of the housework; they clean toilets; they do ironing; they cook. And if you never did that in your first relationship, you need to start thinking about learning how to – now!

Take another example: financial security. That's very important – and so is owning your own home.

If your new partner's parents aren't divorced, that's a very good sign. And if your new wife gets on well with her dad, that's a good sign, too.

And a final thing – the most important – is about making sure you are well informed.

In my research I went and worshipped at the knees of Professor James Bray who's a former president of the American Psychological Association and has done more work studying step-families than any other human being on the planet – and is a step father. He writes dry, academic books – not chatty like mine. So I basically said to him, "Look I'm going to try and write this book – I'd be really interested in trying to distil what you've written about that we know *actually works*."

**GRAPEVINE:** Does being well-informed, about what works and what doesn't, help when you're trying to blend families?

**CARR-GREGG:** Yes, definitely. When we step back and take a good look, we see three types of step-families today:

There are the 'NEO-TRADITIONALS' – families that work well, do all the right things, succeed. They form solid, committed relationships. They nurture



their marriage and build a really solid union. They avoid getting stuck in unrealistic expectations of what the family might be/could be/should be like.

Then there are the 'ROMANTICS' – they're disasters. They *do* get stuck, and they seem to fall over almost straight away.

**GRAPEVINE:** Why's that? Because they come in with romantic illusions about what it'll be like?

**CARR-GREGG:** Right. They suffer from 'The Brady Delusion', and that's why they're the most divorce-prone. They want this immediate, perfect, family atmosphere – and they often misinterpret their step-children's ambivalent reactions. They take it all personally, instead of seeing all the hard work needed as normal.

**GRAPEVINE:** So what's the third type?

**CARR-GREGG:** These are the ones in the middle – the 'MATRIARCHAL' type families – which are headed by strong, independent women who remarried not necessarily to gain a parenting partner but a companion. The blokes in these families are devoted to their women, but may have fairly distant relationships with the children. They're not in the kids' faces

all the time ... and that can actually function surprisingly well.

**GRAPEVINE:** What are the traps for young players – the false assumptions that step-mums and step-dads bring into these reconstructed families?

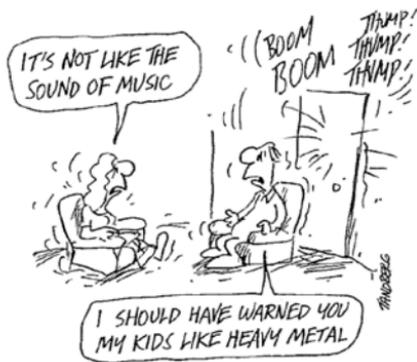
**CARR-GREGG:** Well, as I said, men need to watch the tendency to be disciplinarians. And the carbon-copy thing – where they expect the step-kids to immediately accept and love them. That's simply not going to happen.

With women, it's the expectation that they're going to 'know what to do' ... that they'll instantaneously have this wonderful relationship with their step-children. And, usually, that doesn't happen either.

Of course, the relationship between step-parents and children can often be interfered with by a toxic former spouse – and that can really wreck things.

**GRAPEVINE:** Any top tips for families where this is going on?

**CARR-GREGG:** Well – don't react. We *teach* people how to treat us, and if we respond like-for-like, if we match character assassinating and name calling, relations just get worse and worse. So don't buy into it.



Channel your anger and frustration into trying to minimise conflict.

All the research shows that the kids do best if they have access to *both* parents ... and it's certainly best for them if both biological parents can maintain a level of pleasantness and politeness. Sign a 'pledge not to sledge' ... a non-aggression treaty.

**GRAPEVINE:** You suggest step-families move through several stages – can you tell us about those?

**CARR-GREGG:** Well, it starts with a stage I call 'FANTASY' – and, to move on from here, they have to give up the dream, let go of that instant 'happy-ever-after' delusion.

The next stage is 'CONFUSION'. For the first couple of weeks, everyone's on their best behaviour – but, oh boy, it doesn't last long. Reality will intrude, and families have to accept that everything's going to be very confusing.

That's often followed by 'CONFLICT' – when anger erupts and true feelings come out. But the important thing is, don't personalise it – this is normal.

Hopefully, finally, comes 'RESOLUTION' – where at last we see that, yes, there's light at the end of the tunnel.

**GRAPEVINE:** Should step-parents pay more attention to the needs of the *children* – or to *their own* needs as adults?

**CARR-GREGG:** The latter – without question. That's one of the mistakes the 'Romantics' often make: they get preoccupied trying to help the kids. And that's totally understandable because we feel so guilty if we put our own needs above theirs. But you can't weather the maelstrom of being a step-family unless you put *your* relationship first.

**GRAPEVINE:** Another thing you've said is, "*Having a child no more makes you a qualified parent than having a piano makes you a pianist.*" So what's the toughest challenge for step-parents?

**CARR-GREGG:** I think it's giving the 'visiting' kids their own space ... be it just a drawer, a corner of a room, or a room of their own. Give them time to adjust. Understand the loyalty issues they'll be struggling with. And let them lead the way, because it's very important to allow the children to define their relationship with you.

Your job is to make yourself available. But you must accept that they're not necessarily going to take you up on that.

And don't expect any thanks! It's amazing how many people I come across who tell me in aggrieved tones, "You know, they never even thanked me!"

**GRAPEVINE:** How do we handle accusations like, "*You're not my real mum!*" Or, "*You're not my real dad!*" Or, "*You're not the boss of me!*"?

**CARR-GREGG:** You need to be prepared for that, because you *are* going to get it. But you don't have to flounder around and dredge something up – there are helpful ways to respond. Like: "*I'm sorry your real dad isn't here and I know you miss him, but I'm doing the best I can.*" Or, "*No, I'm not your real mum, but if I were I couldn't love you more!*" Or, "*You're right, I'm not your real mum, but I'm the one you've got at the moment.*"

Step-kids often cling to the reunification fantasy: that, given time, their biological parents will get back together again and they'll all live happily ever after. And that's where the adults have to be really careful. Kids like – and need

– predictability; they like to know what's going to happen round the corner. But if you repeatedly go into broken-record-mode, saying, "Look, your mum and I just didn't get on; we're not going to get back together; but we'll both always love you," it'll eventually have an effect.

**GRAPEVINE:** Communication between the step-parents is important – right? – to sort out things like discipline, boundaries and so on.

**CARR-GREGG:** For sure. Having decided to put *your* relationship first, you should make a pact to nurture your relationship – which means spending time together, away from the kids, so you're free to discuss the issues that life is throwing up at the time.

It's being prepared – not scared. And if you listen carefully to what your partner's saying you can (i) compromise and negotiate ... and (ii) come up with a united strategy which the kids will see and understand. Particularly with teenagers, if you can stand united against the emotional *fatwa* that they've issued, you have so much more power.

If the kids get an inkling that you're not united, then the whole pack of cards will come tumbling down.

**GRAPEVINE:** Can finances be a problem?

**CARR-GREGG:** Huge! You must avoid a situation where, say, the step-mother wants to spend too much money on *her* kids. You know – "What about *my* kids?" Both partners need to agree absolutely that things must be equitable for *all* the kids.

I had a mother and her daughter in my office recently. The mother and father had separated and it had taken two years to finalise the financial settlement

(which was huge – millions of dollars). And the daughter was saying to her mother, in front of me: “Mum, now that you’ve got all this money from Dad, why don’t we sit down together and do some financial planning? Maybe buy a property together?” The mother was just completely taken aback at what the daughter (who was just 15) was trying to do ... to assume the role of her partner. And that’s totally inappropriate.

Fortunately, Mum said (because I’d coached her well): “Now, I love you very

Mike and Carol Brady got right! Mike was an architect, if you remember, and he built this new house for his new family. And it enabled the family to develop their own new history – their own rituals and traditions.

One characteristic of blended families is that they don’t have those traditions – and they need to work hard at creating them. Having, say, Friday nights as ‘take-aways night’ or Sunday lunch as a special, regular thing. Whatever it is, you need to establish these things right from the start,



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much ... but I’m your mother, and I do not discuss finances with you.” I responded with a sort of internal “Yahoo!” when she said that. But you can easily see how financial difficulties can arise!

**GRAPEVINE:** Do you have any advice on things like a suitable place to live? Presumably not too far away from the former partner?

**CARR-GREGG:** Well, isn’t that only common sense?

This is probably the only thing that

because they’ll help you build a cohesive, functional family in the future.

**GRAPEVINE:** Listening’s important in any family, and especially important in step-families – surely? How can we become better listeners?

**CARR-GREGG:** Well, shut up for a start! Don’t talk too much. I think we do a lot of that. Don’t trivialise problems. Don’t be condescending. Open your ears and really get a sense of what the kids are saying, what your partner’s saying. In

my experience, far too many men and women who come into step-families don't know how to listen to one another ... how to listen to their children ... how to talk to very young children and how to talk to adolescents.

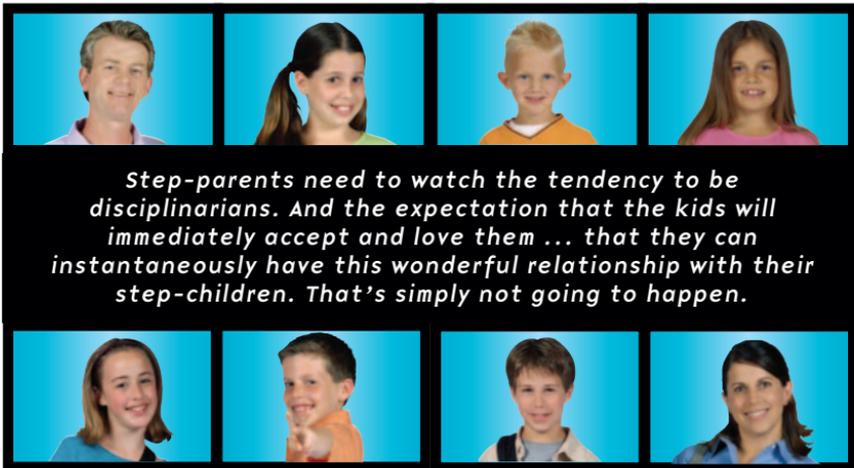
Adolescents especially have a built-in B.S. detector. They know when they're being snowed. And we have to be authentic, because they're looking for us to trip up.

Your content has to match your tone, and you really must make an effort to

**CARR-GREGG:** Well, it depends. I always think the healthiest families are the ones that fight ... but it's *the way* you fight that's important. You need to fight in a productive, not destructive, way.

**GRAPEVINE:** So how do we go about that?

**CARR-GREGG:** Well, the destructive way is when people get physical with one another. Violence, sadly, is a huge part of our culture. Most young people in stressful family situations receive buckets



listen. That means looking at them ... paraphrasing back to them what they've actually said ... showing that you rate their concerns as important.

If you can add a little bit of playfulness into that, even better. But at all costs, you need to be a really active listener.

**GRAPEVINE:** Let's talk about a meltdown situation. Should step-parents welcome strong feelings from the kids – things like rage, sulks, rebellion, disappointment, frustration – or avoid them at all costs?

of violence as 'entertainment'. So they can easily be desensitised and see it as a problem-solving strategy. We can't put up with that. The brakes on young people's behaviour are not yet fully developed – they're going to express their feelings, and they're not going to care about hurting other people.

But, for all that, I think those strong feelings should be welcomed and encouraged. I mean ... better out than in.

**GRAPEVINE:** As you know better than most, many step-parents are really

struggling. They've tried and tried and tried again, but things aren't getting better. How bad do things need to get before they admit they're not coping? How can they judge if they need some sort of professional outside help?

**CARR-GREGG:** That's a great question. I think if the language of the relationships within the family is purely anger ... if there is no happiness, no joy, no playfulness or humour ... if life is just a dirge, where you get up every morning and you don't look forward to most of what you're going to do with the family that day – that's Mother Nature's way of telling you that you've absolutely got to get some help.

A "Google" search under 'step-family support' will show you what's available close to you in your own area.

**GRAPEVINE:** We've talked about the problems step-families face, and it might all seem a bit daunting. Lots of us live in this situation, so are there any plusses?

**CARR-GREGG:** Oh, my word yes! Loads of them. For starters you've got *two* adults to provide role-models for the kids and to share the emotional load. The step-parent can be, I think, much more objective sometimes than the biological parent.

You're often better placed to provide friendship and nurture and emotional support to your step-child. And particularly if you're same-sex – like step-dad and step-son – you can provide a very positive, gender-appropriate relationship model.

You can also, of course, learn a lot from the others who've been grafted into your new family.

The good news is that, ultimately, these relationships that you've brought together *can* blend into a loving, smooth-running, healthy family. Given time and patience it'll happen. And, within that new family, wounds from the past – from death, divorce, or whatever – can actually be healed. ❁



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Thanks so much – John Cooney (founder/editor)

