

Secrets in Stepfamilies

Stepfamily Scotland Helpline: 0845 122 8655

The best way to make trusting and warm relationships in your family is through honest and clear communication. However, when something in your past made you feel frightened, ashamed, or sad, it is tempting to avoid talking about it, and this is how a family secret develops. This leaflet talks about some of the secrets that stepfamilies might have and why they can become the source of stress and anxiety. It also provides some advice on how you might tell a secret.

Secrets about a child's identity

Children need to know who they are and where they fit in the world, even if it means being told about illegitimacy, adoption, or half-siblings in another family. The earlier they know the truth the better, as you will avoid the risk of your child finding out elsewhere. Try to find an opening to talk about it when you think the child is ready to take it in. For example the arrival of a new baby or when sex education begins at school.

Taboo subjects

Mental illness, hereditary disease, suicide and death are subjects that are often hidden from children, sometimes in an attempt to erase the past or because you want to protect them. Some shameful secrets, such as a prison sentence or abuse, are also difficult to talk about with young children.

Children have resilience, but they can only use it if they know what they are coping with. They often suspect that something is being hidden from them, but because they don't know what it is, they have no way of dealing with it. The unknown is more frightening than something that has been named.

Who else knows the secret?

Only you? You and your partner? A family doctor or a teacher? The wider the circle of people who know, the more likely it is that the secret will be revealed by someone other than yourself, and not at a time or in a way that you would have chosen. By deciding to share your secret you will destroy the power of the secret to damage your family.

Consequences of keeping a secret

Forever avoiding the subject and being careful about what we say inhibits our relationships with others. Also, the effort needed to ensure that the secret remains hidden can often cause anxiety and stress. If the secret concerns your child you may unconsciously treat him or her differently from the other children in the stepfamily, which may leave them feeling confused, jealous, or angry.



Losing control of a secret

Secrets regarding a child's identity will become difficult to hide as the child becomes an adult. For example, when applying for a passport or getting married a birth certificate must be produced. This will show the name of the birth father, even if the child has been adopted by a stepparent. Or, equally revealing, it may show no father. A child's original name will also remain on the birth certificate even after it has been changed.

Family Secrets also have a habit of revealing themselves in other ways. If the child grows up looking different from siblings or step-siblings; if past events are alluded to that make a child suspect a secret; if the birth parent stays around in the guise of, say, an aunt, and drops hints about their kinship; or the child overhears conversations. When these things happen they may not speak of it to anyone, but they will wonder and perhaps worry more than if they had been told openly.

Telling the Secret

Plan where and when it would be best to tell the child or person involved. Would it be helpful to have someone else there, and if so, who? Make sure you have time to listen to their reactions and

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feelings. Assure them that their feelings, even negative ones such as anger or grief, are OK. Tell them that they can ask you more about it when they feel ready, and that you will be as honest as possible. If you need support, you can call the Stepfamily Scotland Helpline and a helpline worker will help you consider your options.



Make sure the message has been received

Younger children especially will probably need more than one conversation. A child may be too shocked, embarrassed or disbelieving to take everything in the first time. If you never mention it again, a child could either try to believe that it wasn't really true, or fantasise to fill in the gaps in their understanding. You can reassure the person you have shared your secret with by being open and frank with them. This will send a message that they can be too. Sometimes the person being told the secret will be relieved because they know already, or suspect it, and are glad to have the secret out in the open.

Stepfamily Scotland offers support and information to anyone in or related to a stepfamily. If you feel you need some additional support or just need to talk to someone about some of these issues, then you can call the Stepfamily Scotland confidential Helpline and talk to one of our fully trained helpline workers. They are non-judgemental, will listen, and can help you explore your situation.

**Stepfamily Scotland
Gillis Centre
113 Whitehouse Loan
Edinburgh
EH9 1BB**

Useful Contacts:

Family & Relationship Counselling

**Scottish Marriage Care
Telephone: 0141 222 2166
www.scottishmarriagecare.org**

Provide relationship counselling services throughout Scotland to couples or individuals who are married, living together, living apart, divorced or separated. They also provide counselling services to families who are living with conflict.

Post-Adoption Service

**BirthLink
Telephone: 0131 225 6441
www.birthlink.org.uk**

BirthLink helps adopted people and their birth relatives to establish and maintain contact. They offer a Search Service to help trace missing relatives and a Go-between Service to assist with initial contact between people separated by adoption.