



# THE CONTACT

## CONTACT Family Counselling Centre's Newsletter

APRIL-JUNE 2006

In the last Newsletter we had an article about parenting issues. This time we respond to a demand from readers and the public to write something about step parenting, as this seems at the hearts of many, because it becomes more and more common in our society and worldwide. We experience it in our counselling sessions as well: More parents separate, get divorced, single parents get together, or partners and spouses have died, and now new relationships between adults are formed.

### **What is a stepfamily?**

A family in which one or both of the adult partners bring children from a previous relationship.

### **When does one become a stepparent?**

One becomes a stepparent when s/he marries a parent or makes a fulltime commitment to a partner with a child, even without official marriage, and the new partner becomes an important adult and parental figure to the child(ren).

Most of the time, the setting up of a new family is not an easy process for the children. Although the adults have reasons why they want to live together, the children in most cases have not.

The transition from a family to a stepfamily is a time of huge disruption for a child. S/he has to deal not only with the painful period prior to the parents separation, when there may have been fights, tension and insecurity, (or the pain and grief when a parent has died), but also with the actual fact of the parents now living apart and the addition of a new authority figure into the family.

This authority figure cannot only threaten the relationship between the remaining parent and the child, but also finally closes the door on the hopes that the parents may reunite.

The believe that children "are so adaptable" is true only to a certain extent: They are outwardly adaptable, because they have to be so, they do not have a choice, but their underlying resentment may show e.g. in difficult behaviour.

A parent or stepparent should understand where the difficult behaviour comes from and be tolerant.

Very often all a child wants is acknowledgement of his dilemma and reassurance about what the new family set-up will mean to her/him and to his lifestyle.

A stepfamily does not recreate *a first family*, (which would mean blend into something entirely new with all prior connections cut off and the former existence being wiped out), but has to deal with all the important relationships which have been formed in the past as well.

Children have divided loyalties when parents do not live together any more, and when both parents remarry again, they *cannot* be full-time members of **both** families.

Parents need realistic expectations concerning their children's period of adjustment. Time will be necessary to adjust to the loss of the former family structure and to accept the new situation.

This also applies to children who have lived somewhere else with members of the extended family and after some years join one parent or the two biological parents to live with them. Being with the parent(s) does not automatically mean that the living together runs smoothly, as there is a lot of adjustment to the new situation necessary, and the children may experience distress and develop emotional and behavioural problems.

**In stepfamilies there is often lack of clarity about the role of the stepparent.**

A stepparent is basically an adult who forms a relationship with someone who is a parent, and this is where the problem lies. S/he does not enter the family because of the child, and often the child's presence is sidelined or even ignored, when a stepfamily is formed. Therefore quite often the children are a nuisance or inconvenience for the incoming stepparent.

They are sent off to boarding school or to live with relatives like grandparents or aunts and uncles, making them more vulnerable for abuse of all kinds, because the relatives often do not take them in wholeheartedly.

When the children live within the newly formed family, the role of the stepparent is often not clearly defined. In a conventional family most people regard it that both parents are responsible for their children, but how much responsibility should or does a stepparent have?

Should s/he discipline the child, make life style decisions for them as a parent might do, or should s/he leave that entirely or in part to the biological parent?

Lack of clarity about the authority structure in stepfamilies causes confusion for both adults and children – the stepparents are not clear how much they can/should get involved, and the children do not know what to expect from the new adult in their life.

Even under normal circumstances there are a number of problems parents are faced with: There is still the perception that, when one becomes a parent, the skills to be successful in that task are naturally given. This denial of problems parenting can be lays a burden of guilt on those of us parents who feel we are failing or those who are afraid of failing. It also prevents us from seeking help until our child starts to show signs of emotional and behavioural disturbances.

### **What can stepfamilies do to be successful?**

One of the most important things is that the adults are aware of the children's feelings and the pain they go through when their parents are not together any more, either through separation or death of one parent. (*continued on page 2*)

Younger children often live with the magical thinking that one day both parents will get together again,

## ***PARENTING IN STEP FAMILIES***

by

**Dr. G. Bischoff**

DIRECTOR'S WORD

Dear Members and Friends,

Contact is going through a strange phase these days: on one hand we are happy and excited to welcome our new psychologist Mr Karl Weisensee who has been seconded by EED to work for us for three years and on the other hand we have to say “good bye” to our Gertrud Bischoff, who has been with us for almost six years as... What can I say about what Gertrud has been doing for Contact? First of all she has been our Counselling Supervisor, enlightening our staff in their weekly and monthly supervision sessions. She has also participated in our Training department as trainer, module advisor, students supervisor and indeed during times of staff turnover she was the professional who kept our training courses going. As a Child Psychiatrist, Gertrud has helped us a lot in the handling of child abuse cases but she has also done counselling in other cases as well. She has helped in reorganizing the library and set out its regulations. She participated in workshops and meetings representing Contact and developed very good networking relationships. In short, there is no activity of Contact that Gertrud has not contributed constructively. She performed with great success even duties that were not within her professional capacity (remember her carrying boxes etc when Contact changed premises!) and I am particularly thankful for hanging the pictures on the wall in my office! We will miss Gertrud but, fortunately, not for very long as Richard

and her promise to come back. Don't they say that if you drink the water from Africa you will have to come back?

I would also, like to thank Dr Richard Bischoff who has very actively helped us during the last two years particularly with the child abuse cases. His assistance in both mobilization of resources and supervision has been extremely valuable.

In this issue of our newsletter you will see articles on step parenting and stress management which are issues that preoccupy more and more people due to the developments in today's society. You will also see a self-introduction of Karl Weisensee who has just arrived in the country to help us in our activities. We are very lucky to have Karl with us not only because he is a very well qualified and experienced professional but because he has a very friendly and pleasant personality.

Finally I want to comment on the hard work that our Training Department is doing with the running of the Basic Counselling Skills courses for the PLWHA, as well as the regular CSC activities. Well done, Dumisani, keep it up!

We are also looking forward to seeing our Counselling Coordinator, J. T. Ncube back again with us soon as she is recovering successfully.

STEP-PARENTING ( continued from page 1)

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Younger children often live with the magical thinking that one day both parents will get together again, when s/he (the child) e.g. behaves better, because the child might feel guilty and think that s/he has caused the separation. The stepparent has then difficulties to build a relationship with the child, because the situation is in the mind of the child only temporary.</li> <li>• A child wants both parents around, so it takes time to accept that this is no longer the case and that the stepfamily is an acceptable substitute.</li> <li>• The child has not been asked when the parents separated, so s/he feels helpless, unimportant and angry about the situation s/he is confronted with.</li> <li>• With the above in mind, as a stepparent expect ambivalence. Feelings of love and hate from the child may change every day, even every few hours. Allow an outlet for children's feelings for the absent parent; they will maintain affection for the natural parent, even when the adults do not talk to each other any more. Children should be given the opportunity to communicate with the non-resident parent, if they wish so.<br/>A child should never be forced to align with one parent against the other through words or actions.<br/>A child who is pushed to express affection that is not there towards the new stepparent may feel guilty or pressured.<br/>All parents, whether natural or step, need to accept the fact that each will play some role in the life of the child</li> <li>• Be patient. The first month or even years may have difficult periods.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is necessary to keep the new partnership strong. The new couple needs some regular time on their own to build this relationship. The stronger this bond is, the better the new family can deal with the arising problems. Statistics show that one of the main causes for divorce in stepfamilies is the stress of step parenting.</li> <li>• For the couple it is very important to agree on a type of discipline, and <i>who</i> is disciplining.<br/>In the beginning it is often easier to let the biological parent handle the discipline, because the children accept it better from somebody they trust and love and has lived with them than from a newcomer.<br/>Many children often resent being disciplined by a stepparent, and say, or at least think, “you can't tell me what to do, you are not my <i>real</i> dad/mom”.<br/>When not involved in the beginning in disciplining, the stepparent can focus better on building a positive relationship with the child.</li> <li>• Do not get caught in the middle!<br/>Parents feel great loyalty with their children, but also want the new partner feel like a “real” parent. For example, when a mother sticks up for her children, her new husband may get upset, but when she lets her husband change the rules, her children may feel betrayed.<br/>To make a stepfamily work, all persons involved must acknowledge that the stepfamily <i>is</i> different from a conventional family, but that it can be functional and successful nevertheless, having the differences in mind and acting accordingly.<br/>Like in any other relationships, people can have problems with dealing with life requirements at times, and it can be helpful to approach somebody for support. If you are a parent or stepparent, and you have the feeling you are not coping, contact us.</li> </ul> |
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## A MESSAGE FROM KARL WEISENSEE

I would like to thank CONTACT for giving me this opportunity to introduce myself to the members and friends of CONTACT in this Newsletter.

My name is Karl Weisensee, Karl translated as Charles in English being my first name and Weisensee being my surname. Before coming to Zimbabwe, I worked in a psychiatric hospital for about 20 years, especially in a day treatment programme as a clinician, mainly as a family-group- and trauma psychologist and psychotherapist. One of my special interests in my profession are relaxation techniques. Furthermore I gave lessons at the hospital school for nurses, at the local counselling centre for addicts and for other organisations like self-help groups or the police. The developmental service of the protestant churches in Germany, the EED, is funding my stay here in Bulawayo.

It may interest you that my wife, Monika Lange, is joining me here. Our son is still studying in Germany for applied informatics at the university of applied science.



I hope I will be able to make a useful contribution to the excellent

work CONTACT already does and in closing I would like to thank all members of the staff, the board and others, especially the Director and Mrs Bischoff, for their friendly welcome and the supporting hints which make our start here much more easier.

If you have any further questions about me or the services I have to offer, please don't hesitate to ask me at the office.

### NOTICE

- The Annual General Meeting will be held on the 18th of May 2006 at 1630 hrs for 1700 hrs, at our offices. All members and friends are invited and urged to confirm their attendance in advance.
- The graduation ceremony for the Certificate in Systemic Counselling Fourth Intake will be held on the 26th of May 2006. It will also be held at our offices.

## COUNSELLORS' CORNER with Mrs B. Terry

Stress is the major factor in all illnesses and psychological disturbances we experience today. The impact of this one single factor has been the root cause of breakdown of the family and society. It also causes illness and disease.

There are two kinds of stress, the kind that energises us to work harder, climb mountains, build a free and democratic society. And there is dis-stress which each of us recognises as an unpleasant, unhappy, disturbing or frightening effect. This can be seen in the violence we are seeing today.

This negative stress creates the mind set that there is only one way to solve a problem or situation and this is "my way". And it creates more than just the destabilising effect of violence on the family and on society, it also has an effect on each of us in terms of the mind-body-behaviour connection.

Our mind distorts the way we see things and understand situations for it blinds us to the whole truth. It can trap us in the belief that our perception is the correct and only perception. We get lost in the subjective, my view of things and lose the objective and bigger picture.

In our personal lives, ongoing chronic stress weakens the immune system, that is our natural ability to fight illness and disease. So many people are getting sick with allergies, diabetes, high blood pressure, strokes and heart attacks because of the effects of stress.

We are not listening to our bodies and what our physical condition is saying. In our worry, anxiety, fear, we let the effects of stress take over and illness or disease consumes our bodies. And in some instances we wonder what hit us.

And stress also causes the behaviour that spreads AIDS and STDs. Why? Because we use sex to escape from the unpleasant feelings created by stress, whether the stress is lack of money, which promotes prostitution, or pressure of work problems. Our need to escape from the stress of our fears and anxiety can also cause us to be involved in accidents.

This negative type of stress stems from a deep-rooted fear of "what's going to happen if ...." It is going on mostly on an unconscious level, but the repercussions bring on the behaviour that is so destabilising and destructive today.

We see this kind of stress in our homes, in our work place, on the streets, in our cities, towns and villages. The management of stress is a whole new subject concerning techniques and means of reducing or eliminating the stress we are experiencing today. It is extremely necessary to examine the effects of stress and to talk to trained persons, who can help us to understand how we are being affected by this and to help direct us to coping and dealing with it in a more effective way.



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**Family Counselling Centre**

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CONTACT Family Counselling Centre is a Welfare Organisation that offers Counselling Services free of charge to the Bulawayo public. If you have problems in your family, at your school or at your workplace; if you want to improve your relationships, performance, and to reduce stress, anxiety and grief, you are welcome. It also trains a broad range of people working in community based contexts in Systemic Counselling Courses.

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Due to the high postage costs we are unable to post the Newsletter to you. We therefore advise you to collect it from our offices.

## DIARY OF activities

MAY 2006

- ⇒ 17<sup>TH</sup> – 19<sup>TH</sup> TRAINING WORKSHOP  
(Basic Counselling Skills)
- ⇒ 18<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

JUNE 2006

- ⇒ 2<sup>nd</sup> CSC3 & 4 GRADUATION CEREMONY
- ⇒ 7<sup>TH</sup> – 9<sup>TH</sup> SUPPORT GROUP WORKSHOP  
(Basic Counselling Skills Workshop)
- ⇒ 10<sup>TH</sup> TALK TO MEMBERS
- ⇒ 14<sup>TH</sup> REFRESHER COURSE FOR SUPPORT GROUPS
- ⇒ 28<sup>TH</sup> – 30<sup>TH</sup> SUPPORT GROUP WORKSHOP  
(Basic Counselling Skills Workshop)

Talk to our Counsellors, Auntie “**Thandie**”  
or Uncle “**D**” on:  
Tel: (09) 72400

## RESOURCE LIBRARY

The resource library is getting bigger and better for your convenience. Thanks to a donation funded by the EED, the following books are now available in the library:

1. **Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends** (1990) by Michael White and David Epston— “ This book presents a respectful, often playful approach to serious problems, with ground-breaking theory as backdrop. The authors start with the assumption that people experience problems when the stories of their lives, as they or other s have invented them , do not sufficiently represent their lived experience. Therapy then becomes a process of storying or re-storying the lives and experiences of these people. In this way, narrative comes to play a central role in therapy.”
2. **The Reflecting Team** (1991) Edited by Tom Anderson— “What happens when the barriers between therapists and clients are removed, when they all participate in a dialogue about change, and when therapists and clients even trade place? As Lynn Hoffman says in her foreword to this remarkable book, it “dramatically alters a family’s position in relation to the professionals they have come to see.” In the process , it changes the roles, the rules and expectations of therapy.”
3. **Essential Skills in Family Therapy** (1998) by JoEllen Patterson et al — “ Family therapists commonly experience a host of nervous feelings when they begin their clinical work. Even after intense classroom study, students often feel unprepared to address such fundamental practical questions as :
  - What should happen after I complete the intake form?
  - How do I figure out what information from the session is most important?
  - Can clients tell I’m new art this, and that I feel completely inadequate?

An ideal clinical resource text, this volume provides students and new therapists with the basic skills and tools necessary to become empathetic, confident, and successful practitioners in today’s rapidly changing field of family therapy.”

4. **Family Reconstruction** (1986) by William F. Nerin— “ This book, written for both psychotherapists and for individuals interested in the dynamics of their own families, describes the process of family reconstruction, a powerful expedition into one’s past. Developed by Virginia Satir, family reconstruction enables a person to unlock the family within the self and so become free from dysfunctional learnings and patterns stemming from the family of origin.”