

# REVIEWS



keeping pace with the rising rate of divorce in the U.K. and the U.S. the phenomenon of stepfamilies is increasingly common, yet little has been written about it. Far more prevalent a problem than the adopted child, the handicapped child, or the fatherless child, there has been little research on a subject that cries out for investigation. One explanation offered for this is that the relationship stirs up a great deal of pain: the feelings aroused by step-children, for many people, create avoidance behaviour. The other reason suggested for lack of study is that stepfamilies are not easily accessible for investigation. Unlike a broken home where society can act in *loco parentis*, or in adoption where a couple opens their doors voluntarily, a step-family is seen as a healed breach, a remade family, and there is a formidable respect for the privacy of a family in our society.

In seeking some answers to the needs and problems of stepfamilies, the author interviewed nearly 100 step-parents. They lived in either the U.K. or the U.S. Almost all were white and middle class. (Working class step-parents were harder to find and far more reluctant to discuss their family situation.) Most of those interviewed in the study were still married to the spouse who had made them a step-parent. Unfortunately the stepchildren of the step-parents were not interviewed.

The areas investigated include: the ambiguous relationship of the new step-parent to his/her "instant" family; the inadequacy (and frequent inaccuracy) of step-terminology, and the feelings evoked by them; pre-marital assumptions, or why people marry parents; contrasting step-parenthood after a death and after a divorce; the "unacceptable" feelings of guilt and resentment; discipline and conflict — who holds the authority; the missing incest taboo; new babies or no babies; the omnipresent wicked-stepmother-myth; obligations without rights.

These topics are discussed by the author in a free flowing style in which her own findings in the form of comments, quotes and interchanges are reinforced by classic examples from literature and biography. Like many books on serious topics written for popular consumption, the study design and analysis of data is lacking, so it's impossible to judge the rigor of the analysis. In addition the reference citations are listed at the back of the book by chapter and page number and do not appear in the narrative. This makes the book more readable for most, yet those who wish to delve more deeply have some guidelines.

The strength of the book lies in its candid approach to a complex relationship that no monogamous society has found easy. The irreconcilable facts are that children do not like divorce and substitute parents, yet adults demand the freedom to live with whom they love. Until such families stop going along with the irrational facade that all families, including those with stepchildren are ipso facto happy families, things will never come right. A step-parent is an added dimension in a family circle upheaval and tension are inevitable. To pretend otherwise is foolish and fallacious. Maddox argues that facing up to the realities openly and together takes away the pretense, provides a climate for honest interchange, and may lead the way to a more comfortable everyday living relationship, if not acceptance.

While the book is most helpful for prospective step-parents, and those already in the role, in that it sensitizes them to the dimensions of the problem and provides a beginning source of conventional wisdom, there are considerable insights for the professional as well. The book also points out the need for a more rigorous and systematic study of step-parenting.

*Ann J. Pilcher, MSW, ACSW  
Lecturer,  
Department of Social Work,  
La Trobe University.*



## "THE ROOTS OF LOVE"

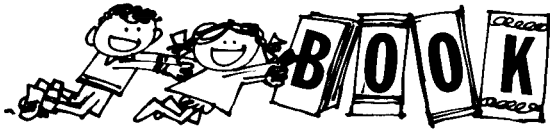
by Helene S. Arnstein,  
Unwin Paperbacks, London,  
1980, 239 pages.

When the blurb on the back cover of the paperback quotes Margaret Mead as saying "A warm friendly book that has distilled the best of modern thinking about the needs of young children" I was a little impressed. However the book "The Roots of Love" by Helene S. Arnstein leaves me a little puzzled as to what moved Miss Mead to such an accolade.

"The Roots of Love" is one among many of recently published books aimed at helping you relate to your child in a warm, positive way, so that the child may grow up to be well-balanced, happy and healthy. It is aimed at "the families who have the no-more-than-usual problems of family living" and talks much about the importance of giving and receiving love and how you too can do it successfully. In theoretical approach it can be described as neo-Freudian drawing on psycho-analytic literature with a little anthropology thrown in for balance.

There is no doubt it is a warm and friendly book. It is like this, I feel, in its efforts to lower the anxiety of parents who are very concerned about loving their newborn babe or toddler. Ms Arnstein is at pains to tell you that you too can do it, just because you are reading the book and are motivated. The book comes across as being very supportive, particularly to those who are having problems.

There is also no doubt that this book tries to be modern, with sections on the busy career woman turned mother, the new more involved role of



a modern father and some modern thinking about baby sexual play and late toilet training. There is also some mention of modern theories, including a rather cautious note that some people believe it is all right for children to see their parents naked, even though traditional literature has frowned on it.

However, there are parts of the book that I found wanting, including vague discussions, lack of recent information and its simple acquiescence to psycho-analytic theory. Whilst in all fairness the book does not claim to be a "how to do it" book it does seem to drift over the early times in a newborn's life; in particular the birth process itself, surely a time of great significance in the creation of love between a baby and its parents. There is no mention of current thought about the issue of mutual bonding at this crucial time. There is mention made of old research by Bowlby and Spitz about the effects of maternal deprivation, but it's all a bit old hat. A book published in 1980 should mention those champions of natural childbirth and bonding, Le Boyer and Erna Wright among others. The book also does not focus clearly on the issue of breast/bottle feeding, another topical area in modern thought in terms of bonding and the growth of love; this particular example of soft-peddling, I feel, is related to not wishing to make a bottle-feeding parent anxious that they are not developing love roots in this area. When talking about the toddler, the book does seem to tighten up a bit with a firmer and clearer stance on toilet training, discipline etc. in the psycho-analytic tradition. Yet there are some out of date sections even here, in particular the omission of a discussion on whether older siblings should be present at the birth of new siblings, a very hot current issue when talking about the growth of family love.

The book's unstated aim of lowering the anxiety of parents backfires a little. In its efforts to placate the

anxious parent, yet follow psycho-analytic theory about child-rearing, it seems to be trying to do too much. The message is that you too can bring up a well-adjusted child even if you have already made many mistakes. Reading about past mistakes, "a la Freud" must only create guilt feelings in the anxious parent, not allay them. Furthermore the book is so busy being kind and generous when showing you how to love your child that it neglects to give a discussion on what to do when you feel like chucking the wee one down the stairs or giving a toddler a thrashing, feelings that overwhelm any normal parent. There is a fairly lengthy section on "Control through Spanking" which in effect says that if you do, you weaken the love bonds and teach the child that "might is right". Where does that leave you as the parent? No offerings here on handling your own feelings and problems.

As mentioned before, the book is written for parents who want to bring their children up in an atmosphere of love. To me it seemed that the person the book is written for doesn't need to read it, as they are probably so well adjusted that creating a loving family just comes naturally. Anyone who reads the book but deviates from the norm will only get feelings of increased anxiety, as they cannot fulfill the initial criteria. For workers in the field of child care it is a rather long, meandering book to read and pick up the one or two good theoretical and practical points. As the sort of parent the book is aimed at would rarely be a client, there is no-one to give the book to as a back-up to counselling. Foster parents, a possible group of potential readers, would get little out of the book except the realization that they have a difficult task at hand, which I'm sure they would know already.

The book is another one of those well-intentioned tomes filling the book shops to give answers to those seeking to be parents in the modern way. It would have done better if filled

with some fresh thinking and practical hints on how to be a new-wave parent. As it is, it adds nothing new to the vague philosophising which abounds in the discussion of what makes good parenting. In fact it merely seeks to reinforce many people's slavish devotion to the worst parts of the tried old theory of psycho-analysis. It is old mutton dressed up as young lamb.

*Jan Armstrong-Conn,  
Social Worker and Mother of Three.*

