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GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / YINGCHI KIM

Steven Green, with stepdaughter Stephanie, right. Behind them is Green's wife, Rose, with Green's daughters from a previous marriage, Joanna, left, and Jennifer.

Make room for stepdaddy

The new man
doesn't want
to leave
parenting
to his wife

By Julia Lieblich
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE

Parison psychologist David Toll still sounds wistful when recalling his first meeting with Lana. "She was a whirling dervish, a dark-haired gypsy who could dance all night." A few dates and Toll was sure he'd met his mate. He hadn't counted on Lana's son, Steven, a whirling dervish in diapers, to make the happy twosome a triangle from hell.

"The first time I spent the night at Lana's, I woke up to 2½-year-old Steven pointing a stick at me and swearing," says Toll, 45. "He celebrated his third birthday by peeing on my stereo."

Welcome to stepfathering, an old leading role in a new family drama - or melodrama, in the case of quasi-stepdad Woody Allen and his scene-stealing romance with the college-age daughter of his longtime companion, Mia Farrow. The old-fash-

ioned stepfather was often content to leave parenting to his wife, if only to avoid the wrath of children who resented the intruder who shared Mommy's bed. Now, thanks in part to the men's movement, the new man wants a say in bringing up baby.

So today's stepfathers, facing conflicting role expectations unique to men, are reading self-help books and flocking to support groups in an effort to grapple with issues stepmothers have always faced. Although there are no good statistics on the number of stepfathers, the National Center for Health Statistics reports that almost half of all marriages involve the remarriage of at least one partner. Mike Brady is joining Ward Cleaver as man of the house.

The Brady Bunch suffered the death of two parents and emerged unscathed. Real stepfamilies carry more baggage than a Greyhound bus. Most don't survive the struggle of creating a new family while grieving an old one. "The demographics are frightening," notes Bruce McKay, the New England regional

STEPDADS, Page 71

Make room for stepdaddy: The new man want

■ STEPDADS

Continued from Page 67
director of the Stepfamily Association of America and a stepfather for more than three decades. "Sixty percent of remarriages fail."

The good news is that stepfathers without illusions of recreating a stereotypical biological family can help build a new one that benefits from the richness of combined experience. The men who make it pass muster with children. According to Emily Visser, a California psychologist specializing in stepfamily therapy, "Studies indicate that children rate stepfathers more highly than the stepfathers rate themselves."

Starting a stepfamily is like entering a play in the second act. While some stepfathers waltz in from the wings - "I got two wonderful children, toilet trained and ready for school," says 35-year-old Worcester salesman Nick Nawidjan - others find themselves co-starring in a drama with Oedipus Rex.

"You're breaking my heart," 5-year-old Alexis announced out of the blue to his newly married mother. "You love Robert more than you love me."

Stepfathers who expect to play the traditional dad are in for a let-down. Children who have finally adjusted to a single-parent household after the trauma of death or divorce are often loath to share their mothers. For many the entrance of the stepfather represents an end to the fantasy that Mom and Dad will get back together. Teen-agers have a particularly tough time with Mom's second honeymoon. Experts say it takes most stepfamilies two to four years to adjust.

The wise stepfather will lay low in the beginning, but many come on as tough-love Titans determined to impose order on chaos. A single mother who has had trouble controlling her children may initially welcome this domineering male - and later resent him. "There's a double message," says stepparent and Connecticut psychotherapist Anne McKay. "Step in and straighten this mess out, but stay away from my kids."

Children reject such strong-arm tactics. "You're not my real father.

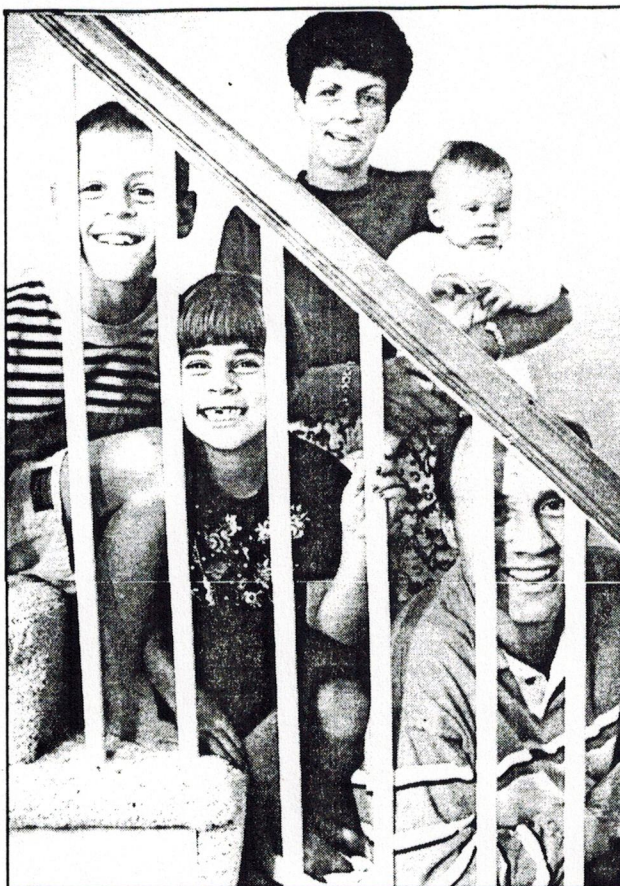
You can't tell me what to do," is the stepchild anthem. Instead of acknowledging the complex dynamics of the step relationship, stepfathers often blame the children for failing to accept the new world order and then escalate the punishment. A better strategy, says Brookline psychologist Ronald Levant, is to leave the disciplining to Mom.

"Any authority should be given to the stepfather by the wife and only after he's established a friendly relationship with the kid and he's thought of as a giving person," says Levant, co-author of "Between Father and Child." In time the mother can delegate some authority. When she is away, for example, she can let the children know the stepfather is in charge of enforcing house rules.

Mothers may be tempted to exert too much force, preventing stepfather and child from finding their own language. "Lana tried to tell me to go 'Goo, goo, goo' when I put the kid to bed," says Toll. "I would have felt like an idiot. I said, 'Leave me alone and let me do it my own way. I have to have my own relationship with this kid.' So she'd tell him stories about the fairy princess, and I'd tell him about the guy who drowned in a bucket of yogurt. Everyone has his own style."

Levant notes that instant parenthood is particularly rough on men who have trouble identifying their feelings. "The most vulnerable emotions, such as disappointment and rejection, get channeled into anger," he says. "They yell at the child or withdraw or sulk." Even super-sensitive men's movement guru Warren Farrell, of California, had a hard time handling rejection from his live-in lover's daughter. "Each day eroded my image of myself as a loving, giving man."

Ex-husbands can erode the confidence of the most stable stepfathers. Three weeks after Toll moved in with his stepfamily, the child's father showed up following a year-and-a-half absence. "He had just gotten sober and found a super job. He was the Santa Claus Daddy. He would have the kid come over and totally indulge him and I was the one who demanded sensible behavior at home." Visser advises stepfathers to



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / YUNGHI KIM

Nick Nawidjan, right, with stepchildren Jarred, left, and Danielle, wife Barbara and son Ryan.

grit their teeth and establish a working relationship with noncustodial parents while informing the children that each household has its own rules. In Daddy's house you may color on the wall; in Mommy's we use paper.

Stepfathers who don't have custody of their biological children often feel torn between families. "When I would say good night to Rose's daughter I felt the pain of a broken heart," says Northborough career consultant Steven Green, 41, who has two daughters from a previous marriage. "Here I am saying good night to Stephanie and I would love to have my children here too."

Men who bring their children with them face the challenge of helping two sets of kids with two sets of rituals find common ground. Both fathers and mothers should recognize that it is natural to feel a stronger attachment to their biological children and that it may take a while to form close relationships with stepchildren. To foster family unity, adults should spend some time getting to know each child individually, stressing his or her importance to the group. This is particularly important when a new baby arrives on the scene.

Men who have chosen not to have biological children may feel some re-

gret. "Seeing the bond between my wife and her son reminds me of what I'll never have," says 47-year-old writer Stephen Fox of Somerville. "As close as I feel to him, it's just not the same as having my own kid." Still, the stepfather-stepchild bond can have a power of its own. When

Fox's 22-year-old stepson faced a life-threatening operation, Fox realized the depth of his feeling. "We were all in the preparation room: his biological father, my wife. Just before they wheeled him in I kissed him. I felt a visceral vibrating closeness that I had never felt before."

Fox describes the relationship as a combination of parent and friend. "It's more superficial, but it's also looser. I can talk to him about sex or girlfriends in a way he might not talk to his parents." Cambridge psychologist and stepfamily authority Patricia Papernow calls the relationship one of intimate outsiders. "They're close enough to know each other very well, but outside enough so they don't have the same chemical overreaction."

Relationships between stepfathers and daughters can be more problematic, particularly during adolescence. "Even for a father, dealing with his daughter's emerging womanhood is difficult," says Levant. "A typical response is for men to distance themselves, and a lot of daughters feel rejected. I tell them that it's natural that they find their daughters attractive, but they're not going to act on that" — a line Woody Allen's critics say he shouldn't have crossed with his partner's daughter. Papernow says that girls are more comfortable if stepfathers are not physically affectionate. "But they can be verbally affectionate, interested in her activities and who she is."

To get a handle on the dynamics, many stepfathers rely on family therapy and support groups, such as those formed under the auspices of the Stepfamily Association of America, a nonprofit organization based in Lincoln, Neb., founded by Emily Visser and her husband, California psychiatrist John Visser.

"I got to the point in the first year that I thought, 'I need help or I'm going to strangle everyone,'"

says Linwood Beverly, 48, a Medfield cytologist who attends a step-parenting group in Needham. "I learned it was all right to have conflicts, that the feelings of rage, resentment and anxiety were normal. It helped the kids because they saw that my wife and I were concerned enough about them to see how we could better the relationship."

Stepfamilies that weather the early years can reap numerous rewards. "Adults have a second chance at happiness," says Visser, "and children have opportunities to see a couple that can work together. This is a very good model for them because they've seen couples that couldn't. There are a lot of adult role models for the child to learn from."

Even after a divorce, ex-husbands don't necessarily become ex-stepfathers. Although they have little or no legal rights or responsibilities for their stepchildren, many feel an emotional tie that endures. David Toll and Lana are no longer together, but he is still close to his 23-year-old stepson, Steven, who lived with him for a year after the breakup. "He calls me Dad or Dave," says Toll. "He calls his real father 'sire.'"

Survivors of stepfamily breakups may have second thoughts about trying again. "It's certainly made me more hesitant to commit to a woman with any children at all," says Warren Farrell, who blames his breakup on the couple's disagreements over child rearing. Toll, however, moved in with an artist and her two young children.

Was the adjustment any smoother the second time around?

"No," he says. "Whenever we'd sleep late, the kids would empty out the refrigerator and pour everything on the floor. A jar of honey, a bucket of milk. They'd mix it all up on the carpet, and we'd find them up to their ears in slime."

Welcome home, stepdad. Hang on for the ride.