

Book Review Editor
Ruth Stewart



I MARRIED A FAMILY: Step-Parenting and the Blended Family
by Joy Conolly
Published by Family Life Movement of Australia, 1981. 76 pages

This book is a personal account of one Australian woman's experience with step-parenting. Left a widow with three children, she married a divorced man who had custody of his three children and they subsequently had a daughter of their own. Joy Conolly writes simply but warmly of her 10 years, to date, in this blended family.

A blended or reconstituted family is seen as a less negative label than 'step-family' which often conjures up the image of the wicked step-mother or the inevitably disadvantaged step-child. In this personal narrative the author rejects the typical stereotyping of the blended family, either positive or negative, highlighting instead its individual uniqueness. While emphasising the adjustments that are required, she stresses the rich possibilities such constellations can provide, likening it to an extended family with a wide network of relationships.

The author is not suggesting that step-parenting is easy. The inevitable problems of any growing family are compounded by the cross currents of new roles and expectations. Unprepared for the realities of the situation, Joy and her husband found they had no one to turn to for advice and direction. There were no articles or 'how-to' classes on the art of step-parenting. This book is an attempt to start to fill that void.

Writing out of her own and others' experiences, the author seeks to share with those in similar circumstances, the wisdom she's acquired on ways to avoid and resolve some of the general problems likely to arise in blended families. For example, her advice on housing: If at all possible don't move into her or his but rather move into a different house and start fresh. On schooling:

send them all to different schools, particularly if they are of the same age. It reduces competition and gives them each six hours a day on their own. On counselling: have the whole family get some. It gets problems out in the open so they can be faced. On the physical demands when two families become one: Don't let Mum do it all. One way or another (rostering children or hiring someone) she has to have help. On privacy: It's imperative for everyone, but especially for the two adults. (The Conollys got their privacy by taking a daily hourly walk.) And so on, suggestions and pragmatic advice on many relevant topics.

This book is neither theoretical nor based on empirical findings. Instead it's a small collection of the kind of knowledge one gains from personal experience which the author has written for other step-mums and dads. Step-parenting is a growing phenomenon in Australia as in the western world generally but it's not a new phenomenon. Rather it's been a taboo subject and so far there has been very little written on it. This book is one small step in that direction.

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'CHILDREN'S FRIENDSHIPS'
In the Developing Child Series. Zick Rubin. 153 Pages.
Fontana Paperbacks. Great Britain. 1980. \$5.50.

Friendships occupy, both in their actual content and in the world of thought and fantasy, a large proportion of children's waking hours. For the most part friendships are among the central ingredients of children's lives. Parents, teachers and helping professionals have known for a long time about the potential importance of friendships in children's lives so this book does well to contribute and enlighten us upon this fact. It seems surprising to discover that behavioural scientists until the last decade have paid relatively little attention to children's friendships. This in part was due to the emphasis of psychoanalytic theory on the importance of the mother-child relationship, rather than the child's relationship with other children, in the child's development.

By drawing on his own and others' research into the area, especially since 1970, Rubin by way of pertinent case history examples is able to review and integrate what we now know or suspect about children's friendships — the forms they take, the factors that influence them and their place in children's lives. In particular children can provide certain resources for their friends that cannot be provided so well by adults. Three ways in which children serve distinctive functions for one another are by providing opportunities for the learning of social skills, by facilitating social comparisons, and by fostering a sense of group belonging. Rubin points out that friendships are often the sources of children's greatest pleasures and deepest frustrations. That children's friendships can be harmful only serves to underline their importance. Friends serve central functions for children that parents do not, and they play a critical role in shaping children's social skills

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and their sense of identity. Children's experiences with their friends may also have major effects on their later development, including their orientations towards friendship and love as adults.

Along with individual chapter references (should any piece of research or relevant reading want to be followed up), Rubin also makes practical implications in several of the chapters concerning the important role teachers and parents can play with regard to children's friendships. He believes that cross-sex play among pre-schoolers should be encouraged, and that many children tend to choose same-sex peers due to culturally imposed barriers which should be broken down. Such cross-sex play would then expose boys and girls to a wider range of behavioural styles and activities, expand their pool of potential friends and help to give them a fuller appreciation of the qualities that are in fact shared by the two sexes.

Similar advantages can be applied to cross-age friendships as well. Mixed-age settings, whether in school or socially are able to allow children greater flexibility in finding their 'peers'. Often same-age groups breed competition and aggressiveness, and interaction across age lines may help to diffuse such problems. Such mixed-age interaction can provide younger children with the stimulation and guidance of the older ones, and in turn the older children can benefit from a sense of increased competence, pride and responsibility that comes from helping others. Rubin notes that such benefits of cross-age interaction are increasingly being exploited in tutoring programmes set up in some American primary schools where children of higher grades tutor some of the younger ones on a regular basis. In Australia more widespread use of such 'pupil teaching' could have positive advantages for both child and teacher in

instances of composite grades within the one classroom setting. There is also reason to believe that such cross-age relationships might enhance the younger child's conversational repertoire and ability to grasp new concepts.

Many of the advantages of cross-age interaction may be observed between brothers and sisters where the older siblings often take a special interest in the well-being of their younger ones. Cross-age friendships however may also have their negative side, leading to bullying of a younger child by an older one, or rejection of the older by peers because of the younger friend. Parents and teachers might also need to watch that the younger child is not being pushed into advanced activities or that the older child is adopting immature behaviours.

Adults are faced with a dilemma when it comes to their influence on children's friendships. The line between helping and interfering is a fine one and pressure put on children to 'make friends' may lead to an over emphasis on congeniality, dependence and conformity, or on the other hand, withdrawal. Rubin suggests that parents might assume an unobtrusive role respecting the real differences between each child and helping him work toward a quality rather than quantity in those friendships. Losing friends can sometimes be difficult and upsetting for children, so parents should not underestimate these losses. Rather, Rubin feels that the parent could talk with the child about the friendship and turn the experience into a positive one for future friendships.

Throughout this insightful and easily readable book Rubin demonstrates an understanding of children's friendships as best understood in the child's own terms. His examples clearly show the wondrous state of being friends — human relationships of remarkable

strength, satisfaction, and importance for future growth.

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CHILDREN AUSTRALIA, R.G. Brown
282, pp Geo. Allen & Unwin, in
association with the Morialta trust of
South Australia, Sydney 1980,
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Anyone looking for a broad, general text on children and their families and their relationship with certain social institutions, in Australia, about five or six years ago would have been disappointed. Mounting such a search quite recently this reviewer could find only one such book and that was not even a generalised study and what is more, it was published in 1963. Today the situation is improved, the past couple of years has seen the publication of a number of general texts. The book under review here is a welcome addition to what one may tentatively venture to nominate as the beginnings of an Australian literature on child welfare.

Children Australia is a reader on a number of facets which span issues such as the relationships of children to their families and other institutions in society, the status and rights of children and the changing conceptions and policies relating to their welfare. All this is cast against a background of rapid changes in our society's social and economic conditions. The book helps us to