

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