

WHEN BLENDED FAMILIES BREAK UP, WHAT HAPPENS TO THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE STEP-PARENT AND STEPCHILD? THERE ARE NO RULES FOR THIS VERY MODERN SITUATION, WRITES **COSIMA MARRINER**.

**J**acqueline Simpson\* realised she had become a linchpin in her two stepdaughters' lives when the elder girl confided in her a problem she was having at school.

"She didn't want to talk to either of her parents about it," Simpson remembers.

"I suddenly saw there was a role for me to play in the girls' lives that was as important as being a biological parent."

So when Simpson's marriage to the girls' father ended abruptly four years ago, she "didn't consider for a second" ending her relationship with her stepdaughters.

"Why would I end it? I divorced their father, I haven't divorced the girls."

But not everyone in Simpson's life saw it that way. "A few people thought I was hanging onto the past, that the best way for me to move forward was to cut all ties. I just didn't see it that way at all."

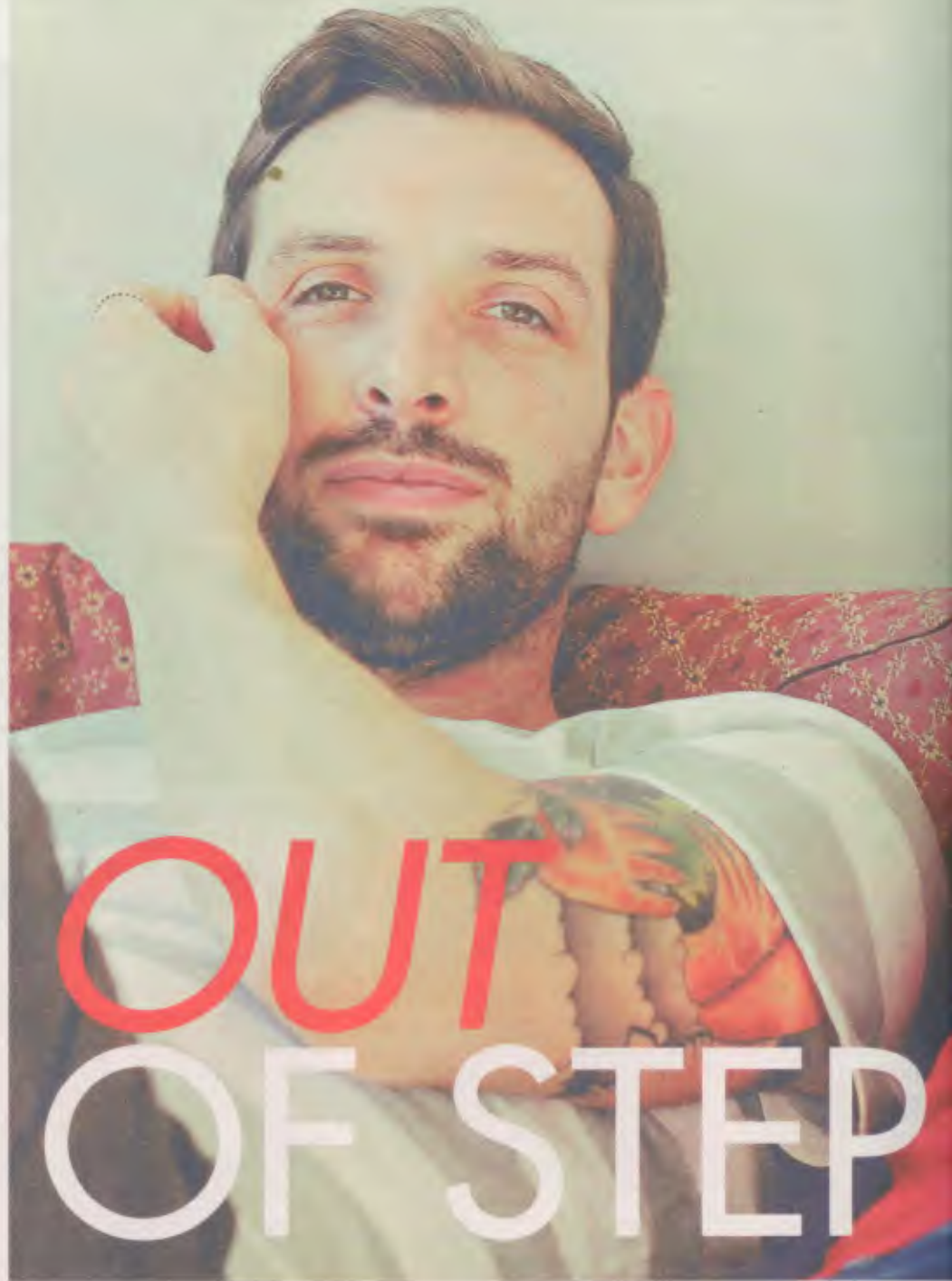
Simpson's relationship with her stepdaughters is so strong that both girls (who have different mothers) now live with her and have no contact with their father.

Simpson is just one of many step-parents feeling their way across this new relationship terrain, which comes without a guidebook and contains many pitfalls. There may not be a blood link, a formal family structure or even any legal rights to bind the relationship, but not every step-parent wants to sever ties with their stepchildren just because their marriage to the biological parent is over. And as complicated family structures multiply thanks to high divorce and remarriage rates, families are increasingly having to negotiate this tricky territory themselves.

Nearly one in five Australian families are stepfamilies, according to the Bureau of Statistics. Also known as blended, bonus, patchwork or even emulsified families, they are also more likely to break down: two-thirds of American stepfamilies fail, according to the US Stepfamily Foundation, compared with a third of first marriages.

When stepfamilies do fall apart, there is a tangle of relationships to unravel. Stepchildren and step-parents who struggled to accept each other are likely to breathe a sigh of relief that they need never meet again.

Katie Holmes reportedly fired her stepdaughter, Isabella, from her Holmes & Yang clothes line shortly before she divorced Tom Cruise. Gossip sites claim she wanted to



cut ties with the teenager, who had called her "Mom", because Isabella was "Tom's kid".

But those who genuinely bonded during the life of the blended family can be left distraught. They might have spent years forging a relationship – living under the same roof, making school lunches, turning up to parent-teacher interviews, baking elaborate birthday cakes, mopping feverish brows – only to face the prospect of the fragile alliance disintegrating.

Stepfamilies Australia's Daniela Zimmerman estimates that 10 per cent of step-parents want

to remain in their stepchildren's lives. "If you can manage at least some sort of contact it is definitely advisable," she says. "For children who are not expecting the contact to be cut off, if you see them one day and not the next, it can be quite traumatising."

But step-parents who don't want to lose touch are at the mercy of the child's wishes – and the biological parents' consent.

"It really depends on the ages of the young people, how far away they live, how mutual the separation is, and what is in the best interests of the child," says Zimmerman,

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with both [biological] mother and father. Of course, there will be resentment and angst."

Becoming a full-time mum to two stepdaughters has been a steep learning curve for Jacqueline Simpson and she feels the weight of responsibility of looking after someone else's biological children. "The scariest thing is the responsibility. It's kind of terrifying, it can be quite stressful. I don't want anything to happen on my watch."

Simpson also worries that she has fewer parenting instincts because she isn't the biological mother. "I don't know what I'm doing, I wouldn't have a bloody clue. I'm hoping to get it right more than I get it wrong."

**S**tepfamily experts advise step-parents to think of themselves as the friendly aunt or uncle – important, but not replacing the biological parent. Any ongoing contact should be consistent (monthly catch-ups, emails and texts, getting together at special occasions etc), rather than fading out of a stepchild's life after a few years.

But some step-parents resist a stepchild's pleas to keep in touch. Dr Jonathan Toussaint, from the not-for-profit counselling service Interrelate, has seen young boys in particular desperate to maintain contact with their stepfathers. "Boys often have this great big father wound; they desperately need a male figure and male approval in their life to avoid any dysfunction in later years. More often than not it's the child who wants the relationship, and it's up to the dad to step up to the mark."

Yet Toussaint says many men are keen to just move on with their lives, fearful of being entrenched in the conflict of a relationship split. He recounts the story of a 15-year-old boy he is counselling, whose biological father isn't around and whose mum has split up with his stepdad. "He would leave messages on his stepdad's mobile and not hear from him for a month. He remembers the times they used to go to the footy together and he hasn't heard from him – it's heartbreaking. This kid towers over you, but he longs for mateship."

Jacqueline Simpson's younger stepdaughter was so anxious about losing her stepmum that she tried "for years" to get her back together with her father. "I would tell her, 'You and I are still going to be friends. I'm not going anywhere,'" Simpson says.

She adds that she would have been "devastated" if she had lost contact with her two stepdaughters, now aged 13 and 19. Now she is 40, Simpson doubts she will ever have her own offspring. "I realised I wasn't going to have kids of my own, but because I had the girls in my life, it filled that hole."

"My life is so much better for having them in it. It's so much more complicated, it's vastly more expensive, but it's infinitely better. I'm always so happy to see and have them." ●

## ENDURING BONDS



**AMANDA MAALIA**

*Stepmother of Melissa and Jacob*

When Amanda Maalia's 10-year marriage ended, she asked her ex-husband if she could keep in touch with her two stepchildren. "I would want nothing less," he replied.

"He knew I'd give them the shirt off my own back," Maalia, a life coach, explains. "Those two kids were my kids as well. They're not my blood but I love them."

Maalia was just 20 when she met Andrew, 14 years her senior and a divorced father of five-year-old Melissa and three-year-old Jacob. The couple married and went on to have three kids together, but split up in 2007.

But Maalia remains close to Melissa and Jacob, who are now 23 and 21 respectively. "Why should I give up my kids as well as my husband? What happened between me and their dad has nothing to do with them," she says.

They come for dinner once a month, regularly talk on the phone, and Maalia still buys them Christmas and birthday presents.

Yet while Maalia is friends with her ex-husband, his family discouraged Melissa and Jacob from staying in touch with their stepmum after the divorce. "His family said, 'Why do you keep in contact with her? She's not family any more.' It made the kids rattled – they feel like they're on eggshells."

Melissa says Amanda was more like a friend than a parent when she was married to her father. "She made Dad do the disciplining ... it was cool having someone close to my age when I was growing up who I could talk to."

Because of the big part "Mandy" played in her childhood, Melissa didn't want to lose touch with her stepmum, or her three stepsiblings, after the divorce. "We had a bond and I didn't want that to just disappear, but it is hard trying to see three different families."



**STAN KOROSI**

*Stepfather of Andrew*

Stan Korosi thinks we need to embrace the concept of the social parent, as distinct from the biological parent. "The world tends to run on biological family lines, but a parent's relationship with a child has nothing to do with blood," he says. "Genetics is one aspect of parenting. It doesn't define it."

Korosi's own family is a case in point: his 20-year-old stepson Andrew has lived with him for the last nine years. Andrew has no contact with his biological mother (from whom Korosi divorced in 2005), and all attempts to reconcile with his biological father have failed. "His idea of family, the family he's known, is me and my extended family," Korosi says.

While Andrew looks nothing like his stepdad, "he has certain attitudes, values, ways of approaching the world. I smile and think, 'I know where you got that from,'" Korosi says. "They still get influenced by you, they still use you as a role model."

Korosi, 50, has been the father figure in Andrew's life since the boy was 18 months old. "I would say to my daughter, 'I made you'; to my son, 'I chose you'. But also, 'At the end of the day I love you both,'" Korosi recalls.

But it isn't all happy news. Korosi's daughter now lives with his ex-wife and doesn't speak to him. "When the relationship with my wife ended I wanted to be in my children's lives, I wanted them to be in my life. The idea of it ending up this way is quite horrifying. It's in defiance of the conventional family."

Korosi, who counsels stepfamilies, says just because one relationship shatters, not all have to shatter. "It's a funny bond, the step-parent bond. It's something that goes beyond genetics. It can be powerfully constructive and powerfully destructive."

\* Name has been changed.