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Blended Families:
A Critical Review of the Current Research

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Current research on blended families is summarized to address blended family development, communication strategies, and relationships between stepparents and stepchildren. Considerations for family counselors and blended families are addressed. Implications for future research opportunities include multicultural issues within blended families and stepmothers’ relationships with their stepchildren.

Keywords: blended families; stepfamilies; stepparents; remarriage; stepfathers; stepmothers

The American divorce rate has reached a normative level, averaging about 50% (Carter & McGoldrick, 2005). A large percentage of divorced couples are remarrying and increasing the number of blended families living together. It is estimated that approximately 20% of children younger than the age of 18 reside in stepparent households (U.S. Census Bureau, 1998). As the structure of American families continues to expand in its complexity, it is imperative that marriage and family counselors conceptualize family issues and clinical interventions from an empirically based perspective. Relying on assumptions about blended families may perpetuate cultural beliefs that endorse a deficit perspective of stepfamily functioning (Malia, 2005).

The current research on blended families within the past 7 years has increasingly reflected the transition from the nuclear family to a more diverse blending of families. The recent research explored in this literature review contains important considerations for counselors on the development of blended families, relationship building between the stepparent and stepchildren, and development of resiliency factors. The results tend to suggest a confluence of variables impacting family functioning as opposed to a myopic conceptualization of family structure being the predominant factor. Implications for future research and family counseling are identified at the conclusion of the article.

DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS OF BECOMING A SUCCESSFUL BLENDED FAMILY

Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, and Turman (2001) conducted a qualitative/interpretive method analyzing 980 pages of interview transcripts with stepparents and stepchildren in response to the limited research addressing how blended families join together; the limited understanding of family communication including boundary management, conflict resolution, and role negotiation; and the limited knowledge about the role that communication plays in blended family functioning. Past literature addressing developmental stage-based models were noted to be limited in three ways—namely, being prescriptive in nature, stating how the families “should” develop, a lack of information concerning diversity within the blended family structure, and not expressing the dynamic shifts of blended family relationships (Braithwaite et al., 2001).

Braithwaite et al. (2001) focused on gathering a holistic understanding of blended families across the first 4 years of family development by using a framework initially developed by Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson (1999). Using a hierarchical cluster analysis, Baxter et al. created five developmental trajectories: (a) accelerated (characterized by clear assumption of parental roles by stepparent and by perceptions of children as being related to each other as siblings), (b) prolonged (characterized by low levels of solidarity and by being functional), (c) declining (characterized by an initial perception of a “perfect” and ideal family that has been replaced by a disillusioned and distraught perception), (d) stagnating (characterized by fluctuating expectations and role ambiguity),
and (e) high-amplitude turbulent (characterized by difficulty accepting new family roles). These developmental trajectories became the defining categories for Braithwaite et al.’s study.

Participants included 5 biological/adoptive parents, 15 stepparents, and 33 stepchildren. Their descriptions across the 4 years were divided into the five trajectories to identify the blended families’ development and the process of communication (Braithwaite et al., 2001). All five categories of the developmental trajectories characterized the blended families’ development as satisfying when open communication existed. The participants described open communication as the family’s ability to discuss family roles, boundaries, shared identity, acclimation into the family, diverse expectations, conflicts, and their feelings (Braithwaite et al., 2001). The participants within the accelerated, prolonged, stagnating, and high-amplitude turbulent trajectories were noted for their ability to put their differences within the blended family aside and adapt to the changes they confronted by negotiating their relationships in the family. The blended families’ ability to confront presenting issues through communication were reported to develop a high degree of solidarity within the blended family (Braithwaite et al., 2001).

These findings were substantially different for blended families within the declining trajectory (Braithwaite et al., 2001). A lack of communication and the deterioration of a blended family was noted by the participants within the declining trajectory. The participants conceptualized the family’s ongoing avoidance in communication across the 4-year time frame as having devastating effects that resulted in a family member’s physical and emotional disengagement from the blended family.

The five different developmental trajectories spoke to the forward movement of the families’ process and the individuals’ own unique pattern of development. Researchers encourage counselors, future researchers, and the blended family members not to limit their views of blended family development and to openly explore the families’ diverse experiences as a blended family. The blended families’ level of solidarity and satisfaction is connected to their ability to negotiate and communicate about role identification, boundarymanagement, conflicts, and expectations. The researchers suggest that family counselors help the blended family members develop communication patterns that support confronting conflicts, honesty, and relationships within the blended family (Braithwaite et al., 2001).

The important role of communication within stepfamilies was supported by the findings of Golish (2003), who employed a qualitative methodology to examine stepfamilies’ communication strengths. A total of 90 in-depth interviews were conducted with stepparents, parents, and stepchildren from 30 stepfamilies. The study examined the communication strategies that differentiate “strong” stepfamilies from stepfamilies having more difficulty forming a blended family (Golish, 2003). Golish found all families to experience the same seven primary challenges regardless of the families’ strengths and development including “feeling caught,” regulating boundaries with a noncustodial family, ambiguity of parental roles, “traumatic bonding,” vying for resources, discrepancies in conflict management styles, and building solidarity as a family unit.

In Golish’s (2003) study, stepfamilies who reported using everyday talk engaged in family problem solving, promoted a positive image, and demonstrated consistent awareness of problem severity as a strong blended family. She also stated that communication strengths are essential to any family; the manner in which they are applied in stepfamilies may be unique because the “rules” for communication in a stepfamily system are complicated by a web of boundaries (Bray, 1999; Golish, 2003; Madden-Derich, Leonard, & Christopher, 1999). Families were identified as developing communication strategies in a different manner leading to diversity in stepfamily communication development. Golish (2003) has supported Braithwaite et al.’s (2001) research exploring blended family development. The researchers concluded that all blended family development is unique and is based on the family’s communication patterns (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Golish 2003).

The developmental model of pathways for blended families explores the overall interactions and functioning of the family unit (Braithwaite et al., 2001). Other contemporary research examines the different factors related to family functioning. Some research focuses on the role of the stepparents (Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001; MacDonald & DeMaris, 2002), whereas other research addresses the well-being and perceptions of children (Jenkins, Simpson, Dunn, Rasbash, & O’Connor, 2005; Morin, Milito, & Costlow, 2001).

**STEPFATHER AND STEPCHILD RELATIONSHIPS**

MacDonald and DeMaris (2002) examined the quality of the stepfather’s relationship with stepchildren. The researchers conducted a study analyzing the data from the 1987-1988 National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). The study administered a multistage probability sample of 13,008 people aged 19 or older, who were able to communicate in English or Spanish and lived in households in the United States (MacDonald & DeMaris, 2002; Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988). The study selected one adult from each household to be the primary respondent. Respondents selected were either cohabiting with one child or married with children.

The researchers explored stepfathers’ negotiation of family roles and development of the stepchild relationship. The researchers hypothesized from normative resource theory (Szinovacz, 1987) that the effect of the stepparent’s demand
for conformity (i.e., following directions, controlling tempers, and following rules) depends on the biological father’s involvement in the stepchild’s life. The prediction is based on the nonresidential biological parent’s support of the child, and the time they spend together is predicted to decrease stepchildren’s likelihood to accept the authority of the step-parent compared with stepchildren who spend less time with or never see their biological parent.

The researchers measured the stepfather’s demand for conformity from the stepchild through a four-item summary scale (MacDonald & DeMaris, 2002). The stepchild’s relationship with the biological father was measured by the mother’s report of the child’s participation with the biological father in the following four types of activities: (a) leisure activities, (b) religious activities, (c) talking or working on a project or playing together, and (d) school or other organized activities. The biological father’s influence on parental decisions was gathered to provide input regarding the child’s education, health care, and religion.

The results indicated that conflict between the biological parents negatively affects stepfather-stepchild relationship quality and that contact between the stepchild and his or her biological father weakens the quality of the stepfather-stepchild relationship (MacDonald & DeMaris, 2002). Stepfather and stepchild’s relationship quality is dependent on the stepfather’s demand for conformity. The biological father’s input did not appear to matter on the stepchildren-stepfathers’ relationship as long as the contact time between the biological father and stepchild was minimal. Thus, this study provides a more clear understanding of how child-biological parent relations impacts child-stepparent relations and emphasizes the importance of quality time as compared to conformity demands. In addition to exploring the relationship of stepfathers with children, there is also research that specifically examines the relationship of stepmothers with children.

**STEPMOTHER FAMILY STRUCTURE**

Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, and Stewart (2001) investigated relationship quality and well-being across five different family structures: (a) two-parent biological families, (b) single-mother families raising biological children following divorce, (c) stepfather families, (d) stepmother families, and (e) adoptive families. The study included data from the 799 families who participated in the 1992-1994 NSFH (Sweet & Bumpass, 1996). Two hundred twelve children between the ages of 10 and 18 years were randomly selected within the 799 families and were interviewed over the telephone to provide self-reports of their well-being and the quality of their relationships with family members. At least 1 parent from the above sample was interviewed separately in a face-to-face interview.

Lansford et al. (2001) investigated the importance of family structures in predicting psychological well-being and relational quality of family members. Initially, the researchers hypothesized that socialization by two parents is optimal (Demo & Acock, 1996) and single parents, stepparents, and adoptive families would evidence lower levels of well-being and relational quality. Stepmother and stepfather families reported fewer disagreements than did mothers in two-parent biological families. The results indicated that mothers reported somewhat lower well-being than married households; however, they did not consistently differ from other families, and children from the various households did not report a difference in well-being or relationships. Also, the authors initially hypothesized that stepfamilies, adoptive families, and single-parent families would have a disadvantage when compared with traditional two-parent families. The findings concluded that stepmothers and biological mothers reported children to have fewer behavioral problems than did mothers of other types of families. The final hypothesis controls for family process variables using the MANCOVA to determine which family structure increased well-being among the family members. The overall results concluded that family structure differences in mothers’ well-being and mothers’ reports of their child’s well-being were no longer significant after controlling for the family process variable, which is the disagreement between the spouses and between mothers and children.

In conclusion, Lansford et al. (2001) speculated on stepmothers’ heightened perceptions of problems within the family structure compared with other family structures to be a result of the cultural expectations for stepfamilies to have an increase in family problems. The authors contemplated whether or not the stepmothers’ perceptions of family problems within the family structure and the well-being of the family members are a result of the increased sensitivity to any signs of problems because of the expectation that stepfamilies will have an increased rate of problems. Lansford et al. cautioned that the perceptions of problems may once again be related to the stigma related to stepfamilies being more susceptible to problems than two-parent biological families, resulting in stepmothers’ awareness of problems and fathers’ lack of awareness and potential denial of problems.

**STEPFATHERS’ MONITORING OF CHILDREN**

Fisher, Leve, O’Leary, and Leve (2003) examined the effects of parental monitoring of children’s behaviors. Parental monitoring involves tracking the child’s whereabouts and activities (Bulcroft, Carmody, & Bulcroft, 1998; Fisher et al., 2003). This research was informed by previous studies that found that stepfamilies are characterized by lower levels of control and monitoring than two-parent biological families (Fisher et al., 2003; Henderson & Taylor, 1999) and that stepfathers’ monitoring tends to be lower than stepmothers’ moni-
toring, indicating a difference among stepfamilies (Kurdek & Fine, 1993).

In this specific study, participants consisted of 32 stepmother/biological father families, 77 biological mother/stepfather families, and 82 two-parent biological families (Fisher et al., 2003). All participating families had a child between the ages of 5 and 8. The participants were recruited via a newspaper advertisement, flyers placed on bulletin boards, and newsletters. The participants needed to be married or to be in an ongoing relationship for at least 6 months.

The sample demographics indicated several differences between stepmothers, stepfathers, and biological families. Biological families reported having longer established relationships than stepfamilies. Scheffé post hoc comparisons indicated significant differences in stepmothers'/stepfathers’ level of education compared with biological two-parent education levels, which were reported to have completed college or graduate school. In addition to increased education levels, biological two-parent families were also older than stepfamilies.

The differences in family type and the level of monitoring were examined by conducting a one-way ANOVA. The results of the post hoc indicated that the biological family’s level of monitoring to be approximately .5 standard deviations higher than that for stepfamilies. Stepfathers appeared to have lower monitoring levels than stepmothers.

In conclusion, there was no difference in the elements of monitoring between stepmothers, stepfathers, or biological families despite the initial hypothesis that the level of monitoring would be less between stepmother and stepfather families than two-parent biological families. The researchers conducted an additional analysis to control for demographic issues. The biological two-parent family held higher levels of monitoring when controlling for relationship lengths and compared with stepfathers. There was no significant difference found between stepmothers’ and biological two-parent families’ level of monitoring. Therefore, stepfathers may need additional assistance in taking on a more parental role of monitoring their stepchildren. In addition to exploring parental monitoring in various family structures, there are numerous research studies that specifically examine the experiences and perceptions of youth in blended families.

YOUTH IN BLENDED FAMILIES

The research that empirically and directly explores the experiences and perceptions of children and adolescents within stepfamilies tends to focus on youth well-being (Manning & Lamb, 2003) and the influence of family dynamics on behavioral issues (Jenkins et al., 2005; Morin et al., 2001). Risk and protective factors provide important information for family counselors as they work to support the resiliency of the family and its members. Factors influencing adolescent well-being encompass externalizing and internalizing dimensions and tend to include problems in school, delinquency, academic achievement, academic expectations (Manning & Lamb, 2003), aggression, depression, anxiety, isolation (Jenkins et al., 2005), peer support, neighbor support, school attachment (Rodgers & Rose, 2002), and perceptions of discipline (Morin et al., 2001). Overviewing the individual research studies creates a more comprehensive understanding about how these issues manifest in blended families.

In 2001, Morin et al. explored differences in how adolescents perceive discipline based on the structure of their family. Forty-five adolescents completed a questionnaire that explored attitudes and perceptions of discipline in the home. The adolescents in blended and intact families responded similarly to several issues such as the typical discipline issues (i.e., complying with house rules, peers), most severe punishment received, and the reason for the most severe discipline. There were a couple of meaningful differences that emerged for the two groups. First, the results reveal that 22% of the adolescents residing in stepfamilies (n = 15) identified family relationships as a discipline issue as compared to 6% of the adolescents living in families with both biological parents (n = 30). This suggests that a challenging developmental task of stepfamilies is to create parent-child relationships. Second, 20% of adolescents from intact families reported forgetting the reason for receiving the most severe punishment, whereas no adolescent in the blended family group forgot the reason. Such a difference highlights the importance that adolescents in stepfamilies place on the interaction of parents with rules and boundaries. Although this study focused on one dimension of parent-child interactions, other research broadens the exploration of risk and resiliency factors and creates a more global context for our understanding.

Three recent studies explored the role of family structure on promoting risk and resiliency factors for adolescents. First, Manning and Lamb (2003) examined risk behaviors for 13,231 adolescents who participated in the National Longitudinal Adolescent Survey of Adolescent Health. This study is unique because it expands the understanding of stepfamilies by differentiating between married stepfamilies and cohabiting stepfamilies. The measures of well-being included whether the adolescent had been expelled or suspended, whether the adolescent struggled to get along with teachers and other students or to complete homework, frequency of engaging in delinquency acts, grade point average, desire to attend college, and scores on Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test. The results suggest that adolescents residing in cohabiting stepfamilies have a higher likelihood of engaging in acts of delinquency, being expelled or suspended from school, receiving lower grades, performing at a lower level on the vocabulary test, and experiencing problems at school. An important finding was the lack of statistically different results between married stepfamilies and married families with two biological parents. Manning and Lamb concluded that roles in married stepfamilies and married biological families may
be more clearly defined and developed as compared to cohabiting stepfamilies that may be characterized by role ambiguity.

Role ambiguity may also be a factor that explains the results of Rodgers and Rose’s (2002) study of 2,011 adolescents (mean age = 14) in 7th, 9th, and 11th grades that explored risk and resiliency factors. Rodgers and Rose conducted a self-report survey that encompassed adolescent perceptions about parental monitoring, parental support, peer support, school attachment, neighbor attachment, externalizing behaviors (i.e., substance use, fighting, sexual activity), and internalizing behaviors (i.e., depression, suicide, self-esteem). The results indicated that lower levels of parental monitoring were related to higher levels of externalizing behaviors for all types of families. Adolescents in stepfamilies reported higher levels of externalizing behaviors at all levels of parental monitoring in comparison to intact families. The researchers hypothesized that parental monitoring might function as a less effective protective factor in blended families because of the role ambiguity related to effectively monitoring.

Interestingly, peer support did not function as a protective factor for the adolescents in stepfamilies. Parental support and neighborhood support did emerge as variables that protected adolescents in stepfamilies in that adolescents experiencing higher levels of parental and neighborhood support reported lower levels of internalizing behaviors. In conclusion, Rodgers and Rose (2002) found for adolescents in blended families that parental monitoring functioned as a buffer for externalizing behaviors and that neighborhood and parental support functioned as buffers for internalizing behaviors.

The role of internalizing and externalizing behaviors in families was also explored by Jenkins et al. (2005) from the perspective of how it influenced marital conflict. This study was longitudinal in nature and collected data from 127 families (35% biological families, 35% stepfamilies, and 30% from complex families) at two different times in the span of 2 years. The research collected data from multiple sources—namely, teachers, parents, and children (n = 296). Stepfamilies in the study experienced significant increases in marital conflict across time if the children’s externalizing behaviors increased as compared to other family types. The researchers hypothesized that the role of the nonbiological parent in discipline may account for the difference and concluded that this needs to be investigated in future research.

Contemporary research on youth in stepfamilies suggests a more complex and interactive confluence of risk and resiliency factors than the assumption that the role of family structure is the most powerful factor. These findings encourage family counselors to attend to a multiplicity of factors and to explore how they mutually interact within the system. Specific implications for family counselors are important to consider.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY COUNSELORS**

Current research on stepfamily development and the well-being among stepfamily members has increased over recent years. The research overviewed in this article challenges some of the assumptions related to the functioning of blended families. The research spoke to the unique challenges that stepfamilies may face as they develop into a blended family structure. Braithwaite et al. (2001) concluded that blended family development varies across the five trajectories. The blended family members who participated in the interviews did not fit into a single developmental process or communication style; therefore, family counselors and family members need to be cognizant of the family’s experience and not mold families into a single model for success. Also, a central theme of the research findings was that the factors influencing stepfamily well-being and functioning are more multifaceted and complex than family structure alone. Family counselors must attend to the confluence of communication (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Golish, 2003), parental monitoring (Fisher et al., 2003), boundary management, conflict (Jenkins et al., 2005), relationship interaction (Lansford et al., 2001), role definition (Manning & Lamb, 2003), solidarity, and similar variables in both the assessment and conceptualization of stepfamily functioning.

The main theme across the literature speaks to the benefits of communication on the blended families’ well-being, conformity, and monitoring levels compared with biological two-parent families. The blended families who openly communicated and addressed the struggles dealing with role identity, relationships, and the new family development were able to transition into a blended family more smoothly than those who refrained from open communication (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Golish, 2003). Family counselors may address and explore with the stepfamilies the benefits of open communication, boundary development, role identification, and the ambiguity of developing a new family structure to increase the blended family’s awareness of the process and promote discussion on the process and their experiences. In addition, Golish (2003) stated that all stepfamilies vary across communication abilities. Therefore, counselors need to assess the family’s communication strengths and help the family build open communication across the primary challenges.

It is imperative that family counselors develop a framework to explore their personal beliefs about stepfamilies and the stereotypes that may exist. Acknowledging our personal beliefs, values, and attitudes is an important step in continual counseling development. Specifically, family counselors are encouraged to explore the stepfamilies’ dynamics and acknowledge their own stereotypes (if any exist) regarding the relationship between family type and monitoring (Fisher et al., 2003). These authors suggested that all family types establish guidelines to increase child monitoring through increased communication between community, school, and
parents regarding the child’s whereabouts. The parents’ tracking of their child’s activities may potentially decrease the likelihood that the child will follow a deviant path. Overall, parents who spend time with their children and pursue an interest in their lives will potentially be preventing future problems related to education, peers, and the child’s chances for deviant behavior (Fisher et al., 2003).

In conclusion, current research challenges family counselors to assess their existing assumptions and beliefs about the challenges experienced by stepfamilies and to shift to an empowering perspective that acknowledges the multiplicity of factors influencing blended family well-being. Educating stepfamilies about parental monitoring, role definition, communication styles, and conflict management is necessary to support their development processes. Furthermore, family counselors need to be cognizant of differences among stepmothers and stepfathers so that the unique factors of these families are addressed.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Current research on blended families does not speak to the diversity and need for awareness of multicultural issues. Recent research indicates the importance of understanding the diverse needs of blended families; however, no information currently addresses blended families of color, gay and lesbian blended families, and the joining of culturally different families. Within the literature on youth experiences, the representation of non-White participants ranged from .04% (Morin et al., 2001) to 27% (Manning & Lamb, 2003). The articles reviewed did not directly speak to the cultural differences among the blended families. MacDonald and DeMaris (2002) included Spanish-speaking participants in their interviews; however, the results did not highlight cultural differences among the blended families. This is especially salient given the importance of communication within families. The limited multicultural research on blended families demands future research endeavors.

The data from the research studies overviewed tended to be extrapolated from national surveys that were collected 10 years ago. This data design is helpful in capturing a larger, more representative sample, and yet more recent exploration of the perceptions and experiences of stepfamilies need to be conducted to provide more timely and relevant findings. Ongoing research is needed to clarify how various variables of family process and interaction manifest in stepfamilies and impact their development and well-being. The research that specifically addresses the experiences of stepmothers seems to be even more limited and restricted than research exploring the experiences of stepfathers. Future research could target stepmothers as primary participants to address this gap. Qualitative studies are also necessary to create rich and descriptive understandings of blended families.

**REFERENCES**


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Adolescent personalities and their self-acceptance within complete families, incomplete families and reconstructed families

Abstract:
At the time of this work I had been concentrating on how the family gave shape to adolescent personalities and how adolescents would, as a consequence, accept themselves. The purpose of this present study is to determine the differences in personality range and levels of self-acceptance among groups of women and men from complete, incomplete and reconstructed families. The study included a group of 314 adolescents, from the administrative region of Łódź. The following test methods were used: the Survey and standardised Inventory of Personality NEO - FFI by P.T. Costa and R. McCrae as adapted by B. Zawadzki, J. Strelau, P. Szczepaniak and M. Śliwińska; and the Scale of Interpersonal Attitude (SUI) as adapted by J. M. Stanik.
As a result of statistical analyses, it turned out that the dimension of personality the Openness to Experience had indeed diversified the examined adolescent groups. Statistically significant differences were also observed at the self-acceptance level between the study groups.

Keywords:
family structure, adolescence, personality, self-acceptance

Streszczenie:
W rezultacie przeprowadzonych analiz statystycznych okazało się, że wymiar osobowości różnicujący badane grupy stanowi cecha otwartości na doświadczenie. Istotne statystycznie różnice zaobserwowano także w zakresie samooceny badanych grup młodzieży.

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Introduction

Psychological literature widely discusses the multilateral influences of family on emotional and social life development as well as on the whole man’s personality (Cartwright, 2003; Plopa, 2005; Liberska, 2011; Rostowska, Rostowski, 2011).

Researchers assume that an individual’s correct development including the formation of personality, self image, self acceptance and the relation to oneself as well as to other people results from family experience (Reykowski, 1992).

Family experience can either help develop an individual or, in cases of adverse and very strong influences, impede the process of psychical and social development, not letting an individual form desirable human values.

The above-mentioned experience is extremely important because its impact concentrates mostly in the childhood period, when a child’s psyche of is the most absorptive, vulnerable, flexible and hardly influenced by the external environment (Dunn, Munn, 1985).

Familioologists point out the importance of the parents’ role in family functioning and the children’s development. It is because in the initial life period, including the time from infancy to pre-school age, it is the family that plays the main role in the child’s personality and self-esteem formation. Its first social contacts are established with the mother, then with the father, brothers and sisters and other housemates (Napora, Schneider, 2010).

Familial influence on the child’s development is spontaneous in nature, and is not the effect of any particular educational program. Social stances, determined to a large extent by the socialization process in the first years of life, depend on the family atmosphere in the home, the educational methods applied by the parents, the family structure, and on the social behaviour patterns demonstrated by the parents.

The research done by G. Poraj (1988) shows that parents affect the children’s personality and self-acceptance development through applying particular educational methods. Negative influences can be exerted by excessive severity, exaggerated rigorism, and using too much punishment and rules as well as by permissive education, excessive care, and solicitude linked with limited independence.

A number of researchers (Tyszkowa, 2006; Harwas-Napierala, 2006) point out that the relations of a child with adults, mainly concerning their personal qualities, are considered to be one of the most important factors in personal development.
There is also some empirical evidence that there is a close connection between personality and mature parenthood. Mature parenthood can help to reduce the child’s self-centeredness, form the child’s sense of responsibility and empathy, and trigger its readiness to perform social roles (Rostowska, 2003).

The family structure plays a very important role in personal development. It includes the fact that the child has both biological parents, a stepfather or a stepmother, as well as their age, job and social status. A different educational situation is created in a two-generation family as well as in an extended one. Furthermore, when a child has siblings, their age and number appear to be significant for personality and self-acceptance formation. Different personal qualities and self-acceptance levels will be formed in the eldest, the youngest or the only child, or the only boy among a few sisters or the only girl among a number of brothers (Tenikue, Bertrand, 2010). Knowledge of emotional and social experiences which were provided to a child in its family is often the key to understanding the difficulties the child has in social functioning (Kubik, 1999).

At the early school age and during adolescence a child comes into the secondary developmental context, whose range is much wider than the family environment. In this life period an individual’s personal development takes place mainly through influences of non-family environments, such as school, friends and people met in various youth organizations, and later in work (Tyszkowa, 2006).

Our article concentrates on the family role in personality shaping and self-acceptance of adolescents (average age 21). An important argument for doing research in this field is to explore the changes which are currently taking place within the Polish family. They are structural, and functional, in nature and are connected with self-consciousness, thus creating a new kind of educational environment.

Modern families have a diversified structure. Increasingly, incomplete families as well as reconstructed ones are becoming visible in Polish society. Both cases have a tendency to increase, therefore it is so important to study how young people function in incomplete families after a divorce and in reconstructed ones since the psychological knowledge on this subject is still insufficient.

This study adopted the personality concept by R.R. McCrae and O.P. John. The authors singled out five main personality dimensions: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness (John, 1990). These five dimensions were confirmed by numerous sample groups, kinds of data, and for a number of languages (Zimbardo, 2012).

Self-acceptance was determined based on the definition suggested by J. M. Stanik. The author defines it as a rather stable state of personality, resulting from an individual’s relatively stable self-estimation, especially when comparing oneself with other people.
High scores obtained on the self-complacency scale for low self-estimation, connect a neurotic, suspicious and hostile personality with a high level of apprehension. On the contrary, low scores point to the lack of these symptoms in the surveyed person’s self-description (Stanik, 1998).

It should be emphasized that the level of self-acceptance is connected with how an individual’s personality acts, in other words, with its structuralization and organization level. Individuals with stable self-estimation have a better organized personality that individuals with unstable self-estimation. Moreover, worse structuralization results in greater susceptibility of the personality to emotional influences.

**Research problems and hypotheses**

The purpose of our research was to answer the following questions: Are there any differences in personality qualities between young people from full families, incomplete families and reconstructed ones? Are there any differences in the self-acceptance level between young people from full families, incomplete families and reconstructed ones? Are there any relations and of what kind between young persons’ self-acceptance levels and personality qualities from differently structured families?

According to our designated purpose and the above-mentioned questions and based on the content-related literature, a number of research hypotheses have been formulated.

Hypothesis no. 1: There is a difference in personality qualities between groups of women from full families, incomplete families and reconstructed ones.

Hypothesis no. 2: There is a difference in personality qualities between groups of men from full families, incomplete families and reconstructed ones.

Hypothesis no. 3: There is a difference in the self-acceptance level between groups of women from full families, incomplete families and reconstructed ones.

Hypothesis no. 4: There are statistically significant differences in the self-acceptance level between groups of men from families of different structure.

Hypothesis no. 5: There are relations, different as far as strength and direction are concerned, between the self-acceptance level and the examined personality qualities.

**Research methods**

The following test methods were used to answer our research questions: Survey and Standardised Inventory of Personality NEO - FFI by P.T. Costa and R. McCrae as adapted by B. Zawadzki, J. Strelau, P. Szczepaniak and M. Śliwińska and Interpersonal Relationships Scale (SUI) in J. M. Stanik’s adaptation. The survey method allowed us to
gather data on the socio-demographic situation of young persons (age, gender, family structure, domicile, marital status, education). NEO-FFI and SUI are psychometrically acceptable and allow for scientific research (Stanik, 1998; Zawadzki, Strelau, Śliwińska, 1998).

Participants

The study included a group of 600 young persons (average age 21; δ=1,181) from the administrative region of Łódź. The tests were anonymous and done in groups. Participation in the research was voluntary. To create an appropriate sample group, the following exclusion criteria were adopted: young person’s attitude toward participation in the survey, demographic structure of the family of origin, and completion of the test sheets\(^2\).

Taking into account the demographic structure of the family of origin, and according to our designated purposes, the distinguished environments included: the full family, the incomplete family as a result of parental divorce, and the reconstructed family. The above-mentioned familial typology was adopted due to methodological considerations connected with facilitating the conduct of research in this area. The appropriate sample group did not include any persons originating from other family types than the above-mentioned.

Ultimately, the test group comprised 314 people (158 women and 156 men). With respect to the family of origin criterion three comparative groups were identified. Comparative group I was made up of 105 people from incomplete families (53 men and 52 women). Comparative Group II consisted of 104 people from stepfamilies (51 men and 53 women). In contrast, comparative group III comprised 105 people from full families (52 men and 53 women).

The empirical material, collected through surveys, was subject to qualitative analysis. For elaborating the data, the test of independence chi-square (\(\chi^2\)) was used. A number of statistical analyses were carried out using the computer program IBM SPSS Statistics 20. It turned out that the persons forming the appropriate sample group were characterized by domiciled uniformity (large cities, with a population of more than 100 thousand-\(\chi^2=4.166; df=4; p=.384\)), marital status (single-\(\chi^2=1.322; df=2; p=.516\)) and education level (secondary education-\(\chi^2=1.031; df=2; p=.597\)).

\(^2\) In order to determine the credibility degree of the received results, we used a rate which consisted of the number of question marks in the Interpersonal Relationships Scale by M. Stanik. It points to a protective and distrustful attitude towards the survey. Considering this fact, we excluded from the examination all those persons who had received high and extremely high scores in this scope (119 people) (Stanik, 1998).
Results

The results presented below were intended to answer the question: Did the surveyed groups of women and men from families of diversified structures differ in their personality qualities? For statistical results the F test and Tukey’s multiple comparison test were used.

Since women and men react differently to the same stimuli and behave differently in social situations, is the difference being subject to both genetic factors as well as environmental ones the results for all the women and men in the comparable groups from differently structure families were taken into account (Mandal, 2006).

Variations in the personality dimensions of the tested young women from complete families, incomplete families and reconstructed families.

Bi-factor variation analysis taking gender into consideration pointed to a statistically significant difference between the women from the examined types of families. It concerned the quality of Openness (F=14.487; p=.0005) (Figure 1 and Table 1).

In the Openness dimension, the highest average results (above average) were obtained by women from full families in comparison with those from incomplete families and reconstructed ones. The results appeared statistically significant. A similar degree of Openness also characterized women from incomplete and reconstructed families, who otherwise obtained average results or results below average.

Figure 1. Variations in the personality dimensions of the tested young women from families of diverse structure.
Table 1. The family structure and the dimensions of personality of women in the light of Tukey’s test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure of family:</th>
<th>reconstructed</th>
<th>incomplete</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>complete</td>
<td>.0005</td>
<td>.0005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>incomplete</td>
<td>.768</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the other personality dimensions surveyed by the NEO-FFI test, namely Neuroticism, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, there were no statistically significant differences between the surveyed groups of women. The results were on the average level. In this way Hypothesis no. 1 was supported.

**Variations in the personality dimensions of the tested young men from complete families, incomplete families and reconstructed families.**

Comparative analysis pointed out that the personality dimension significantly different among the men’s groups was Openness (F=23.677; p=.0005) (Figure 2 and Table 2). Survey results for men from differently structured families were similar to those received by the women in this sphere.

In Openness, the highest average results (above average) were obtained by men from full families in comparison with men from either incomplete or reconstructed families, whose results were below average. The results appeared statistically significant. The quality of Openness characterized the men from incomplete families and those from reconstructed ones to a similar degree.

![Figure 2. Variations in personalities of the young men from diverse structured families.](image-url)
Table 2. The family structure and dimensions of the men’s personality in the light of Tukey’s test.

| Openness to Experience | Structure of family: |  |  |
|------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
|                        | reconstructed       | incomplete          |
| complete               | .0005               | .0005               |
| incomplete             | .423                | .984                |

In the other personality dimensions surveyed by NEO-FFI, namely Neuroticism, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, there were no statistically significant differences between the men’s groups. The results were on the average level and in this way they supported Hypothesis no. 2.

**Variations in self-acceptance of the young women from diversely structured families**

The research results presented below (Figure 3 and Table 3) concerning variations in the self-acceptance for the female groups pointed to a statistically significant difference (F=32.664; p=.0005).

![Figure 3. Variations of the average results as regards self-acceptance in the surveyed female groups.](image)

Table 3. The family structure and the women’s self-acceptance level in the light of Tukey’s test.

| Self-acceptance | Structure of family: |  |  |
|-----------------|---------------------|---------------------|
|                 | reconstructed       | incomplete          |
| complete        | .0005               | .0005               |
| incomplete      | .984                |                     |

Considering the women’s self-acceptance from the types of families, it was noticed that women from incomplete families were characterized by the highest average results on the self-acceptance scale, which means that they have a low level of self-esteem in comparison with women from full families.
The group from reconstructed families did not differ significantly as regards average results in self-acceptance from those growing up in incomplete families. The self-esteem level was similar in these two groups.

The optimum level of self-acceptance characterized the group from full families, which differed significantly in this scope from the groups of the women coming from other family types.

**Variations in self-acceptance of the young men from diversely structured families.**

Considering the influence of the family structure on the self-acceptance level in the tested men groups, a statistically significant difference was noticed ($F=45.723; p=.0005$). The results are presented by Figure 4 and Table 4.

**Table 4.** The family structure and the men’s self-acceptance level in the light of Tukey’s test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure of family:</th>
<th>Self-acceptance</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>complete</td>
<td>.044</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>incomplete</td>
<td>.0005</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The statistical analysis shows that, as far as self-acceptance is concerned, men from incomplete families received the highest average results in comparison with men from reconstructed families (above average) and from full ones (low results). It means that they are characterized by a low level of self-esteem; they are tense and neurotic. The results appeared statistically significant.

Between the male groups from full families and reconstructed ones there was seen a tendency ($p=.044$) toward showing better socially adapted men from full families. As it appeared, men from full families received the lowest average results on the self-acceptance scale, which means the their self-esteem was optimal.
Correlation of self-acceptance with the personality dimensions in the young people from the examined families types.

The next research stage analysed the relations between self-acceptance and the young persons’ personality dimensions from differently structured families. In order to do that, we used the r-Pearson correlation coefficient.

Taking into consideration that the correlation coefficients are not additive, we carried out a statistical analysis separately for each compared group.

In the situation when the same two psychological variations correlated with each other in two or/and three types of the surveyed families, the obtained correlation coefficients were compared with respect to their value compatibility.

Analysing the results with respect to correlations between self-acceptance and selected personality dimensions, we used a breakdown of these variations and received the results which are in Table 5.

Table 5. The relation between self-acceptance and some personal qualities of the young people from differently structure families.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions of personality</th>
<th>Self-acceptation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Structure of family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family complete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>-.200 p=.041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness to Experience</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>-.200 p=.041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The research results with respect to correlation between self-acceptance and some personal qualities showed that there are relations between the variations and that their strength and directions are different. In this way, Hypothesis five was confirmed.

Considering the relation between self-acceptance and neuroticism, we discovered that it occurs in all the surveyed groups from full families, incomplete families and reconstructed ones (p=.200; p=.575; p=.339). Correlation coefficient values were not significantly different (p=.029).

High levels of apprehension, emotional tension, frequently experienced feelings of hostility and anger, shyness, and minimal ability to cope with stress result in receiving
high scores in the self-acceptance scale, which can be interpreted as pointing to low self-esteem.

There was negative correlation between the extraversion and self-acceptance in the persons from incomplete families. This low level of self-acceptance appears to be related to behaviours aimed at seeking stimulation, willingness to dominate in company, and life activities. The mechanism of compensation might have taken place here. A young man from an incomplete family, having low self-esteem, wants above all to show psychic strength and vigour – and not to be perceived as weak and hesitant.

Agreeableness, or one’s attitude about other people, correlated negatively with self-acceptance in persons from full families. It appears that a higher level of self-esteem characterizes persons who are less agreeable, more egocentric, and in relations with others oriented towards competition rather than cooperation. The last relation analysed concerned conscientiousness, which correlated positively with self-acceptance for young persons from reconstructed families. We found that strong-willed, highly motivated and persistent persons are characterized by an optimum level of self-acceptance.

Conclusions

From the dawn of time, humanistic thought has been interested in the family as an institution, its problems having always been the centre of attention of all religious, philosophical, ethical and legal systems, since the family constitutes man’s most fundamental reality. Although the family still occupies a high position in the hierarchy of values declared by man, it is affected by a host of undesirable changes and threats, such as: consumptionism, unemployment, poverty, and social pathologies. More and more families are unable to perform all their roles correctly and because of this they cannot provide their children with optimal conditions for development. Phenomena of the kind mentioned concern both full, incomplete, and reconstructed families, which can also be affected by permanent conflicts or commonly existing social diseases such as alcoholism.

Content related literature concerning diversified family structures, shows a wide range of occurring problems. It is emphasized that they affect not only adults but also the younger generation, who are doomed to existence in atypical environments not always satisfying their needs. There is no doubt that any abnormalities in a family influence a young individual’s personal development and self-acceptance.

Our research has shown that the functioning specificity of full families, incomplete families and reconstructed ones strongly determine young persons personalities and their self-acceptance levels.
Comparisons between the groups of women and men from differently structured families pointed to one differentiating personality dimension. It appeared that the women and the men from full families most frequently displayed cognitive curiosity, a tendency toward positive valuations of life experiences. Young people from incomplete and reconstructed families received Openness scores below average, which can point to conventionalism and conservatism demonstrated both in views and behaviour.

Openness characterizing the young people from full families could have resulted from the attitudes presented by the parents, expressing acceptance, respect and the right to gain experience. Being able to act independently and at the same time feeling secure, the young generation could fully concentrate on their cognitive activity development.

Openness is very important for young, contemporary men since the environment where people live is characterized by an unheard of confrontation of cultures, a variety of which can be defined both globally and in micro-sociological terms. It is the consequence of such phenomena as: availability of modern transport, communication, and information transmission as well as social mobility and environmental openness. People meeting each other, almost at every step, reveal their distinctness to each other. In such circumstances, even peaceful co-existence, not to mention agreement or cooperation, is impossible without openness or tolerance toward others.

It should be emphasized that nowadays a preferable personality structure is an “open” one as it is open to innovativeness and a high level of life aspirations. The occurring cultural changes intertwine with social culture differentiation, its mobility, tendency to be open to act according to new social rules, with its emergence of new social groups, institutions, jobs, development, and deepening individual autonomy (Doniec, 2005).

Therefore, people characterized by openness have more opportunities to find their place and succeed in the contemporary world than those people who do not have this quality.

There is no doubt that besides personal qualities, self-awareness and self-acceptance are crucial for social behaviours displayed by an individual.

Self-acceptance is an important element of self-awareness as it enables self-determination as well as enabling individuals to distinguish themselves from the environment. It allows a person to assume a critical attitude towards their abilities as well as towards new requirements set by the environment. It plays an important role not only in getting to know oneself but also in steering one’s behaviour and realizing his/her life plans.

If a person knows what place they occupy in society and what they can achieve, that means that their self-awareness functions correctly and there are no intrapersonal conflicts.
If, on the other hand, there is a big discrepancy between a person’s view of their abilities and their real achievements, we speak about a self-awareness disorder. This disorder, according to psychoanalysis, can result from a conflict between aspirations for significance and feelings of low self-esteem.

The results of our research with respect to self-acceptance in young people from differently structured families showed statistically significant differences between women’s and men’s groups.

Both women and men from full families received scores pointing to a high level of self-esteem. On the other hand, women and men from incomplete and reconstructed families received scores reflecting low levels of self-esteem, which were connected with neurotic and hostile attitudes.

Our results strongly indicate that the family which satisfies the needs of its members and provides them with support and unconditional love, constitutes the optimal educational environment for stimulating one’s positive self-image.

Our results can be confirmed by the research results done by H. Szczęsna (2005). The author demonstrated empirically that young people from divorced families were characterized by an average self-acceptance level in comparison with young people from full, well-functioning families, who had a high level of self-acceptance.

Also, J. Conway (1997) in his research, demonstrated empirically that young people from incomplete families were more often characterized by low levels of self-acceptance and self-esteem.

Furthermore, research by K. Pospiszyl showed that the more the father is involved in the educational process and the stronger his emotional bonds with the child are, the higher the child’s self-acceptance and self-confidence are in relations with other people (Pospiszyl, 1980).

As a result of our research, a few important observations were made, which are not only consistent with contemporary thought but also bring in some valuable elements modifying the general knowledge on the subject. The research results are significant psychologically because they show that the family structure and parental relationship influence, to a large extent, the personal development and the self-acceptance level of young people.
References:


Parental Divorce and Sibling Relationships: A Research Note
Anne-Rigt Poortman and Marieke Voorpostel

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This study examines long-term effects of parental divorce on sibling relationships in adulthood and the role of predivorce parental conflict. It used large-scale retrospective data from the Netherlands that contain reports from both siblings of the sibling dyad. Results show limited effects of parental divorce on sibling contact and relationship quality in adulthood but strong effects on sibling conflict. The greater conflict among siblings from divorced families is explained by the greater parental conflict in these families. Parental conflict is a far more important predictor than parental divorce per se. Siblings from high-conflict families have less contact, lower relationship quality, and more conflict than do siblings from low-conflict families. Finally, when it comes to sibling relationship quality, the effect of parental divorce depends on the amount of parental conflict. Parental divorce has little effect on the quality of the relationship in low-conflict families, but it improves the relationship in high-conflict families.

Keywords: dyadic data; parental conflict; parental divorce; siblings

Divorce disrupts family ties. Partners dissolve their marriage, and relationships between parents and their children deteriorate. The relationship with the custodial parent (usually, the mother) often becomes less supportive (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; but see Riggio, 2004), and so does
contact with the nonresident parent (Amato, 1987; Manning & Smock, 1999). As a result, children from divorced families have fewer parental resources at their disposal and so lack the support and warmth of a well-functioning intact family. The decline in resources and support may lead to the many and well-documented negative outcomes for these children, such as low educational attainment and problem behavior (Amato, 2000).

Parental divorce may disrupt not only ties between partners and between parents and children but also relationships among the children themselves. The divorce literature has paid relatively little attention to the effect of parental divorce on these types of nuclear family ties. Only a few studies have examined how parental divorce affects sibling relationships (e.g., Amato, 1987; Riggio, 2001). This lack of attention is surprising and unfortunate. Sibling relationships are the longest-surviving family relationships and an important source of comfort and support throughout the life course (Campbell, Connidis, & Davies, 1999; Eriksen & Gerstel, 2002; Voorpostel, Van der Lippe, Dykstra, & Flap, 2007). Therefore, not only may parental divorce be more disruptive to the nuclear family than what is commonly thought, but it may also have a stronger and longer-lasting effect if sibling relationships deteriorate. In this study, we aimed to further our understanding of the effect of parental divorce on sibling relationships, and we did so in three ways.

First, we assessed the effect of parental divorce on sibling relationships in adulthood. As such, there are two opposing views: The first states that the experience of parental divorce brings siblings closer together, whereas the second perspective argues that parental divorce drives them apart (e.g., Riggio, 2001). Although some small-scale studies have found support for the former view (e.g., Bush & Ehrenberg, 2003; Kier & Lewis, 1998), larger-scale studies have supported the latter. Sibling relationships are more hostile and conflict laden (MacKinnon, 1989; Panish & Stricker, 2001; Sheehan, Darlington, Noller, & Feeney, 2004), less supportive, and of lower quality (Amato, 1987; Milevsky, 2004; Riggio, 2001) in divorced families than in intact families. These studies have mostly focused on sibling relationships in childhood and adolescence (e.g., Amato, 1987; MacKinnon, 1989) or young adulthood (Milevsky, 2004; Riggio, 2001). By our focus on sibling relationships beyond young adulthood, we gain knowledge about whether this negative effect of parental divorce persists in middle and late adulthood.

Second, we aimed to understand why parental divorce affects sibling relationships. One of the most important explanations for the adverse consequences of parental divorce is that it is not the divorce per se but the parental conflict that goes hand in hand with divorce that causes children to
be worse off (Amato, 2000; Emery, 1982; Fischer, 2004). Also, the literature on siblings emphasizes the role of parental conflict in explaining why parental divorce affects sibling relationships (Brody, 1998; Sheehan et al., 2004), but only a few studies have directly assessed the extent to which parental conflict explains the adverse effects of parental divorce on sibling relationships (Milevsky, 2004; Panish & Stricker, 2001).

Third, we aimed to understand the conditions under which parental divorce is more or less detrimental to the sibling bond. The child adjustment literature often points out that the negative effect of parental divorce may be nonexistent in high-conflict families because children are no longer exposed to this harmful conflict when parents split up (Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995; Morrison & Coiro, 1999). The assumption that divorce may be better than staying together in case of high conflict has, to our knowledge, not been tested in the context of sibling relationships.

The effect of parental divorce on the sibling bond and the role of parental conflict are examined by using large-scale survey data from the Netherlands. We focus on three aspects of the sibling relationship: contact, conflict, and relationship quality. Our data and research design improve on prior studies that examined the effect of parental divorce on sibling relationships. First, we have a larger sample than that of prior studies, which often include no more than 300 respondents. Second, we use reports from both siblings in the dyad rather than rely on the reports of only one sibling. Third, we include more control variables than other studies have. As such, our findings provide more conclusive answers to the question of whether, why, and when parental divorce affects the sibling bond.

Theoretical Background

Divorce goes hand in hand with stressful events that may be harmful to children (Amato, 2000). Stress results from the loss of financial resources, given that the economic situation often worsens after divorce (Bianchi, Subaiya, & Kahn, 1999; Poortman, 2000). Children also experience stress because of the loss of emotional and social support resulting from the reduced contact with the nonresidential parent and the greater strains on the residential single parent (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Manning & Smock, 1999). Another important stressor, one central to our discussion here, is the parental conflict associated with divorce. In the process leading up to divorce, parents often have conflicts, and these may linger on (Fischer, De Graaf, & Kalmijn, 2005). This parental conflict may in turn induce stress in children.
Researchers have argued that the stress resulting from parental conflict and the loss of economic and social resources affects the sibling relationship in two opposite ways. First, children may compensate for this stress by developing closer sibling bonds as they seek support and comfort from their brothers and sisters (Bank & Kahn, 1982; Hetherington, 1988). Second, the stress may translate into aggression and hostility toward siblings (Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994; Cummings, Zahn-Waxler, & Radke-Yarrow, 1981; Dunn, Deater-Deckard, Pickering, & ALSPAC Study Team, 1999; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Stocker & Youngblade, 1999). Over and above the stress that parental conflict induces in children, the conflict associated with parental divorce is expected to have a negative effect on sibling relationships for two other reasons. First, children who often see their parents quarrel are likely to imitate this behavior in their relationships with others, including siblings (Amato, 1993; Bandura, 1977). Second, children may have to choose whose side they are on when parents fight (Amato, 1993), which is likely to strain sibling relationships as well.

These arguments suggest that parental divorce may have a positive or a negative effect on the sibling bond, but most of the arguments go in the direction of a negative effect. Although scarce, existing research also suggests a negative effect. Young children and adolescents from divorced families are found to experience more conflict and hostility in their relationships with siblings (Amato, 1987; MacKinnon, 1989). Moreover, research on adults suggests that this negative effect persists in adulthood. Samples of young adults have shown that siblings of divorced parents are less close and supportive than siblings from intact families (Milevsky, 2004; Riggio, 2001), and findings based on samples of older adults have shown such negative effects of parental divorce in cases of sibling conflict (Panish & Stricker, 2001). Given that most evidence is in the direction of a negative effect, we expect that siblings of divorced parents have less contact, more conflict, and lower relationship quality than do siblings from intact families.

In light of these arguments, we also expect that at least part of the divorce effect on sibling relationships can be explained by parental conflict; that is, the bond between siblings from a divorced family is worse because their parents more often had conflicts. Empirically, the divorce adjustment literature consistently shows that adverse child outcomes are partly explained by parental conflict (see reviews by Amato, 1993, 2000). Evidence in the context of sibling relationships is rare, and it pertains to adult siblings only. These studies suggest that the effect of parental divorce is mediated by marital satisfaction (Milevsky, 2004) and that indicators for marital quality are more important determinants of sibling relationships than parental divorce per se (Milevsky, 2004; Panish & Stricker, 2001).
Parental conflict may also condition the effect of parental divorce on sibling relationships. In case of high conflict between parents, it may be better for children if their parents were to divorce because this may mitigate the stressful situation at home (Amato et al., 1995; Hanson, 1999; Jekielek, 1998; Morrison & Coiro, 1999). This means that the effect of parental divorce is less negative or even positive when parents often fight, as compared to low-conflict families. Empirical evidence indeed shows that this is the case when considering child well-being and problematic behavior (e.g., Hanson, 1999; Strohschein, 2005). Although not tested so far, a similar reasoning might hold for sibling relationships—namely, if being exposed to parental conflict (rather than divorce) causes the sibling bond to deteriorate, then a divorce might improve sibling bonds, given that siblings would no longer be exposed to parental conflict (or at least they would be to a lesser extent). Compared to that of low-conflict families, the negative effect of parental divorce on sibling relationships would therefore be expected to be weaker or even positive in case of high parental conflict.

Method

We used data from the first wave of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (Dykstra et al., 2005). Prospective data following siblings before and after parental divorce into adulthood would be ideal. Given the long time span, it may come as no surprise that such data are not (yet) available. We therefore relied on cross-sectional data that contain retrospective information about parental divorce and conflict. Although longitudinal data have become quite common in the child adjustment literature on parental divorce (for review, see Amato, 2000), the few studies on parental divorce and sibling relationships have relied on cross-sectional data as well. Our data are unique, however, in that we have reports from both siblings of the dyad, thereby providing a more accurate view on the sibling bond.

Between 2002 and 2004, 8,161 individuals between 18 and 80 years old were interviewed face-to-face in their homes by means of a structured computer-assisted interview. The overall response rate was 45%—a rate quite comparable to those of other Dutch family surveys (Dykstra et al., 2005). After the interview, respondents were asked to fill out a supplementary self-completion questionnaire, and 92% of them returned it. Compared to the Dutch population, women were overrepresented, especially women in the age group of 35 to 54 years old. Young men (aged 18 to 30 years) were somewhat underrepresented. There was an overrepresentation of people with children at home and an underrepresentation of children still living with their parents.
During the interview, respondents (from here on, also called anchors) reported on several family ties, including their siblings. One of the respondent’s siblings was randomly selected by the computer to be approached with a self-administered questionnaire. If the respondent had only one sibling, this sibling was selected. About 27% of the respondents had one sibling, 26%, two; 16%, three; and 31%, more than three. When the anchor gave permission to contact this randomly selected sibling, a questionnaire was sent to the sibling or left at the anchor’s residence. In all, 2,731 sibling questionnaires were received, which was 60% of all sibling questionnaires that were mailed or left at anchors’ homes. This constitutes a response rate of 36% of all eligible siblings, including those who were selected but for whom the anchor did not grant contact permission. After excluding dyads with missing values on the dependent variables and dyads who were non-biological siblings, we were left with a sample of 2,707 complete dyads, containing information from 5,414 siblings.

Response by siblings was selective. First, coresident siblings were more likely than non-coresident siblings to return questionnaires (64% versus 37%). Second, the response rate was selective with respect to the perceived quality of the relationship as reported by the anchor; that is, the better the relationship, the higher the response rate. As a consequence, our sample is biased toward siblings who have good relationships. As such, we may underestimate the effects of parental divorce and conflict, thereby providing a conservative test of the hypotheses. We would like to note, though, that the bias toward positive sibling relationships is also likely to be present in other research on siblings. A common approach is to ask respondents to choose the sibling with whom they have most contact or feel the closest and then ask questions about this sibling relationship. Our procedure to randomly select a sibling to be questioned overcomes this problem of selective selection, even though selective response by the randomly chosen siblings again introduces bias toward positive relationships.

Measures

The three dependent variables—that is, contact frequency, conflict, and perceived relationship quality—tap different aspects of the sibling relationship. Contact frequency is a general often-used measure that indirectly indicates the content of the relationship. Relationship quality and conflict are more indicative of the content of the sibling relationship. These aspects refer to positive and negative aspects of personal relationships and differ in time frame: Whereas the recent occurrence of conflict is an instantaneous...
measure, overall relationship quality gives a general picture of the relationship. The correlation is therefore only –.13. The correlation of contact frequency with relationship quality is moderately positive (.33) and with conflict, low and positive as well (.12); having much contact thus indicates a more positive and more negative content. A limitation of the measures for conflict and relationship quality is that they are based on single items and have a limited range. Contact frequency, however, is based on two items and has a wider range. Below we present details on how the dependent variables were constructed. Important to note is that each indicator of the sibling relationship is assessed by both siblings, which comes down to having two observations for the same construct per sibling dyad. As explained later, the analyses use reports of both siblings as dependent variables, while adjusting for their interdependency.

**Contact frequency.** Anchors were asked to report how often they had seen each other, as well as how often they had had contact by phone, e-mail, or letter in the past 12 months. Answers to both questions ranged from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*daily*). The scores were summed, and the resulting scale therefore ranges from 2 to 14, with higher scores indicating more frequent contact. Siblings were asked the same questions in the written questionnaire, and the same procedure was used here to construct a scale for contact frequency. Coresident siblings were not questioned about their contact frequency. The analyses therefore pertain to the subsample of non-coresident siblings (*n* = 5,232 siblings; *n* = 2,616 sibling dyads).

**Conflict in the sibling relationship.** Anchors were asked whether they had experienced any conflicts, strains, or disagreements with their sibling during the past 3 months. Response categories were as follows: 1 = *not at all*, 2 = *once or twice*, and 3 = *several times*. Siblings answered the same question in the written questionnaire. Because few anchors and siblings reported having had conflicts several times (less than 2%), we had to construct a dichotomous measure indicating the presence (coded as 1) versus absence of conflicts (coded as 0). In 15% of the sibling relationships, conflicts had occurred (see Table 1).

**Relationship quality.** Anchors were asked, “Taking everything together, how would you describe your relationship with [sibling]?” Answers were rated as follows: 1 = *not great*, 2 = *reasonable*, 3 = *good*, 4 = *very good*. The same question was included in the sibling’s written questionnaire. Because few siblings qualified their relationship as *not great* (2%) or *reasonable*
(15%), these categories had to be combined. In addition, we combined the
two upper categories and created a dichotomous variable indicating a posi-
tive (coded as 1) versus a not-so-positive relationship. Additional ordinal
logistic analyses using all three categories (not great and reasonable com-
bined, good, and very good) show that the upper two categories do not sig-
ificantly differ from each other and so yield similar conclusions as the
analyses using a dichotomous variable. Because logistic models are easier
to interpret than ordinal models, we use the dichotomous version. Table 1
shows that 83% of the siblings reported having a good or very good rela-
tionship with their siblings. Our central independent variables refer to
parental divorce and parental conflict. Information was obtained from the
anchor by means of retrospective questions.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Dependent and Independent Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dependent variables: Level 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling contact</td>
<td>7.711</td>
<td>1.827</td>
<td>2-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling conflict</td>
<td>0.150</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling relationship quality</td>
<td>0.833</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent variables: Level 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental divorce</td>
<td>0.075</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental conflict</td>
<td>1.853</td>
<td>1.929</td>
<td>0-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control variables: Level 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size sibling group</td>
<td>3.130</td>
<td>2.387</td>
<td>1-17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ln geographical distance to sibling</td>
<td>2.034</td>
<td>3.835</td>
<td>–13.82-5.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coresident sibling</td>
<td>0.034</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling lives abroad</td>
<td>0.037</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent deceased</td>
<td>0.547</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control variables: Level 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>44.740</td>
<td>14.447</td>
<td>14-85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>0.621</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>0.717</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>0.673</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.580</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>6.380</td>
<td>2.474</td>
<td>1-11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>0.577</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response from sibling (not anchor)</td>
<td>0.500</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0-1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Level 1: n = 5,232 for sibling contact (because this information was not available for coresident siblings).
Parental divorce. Anchors were asked if their parents ever divorced or separated. Of all sibling pairs, 7.5% had divorced parents \((n = 202)\). On average, parents divorced 20.0 years ago \((SD = 12.5 \text{ years})\). Our analyses thus refer to the long-term consequences. We do not take into account the time since parental divorce or age at divorce, because our cross-sectional data do not allow for a straightforward interpretation; duration effects may as well be interpreted in terms of differential effects, depending on the age at divorce (and vice versa), and both may be interpreted in terms of differences between divorce cohorts. We also do not take into account whether parents remarried, because there were too few divorced families in which neither parent remarried \((n = 46)\) to get reliable estimates.

Parental conflict. Anchors reported the occurrence of the following sorts of conflict between the parents when the anchor was fifteen years old: heated discussions, serious reproaches, temporarily no communication, escalating fights, temporarily living apart. If parents were already divorced when the anchor was fifteen years old, anchors reported on parental conflict prior to divorce. Response categories were as follows: 0 = not at all, 1 = once or twice, 2 = several times. Scores were summed, creating a scale ranging from 0 to 10 (Cronbach’s \(\alpha = .73\)). The average score was 1.85, indicating low levels of conflict (Table 1). Note that when parents divorced long after the age of 15 (i.e., about 25% of parents divorced after the anchor was 18 years old), our measure of predivorce parental conflict may not be that reliable in that no conflict may have been present at that time. Our results may therefore underestimate the role of parental conflict. The retrospective nature of the questions, however, may lead to an overestimation of its role. Respondents whose parents divorced may in hindsight be less positive than respondents from intact families about the parental relationship, thereby leading to a higher correlation between parental divorce and conflict. Empirically, the correlation between parental divorce and conflict is found to be moderately positive (.31).

To avoid spurious effects, our analyses control for sociodemographic characteristics that are known to affect the sibling bond (e.g., Conidis, 2001; Eriksen & Gerstel, 2002; White & Riedmann, 1992) and that are related to parental divorce (e.g., Amato, 2000; Heaton, 1990; Joung, Van de Mheen, Stronks, Van Poppel, & Mackenback, 1998; Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993). Parental divorce is known to negatively affect children’s socioeconomic achievements, the timing of leaving the parental home, and future family behavior. Because employment, educational level, coresidency of siblings, and partner and parenthood status also affect the sibling bond, we control for these variables. In addition, we control for siblings’ religiosity.
because parental divorce is more likely in nonreligious families and because religiosity positively affects sibling relationships. Because divorce is associated with worse health and higher mortality and because the sibling relationship is likely to change after parental death, we also control for whether either parent was deceased. The number of children is also known to be negatively associated with parental divorce and with the way that siblings interact. Another source of spuriousness is the geographical distance between siblings because parental divorce may lead to greater geographical distances between family members and because the distance is likely to affect the sibling relationship as well. Finally, we control for some basic information—namely, the age of the siblings and whether the report about the sibling bond comes from anchor or sibling. All information was provided by both siblings except for the geographical distance between them, whether the sibling lived in the same household (assigned 0 on geographical distance) or abroad (assigned the mean on geographical distance), the size of the sibling group, and whether either parent was deceased. This information was provided by the anchor. Descriptive statistics of the controls can be found in Table 1.

**Analytical Strategy**

We use reports from both siblings, which means that we have two observations per sibling dyad, and each is treated as a separate record in the data file. As a result, we have nonindependent data (Kenny, Mannetti, Pierro, Livi, & Kashy, 2002). The structure of the data (i.e., siblings are nested within dyads) causes the observations within sibling dyads to be more similar than those between dyads. Multilevel analysis is a useful tool for such nested data because it takes the nonindependent nature of the data into account (Sayer & Klute, 2005). The higher level (Level 2) is the dyad, and every dyad contains two Level 1 units, representing the answers from both siblings in the dyad. The dependent variables are reported by both siblings and so refer to Level 1. The central independent variables—that is, parental divorce and conflict—are reported by the anchor and refer to siblings’ shared family background—thus, Level 2. We use multilevel regression analysis for sibling contact, and we use logistic multilevel analysis to estimate models for sibling conflict and relationship quality. Both the regression and logistic models are random-effect models. In logistic models, coefficients can be interpreted by taking the antilog ($e^\beta$) to determine how strongly the odds of conflict and a positive relationship increase or decrease when the independent variable increases by 1. Explained variance was calculated using an extension of the McKelvey and Zavoina measure (Snijders & Bosker, 1999).
We estimate three models. Model 1 includes the controls and parental divorce (Model 1A for sibling contact, Model 1B for relationship quality, and Model 1C for conflict). These variables are entered all at once. This model shows the main effect of parental divorce. In Model 2, parental conflict is added to examine whether parental conflict explains part of the effect of parental divorce. Methodologically, parental conflict is a mediating variable (see Baron & Kenny, 1986). A comparison of the effect of parental divorce in Model 1 and Model 2 shows the extent to which parental conflict explains the effect of parental divorce. Finally, Model 3 includes an interaction term between parental divorce and parental conflict to test whether the effect of parental divorce is dependent on the amount of predivorce parental conflict. In methodological terms, parental conflict is a moderating variable here (see Baron & Kenny, 1986). The main effect of parental divorce in Model 3 shows its effect in case of no conflict, and the interaction term shows how much the effect of parental divorce increases (in case of a positive interaction) or decreases (in case of a negative interaction) when the amount of parental conflict increases.

**Results**

Models 1A, 1B and 1C in Table 2 show the effects of parental divorce on sibling contact, relationship quality, and conflict, respectively. The results partially support our hypotheses. In line with expectations, sibling conflict is more likely to occur when parents are divorced: The odds of sibling conflict are significantly increased by about 50% \((100 \times [e^{.401} - 1])\). Contrary to expectations, however, we find no significant effects of parental divorce on sibling contact and relationship quality. Perhaps the effect is only present for sibling conflict because in this case imitation of parental behavior may be at play: The parental conflict associated with divorce is imitated by children in how they behave toward their siblings, thus resulting in higher sibling conflict—even though they may evaluate their relationship as being positive or they may have as much contact as siblings from intact families. It is therefore insightful to take into account the role of parental conflict, as done in Models 2A to 2C.

In these models, parental conflict is added to assess whether the effect of parental divorce is mediated by parental conflict. For all aspects of the sibling relationship, parental conflict is found to be an important determinant, much more so than parental divorce. When parents had more conflicts before divorce, siblings report less contact, more conflict, and a lower-quality relationship. Given that parental conflict has such strong effects, to what extent
Table 2
Effects of Parental Divorce and Parental Conflict on Sibling Contact, Conflict, and Relationship Quality: Coefficients From Multilevel Models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Contact</th>
<th>Relationship Quality</th>
<th>Conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1A</td>
<td>Model 2A</td>
<td>Model 3A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental divorce</td>
<td>.150</td>
<td>.259*</td>
<td>.163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental conflict</td>
<td>-.051***</td>
<td>-.055**</td>
<td>-.119**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Divorce × Conflict</td>
<td>.027</td>
<td>.156*</td>
<td>-.090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size sibling group</td>
<td>-.118***</td>
<td>-.118**</td>
<td>-.119**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographical distance</td>
<td>-.235***</td>
<td>-.234**</td>
<td>-.234**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coresident sibling</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling lives abroad</td>
<td>-.980***</td>
<td>-.967**</td>
<td>-.968**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.020**</td>
<td>-.020**</td>
<td>-.020**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>-.065</td>
<td>-.065</td>
<td>-.065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>-.187**</td>
<td>-.188**</td>
<td>-.188**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With children</td>
<td>-.077†</td>
<td>-.077†</td>
<td>-.076</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent deceased</td>
<td>-.041</td>
<td>-.049</td>
<td>-.050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.182**</td>
<td>.185**</td>
<td>.185**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-.009</td>
<td>-.008</td>
<td>-.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>.072†</td>
<td>.066</td>
<td>.066</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response from sibling</td>
<td>-.083**</td>
<td>-.083**</td>
<td>-.083**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Pseudo) R-square b</td>
<td>.230</td>
<td>.232</td>
<td>.233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rho</td>
<td>.648</td>
<td>.647</td>
<td>.647</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: n = 5,414 siblings; n = 2,707 sibling dyads. In case of analyses for contact: n = 5,232 siblings; n = 2,616 sibling dyads.
a. Not included in model for contact, because contact information pertains only to non-coresident siblings.
b. Overall R-square for random effects regression model for contact and pseudo R-square for random effects logit models for relationship quality and conflict.

* p < 0.10. † p < .05. ** p < .01 (two-tailed).
can parental conflict account for any divorce effects? Because parental divorce exerts only a significant effect in the case of sibling conflict, this question is relevant only for sibling conflict. As expected, the effect of parental divorce on sibling conflict is strongly reduced after parental conflict is controlled for, and it is even no longer significant in Model 2C. The increased conflict among siblings from divorced families can therefore be completely explained by the parental conflict that comes with divorce. Although the effects of parental divorce were not significant to begin with for sibling contact and relationship quality (see Models 1A and 1B), effects of parental divorce become positive when parental conflict is controlled for, particularly for sibling contact. Hence, if siblings from divorced families would have experienced the same amount of parental conflict as siblings from intact families, then their contact is even more intense than that of siblings from intact families.

Models 3A, 3B, and 3C show whether the effect of parental divorce is dependent on parental conflict by including an interaction term between parental divorce and parental conflict. Contrary to expectations, the interaction effects for sibling contact and sibling conflict (Models 3A and 3C) are not significant, even though the effects are in the expected direction. For sibling relationship quality, we do find the expected positive interaction effect, indicating that parental divorce becomes increasingly less detrimental to the sibling relationship when parents have more conflict. The main effect of parental divorce in Model 3B shows that parental conflict lowers the quality of the sibling relationship in case of no parental conflict, but the effect fails to reach significance. This slightly negative effect turns into a positive effect when parental conflict is well above average: The turning point is about 3 on the conflict scale (0.513/0.156). Parental divorce appears to have a liberating effect on children in case of high conflict between parents, but results are not strong given that this is only the case for sibling relationship quality.

Overall, the effects of the controls conform to earlier findings. A random sibling plays a less significant role in someone’s life when the sibling group is greater, thereby leading to less contact, less conflict, and lower quality. The same holds when geographical distance increases, and when siblings share a household, their role is particularly salient. When people age and experience important transitions into adulthood (i.e., employment, partner, parenthood), the sibling relationship becomes less important, thus leading to less contact, less conflict, and lower quality. When either parent is deceased, sibling conflict is higher, but there is no relation with relationship quality or contact. Women reported more conflict and contact. Education has little effect, and
religious people have higher-quality sibling relationships. Finally, responses coming from anchors differ from sibling reports in that the latter reported more conflicts, less contact, and a slightly higher-quality relationship.

Conclusion

This study was one of the few studies about the effect of parental divorce on sibling relationships. Our results show that siblings from divorced families more often have conflict-laden relationships in adulthood than do siblings from intact families. There were, however, no differences between siblings from divorced and intact families regarding the more positive aspects of their relationships—that is, relationship quality and contact frequency. As such, our findings show weaker support than do previous studies for any negative effects of parental divorce on adult sibling relationships. Studies by Riggio (2001) and Milevsky (2004), for example, found sibling relationships among young adults to be less positive in cases where parents divorced. Besides differences in measures and the number of controls, the inconsistent findings across studies may be explained by the older average age of our sample, which is about twice as high as that in the studies by Milevsky and Riggio. In our sample, the divorce occurred about 20 years ago on average, and the weaker support found here may suggest that the negative effects of parental divorce wear off as siblings progress into adulthood. Because our cross-sectional design did not allow us to do so, we strongly encourage future researchers to examine more directly whether the effects of parental divorce persist in the long term or diminish as time goes by.

Even though no effects were found for siblings’ contact and relationship quality, parental divorce was still associated with more conflict in the long term. This strong effect for sibling conflict points at the importance of imitation and modeling of parental behavior. Siblings from divorced families may have more conflicts because they simply copied this behavior from their quarreling parents, even though they still feel positive toward each other. Indeed, parental conflict appears to be a crucial factor in the association between parental divorce and sibling conflict. Greater sibling conflict in divorced families could be explained by the greater parental conflict in these families. Furthermore, parental conflict was found to be a far more important determinant of sibling relationships than parental divorce per se. These results corroborate the findings by Milevsky (2004) and Panish and Stricker (2001). Interestingly, if the greater conflict in divorced families is taken into account, siblings from divorced families are found to have more
intense contact. If it were not for the overall higher levels of conflict at home, parental divorce may thus even lead to better sibling relationships (see Riggio, 2001).

Finally, there are indications that parental conflict conditions the effect of parental divorce. Parental divorce improves relationships among siblings in cases of high conflict. These findings conform to earlier research on other child outcomes, such as well-being and problem behavior, showing that children are actually better off when quarreling parents divorce (e.g., Hanson, 1999; Morrison & Coiro, 1999; Strohschein, 2005). We would like to remark, though, that no such differences between low- and high-conflict families are found for sibling contact and conflict.

Our data and research design improved on the few earlier studies on this topic, most notably in that we used reports from both siblings of the sibling dyad rather than reports from only one sibling. The study suffered from certain limitations as well, and these can be improved on in future research. First, our measures for sibling conflict and relationship quality were based on single-item measures and dichotomized. Preferably, continuous scales based on several items tapping positive and negative aspects of the sibling bond should be used in future extensions of this study. Second, the use of information from both siblings came at a price in that selective sibling response may have led to a sample biased toward sibling pairs who get along well. The role of parental divorce and parental conflict may therefore be greater than what our results suggest. Third and most important, we relied on a cross-sectional retrospective survey. Our findings may be biased by recall biases and by our lack of information about the precise temporal ordering of parental conflict and divorce. Longitudinal data are needed to more conclusively address the role of parental divorce and parental conflict.

Despite these shortcomings, our study has offered greater insight into the effect of parental divorce on sibling relationships than that of prior studies. In particular, there was little research on whether the consequences of parental divorce are conditioned by the amount of parental conflict. We recommend that future research focus on other such conditions. We would especially like to point at the role of remarriage and siblings’ ages at parental divorce. The child adjustment literature considers these factors to be important moderators of divorce effects (Amato, 2000; Fischer, 2004), but sibling studies on these issues are rare and have yielded inconsistent findings (Deater-Deckard, Dunn, & Lussier, 2002; Milevsky, 2004; Riggio, 2001). Recently, the child adjustment literature has begun to examine whether the effect of parental divorce has declined over time as divorce has become a widespread phenomenon (e.g., Sigle-Rushton, Hobcraft, & Kiernan, 2005; Wolfinger, 1999). In light of rising
divorce rates and the importance of sibling relationships over the life course, it would be worthwhile to examine historical change in the effect of parental divorce on sibling relationships.

References


Stepfamilies face a series of unique opportunities and challenges in their development. This article provides an overview of an emotionally focused family intervention for stepfamilies. Common stepfamily concerns are considered using attachment theory as a relational framework for conceptualizing the impact of structural change and loss on stepfamily adjustment. Problem patterns are understood in the context of an emerging family system where bids for connection may be missed or misinterpreted. Application of the emotionally focused approach demonstrates the role of attachment security in changing patterns of interaction that promote stability in the developing stepfamily system. A case study is presented that illustrates the approach’s conceptualization and treatment of a prototypical stepfamily issue.

As a common family form stepfamilies represent a unique and complex family system that is distinct in its composition, structure, and development. Ahrons and Rodgers (1987) coined the phrase “Binuclear Family” to capture the extent to which these families represent a combination of family households who must work together. As such these families possess unique resources and face distinct challenges as they navigate their development as a complex family system (Papernow, 1993). By some estimates a majority of stepfamilies will seek help within the first four years of remarriage (Pasley, Rhoden, Visher, & Visher, 1996) and these families need treatment approaches that are sensitive to their particular challenges and strengths (Michaels, 2000; Pasley, Dollahite, & Ihinger-Tallman, 1993; Visher & Visher, 1996). This article provides an overview of clinical issues relevant to
stepfamilies and the application of Emotionally Focused Family Therapy (EFFT) to the treatment of stepfamilies. Specific focus is given to the role of emotion and attachment as guiding perspectives in restructuring problem patterns, resolving relational loss, and promoting more secure stepfamily bonds.

UNIQUE NEEDS OF STEPFAMILIES AND CLINICAL CHALLENGES

Remarried families appear to face a greater vulnerability at their inception. Stepfamilies in the earliest stages of development face greater risk for dissolution compared to first-time marriages (Kurdek, 1991; O’Conner, Pickering, Dunn, & Golding, 1999). Couples entering marriage with children from a previous relationship encounter increased demands that often result in greater family tension and conflict (Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, & Pauk, 2001; Tzeng & Mare, 1995). A stepfamily’s hope for a “second chance” may be challenged in light of heightened negativity, increased conflict, and less cohesive family bonds (Bray & Berger, 1993; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). The impact of these negative effects is most apparent for stepparents and stepchildren (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Jenkins, Simpson, Dunn, Rabash, & O’Connor, 2005). These challenges are best understood as common adjustments that families face in the various phases of marital transition, system reorganization, and stepfamily development (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987; Hetherington, 1999; Papernow, 1993).

Clinical approaches designed to support stepfamilies should anticipate four primary challenges (Pasley, Rhoden, Visher, & Visher, 1996). First, a stepfamily typically joins one or two families with an existing history, and these past experiences often compete with the family’s effort to consolidate its new relational commitments. The remarried couple’s attempts to foster a new family identity are met with resistance as loyalty conflicts result in children feeling forced to “choose sides” (Pacey, 2005). These tensions highlight the stepfamily’s need to develop “middle ground,” where family members are able to invest in new areas of mutual experience and shared values as a reconstituted family (Papernow, 1993). Therapy focused on processing the past and present emotional experience of family members is necessary for promoting middle ground and fostering a new family identity.

A second therapeutic challenge in stepfamily work is clarifying boundaries within the remarried family. Tensions emerge as a remarried couple navigates the co-parenting demands of former spouses and the expectation of biological children who may feel dethroned from the privileged attention afforded in a single parent household. Caught between past family ties and the new commitments, the remarried couple is both highly vulnerable and highly significant to the stepfamily’s development. The couple’s bond is the glue (Visher & Visher, 1996) that holds the family together while it has time to develop. Co-parenting requires negotiating issues of parental intimacy/affection and power/discipline. These issues
may trigger loyalty conflicts for parents, stepparents, and the children they are raising (Ahrons & Rogers, 1987; Emery & Dillon, 1994; Pacey, 2005). A therapist must help remarried couples clarify boundaries in their family relationships to nurture and affirm the intimacy of the couple’s relationship, which is an anchor for stability and security for the changing family.

Third, families formed through remarriage inherit a legacy of loss (Visher, 1994). The urgency felt by some families to move “beyond the past” may leave some loss experiences unresolved. New partners may fulfill the loss of a former spouse, but the presence of the stepparent may complicate a child’s grief related to divorce or remarriage. Children may mourn the distance of a previous custodial parent, the loss of a previous extended family, and the death of hope that one day reconciliation and reunion would occur (Riches & Dawson, 2001). Grief work compliments the therapist’s support of the developing stepfamily identity. Grieving the past and promoting awareness of each individual’s loss provides a basis for building coherence between a family’s past and future.

A final challenge facing stepfamilies is the integration of differing developmental needs. Stepfamilies are complex family systems that can experience competing developmental needs as they span more than a single life cycle stage (McGoldrick & Carter, 2005). These families must negotiate competing developmental needs and resources. When the joining families include differences in life cycle stages (e.g., adolescent extrusion; Crosby-Burnett, Lewis, Sullivan, Poldosky, Mantella de Sousa, & Mitriani, 2005) or discrepancies in parental experience (Visher & Visher, 1988), the therapist must work with the remarried couple and stepfamily to accept varying developmental demands and the needs that conflict.

Clinical treatment of stepfamilies warrants an awareness of these challenges and an approach to the therapeutic process which promote their resolution. After surveying stepfamilies on their experience of therapy Pasley and colleagues (1996) found that therapy experienced as beneficial included: focusing on emotional support, clarification of problems, and providing a “safe place” for promoting understanding of family members’ experience. A therapist’s emotional support through evoking and validation of individual’s unique family experience enables the client to explore more complex emotional responses to grief. These may include a mix of anger, hurt, and love (Emery & Dillon, 1994). Therapist processing of emotional experience is paramount to strengthening the couple’s relationship and helping parents better attend to the developmental needs of children. Many stepchildren are not only adjusting to a new family, but are simultaneously grieving the loss of the world they knew in a previous family (e.g., friends, schools, neighborhoods, and economic status).

ATTACHMENT THEORY AND STEPFAMILY ADJUSTMENT

Attachment theory provides a comprehensive approach to the development, maintenance, and dissolution of attachment relationships (Bowlby, 1979). As such, it
provides a unique perspective on the dynamics of developing stepfamilies (Hazan & Shaver, 1992), where former bonds are broken (biological parents), existing bonds sustained (biological parents and children), and new bonds are formed (re-married couple). These “affective bonds” provide a “secure base” for exploration and “safe haven” in times of distress. Attachment relationships remain a primary influence from “cradle to grave” (Bowlby, 1979). The continuity and quality of these attachment bonds prove significant in shaping the processing of social experience, emotional regulation, and behavior in family relationships, all of which are relevant to how family members may respond to losses common to stepfamily experience.

After studying childhood grief, Bowlby (1980) proposed an expected patterned response to the loss of an attachment figure. This pattern included a “protest response” often seen in a child’s angry and anxious reactions as the child sought out an attachment figure. This was followed by a period of despair and loss. For those not regaining an attachment connection this despair resulted in detachment often seen in emotional distancing and disengagement. The identification of these prototypical responses to the loss of an attachment figure provide a helpful framework for understanding the impact of the voluntary loss of divorce in adulthood (Hazan & Shaver, 1992), grief reactions to divorce for children (Emery & Dillon, 1994), and the human capacity to adjust to loss and establish new attachments.

Many of the challenges faced in a stepfamily’s development can be understood as a response to attachment insecurity. Both parents and children respond to attachment insecurity in predictable ways including anxious and/or avoidant behaviors, which are informed by a persistent fear of or anticipated loss of an attachment figure. Children often enter stepfamilies with a history of loss (Papernow, 1987). A parent’s divorce may result in the reduction of a parent’s physical and emotional availability, and this loss occurs in the context of a child’s perceived loss of her parent’s original marriage. These loss experiences become more complicated for families where postdivorce parents engage in heightened conflict (Dunn, Davies, O’Conner, & Sturgis, 2000). The unfolding adjustments to change and loss in the family impact a child’s attachment-related behaviors and needs (Lewis, Feiring, & Rosenthal, 2000). For adolescents, the experience of attachment insecurity often leads to an increasing distance from their parents (Maio, Fincham, & Lycett, 2000) and a decreasing range of psychological functioning (Moretti & Holland, 2003). Using Bowlby’s (1979) model of separation distress, the problematic functioning of children and adults in these stages of postdivorce and stepfamily adjustment can be understood as meaningful attempts to respond to attachment insecurity.

Stratton (2003) illustrates how these underlying and unmet emotional needs function to organize relational patterns in a stepfamily. A stepfather may attribute the family’s problems to issues with his stepchildren. The stepchildren respond by internalizing these conflicts thereby reducing the risk of escalating conflict within the vulnerable family. Both actions can be seen as legitimate and problematic attempts to protect the family from aversive conflict. Similar family patterns
prompting emotional disengagement or enmeshment are indicative of unsuccessful family attempts to address the underlying issues of relational insecurity (Byng-Hall, 2001). Clinical intervention designed to address the experience of attachment insecurity in the remarried family offer promise for addressing unresolved issues underlying maladaptive family patterns.

**EMOTIONALLY FOCUSED FAMILY THERAPY**

Emotionally Focused Family Therapy (EFFT) offers a unique approach designed to promote the development of secure emotional connections between family members (Johnson, 2004; Johnson & Lee, 1999; Johnson, Maddeaux, & Blouin, 1998; Johnson et al., 2005). The EFFT approach uses an “attachment lens” to conceptualize a family’s presenting problem. Family conflicts are seen as relational dilemmas based on the unmet and typically unexpressed attachment needs of family members. For a general description of EFFT, see Palmer and Efron, this issue.

The assumptions and focus of the EFFT approach fit well with the needs of stepfamilies seeking treatment. Divorce and remarriage often heighten family members’ sensitivity to the emotional accessibility and responsiveness of primary relationships (Johnson et al., 2005). Problem patterns emerge in the stepfamily, organized by a climate of negative affect, and bids for attachment security are blocked as a result. The EFFT therapist conceptualizes the family’s problem in terms of these stuck patterns and works to restructure these patterns so parents, partners, and children can strengthen bonds of connection in the remarried family (Furrow, Bradley, & Johnson, 2004).

EFFT sessions focus on accessing and eliciting emotional responses of each family member and promoting the family’s acceptance of these experiences. Developing an awareness of each family member’s unique emotional experience facilitates a stepfamily’s development and functioning (Papernow, 1993). Focusing on attachment-related emotions (e.g., fear, sadness, and loss) enables the EFFT therapist to promote the emotional processing of basic relational needs heightened in the process of marital transition (Emery & Dillon, 1994; Visher & Visher, 1996). The therapist frames the family’s problem pattern within the context of these attachment needs and creates new opportunities for building more secure bonds in the family through the expression of these needs. EFFT follows three general stages of treatment: assessment, de-escalation, and working-through phase.

**Assessment: Building a Therapeutic Alliance and Understanding Family Patterns**

The first goal in EFFT with stepfamilies is to build a therapeutic alliance with the family that is characterized by a “felt sense” of safety. The initial sessions of EFFT typically include only stepfamily members. This practice makes clear the thera-
pist’s commitment to honoring the integrity and identity of the stepfamily by focusing on the immediate family system (Visher & Visher, 1996). This does not dismiss the influence of an ex-spouse on the stepfamily system; rather the exclusive focus on the remarried family is necessary for assuring a more “secure” therapeutic alliance. In these initial sessions, the therapist validates the unique experience of each family member including his or her emotional response to the presenting problem. A therapist’s attention and responsiveness to each family member promotes a more secure therapeutic relationship.

A second goal in the assessment phase of treatment is the identification of problematic interactional patterns, which often inform a family’s presenting problem. In EFFT, family sessions enable the observation of a family’s process as they engage issues related to the presenting problem. The therapist tracks and reflects emerging behavioral patterns that define family members’ responses (e.g., avoidance, anxious pursuit). A discussion of the family’s problem often elicits these prototypical responses as negative affect is experienced within the session. The therapist responds to the personal reactions of family members by reflecting and validating the varying emotional responses to the family’s problem. In EFFT, sessions focus on understanding the relational process that unfolds in session as the family engages a discussion of their presenting concerns.

**De-escalation: Reframing the Pattern**

The goal of the second phase of treatment is to reframe the family’s problem as a pattern that has taken over the family’s relationships. The EFFT therapist continues to track a family’s pattern placing more emphasis on predictable patterns that emerge in response to the family’s experience of attachment insecurity. These patterns become more rigid in the face of ongoing negative affect, so the therapist works with family members to acknowledge their typical responses or positions in the pattern. The EFFT therapist will conceptualize the family’s pattern in terms of these positions describing members as being a “withdrawer,” “pursuer,” “blamer,” or “placater.” It is important to note that the therapist uses these terms to describe a person’s position in the cycle, not the person’s role in the family. Family members are not labeled; instead the therapist uses these terms as a way of symbolizing the typical response of family members in the family pattern.

The EFFT therapist reframes the family’s pattern through processing the emotional experience of family members as a part of the problematic cycle. Family members’ secondary emotional responses (e.g., withdrawal, pursuit) are seen as unsuccessful responses to attachment bonds that are in question. At this stage the therapist focuses on eliciting the underlying emotional experience that colors each person’s experience of the family. Accessing these primary emotions (e.g., fear, hurt, protest, anger) is important to de-escalating the family process as these emotions prime more adaptive responses within the family. As family members are better able to connect their emotional responses to the behavioral pattern of the
family problem, the therapist helps the family reframe the problem as a pattern that invades their relationships. The pattern takes over the family leaving some members in distant withdrawn positions seeking safety and others in anxious or angry pursuing responses seeking connection. Either way the pattern keeps the family from the connection that they seek from one another.

The patterns in a stepfamily are complex. Competing attachment needs are characteristic of the earliest stages of a stepfamily’s development (Papernow, 1993). Family processes preference biological ties as a primary source of emotional connection at the same time the couple’s bond is the most visible and vulnerable relationship (Visher & Visher, 1996). As a result families encountering escalating conflict and loyalty binds both within and between different family systems may enact different positions in the family’s emotional dance depending on the relationship (e.g. spouse, parent–child, stepparent–stepchild1).

**Working-Through Phase**

As the family pattern and problematic cycle are clarified, the goal of the “working-through” phase includes restructuring the family’s pattern to facilitate the sharing and acceptance of family members’ attachment-related emotions and needs. The therapist uses evocative interventions to promote a deeper level of emotional processing. This enables family members to connect their primary emotional experiences (e.g., fear of abandonment or rejection) with corresponding attachment-related needs (e.g., reassurance, support, acceptance).

A primary therapeutic task at this stage requires structuring interactions that facilitate family members sharing openly their emotional experience and needs in the context of support and validation from key family members. For example, the therapist would use an enactment where a more withdrawing family member turns toward his or her parent or partner with his or her fear of abandonment and need for reassurance. The therapist supports this risk to reach out to another within the family and helps the other family members respond with support. This is a challenging task as differences in emotional experience can be experienced as a betrayal, a lack of love or caring, abandonment, or rejection. Thus the focus of this stage is helping family members “work through” their fears and connect to one another’s needs.

**EFFT COMPETENCIES WITH STEPFAMILIES**

The primary challenge for the EFFT therapist is to be able to hold the varying attachment pulls in the stepfamily and help the family remain a cohesive unit in

1Depending on the stage of the stepfamily these attachment needs may be defined by biological relationships or the couple’s relationship, but less often by these needs in a stepchild to stepparent relationship (Papernow, 1993).
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this time of family transition. The common intervention used in EFFT with stepfamilies includes: validating and normalizing family members’ emotional experience without alienating others; reframing the presenting problem within the context of common adjustment issues faced by stepfamilies; identifying and de-escalating the negative interactional cycle both within and between the biological and stepfamily subsystems; facilitating the expression of attachment needs in strengthening the bonds between biological parents and child(ren); and clarifying the relationship between stepparent and child(ren) as this relates to expectations of intimacy and discipline.

CASE STUDY

The following case study illustrates the application of EFFT practices to a stepfamily situation where the identification and restructuring of negative interactional patterns lead to the development of stronger bonds among family members. The family issues faced in this case demonstrate how negative interactional patterns can develop around the structural features unique to stepfamilies. EFFT interventions are described and the repair work between pivotal family members is exemplified. All names and identifying characteristics of the family have been changed.

Family History and Presenting Problem

Susan, age 45, a mother of two adolescent boys, Jason, age 19 and Matt, age 16, requested family counselling for herself, her children, and her new husband of one year, John, age 53. The impetus for counselling followed an altercation between Matt and John over the Thanksgiving holiday. John had requested that Matt not drink the beer in the fridge that was intended for his family, and following the meal and after the guests had left, John confronted Matt over the missing beer. An argument ensued and Matt was not allowed to drive his girlfriend home. Consequently John and Susan left the house to drive the girl home. Upon their return, they found that John’s side of the bed had been saturated with urine and Matt had barricaded himself in his bedroom. The altercation that followed resulted in Matt leaving the house to stay with a friend and John and Matt no longer speaking to one another.

Susan was a single mother for ten years prior to meeting John. She had spent this time devoted primarily to parenting and had not dated until she met John. Susan had become tired and somewhat discouraged in her single parenting role. She had had longstanding difficulties in parenting Matt, who had been diagnosed with ADD and had always had problems with his schoolwork and with his peers. Susan stated that she had always been “soft” with Matt and generally gave him the benefit of the doubt. While there had been several incidents of stealing and lying, Susan typically would not believe that Matt had done this. It was only when there was
no other option but to recognize that Matt had been stealing, that Susan would face this. Afterwards she would feel betrayed and disappointed in her son, which gradually eroded the trust she placed in him. Susan understood her treatment of Matt as resulting from her feeling sorry for him because he was rejected by his father. The father had limited involvement with his sons. He did pay attention to Jason around his hockey and would attend Jason’s games and talk to him about hockey. Matt was not athletic so there was little point of contact between him and his father.

John had two children from his first marriage who were now grown and living independently. He had been optimistic that he could help Susan in her parenting of her sons and lend her the wisdom of his past experience with his own children. In the beginning of their relationship, while the couple was dating and generally everyone expressed positive feelings about the marriage, John did actually enjoy a positive relationship with Susan’s sons. Jason and Matt were supportive of their mother and her marriage to John, as each felt she deserved some happiness. The couple was confident that their marriage would be a positive event in the boys’ lives. The Thanksgiving altercation was a shock to John and he was angry and insulted by Matt’s behavior whereas Susan was equally shocked but also embarrassed by her son and angry with him. Overall the couple was positive about the warm and intimate relationship they shared and their ability to support and nurture each other. The primary stress in this family was the relationship of stepfather John’s and his stepson Matt.

**EFFT Treatment Process**

**Assessment**

The initial sessions focused on helping the family identify their negative interactional cycle. The crisis at Thanksgiving crystallized a pattern that began in the earliest day of the remarriage. Matt’s negative behavior escalated over time as incidents involving his drinking and smoking marijuana increased. With each incident, John criticized Susan for not taking a “firmer” stance with Matt and would make disparaging remarks regarding Matt and his behavior. Susan would follow John’s directives but also resent his comments finding it very difficult to enforce the proposed consequence. When Matt would push his mother for leniency, Susan would rescind the punishment and John in turn would be angry as she did “not follow through.” Over time, John assumed more and more of the disciplinary role with Matt and Jason supported the stepfather’s efforts because Jason felt unprotected from his younger brother in the past. This alliance created tension between Matt and Jason and the boys spent less and less time together. Furthermore, Jason’s stance and John’s ousting of the parenting functions reinforced Susan’s feelings of incompetence as a parent. Susan felt pulled between her husband and Matt, and she tried to please them both. Matt resented John’s intrusion into his life stating: “You’re not my father.” He also expressed the betrayal he felt from his
mother’s support of the stepfather’s disciplinarian role. His anger escalated to the point where he was saying he no longer wanted to live at home.

**De-escalation**

The family’s negative cycle was framed as a reaction to the reconfiguration of the family unit. John wanted to support his wife and help her manage her sons. Susan wanted his support because she felt she had failed as a parent in the past and that the boys lacked a strong male figure in their lives. Matt felt displaced by John and rejected by both his mother and his brother. The therapist framed these responses as efforts to make this new family work, but also recognized how negative patterns were creating distance and negative tension in the family. The Thanksgiving crisis was an alarm signaling that the family needed to address each member’s underlying feelings and help create a safe haven as a whole.

The Thanksgiving incident was unsettling for Susan as her dream of having a two-parent family was broken. John felt he “had lost face” with both Susan and her sons. Both partners came to their marriage with underlying fears that their marriage might fail again. Given John’s two previous marriages, he desperately wanted this family to work. John’s fear spurred him to try harder and become more aggressive with Susan and Matt over Matt’s behavior. In turn, Susan felt that she had failed as a mother, despite all of her sacrifices of the past, Matt’s continuing problems signaled to her that she had failed him. Susan’s feelings lead her to withdraw and defer to both her husband and her son. Matt’s actions finally reached a point where they could not be ignored and the family acting out behavior communicated his anger in a graphic way that could not be ignored and provided the opportunity for the family to deal directly with their feelings. The cycle was seen clearly with John as the anxious pursuer and Matt the hurt attacker with both responding to Susan’s withdrawal.

The primary therapeutic task of working with EFFT is de-escalation of the negative interactional cycle. Identifying the cycle and helping each member become aware of their underlying feelings allowed the therapist to begin restructuring the family’s interaction.

**Working-Through**

As therapy progressed, the therapist worked within dyads to promote the acceptance of the different experiences of family members and to facilitate new interactional responses. A primary task in processing the attachment emotions in a stepfamily is helping family members talk openly about their emotional experiences and helping each member validate each other. Typically this occurs in dyadic sessions as is illustrated by the following examples.

In a later session, Susan and John explored the emotional impact of the negative cycle on their relationship which allowed them to speak more directly about
their parenting roles. Each partner began to acknowledge their insecurities and fears regarding their relationship and received reassurance and validation of their love and caring for one another. This renewed emotional intimacy then allowed them to express specific needs in their relationship. Susan was encouraged to communicate her needs directly to John and not to fall into her pattern of withdrawing and deferring to him. Susan expressed her hope that John would not give up on her son and asked him to “be the adult” in his interactions with the boys as he worked to build a positive relationship with them. She shared how important her relationships with her sons were to her. As John felt more secure in Susan’s love for him, he softened his position and was able to understand Susan’s attachment to her children, ultimately supporting Matt returning home. Susan acknowledged her need to hold expectations for her son that were more age appropriate, knowing now that she could no longer rescue him. John stated that he no longer wanted the role of the “heavy” with the boys and felt he could let that go as long as there were firm guidelines in place for Matt. Both partners were able to communicate directly with each other their need for continued support and reassurance from one another strengthening their relationship and enabling them together to be more effective in their parenting roles.

Sessions with the boys fostered support for their feelings through validation and normalizing of their reactions to the changing family. Both sons had wanted to support their mother’s choice of a mate and they felt she deserved to be happy with John, so they tended to cope with their reservations and reluctance to the remarriage in nondirect ways. Jason was seen as a withdrawer, because he spent more time away from home and avoided family dinners and conversations with anyone in the family. Matt took the position of a pleaser/placater as he stated that he had wanted to please his mother by talking with John and keeping his own feelings to himself. Matt revealed that he not only felt left behind by his brother who was leaving for college but also by his mother who seemed to have little time to spend with him in part because of John.

In session, a stronger bond was made between the brothers as they shared the sadness they felt regarding their biological father and their mutual desires to protect their mother. Jason validated that Matt was getting less positive attention, but he also challenged Matt on his acting out behavior suggesting that just led to more alienation rather than support. In turn, Matt took responsibility for his acting out and expressed a desire to improve his relationship with his brother. The therapist strengthened the alliance between the brothers through identifying their shared experience of the family’s transition and their needs for support and connection.

Additional sessions included only Susan and Matt as the emotional distance in their relationship appeared to be at the core of the family crisis. Their negative pattern prompted discouragement for both, as Susan saw herself as the failing parent and Matt identified himself as the bad son. Susan alternated between rescuing and criticizing Matt while Matt either placated to his mother’s desires or reacted with flagrant disregard in the face of his mother’s disapproval. As the
therapist explored the emotions underlying their placating and distancing positions, each was able to express their experience of the relationship on attachment terms. As Matt began to shake visibly, he said, “I am just bad” and through tears shared his shame and remorse with his mother. Susan was able to reach back directly and comfort her son which helped her to feel more connected to him. Susan related her own disappointment as a parent acknowledging that she had not been there for Matt. In her own words she said, “I am doing a bum job” to which Matt responded by asserting that he still needed her help. As Susan was able to see how her son still needed her, she became more activated and the pair was able to begin to discuss and negotiate reasonable expectations for Matt’s behavior at home.

In review, these dyadic sessions are necessary for creating a secure context where the attachment needs of each relationship can be attended to and nurtured. The cycle is framed as an enemy which serves to block family members from connecting with one another. The problem cycle reinforces negative affect and reduces the family’s resilience and problem solving abilities. The therapist works with the underlying feelings directly and moves the family toward greater accessibility and responsiveness between members. In this case, Susan and Matt reconnected and Susan took more leadership in her parenting role and Matt exercised more responsibility for his behavior. At the end of therapy, Matt had written his mother a lengthy letter, opening up around his past behavior and being transparent in his struggles. He wrote: “I am so sorry for all I have done and I want you to know that I will do my best to make it up to you. Love Matt.”

This case illustrates how EFFT applies to the stepfamily experience. The negative interactional cycle in stepfamilies is more complex given the inside-outside nature of the relationships and the power of framing the cycle as the enemy as opposed to the stepfamily dimensions—“You are not my father”—is both freeing and inspiring for these families. Facilitation of open expression of each member’s attachment needs and the promotion of emotional accessibility and responsiveness restructures and redefines the familial, the romantic, and the affiliate relationships. EFFT makes possible the creation of a safe haven in a family created not out of biology but from the vestiges of loss, renewed love, and the promise of new relationships.

CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates the principles and approach of EFFT to stepfamilies. EFFT offers a non-pathologizing approach that is sensitive to the needs and challenges of families in the midst of marital transitions. Stepfamilies are more likely to seek clinical treatment in the early years of their development, when couple and family bonds are vulnerable to loyalty binds and competing attachments. EFFT offers families a clinical approach that is sensitive to the individual experiences and needs of family members. Applying a systemic and humanistic approach the
model frames the problems families face within the context of members’ needs for belonging and intimacy. The case study provides one example of the model and its potential benefit to stepfamilies.

Further study of EFFT and its efficacy with various family forms and backgrounds is warranted. Therapists using this approach with stepfamilies should extend a similar interest and sensitivity to the unique experience and perspectives of families from varying cultural and ethnic backgrounds. While attachment theory provides a heuristic model of human functioning, a therapist’s work to restructure patterns of interaction informed by emotional experience and attachment needs will benefit from a respect for and an engagement of culturally specific values. The promise of this approach for stepfamilies is found in part in the model’s emphasis on eliciting emotional experience in the context of attachment security. A therapist’s accessibility and responsiveness to family members is both means and model for facilitating the connection that many stepfamilies seek.

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Responses to Peer Stress Predict Academic Outcomes Across the Transition to Middle School

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Abstract
This study examined physiological and coping responses to peer-evaluative challenges in early adolescence as predictors of academic outcomes. The sample included 123 young adolescents (\( \bar{X}_{\text{age}} = 12.03 \) years) who participated in the summer before (T1) and the spring after (T2) the transition to middle school. At T1, respiratory sinus arrhythmia reactivity (RSAR) and engaged coping responses (prosocial problem-solving, positive cognitive appraisals) were assessed in real-time during lab-based simulations of peer-evaluative challenges. Academic performance was assessed with multiple informants (teachers, parents, adolescents) at T1 and T2. Parents provided reports about academic adjustment to middle school at T2. RSAR significantly predicted improved academic performance between T1 and T2 and positive academic adjustment at T2. Engaged coping was marginally associated with improved academic performance and significantly associated with positive academic adjustment; these results were partially corroborated by analyses with an alternative measure of engaged coping (engaged planning), which significantly predicted improved academic performance.

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Young adolescents frequently experience peer evaluations of their competence and likeability (Parker, Rubin, Erath, Wojslawowicz, & Buskirk, 2006). Social-cognitive development and physical maturation, as well as increasing positive and negative peer experiences, may amplify the significance of these peer-evaluative challenges in early adolescence. Indeed, concerns about negative peer evaluation escalate in adolescence (Beidel & Turner, 2007; Westenberg, Gullone, Bokhorst, Heyne, & King, 2007) and are corroborated by heightened physiological responses to social challenges (Stroud et al., 2009; Sumter, Bokhorst, Miers, Van Pelt, & Westenberg, 2010). The transition to middle school may exacerbate peer challenges, as this transition often introduces a larger and more diverse peer group, realignment of existing peer networks, and adult expectations of independence with peers (Eccles, Lord, & Buchanan, 1996).

Academic functioning may be particularly susceptible to rising peer challenges across the transition to middle school due to the salience of peer relationships in early adolescence as well as the common occurrence of peer stressors at school (Nishina & Juvonen, 2005). Indeed, LaFontana and Cillessen (2010) reported that prioritizing peer status over achievement peaks in middle school. Maladaptive responses to peer challenges may lead to peer problems, such as friendlessness, rejection, and victimization (Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2004; Sandstrom, 2004; Zimmer-Gembeck, Lees, & Skinner, 2011), and these peer problems are well-documented predictors of poorer academic performance (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006; Crosnoe, 2011; Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010; Ryan, 2011; Wentzel, 2009). Even in the absence of worsening peer problems, maladaptive responses to peer challenges may fail to mitigate or overcome normative peer challenges, thereby producing increased peer-related stress that interferes with academic performance. Adaptive responses to peer challenges, in contrast, may allow adolescents to preserve positive emotion and attentional focus on academic demands even in the context of normative peer challenges. The present study examined real-time physiological and coping responses to peer-evaluative challenges as predictors of academic performance across the transition to middle school and academic adjustment following the transition to middle school. In addition, social anxiety and peer victimization, both indices of peer-evaluative stress, were tested as mediators of associations between earlier responses to peer-evaluative challenges and academic outcomes in middle school.
Responses to Peer Challenges

Many young adolescents feel some anxiety about interacting with unfamiliar peers or experience exclusion or rebuff from peers, especially during the transition to middle school. Consistent with stress-coping theories (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987; Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2011), however, these peer-evaluative experiences are not necessarily correlates or causes of maladjustment. Rather, adolescents’ responses to peer challenges may be adaptive or maladaptive and thereby contribute to positive or negative adjustment across a range of domains, including emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001). Responses to peer challenges include voluntary-coping and involuntary-physiological responses, each of which may influence adjustment. Theories of coping (Compas et al., 2001) and psychophysiology (Porges, 2007) suggest that responses to challenges may be engaged or disengaged across voluntary-coping and involuntary-physiological levels.

Voluntary-Coping Responses

Coping refers to “conscious volitional efforts to regulate emotion, cognition, behavior, physiology, and the environment in response to stressful events or circumstances” (p. 89, Compas et al., 2001). Voluntary engagement strategies seek to influence events or conditions (e.g., problem-solve), directly regulate emotions, or involve attempts to adapt to the environment through cognitive reappraisal. Voluntary disengagement strategies are directed away from the stressor or away from thoughts and emotions about the stressor, and include avoidance, distraction, and denial (Compas et al., 2001). Generally, research has linked engaged coping strategies with lower internalizing and externalizing problems and higher social competence, particularly when coping was assessed in response to more controllable situations (Clarke, 2006; Compas et al., 2001; Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007). For example, Erath, Flanagan, and Bierman (2007) found that young adolescents’ problem-directed coping strategies during a conversation challenge (e.g., conversation focus) were associated with observed conversation skills and peer-reported acceptance, whereas self-directed coping strategies (e.g., distraction) were associated with peer-reported victimization. In addition, several studies have linked engaged coping strategies with indices of positive academic functioning. In a meta-analysis including six studies with children and adolescents, Clarke (2006) reported a modest positive association ($r = .12$) between active coping (e.g., problem-solving, cognitive restructuring) with a variety of interpersonal stressors (e.g., sibling, peer, person you know) and academic performance.
As discussed by Compas et al. (2001) and Zimmer-Gembeck and Skinner (2011), however, the types and effectiveness of coping strategies may vary across contexts, such as family, peer, or academic contexts (Jaser et al., 2007; Sandstrom, 2004). Despite the fact that negative peer experiences often occur at school (Nishina & Juvonen, 2005), relatively few studies have examined associations between coping with peer stress and academic outcomes. In one recent study, young adolescents’ self-reported engaged coping responses to a range of peer stressors (e.g., being around rude peers, having problems with a friend, feeling pressured) was positively correlated with academic achievement as rated by adolescents and their teachers (Swanson, Valiente, Lemery-Chalfant, & O’Brien, 2011). In a well-known study, Causey and Dubow (1992) found that self-reported problem-solving coping responses to a peer argument scenario were positively correlated with grade point average (GPA) among fourth through sixth graders, but other coping responses (e.g., seeking support, distancing) were not associated with academic performance. To our knowledge, no published studies have examined coping responses to peer stress as prospective predictors of academic outcomes across the transition to middle school.

**Physiological Responses**

Involuntary-physiological responses to peer challenges may also influence academic outcomes. The autonomic nervous system (ANS) is a major psychophysiological component of the human stress system, and the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) is the regulatory branch of the ANS. According to Polyvagal Theory (Porges, 2007), the PNS serves as a “brake” (via the vagus nerve) that decelerates heart rate and facilitates calmness, attentional focus, and social engagement under normal circumstances. The deceleration in heart rate produced by higher vagal output to the heart is reflected in heart rate variability across the breathing cycle (e.g., slower heart rate during exhalation than inhalation), which is referred to as respiratory sinus arrhythmia (RSA). Under challenging or threatening conditions, the vagal brake can be withdrawn, yielding an incremental and efficient increase in heart rate and metabolic output that may allow individuals to engage with environmental demands and use active coping strategies in a regulated manner. Thus, greater reductions in vagal tone (higher respiratory sinus arrhythmia reactivity or RSAR) in challenging situations should reflect emotion regulation and flexible adaptation to environmental demands (Porges, 2007).

Consistent with contemporary physiological perspectives, research has reliably linked higher RSAR with fewer internalizing, externalizing, and social problems in community samples (Graziano & Dereffinko, 2013). For example, Graziano, Keane, and Calkins (2007) reported that young children’s
higher RSAR (i.e., higher vagal withdrawal) during cognitively and emotion-
ally challenging tasks was modestly associated with higher teacher-reported
social skills and peer-nominated social preference. In addition, several stud-
ies have found associations between higher RSAR and more positive cogni-
tive or academic functioning. A recent meta-analysis of 10 studies revealed a
modest association ($r = −.16$) between higher RSAR and fewer cognitive/
academic problems among children and adolescents (Graziano & Derefinko,
2013). Studies included in this meta-analysis used a variety of tasks to elicit
RSAR, including reward, negative emotion, and cognitive tasks, but not nor-
mative peer stress tasks. To our knowledge, no published studies have exam-
ined RSAR in the context of peer stress as a prospective predictor of academic
outcomes across the transition to middle school.

**The Present Study**

The present study examined RSAR and engaged coping responses as predic-
tors of academic performance across the transition to middle school and aca-
demic adjustment to middle school. At T1, RSAR and engaged coping were
assessed in real-time during lab-based simulations of normative peer-evalua-
tive challenges. A lab-based measure of engaged planning also assessed
engagement with peer-evaluative stress and was included in an effort to cor-
roborate results using the engaged coping variable. Academic performance
was assessed with adolescent, parent, and teacher reports of academic perfor-
ance before (T1) and after (T2) the transition to middle school. Academic
adjustment was assessed at T2 with parent reports of more general academic
adjustment during the first year of middle school. We hypothesized that
higher RSAR and engaged coping would predict better academic outcomes.
Because peer-evaluative challenges are prevalent in early adolescence, we
reasoned that these peer challenges would be less likely to interfere with
positive academic outcomes among young adolescents whose physiological
responses indicate awareness of challenges and well-regulated responses to
challenges (i.e., higher RSAR). We also reasoned that peer challenges are
more likely to be mitigated or solved in a manner that supports positive emo-
tion and academic focus among young adolescents who use engaged (rather
than disengaged) coping strategies.

We also conducted three sets of follow-up analyses. First, we examined the
interaction between RSAR and engaged coping (and planning) as a predictor
of academic outcomes. In one recent study, coping responses moderated the
association between RSAR and social competence, such that lower RSAR
was associated with lower social competence among young adolescents with
less engaged coping responses but not among young adolescents with more
engaged coping responses (Erath & Tu, 2013). Results suggested that adolescents with disengaged physiological (lower RSAR) and coping responses may be least attuned to challenging peer situations and thus least likely to solve social problems effectively. Consistent with these results, we anticipated that lower RSAR would particularly predict poorer academic outcomes among young adolescents who reported less engaged coping or planning.

Second, we tested for sex differences in associations linking RSAR and engaged coping with academic outcomes. Although we did not specify hypotheses, sex differences in responses to peer stress and sex-linked norms regarding behaviors and coping responses (Rose & Rudolph, 2006) suggest that responses to peer challenges may predict academic outcomes differently among boys and girls.

Finally, we considered whether experiences of peer-evaluative stress in middle school mediate associations between earlier responses to peer-evaluative stress (RSAR and engaged coping or planning), assessed just before the transition to middle school, and academic outcomes in middle school. Earlier responses to peer-evaluative stress may predict later experiences of peer-evaluative stress, which may account for poor academic outcomes associated with earlier responses to peer-evaluative stress. Although “peer-evaluative stress experiences” have not been defined and measured in precise terms, we conceptualized adolescent-reported social anxiety and peer victimization as developmentally salient indices of peer-evaluative stress experiences. Social anxiety is characterized by distress in social situations due to intense fears of negative evaluation (Beidel & Turner, 2007; La Greca & Lopez, 1998). Peer victimization refers to being the target of direct (physical or verbal) or indirect (relational) peer aggression, which often involves negative evaluation (e.g., insults) and stress (e.g., anxiety; Nishina & Juvonen, 2005). Both social anxiety (Beidel & Turner, 2007; Sumter, Bokhorst, & Westenberg, 2009) and peer victimization (Williams & Guerra, 2007) generally increase across the transition to adolescence. We anticipated that lower RSAR and less engaged coping (and planning) responses to peer-evaluative stress at T1 would predict increases in social anxiety and peer victimization from T1 to T2, and that T2 social anxiety and peer victimization would at least partially account for associations linking earlier physiological and coping responses with later academic outcomes.

**Method**

**Participants**

In all, 123 fifth and sixth graders (\(X_{\text{age}} = 12.03\) years, \(SD = .64\)) and one parent per child (82% biological mothers, 67% married) participated in the study.
at T1. The sample of young adolescents included 50% males and 58.5% European Americans, 35% African Americans, and 6.5% of other races/ethnicities. The modal annual family income was between US$35,001 and US$50,000; 21% reported an income of less than US$20,000 and 24% reported an income of more than US$75,000. Teacher reports were obtained for 81% of participants. There were no significant differences between participants with and without teacher data on age, sex, physiological responses, or coping responses. However, participants without teacher data were more likely to be ethnic minorities ($\chi^2 = 9.21, p < .01$) and from lower income households ($t = -2.64, p < .01$). Ninety-nine adolescents and one parent per child participated at T2 ($\bar{X}_{age} = 12.78$ years, $SD = .63$). Teacher reports were obtained for 87% of participants at T2. Participants with and without T2 data did not differ on age, gender, ethnicity, income, physiological responses, or engaged planning. Participants without T2 data had slightly poorer academic performance at T1 ($t = -2.14, p < .05$) and reported less engaged coping ($t = -2.65, p < .05$) compared with participants with T2 data.

Procedures

The short-term longitudinal design of the present study involved two waves of data collection spaced approximately 10 months apart. Participants were recruited in 2 cohorts separated by 1 year through flyers sent home with fifth- and sixth-grade students at five elementary schools in the southeastern United States. At T1, parents who responded to the school flyers were given information about the study, including the lab protocol, and were scheduled for a research visit over the phone in the spring. Teachers completed questionnaires near the end of the school year (May). Adolescents and their parents visited the lab for about 2 hours in the summer (mostly in June). Following an introduction and consent procedures, parents completed questionnaires and adolescents participated in lab activities while their physiological activity was recorded. After completing lab activities, participants were debriefed and given a snack break before they completed questionnaires.

The lab protocol included peer evaluation and peer rebuff periods. Following 5-minute acclimation and 3-minute baseline periods, adolescents were asked to act as if an adult research assistant (RA; same sex) was someone about their age, and to lead a 3-minute conversation to get to know the RA. To lead the conversation, adolescents were told that they could tell about themselves, ask questions about the RA, and talk about anything they wished. They were told that the conversation would be viewed via one-way Skype (an Internet-based video-chat program) by three same-age, same-sex peer judges, who were actually fictitious. Participants were told that the peer judges would
decide how well they performed in the conversation activity compared with two other participants the peer judges had watched on video. The peer evaluation period refers to the 3-minute conversation activity. Three minutes after post-conversation interview questions, participants received a text message via Skype, ostensibly from the peer judges, indicating that the peer judges chose the other two participants as the best performers in the conversation activity. Participants were then told that they may have a chance to change the peer judges’ opinions by reconnecting through Skype and speaking directly to the peer judges. The peer rebuff period refers to the 3 minutes following the feedback from the peer judges, during which participants considered their potential response to the peer judges. Following the peer rebuff period and several interview questions, the task was ended and participants were carefully debriefed using a process debriefing procedure informed by Underwood (2005) and Hubbard (2005). In particular, participants were led to their own conclusion that the peer judges were not real, and the rationale for deception and purpose of the study were discussed with participants.

Parents were re-contacted during the spring of adolescents’ first year in middle school for a follow-up visit (T2). Adolescents and their parents visited the research lab in the spring and completed questionnaires. Parents and adolescents were asked to select the teacher who knew the student best to complete teacher reports. Teachers were contacted to participate and completed questionnaires in the spring. Adolescents, parents, and teachers were compensated monetarily. All study procedures were approved by the University Institutional Review Board.

**Measures**

**Physiological assessment.** RSA was measured during acclimation (5 minutes), resting baseline (3 minutes), speaking baseline (3 minutes), peer evaluation (3 minutes), waiting (3 minutes), peer rebuff (3 minutes), and recovery (3 minutes) periods. Pre-task (resting baseline) and peer-evaluative stress (mean of peer evaluation and peer rebuff periods) levels of RSA were used in the present study. Peer-evaluative stress levels of RSA were not collected for three participants because they chose not to participate in the peer stress procedures or their uncomfortable appearance led us to forego the peer stress period. One of these participants said that he did not want to participate in the conversation activity and two of these participants did not speak to researchers and appeared anxious while researchers provided instructions and attached electrodes.

**Respiratory sinus arrhythmia reactivity.** RSA data acquisition followed standard guidelines (Berntson et al., 1997) using a MindWare data acquisition
system (MindWare Technologies, Inc., Gahanna, OH). Electrocardiography (ECG) data were collected through disposable Ag-AgCl electrodes (1½” foam sensor, 7% chloride gel) placed on participants’ right clavicle and left and right rib by a same-sex RA. RSA scores were quantified using the spectral analysis method (Berntson et al., 1997) with MindWare HRV analysis software and expressed in units of ln(ms²). The very few artifacts that were detected were corrected manually using standard procedures (Berntson et al., 1997). RSA levels during the peer evaluation ($\bar{X} = 6.88$, $SD = 1.10$) and peer rebuff ($\bar{X} = 6.96$, $SD = .99$) periods were highly correlated ($r = .77$, $p < .001$) and averaged to create an RSA-stress score. RSAR refers to the residualized change score from the pre-task period to the peer-evaluative stress period. The residualized change score is the residual of the regression of RSA-stress on pre-task RSA (Burt & Obradović, 2013). In the present study, residualized change scores were multiplied by −1 so that higher RSAR scores indicate greater reductions in RSA (i.e., greater vagal withdrawal) from the pre-task period to the peer-evaluative stress period (Eisenberg et al., 2012).

Engaged coping with peer-evaluative stress. Real-time coping with peer-evaluative stress was assessed with adolescents’ open-ended responses to questions that immediately followed the peer evaluation and peer rebuff periods. After the peer evaluation period, participants were asked, “Having a conversation with someone you don’t know, while being judged by peers, can be challenging—how did you cope with this situation?” Following their initial response, participants were asked, “Did you use any other coping strategies to make yourself feel better or to help you get through the conversation activity?” After the peer rebuff period, participants were asked, “Not being chosen by peers can be challenging—how did you cope with this situation?” They were also asked, “Did you use any other coping strategies to make yourself feel better or to help you plan your response to the peer judges?” Responses were transcribed from video-recordings of the laboratory procedures.

Following extensive training with coping responses from a prior study (Erath et al., 2007), the first author and trained doctoral students coded coping responses as problem-focused (e.g., focused on the conversation, thought about what to say to the peer judges), emotion regulation (e.g., calmed down, took deep breaths), positive appraisal about the self (e.g., told myself that I did my best), positive appraisal about the situation (e.g., thought of the RA as a friend, figured that you cannot win all the time), disengaged (e.g., did not think about the peer judges, thought about something else), and other (e.g., no response, unclear response, involuntary motor response). All responses were
double-coded, and inter-rater reliability was good (κ = .77). All discrepant codes were resolved by consensus.

Consistent with a well-established coping taxonomy (Compas et al., 2001; Connor-Smith, Compas, Wadsworth, Thomsen, & Saltzman, 2000), engaged coping responses included problem-focused, emotion regulation, and positive appraisal (self and situation) codes, and disengaged coping responses included only disengaged coping codes. The proportion of engaged coping with peer-evaluative stress was computed by dividing the sum of engaged coping responses during the peer evaluation and peer rebuff periods by the sum of all coping responses (engaged, disengaged, other) during the peer evaluation and peer rebuff periods.

**Engaged planning.** Following the peer rebuff period and questions about coping with peer rebuff, participants were asked about their inclination to reconnect with the peer judges and their plan for reconnecting. Participants’ inclination to reconnect was assessed with interviewer ratings (1 = no; 2 = very reluctant, preference not to; 3 = little reluctant, but willing; 4 = yes) of participants’ responses to the question, “What do you plan to do—do you want to speak directly to the peer judges?” If they were in favor of speaking with the peer judges (rating of 3 or 4), participants were prompted with, “Tell me about how you plan to respond to the peer judges, or what you plan to say to the peer judges.” If participants were not inclined to speak with the peer judges (rating of 1 or 2), they were prompted with, “I understand that you do not want to speak with the peer judges, but if you were to speak with the peer judges, tell me about how you would respond to the peer judges, or what you would say to the peer judges.”

Responses were rated on a scale of engaged planning from 1 to 4, with lower scores representing lack of planning (e.g., no plan; simple or vague plan, such as “talk to them”) and higher scores representing more specific and elaborate planning (e.g., planning to raise open-ended topics, such as favorite activities; conversation strategies such as identifying common interests and talking about them). Participants’ plans were double-coded and inter-rater reliability was high (intraclass correlation = .98). Whereas the measure of engaged coping is based on adolescents’ self-reported coping strategies, the measure of engaged planning is based on the degree to which adolescents developed a plan for dealing with the peer stress situation, which should reflect their engagement with the situation.

**Academic performance.** Academic performance was assessed at T1 and T2 with teacher, parent, and adolescent ratings of performance in five subject areas:
English/Language, Reading, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies/History. Respondents used a 5-point rating scale (1 = failing, 2 = below average, 3 = average, 4 = above average, and 5 = excellent). Inter-item reliability was high within each informant, ranging from α = .73 to .98. Similar academic performance ratings have been validated with cross-informant correlations and school-issued report cards (Graham, Updegraff, Tomascik, & McHale, 1997; Swanson et al., 2011; Valiente, Lemery-Chalfant, & Swanson, 2009). In the present study, cross-informant correlations ranged from .49 to .63 at T1 and from .48 to .66 at T2. We averaged across informants (teacher, parent, early adolescent) to create an academic performance score. Cross-informant reliability was good (α = .78 at T1 and α = .78 at T2).

**Academic adjustment.** At T2, parents provided ratings of adolescents’ academic adjustment across the transition to middle school with six academic items from the School Adjustment–Parent Report measure created by the Fast Track project (Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 1997). Items refer to the transition to the new school year (e.g., “My child had an easy time handling the new academic demands made on him/her,” “My child liked the new things about school this year”) and therefore were assessed only at T2, following the transition to middle school. Parents provided ratings on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) and inter-item reliability was high (α = .84).

**Social anxiety.** At T1 and T2, adolescents completed the well-validated Social Anxiety Scale for Adolescents (SAS-A; La Greca & Lopez, 1998). Eighteen items were rated on a 5-point scale (e.g., “I worry about what others think of me”; 0 = not at all to 4 = all the time). Internal consistency was strong at T1 (α = .92) and T2 (α = .94).

**Peer victimization.** Adolescents completed eight items from the Social Experiences Questionnaire (e.g., “How often do you get pushed or shoved by other peers at school?” and “How often have other kids said mean things about you to keep other people from liking you?”; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996), which were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = almost never to 5 = almost always). Internal consistency was high at T1 (α = .85) and T2 (α = .86).

**Demographic variables.** Gender, ethnicity, and T1 grade level were represented by dichotomous variables (male = 0, female = 1; European American = 0, ethnic minority = 1; fifth grade = 0, sixth grade = 1, respectively). Parents reported annual household income on a 6-point scale (1 = less than US$10,000 to 6 = more than US$75,000).
Results

Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics and correlations are shown in Table 1. Two RSAR values were considered outliers based on their deviations from the mean (+3.4 and −3.9 SDs); analyses presented below include these values because analyses were repeated without the outlier values and revealed no substantive differences compared with analyses that include all data. On average, mean RSA levels did not change from the pre-task period (\( \bar{X} = 6.88, SD = 1.05 \)) to the peer-evaluative stress period (\( \bar{X} = 6.91, SD = 1.03 \)), \( t = −.63, p = .53 \). Fifty-five percent of adolescents exhibited a reduction in RSA from the pre-task period to the peer-evaluative stress period (i.e., vagal withdrawal), whereas 45% of adolescents exhibited an increase in RSA (i.e., vagal augmentation). Thus, although mean levels of RSA did not change significantly from the pre-task period to the peer-evaluative stress period, considerable variability was observed, ranging from substantial decreases in RSA (i.e., higher RSAR) to substantial increases in RSA (i.e., lower RSAR).

Engaged coping responses to the peer-evaluative stress protocol (77% of responses) were more common than disengaged (14%) or other (9%) coping responses. On average, adolescents reported 2.64 (\( SD = .88 \)) total coping responses across the peer-evaluative stress protocol, including 2.06 (\( SD = 1.11 \)) engaged responses, 0.38 (\( SD = .61 \)) disengaged responses, and 0.20 (\( SD = .44 \)) other responses. Participants were generally reluctant to reconnect with the peer judges (\( \bar{X} \) inclination to reconnect = 2.19, \( SD = 1.33 \)) and

| Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Primary Study Variables. |
|---------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|                               | 1  | 2  | 3  | 4  | 5  | 6  | 7  | 8  | 9  | 10 |
| 1. Gender                      | —  | —  |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| 2. Family income               | .02 | —  |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| 3. T1 Academic performance     | .04 | .45*** | —  |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| 4. RSAR                         | .10 | .14 | .07 | —  |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| 5. Engaged coping              | .19* | −.00 | .10 | .07 | —  |    |    |    |    |    |
| 6. Engaged planning            | .08 | .02 | .13 | −.13 | .27*** | —  |    |    |    |    |
| 7. T2 Social anxiety           | .08 | −.09 | −.13 | .00 | −.09 | −.06 | —  |    |    |    |
| 8. T2 Peer victimization       | .07 | .06 | −.21* | −.05 | −.03 | .01 | .56*** | —  |    |    |
| 9. T2 Academic performance     | .08 | .41**** | .67**** | .27** | .16 | .13 | −.11 | −.18 | —  |    |
| 10. T2 Academic adjustment     | .13 | .12 | .23* | .31*** | .26** | .03 | −.16 | −.24* | .53**** | —  |
| \( \bar{X} (SD) \)             | 50% | 4.13 | 4.00 | 0.00 | 0.77 | 2.73 | 2.30 | 1.95 | 4.04 | 3.85 |
|                                | (1.55) | (.71) | (.63) | (.30) | (1.16) | (.87) | (.85) | (.67) | (.82) |    |

Note. Gender was coded 0 = male, 1 = female. RSAR = respiratory sinus arrhythmia reactivity (units = ln[ms2]).

*\( p < .05 \). **\( p < .01 \). ***\( p < .001 \).
reported moderately engaged (i.e., prosocial and specific) planning in case of reconnecting with the peer judges. On average, adolescents reported low-moderate levels of social anxiety at T1 ($\bar{X} = 2.38, SD = .81$) and T2 ($\bar{X} = 2.30, SD = .87$) and peer victimization at T1 ($\bar{X} = 2.02, SD = .87$) and T2 ($\bar{X} = 1.95, SD = .85$).

As shown in Table 1, gender was correlated with engaged coping with peer-evaluative stress, such that girls reported more engaged coping than boys. Higher family income was correlated with better academic performance at T1 and T2. Grade level and ethnicity were not correlated with physiological, coping, or academic variables. RSAR was positively and significantly correlated with T2 academic performance and adjustment, and engaged coping was correlated with academic adjustment but not academic performance.

T1 social anxiety was marginally correlated with less engaged planning ($r = -.16, p < .10$), but T2 social anxiety was not correlated with RSAR, engaged coping or planning, or academic outcomes. T1 and T2 peer victimization were significantly correlated with poorer academic performance at T1 ($r = -.25, p < .01$ and $r = -.21, p < .05$, respectively) and poorer academic adjustment at T2 ($r = -.25, p < .05$ and $r = -.24, p < .05$, respectively). T2 peer victimization was also marginally correlated with poorer academic performance at T2 ($r = -.19, p < .10$). However, neither T1 nor T2 peer victimization was significantly correlated with RSAR, engaged coping or planning, or academic performance at T2.

**Regression Analyses Predicting Academic Performance and Academic Adjustment**

Regression analyses were conducted in AMOS (Arbuckle, 2012) to take advantage of full information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation of missing data. Regression analyses tested predictive associations linking RSAR and coping responses with changes in academic performance from T1 to T2 and academic adjustment at T2 (Table 2). All continuous control and predictor variables were mean-centered for regression analyses. Gender and income were entered as control variables in each analysis due to their correlations with either predictor or outcome variables (ethnicity and grade level were not included as control variables due to lack of correlations with predictor or outcome variables).

Two separate sets of regression analyses were conducted—one for academic performance and one for academic adjustment. The first regression analysis in each set (top half of Table 2) included RSAR and engaged coping. The second regression analysis in each set (bottom half of Table 2) included
### Table 2. Predictive Associations Linking RSAR and Engaged Coping With Academic Outcomes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>T2 academic performance</th>
<th>T2 academic adjustment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B (SE)</td>
<td>β</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Engaged coping model</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.09 (.10)</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>.05 (.04)</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T1 academic performance</td>
<td>.63 (.08)***</td>
<td>.64***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSAR</td>
<td>.21 (.08)**</td>
<td>.19**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged coping</td>
<td>.28 (.16)†</td>
<td>.12†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSAR × Engaged coping</td>
<td>-.30 (.29)</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Engaged planning model</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Step 1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.09 (.10)</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>.05 (.04)</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclination to reconnect</td>
<td>-.01 (.04)</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T1 academic performance</td>
<td>.63 (.08)***</td>
<td>.65***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSAR</td>
<td>.25 (.08)***</td>
<td>.23***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged planning</td>
<td>.09 (.04)*</td>
<td>.15*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSAR × Engaged planning</td>
<td>-.04 (.08)</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. RSAR = respiratory sinus arrhythmia reactivity.

†p < .10. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

RSAR and replaced the engaged coping variable with engaged planning, to test corroborating evidence for the role of engaged coping. Analyses that included engaged planning as a predictor variable also included participants’ inclination to reconnect with the peer judges as a control variable; controlling for inclination to reconnect helped rule out the possibility that the effects of engaged planning are explained simply by inclination to reconnect (i.e., young adolescents who are more outgoing, or more socially confident, are more likely to plan to respond to the peer judges and perform better academically) rather than actual engagement with the challenging situation (i.e., young adolescents who develop more prosocial plans for reconnecting with the peer judges perform better academically). T1 academic performance was
controlled in the regression analyses predicting T2 academic performance. Because our measure of academic adjustment reflects adjustment to a new school, T1 levels were not collected; thus, analyses predicting T2 academic adjustment do not account for prior levels of academic adjustment. In the absence of a measure of T1 academic adjustment, we used T1 academic performance as a proxy and controlled for T1 academic performance in regression analyses predicting T2 academic adjustment.

Follow-up analyses tested interactions between RSAR and coping responses as well as interactions between gender and both RSAR and coping responses. These interactions were tested by entering either (a) the RSAR × Engaged coping (or planning) product term or (b) the Gender × RSAR and Gender × Engaged coping (or planning) product terms on the final step of the regression analyses. Interactions between RSAR and engaged coping (or engaged planning) did not predict academic outcomes (either changes in academic performance or T2 academic adjustment) so these analyses are not presented below. When interactions with gender emerged, simple intercepts and slopes were estimated (Aiken & West, 1991; Holmbeck, 2002).

In addition, follow-up analyses examined the possibility that social anxiety or peer victimization mediated the effects of RSAR or engaged coping (or engaged planning) on academic outcomes. These analyses included the same predictor and control variables described above in addition to T1 social anxiety or T1 peer victimization; T2 social anxiety or T2 peer victimization served as the outcome variable in step one of the mediation tests. Neither RSAR nor engaged coping (nor engaged planning) predicted T2 social anxiety or T2 peer victimization; thus, mediation was not possible and these analyses are not presented.

**Predicting academic performance.** As shown in Table 2, T1 academic performance strongly predicted T2 academic performance. Gender and income were not associated with T2 academic performance above and beyond T1 academic performance. In the model with engaged coping (top half of Table 2), RSAR significantly predicted positive differences in academic performance between T1 and T2, and engaged coping responses predicted positive differences in academic performance between T1 and T2 at the non-significant trend level. Adolescents with higher RSAR (i.e., higher vagal withdrawal) or more engaged coping responses outperformed their peers with lower RSAR or less engaged coping responses. The addition of RSAR and engaged coping variables explained an additional 3% of the variance in academic performance above and beyond T1 academic performance and control variables (2% unique to RSAR and 1% unique to engaged coping), resulting in a total of 53% of the variance explained. Gender did not interact with
RSAR, $\beta = -.15, B = -.24, SE = .15, p = .12$, or engaged coping, $\beta = -.10, B = -.37, SE = .33, p = .26$.

In the model with engaged planning (bottom half of Table 2), both RSAR and engaged planning significantly predicted positive differences in academic performance between T1 and T2. Again, higher vagal withdrawal and greater engaged planning were each associated with better academic performance. The addition of RSAR and engaged planning explained 4% of the variance in T2 academic performance above and beyond T1 academic performance and control variables (3% unique to RSAR and 2% unique to engaged planning), resulting in 54% of the variance explained. Gender did not interact with engaged planning, $\beta = -.07, B = -.06, SE = .08, p = .44$, but the interaction between RSAR and gender predicted T2 academic performance in this model, $\beta = -.21, B = -.33, SE = .15, p < .05$. Simple slopes analysis revealed a stronger association between RSAR and academic performance among boys, $\beta = .40, B = .45, SE = .10, p < .001$, compared with girls, $\beta = .11, B = .12, SE = .11, p = .27$.

Predicting academic adjustment. As shown in Table 2, T1 academic performance, but not gender or income, predicted academic adjustment following the transition to middle school. In the model with engaged coping, both RSAR and engaged coping significantly predicted better T2 academic adjustment, explaining 12% of the variance beyond control variables (6% unique to RSAR and 5% unique to engaged coping). This resulted in a total of 20% of the variance in academic adjustment explained. Adolescents with higher RSAR (i.e., higher vagal withdrawal) or more engaged coping responses were reported by their parents to exhibit better academic adjustment following the transition to middle school. Gender did not interact with RSAR, $\beta = -.15, B = -.28, SE = .24, p = .24$, or engaged coping, $\beta = -.16, B = -.73, SE = .52, p = .16$.

Finally, in the model with engaged planning, RSAR again predicted better academic adjustment at T2, but engaged planning did not predict academic adjustment. The addition of RSAR and engaged planning accounted for 10% of the variance in T2 academic adjustment beyond control variables (10% unique to RSAR), resulting in a total of 19% of the variance explained. Gender did not interact with RSAR, $\beta = -.19, B = -.37, SE = .24, p = .12$, or engaged planning, $\beta = -.12, B = -.12, SE = .14, p = .37$.

Discussion

The present study examined physiological and coping responses to salient social challenges as predictors of academic outcomes in early adolescence.
More specifically, we investigated predictive associations between physiological and coping responses assessed prior to the transition to middle school (T1) and academic outcomes assessed after the transition to middle school (T2). RSAR and coping responses were assessed in the context of peer-evaluative challenges. Participants were asked to lead a conversation while under evaluation by fictitious peer judges and to consider a response to the peer judges after receiving feedback that they were not chosen as one of the best performers. Academic performance was assessed with multiple informants before and after the transition to middle school. RSAR significantly predicted improved academic performance from T1 to T2 and positive academic adjustment at T2. Engaged coping marginally predicted improved academic performance and significantly predicted positive academic adjustment; these results were partially corroborated by analyses with engaged planning, which significantly predicted better academic performance from T1 to T2. These associations were not mediated by changes in social anxiety or peer victimization across the transition to middle school and little evidence emerged for gender differences in predictive associations. An interaction effect suggested that RSAR may predict academic performance more strongly among boys compared with girls, but this result must be considered very tentative because it was not replicated in other analyses.

Engaged physiological responses (i.e., higher RSAR) and engaged coping responses (i.e., prosocial problem-solving and planning, positive cognitive appraisal) each independently predicted improved academic performance from T1 to T2 and positive academic adjustment at T2. In other words, less engaged physiological and coping responses predicted poorer academic performance and adjustment. These results are consistent with research that links RSAR with better cognitive and academic functioning (Graziano & Dereffinko, 2013) as well as studies that connect active coping with academic performance (Clarke, 2006). However, the present study is the first to examine physiological or coping responses to peer stress as prospective predictors of academic performance across the transition to middle school and academic adjustment in middle school.

One potential explanation for predictive associations linking earlier engaged physiological and coping responses with later academic outcomes is that engaged responses may actually reduce subsequent peer stress experiences which, in turn, may promote academic performance and adjustment. However, in the present study, RSAR and engaged coping did not predict two developmentally salient indices of peer-evaluative stress (social anxiety and peer victimization) across the transition to middle school. Thus, whereas RSAR and engaged coping with peer stress may be important dimensions of social competence in early adolescence (Erath et al., 2007; Erath & Tu, 2013;
Graziano & Dereffinko, 2013; Reijntjes, Stegge, & Meerum Terwogt, 2006; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2011), these stress responses may not necessarily predict short-term (i.e., 10 month) changes in peer stress, as represented by social anxiety and peer victimization in the present study. Indeed, engaged responses may not reduce peer stress overall because engaged responses involve awareness and attention to peer challenges.

Instead, during a period when peer-evaluative challenges become increasingly salient, engaged responses may prevent spillover, or negative cascading (Masten & Cicchetti, 2010), of peer stress to other domains of development, such as academic functioning. That is, engaged responses may allow young adolescents to better compartmentalize peer challenges such that they do not undermine other important developmental tasks. Adolescents with higher RSAR or engaged coping responses may recognize and resolve peer-evaluative challenges and more easily focus on academic activities. In contrast, peer challenges may remain unresolved and interfere with academic focus among adolescents with less engaged responses to common peer-evaluative challenges. Lack of signal or support at the physiological level (e.g., lower RSAR) or lack of cognitive or behavioral attention (e.g., distraction, denial, avoidance) to peer-evaluative challenges may allow these challenges to disrupt academic functioning.

In the present study, RSAR and engaged coping were unrelated and each independently predicted academic outcomes. It is important to note that, like the present study, other studies find no evidence or limited evidence for associations between involuntary ANS responses and voluntary-coping responses among children and adolescents (Connor-Smith et al., 2000; Dufton, Dunn, Slosky, & Compas, 2011; see also Gunnar, 1987). Likewise, dual-process frameworks contend that automatic (e.g., physiological) and reflective (e.g., logical) emotion response systems are relatively independent and elicit behaviors via different mechanisms (e.g., motivational orientations vs. knowledge about values and consequences; Evers et al., 2014; Strack & Deutsch, 2004). Another possibility is that adaptive physiological responses (e.g., RSAR) that increase arousal in response to stress do indeed support more engaged voluntary-coping responses (Porges, 2007); at the same time, however, adaptive physiological responses may reflect a more familiar or automated process that reduces the need or opportunity for deliberate, voluntary coping. Both processes may be operative, in which case physiological and coping responses may be modestly associated at most, yet both may contribute to adaptive stress management that facilitates positive outcomes, such as academic performance. Future research that examines the conditions under which physiological and coping responses are associated and contribute to adjustment independently or interactively will be very informative.
It is important to consider several limitations of the present study and additional directions for future research. Although the peer challenges in the present study are developmentally relevant and allowed assessment of real-time physiological and coping responses to social interaction in the context of peer evaluation, lab-based responses to peer challenges may not reflect responses in more naturalistic circumstances such as during peer-evaluative challenges at school. School-based physiological and coping responses would be very difficult to measure in real-time, but future research under more naturalistic conditions could reinforce the current results and perhaps reveal stronger connections with academic outcomes. It would also be informative to assess responses to a greater number of peer stress situations, which would yield a greater number of coping responses and allow more fine-grained analysis of coping responses, such as distinctions between behavioral problem-solving and cognitive appraisal (Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2011). Measures of engagement with peer stress included self-reports of coping immediately following a peer challenge (engaged coping) as well as coping as potentially reflected in a plan for dealing with the peer challenge (engaged planning). Coping strategies are commonly measured with self-reports, and measuring coping as reflected in a planned response may provide further evidence that engaged coping actually occurred. These measures of engagement were correlated, but only moderately, and predicted academic outcomes similarly, but not identically. Future research that compares and contrasts multiple methods of coping assessment will continue to improve the reliability and validity of coping measures. Future research that further investigates the academic implications of responses to other types of stressors (e.g., cognitive-academic, family) would also be informative.

In addition, results of the present study suggest that responses to peer stress may control the spillover of peer stress to other domains of development (i.e., academic functioning), and future research could extend this research to other developmental domains such as physical health. Indeed, the voluminous body of research showing that engaged coping with various stressors predicts various indices of adjustment (Compas et al., 2001; Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007) may be explained, in part, by the potential compartmentalization (i.e., spillover prevention) function of engaged physiological and coping responses. Importantly, although we used multiple reporters to assess adolescents’ academic outcomes across the transition to middle school, we did not include a direct measure of achievement such as GPA nor did we use objective assessments of cognitive achievement. The inclusion of such measures in future studies may provide insight into the role that physiological and coping responses may play in fostering academic success. In addition, in contrast to academic performance, academic adjustment was assessed at T2
only; thus, results of the present study do not provide information about whether physiological and coping responses predict change in academic adjustment (though T1 academic performance was included as a control variable in analyses predicting T2 academic adjustment). Future studies that include multiple assessments of adjustment following the transition to middle school may provide important information about change in academic adjustment in the context of peer stress. RSAR was assessed at T1 only; multiple assessments of RSAR in future research would allow investigations of change in RSAR across novel or stressful transitions. Finally, the present study considered social anxiety and peer victimization as potential mediators, but the effects of engaged physiological and coping responses may be mediated by other indices of peer-evaluative stress or other social or psychological factors. Understanding mediators would further inform interventions.

Despite several limitations, this study provides new evidence about physiological and coping responses that predict academic performance and adjustment across the transition to middle school. Results suggest that promoting young adolescents’ positive engagement with peer challenges should support academic success. It will be important for future research to examine how changes in coping responses may influence physiological responses, which may further inform interventions designed to facilitate adaptive responses to peer stress (e.g., Lochman, Wells, & Murray, 2007).

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A Qualitative Analysis of Difficulties on Transition Days in Blended Families

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Abstract

The current qualitative research study focused on the difficulties experienced by individuals in stepfamilies or blended families on transition days. A transition day is the day a child prepares to leave one custodial home and go to another, or vice-versa. Parents in various stages of stepfamily development and varying demographics were interviewed regarding transition day. The theme “difficulties” emerged throughout the coding process. Difficulties were further broken down into subthemes: difficulty and disconnect, difficulty and age of children, and difficulty and different households. Through a more in-depth understanding of transition days in stepfamilies, immediate assistance may be provided to families who are in various stages of stepfamily/blended family formation. Lastly, advice for current stepfamilies and future stepfamilies is discussed.

Keywords

Qualitative, Stepfamily, Blended Family, Transition, Difficulties, Transition Daze, Transition Day

1. Introduction

The purpose of the current study was to gain greater understanding of transitional days in the development of stepfamilies by systematically evaluating the content of semi-structured interviews collected from family members. Transition days occur when families are in the process of forming or altering a stepfamily or blended family, and for many blended families, this is a weekly occurrence. A transition day is specifically the day a child prepares to leave one custodial home and go to another or vice-versa. Cartwright (2012) examined the challenges of being a mother in a stepfamily and found that when transitions were managed carefully, stepparents and stepchildren felt ready to transition, leading to praise of the mother. Although,
Cartwright’s work focused specifically on the transition of remarriage, this concept can be applied to transitional days. Their results suggest that it is crucial to be patient with children who are shuffling between two households on a regular basis. Today researchers and clinicians have acquired a greater understanding of the family dynamics that lead separation and divorce. Still, the issue of transitioning between family units has been largely ignored. Addressing a family’s psychological needs and their responses within the family unit during these times is incredibly important in order to foster growth and trust in a family. The current study seeks to enhance the understanding of transitional day issues for researchers and for clinicians who focus on marriage and family issues.

Stepfamilies are common. Nearly everyone has had experience with a stepfamily; they are either from one, know someone who is from one, or have a relative from one. For example, De Vaus and Gray (2003) examined transitions from cohabitation to marriage and divorce to marriage, but the issue of transitions within stepfamilies (i.e., household to household research) was largely ignored in that study. Perry-Fraser and Fraser (2016) identified and coined the term “transition daze” in previous research laying a foundation for the many trying demands of transitional days. Understanding transitional days in stepfamilies is beneficial to all stepfamilies or blended families. It is also important for clinicians who work with these families. Evidence from both non-clinical and clinical samples reveals that the first several years following formation of a stepfamily can often be turbulent (Bray & Kelly, 1999). This is one reason why remarriages are at the greatest risk for divorce during the first five years (Clarke & Wilson, 1994). Anything that can be done to reduce the conflict potentially preventing the dissolution of a family is welcomed. That is, knowledge or interventions, which assist children who may be involved in high conflict transitions between remarried partners, is of great importance. Children of blended families experience multiple changes in their environment. Moving households, adjusting to two households, addition or subtraction of siblings, and a change in school or social networks are but a few of the issues that children face. Multiple transitions in particular can have an effect on the psychological well-being children. Not all family transitions are equal. Some may be positive, others negative. Whether positive or negative, such transitions are dependent on a number of objective and subjective factors. For example, a child who transitions away from an abusive parental situation would more than likely be happy during a transition, while others may have divided loyalties choosing between two equally supportive households. These subjective factors make it difficult to conduct quantitative research on the process of transition.

The purpose of this study is to understand the development of a stepfamily during days of transition. The current study provides research results are applicable for clinicians in the field of marriage and family therapy and examines stepfamily narratives to further identify their experiences. The difficulties recorded on transition days within families were obtained by interviewing biological parents and stepparents who are a part of blended families. The current study
conveys a greater understanding of difficulties on transitional days in blended families.

2. Review of Literature

Much is known about stepfamilies (Beer, 1992; Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001; Felker, Fromme, Arnaut, & Stoll, 2002; Filinson, 1986). Ironically, the more that is learned about stepfamilies, the stronger the realization is of how little is actually known (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013). Stepfamilies are more common in the United States than in other industrialized nations (Sweeney, 2010). The social sciences have a lengthy history of stepfamily research (Filinson, 1986; Glick, 1988; Papernow, 1984). One of the primary interests of stepfamily researchers has been on the demographic shifts our nation has experienced. Postmodern terms and variations on traditionally held themes add areas of interest and are attractive to researchers and scholars (Kunz, 2011). Such research indicates that despite social changes, stepfamilies may be quite different from first families or families of origin. Stepfamilies tend to have more conflict, are more likely to experience crises, and are slower to recover from crises (Schlomer, Del Giudice, & Ellis, 2011). One reason for the difference between stepfamilies and families of origin is that stepparents and stepchildren must actively work to develop new bonds (Visher, Visher, & Pasley, 2003). Research suggested that successful stepfamilies have realistic expectations about stepfamily dynamics and development. They have realistic expectations about the time necessary to establish roles and to determine their family’s natural pattern of functioning (e.g. Hetherington & Kelly, 2003; Visher et al., 2003). In order to gain greater insight into how these bonds are formed and the functioning patterns of stepfamilies, the current study will examine theoretical approaches to stepfamily transition.

3. Theoretical Approaches to Stepfamily Transition Research

Stepfamily research has been approached from many different theoretical perspectives. Systemic clinicians and researchers conceptualize approaches of the whole family system and recognize an equilibrium that comes with destabilization of the family. This has led to development of stage-based models grounded in family systems theory. The complete discussion of the literature of these theories is beyond the scope of this study and will not be fully explicated here. Major theories that are influential in social policy and among practitioners will be discussed. Discussion will be limited to theories that may be relevant for elucidating factors associated with successful and unsuccessful transitions. Conflict Theory and Stage Theory are introduced in this section to better explain stepfamily transition research in the context of the transition day.

Conflict Theory. Conflict theory is closely aligned with neo-Marxism (Sallach, 1973). From a conflict theorists perspective, the blended family attempts “fit” two family systems together. Conflict may arise during this time, and difficulties
must be addressed for the family to maintain equilibrium.

Conflict theory assumes individuals have different interests and amounts of power, which put them at odds with each other. When applied to the family, it assumes members of a family unit will differ in preferences, interest and motivations. Conflict within a blended family can also exist in the form of differences in age, gender, authority, power and privilege. Gains for one family member can be losses for another, creating competition among family members that can lead to confrontational behavior, or behaviors that are competitive such as threats, promises or appeasement. When applied to families, conflict theory assumes that solutions that everyone can agree upon must be found before a conflict can end. Compromise among the members of the family unit must exist so that the family unit is able to function and maximally meet the goals of its members. When families find difficulty in finding common ground, conflicts must be negotiated to gain consensus and restore the family’s equilibrium. In stepfamilies, the need to reestablish oneself on a weekly basis may add to difficulty on days of transition.

During days of transition, normative pressures to conform to a different set of expectations associated with each household, and the need to adjust after having spent time apart from a particular family unit may increase conflict. Stepfamily systems tend to evolve based on responses to individual and systemic changes of the entire family. To explore this in more depth, stage theory is examined.

Stage Theory. In the current study, a questionnaire was created with questions that mirror modern stage theories. For children of stepfamilies, feelings can be conflicting and complicated by social, emotional, and developmental matters (L’Abate, 1976, 1986). The researchers of the current study recognize stages are not necessarily rigid and sequential. In other words, families may fluctuate between the stages (McManus-Gay, 2002; Papernow, 1993). The current study utilizes Papernow’s argument that members of the stepfamily are often in different stages from one another. The current study explicates additional ways in which a family may grow toward developing greater cohesiveness. In order to explore the ideas held by the interviewees in the current study, it is important to understand how individuals cope with adversity in various stages in a stepfamily. Individual and coping theories are examined to gain a greater understanding about how to create a space for greater family development and greater empathy toward family members during days of transition. Individuals cope differently under various pressures. Below, individual and family coping theories are explored.

Individual and Family Coping Theories

Coping in ordinary parlance is the ability to strive with some degree of success against adversity (Nuttman-Shwartz & Dekel, 2009). Other definitions emphasize adversity and the availability of resources needed for successful resolution (Matthews & Campbell, 2009; Riolli & Savicki, 2010). Hans Selye (1976) developed a theory of stress that was foundationally based on the concepts of stress, distress and exhaustion. In the blended family unit, threats may be perceived
among family members, therefore coping defenses may vary among family members in their efforts to deal with stressors. According to Pearlin and Schooler (1978) coping represents an individuals’ effort to deal with stressors. Newer accounts of coping are based on alternative theories, but many also emphasize individual differences (Scholer & Higgins, 2010; Skočić, Rudan, Brajković, & Marčinko, 2010).

It is therefore imperative to identify what is happening within the family system to gain a greater understanding of the individual, coping mechanisms, empathy and adaptation. Transitions require empathy and patience toward the individual who is experiencing internal changes and their concomitant behavior. The current study explicates interviewees’ reflections on behaviors of family members as well as their own behaviors, during transitional days. The family systems approach expands the frame of reference to include all of the forces at work within a family unit (L’Abate, 1981). Accordingly, family transitions are more likely to be difficult if those who are involved believe the transition to be unfair or overwhelming (Guerin, 1976). When families respond to stress in a positive manner they are said to adapt. Adaptation is the ability of the family and its members to make changes that are needed to recover from a stressor.

Stepfamilies and their member’s ability to adapt to a stressful situation depends on the needs of individual family, and its members along with other factors such as the needs of extended family members, a family’s social institutions, the larger environment. Successful resolution often requires changes in roles, rules, interactional patterns and perceptions of family members (McCubbin, Cauble, & Patterson, 1982). Adaptation should not be perceived as an end product that is definitive, as stepfamilies continue to adapt as other stressors come into play. Family stress theory has evolved over the past few decades. Although linear theories that reflect stage processes in families have been helpful to the field of marriage and family therapy, many family theorists believe that families should be viewed nonlinearly, as discussed in the next section (Kaslow et al., 2011; Minuchin, 1974; Rigazio-DiGilio & McDowell, 2013).

4. Methodology

Qualitative research methods are used to examine the content surrounding the difficulties newly constituted families face on days of transition. Qualitative methods have been shown to be useful for the types of multi-layered systems that families are rooted in whereby research questions are often open-ended and exploratory. Narrative inquiry was utilized for this study. It allowed for an in-depth investigation of changing experiences in stepfamilies and similar methodologies as found in grounded theory approach.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) developed the grounded theory approach as a response to the shortcomings of traditional hypothesis-testing. Grounded theory has been shown to be appropriate to understand familial processes (Morse & Richards, 2002), such as transitional days in stepfamilies. Grounded theory methods are well suited for examination of the links between reported experiences
and the interpersonal processes of an individual (Clawson & Ganong, 2002). Through the use of grounded theory, categories of meaning emerge from which thematic analysis can be applied to narratives. Grounded theory approaches have been used in qualitative interviewing because they allow for certain concepts to be explored in greater depth, which in turn allows the feedback to shape further inquiry (Burck, 2005).

The current study utilizes narrative inquiry as a method for simultaneous representation of both personal and social conditions, as was done previously by Clandinin (2006). They discussed personal conditions in the context of social conditions to describe life events. Blended families experience many events that have led them to the current union. Tactful inquiry, open to respondent’s directions and feelings, allows for elicitation of their subjective experiences.

5. Participant Selection

5.1. Participants

The current study involved in-depth, semi-structured face-to-face interviews with thirteen parents of a blended or step family along with a demographic questionnaire. Names were changed in the narratives to protect confidentiality. The names of seven participants were changed in accordance with standard qualitative research guidelines (Creswell, 2009). The researcher assigned a code for each participant, ranging from P1 to P13.

5.2. Summary of Demographics

Thirteen participants consented to be interviewed for this study. The current study focused only on blended families or stepfamilies therefore and all of the participants were involved in a family unit that met these criteria. Participants’ ages ranged from 30 years old to 69 years old, and 38% of interviewees fell in the range of 30 years old to 39 years old. Of the 13 participants, 9 were female and 4 were male. The interviewees ethnic identities were: Caucasian, African-American, Asian, and Latino/Latina; 46% of the interviewees were Caucasian. All thirteen interviewees identified as a biological parent in a blended family unit or a step-parent to a child in the family unit. Interviewees represented some of the religious categories included in questionnaire, whereby the categories were: Buddhism, Catholic/Christian, Islam, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, other religion and no religion. The interviewees identified the following religions from the categories listed above Catholic/Christian, Buddhism, Christian, or no religion. Specifically, 30% of the interviewees were Catholic/Christian, 30% Christian, 15% Buddhism, 15% no religion and 10% identified as Buddhist/Catholic/Christian. Educational attainment was assessed whereby 38% reported having completed a graduate degree, 30% reported having completed a four-year degree, 15% reported having completed a post-graduate degree, 10% reported having completed a two-year degree, and 10% reported having completed high school. Reported occupations were: banker, talent agent, registered nurse, administrator, paralegal, tennis coach, musician, yoga teacher, student, writer, of-
fice manager and physician.

For the current study, 70% of the interviewees were previously married and 30% were never been married. Length of previous marriages ranged from 4 years to 14 years. Not every interviewee had children from a previous relationship. The ages of the children ranged from 5 years old to 37 years old. The percentage of time a child spends with the interviewee’s family was recorded. The time spent with the identified parent ranged from 20% - 100% of the week. It is important to note that for the children who spent 100% of the time with the custodial parent there was still some contact with the non-custodial parent from time to time. The current study also elicited information about the other parent of the child and found that 40% of previous spouses had remarried, with time of remarriage ranging from 10 days to 4 years. Children were present in these homes 54% of the time and the ages of the children ranged from 6 years old to 19 years old. Interview questions also addressed whether or not the current family unit cohabitated with their current spouse/partner before marriage; 53% of the interviewees had cohabitated before blending their current family unit. Children’s ages at the time of cohabitation/marriage ranged from 2 years old to 17 years old. Current family members in the household of interviewees reported having: no additional family members in the household, stepchildren in the household, biological children in the household or extended family members in the household.

6. Data Analysis Findings

The goal was to describe the participants’ subjective experiences and views.

The first level of identification was performed during the initial review of each interview transcript. The resulting theme difficulties and its subthemes are described below.

The theme of difficulty was identified from the coding process and further classified into subthemes. The findings for the research questions are summarized with brief quotes that exemplify the themes or subthemes. Table 1 shows the frequency of difficulty as a theme appeared across interviews.

Table: Difficulties. Interviewees referenced common difficulties of transitions between custodial and non-custodial parent’s homes. Subthemes were disconnect, age of kids, and different households.

Subtheme 1: Disconnect. The primary subtheme was disconnect. Interviewees reported feeling disconnected with their stepchildren. It was mentioned 17 times.

Table 1. Frequency of themes for research questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme and Subthemes</th>
<th>N Mentioning</th>
<th>Exemplar Quotes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difficulties</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disconnect</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of kids</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different households</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
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</table>
in three interviews. Participant 5 described the feelings she had towards her stepchildren, saying

“It was really hard. I mean there were many times that it was on the edge of disdain, which is a terrible feeling to have about the children that you love.”

Participant 9 expressed a preference for spending time when her stepchild is not at home, saying, “And it’s kind of horrible but I prefer it. I love my stepdaughter, but I prefer it... because she brings part of her mother into the equation.”

Participant 7 actively sought out ways to spend as little time with her stepchildren as possible sharing:

“I would just make plans to do other things. You know go hang out with my mom, my friends, whatever, work late um, just because of how they behaved and I think that the attachment they were starting to get to me seemed... it just was different to me and I wasn’t... I didn’t really like it.”

Participant 7 added, “They’re not my children, they not reflective at all of who I am.”

Subtheme 2: Age of kids. The second subtheme of difficulties involved older children. Interviewees referenced difficulties associated with transitioning older children into a blended family, as well as difficulties of children going through their pre-teens and teen years. Some participants recognized that the behavioral changes during the preteen years may just be part of growing up and not necessarily a result of divorce and blended families.

This subtheme was mentioned fifteen times in eight interviews. While Participant 2 described a good blended family situation, she added:

“Everything has shifted in the last year. So, it is like all of my answers have this caveat of that I have a teenager now, and so that has been a shift in that there is a lot of, I see her kind of pushing the rules.”

Participant 12 shared about her stepdaughter, stating:

“Between 11 and 13, she absolutely wanted nothing to do with us. She refused to come visit us, we would come and want to pick her up for visits and she did not want anything to do with us. She, at some point told us also that, she didn’t like coming to our house when the other kids were there because the attention was not on her.”

Participant 4 opined, “I feel really lucky, they were one and three. I know it would be a completely different story if I got them at eight and ten.” Participant 7 added, “… You know, other people’s 8 and 10-year-olds, I’m not that interested.”

Subtheme 3: Different households. The third subtheme of difficulties was different across households. Interviewees referenced difficulties associated with two households involving both parents and children. It was mentioned eight times in four interviews. Participant 5 described having similar household rules with her ex-husband, saying:
“As they have gotten older we don’t have to check in with each other as much. However, the rules are completely different for the children at their house and our house, so I feel that is much more difficult for them.”

Participant 10 shared, “And so it was this constant struggle with those things because there were two different households, two different sets of rules, two sets of what’s important.” Participant 7 said,

“I feel like the kids really should feel comfortable no matter where they are and it would be better if parents could agree on rules and other things and keep them consistent, but realistically it is not going to happen.”

7. Conclusion

In summary, the researcher thoroughly read the transcripts and mined them for emergent themes. Each transcript was read numerous times before moving on to the next transcript. Through this method of data analysis, the researcher was able to bring forth each participant’s voice on the themes highlighted above. The main research question was: Are different processes involved when moving from a custodial parent’s home to a non-custodial parent’s home and vice-versa? A primary theme was difficulties.

7.1. Overall Findings

Difficulties were a theme elicited from the data analysis. Disconnect, age of children and different households were subthemes of the theme, difficulties.

Difficulty and disconnect. Interviewees referenced common difficulties of transitions between custodial and non-custodial parents’ homes. Further exploration of the primary theme, difficulty, elucidated subthemes of disconnection, age of children, and different households. Interviewees remarked 17 times in three individual interviews that there was a disconnection with stepchildren. One interviewee remarked that disconnections were brought in by the child merely having the biological equation of the other parent thus creating a disconnect. Another interviewee revealed there were times when feelings of disdain were present and she felt bad about that because she did love her stepchildren. There were times that interviewees actively sought out disconnection by being involved in other tasks to avoid connecting with their stepchildren.

Difficulty and age of children. The second subtheme of difficulty involved older kids. Interviewees referenced the difficulties associated with transitioning older kids into a blended family. Some interviewees recognized that the behavioral changes during the preteens may just be part of growing up and not necessarily the result of divorce and of blended families. The subtheme was mentioned fifteen times in eight interviews. An interviewee shared that she attributes some of the behaviors of her older stepchild to stereotypical teenage behavior such as pushing limits. The realization that a stepchild is an age appropriate teenager created a better blended family atmosphere for her. Other older stepchildren were described by their stepparents as wanting nothing to do with them. It
was also discovered that older children struggled because there were other children in the house, reducing attention for that stepchild. Other interviewees remarked that they felt lucky because they had been in the picture since the children were very young. They indicated that they probably would not have been as interested in their stepchildren had they been older when the blended family was created.

**Difficulty and different households.** The third subtheme of difficulty was difficulties associated with living in different households. Interviewees referenced difficulties for parents and children associated with dealing with two households. It was mentioned eight times in four interviews. One of the greatest challenges interviewees faced was the existence of different rules for the different households. Some participants remarked that as their children aged they did not have to check-in with them as often. Still there were difficulties that children experienced due to the changing rules between households. One interviewee remarked that agreement of rules between the two households was not possible, and that participant acknowledged that it would be preferable if the rules were similar.

### 7.2. Discussion of Findings/Conclusion

This study was intended to explore and develop a fundamental understanding of transitional days in stepfamilies. The main research question was: Are different processes involved when moving from a custodial parent’s home to a non-custodial parent’s home and *vice-versa*? Participants described difficulties. Qualitative software (Atlas.ti) was used to further capture the voice of the interviewee.

Through interviews, valuable information for individuals who are involved in a stepfamily/blended family environment was explored. The results of the current study yielded the theme: difficulties.

The participants of the current study had diversity with respect to age, gender, marital status, ethnicity, parental status (bio-step), religion, educational attainment, occupational diversity, previous marital statuses and custody arrangements, marriage or the partnership with their current mate was also collected. For the current study, 70% of the interviewees had been previously married and 30% had never been married. Length of previous marriages ranged from four years to 14 years. Not every interviewee had children from a previous relationship. For the interviewees who did have children from a previous marriage, the children’s ages ranged from five to 37 years old.

This researchers’ objective was to identify the difficulties of transition days in blended families and relate their stories to emergent themes found in the data of the thirteen interviews.

The theme difficulties call to mind the disconnection and reassembly of the family system.

Conflict theory highlights how harmony in blended and stepfamilies can exist. When applied to the family, conflict theory assumes that members of a family unit will differ in preferences, interests and motivations. In the current study,
most families interviewed differed in these respects. Conflict within the interviewed families was also in the form of age and gender differences. Conflict theory, when applied to the family assumes solutions can be agreed upon by all family members. In the current study, easing conflict in days of transition through specific approaches, as discussed below, varied between families. Compromising by parents facilitated harmony in finding common ground to negotiate consensus in the family unit resulting in less role strain among the family members.

Among the primary challenges identified by the 13 families in the current study, was the children’s sibling role change. Age of the child in this sense became secondary to the child’s position in family when new families were reconstituted. There is little or no research regarding the effects of long term role change in literature today. However, we can speculate that because kids of divorce seem to have an easier time in adjusting to new situations after they leave the household (i.e., College, military), it can be presume that these children benefited from having to take on different roles in different households. This is the most positive aspect of the change in households. On the other hand, it is equally reasonable to assume that children who may have experienced a favored role (i.e., the eldest child in a household) when placed in a new household, may experience loss of status, power, and authority. While this research did not address this directly, it is presumed that parental intervention would be the primary mediating factor during this kind of role change. Attitudes of parents toward the children and recognition of their previous role and new role is crucial in being able to assuage the emotional experience of a child who has lost their status.

Conflict theory argues that there is no reason for a family member to oppose harmony (Sprey, 1969). The current study explored this issue and determined that most families tried to create space for the children in the family by debriefing those children during days of transition. The researcher of the current study discussed stage theory. The current study supports the notion that different stages may be present, static and not necessarily rigid or sequential for families during transitional days. Stepfamily or blended family members are typically in different stages and must find various ways to grow toward cohesiveness. In the current study, interviewees described creating such cohesiveness by establishing family routines such as eating dinner together on specific nights in order to create greater cohesion among the members of the family unit.

A final aspect under the theme of difficulties, which is similar to the change in roles theme, is the change in rules by which family systems operate. These rules exhibit both conscious and unconscious attitudes that manifest in a variety of behaviors. Conscious decisions such as bedtimes, chore duties, and discipline, are among the clearest examples of rule setting. These conscious rules must be navigated by children during transitional days. Unconscious rules such as attitudes toward education, feelings about the other parent, ways in which to get the parent’s attention, and respect, are not clearly formatted within families and are oftentimes overlooked when parents talk about difficulties. While one child may
be acting out because one parent is assigning the homework to be completed in a certain way, the underlying concern may be a power battle between the parent and the child (whether step or biological parent), which that child does not encounter in the other household. In this scenario, parents may misidentify a child’s behavior as not wanting to follow through with rules or as being rebellious, when in fact child may be attempting to engage support from parents in a way that works in the other family unit. From the child's perspective, what works for one parent may not work for another.

In summary, the primary difficulties observed during transition days involved disconnection and reassembly of a family system; an adjustment by the child to a new role and therefore, a new family position or status; and adjustment of parents and the child to as structure that is congruent with a stable family system. All of these aspects create and necessitate a change in the status quo. Change can be stressful and chaotic and thus parents have the obligation to mediate how this change is experienced. This is achieved primarily through the attitudes and behaviors of the parents. The next section will examine how parents manage the transitions, which was the second most common theme in the current study.

Individual and coping theories were also discussed. Those theories are applicable to interviewees’ reflections of behaviors during transitional days. McCubbin, Cauble, & Patterson (1982) argued that a stepfamily’s ability to adapt to the needs of individual family members often requires changes in roles, rules, interactional patterns and perceptions.

8. Limitations of the Current Study

As in all research studies, there were unavoidable limitations. The first limitation is that different interpretations of the material were possible. This subjectivity could have led to the second limitation, which is generalizability of results. The current study sought out 13 individuals who were in various stages of transition in family unit structure. Arguably the subjective nature of the current study minimizes generalizability to a larger population. Third, my personal biases may have influenced the participant’s responses. The fourth limitation is the shifting demographics and backgrounds of the interviewee’s. Questions for the current study varied in interpretation for the interviewees, who varied in cultural backgrounds, age, education attainment and race.

With the aforementioned limitations acknowledged, the narratives were analyzed to elucidate themes from the narratives as expressed by the interviewees. Notably, there were strengths and weaknesses of the narrative approach used in this study.

8.1. Strengths and Weaknesses of Narrative Inquiry Interviewing

Strengths of narrative inquiry include possible benefits to the research participants in the form of a greater understanding of the power dynamics (whether social, cultural, political or historical) that can play out during family transitions. Application of meaning elucidated in the current research study revealed the
quality of relationship dynamics that typical research methods cannot deliver. Experientially, strengths of narrative inquiry toward cultural contexts constructed an even greater cross-section among disciplines, marriage and family therapy, epistemologies and other theoretical commitments.

Weaknesses of narrative inquiry involved unreasonable expectations during the interview. An example of unreasonable expectations is when a participant makes assumptions about the knowledge the researcher has on the topic. Also, interviewees may realize that he or she is not the first to be interviewed, and this may lead them alter their narratives (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000).

Interpretation of data through narrative inquiry and theme analysis is based on the assumption that the interviewee has given a truthful account of events. However this may not be the case as interviewees may have had a hidden agendas, rendering non-authentic information to the interviewer.

8.2. Advice for Current Future Stepfamily/Blended Family Members

Difficulties during days of transition are largely related to feelings. The feelings of children are often overwhelming and they are unable to communicate their feelings to their loved ones. Being thoughtful in one’s approach to children during days of transition takes work. Allowing a child the emotional room and physical time to adjust to their current surroundings allows for stronger connections among the family. Difficulties abound in stepfamily family relationships because they began with a loss. That is, through the loss of the ideal family, families are required to navigate unchartered waters, which require exploration of thoughts and feelings, and more importantly dealing with the grief and loss that comes from the changes associated with a separation.

Transition day for parents, requires the self-acknowledgement of the parent that “normal” on days of transition may fluctuate and this requires flexibility and patience on the part of the parent. Emotions run strong on days of transition. Children may be anxious, withdrawn, push boundaries, or react with far greater intensity on the first day of re-entry or day of exit than family members experience during the other days of visitation. It is incredibly important to be patient with one’s child or step-child on this day. Oftentimes, as children get older, transitions become more routine. Giving a child room to re-center themselves in their “new” surroundings is essential for smooth transition days.

References


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TURNING POINTS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF BLENDED FAMILIES

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ABSTRACT

A modified retrospective interview technique (RIT) was employed with members of 53 blended families to determine the types of turning points they reported experiencing and the developmental trajectories of their respective blended family’s first 4 years. Findings revealed 15 primary types of turning points, of which ‘Changes in Household Configuration’, ‘Conflict’, ‘Holidays/Special Events’, ‘Quality Time’ and ‘Family Crisis’ were the most frequent. A cluster analysis revealed five basic trajectories of development for the first 48 months of family development: Accelerated, Prolonged, Stagnating, Declining and High-amplitude Turbulent. The trajectories differed in the overall positive-to-negative valence ratio, the frequency of conflict related events, the average amplitude of change in feeling like a family, and the current reported level of feeling like a family.

KEY WORDS • blended family development • developmental pathways • stepfamily • turning points

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The blended family, or stepfamily, is a pervasive social unit in the American social landscape. According to Glick (1989), about one-third of Americans are now members of a blended family, including an estimated 10 million children under the age of 18 (Furukawa, 1994). If current divorce and remarriage rates continue, approximately 35 percent of American children will be part of a blended family before they turn 18 years old (Glick, 1989). Despite the prevalence of this family form, research on the blended family is relatively recent, largely concentrated in the past two decades. The bulk of this research activity reflects what Ganong and Coleman (1994) describe as a ‘deficit-comparison approach’, in which the ideology of the nuclear family constitutes the dominant theoretical framework against which the blended family is found deficient and problematic. Only limited work has taken the blended family on its own terms (e.g. Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990). Furthermore, research on the blended family provides only limited insight into matters of process (Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Ihinger-Tallman, 1988). The current study considers blended families on their own terms, examining the major turning points that are retrospectively viewed by blended family members as important in the early development of their respective families and the basic developmental trajectories in which these turning points are embedded. Throughout the article, we use the term ‘blended family’ to highlight our emphasis on the process of integration or reorganization that characterizes the development of this family form, in contrast to more perjorative labels such as ‘stepfamily’, ‘reconstituted family’, ‘reconstructed family’, or ‘second chance family’ (Ganong, Coleman, & Kennedy, 1990; Preston, 1984).

Some scholarship has addressed the processes of development that characterize the formation of a blended family (McGoldrick & Carter, 1989; Papernow, 1993; Ransom, Schlesinger, & Derdeyn, 1979; Rodgers & Conrad, 1986; Whiteside, 1982). For the most part, however, this work is prescriptive and not descriptive in nature, proposing what blended family members could or should do to become successful from the researcher’s point of view (Coleman & Ganong, 1995; Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Coming from a clinical tradition, these models have not been subject to careful scientific study (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Based on his clinical work, Mills (1984), for example, argued that developing blended families should avoid modeling themselves after a nuclear family model, especially efforts to duplicate the parent-child bond in the stepparent-stepchild relationship. Visher and Visher (1978) have also posited a clinically based model of psychological and behavioral tasks (e.g. establishing new family rituals and traditions) that must be accomplished in the formation of a new identity as a blended family. McGoldrick and Carter’s model (1989), based on an earlier clinical model by Ransom and colleagues (1979), posited a series of prerequisite emotional tasks that must be resolved before a blended family can develop successfully. For example, adults must resolve any residual attachment to their former spouse. The majority of these tasks is concentrated in the period prior to remarriage. Others have similarly
focused prescriptively on the divorce-courtship-remarriage period (e.g. Rodgers & Conrad, 1986; Whiteside, 1982).

Perhaps the most detailed model of blended family development is Papernow’s (1993) stage model of blended family development. Based on interviews with clinical and non-clinical blended family members, Papernow advanced seven stages of development: (i) the fantasy stage, in which members hold unrealistic, idealized expectations; (ii) the immersion stage, in which members are confronted with the daily challenges of blended family life and expectations are shattered; (iii) the awareness stage, in which family members attempt to make psychological sense of their confusion; (iv) the mobilization stage, a highly conflictual stage in which feelings are expressed and initial efforts at negotiation and resolution are attempted; (v) the action stage, in which members establish new agreements, thereby putting in place a solid base upon which to build; (vi) the contact stage, in which positive emotional bonds form between and among various members; and (vii) the resolution stage, which finds a solid and stable family unit in place. According to Papernow, unsuccessful blended families do not get beyond stage four in their development. Despite the caveat that ‘stages of stepfamily development do not happen neatly and precisely’, Papernow (1993, p. 17) nonetheless posits the stepfamily cycle model as a framework that holds relevance for all blended families as they ‘make sense out of the challenges of remarried family life’.

Although Papernow’s (1993) seven-stage model reflects the opinions and experiences of blended family members, rather than the exclusive perspective of the clinician, it is still quite prescriptive in nature. Prescriptive models of development hold obvious value for blended families that are experiencing difficulty, but they do not inform us descriptively about the developmental processes from the insider perspective of the blended family members themselves.

In general, stage-based models of close relationship development have been subject to substantial criticism (for reviews, see Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Cate & Lloyd, 1992); these criticisms appear relevant to blended family stage models, such as that proposed by Papernow (1993). First, such models presume that a single sequence of stages captures the experience of all developing relationships and de-emphasize the possibility of multiple developmental trajectories. Second, such models are predicated on an underlying assumption of linear progress. Developing relationships are presumed to advance sequentially and progressively from less closeness–attachment–bonding to more. Alternatively, relationship development may have more up-and-down movement to it and thus may better be described in non-linear ways. Third, stage-based models present relationship development as a series of sequential ‘plateaus’ that somehow are punctuated by transitions from one stage/plateau to another. Unexplained in such models are the forces or factors that move a relationship from one stage/plateau to another. Further, a stage–plateau model emphasizes the long periods of stability while a relationship is in a given stage/plateau, de-emphasizing the times of change. Relationship development may be
characterized by greater fluctuation and turbulence than what is presumed in stage-based models. Fourth, stages often have overlapping characteristics that result in fuzzy boundaries between one stage and another; therefore, the ‘stage’ may be a less fruitful unit of analysis because of its conceptual murkiness. Perhaps not surprisingly, at least in the context of dyadic relationship development, stage-based models have not fared well empirically (Cate & Lloyd, 1992).

The ‘turning point’ offers a conceptual alternative to the ‘stage’, one that is free from the criticisms mounted against stage-based models of relationship development. Originally conceived by Bolton (1961), a ‘turning point’ refers to a transformative event that alters a relationship in some important way, either positively or negatively. Put simply, turning points are the sites of developmental change in relationships. Considerable research has been conducted on developmental turning points within the context of romantic and pre-marital pairs (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Bullis, Clark, & Sline, 1993; Cate, Huston, & Nesselroade, 1986; Huston, Surra, Fitzgerald, & Cate, 1981; Surra, 1985, 1987; Surra & Hughes, 1997). Taken collectively, this body of work has emphasized a variety of topics related to turning points, including the types of events that constitute turning points, the valence of various event types, the attributed causes of turning point change, the sequenced patterning of turning points, and the correlation of turning points with such outcome indicators as relational commitment and satisfaction.

In general terms, four broad categories of turning point events can be identified in romantic relationships (Surra & Huston, 1987): (i) intrapersonal/normative, those turning points in which ‘the self, the partner, or the relationships is evaluated against some ideal or normative standard’ (p. 104), (ii) dyadic, those turning points centered in interaction between the two romantic partners, (iii) social network, those turning points involving in some way third parties from the members’ social networks, and (iv) circumstantial, those turning points located in forces external to the parties and their relationship over which little control is exerted. Although the particular turning points of blended family development may be different from those found to characterize the growth of romantic dyads, the turning point offers a useful conceptual alternative to the family stage model as a lens by which to gain insight into family members’ perceptions of their development.

The sequencing of turning points into trajectories, or pathways, of relationship development also has received scholarly attention. In the context of courtship, four basic trajectories have been identified (Cate et al., 1986; Surra, 1985): (i) an accelerated type in which a pair moves quickly and smoothly to marital commitment; (ii) an accelerated-arrested type, in which a pair moves quickly to a high level of commitment and then loses momentum; (iii) an intermediate type, characterized by a somewhat turbulent and slow ascent to high commitment levels; and (iv) a prolonged type, in which courtship pairs progress in a relatively turbulent and slow manner toward commitment. Of course, the several trajectories of courtship development may differ significantly in form from the developmental paths that might characterize blended families.
Research questions

R Q 1: What are the primary types of events that are perceived as turning points in the first 48 months of blended family development?

Our primary research question simply seeks a profile of the phenomena that members of blended families retrospectively perceive to have been turning points in the development of their family. What are the reported transformative events that quantitatively and qualitatively changed blended family members’ sense of their blended family? We have selected the early developmental period of the first 48 months based on existing research that suggests blended families ‘make or break’ by the 4th year (Furstenberg, 1987; Mills, 1984; Papernow, 1993; Visher & Visher, 1978, 1979). However, unlike much prior research, we do not start our developmental calendar with the date of remarriage. We agree with Ganong and Coleman (1994) that the date of remarriage is unnecessarily restrictive for two reasons. First, some de facto blended families never involve a legal marriage of the adults. Second, many remarried spouses have lived together first, thus affording family members any number of bonding opportunities prior to the date of remarriage. Further, some blended families may experience bonding events that precede cohabitation.

The blended family research is suggestive of several candidates for reported turning point types. If the prescriptive models of development are valid, then the several emotional and psychological tasks that need to be accomplished by blended families may be perceived as positive turning points when successfully achieved. Relatedly, failure to accomplish a given developmental task may surface as a reported negative turning point in a recalled developmental history. Thus, such tasks as ‘working through the disappointment of unmet expectations’, ‘working through relationships with the non-residential parent’, ‘working through children’s reaction to parental remarriage’, ‘constructing the stepparent-stepchild relationship’, ‘developing a solid marital couple bond,’ ‘establishing new family traditions’ and so on may be implicated in the perceived turning points of development for blended families (McGoldrick & Carter, 1989; Papernow, 1993; Schwebel, Fine, & Renner, 1991; Visher & Visher, 1990). However, such tasks, at least as they have been articulated in extant work, tend to be presented in a highly abstract manner in which the researcher viewpoint is emphasized. Our interest in turning points is closer to the ground (Geertz, 1973) in that we seek to profile events that are more specific and concrete. For example, precisely what reported events transpire in such tasks as ‘constructing the stepparent-stepchild relationship’ or ‘developing a solid marital couple bond’? Our approach also privileges the perspective of blended family members instead of that of the researcher. We seek to understand the insiders’ perspective regarding the hows and whys of developmental change in blended families.

R Q 2: What are the primary trajectories of development for blended families?
The second research question shifts our attention from description of turning point event types to the issues of turning point amplitude and sequencing. Just as the romantic relationship development research suggests that couples take different paths toward commitment, we suspect that blended families also take different paths in forming their sense of family identity. Some blended families may be reported to accelerate quickly toward family bonding, whereas others may report progressing more slowly and gradually. Still other blended families may have relatively high degrees of turbulence in their development, that is, up-and-down fluctuation from turning point to turning point. Papernow (1993) loosely differentiated four developmental types that imply multiple pathways of development varying in their rate of bonding: ‘fast families’, which move quickly through all seven stages of the stepfamily cycle in 4 years; ‘average families’, which are intermediate in their rate of progress; ‘slower paced families’, which are slower than the intermediate families; and ‘stuck families’, which apparently fail to progress in any meaningful way. To date, however, no empirical test has been made of these or alternative trajectories, or pathways, of development from the insiders’ point of view.

RQ3: Does current level of reported family bonding correlate with the trajectory of blended family development?

The third, and final, research question examines whether the multiple trajectories explored in the second research question differ in their outcome, as measured by current reported sense of family identity. If, in fact, the fate of a blended family is more or less ‘sealed’ in the first 4 years, as Papernow (1993) and others have suggested, then one might reasonably expect a retrospective snapshot of early family development to correlate with current sentiment toward the blended family on the part of family members.

Methods

Participants

We sought voluntary participants through several means, including announcements of the study in university classes and offices in the USA at both a small Southwestern university and a large Midwestern university, and snowballing referrals from early respondents. We interviewed one member from each of 53 blended families: five residential parents (i.e. parents whose biological or adoptive children lived with them as part of a blended family unit), 15 stepparents (i.e. husbands and wives whose spouses brought their biological or adoptive children to live with them in a blended family unit) and 33 stepchildren. At the time of the interview, the mean age of the interviewed (step)parents was 41 years, and the mean age of the interviewed stepchildren was 20 years. Although our interview focused only on the first 48 months of blended family history, our respondents were from blended families of varying lengths (M = 62 months; SD = 20 months), calibrated from the self-identified point of origin for the blended family until the time of the interview. The blended
families in our sample were quite complex, with almost endless combinations of adults, children, and other family and non-family members living together. Additionally, several of the families were in constant flux, with children and others moving in and out of the residence of the blended family household and some children spending equal amounts of times in two households. In general terms, however, five of the families were simple stepfather families (a mother who brought her children into the remarriage), three were simple stepmother families (a father who brought his children into the remarriage), 44 were complex families (both adults brought prior children with them to the remarriage) and one was a de facto family unit (a woman with children formed a long-term partnership with a man). Thirteen percent of the couples also had biological children together.

**Procedures**

Faculty and student research teams were formed at the universities of the first and second authors. Student interviewers participated in training sessions with the interview protocol until the principal investigators and the interviewers themselves felt they were ready to collect data.

Respondents participated in an in-depth interview that was between 90 and 150 minutes in length. They first completed a modified genogram of their family relationships and provided demographic information. Next, respondents participated in a modification of the retrospective interview technique (RIT), a frequently employed method in the study of turning points (Huston et al., 1981). Miell (1984) found that people were remarkably accurate in their recall of turning point phenomena, thus lending some validity to the technique. In general, the RIT asks a participant to identify and plot on a graph all of the turning points in the development of his or her relationship; the abscissa axis of the graph marks time in monthly intervals and the ordinate axis reflects some index of relationship commitment or closeness, most commonly in percentage points from 0 to 100 percent. At each identified turning point, the interviewer probes for elaboration about that particular point.

One basic modification of the basic RIT procedure was employed in the current study, consistent with some prior turning point research (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Bullis, Clark, & Sline, 1993). Specifically, we conceived of a turning point as a singular event rather than the entire period of time between two plotted points. For the current study, the ordinate axis consisted of a 0–100 percent estimate of ‘feeling like a family’ (FLF). In particular, the respondent was asked to base his or her FLF judgment on both his or her own feelings and what he or she believed other blended family members felt. In an open-ended manner, we asked each respondent to elaborate on what 0 and 100 percent ‘feeling like a family’ meant to them. Overwhelmingly, respondents used one or more of the following words in describing what ‘100 percent FLF’ meant to them: ‘support’, ‘openness’, ‘comfort’, ‘caring’ and ‘sharing’; 0 percent FLF was characterized by the perceived absence of these qualities. The abscissa axis consisted of 48-monthly intervals, given our focus on the first 4 years of the family’s developmental life cycle. The starting month was self-identified by the respondent; the interviewer prompted the respondent to recall the first time that FLF was greater than 0 percent, and this served as the origin point for the abscissa axis. The respondent was then asked his or her judgment of the family’s current FLF level.

After calibrating the x- and y-axes of the graph, each respondent was asked
each step, the two clusters that merged were those that resulted in the smallest increase in the overall sum of the squared within cluster distances.

**Results**

Table 1 presents the results of our analysis responsive to the first research question, a frequency distribution of the reported turning point event types for the sample as a whole, as well as supplementary information about the perceived positive or negative FLF changes associated with those types. The most frequently reported type of turning point event was ‘Changes in Household/Family Composition’. This supratype consisted of a variety of subevents including: cohabitation of the adults, events surrounding the engagement and marriage of the adults, events associated with the birth of a child to the remarried couple, events associated with grandparent status for the remarried couple, children/stepchildren visiting the non-resident or resident parent, and children/stepchildren moving in or out of the blended family household. Of these subevents, the most frequent were children/stepchildren moving in/out of the blended family household (36.6% of all instances) and marriage related events for the adults (29% of all instances). In approximately two-thirds of reported changes in household/family composition, the turning point was perceived to impact FLF positively. In about one-third of reported instances, concentrated in children/stepchildren moves, this turning point was perceived to impact FLF in a negative manner.

The second most frequent event type was ‘Conflict or Disagreement’. Overall, about 95 percent of all reported instances of this turning point type were regarded as negative in their effect on feeling like a family. A total of 31 percent of the conflicts were reported to be between stepparents and stepchildren. An additional 27 percent of the conflict events were reported to be between the married adult spouses.

Relatedly, 5.1 percent of all turning points were ‘Reconciliation or Problem-solving’ events. Such reconciliation events are predicated on prior conflict and disagreement; in framing events as reconciliation, respondents simply elected to situate the significance of the event in a positive outcome. About three-fourths of the time, reconciliation/problem-solving events were reported to have a positive impact on feeling like a family. Thus, whether through the direct reference of ‘Conflict or Disagreement’ or the indirect reference of ‘Reconciliation/Problem-solving’, conflict-related events were very salient in our respondents’ recollected developmental histories.

‘Holidays and Special Events’ were the third most frequently reported event type. Thanksgiving and Christmas holiday celebrations were particularly important to our respondents, but such special events as birthdays and graduations also held significance. Holidays and special events were reported to impact FLF in a positive manner approximately two-thirds of the time.

‘Quality Time’ emerged as the fourth most frequently reported event type. This supratype involved high quality time spent between participants, including such phenomena as private time away from others, family vacations, non-problem-oriented relationship talks, participation in leisure activities together and so forth. Although the majority of ‘Quality Time’ events were reported to involve all family members, a significant percentage of events in this category were recollected experiences between stepparent and stepchild (30% of all
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turning point event types</th>
<th>Overall frequency</th>
<th>% of total TPs</th>
<th>% of respondents reporting at least one instance</th>
<th>% of total TPs reported with positive FLF change</th>
<th>% of total TPs reported with negative FLF change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Changes in household/family composition</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>94.3</td>
<td>65.5 (M = 27.4; SD = 23.3)</td>
<td>34.5 (M = -15.7; SD = 17.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Conflict or disagreement</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>71.7</td>
<td>4.8 (M = 20.0; SD = 20.0)</td>
<td>95.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Holidays or special celebrations</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>66.6</td>
<td>67.1 (M = 20.1; SD = 18.1)</td>
<td>32.9 (M = -9.2; SD = 11.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Quality time</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>64.2</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Family crisis</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>72.0 (M = 18.1; SD = 16.2)</td>
<td>28.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Reconciliation/problem-solving</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>41.5</td>
<td>75.9 (M = 24.9; SD = 19.4)</td>
<td>24.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Relocation or geographical move for household</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>39.6</td>
<td>68.0 (M = 27.0; SD = 22.9)</td>
<td>32.0 (M = -14.0; SD = 16.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Prosocial actions</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Unmet expectations or disappointment</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>11.8 (M = 19.9; SD = 23.6)</td>
<td>88.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Social network related</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>76.9 (M = 7.5; SD = 3.5)</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Change in employment for adults</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>60.0 (M = 23.8; SD = 21.8)</td>
<td>40.0 (M = -41.6; SD = 48.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Life changes for ex-spouse/non-residential parent</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>50.0 (M = 20.0; SD = 12.6)</td>
<td>50.0 (M = -37.5; SD = 16.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Negative intrapsychic change</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.7</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>0.0 (M = 18.7; SD = 14.3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Breakup/divorce of remarriage</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.7</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>0.0 (M = -10.0; SD = 10.0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Positive intrapsychic change</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>100.0 (M = 25.0; SD = 35.4)</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
instances). Not surprisingly, given the positive nature of this turning point event type, respondents reported that Quality Time had a positive impact on FLF in 100 percent of reported instances.

‘Family Crisis’ events were the fifth most frequently reported event type. Typically involving illnesses, deaths, accidents, or major financial disasters, these events were positive in their effect on FLF in 72 percent of all reported instances; in these instances, blended family members reported that they were brought closer together by the crisis, whether the effect was short- or long-lived.

Other turning points were dispersed among remaining event types. ‘Relocation or Geographical Move’ involved a change in the location of the blended family household, either to a different house in the same area or to a different city or state. Relocation was a positive step for the blended family in about two-thirds of these instances, helping to forge a new identity as a family unit. In the remaining instances, however, relocation was resented and problematic especially as family members were uprooted from schools, neighborhoods, and for stepchildren, access to the non-resident parent.

‘Prosocial Actions’ referenced giftgiving, friendly gestures, or acts of kindness on the part of some family member(s). A total of 68 percent of the events in this category were reported to take place between stepparents and stepchildren. Such actions stood out from the ordinary in some way that affected positively the sense of familyness. For example, one respondent told us that her stepparent had contributed her monthly child support payment in the name of her non-residential parent for a period of time, keeping secret that the non-residential parent had reneged on this financial responsibility. To our respondent, this gesture represented an extraordinary act of kindness and generosity that transformed the blended family’s sense of unity.

‘Unmet Expectations or Disappointment’ were psychologically oriented events precipitated by the (in)actions of some family member(s) that were not manifested in conflict or other behavioral action. In large measure, disappointment resulted from unrealistic expectations about blended family life (i.e. ‘the Brady Bunch syndrome’). A total of 47 percent of these unmet expectation events were reported to involve stepparents and stepchildren. An additional 29 percent of unmet expectations were reported to involve marital partners. Not surprisingly, such events were negatively valenced in 88 percent of all reported instances.

‘Social Network’ events involved friends and relatives of the blended family, including grandparents, stepgrandparents and other extended (step)kin. These events were reported to affect FLF in a positive manner about three-fourths of the time. When these events were perceived to function positively, they were perceived as occasions in which the blended family and its constituent relationships were legitimated by outside friends and family members. When these events were regarded as negative, respondents reported that outsiders failed in some way to accept or legitimate the blended family, such as when relatives of a stepparent failed to accept stepchildren as part of the extended family.

‘Change in employment’ events involved major job related events for one or both of the adults of the blended family household, including job promotions, changes in career, returning to school, and periods of intense job related pressure. In 60 percent of reported instances, these events were positive, as when an adult received a job promotion that eased financial burdens for the
blended family household. Other times, the reported effect was less favorable, such as when an adult was fired or otherwise became unemployed.

‘Life Changes for the Ex-spouse/Non-residential Parent’ involved geographical relocation of the ex- or non-resident parent or changes in his or her household composition (e.g. remarriage, birth of a child). These events were equally likely to be positive or negative in their reported effect on feeling like a family. Whether positive or negative, such events were reported to affect the blended family through their effects on the children. For example, a parent who moved to a different state complicated a child’s easy movement between the residences of the two parents, and this was reported to result in increased resentment and bitterness toward his blended family. In a positive vein, the remarriage of a non-resident parent facilitated the regularization of visitations by a child, which was reported to promote a more positive outlook on the part of the child toward the blended family.

‘Negative Intrapsychic Changes’ and ‘Positive Intrapsychic Changes’ were psychological changes in attitude toward the blended family or some member(s) that were not provoked by any apparent external events. For example, one respondent told us that she ‘just decided one day’ that she didn’t want to be a part of the blended family arrangement.

Last, ‘Breakup/Divorce’ refers to the separation, breakup, or divorce of the remarried couple. This event was uniformly evaluated as negative in its effect on FLF. By the time blended families had reached this turning point, their FLF level was typically very low with little room left for further decline in FLF level.

To determine whether (step)parents (i.e. residential parents and stepparents) and stepchildren differed in the frequencies with which they reported turning point types, a chi-square analysis was conducted for all event types whose overall reported frequency was at least 10. Overall significance was obtained ($\chi^2 (10, n = 545) = 23.59; p < .01$). Following the partitioning strategy recommended by Siegel and Castellan (1988), this significance was attributable to the turning point type of change in employment status for the adults ($\chi^2 (1, n = 545) = 10.99; p < .05$) and network related turning points ($\chi^2 (1, n = 545) = 5.34; p < .05$). (Step)parents were more likely to report both events than were stepchildren. Overall, 4.2 percent of all events reported by (step)parents were changes in employment status, compared with .3 percent of all events reported by stepchildren. Overall, 4.2 percent of all events reported by (step)parents were related to the social network, compared with 1.2 percent of all events reported by stepchildren.

To determine whether (step)parents and stepchildren differed in the perceived valence they associated with the turning point types, a chi-square analysis was conducted on the distribution of those positively valenced turning points with reported frequencies of at least 10; because of small cell sizes, negatively valenced turning points were not examined. The overall chi-square was significant ($\chi^2 (7, n = 319) = 14.36; p < .05$); subsequent partitioning indicated that the significance was attributable to network related turning points ($\chi^2 (1, n = 319) = 5.50; p < .05$) and to relocations/geographical moves ($\chi^2 (1, n = 319) = 4.01; p < .05$). Overall, 6.2 percent of positively valenced turning points reported by (step)parents were network related, compared with 1.4 percent among stepchildren. Overall, 7.1 percent of positively valenced turning points reported by (step)parents involved relocations or moves, compared with 1.8 percent among stepchildren.
In answering the second research question, the rate of change in the amalgamation coefficients for the hierarchical cluster analysis suggested a best fit with the five cluster solution (Aldenderfer & Blashfield, 1984). Figure 1 displays the trajectory of a particular family judged to be typical of each of the five clusters. Table 2 presents summary information for each trajectory on the mean number of total turning points, the ratio of the number of positive to negative turning points, and the mean amplitude of the absolute values of turning point change in FLF. The five trajectories did not differ significantly on the total number of turning points reported in the 48-month period. Trajectories differed significantly in the ratio of the number of positive to negative turning points ($F(4, 46) = 3.37; p < .02$). LSD post-hoc comparisons indicated that the ratio for the Accelerated trajectory was significantly greater at the .05 level than the ratios for the Declining and High-amplitude Turbulent trajectories. Trajectories also differed significantly in the mean amplitude of absolute turning point change ($F(4, 46) = 3.88; p < .01$). LSD post-hoc comparisons indicated that the mean amplitude of change for the High-amplitude Turbulent trajectory was significantly greater at the .05 level than the amplitudes for the other trajectories.

The first trajectory, which represented 31.4 percent of the 51 analyzable cases, was labeled ‘Accelerated’ to reflect a pattern of relatively rapid movement toward 100 percent FLF. Blended families whose development was accelerated typically entered the graph at mid-range levels of FLF and progressed with positive turning points outnumbering negative turning points at a ratio of 3.65:1. The second cluster, labeled ‘Prolonged’, accounted for 27.5 percent of the analyzable cases. Like the ‘Accelerated’ trajectory type, the ‘Prolonged’ type progressed upwards in FLF, although at a slower rate than the ‘Accelerated’. Positive turning points outnumbered negative turning points at about a 3:1 ratio. The amplitude of turning points was somewhat higher for the ‘Prolonged’ trajectory type than for the ‘Accelerated’ type. Whereas these families in the ‘Accelerated’ type entered their development at a mid-range level of FLF, those in the ‘Prolonged’ type entered their development at a low level of FLF.

The third cluster type was labeled ‘Stagnating’. As the figure suggests, blended families whose development fit this pattern were characterized by relatively low levels of initial FLF, which more or less stayed low throughout the 48-month period. Turning points in this trajectory type were characterized by the lowest amplitude value. The 13.7 percent of cases grouped in this cluster basically did not ‘take off’; although positive turning points outnumbered

### TABLE 2

Means and standard deviations for total number of turning points (TPs), the ratio of the number of positive to negative turning points, and turning-point amplitude by trajectory type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trajectory type</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Total #TPs</th>
<th>± Ratio</th>
<th>TP amplitude</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Accelerated</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10.69 (3.50)</td>
<td>3.65 (2.90)</td>
<td>21.12 (9.45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Prolonged</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9.86 (4.05)</td>
<td>3.08 (1.23)</td>
<td>23.69 (10.90)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Stagnating</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11.00 (3.56)</td>
<td>2.05 (1.43)</td>
<td>18.13 (6.78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Declining</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9.67 (2.08)</td>
<td>.45 (.14)</td>
<td>21.29 (6.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. High-amplitude Turbulent</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11.82 (1.89)</td>
<td>1.66 (.67)</td>
<td>34.00 (11.94)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
negative turning points by a 2:1 ratio, the events were ineffectual in advancing FLF beyond modest levels.

Only 5.9 percent of the cases fit the pattern for the fourth cluster, which we labeled ‘Declining’. These developmental paths were characterized by a high level of FLF very early in the 48-month period, followed by a general decline over time. The ‘Declining’ trajectory type featured the lowest positive-to-negative ratio, with negative turning points outnumbering positive turning points at close to a 2:1 ratio.

The fifth cluster, labeled ‘High-amplitude Turbulent’, accounted for 21.6 percent of analyzable cases. This trajectory type was characterized by a roller coaster effect, with turning points that featured high amplitudes in change. Positive and negative turning points followed one another with rapid increases and rapid decreases in FLF levels.

Because respondents self-identified the starting points for their trajectories, it is possible that the trajectories could represent different sections of longer developmental pathways for the different clusters. To check this possibility, the five clusters were compared on the timing of the marriage event for the two adults. A one-way ANOVA was performed in which the dependent variable was the number of months from the beginning of the graph until the marriage event for the two adults. No significant difference emerged.

Table 3 presents a summary profile of the turning points that were embedded in each of the five trajectory types. Because of small cell sizes, a chi-square test comparing the five trajectories could be performed only on the five most frequently reported turning point event types. Overall significance was obtained ($\chi^2(16, n = 414) = 26.78; p < .05$). Follow-up partitioning tests indicated that the significance was largely attributable to the relatively low
proportion of conflict events in the Accelerated trajectory ($\chi^2 (1, n = 414) = 6.96; p < .05$) and the relatively high proportion of conflict events in the Declining trajectory ($\chi^2 (1, n = 414) = 7.86; p < .05$). Small cell sizes precluded a meaningful comparison of (step)parent and stepchild perceptions of reported trajectory type.

The fourth, and final, research question asked about outcome differences for different developmental paths. This question was examined in a one-way ANOVA, with trajectory type serving as the independent variable, and current reported level of FLF serving as the dependent variable. A significant effect was found ($F(4, 46) = 11.26, p < .0001$). Blended families whose development in the first 48 months was Accelerated featured the highest level of current FLF ($M = 93.1; SD = 9.29$), followed by the Prolonged trajectory type ($M = 74.6; SD = 27.52$) and the High-amplitude Turbulent trajectory ($M = 66.8; SD = 31.90$). The Declining trajectory was characterized by the lowest level of current FLF ($M = 0.00; SD = 0.00$), followed by the Stagnating trajectory ($M = 35.7; SD = 41.47$). LSD post-hoc comparisons revealed that the current level of FLF for the Declining trajectory was significantly lower than all other FLF levels at the .05 level. In addition, the FLF level for the Accelerated type was significantly higher than the levels reported for all trajectory types except the Prolonged type.

**Discussion**

This study complements existing work on the developmental life cycle of blended families by providing insights into those events that family members retrospectively perceived to transform their sense of feeling like a family. For our sample, the first 4 years of development were punctuated by 15 basic types of turning points, of which five were dominant in reported

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turning point event type</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Changes in household/family composition</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Conflict or disagreement</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Holidays or special celebrations</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Quality time</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Family crisis</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Reconciliation/problem-solving</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Relocation or geographical move for household</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Prosocial actions</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Unmet expectations or disappointment</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Social network related</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Change in employment for adults</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Life changes for ex-spouse/non-residential parent</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Negative intrapsychic change</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Breakup/divorce of remarriage</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Positive intrapsychic change</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
frequency: changes in household composition, conflict, the celebration of holidays and special events, quality time for family members, and family crises. Unlike the picture provided by many developmental models, blended families do not develop in a uniform way; our results point to five basic pathways of development. The five trajectories were more or less comparable in their turbulence, differing not in the number of overall turning points but in the mix of positive to negative events, the reported amplitude of change associated with these events, and the reported current level of feeling like a family. Conflict related events were the single most important discriminator among trajectory types.

The turning point events help us to identify the specific events, moments and experiences of blended family members that they viewed as significant in forging an identity as a new family. The most frequent turning point type, changes in household composition, suggests that blended families are experienced as structurally dynamic. Many of the reported structural changes reflected alteration in the legal status of the family, most notably the (re)marriage of the adults. Although some of our respondents initiated their RIT grids with the (re)marriage event, more typical was a developmental history in which another starting point of family identity, often cohabitation, preceded this event. The sequencing of events surrounding the remarriage underscores Ganong and Coleman’s (1994) observation that blended families often are perceived by insiders to begin prior to the formal remarriage event. This finding has implications for how researchers and professionals dealing with blended families conceptualize the early era of the life of these families. Starting analysis at the time of marriage is likely to miss salient premarital events.

Other reported structural changes reflect shifts in the membership of the blended family household. Blended families were regarded by family members as structurally fluid, with ongoing changes in household composition experienced when children visited the non-resident parent and moved in with (and moved out of) the blended family household. This fact, coupled with the complex configuration of blended family membership and households, represents a continual challenge to the development of these families and to the relationships between family members as they seek to adjust to blended family life (e.g. Duberman, 1975; Esses & Campbell, 1984; Fine, 1986; Ganong & Coleman, 1986, 1994; Kelley, 1992; Whisett & Land, 1992).

Although perceived changes in family composition can function negatively, our respondents retrospectively reported positive changes in feeling like a family in about two-thirds of their reported turning points. In general, the relatively high proportion of positive changes in household composition suggests that, for the most part, our blended family respondents adapted reasonably well to their dynamic circumstances. However, our sample may overrepresent successful blended families; persons from unsuccessful blended families may have been disproportionately hesitant to participate in our study and they may experience more difficulty in coping with changing household composition.
The frequency with which conflict related events were perceived in blended family development underscores the challenging nature of blended family life. Overwhelmingly, to our respondents, conflict was perceived as negative in its effects on feeling like a family. The frequency with which the stepparents and stepchildren were reported to engage in conflict also supports much of the research in which this relational subsystem is found to be a difficult one (e.g. Cissna et al., 1990; Ihinger-Tallman, 1988). A long with conflict between stepparents and stepchildren, our data show that the marital couple was perceived to be involved in substantial conflict, as well, which is consistent with existing research in which the marital couple has been found subject to substantial tension and stress (for a review, see Ganong & Coleman, 1994).

The celebration of holidays and special events is an opportunity for blended family members to build and sustain close emotional bonding (Visher & Visher, 1990). When that opportunity was realized in our respondents’ perceptions, the effect on feeling like a family was quite positive. For our respondents, however, the celebration of holidays and special events was experienced negatively in about one-third of the reported instances. For some blended families, holidays were reported as stressful and difficult, with conflicting obligations to multiple constituencies or positive recollections of lost times from the past. Scholars have recognized the importance of rituals to family life and have studied rituals as a way to understand family identity, relationships, beliefs and emotional health (e.g. Bossard & Boll, 1950; Imber-Black, Roberts, & Whiting, 1988; Reiss, 1981; Visher & Visher, 1990; Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Further research needs to examine how blended families can successfully forge new traditions and rituals of celebration.

Not surprisingly, quality time events were perceived as universally positive in their effects on feeling like a family. To outsiders, quality time may not appear to be anything special beyond living day-to-day life together. However, to insiders, quality times were special because they marked particular moments of bonding, whether achieved through watching a football game on TV or going shopping together. Meaningful togetherness seemed to be the key to our respondents’ perceptions of quality time events. Although the majority of reported togetherness events involved the whole family, a significant portion took place between the stepparent and the stepchildren. These quality times allowed the stepparent–stepchild relationship to become established in its own right, which in turn was perceived to contribute to positive feelings of familyness.

Family crises often were perceived to produce positive effects on a blended family’s identity as members came together in times of need. For some family members, especially some stepchildren, crises represented the first time that they recognized that other members of the ‘new’ family truly cared about them individually.

Unmet expectations/disappointments and intrapsychic changes (both positive and negative) were relatively infrequently reported turning points for our sample. This finding is somewhat surprising given the salience of
internal thoughts and feelings in existing models of blended family development. In focusing on the turning point as our unit of analysis, we may have shifted attention away from internal states to externally situated behaviors and events. Perceptions of actions and events both reflect and shape parties’ internal mental states. As such, the present study contributes another dimension to existing research on blended families, providing a starting place for future research. For example, researchers may fruitfully explore the perceived communication behaviors of family members that contribute to both positively and negatively valenced intrapsychic events in blended family development.

Although residential parents, stepparents and stepchildren occupy different positions in a blended family structure, we found relatively few perceptual differences when comparing parents (residential and step-) to stepchildren. However, two kinds of differences were identified in our sample. First, (step)parents were more likely than stepchildren to report network related events and changes in adult employment status. Because adults are positioned as the head of the family unit in the eyes of others, the (step)parents may have been subject to more interactions with social network members in which the legitimation of the family was at stake, thereby increasing the salience of these events for adults. Because (step) parents were more directly involved than children in employment changes, these events also may have been more salient to them. Second, (step)parents attached more positive valence to network-related events and to relocations and moves than did stepchildren. Adults and children may encounter different degrees of legitimation of their new blended family unit, with adults more likely to experience positive interaction. For example, the parents of an adult partner may affirm the new marriage and their new daughter-in-law or son-in-law, yet express more ambivalence about whether the children of that son- or daughter-in-law are their grandchildren (Schneider, 1980). (Step)parents also reported relocations and geographic moves to be more positive than did stepchildren. Whereas stepchildren may focus more on the uprooting side of relocation, with changes in schools and friends, (step)parents may focus more on the possibilities attached to a ‘fresh start’. Future research needs to interview multiple members from the same blended family in order to understand better perceptual differences that might be related systematically to the position one occupies in the structure of the family.

The blended families in our sample displayed five basic developmental trajectories or pathways in their first 48 months of development, based on month-to-month recollections of feeling like a family. The five trajectories differed significantly on the frequency of reported conflict related events. The declining trajectory featured the greatest likelihood of reported conflict events, an understandable finding given that conflict was strongly perceived as a negatively valenced turning point event and the declining trajectory was characterized by the lowest ratio of positive-to-negative turning points. Descriptively, the declining trajectory also featured a relatively high frequency of reported separation, breakup, or divorce of the
married couple. This trajectory also featured a relatively low reported frequency of the positively valenced turning points of quality time and prosocial actions. Although families characterized by decline entered their developmental trajectory with a strong sense of feeling like a family, this feeling could not be sustained. Blended families whose development was declining appeared to be caught in spiraling negativity with insufficient positively valenced experiences to arrest the deterioration in their feeling like a family.

By contrast, the accelerated trajectory, characterized by the greatest ratio of positive-to-negative events, unsurprisingly featured the lowest proportion of conflict events. Other negatively valenced events were also reported with relatively low frequency for this trajectory type, especially unmet expectations and separation, breakup or divorce of the marital couple. The positivity of the accelerating trajectory, in contrast to the negativity of the declining trajectory, was perhaps a function, as well, of the presence of quality time, reconciliation and prosocial actions in accelerated families. Blended families whose development was accelerated appeared to move rapidly and positively toward a sense of ‘100 percent familyness’.

The three trajectories of Stagnating, Prolonged and High-amplitude Turbulent were intermediate in their reported conflict events and intermediate in their ratios of positive-to-negative events. A part from reported conflict, the Prolonged trajectory appeared quite similar to the Accelerated trajectory in its distribution of event types. Unlike blended families in the Accelerated trajectory, however, blended families characterized by a prolonged development tended to start their developmental trajectory at a relatively lower point of felt familyness. The higher initial entry value for Accelerated families may have provided them with a bias toward attributing positivity to events more so than was the case for Prolonged families. Thus, for example, an event of the same type, such as changes in family composition, would be attributed more positive valence among Accelerated families as opposed to Prolonged families. Such a pattern would be consistent with much research in attribution in interpersonal relationships (e.g. Bradbury & Fincham, 1990).

The Stagnating trajectory was intermediate in reported conflict events but higher in other negatively valenced events (e.g. unmet expectations and separation, breakup or divorce) than the Prolonged trajectory. Like the Prolonged trajectory, the Stagnating trajectory was characterized by a relatively low initial level of feeling like a family. However, blended families caught in a stagnating pattern experienced too many negative and too few positive events to develop much sense of familyness. Further, families in the Stagnating trajectory reported the lowest amplitude of change for their turning points. Perhaps the relatively high proportion of changes in family composition prevented these families from establishing a coherent sense of their family boundaries.

The High-amplitude Turbulent trajectory was also intermediate in reported conflict events and intermediate in its ratio of positive-to-negative events. What distinguished the High-amplitude Turbulent trajectory were
the dramatic shifts in amplitude that were reported for turning points. Positive and negative events followed upon one another in rapid succession, perhaps creating a contrast effect that resulted in such large reported amplitudes. This trajectory featured high instability. Families enmeshed in this trajectory repeatedly established reasonably high feelings of familyness that were repeatedly unraveled by negatively valenced events.

Not surprisingly, the Declining and the Stagnating trajectories were associated with the lowest levels of current feeling like a family, whereas the Accelerated trajectory was associated with the highest level followed by the Prolonged trajectory. The intermediate value associated with the Turbulent trajectory may be a sampling artifact; on the assumption that turbulent cycles continued until the time of the interview, we may have found respondents at points when their families happened by chance to be in the upswing of their up-and-down turbulence. Alternatively, blended families whose development is highly turbulent may have adapted to such a roller coaster experience, crafting a sense of themselves as a family in spite of instability.

The Accelerated, Prolonged and Stagnating trajectories bear some resemblance, respectively, to Papernow’s (1993) ‘rapid’, ‘slow’, and ‘stuck’ families. Papernow’s final stages of ‘contact’ and ‘resolution’ feature outcomes that correspond closely to what our sample meant by ‘100 percent familyness’: strong emotional bonds between family members in a stable system of mutual support and caring. However, blended families characterized by our Accelerated, Prolonged and Stagnating developmental pathways did not achieve their familyness outcomes by movement through Papernow’s unitary stage model. Papernow’s stage-based model suggests a singular progression through stages of idealization, shattered expectations, conflict, problem-solving and bonding. The wide array of turning point events reported by our sample belies a simple reduction to a small number of stages. Furthermore, in order for Papernow’s stage model to have gained support, we would logically have expected a higher frequency of reported turning points that involved idealizations, shattered expectations and problem-solving efforts. In addition, the stage-based model suggests that blended families progress from negatively valenced experiences (shattered experiences and conflict) to positively valenced ones (problem-solving and bonding); by contrast, our blended families appeared to move in and out of positive and negative turning points throughout their development. Finally, we identified two trajectories, the Declining and High-amplitude Turbulent, that are not readily evident in Papernow’s (1993) work.

Our study has several limitations. We only interviewed one member from a given blended family. Future research could usefully collect data from multiple family members in order to determine the extent and nature of agreement on recollected turning points. Our relatively small sample size did not allow us to compare completely the accounts of biological/adoptive parents, stepparents and stepchildren, nor could we usefully compare the accounts of respondents from simple versus complex blended
family structures. Our respondents represented blended families whose histories were of varying length. Future research should consider whether the turning points that are recalled vary as a function of how distant they were in the past. The identification of turning points is a reconstructive enterprise in which one always identifies the past based on the present. What may seem to be a significant turning point at one time may later seem insignificant or important but in a different way.

Despite its limitations, this study supports a complex view of blended family development. The formation of blended family identity is retrospectively perceived as a fluid process of up-and-down movement, with variations organized around the ratio of positive-to-negative turning points, the amplitude of change, and the presence of conflict. Changes in feeling like a family are linked to a variety of types of reported events. These results can help scholars, therapists, and family members themselves gain insight into an intricate and often perplexing process.

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Blended Families: A Critical Review of the Current Research
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What is This?
Blended Families:  
A Critical Review of the Current Research  

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Nicole R. Hill  
Idaho State University  

Current research on blended families is summarized to address blended family development, communication strategies, and relationships between stepparents and stepchildren. Considerations for family counselors and blended families are addressed. Implications for future research opportunities include multicultural issues within blended families and stepmothers’ relationships with their stepchildren.

Keywords: blended families; stepparents; remarriage; stepfathers; stepmothers  

The American divorce rate has reached a normative level, averaging about 50% (Carter & McGoldrick, 2005). A large percentage of divorced couples are remarrying and increasing the number of blended families living together. It is estimated that approximately 20% of children younger than the age of 18 reside in stepparent households (U.S. Census Bureau, 1998). As the structure of American families continues to expand in its complexity, it is imperative that marriage and family counselors conceptualize family issues and clinical interventions from an empirically based perspective. Relying on assumptions about blended families may perpetuate cultural beliefs that endorse a deficit perspective of stepfamily functioning (Malia, 2005).

The current research on blended families within the past 7 years has increasingly reflected the transition from the nuclear family to a more diverse blending of families. The recent research explored in this literature review contains important considerations for counselors on the development of blended families, relationship building between the stepparent and stepchildren, and development of resiliency factors. The results tend to suggest a confluence of variables impacting family functioning as opposed to a myopic conceptualization of family structure being the predominant factor. Implications for future research and family counseling are identified at the conclusion of the article.

DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS OF BECOMING A SUCCESSFUL BLENDED FAMILY  

Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, and Turman (2001) conducted a qualitative/interpretive method analyzing 980 pages of interview transcripts with stepparents and stepchildren in response to the limited research addressing how blended families join together; the limited understanding of family communication including boundary management, conflict resolution, and role negotiation; and the limited knowledge about the role that communication plays in blended family functioning. Past literature addressing developmental stage-based models were noted to be limited in three ways—namely, being prescriptive in nature, stating how the families “should” develop, a lack of information concerning diversity within the blended family structure, and not expressing the dynamic shifts of blended family relationships (Braithwaite et al., 2001).

Braithwaite et al. (2001) focused on gathering a holistic understanding of blended families across the first 4 years of family development by using a framework initially developed by Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson (1999). Using a hierarchical cluster analysis, Baxter et al. created five developmental trajectories: (a) accelerated (characterized by clear assumption of parental roles by stepparent and by perceptions of children as being related to each other as siblings), (b) prolonged (characterized by low levels of solidarity and by being functional), (c) declining (characterized by an initial perception of a “perfect” and ideal family that has been replaced by a disillusioned and distraught perception), (d) stagnating (characterized by fluctuating expectations and role ambiguity),

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and (e) high-amplitude turbulent (characterized by difficulty accepting new family roles). These developmental trajectories became the defining categories for Braithwaite et al.’s study.

Participants included 5 biological/adoptive parents, 15 stepparents, and 33 stepchildren. Their descriptions across the 4 years were divided into the five trajectories to identify the blended families’ development and the process of communication (Braithwaite et al., 2001). All five categories of the developmental trajectories characterized the blended families’ development as satisfying when open communication existed. The participants described open communication as the family’s ability to discuss family roles, boundaries, shared identity, acclimation into the family, diverse expectations, conflicts, and their feelings (Braithwaite et al., 2001).

The participants within the accelerated, prolonged, stagnating, and high-amplitude turbulent trajectories were noted for their ability to put their differences within the blended family aside and adapt to the changes they confronted by negotiating their relationships in the family. The blended families’ ability to confront presenting issues through communication were reported to develop a high degree of solidarity within the blended family (Braithwaite et al., 2001).

These findings were substantially different for blended families within the declining trajectory (Braithwaite et al., 2001). A lack of communication and the deterioration of a blended family was noted by the participants within the declining trajectory. The participants conceptualized the family’s ongoing avoidance in communication across the 4-year time frame as having devastating effects that resulted in a family member’s physical and emotional disengagement from the blended family.

The five different developmental trajectories spoke to the forward movement of the families’ process and the individuals’ own unique pattern of development. Researchers encourage counselors, future researchers, and the blended family members not to limit their views of blended family development and to openly explore the families’ diverse experiences as a blended family. The blended families’ level of solidarity and satisfaction is connected to their ability to negotiate and communicate about role identification, boundary management, conflicts, and expectations. The researchers suggest that family counselors help the blended family members develop communication patterns that support confronting conflicts, honesty, and relationships within the blended family (Braithwaite et al., 2001).

The important role of communication within stepfamilies was supported by the findings of Golish (2003), who employed a qualitative methodology to examine stepfamilies’ communication strengths. A total of 90 in-depth interviews were conducted with stepparents, parents, and stepchildren from 30 stepfamilies. The study examined the communication strategies that differentiate “strong” stepfamilies from stepfamilies having more difficulty forming a blended family (Golish, 2003). Golish found all families to experience the same seven primary challenges regardless of the families’ strengths and development including “feeling caught,” regulating boundaries with a noncustodial family, ambiguity of parental roles, “traumatic bonding,” vying for resources, discrepancies in conflict management styles, and building solidarity as a family unit.

In Golish’s (2003) study, stepfamilies who reported using everyday talk engaged in family problem solving, promoted a positive image, and demonstrated consistent awareness of problem severity as a strong blended family. She also stated that communication strengths are essential to any family; the manner in which they are applied in stepfamilies may be unique because the “rules” for communication in a stepfamily system are complicated by a web of boundaries (Bray, 1999; Golish, 2003; Madden-Derich, Leonard, & Christopher, 1999). Families were identified as developing communication strategies in a different manner leading to diversity in stepfamily communication development. Golish (2003) has supported Braithwaite et al.’s (2001) research exploring blended family development. The researchers concluded that all blended family development is unique and is based on the family’s communication patterns (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Golish, 2003).

The developmental model of pathways for blended families explores the overall interactions and functioning of the family unit (Braithwaite et al., 2001). Other contemporary research examines the different factors related to family functioning. Some research focuses on the role of the stepparents (Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001; MacDonald & DeMaris, 2002), whereas other research addresses the well-being and perceptions of children (Jenkins, Simpson, Dunn, Rasbash, & O’Connor, 2005; Morin, Milito, & Costlow, 2001).

**STEPFATHER AND STEPCHLID RELATIONSHIPS**

MacDonald and DeMaris (2002) examined the quality of the stepfather’s relationship with stepchildren. The researchers conducted a study analyzing the data from the 1987-1988 National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). The study administered a multistage probability sample of 13,008 people aged 19 or older, who were able to communicate in English or Spanish and lived in households in the United States (MacDonald & DeMaris, 2002; Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988). The study selected one adult from each household to be the primary respondent. Respondents selected were either cohabiting with one child or married with children.

The researchers explored stepfathers’ negotiation of family roles and development of the stepchild relationship. The researchers hypothesized from normative resource theory (Szinovacz, 1987) that the effect of the stepparent’s demand...
for conformity (i.e., following directions, controlling tempers, and following rules) depends on the biological father’s involvement in the stepchild’s life. The prediction is based on the nonresidential biological parent’s support of the child, and the time they spend together is predicted to decrease stepchildren’s likelihood to accept the authority of the step-parent compared with stepchildren who spend less time with or never see their biological parent.

The researchers measured the stepfather’s demand for conformity from the stepchild through a four-item summary scale (MacDonald & DeMaris, 2002). The stepchild’s relationship with the biological father was measured by the mother’s report of the child’s participation with the biological father in the following four types of activities: (a) leisure activities, (b) religious activities, (c) talking or working on a project or playing together, and (d) school or other organized activities. The biological father’s influence on parental decisions was gathered to provide input regarding the child’s education, health care, and religion.

The results indicated that conflict between the biological parents negatively affects stepfather-stepchild relationship quality and that contact between the stepchild and his or her biological father weakens the quality of the stepfather-stepchild relationship (MacDonald & DeMaris, 2002). Stepfather and stepchild’s relationship quality is dependent on the stepfather’s demand for conformity. The biological father’s input did not appear to matter on the stepchildren–stepfathers’ relationship as long as the contact time between the biological father and stepchild was minimal. Thus, this study provides a more clear understanding of how child-biological parent relations impacts child-stepparent relations and emphasizes the importance of quality time as compared to conformity demands. In addition to exploring the relationship of stepfathers with children, there is also research that specifically examines the relationship of stepmothers with children.

**STEPMOTHER FAMILY STRUCTURE**

Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, and Stewart (2001) investigated relationship quality and well-being across five different family structures: (a) two-parent biological families, (b) single-mother families raising biological children following divorce, (c) stepfather families, (d) stepmother families, and (e) adoptive families. The study included data from the 799 families who participated in the 1992-1994 NSFH (Sweet & Bumpass, 1996). Two hundred twelve children between the ages of 10 and 18 years were randomly selected within the 799 families and were interviewed over the telephone to provide self-reports of their well-being and the quality of their relationships with family members. At least 1 parent from the above sample was interviewed separately in a face-to-face interview.

Lansford et al. (2001) investigated the importance of family structures in predicting psychological well-being and relational quality of family members. Initially, the researchers hypothesized that socialization by two parents is optimal (Demo & Acock, 1996) and single parents, stepparents, and adoptive families would evidence lower levels of well-being and relational quality. Stepfather and stepmother families reported fewer disagreements than did mothers in two-parent biological families. The results indicated that mothers reported somewhat lower well-being than married households; however, they did not consistently differ from other families, and children from the various households did not report a difference in well-being or relationships. Also, the authors initially hypothesized that stepfamilies, adoptive families, and single-parent families would have a disadvantage when compared with traditional two-parent families. The findings concluded that stepmothers and biological mothers reported children to have fewer behavioral problems than did mothers of other types of families. The final hypothesis controls for family process variables using the MANCOVA to determine which family structure increased well-being among the family members. The overall results concluded that family structure differences in mothers’ well-being and mothers’ reports of their child’s well-being were no longer significant after controlling for the family process variable, which is the disagreement between the spouses and between mothers and children.

In conclusion, Lansford et al. (2001) speculated on stepmothers’ heightened perceptions of problems within the family structure compared with other family structures to be a result of the cultural expectations for stepfamilies to have an increase in family problems. The authors contemplated whether or not the stepmothers’ perceptions of family problems within the family structure and the well-being of the family members are a result of the increased sensitivity to any signs of problems because of the expectation that stepfamilies will have an increased rate of problems. Lansford et al. cautioned that the perceptions of problems may once again be related to the stigma related to stepfamilies being more susceptible to problems than two-parent biological families, resulting in stepmothers’ awareness of problems and fathers’ lack of awareness and potential denial of problems.

**STEPPARENTS’ MONITORING OF CHILDREN**

Fisher, Leve, O’Leary, and Leve (2003) examined the effects of parental monitoring of children’s behaviors. Parental monitoring involves tracking the child’s whereabouts and activities (Bulcroft, Carmody, & Bulcroft, 1998; Fisher et al., 2003). This research was informed by previous studies that found that stepfamilies are characterized by lower levels of control and monitoring than two-parent biological families (Fisher et al., 2003; Henderson & Taylor, 1999) and that stepfathers’ monitoring tends to be lower than stepmothers’ moni-
toring, indicating a difference among stepfamilies (Kurdek & Fine, 1993).

In this specific study, participants consisted of 32 stepmother/biological father families, 77 biological mother/stepfather families, and 82 two-parent biological families (Fisher et al., 2003). All participating families had a child between the ages of 5 and 8. The participants were recruited via a newspaper advertisement, flyers placed on bulletin boards, and newsletters. The participants needed to be married or to be in an ongoing relationship for at least 6 months.

The sample demographics indicated several differences between stepparents, stepfathers, and biological families. Biological families reported having longer established relationships than stepfamilies. Scheffé post hoc comparisons indicated significant differences in stepmothers’/stepfathers’ level of education compared with biological two-parent education levels, which were reported to have completed college or graduate school. In addition to increased education levels, biological two-parent families were also older than stepfamilies.

The differences in family type and the level of monitoring were examined by conducting a one-way ANOVA. The results of the post hoc indicated that the biological family’s level of monitoring to be approximately .5 standard deviations higher than that for stepfamilies. Stepfathers appeared to have lower monitoring levels than stepmothers.

In conclusion, there was no difference in the elements of monitoring between stepmothers, stepfathers, or biological families despite the initial hypothesis that the level of monitoring would be less between stepmother and stepfather families than two-parent biological families. The researchers conducted an additional analysis to control for demographic issues. The biological two-parent family held higher levels of monitoring when controlling for relationship lengths and compared with stepfathers. There was no significant difference found between stepmothers and biological two-parent families’ level of monitoring. Therefore, stepfathers may need additional assistance in taking on a more parental role of monitoring their stepchildren. In addition to exploring parental monitoring in various family structures, there are numerous research studies that specifically examine the experiences and perceptions of youth in blended families.

YOUTH IN BLENDED FAMILIES

The research that empirically and directly explores the experiences and perceptions of children and adolescents within stepfamilies tends to focus on youth well-being (Manning & Lamb, 2003) and the influence of family dynamics on behavioral issues (Jenkins et al., 2005; Morin et al., 2001). Risk and protective factors provide important information for family counselors as they work to support the resiliency of the family and its members. Factors influencing adolescent well-being encompass externalizing and internalizing dimensions and tend to include problems in school, delinquency, academic achievement, academic expectations (Manning & Lamb, 2003), aggression, depression, anxiety, isolation (Jenkins et al., 2005), peer support, neighbor support, school attachment (Rodgers & Rose, 2002), and perceptions of discipline (Morin et al., 2001). Overviewing the individual research studies creates a more comprehensive understanding about how these issues manifest in blended families.

In 2001, Morin et al. explored differences in how adolescents perceive discipline based on the structure of their family. Forty-five adolescents completed a questionnaire that explored attitudes and perceptions of discipline in the home. The adolescents in blended and intact families responded similarly to several issues such as the typical discipline issues (i.e., complying with house rules, peers), most severe punishment received, and the reason for the most severe discipline. There were a couple of meaningful differences that emerged for the two groups. First, the results reveal that 22% of the adolescents residing in stepfamilies (n = 15) identified family relationships as a discipline issue as compared to 6% of the adolescents living in families with both biological parents (n = 30). This suggests that a challenging developmental task of stepfamilies is to create parent-child relationships. Second, 20% of adolescents from intact families reported forgetting the reason for receiving the most severe punishment, whereas no adolescent in the blended family group forgot the reason. Such a difference highlights the importance that adolescents in stepfamilies place on the interaction of parents with rules and boundaries. Although this study focused on one dimension of parent-child interactions, other research broadens the exploration of risk and resiliency factors and creates a more global context for our understanding.

Three recent studies explored the role of family structure on promoting risk and resiliency factors for adolescents. First, Manning and Lamb (2003) examined risk behaviors for 13,231 adolescents who participated in the National Longitudinal Adolescent Survey of Adolescent Health. This study is unique because it expands the understanding of stepfamilies by differentiating between married stepfamilies and cohabiting stepfamilies. The measures of well-being included whether the adolescent had been expelled or suspended, whether the adolescent struggled to get along with teachers and other students or to complete homework, frequency of engaging in delinquency acts, grade point average, desire to attend college, and scores on Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test. The results suggest that adolescents residing in cohabiting stepfamilies tend to focus on youth well-being (Manning & Lamb, 2003) and the influence of family dynamics on behavioral issues (Jenkins et al., 2005; Morin et al., 2001). Risk and protective factors provide important information for family counselors as they work to support the resiliency of the family and its members. Factors influencing adolescent well-being encompass externalizing and internalizing dimensions and tend to include problems in school, delinquency, academic achievement, academic expectations (Manning & Lamb, 2003), aggression, depression, anxiety, isolation (Jenkins et al., 2005), peer support, neighbor support, school attachment (Rodgers & Rose, 2002), and perceptions of discipline (Morin et al., 2001). Overviewing the individual research studies creates a more comprehensive understanding about how these issues manifest in blended families.

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be more clearly defined and developed as compared to cohabiting stepfamilies that may be characterized by role ambiguity.

Role ambiguity may also be a factor that explains the results of Rodgers and Rose’s (2002) study of 2,011 adolescents (mean age = 14) in 7th, 9th, and 11th grades that explored risk and resiliency factors. Rodgers and Rose conducted a self-report survey that encompassed adolescent perceptions about parental monitoring, parental support, peer support, school attachment, neighbor attachment, externalizing behaviors (i.e., substance use, fighting, sexual activity), and internalizing behaviors (i.e., depression, suicide, self-esteem). The results indicated that lower levels of parental monitoring were related to higher levels of externalizing behaviors for all types of families. Adolescents in stepfamilies reported higher levels of externalizing behaviors at all levels of parental monitoring in comparison to intact families. The researchers hypothesized that parental monitoring might function as a less effective protective factor in blended families because of the role ambiguity related to effectively monitoring.

Interestingly, peer support did not function as a protective factor for the adolescents in stepfamilies. Parental support and neighborhood support did emerge as variables that protected adolescents in stepfamilies in that adolescents experiencing higher levels of parental and neighborhood support reported lower levels of internalizing behaviors. In conclusion, Rodgers and Rose (2002) found for adolescents in blended families that parental monitoring functioned as a buffer for externalizing behaviors and that neighborhood and parental support functioned as buffers for internalizing behaviors.

The role of internalizing and externalizing behaviors in families was also explored by Jenkins et al. (2005) from the perspective of how it influenced marital conflict. This study was longitudinal in nature and collected data from 127 families (35% biological families, 35% stepfamilies, and 30% from complex families) at two different times in the span of 2 years. The research collected data from multiple sources—namely, teachers, parents, and children (n = 296). Stepfamilies in the study experienced significant increases in marital conflict across time if the children’s externalizing behaviors increased as compared to other family types. The researchers hypothesized that the role of the nonbiological parent in discipline may account for the difference and concluded that this needs to be investigated in future research.

Contemporary research on youth in stepfamilies suggests a more complex and interactive confluence of risk and resiliency factors than the assumption that the role of family structure is the most powerful factor. These findings encourage family counselors to attend to a multiplicity of factors and to explore how they mutually interact within the system. Specific implications for family counselors are important to consider.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY COUNSELORS**

Current research on stepfamily development and the well-being among stepfamily members has increased over recent years. The research reviewed in this article challenges some of the assumptions related to the functioning of blended families. The research spoke to the unique challenges that stepfamilies may face as they develop into a blended family structure. Braithwaite et al. (2001) concluded that blended family development varies across the five trajectories. The blended family members who participated in the interviews did not fit into a single developmental process or communication style; therefore, family counselors and family members need to be cognizant of the family’s experience and not mold families into a single model for success. Also, a central theme of the research findings was that the factors influencing stepfamily well-being and functioning are more multifaceted and complex than family structure alone. Family counselors must attend to the confluence of communication (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Golish, 2003), parental monitoring (Fisher et al., 2003), boundary management, conflict (Jenkins et al., 2005), relationship interaction (Lansford et al., 2001), role definition (Manning & Lamb, 2003), solidarity, and similar variables in both the assessment and conceptualization of stepfamily functioning.

The main theme across the literature speaks to the benefits of communication on the blended families’ well-being, conformity, and monitoring levels compared with biological two-parent families. The blended families who openly communicated and addressed the struggles dealing with role identity, relationships, and the new family development were able to transition into a blended family more smoothly than those who refrained from open communication (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Golish, 2003). Family counselors may address and explore with the stepfamilies the benefits of open communication, boundary development, role identification, and the ambiguity of developing a new family structure to increase the blended family’s awareness of the process and promote discussion on the process and their experiences. In addition, Golish (2003) stated that all stepfamilies vary across communication abilities. Therefore, counselors need to assess the family’s communication strengths and help the family build open communication across the primary challenges.

It is imperative that family counselors develop a framework to explore their personal beliefs about stepfamilies and the stereotypes that may exist. Acknowledging our personal beliefs, values, and attitudes is an important step in continual counseling development. Specifically, family counselors are encouraged to explore the stepfamilies’ dynamics and acknowledge their own stereotypes (if any exist) regarding the relationship between family type and monitoring (Fisher et al., 2003). These authors suggested that all family types establish guidelines to increase child monitoring through increased communication between community, school, and
parents regarding the child’s whereabouts. The parents’ tracking of their child’s activities may potentially decrease the likelihood that the child will follow a deviant path. Overall, parents who spend time with their children and pursue an interest in their lives will potentially be preventing future problems related to education, peers, and the child’s chances for deviant behavior (Fisher et al., 2003).

In conclusion, current research challenges family counselors to assess their existing assumptions and beliefs about the challenges experienced by stepfamilies and to shift to an empowering perspective that acknowledges the multiplicity of factors influencing blended family well-being. Educating stepfamilies about parental monitoring, role definition, communication styles, and conflict management is necessary to support their development processes. Furthermore, family counselors need to be cognizant of differences among stepmothers and stepfathers so that the unique factors of these families are addressed.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Current research on blended families does not speak to the diversity and need for awareness of multicultural issues. Recent research indicates the importance of understanding the diverse needs of blended families; however, no information currently addresses blended families of color, gay and lesbian blended families, and the joining of culturally different families. Within the literature on youth experiences, the representation of non-White participants ranged from 0.04% (Morin et al., 2001) to 27% (Manning & Lamb, 2003). The articles reviewed did not directly speak to the cultural differences among the blended families. MacDonald and DeMaris (2002) included Spanish-speaking participants in their interviews; however, the results did not highlight cultural differences among the blended families. This is especially salient given the importance of communication within families. The limited multicultural research on blended families demands future research endeavors.

The data from the research studies overviewed tended to be extrapolated from national surveys that were collected 10 years ago. This data design is helpful in capturing a larger, more representative sample, and yet more recent exploration of the perceptions and experiences of stepfamilies need to be conducted to provide more timely and relevant findings. Ongoing research is needed to clarify how various variables of family process and interaction manifest in stepfamilies and impact their development and well-being. The research that specifically addresses the experiences of stepmothers seems to be even more limited and restricted than research exploring the experiences of stepfathers. Future research could target stepmothers as primary participants to address this gap. Qualitative studies are also necessary to create rich and descriptive understandings of blended families.

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Adolescent personalities and their self-acceptance within complete families, incomplete families and reconstructed families

Abstract:
At the time of this work I had been concentrating on how the family gave shape to adolescent personalities and how adolescents would, as a consequence, accept themselves. The purpose of this present study is to determine the differences in personality range and levels of self-acceptance among groups of women and men from complete, incomplete and reconstructed families. The study included a group of 314 adolescents, from the administrative region of Łódź. The following test methods were used: the Survey and standardised Inventory of Personality NEO - FFI by P.T. Costa and R. McCrae as adapted by B. Zawadzki, J. Strelau, P. Szczepaniak and M. Śliwińska; and the Scale of Interpersonal Attitude (SUI) as adapted by J. M. Stanik.
As a result of statistical analyses, it turned out that the dimension of personality the Openness to Experience had indeed diversified the examined adolescent groups. Statistically significant differences were also observed at the self-acceptance level between the study groups.

Keywords:
family structure, adolescence, personality, self-acceptance

Streszczenie:
W rezultacie przeprowadzonych analiz statystycznych okazało się, że wymiar osobowości różnicujący badane grupy stanowi cecha otwartości na doświadczenie. Istotne statystycznie różnice zaobserwowano także w zakresie samooceny badanych grup młodzieży.
Introduction

Psychological literature widely discusses the multilateral influences of family on emotional and social life development as well as on the whole man’s personality (Cartwright, 2003; Plopa, 2005; Liberska, 2011; Rostowska, Rostowski, 2011).

Researchers assume that an individual’s correct development including the formation of personality, self image, self acceptance and the relation to oneself as well as to other people results from family experience (Reykowski, 1992).

Family experience can either help develop an individual or, in cases of adverse and very strong influences, impede the process of psychical and social development, not letting an individual form desirable human values.

The above-mentioned experience is extremely important because its impact concentrates mostly in the childhood period, when a child’s psyche of is the most absorptive, vulnerable, flexible and hardly influenced by the external environment (Dunn, Munn, 1985).

Familioologists point out the importance of the parents’ role in family functioning and the children’s development. It is because in the initial life period, including the time from infancy to pre-school age, it is the family that plays the main role in the child’s personality and self-esteem formation. Its first social contacts are established with the mother, then with the father, brothers and sisters and other housemates (Napora, Schneider, 2010).

Familial influence on the child’s development is spontaneous in nature, and is not the effect of any particular educational program. Social stances, determined to a large extent by the socialization process in the first years of life, depend on the family atmosphere in the home, the educational methods applied by the parents, the family structure, and on the social behaviour patterns demonstrated by the parents.

The research done by G. Poraj (1988) shows that parents affect the children’s personality and self-acceptance development through applying particular educational methods. Negative influences can be exerted by excessive severity, exaggerated rigorism, and using too much punishment and rules as well as by permissive education, excessive care, and solicitude linked with limited independence.

A number of researchers (Tyszkowa, 2006; Harwas-Napierala, 2006) point out that the relations of a child with adults, mainly concerning their personal qualities, are considered to be one of the most important factors in personal development.
There is also some empirical evidence that there is a close connection between personality and mature parenthood. Mature parenthood can help to reduce the child’s self-centeredness, form the child’s sense of responsibility and empathy, and trigger its readiness to perform social roles (Rostowska, 2003).

The family structure plays a very important role in personal development. It includes the fact that the child has both biological parents, a stepfather or a stepmother, as well as their age, job and social status. A different educational situation is created in a two-generation family as well as in an extended one. Furthermore, when a child has siblings, their age and number appear to be significant for personality and self-acceptance formation. Different personal qualities and self-acceptance levels will be formed in the eldest, the youngest or the only child, or the only boy among a few sisters or the only girl among a number of brothers (Tenikue, Bertrand, 2010). Knowledge of emotional and social experiences which were provided to a child in its family is often the key to understanding the difficulties the child has in social functioning (Kubik, 1999).

At the early school age and during adolescence a child comes into the secondary developmental context, whose range is much wider than the family environment. In this life period an individual’s personal development takes place mainly through influences of non-family environments, such as school, friends and people met in various youth organizations, and later in work (Tyszkowa, 2006).

Our article concentrates on the family role in personality shaping and self-acceptance of adolescents (average age 21). An important argument for doing research in this field is to explore the changes which are currently taking place within the Polish family. They are structural, and functional, in nature and are connected with self-consciousness, thus creating a new kind of educational environment.

Modern families have a diversified structure. Increasingly, incomplete families as well as reconstructed ones are becoming visible in Polish society. Both cases have a tendency to increase, therefore it is so important to study how young people function in incomplete families after a divorce and in reconstructed ones since the psychological knowledge on this subject is still insufficient.

This study adopted the personality concept by R.R. McCrae and O.P. John. The authors singled out five main personality dimensions: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness (John, 1990). These five dimensions were confirmed by numerous sample groups, kinds of data, and for a number of languages (Zimbardo, 2012).

Self-acceptance was determined based on the definition suggested by J. M. Stanik. The author defines it as a rather stable state of personality, resulting from an individual’s relatively stable self-estimation, especially when comparing oneself with other people.
High scores obtained on the self-complacency scale for low self-estimation, connect a neurotic, suspicious and hostile personality with a high level of apprehension. On the contrary, low scores point to the lack of these symptoms in the surveyed person’s self-description (Stanik, 1998).

It should be emphasized that the level of self-acceptance is connected with how an individual’s personality acts, in other words, with its structuralization and organization level. Individuals with stable self-estimation have a better organized personality that individuals with unstable self-estimation. Moreover, worse structuralization results in greater susceptibility of the personality to emotional influences.

Research problems and hypotheses

The purpose of our research was to answer the following questions: Are there any differences in personality qualities between young people from full families, incomplete families and reconstructed ones? Are there any differences in the self-acceptance level between young people from full families, incomplete families and reconstructed ones? Are there any relations and of what kind between young persons’ self-acceptance levels and personality qualities from differently structured families?

According to our designated purpose and the above-mentioned questions and based on the content-related literature, a number of research hypotheses have been formulated.

Hypothesis no. 1: There is a difference in personality qualities between groups of women from full families, incomplete families and reconstructed ones.

Hypothesis no. 2: There is a difference in personality qualities between groups of men from full families, incomplete families and reconstructed ones.

Hypothesis no. 3: There is a difference in the self-acceptance level between groups of women from full families, incomplete families and reconstructed ones.

Hypothesis no. 4: There are statistically significant differences in the self-acceptance level between groups of men from families of different structure.

Hypothesis no. 5: There are relations, different as far as strength and direction are concerned, between the self-acceptance level and the examined personality qualities.

Research methods

The following test methods were used to answer our research questions: Survey and Standardised Inventory of Personality NEO - FFI by P.T. Costa and R. McCrae as adapted by B. Zawadzki, J. Strelau, P. Szczepaniak and M. Śliwińska and Interpersonal Relationships Scale (SUI) in J. M. Stanik’s adaptation. The survey method allowed us to
gather data on the socio-demographic situation of young persons (age, gender, family structure, domicile, marital status, education). NEO-FFI and SUI are psychometrically acceptable and allow for scientific research (Stanik, 1998; Zawadzki, Strelau, Śliwińska, 1998).

Participants

The study included a group of 600 young persons (average age 21; \(\delta=1.181\)) from the administrative region of Łódź. The tests were anonymous and done in groups. Participation in the research was voluntary. To create an appropriate sample group, the following exclusion criteria were adopted: young person’s attitude toward participation in the survey, demographic structure of the family of origin, and completion of the test sheets2.

Taking into account the demographic structure of the family of origin, and according to our designated purposes, the distinguished environments included: the full family, the incomplete family as a result of parental divorce, and the reconstructed family. The above-mentioned familial typology was adopted due to methodological considerations connected with facilitating the conduct of research in this area. The appropriate sample group did not include any persons originating from other family types than the above-mentioned.

Ultimately, the test group comprised 314 people (158 women and 156 men). With respect to the family of origin criterion three comparative groups were identified. Comparative group I was made up of 105 people from incomplete families (53 men and 52 women). Comparative Group II consisted of 104 people from stepfamilies (51 men and 53 women). In contrast, comparative group III comprised 105 people from full families (52 men and 53 women).

The empirical material, collected through surveys, was subject to qualitative analysis. For elaborating the data, the test of independence chi-square (\(\chi^2\)) was used. A number of statistical analyses were carried out using the computer program IBM SPSS Statistics 20. It turned out that the persons forming the appropriate sample group were characterized by domiciled uniformity (large cities, with a population of more than 100 thousand-\(\chi^2=4.166; df=4; p=.384\)), marital status (single-\(\chi^2=1.322; df=2; p=.516\)) and education level (secondary education-\(\chi^2=1.031; df=2; p=.597\)).

---

2 In order to determine the credibility degree of the received results, we used a rate which consisted of the number of question marks in the Interpersonal Relationships Scale by M. Stanik. It points to a protective and distrustful attitude towards the survey. Considering this fact, we excluded from the examination all those persons who had received high and extremely high scores in this scope (119 people) (Stanik, 1998).
Results

The results presented below were intended to answer the question: Did the surveyed groups of women and men from families of diversified structures differ in their personality qualities? For statistical results the F test and Tukey’s multiple comparison test were used.

Since women and men react differently to the same stimuli and behave differently in social situations, is the difference being subject to both genetic factors as well as environmental ones the results for all the women and men in the comparable groups from differently structure families were taken into account (Mandal, 2006).

**Variations in the personality dimensions of the tested young women from complete families, incomplete families and reconstructed families.**

Bi-factor variation analysis taking gender into consideration pointed to a statistically significant difference between the women from the examined types of families. It concerned the quality of Openness (F=14.487; p=.0005) (Figure 1 and Table 1).

In the Openness dimension, the highest average results (above average) were obtained by women from full families in comparison with those from incomplete families and reconstructed ones. The results appeared statistically significant. A similar degree of Openness also characterized women from incomplete and reconstructed families, who otherwise obtained average results or results below average.

![Figure 1. Variations in the personality dimensions of the tested young women from families of diverse structure.](image-url)
Table 1. The family structure and the dimensions of personality of women in the light of Tukey’s test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure of family:</th>
<th>Openness to Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>complete</td>
<td>.0005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>incomplete</td>
<td>.0005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.768</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the other personality dimensions surveyed by the NEO-FFI test, namely Neuroticism, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, there were no statistically significant differences between the surveyed groups of women. The results were on the average level. In this way Hypothesis no. 1 was supported.

Variations in the personality dimensions of the tested young men from complete families, incomplete families and reconstructed families.

Comparative analysis pointed out that the personality dimension significantly different among the men’s groups was Openness ($F=23.677; p=.0005$) (Figure 2 and Table 2). Survey results for men from differently structured families were similar to those received by the women in this sphere.

In Openness, the highest average results (above average) were obtained by men from full families in comparison with men from either incomplete or reconstructed families, whose results were below average. The results appeared statistically significant. The quality of Openness characterized the men from incomplete families and those from reconstructed ones to a similar degree.

![Figure 2. Variations in personalities of the young men from diverse structured families.](image-url)
Table 2. The family structure and dimensions of the men’s personality in the light of Tukey’s test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure of family:</th>
<th>Openness to Experience</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>complete</td>
<td>.0005</td>
<td>.0005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>incomplete</td>
<td>.423</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the other personality dimensions surveyed by NEO-FFI, namely Neuroticism, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, there were no statistically significant differences between the men’s groups. The results were on the average level and in this way they supported Hypothesis no. 2.

**Variations in self-acceptance of the young women from diversely structured families**

The research results presented below (Figure 3 and Table 3) concerning variations in the self-acceptance for the female groups pointed to a statistically significant difference (F=32.664; p=.0005).

![Figure 3. Variations of the average results as regards self-acceptance in the surveyed female groups.](image)

Table 3. The family structure and the women’s self-acceptance level in the light of Tukey’s test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure of family:</th>
<th>Self-acceptance</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>complete</td>
<td>.0005</td>
<td>.0005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>incomplete</td>
<td>.984</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Considering the women’s self-acceptance from the types of families, it was noticed that women from incomplete families were characterized by the highest average results on the self-acceptance scale, which means that they have a low level of self-esteem in comparison with women from full families.
The group from reconstructed families did not differ significantly as regards average results in self-acceptance from those growing up in incomplete families. The self-esteem level was similar in these two groups.

The optimum level of self-acceptance characterized the group from full families, which differed significantly in this scope from the groups of the women coming from other family types.

**Variations in self-acceptance of the young men from diversely structured families.**

Considering the influence of the family structure on the self-acceptance level in the tested men groups, a statistically significant difference was noticed ($F=45.723; p=.0005$). The results are presented by Figure 4 and Table 4.

![Figure 4. Variations of the average results as regards self-acceptance in the male groups.](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure of family:</th>
<th>Self-acceptance level</th>
<th>Tukey’s test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>complete</td>
<td>.044</td>
<td>.0005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>incomplete</td>
<td>.0005</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reconstructed</td>
<td>.044</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The statistical analysis shows that, as far as self-acceptance is concerned, men from incomplete families received the highest average results in comparison with men from reconstructed families (above average) and from full ones (low results). It means that they are characterized by a low level of self-esteem; they are tense and neurotic. The results appeared statistically significant.

Between the male groups from full families and reconstructed ones there was seen a tendency ($p=.044$) toward showing better socially adapted men from full families. As it appeared, men from full families received the lowest average results on the self-acceptance scale, which means the their self-esteem was optimal.
Correlation of self-acceptance with the personality dimensions in the young people from the examined families types.

The next research stage analysed the relations between self-acceptance and the young persons’ personality dimensions from differently structured families. In order to do that, we used the r-Pearson correlation coefficient.

Taking into consideration that the correlation coefficients are not additive, we carried out a statistical analysis separately for each compared group.

In the situation when the same two psychological variations correlated with each other in two or/and three types of the surveyed families, the obtained correlation coefficients were compared with respect to their value compatibility.

Analysing the results with respect to correlations between self-acceptance and selected personality dimensions, we used a breakdown of these variations and received the results which are in Table 5.

Table 5. The relation between self-acceptance and some personal qualities of the young people from differently structure families.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions of personality</th>
<th>Self-acceptation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Structure of family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family complete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>.200 p=.041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness to Experience</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>-.200 p=.041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The research results with respect to correlation between self-acceptance and some personal qualities showed that there are relations between the variations and that their strength and directions are different. In this way, Hypothesis five was confirmed.

Considering the relation between self-acceptance and neuroticism, we discovered that it occurs in all the surveyed groups from full families, incomplete families and reconstructed ones (p=.200;p=.575;p=.339). Correlation coefficient values were not significantly different (p=.029).

High levels of apprehension, emotional tension, frequently experienced feelings of hostility and anger, shyness, and minimal ability to cope with stress result in receiving...
high scores in the self-acceptance scale, which can be interpreted as pointing to low self-esteem.

There was negative correlation between the extraversion and self-acceptance in the persons from incomplete families. This low level of self-acceptance appears to be related to behaviours aimed at seeking stimulation, willingness to dominate in company, and life activities. The mechanism of compensation might have taken place here. A young man from an incomplete family, having low self-esteem, wants above all to show psychic strength and vigour – and not to be perceived as weak and hesitant.

Agreeableness, or one’s attitude about other people, correlated negatively with self-acceptance in persons from full families. It appears that a higher level of self-esteem characterizes persons who are less agreeable, more egocentric, and in relations with others oriented towards competition rather than cooperation. The last relation analysed concerned conscientiousness, which correlated positively with self-acceptance for young persons from reconstructed families. We found that strong-willed, highly motivated and persistent persons are characterized by an optimum level of self-acceptance.

Conclusions

From the dawn of time, humanistic thought has been interested in the family as an institution, its problems having always been the centre of attention of all religious, philosophical, ethical and legal systems, since the family constitutes man’s most fundamental reality. Although the family still occupies a high position in the hierarchy of values declared by man, it is affected by a host of undesirable changes and threats, such as: consumptionism, unemployment, poverty, and social pathologies. More and more families are unable to perform all their roles correctly and because of this they cannot provide their children with optimal conditions for development. Phenomena of the kind mentioned concern both full, incomplete, and reconstructed families, which can also be affected by permanent conflicts or commonly existing social diseases such as alcoholism.

Content related literature concerning diversified family structures, shows a wide range of occurring problems. It is emphasized that they affect not only adults but also the younger generation, who are doomed to existence in atypical environments not always satisfying their needs. There is no doubt that any abnormalities in a family influence a young individual’s personal development and self-acceptance.

Our research has shown that the functioning specificity of full families, incomplete families and reconstructed ones strongly determine young persons personalities and their self-acceptance levels.
Comparisons between the groups of women and men from differently structured families pointed to one differentiating personality dimension. It appeared that the women and the men from full families most frequently displayed cognitive curiosity, a tendency toward positive valuations of life experiences. Young people from incomplete and reconstructed families received Openness scores below average, which can point to conventionalism and conservatism demonstrated both in views and behaviour.

Openness characterizing the young people from full families could have resulted from the attitudes presented by the parents, expressing acceptance, respect and the right to gain experience. Being able to act independently and at the same time feeling secure, the young generation could fully concentrate on their cognitive activity development.

Openness is very important for young, contemporary men since the environment where people live is characterized by an unheard of confrontation of cultures, a variety of which can be defined both globally and in micro-sociological terms. It is the consequence of such phenomena as: availability of modern transport, communication, and information transmission as well as social mobility and environmental openness. People meeting each other, almost at every step, reveal their distinctness to each other. In such circumstances, even peaceful co-existence, not to mention agreement or cooperation, is impossible without openness or tolerance toward others.

It should be emphasized that nowadays a preferable personality structure is an “open” one as it is open to innovativeness and a high level of life aspirations. The occurring cultural changes intertwine with social culture differentiation, its mobility, tendency to be open to act according to new social rules, with its emergence of new social groups, institutions, jobs, development, and deepening individual autonomy (Doniec, 2005).

Therefore, people characterized by openness have more opportunities to find their place and succeed in the contemporary world than those people who do not have this quality.

There is no doubt that besides personal qualities, self-awareness and self-acceptance are crucial for social behaviours displayed by an individual.

Self-acceptance is an important element of self-awareness as it enables self-determination as well as enabling individuals to distinguish themselves from the environment. It allows a person to assume a critical attitude towards their abilities as well as towards new requirements set by the environment. It plays an important role not only in getting to know oneself but also in steering one’s behaviour and realizing his/her life plans.

If a person knows what place they occupy in society and what they can achieve, that means that their self-awareness functions correctly and there are no intrapersonal conflicts.
If, on the other hand, there is a big discrepancy between a person’s view of their abilities and their real achievements, we speak about a self-awareness disorder. This disorder, according to psychoanalysis, can result from a conflict between aspirations for significance and feelings of low self-esteem.

The results of our research with respect to self-acceptance in young people from differently structured families showed statistically significant differences between women’s and men’s groups.

Both women and men from full families received scores pointing to a high level of self-esteem. On the other hand, women and men from incomplete and reconstructed families received scores reflecting low levels of self-esteem, which were connected with neurotic and hostile attitudes.

Our results strongly indicate that the family which satisfies the needs of its members and provides them with support and unconditional love, constitutes the optimal educational environment for stimulating one’s positive self-image.

Our results can be confirmed by the research results done by H. Szczęsna (2005). The author demonstrated empirically that young people from divorced families were characterized by an average self-acceptance level in comparison with young people from full, well-functioning families, who had a high level of self-acceptance.

Also, J. Conway (1997) in his research, demonstrated empirically that young people from incomplete families were more often characterized by low levels of self-acceptance and self-esteem.

Furthermore, research by K. Pospiszyl showed that the more the father is involved in the educational process and the stronger his emotional bonds with the child are, the higher the child’s self-acceptance and self-confidence are in relations with other people (Pospiszyl, 1980).

As a result of our research, a few important observations were made, which are not only consistent with contemporary thought but also bring in some valuable elements modifying the general knowledge on the subject. The research results are significant psychologically because they show that the family structure and parental relationship influence, to a large extent, the personal development and the self-acceptance level of young people.
References:


Parental Divorce and Sibling Relationships: A Research Note
Anne-Rigt Poortman and Marieke Voorpostel
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Parental Divorce and Sibling Relationships

A Research Note

Anne-Rigt Poortman
Marieke Voorpostel
Utrecht University, Netherlands

This study examines long-term effects of parental divorce on sibling relationships in adulthood and the role of predivorce parental conflict. It used large-scale retrospective data from the Netherlands that contain reports from both siblings of the sibling dyad. Results show limited effects of parental divorce on sibling contact and relationship quality in adulthood but strong effects on sibling conflict. The greater conflict among siblings from divorced families is explained by the greater parental conflict in these families. Parental conflict is a far more important predictor than parental divorce per se. Siblings from high-conflict families have less contact, lower relationship quality, and more conflict than do siblings from low-conflict families. Finally, when it comes to sibling relationship quality, the effect of parental divorce depends on the amount of parental conflict. Parental divorce has little effect on the quality of the relationship in low-conflict families, but it improves the relationship in high-conflict families.

Keywords: dyadic data; parental conflict; parental divorce; siblings

Divorce disrupts family ties. Partners dissolve their marriage, and relationships between parents and their children deteriorate. The relationship with the custodial parent (usually, the mother) often becomes less supportive (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; but see Riggio, 2004), and so does...

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contact with the nonresident parent (Amato, 1987; Manning & Smock, 1999). As a result, children from divorced families have fewer parental resources at their disposal and so lack the support and warmth of a well-functioning intact family. The decline in resources and support may lead to the many and well-documented negative outcomes for these children, such as low educational attainment and problem behavior (Amato, 2000).

Parental divorce may disrupt not only ties between partners and between parents and children but also relationships among the children themselves. The divorce literature has paid relatively little attention to the effect of parental divorce on these types of nuclear family ties. Only a few studies have examined how parental divorce affects sibling relationships (e.g., Amato, 1987; Riggio, 2001). This lack of attention is surprising and unfortunate. Sibling relationships are the longest-surviving family relationships and an important source of comfort and support throughout the life course (Campbell, Connidis, & Davies, 1999; Eriksen & Gerstel, 2002; Voorpostel, Van der Lippe, Dykstra, & Flap, 2007). Therefore, not only may parental divorce be more disruptive to the nuclear family than what is commonly thought, but it may also have a stronger and longer-lasting effect if sibling relationships deteriorate. In this study, we aimed to further our understanding of the effect of parental divorce on sibling relationships, and we did so in three ways.

First, we assessed the effect of parental divorce on sibling relationships in adulthood. As such, there are two opposing views: The first states that the experience of parental divorce brings siblings closer together, whereas the second perspective argues that parental divorce drives them apart (e.g., Riggio, 2001). Although some small-scale studies have found support for the former view (e.g., Bush & Ehrenberg, 2003; Kier & Lewis, 1998), larger-scale studies have supported the latter. Sibling relationships are more hostile and conflict laden (MacKinnon, 1989; Panish & Stricker, 2001; Sheehan, Darlington, Noller, & Feeney, 2004), less supportive, and of lower quality (Amato, 1987; Milevsky, 2004; Riggio, 2001) in divorced families than in intact families. These studies have mostly focused on sibling relationships in childhood and adolescence (e.g., Amato, 1987; MacKinnon, 1989) or young adulthood (Milevsky, 2004; Riggio, 2001). By our focus on sibling relationships beyond young adulthood, we gain knowledge about whether this negative effect of parental divorce persists in middle and late adulthood.

Second, we aimed to understand why parental divorce affects sibling relationships. One of the most important explanations for the adverse consequences of parental divorce is that it is not the divorce per se but the parental conflict that goes hand in hand with divorce that causes children to
be worse off (Amato, 2000; Emery, 1982; Fischer, 2004). Also, the literature on siblings emphasizes the role of parental conflict in explaining why parental divorce affects sibling relationships (Brody, 1998; Sheehan et al., 2004), but only a few studies have directly assessed the extent to which parental conflict explains the adverse effects of parental divorce on sibling relationships (Milevsky, 2004; Panish & Stricker, 2001).

Third, we aimed to understand the conditions under which parental divorce is more or less detrimental to the sibling bond. The child adjustment literature often points out that the negative effect of parental divorce may be nonexistent in high-conflict families because children are no longer exposed to this harmful conflict when parents split up (Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995; Morrison & Coiro, 1999). The assumption that divorce may be better than staying together in case of high conflict has, to our knowledge, not been tested in the context of sibling relationships.

The effect of parental divorce on the sibling bond and the role of parental conflict are examined by using large-scale survey data from the Netherlands. We focus on three aspects of the sibling relationship: contact, conflict, and relationship quality. Our data and research design improve on prior studies that examined the effect of parental divorce on sibling relationships. First, we have a larger sample than that of prior studies, which often include no more than 300 respondents. Second, we use reports from both siblings in the dyad rather than rely on the reports of only one sibling. Third, we include more control variables than other studies have. As such, our findings provide more conclusive answers to the question of whether, why, and when parental divorce affects the sibling bond.

**Theoretical Background**

Divorce goes hand in hand with stressful events that may be harmful to children (Amato, 2000). Stress results from the loss of financial resources, given that the economic situation often worsens after divorce (Bianchi, Subaiya, & Kahn, 1999; Poortman, 2000). Children also experience stress because of the loss of emotional and social support resulting from the reduced contact with the nonresidential parent and the greater strains on the residential single parent (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Manning & Smock, 1999). Another important stressor, one central to our discussion here, is the parental conflict associated with divorce. In the process leading up to divorce, parents often have conflicts, and these may linger on (Fischer, De Graaf, & Kalmijn, 2005). This parental conflict may in turn induce stress in children.
Researchers have argued that the stress resulting from parental conflict and the loss of economic and social resources affects the sibling relationship in two opposite ways. First, children may compensate for this stress by developing closer sibling bonds as they seek support and comfort from their brothers and sisters (Bank & Kahn, 1982; Hetherington, 1988). Second, the stress may translate into aggression and hostility toward siblings (Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994; Cummings, Zahn-Waxler, & Radke-Yarrow, 1981; Dunn, Deater-Deckard, Pickering, & ALSPAC Study Team, 1999; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Stocker & Youngblade, 1999). Over and above the stress that parental conflict induces in children, the conflict associated with parental divorce is expected to have a negative effect on sibling relationships for two other reasons. First, children who often see their parents quarrel are likely to imitate this behavior in their relationships with others, including siblings (Amato, 1993; Bandura, 1977). Second, children may have to choose whose side they are on when parents fight (Amato, 1993), which is likely to strain sibling relationships as well.

These arguments suggest that parental divorce may have a positive or a negative effect on the sibling bond, but most of the arguments go in the direction of a negative effect. Although scarce, existing research also suggests a negative effect. Young children and adolescents from divorced families are found to experience more conflict and hostility in their relationships with siblings (Amato, 1987; MacKinnon, 1989). Moreover, research on adults suggests that this negative effect persists in adulthood. Samples of young adults have shown that siblings of divorced parents are less close and supportive than siblings from intact families (Milevsky, 2004; Riggio, 2001), and findings based on samples of older adults have shown such negative effects of parental divorce in cases of sibling conflict (Panish & Stricker, 2001). Given that most evidence is in the direction of a negative effect, we expect that siblings of divorced parents have less contact, more conflict, and lower relationship quality than do siblings from intact families.

In light of these arguments, we also expect that at least part of the divorce effect on sibling relationships can be explained by parental conflict; that is, the bond between siblings from a divorced family is worse because their parents more often had conflicts. Empirically, the divorce adjustment literature consistently shows that adverse child outcomes are partly explained by parental conflict (see reviews by Amato, 1993, 2000). Evidence in the context of sibling relationships is rare, and it pertains to adult siblings only. These studies suggest that the effect of parental divorce is mediated by marital satisfaction (Milevsky, 2004) and that indicators for marital quality are more important determinants of sibling relationships than parental divorce per se (Milevsky, 2004; Panish & Stricker, 2001).
Parental conflict may also condition the effect of parental divorce on sibling relationships. In case of high conflict between parents, it may be better for children if their parents were to divorce because this may mitigate the stressful situation at home (Amato et al., 1995; Hanson, 1999; Jekielek, 1998; Morrison & Coiro, 1999). This means that the effect of parental divorce is less negative or even positive when parents often fight, as compared to low-conflict families. Empirical evidence indeed shows that this is the case when considering child well-being and problematic behavior (e.g., Hanson, 1999; Strohschein, 2005). Although not tested so far, a similar reasoning might hold for sibling relationships—namely, if being exposed to parental conflict (rather than divorce) causes the sibling bond to deteriorate, then a divorce might improve sibling bonds, given that siblings would no longer be exposed to parental conflict (or at least they would be to a lesser extent). Compared to that of low-conflict families, the negative effect of parental divorce on sibling relationships would therefore be expected to be weaker or even positive in case of high parental conflict.

Method

We used data from the first wave of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (Dykstra et al., 2005). Prospective data following siblings before and after parental divorce into adulthood would be ideal. Given the long time span, it may come as no surprise that such data are not (yet) available. We therefore relied on cross-sectional data that contain retrospective information about parental divorce and conflict. Although longitudinal data have become quite common in the child adjustment literature on parental divorce (for review, see Amato, 2000), the few studies on parental divorce and sibling relationships have relied on cross-sectional data as well. Our data are unique, however, in that we have reports from both siblings of the dyad, thereby providing a more accurate view on the sibling bond.

Between 2002 and 2004, 8,161 individuals between 18 and 80 years old were interviewed face-to-face in their homes by means of a structured computer-assisted interview. The overall response rate was 45%—a rate quite comparable to those of other Dutch family surveys (Dykstra et al., 2005). After the interview, respondents were asked to fill out a supplementary self-completion questionnaire, and 92% of them returned it. Compared to the Dutch population, women were overrepresented, especially women in the age group of 35 to 54 years old. Young men (aged 18 to 30 years) were somewhat underrepresented. There was an overrepresentation of people with children at home and an underrepresentation of children still living with their parents.
During the interview, respondents (from here on, also called *anchors*) reported on several family ties, including their siblings. One of the respondent’s siblings was randomly selected by the computer to be approached with a self-administered questionnaire. If the respondent had only one sibling, this sibling was selected. About 27% of the respondents had one sibling, 26%, two; 16%, three; and 31%, more than three. When the anchor gave permission to contact this randomly selected sibling, a questionnaire was sent to the sibling or left at the anchor’s residence. In all, 2,731 sibling questionnaires were received, which was 60% of all sibling questionnaires that were mailed or left at anchors’ homes. This constitutes a response rate of 36% of all eligible siblings, including those who were selected but for whom the anchor did not grant contact permission. After excluding dyads with missing values on the dependent variables and dyads who were non-biological siblings, we were left with a sample of 2,707 complete dyads, containing information from 5,414 siblings.

Response by siblings was selective. First, coresident siblings were more likely than non-coresident siblings to return questionnaires (64% versus 37%). Second, the response rate was selective with respect to the perceived quality of the relationship as reported by the anchor; that is, the better the relationship, the higher the response rate. As a consequence, our sample is biased toward siblings who have good relationships. As such, we may underestimate the effects of parental divorce and conflict, thereby providing a conservative test of the hypotheses. We would like to note, though, that the bias toward positive sibling relationships is also likely to be present in other research on siblings. A common approach is to ask respondents to choose the sibling with whom they have most contact or feel the closest and then ask questions about this sibling relationship. Our procedure to randomly select a sibling to be questioned overcomes this problem of selective selection, even though selective response by the randomly chosen siblings again introduces bias toward positive relationships.

**Measures**

The three dependent variables—that is, contact frequency, conflict, and perceived relationship quality—tap different aspects of the sibling relationship. Contact frequency is a general often-used measure that indirectly indicates the content of the relationship. Relationship quality and conflict are more indicative of the content of the sibling relationship. These aspects refer to positive and negative aspects of personal relationships and differ in time frame: Whereas the recent occurrence of conflict is an instantaneous
measure, overall relationship quality gives a general picture of the relationship. The correlation is therefore only –.13. The correlation of contact frequency with relationship quality is moderately positive (.33) and with conflict, low and positive as well (.12); having much contact thus indicates a more positive and more negative content. A limitation of the measures for conflict and relationship quality is that they are based on single items and have a limited range. Contact frequency, however, is based on two items and has a wider range. Below we present details on how the dependent variables were constructed. Important to note is that each indicator of the sibling relationship is assessed by both siblings, which comes down to having two observations for the same construct per sibling dyad. As explained later, the analyses use reports of both siblings as dependent variables, while adjusting for their interdependency.

**Contact frequency.** Anchors were asked to report how often they had seen each other, as well as how often they had had contact by phone, e-mail, or letter in the past 12 months. Answers to both questions ranged from 1 (never) to 7 (daily). The scores were summed, and the resulting scale therefore ranges from 2 to 14, with higher scores indicating more frequent contact. Siblings were asked the same questions in the written questionnaire, and the same procedure was used here to construct a scale for contact frequency. Coresident siblings were not questioned about their contact frequency. The analyses therefore pertain to the subsample of non-coresident siblings (n = 5,232 siblings; n = 2,616 sibling dyads).

**Conflict in the sibling relationship.** Anchors were asked whether they had experienced any conflicts, strains, or disagreements with their sibling during the past 3 months. Response categories were as follows: 1 = not at all, 2 = once or twice, and 3 = several times. Siblings answered the same question in the written questionnaire. Because few anchors and siblings reported having had conflicts several times (less than 2%), we had to construct a dichotomous measure indicating the presence (coded as 1) versus absence of conflicts (coded as 0). In 15% of the sibling relationships, conflicts had occurred (see Table 1).

**Relationship quality.** Anchors were asked, “Taking everything together, how would you describe your relationship with [sibling]?” Answers were rated as follows: 1 = not great, 2 = reasonable, 3 = good, 4 = very good. The same question was included in the sibling’s written questionnaire. Because few siblings qualified their relationship as not great (2%) or reasonable
(15%), these categories had to be combined. In addition, we combined the two upper categories and created a dichotomous variable indicating a positive (coded as 1) versus a not-so-positive relationship. Additional ordinal logistic analyses using all three categories (not great and reasonable combined, good, and very good) show that the upper two categories do not significantly differ from each other and so yield similar conclusions as the analyses using a dichotomous variable. Because logistic models are easier to interpret than ordinal models, we use the dichotomous version. Table 1 shows that 83% of the siblings reported having a good or very good relationship with their siblings. Our central independent variables refer to parental divorce and parental conflict. Information was obtained from the anchor by means of retrospective questions.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Dependent and Independent Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sibling contact</td>
<td>7.711</td>
<td>1.827</td>
<td>2-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling conflict</td>
<td>0.150</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling relationship quality</td>
<td>0.833</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental divorce</td>
<td>0.075</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental conflict</td>
<td>1.853</td>
<td>1.929</td>
<td>0-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size sibling group</td>
<td>3.130</td>
<td>2.387</td>
<td>1-17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ln geographical distance to sibling</td>
<td>2.034</td>
<td>3.835</td>
<td>–13.82-5.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coresident sibling</td>
<td>0.034</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling lives abroad</td>
<td>0.037</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent deceased</td>
<td>0.547</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>44.740</td>
<td>14.447</td>
<td>14-85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>0.621</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>0.717</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>0.673</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.580</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>6.380</td>
<td>2.474</td>
<td>1-11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>0.577</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response from sibling (not anchor)</td>
<td>0.500</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0-1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Level 1: n = 5,232 for sibling contact (because this information was not available for coresident siblings).
Parental divorce. Anchors were asked if their parents ever divorced or separated. Of all sibling pairs, 7.5% had divorced parents ($n = 202$). On average, parents divorced 20.0 years ago ($SD = 12.5$ years). Our analyses thus refer to the long-term consequences. We do not take into account the time since parental divorce or age at divorce, because our cross-sectional data do not allow for a straightforward interpretation; duration effects may as well be interpreted in terms of differential effects, depending on the age at divorce (and vice versa), and both may be interpreted in terms of differences between divorce cohorts. We also do not take into account whether parents remarried, because there were too few divorced families in which neither parent remarried ($n = 46$) to get reliable estimates.

Parental conflict. Anchors reported the occurrence of the following sorts of conflict between the parents when the anchor was fifteen years old: heated discussions, serious reproaches, temporarily no communication, escalating fights, temporarily living apart. If parents were already divorced when the anchor was fifteen years old, anchors reported on parental conflict prior to divorce. Response categories were as follows: $0 =$ not at all, $1 =$ once or twice, $2 =$ several times. Scores were summed, creating a scale ranging from 0 to 10 (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .73$). The average score was 1.85, indicating low levels of conflict (Table 1). Note that when parents divorced long after the age of 15 (i.e., about 25% of parents divorced after the anchor was 18 years old), our measure of predivorce parental conflict may not be that reliable in that no conflict may have been present at that time. Our results may therefore underestimate the role of parental conflict. The retrospective nature of the questions, however, may lead to an overestimation of its role. Respondents whose parents divorced may in hindsight be less positive than respondents from intact families about the parental relationship, thereby leading to a higher correlation between parental divorce and conflict. Empirically, the correlation between parental divorce and conflict is found to be moderately positive (.31).

To avoid spurious effects, our analyses control for sociodemographic characteristics that are known to affect the sibling bond (e.g., Connidis, 2001; Eriksen & Gerstel, 2002; White & Riedmann, 1992) and that are related to parental divorce (e.g., Amato, 2000; Heaton, 1990; Joung, Van de Mheen, Stronks, Van Poppel, & Mackenback, 1998; Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993). Parental divorce is known to negatively affect children’s socioeconomic achievements, the timing of leaving the parental home, and future family behavior. Because employment, educational level, coresidency of siblings, and partner and parenthood status also affect the sibling bond, we control for these variables. In addition, we control for siblings’ religiosity
because parental divorce is more likely in nonreligious families and because religiosity positively affects sibling relationships. Because divorce is associated with worse health and higher mortality and because the sibling relationship is likely to change after parental death, we also control for whether either parent was deceased. The number of children is also known to be negatively associated with parental divorce and with the way that siblings interact. Another source of spuriousness is the geographical distance between siblings because parental divorce may lead to greater geographical distances between family members and because the distance is likely to affect the sibling relationship as well. Finally, we control for some basic information—namely, the age of the siblings and whether the report about the sibling bond comes from anchor or sibling. All information was provided by both siblings except for the geographical distance between them, whether the sibling lived in the same household (assigned 0 on geographical distance) or abroad (assigned the mean on geographical distance), the size of the sibling group, and whether either parent was deceased. This information was provided by the anchor. Descriptive statistics of the controls can be found in Table 1.

**Analytical Strategy**

We use reports from both siblings, which means that we have two observations per sibling dyad, and each is treated as a separate record in the data file. As a result, we have nonindependent data (Kenny, Mannetti, Pierro, Livi, & Kashy, 2002). The structure of the data (i.e., siblings are nested within dyads) causes the observations within sibling dyads to be more similar than those between dyads. Multilevel analysis is a useful tool for such nested data because it takes the nonindependent nature of the data into account (Sayer & Klute, 2005). The higher level (Level 2) is the dyad, and every dyad contains two Level 1 units, representing the answers from both siblings in the dyad. The dependent variables are reported by both siblings and so refer to Level 1. The central independent variables—that is, parental divorce and conflict—are reported by the anchor and refer to siblings’ shared family background—thus, Level 2. We use multilevel regression analysis for sibling contact, and we use logistic multilevel analysis to estimate models for sibling conflict and relationship quality. Both the regression and logistic models are random-effect models. In logistic models, coefficients can be interpreted by taking the antilog ($e^\beta$) to determine how strongly the odds of conflict and a positive relationship increase or decrease when the independent variable increases by 1. Explained variance was calculated using an extension of the McKelvey and Zavoina measure (Snijders & Bosker, 1999).
We estimate three models. Model 1 includes the controls and parental divorce (Model 1A for sibling contact, Model 1B for relationship quality, and Model 1C for conflict). These variables are entered all at once. This model shows the main effect of parental divorce. In Model 2, parental conflict is added to examine whether parental conflict explains part of the effect of parental divorce. Methodologically, parental conflict is a mediating variable (see Baron & Kenny, 1986). A comparison of the effect of parental divorce in Model 1 and Model 2 shows the extent to which parental conflict explains the effect of parental divorce. Finally, Model 3 includes an interaction term between parental divorce and parental conflict to test whether the effect of parental divorce is dependent on the amount of predivorce parental conflict. In methodological terms, parental conflict is a moderating variable here (see Baron & Kenny, 1986). The main effect of parental divorce in Model 3 shows its effect in case of no conflict, and the interaction term shows how much the effect of parental divorce increases (in case of a positive interaction) or decreases (in case of a negative interaction) when the amount of parental conflict increases.

Results

Models 1A, 1B and 1C in Table 2 show the effects of parental divorce on sibling contact, relationship quality, and conflict, respectively. The results partially support our hypotheses. In line with expectations, sibling conflict is more likely to occur when parents are divorced: The odds of sibling conflict are significantly increased by about 50% \((100 \times [e^{.401} – 1])\). Contrary to expectations, however, we find no significant effects of parental divorce on sibling contact and relationship quality. Perhaps the effect is only present for sibling conflict because in this case imitation of parental behavior may be at play: The parental conflict associated with divorce is imitated by children in how they behave toward their siblings, thus resulting in higher sibling conflict—even though they may evaluate their relationship as being positive or they may have as much contact as siblings from intact families. It is therefore insightful to take into account the role of parental conflict, as done in Models 2A to 2C.

In these models, parental conflict is added to assess whether the effect of parental divorce is mediated by parental conflict. For all aspects of the sibling relationship, parental conflict is found to be an important determinant, much more so than parental divorce. When parents had more conflicts before divorce, siblings report less contact, more conflict, and a lower-quality relationship. Given that parental conflict has such strong effects, to what extent
Table 2
Effects of Parental Divorce and Parental Conflict on Sibling Contact, Conflict, and Relationship Quality: Coefficients From Multilevel Models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Contact</th>
<th>Relationship Quality</th>
<th>Conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1A</td>
<td>Model 2A</td>
<td>Model 3A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental divorce</td>
<td>.150</td>
<td>.259*</td>
<td>.163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental conflict</td>
<td>-.051**</td>
<td>-.055**</td>
<td>-.119**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Divorce × Conflict</td>
<td>.027</td>
<td>.156*</td>
<td>-.090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size sibling group</td>
<td>-.118**</td>
<td>-.118**</td>
<td>-.119**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographical distance</td>
<td>-.235**</td>
<td>-.234**</td>
<td>-.234**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coresident sibling</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling lives abroad</td>
<td>-.980**</td>
<td>-.967**</td>
<td>-.968**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.020**</td>
<td>-.020**</td>
<td>-.020**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>-.065</td>
<td>-.065</td>
<td>-.065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>-.187**</td>
<td>-.188**</td>
<td>-.188**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With children</td>
<td>-.077†</td>
<td>-.077†</td>
<td>-.076</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent deceased</td>
<td>-.041</td>
<td>-.049</td>
<td>-.050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.182**</td>
<td>.185**</td>
<td>.185**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-.009</td>
<td>-.008</td>
<td>-.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>.072†</td>
<td>.066</td>
<td>.066</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response from sibling</td>
<td>-.083**</td>
<td>-.083**</td>
<td>-.083**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Pseudo) R-square</td>
<td>.230</td>
<td>.232</td>
<td>.233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rho</td>
<td>.648</td>
<td>.647</td>
<td>.647</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: n = 5,414 siblings; n = 2,707 sibling dyads. In case of analyses for contact: n = 5,232 siblings; n = 2,616 sibling dyads.

a. Not included in model for contact, because contact information pertains only to non coresident siblings.

b. Overall R-square for random effects regression model for contact and pseudo R-square for random effects logit models for relationship quality and conflict.

†p < 0.10. *p < .05. **p < .01 (two-tailed).
can parental conflict account for any divorce effects? Because parental divorce exerts only a significant effect in the case of sibling conflict, this question is relevant only for sibling conflict. As expected, the effect of parental divorce on sibling conflict is strongly reduced after parental conflict is controlled for, and it is even no longer significant in Model 2C. The increased conflict among siblings from divorced families can therefore be completely explained by the parental conflict that comes with divorce. Although the effects of parental divorce were not significant to begin with for sibling contact and relationship quality (see Models 1A and 1B), effects of parental divorce become positive when parental conflict is controlled for, particularly for sibling contact. Hence, if siblings from divorced families would have experienced the same amount of parental conflict as siblings from intact families, then their contact is even more intense than that of siblings from intact families.

Models 3A, 3B, and 3C show whether the effect of parental divorce is dependent on parental conflict by including an interaction term between parental divorce and parental conflict. Contrary to expectations, the interaction effects for sibling contact and sibling conflict (Models 3A and 3C) are not significant, even though the effects are in the expected direction. For sibling relationship quality, we do find the expected positive interaction effect, indicating that parental divorce becomes increasingly less detrimental to the sibling relationship when parents have more conflict. The main effect of parental divorce in Model 3B shows that parental conflict lowers the quality of the sibling relationship in case of no parental conflict, but the effect fails to reach significance. This slightly negative effect turns into a positive effect when parental conflict is well above average: The turning point is about 3 on the conflict scale (0.513/0.156). Parental divorce appears to have a liberating effect on children in case of high conflict between parents, but results are not strong given that this is only the case for sibling relationship quality.

Overall, the effects of the controls conform to earlier findings. A random sibling plays a less significant role in someone’s life when the sibling group is greater, thereby leading to less contact, less conflict, and lower quality. The same holds when geographical distance increases, and when siblings share a household, their role is particularly salient. When people age and experience important transitions into adulthood (i.e., employment, partner, parenthood), the sibling relationship becomes less important, thus leading to less contact, less conflict, and lower quality. When either parent is deceased, sibling conflict is higher, but there is no relation with relationship quality or contact. Women reported more conflict and contact. Education has little effect, and
religious people have higher-quality sibling relationships. Finally, responses coming from anchors differ from sibling reports in that the latter reported more conflicts, less contact, and a slightly higher-quality relationship.

Conclusion

This study was one of the few studies about the effect of parental divorce on sibling relationships. Our results show that siblings from divorced families more often have conflict-laden relationships in adulthood than do siblings from intact families. There were, however, no differences between siblings from divorced and intact families regarding the more positive aspects of their relationships—that is, relationship quality and contact frequency. As such, our findings show weaker support than do previous studies for any negative effects of parental divorce on adult sibling relationships. Studies by Riggio (2001) and Milevsky (2004), for example, found sibling relationships among young adults to be less positive in cases where parents divorced. Besides differences in measures and the number of controls, the inconsistent findings across studies may be explained by the older average age of our sample, which is about twice as high as that in the studies by Milevsky and Riggio. In our sample, the divorce occurred about 20 years ago on average, and the weaker support found here may suggest that the negative effects of parental divorce wear off as siblings progress into adulthood. Because our cross-sectional design did not allow us to do so, we strongly encourage future researchers to examine more directly whether the effects of parental divorce persist in the long term or diminish as time goes by.

Even though no effects were found for siblings’ contact and relationship quality, parental divorce was still associated with more conflict in the long term. This strong effect for sibling conflict points at the importance of imitation and modeling of parental behavior. Siblings from divorced families may have more conflicts because they simply copied this behavior from their quarreling parents, even though they still feel positive toward each other. Indeed, parental conflict appears to be a crucial factor in the association between parental divorce and sibling conflict. Greater sibling conflict in divorced families could be explained by the greater parental conflict in these families. Furthermore, parental conflict was found to be a far more important determinant of sibling relationships than parental divorce per se. These results corroborate the findings by Milevsky (2004) and Panish and Stricker (2001). Interestingly, if the greater conflict in divorced families is taken into account, siblings from divorced families are found to have more
intense contact. If it were not for the overall higher levels of conflict at home, parental divorce may thus even lead to better sibling relationships (see Riggio, 2001).

Finally, there are indications that parental conflict conditions the effect of parental divorce. Parental divorce improves relationships among siblings in cases of high conflict. These findings conform to earlier research on other child outcomes, such as well-being and problem behavior, showing that children are actually better off when quarreling parents divorce (e.g., Hanson, 1999; Morrison & Coiro, 1999; Strohschein, 2005). We would like to remark, though, that no such differences between low- and high-conflict families are found for sibling contact and conflict.

Our data and research design improved on the few earlier studies on this topic, most notably in that we used reports from both siblings of the sibling dyad rather than reports from only one sibling. The study suffered from certain limitations as well, and these can be improved on in future research. First, our measures for sibling conflict and relationship quality were based on single-item measures and dichotomized. Preferably, continuous scales based on several items tapping positive and negative aspects of the sibling bond should be used in future extensions of this study. Second, the use of information from both siblings came at a price in that selective sibling response may have led to a sample biased toward sibling pairs who get along well. The role of parental divorce and parental conflict may therefore be greater than what our results suggest. Third and most important, we relied on a cross-sectional retrospective survey. Our findings may be biased by recall biases and by our lack of information about the precise temporal ordering of parental conflict and divorce. Longitudinal data are needed to more conclusively address the role of parental divorce and parental conflict.

Despite these shortcomings, our study has offered greater insight into the effect of parental divorce on sibling relationships than that of prior studies. In particular, there was little research on whether the consequences of parental divorce are conditioned by the amount of parental conflict. We recommend that future research focus on other such conditions. We would especially like to point at the role of remarriage and siblings’ ages at parental divorce. The child adjustment literature considers these factors to be important moderators of divorce effects (Amato, 2000; Fischer, 2004), but sibling studies on these issues are rare and have yielded inconsistent findings (Deater-Deckard, Dunn, & Lussier, 2002; Milevsky, 2004; Riggio, 2001). Recently, the child adjustment literature has begun to examine whether the effect of parental divorce has declined over time as divorce has become a widespread phenomenon (e.g., Sigle-Rushton, Hobcraft, & Kiernan, 2005; Wolfinger, 1999). In light of rising
divorce rates and the importance of sibling relationships over the life course, it would be worthwhile to examine historical change in the effect of parental divorce on sibling relationships.

References


The Effects of Divorce on Children

Patrick F. Fagan and Aaron Churchill

January 11, 2012

Introduction

Each year, over a million American children suffer the divorce of their parents. Divorce causes irreparable harm to all involved, but most especially to the children. Though it might be shown to benefit some individuals in some individual cases, over all it causes a temporary decrease in an individual’s quality of life and puts some “on a downward trajectory from which they might never fully recover.”

Divorce damages society. It consumes social and human capital. It substantially increases cost to the taxpayer, while diminishing the taxing portion of society. It diminishes children’s future competence in all five of society’s major tasks or institutions: family, school, religion, marketplace and government. The reversal of the cultural and social status of divorce would be nothing less than a cultural revolution. Only a few generations ago, American culture rejected divorce as scandalous. Today, law, behavior, and culture embrace and even celebrate it.

Divorce also permanently weakens the family and the relationship between children and parents. It frequently leads to destructive conflict management methods, diminished social competence and for children, the early loss of virginity, as well as diminished sense of masculinity or femininity for young adults. It also results in more trouble with dating, more cohabitation, greater likelihood of divorce, higher expectations of divorce later in life, and a decreased

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desire to have children. Paul Amato, professor of sociology at Pennsylvania State University summed it up: divorce leads to “disruptions in the parent-child relationship, continuing discord between former spouses, loss of emotional support, economic hardship, and an increase in the number of other negative life events.”

The last year for accurate numbers on children annually affected by divorce was 1988 when the Center for Disease Control stopped gathering the data. That year the number was over 1,044,000. However, since then the percent of women who have been divorced has continued to rise. Therefore, conservatively, we estimate the number to be at least 1,000,000 children per year. Should one add the number affected by the dissolution of “an always intact” cohabitation of natural parents, the number is significantly greater. We do know that for all U.S. children, as of the latest data from the 2009 American Community Survey, only 47 percent reach age 17 in an intact married family.

Divorce detrimentally impacts individuals and society in numerous other ways:

- Religious practice: Divorce diminishes the frequency of worship of God and recourse to Him in prayer.
- Education: Divorce diminishes children’s learning capacity and educational attainment.
- The marketplace: Divorce reduces household income and deeply cuts individual earning capacity.
- Government: Divorce significantly increases crime, abuse and neglect, drug use, and the costs of compensating government services.
- Health and well-being: Divorce weakens children’s health and longevity. It also increases behavioral, emotional, and psychiatric risks, including even suicide.

The effect of divorce on children’s hearts, minds, and souls ranges from mild to severe, from seemingly small to observably significant, and from short-term to long-term. None of the effects applies to each child of every divorced couple, nor has any one child suffered all the effects we will discuss. There is no way to predict how any particular child will be affected nor to what extent, but it is possible to predict divorce’s societal effects and how this large cohort of children will be affected as a group. These effects are both numerous and serious.

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The major issue for researchers is no longer to learn what the ill effects of divorce are, but to understand the extent of these effects on children and grandchildren and to identify ways of reversing their intergenerational cycle.

I. Effects on the Family: Cyclical Brokenness

A. Weakened Parent-Child Relationships

When parents divorce each other, another sort of divorce occurs between the parents and their children. The primary effect of divorce (and of the parental conflict that precedes the divorce) is a decline in the relationship between parent and child.\(^6\) Immediately after a divorce, most parents have two sets of problems: their adjustment to their own intrapsychic conflicts and to their role as a divorced parent. The stress of divorce damages the parent-child relationship for as many as 40 percent of divorced mothers.\(^7\) The support they receive from home is rated much lower by children of divorced parents than by children from intact homes,\(^8\) and these negative ratings become more pronounced by the time children are in high school\(^9\) and college.\(^10\)

Children in divorced families receive less emotional support, financial assistance, and practical help from their parents.\(^11\) Divorced homes show a decrease in language stimulation, pride, affection, stimulation of academic behavior, encouragement of social maturity, and warmth directed towards the children. The presence of fewer toys and games is common, as is an increase in physical punishment.\(^12\) Though some studies show that parental divorce itself may not

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affect parenting, it often leads to worry, exhaustion, and stress for parents. These factors affect both parenting and parental control. Thus, divorce and separation result in less caring and more overprotective parenting during the adolescent years.

Though the child’s ability to trust their parents, close friends, and others “is strongly linked to positive parent-teen relationships regardless of parental divorce,” parental divorce makes it more difficult for children to trust their parents, while a “decline in the closeness of the parent-child relationship mediates much of the association between parental divorce, marital discord, and offspring’s psychological wellbeing in adulthood.”

Though one review of the literature conducted in the United Kingdom found “that although children are at increased risk of adverse outcomes following family breakdown and that negative outcomes can persist into adulthood, the difference between children from intact and non-intact families is a small one, and the majority of children will not be adversely affected in the long-term,” the rest of this paper contradicts this conclusion.

B. Weakened Mother-Child Relationships

Children of divorced mothers have poorer and less stimulating home environments. Furthermore, divorced mothers, despite their best intentions, are less able than married mothers to give emotional support to their children. Divorce also causes a slight decline in children’s trust of their mothers when parental divorce occurs between birth and age four; however, after controlling for

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the quality of the parent-child relationship, this effect all but disappears.\textsuperscript{21} Compared with continuously-married mothers, divorced mothers tend to be less affectionate and communicative with their children, and to discipline them more harshly and more inconsistently, especially during the first year following the divorce.\textsuperscript{22}

Divorced mothers have particular problems with their sons, though their relationship will likely improve within two years,\textsuperscript{23} even if, as often occurs, discipline problems persist for up to six years after the divorce.\textsuperscript{24}

C. Weakened Father-Child Relationships

Contact. Divorce leads to a decline in the frequency and quality of parent-child contact and relationships,\textsuperscript{25} and it becomes difficult for nonresidential parents, 90 percent of whom are fathers, to maintain close ties with their children.\textsuperscript{26} For example, children spend significantly more nights with their mother than their father.\textsuperscript{27} Nearly 50 percent of the children in one study reported not seeing their nonresident father in the past year, and the small number that had recently stayed overnight at the father’s residence did so for a special visit, not as part of a regular routine.\textsuperscript{28} An analysis of the National Survey of Families and

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Valarie King, “Parental Divorce and Interpersonal Trust in Adult Offspring,” Journal of Marriage and the Family 64, no.3 (2002): 648.
\item E. Mavis Hetherington, Roger Cox, and Martha Cox, “Effects of Divorce on Parents and Children,” in Nontraditional Families: Parenting and Child Development, ed. Michael E. Lamb (New York, NY: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1982), 223-288. There is increasing evidence that many divorced families already had these patterns long before the divorce.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Households found that about one in five divorced fathers had not seen his children in the past year, and fewer than half the fathers saw their children more than a few times a year. By adolescence (between the ages of 12 and 16), fewer than half of children living with separated, divorced, or remarried mothers had seen their fathers at all in more than a year, and only one in six saw their fathers once a week.

Contact with the father declines over time after a divorce, though this pattern is less pronounced the older the child is at the time of the divorce. Daughters of divorced parents were 38 percent less likely than their peers in intact families to have frequent contact with their fathers, and sons of divorced parents were 20 percent less likely.

**Emotional Closeness and Well-being.** Children’s relationships with their parents worsen after a divorce. Marital disruption creates distance between parents and children, even compared to children living in married but unhappy families. Divorced parents also report significantly diminished satisfaction with their former spouse’s relationships with their children, though parental divorce

percent of the children whose fathers were nonresident had never-married (as opposed to married and then divorced or separated) fathers.

29 This is a federally funded survey of 13,000 respondents conducted by the University of Wisconsin in 1987-1988, 1992-1994, and 2001-2003.


tends to affect the relationship of the child and the opposite-sex parent more than the child and their parent of the same sex.\textsuperscript{38}

![Father Rated Warm and Loving](image)

Divorced fathers, especially non-custodial fathers, do not fare well with their children. Children report more distant relationships with their fathers,\textsuperscript{39} and fathers report “a more negative change in their relationships with their children than [do] custodial mothers.”\textsuperscript{40} The pattern of worsening relationships after the breakup holds for both sons\textsuperscript{41} and daughters,\textsuperscript{42} and more conflict during the divorce process increases the likelihood of distance between the father and his children.\textsuperscript{43} However, as time passes after the breakup, conflict between father and child decreases. Additionally, older children typically experience less conflict with their nonresident fathers than do younger children.\textsuperscript{44}


\textsuperscript{40} Marsha Kline Pruett, Tamra Y. Williams, Glendessa Insabella, and Todd D. Little, “Family and Legal Indicators of Child Adjustment to Divorce Among Families With Young Children,” \textit{Journal of Family Psychology} 17, no. 2 (2003): 174.


Divorce leads to a decline in children’s ability to trust their fathers, which does not bode well for the lifetime happiness of divorced children. Young adults who feel emotionally close to their fathers tend to be happier and more satisfied in life, regardless of their feelings towards their mothers. However, children and adolescents who do feel close to the father following a divorce experience better outcomes.

Children from divorced families receive less emotional support from their fathers than children from intact families. Divorced fathers are less nurturing, and more likely to drift away from younger children if denied legal custody at the time of the divorce. Nonresident fathers also “have considerably less opportunity to influence their children's attitudes and behavior,” a reality of which the implications this paper will attempt to explore. Ultimately, the proportion of children who enjoy a consistently close relationship with their father is much higher among adolescents whose parents remain married (48 percent) than among those whose parents divorce (25 percent).

**Persisting Effects.** Boys, especially if they live with their mother, respond with more hostility to parental divorce than girls do, both immediately following the divorce and for a period of years thereafter. Girls often fare worse than boys when living with their father or stepfather after a parental divorce. By the time

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children, particularly daughters, attend college, their affection for their divorced father wanes significantly.55

D. Weakened Grandparent-Grandchild Relationships
Divorce negatively affects grandparent/grandchild relationships. Paternal grandparents frequently cease to see their grandchildren as their grandchildren’s contact with their own father, the grandparents’ son, diminishes.56 Furthermore, compared to never-divorced grandparents, grandparents who were themselves divorced had less contact with their adolescent grandchildren and engaged in fewer shared activities with them,57 and divorced grandparents are less likely to agree that their grandchildren are a valuable part of their lives.58 Divorced paternal grandparents were less likely to play a mentoring role in the life of their grandchildren than divorced maternal grandparents.59

E. Children’s View of Divorce
Regardless of age, children of divorce deeply resent the strains and difficulties which arise in long-held family celebrations, traditions, daily rituals, and special times, and rate these changes as major losses.60 Grown children continue to see their parents’ divorce very differently than do the parents. Judith Wallerstein, a clinical psychologist from San Francisco, was the first to disturb the nation in 1980 with her research on the effects of divorce on children.61 She found that 10 percent of children felt positively about their parents’ divorce, but 80 percent of the divorced mothers and 50 percent of the divorced fathers judged the divorce good for them 15 years after the divorce.62

Girls. Young men and women react in slightly different ways to their parent’s divorce. Young women from divorced families will feel a need for love and attention and yet fear abandonment; they will also be prone to both desire and

61 Her research was on children from families in affluent Marin County, near San Francisco.
62 As reported in David Larson, The Costly Consequences of Divorce (Rockville, MD: National Institute for Healthcare Research, 1995), 42.
anxiety. Women whose parents divorce are likely to be hampered or even overwhelmed by anxiety when it comes time to make decisions about marriage, though some “women with no ill effects from paternal divorce, may develop [the] security of friendship-based love quite well.” One study linked parental divorce to lower relationship commitment and confidence in women but not in men.

**Boys.** While parental divorce affects the child’s view of marriage, girls may be less influenced in their attitudes towards divorce “because they have more role models of intimacy and marriage as the ideal in their environment than boys do, especially in the media.” By contrast, boys have fewer role models of intimacy outside of their families. Hence a father’s modeling if interpersonal skills is more important for boys. Men from father-absent homes also experience less masculine sexual identification and more feminine sexual identification.

Men whose parents divorced are inclined to be simultaneously hostile and a “rescuer” of the women to whom they are attracted, rather than the more open, affectionate, cooperative partner, more frequently found among men raised by parents of an intact marriage. By contrast, the problem of being overly meek or overly dominant is much more prevalent in the romantic relationships and marriages of the daughters of divorced families than it is among daughters of intact marriages.

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F. Children’s Weakened Ability to Handle Conflict

Divorce diminishes children’s capacity to handle conflict. The difference between marriages that remain intact and those that end in divorce lies primarily in the couple’s ability to handle marital conflict and move towards agreement. Parental modeling clearly diminishes many children’s capacity for stable marriage later in life, though some children may react by doubling their efforts to ensure stability.

For instance, compared to students from intact families, college students from divorced families use violence more frequently to resolve conflict and are more likely to be aggressive and physically violent with their friends, male or female.\(^71\) In their own marriages, children of divorced parents are more likely to be unhappy, to escalate conflict, to communicate less, to argue frequently, and to shout or to physically assault their spouse when arguing.\(^72\) Thus, the likelihood of divorce is transmitted across generations.\(^73\)

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\(^73\) Researchers have found that the children of violent parents do better if their parents separate. However, if the parents’ conflict is not violent or intense, their children fare better in their own marriages if their parents remain married. Obviously, the best solution for all concerned is that parents learn how to handle conflict and to cooperate with each other, thereby restoring family harmony.
G. Children’s Diminished Social Skills

Social Skills. Gerald Patterson of the Oregon Social Learning Center concluded that “[p]oor social skills, characterized by aversive or coercive interaction styles, lead directly to rejection by normal peers.”

Fear of such peer rejection is twice as likely among adolescents of divorced parents. Their social relations are likely to be damaged in several ways and characterized by more problems relating to peers, fewer childhood friends, and a greater tendency to complain about lack of peer support.

Kent State University faculty members conducted a major national study on the effects of divorce in 1987. The study found that, compared to children from intact families, children of divorced parents did worse when rated by both parents and teachers on peer relationships, hostility towards adults, anxiety, withdrawal, inattention, and aggression.

Psychological Behaviors. A variety of psychological outcomes are associated with parental divorce that lead to vulnerability in some children and resiliency in others. According to one study, child antisocial behavior decreases after the dissolution of marriages in highly dysfunctional families, and “the higher the level of family dysfunction prior to divorce, the greater the reduction in child antisocial behavior after the divorce.” Nevertheless, children whose parents

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78 Sylvie Drapeau and Camil Bouchard, “Support networks and adjustment among 6 to 11 year-olds from maritally disrupted and intact families,” Journal of Divorce and Remarriage 19 (1993): 75-97. Daughters of divorced parents, in a University of Michigan study, had significantly greater difficulty in having and keeping friends and were more frequently depressed while at college. See Kristen M. McCabe, “Sex Differences in the Long-term Effects of Divorce on Children: Depression and Heterosexual Relationship Difficulties in the Young Adult Years,” Journal of Divorce and Remarriage 27 (1997): 123-134.
divorce will exhibit more anxiety and depression and antisocial behavior than children from intact families.\textsuperscript{83}

Children who experience divorce at any age will continue to be affected their whole lives, tending to “exhibit higher malaise scores at age 33 than their contemporaries whose parents remained married.”\textsuperscript{84}

**Behavioral Problems.** Children of divorced or separated parents exhibit increased behavioral problems,\textsuperscript{85} and the marital conflict that accompanies parents’ divorce places the child’s social competence at risk. Even in intact families that have low to medium levels of conflict, children still have “fewer behavior problems than those in the high-conflict, disrupted families.”\textsuperscript{86} Another study suggests that parental conflict affects the outcomes of children’s behavior problems, regardless of parents’ marital status, and sometimes “there is no statistical difference in the level of behavior problems observed for children whose parents separated or divorced and for children whose parents remained together.”\textsuperscript{87}

During a divorce, conflict between parents is often accompanied by less affection, less responsiveness, and more inclination to punish their children, which leaves their children feeling emotionally insecure.\textsuperscript{88} These children are more likely to perceive their social milieu as unpredictable and uncontrollable.\textsuperscript{89} Children who engage in fighting and stealing at school are far more likely to come from broken homes than are well-behaved children.\textsuperscript{90} Other studies have confirmed that children of divorced parents exhibit more behavioral problems than do children


\textsuperscript{86} Donna Ruane Morrison and Mary Jo Coiro, “Parental Conflict and Marital Disruption: Do Children Benefit When High-Conflict Marriages Are Dissolved?” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61 (1999): 634.


Boys whose parents divorced while they were in elementary school tend to develop problems in the years following their parents’ separation. While problem behavior increases immediately following the divorce among boys whose parents divorced while they were in middle school, their problem behavior steadily decreases in the year after the divorce.92

![Problem Behaviors of Children by Parents’ Marital Status](image)

**Problem Behaviors of Children by Parents’ Marital Status**

National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1996

- Lied About Something Important
- Stole From a Store
- Damaged School Property
- Gotten Drunk
- Hurt Someone Enough to Need a Doctor
- Had to Bring Parents to School
- Skipped School without Permission

**H. Children’s Early Departure from Home**

Children of divorced parents move away from their families of origin in greater proportions93 and earlier94 than do children of intact marriages due to low levels

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of family cohesion and harmony. The greater the unhappiness in their parents’ marriage, the earlier children leave home to get married, cohabit, or live on their own. Some children who experience marital disruption in adolescence may leave home “at such young ages that it resembles running away from home.”

Furthermore, compared with children living in intact, two-parent families, runaway children with stepparents are only 70 percent as likely to return home. Stepchildren are over 20 percent more likely to leave home earlier. According to Frances K. Goldscheider and Calvin Goldscheider, “children whose families gained a stepparent while they were adolescents . . . increase their odds of leaving home to marry by about 100 percent.”

I. Children’s Sexual Practices and Attitudes as Adults

Attitudes toward Sexuality. When parents divorce, their children’s attitudes about sexual behavior change. Children’s approval of premarital sex, cohabitation, and divorce rises dramatically, while their endorsement of marriage and childbearing falls. Children from divorced families are also more likely to believe that marriage is not important prior to having children and are more likely to have a child out of wedlock. This holds true even after controlling for socioeconomic status. Furthermore, sexual permissiveness on the part of
divorced parents significantly increases permissive attitudes and behavior in both their sons and daughters.103

"Ever Had Intercourse at 14 Years of Age or Younger"


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure of Family of Origin</th>
<th>Percent Who Have Ever Had Intercourse at 14 Years Old or Younger</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married, Always Intact</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married Stepfamily</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intact Cohabiting Partners</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting Stepfamily</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Divorced Parent</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always Single Parent</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Children from divorced families have an earlier sexual debut than children from intact families.104 American105 and British106 studies repeatedly show that daughters of divorced parents will be more likely to approve of premarital sexual intercourse107 and teen sexual activity108 and to engage in early sexual intercourse.


outside of marriage. The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth reports that African-American girls are 42 percent less likely to have sexual intercourse before age 18 if their biological father is present at home. By contrast, the presence of a stepfather increases by 72 percent the likelihood of sexual intercourse before age 18 for Latino girls.

In addition to an increased likelihood of being sexually active, girls from divorced families are more likely to engage in risky sexual behavior, to have more frequent sexual intercourse, and to have more sexual partners. In a study comparing girls from New Zealand and the United States, researchers found that the earlier a father leaves the home, the higher his daughter’s risk of early sexual activity and teenage pregnancy. In the United States, girls whose fathers had left before their daughters were five years old were eight times more likely to become pregnant while adolescents than were girls whose fathers remained in the home.

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For sons, parental divorce is correlated with adolescent sexual intercourse, earlier sexual debut, and the acquisition of a sexually transmitted disease. Other studies have confirmed that male children of divorce have more relationships and more sexual partners than young men from intact families.

The influences of divorce on sexual behavior extends into adulthood: Adults raised in divorced families are more likely to engage in short sexual affairs and also have more sexual partners than adults from intact families.

**Sexual Behaviors.** Virginity among teenagers of all ages correlates closely with the presence of married parents. Each change in family structure during adolescence (from married to divorced, from single to married, or from divorced to stepfamily) increases the risk of initiation of sexual intercourse for many of the teenage children in these unions.

The children of divorce date more and thus have a higher turnover of dating partners and more failed romantic relationships, may contribute to a larger number of sexual partners, a risk factor for the acquisition of sexually transmitted diseases and a host of emotional repercussions. Even without the

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120 Medical Institute for Sexual Health, *Sexual Health Today* (Austin, TX: Medical Institute of Sexual Health, 1997), 105.
addition of a working mother, divorce leads to an above-average number of sexual partners for the children of divorce as adults.\textsuperscript{123}

Following a divorce, most mothers have to work full-time. This combination of divorce and a full-time working mother leads to the highest level of teenage sexual activity\textsuperscript{124} and is significantly correlated with multiple sexual partners in adult life.\textsuperscript{125}

"Ever Had an Unwed Pregnancy" by Structure of Family of Origin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure of Family of Origin</th>
<th>Percent of Girls Who Have Ever Had an Unwed Pregnancy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married Always Intact</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married Stepfamily</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intact Cohabiting Family</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting Stepfamily</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Divorced Parent</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always Single Parent</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


\textbf{Pregnancy}. Women whose parents separated during childhood are more likely to have an out-of-wedlock teenage pregnancy,\textsuperscript{126} and men with divorced or separated parents are more likely to father a child with a teenage mother.\textsuperscript{127} In
Britain, the phenomenon of out-of-wedlock pregnancy to children of divorced parents has also been found.\textsuperscript{128}

**Abortion.** Daughters of divorced parents have more abortions than the daughters of non-divorced parents, according to a Finnish study.\textsuperscript{129}

**J. Children’s Increased Trouble in Romantic Relationships**

**Trust in Relationships.** Parental divorce often leads to low trust among children,\textsuperscript{130} and those who casually date exhibit “the strongest effects of parental divorce, suggesting that the repercussions of parental divorce may be in place before the young adults form their own romantic relationships.”\textsuperscript{131} The divorce of their parents makes dating and romance more difficult for children as they reach adulthood. Parental divorce horrifies young adults’ heterosexual relationship experiences though the connection is more evident for women than for men, according to one study.\textsuperscript{132}

The effects carry into adulthood. When compared with women from intact families, women from divorced families also reported less trust and satisfaction in romantic relationships.\textsuperscript{133} Children of divorced parents fear being rejected, and a lack of trust frequently hinders a deepening of their relationship.\textsuperscript{134} One study showed that individuals whose parents divorced were more likely than individuals whose parents remained married to believe that relationships were beset by infidelity and the absence of trust, and they were also more likely to believe that relationships should be approached with caution.\textsuperscript{135}

\textsuperscript{128} Andrew J. Cherlin, Kathleen E. Kiernan, and P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale, “Parental Divorce in Childhood and Demographic Outcomes in Young Adulthood,” *Demography* 32 (1995): 299-316.


General Attitudes toward Marriage. One study reported that persons raised in divorced families have less positive attitudes towards marriage, and more positive attitudes towards divorce. This negative attitude about marriage leads to decreased commitment to romantic relationships, which in turn is related to lower relationship quality.\textsuperscript{136} In Sweden, where parental rejection is very high, no significant differences were found between individuals from divorced and intact families in their attitudes towards marriage and divorce.\textsuperscript{137} Thus the more common divorce and rejection is among adults, the more the attitudes and expectations of rejection are mainstreamed among children, even those raised in intact married families.

Adult male children of divorced parents show more ambivalence than men from intact families about becoming involved in a relationship,\textsuperscript{138} though they invest more money and tangible goods in casual dating relationships. Women share this ambivalence and demonstrate even more conflict, doubt, and lack of faith in their partner’s benevolence and tend to place less value on consistent commitment.\textsuperscript{139} Unwed teen mothers, who have expectations of rejection and divorce in relationships, seem to retain negative attitudes towards men instilled by their parents’ divorce.\textsuperscript{140}

Attitudes about Divorce and Marriage. Compared with children of always-married parents, children of divorced parents have more positive attitudes towards divorce\textsuperscript{141} and less favorable attitudes towards marriage.\textsuperscript{142} Specifically, “adolescents who have experienced their parents’ divorces and remarriages may feel that marriage is unpredictable and unstable.”\textsuperscript{143} People raised in divorced families are less likely than those from intact families to believe that marriage is

\begin{itemize}
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enduring and permanent, are less likely to insist upon a lifelong marital commitment, and are less likely to think positively of themselves as parents.

These attitudinal differences among children of divorced parents are noticeable even as early as kindergarten. Children from divorced families are more tolerant of divorce than are children from intact families, though this is only likely if their parents had remarried. Without remarriage, the effect on their views of divorce was not significant. The mothers’ accepting attitudes toward divorce causes more children to be accepting of divorce themselves. These positive attitudes towards divorce affect not only likelihood of divorce, but also overall relationship quality.

After controlling for age, high levels of post-divorce interparental conflict are associated with less positive views of marriage among adolescents. One study of adolescents after a parental divorce reported that many children fear that their future marriages will lack love, trust, or communication, and that they will be beset by infidelity, conflict, or abuse. They also worry that their marriages will fail or that their spouse will abandon them, a finding common to another study published that year (2008).

In her study of children of divorced parents from Marin County, California, Judith Wallerstein found that the children of divorced parents still had persistent anxiety about their chances of a happy marriage a decade after their parents’ divorce. This anxiety interfered with their ability to marry well: Some failed to form satisfying romantic ties, while others rushed impulsively into unhappy

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The evidence shows that “adult children of divorce who eventually wed are more likely to divorce than are adult children from intact families.”

**Expectations to Marry or Divorce.** The children of divorced parents, stepfamilies, or single parents are less likely to expect to marry. Children who have experienced parental divorce are more likely to expect to divorce, compared with children of intact families. Children of divorce also have more negative attitudes towards marriage and a preference for smaller family sizes, although the negative attitudes are mitigated by their parents’ remarriage.

**Likelihood to Marry or Divorce.** Clearly, one generation passes on its marital instability to the next. Sons of divorced parents with less educated mothers have an increased tendency to forgo marriage. Additionally, parental divorce

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Children who have experienced parental divorce are more than twice as likely to divorce, compared with children of intact families. One study found that adults who experience parental divorce have chances of divorce 38 percent higher than adults raised in intact families. Significantly, this increase is not seen in children whose parents’ marriage ended because of the death of one of the parents.

Children of divorce are 39 percent more likely to marry other children of divorce, after controlling for education. Couples with one spouse from a divorced home are nearly twice as likely to divorce as couples with both spouses from non-divorced families. Worse still, couples with both spouses from divorced families over three times more likely to divorce than couples with both spouses from non-divorced families.

Children who experience three or more transitions in family structure are much more likely to divorce later in life, compared to children who did not experience such family transitions. That is, 59 percent of the individuals who have never

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experienced a transition are predicted to never end a marriage, compared to those who experienced three or more transitions, whose likelihood to never divorce is about 33 percent.\footnote{166}

Daughters of divorced parents divorce more than sons of divorced parents do.\footnote{167} The risk of divorce in the first five years is 70\footnote{168} to 76\footnote{169} percent higher for the daughters of divorced parents than for daughters of intact marriages.\footnote{170}

**Marital Behaviors.** Parental divorce is also associated with lower marital quality for their children. This manifests itself in arguing more about the family,\footnote{171} increased rates of jealousy, moodiness, infidelity, conflicts over money, excessive drinking, and drug use.\footnote{172} Analysis of the 1987-1988 wave of the National Survey of Families and Households showed that children of divorce whose marriages were less than “very happy” communicated less and were more than twice as likely to argue frequently and to shout and hit when they argued.\footnote{173}

The child with an available father, both in the early and the adolescent years, is more companionable and responsible as an adult.\footnote{174} In particular, “boys who feel close to their fathers, regardless of biological status, have better attitudes about intimacy and the prospect of their own married lives than boys who do not feel close to their fathers.”\footnote{175}
K. Increased Cohabitation among Children as Adults

Children of divorced parents are more likely than children of always-married parents to have more positive attitudes towards cohabitation\(^{176}\) and more negative attitudes towards marriage.\(^{177}\) When they leave home, they are two to three times as likely to cohabit\(^{178}\) and to do so earlier,\(^{179}\) especially if their parents divorced during their teenage years.\(^{180}\)

Daughters of divorced parents anticipated cohabiting before marriage, regardless of the amount of affection between them and their fathers. Among daughters of intact marriages, it was mainly those with poor relationships with their fathers who anticipated they would cohabit.\(^{181}\)

II. Effects on Religious Practice: Diminished Faithfulness

Following a divorce, children are more likely to abandon their faith,\(^{182}\) and they may be less traditional themselves, with a parental model differing from a lifelong commitment to marriage.\(^{183}\) Adult offspring raised in stepfamilies are less religious


(especially compared to those raised in happy married homes).\textsuperscript{184} Furthermore, abandoning religious practice deprives children of its beneficial effects in a host of areas: marital stability, sexual restraint, education, income, crime, addictions, physical and mental health, and general happiness.\textsuperscript{185}

III. Effects on Education: Capacity and Achievement

A. Diminished Learning Capacity

Outcomes and Achievements. Divorce and separation correlate positively with diminished school achievement and performance.\textsuperscript{186} Daniel Potter of the University of Virginia found that elementary school children who experience parental divorce immediately begin performing worse academically than their peers from intact families. This gap persists through elementary school.\textsuperscript{187}

![Average GPA English/Math by Family Structure](chart.png)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Structure</th>
<th>Average GPA English/Math Combined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTACT STEP COHABIT (BOTH NATURAL)</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COHABIT (ONE NATURAL)</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIVORCED NEVER MARRIED</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adolescent Health Survey, Wave I. Adolescents grade 7-12.


Children exposed to unilateral divorce are less educated by adulthood. Children have lower educational aspirations and test scores during the process of their parents’ marital disruption. Children of divorced parents are also more likely to be held back a grade and have lower GPAs. High school students in intact families have GPAs 11 percent higher than those from divorced families. One study (controlling for parental education, parental occupation, family size, etc.), found that children whose parents divorce get about seven tenths of a year less education than children from intact families.  

Children whose mothers divorced and remained divorced did worse over time on Peabody Individual Achievement Test reading recognition tests (which gauge children’s ability to recognize and pronounce words) than children from intact married families. By age 13, there is an average difference of half a year in reading ability between children of divorced parents and children from intact families.  

In the Kent State University Impact of Divorce Project, which used a national sample study of 699 elementary students, children from divorced homes performed worse in reading, spelling, and math and repeated a grade more frequently than did children in intact two-parent families. The project’s findings led the researchers to conclude that children and young adolescents suffered long-term negative effects following divorce. Paternal absence is detrimental to cognitive test scores for young children, and paternal presence influences girls’

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performance in math. Teenagers who experience parental divorce score lower than their counterparts from intact families on math, science, and history tests.

Some studies show that the correlation between adolescent family disruption and educational attainment is weaker after controlling for the family’s socioeconomic status. This finding likely reflects the influence of income on each. One of divorce’s attendant problems is the financial instability it inflicts on those who experience it.

Lack of family transitions after divorce does not eliminate the effect of the divorce on student academic performance, but it does provide their performance in math and social studies a certain degree of protection, compared to students who live in unstable families with multiple family transitions.

**Age at Divorce.** Norwegian research found that children who experience divorce early in life are likely to have lower educational outcomes, finding that the effect of divorce on education is strongest when the child is young. An American study, by contrast, found that those who had experienced a late divorce (between grades six and 10) were more likely to get low grades than children who experienced an early divorce (between kindergarten and grade five).

**Consequences of Moving.** Residential mobility accounts for 29 percent of the academic performance gap between children living in stepfamilies and children living with both biological parents. Moving tends to increase behavioral, emotional, and academic problems for adolescents.

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200 See section titled “Effect on the Marketplace: Financial Struggle.”
Overall, the less instability of an sort in the child's life following divorce, the less the impact on the child.

B. Behavior at School

Psychosocial Outcomes. One study found that children in pre-disrupted families (whose parents' relationship would later dissolve) exhibit more academic, psychological, behavioral, and drug-related problems than children whose families remained intact. Daniel Potter, referenced above, also found that the deleterious effect of divorce on children’s psychosocial well-being is an important factor in poor math and reading scores.

Absence. One study found that children whose parents divorced skipped nearly 60 percent more class periods than children from intact families. Girls appeared to be more affected than boys.

Dropout, Suspension, or Expulsion. Children who experienced their parents’ divorce or separation are less likely to complete high school. An Australian study found that children of divorced families are 26 percent more likely to drop out of secondary school than children raised in intact families, and found that remarriage did not alleviate the effects of divorce on children’s educational attainment.

C. Less College Attainment for Children

Children whose parents or grandparents divorce tend to have fewer years of education. Divorce and separation reduces children’s likelihood of attending college. Furthermore, 33 percent of students who have already completed secondary school but who have experienced their parents’ divorce graduate from college, compared to 40 percent among their peers from intact families. However,

it seems that parental divorce has a greater impact on likelihood to complete secondary school than college.\textsuperscript{214}

**College Expectations.** Youth living in married stepfamilies and cohabiting stepfamilies (i.e., with the mother’s live-in boyfriend/partner) and single-parent families after a divorce or separation have lower college expectations than youth who have always lived in intact families.\textsuperscript{215}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{chart.png}
\caption{“Ever Received a Bachelor’s Degree” by Structure of Family of Origin}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{216} Catherine E. Ross and John Mirowsky, “Parental Divorce, Life-Course Disruption, and Adult Depression,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 61 (1999): 1040.
occupational status, more materialism and compulsive buying, and higher likelihood of living in public housing by age 33.

Among women whose parents divorced, “statistically significant differences exist in educational attainment, level of household income, [and] receiving welfare...compared with women raised in intact marriages.”

Median Income and Net Worth by Family Type

A new concentration of the population into these classes,
A new economy

**Family Income.** According to 1994 data reported by Mary Corcoran, professor of political science at the University of Michigan, children of divorced or separated parents (though better off than children of always-single parent families) are economically disadvantaged. “During the years children lived with two parents, their family incomes averaged $43,600, and when these same children lived with one parent, their family incomes averaged $25,300.” The household income of a child’s family dropped, on average, by about 42 percent.

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following a divorce. Parents’ accumulated wealth differs widely across family structures and affects the amount of financial support available for their children’s college education. Compared with married parents (59 percent), divorced parents (36 percent) are less likely to pay for all or most of their children’s college expenses. Divorced parents (29 percent) are actually more likely than married parents (17 percent) to provide no assistance at all.

B. Financial Weakness among Divorced Women

Decreased Income. Many women experience a substantial decline in their financial circumstances after divorce, which in turn affects their children. Analysis of the 1987-1988 and 1992-1994 waves of the National Survey of Families and Households found that household income for a mother and children fell by $13,000 after divorce. Additionally, their standard of living was 20 percent lower and their odds of owning a home were 12 percentage points lower.

The detrimental effects of divorce on women’s income vary based on the relative earnings capacity of the husband and wife. Women who experience the largest income losses (38.5 percent for a mother with one child) are “the ‘low education’ mother[s] who [were] married to a ‘high education’ man.” Conversely, highly educated mothers who were married to a less educated man experience the smallest effect of divorce on their equivalent household income (11.2 percent).

Poverty. High divorce rates mean that the children of poor families have fewer adults to support them. Nearly 56 percent of poor families with children had only one adult, but less than 14 percent of non-poor families with children have only one adult. One study goes so far as to assert that “[c]hanges of family structure [i.e., divorce] are by far the major cause of initial spells of poverty among female-headed households.”

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224 Peggy O. Corcoran (Ann Arbor, MI: Survey Research Center, University of Michigan, 1994, unpublished paper).
Most women entering welfare dependency do so because of divorce, particularly those women whose family’s income (prior to the divorce) was in the bottom half of the income distribution.\textsuperscript{231} Seventy-five percent of all women who applied for welfare benefits in the late 1980s did so because of a disrupted marriage or a disrupted relationship in which they lived with a man outside of marriage.\textsuperscript{232} Mothers who are employed at the time of the dissolution of their marriage are much less likely to become welfare recipients than mothers who are not already employed.\textsuperscript{233}

There is some question regarding the efficacy of child support in decreasing poverty. Julia Heath found in 1992 that, particularly for white women, “[t]he most consistent positive predictor of length of poverty spell is number of children,” and wrote that this implied “that child support is not being sufficiently ordered by the courts, that the awards rendered are too small, or perhaps that the orders are not being enforced.”\textsuperscript{234} Philip Robins found in 1986 that “because the current legal system establishes such low child support award amounts, it does not appear to be an effective antipoverty device.”\textsuperscript{235} In general, as Paul Amato and Alan Booth wrote, “many men appear to view fatherhood as a package deal, accepting responsibility for children only as long as they are married to the mother.”\textsuperscript{236}

V. Effects on Government: Increased Crime, Abuse, and Use of Drugs

A. Increased Crime Rates

Robert Sampson (then professor of sociology at the University of Chicago) reported, after studying 171 cities in the United States with populations over 100,000, that the divorce rate predicted the robbery rate of any given area,

regardless of its economic and racial composition. In these communities, he found that lower divorce rates indicated higher formal and informal social controls (such as the supervision of children) and lower crime rates.\textsuperscript{237} In 1994, it was reported in Wisconsin that the incarceration rate of juvenile delinquents was 12 times higher among children of divorced parents than among children of married parents.\textsuperscript{238} In a British longitudinal study of males aged eight to 32, David P. Farrington, professor of criminology at Cambridge University, found experiencing parental divorce before age 10 to be a major predictor of adolescent delinquency and adult criminality.\textsuperscript{239} Adolescents from divorced families (particularly those in divorced single-father families) display more antisocial and violent behavior than adolescents in biologically intact families.\textsuperscript{240} An Australian parliamentary review of the literature found that divorce increases the likelihood that children will feel hostility and rejection.\textsuperscript{241}

![Family Structure: Comparative Rates Of Youth Incarceration](image)


Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services, Division of Youth Services, “Family Status of Delinquents in Juvenile Correctional Facilities in Wisconsin” (1994). The data from the report were merged with Current Population Survey data on family structure in Wisconsin for that year to derive rates of incarceration by family structure.


Children of divorced parents are significantly more likely than children of intact married families to be delinquent by age 15, regardless of when the divorce took place.242 A 1985 study that tracked one thousand families with children ages six to 18 for six years found that children living in intact married families exhibited the least delinquency, while children with stepfathers were more likely to exhibit the most disruptive behavior. (In this study, the behavior of single-parent children fell between that of children of intact and stepfather families.)243

Parental divorce contributes to what some studies term “externalizing behaviors,” which include weapon carrying, fighting, substance abuse, and binge drinking.244 Another study found that the sons of divorced parents are at no greater risk of involvement in delinquent behavior than boys living in intact families if the mother and father “engage in competent parenting.”245

Good parenting on the part of divorced fathers achieved no such effects for the daughters of divorce, according to this same study. Among adolescent girls, there is a strong correlation between family structure and delinquency,246 hostile behavior,247 drug use, larceny, skipping school,248 and alcohol abuse.249 One study found that parental divorce and maternal nonresidence led to delinquent behavior in girls if the mother-daughter relationship was satisfying: A stronger relationship correlated to more frequent exhibition of delinquency.250


B. Increased Abuse and Neglect

Child abuse is closely related to later delinquency, violence, and crime,251 and childhood abuse is more likely in the context of parental divorce.252 Subjection to pre-pubertal sexual contact is more common among children who have experienced their parents’ divorce,253 and individuals who had experienced sexual abuse were significantly more likely than those who had not experienced sexual abuse to have experienced an “adverse childhood event,” (such as parental divorce).254 Child neglect, which is frequently more psychologically damaging than physical abuse,255 is much more commonly present in families of separated and divorced persons than of married persons.256

Abuse is much higher among stepchildren (divorced and remarried) than among children of intact families. One study of Brazilian families reported that higher abuse rates in stepfamilies with stepfathers were attributable to higher incidence of mothers abusing their children. This study reported that children in stepfamilies with stepfathers were 2.7 times more likely to be abused than children in biologically intact households.257

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Living with a stepfather increases a child’s likelihood of subjecting to pre-pubertal sexual contact.\textsuperscript{258} The rate of sexual abuse of girls by their stepfathers is at least six or seven times higher,\textsuperscript{259} and may be as much as 40 times higher,\textsuperscript{260} than sexual abuse of daughters by their biological fathers who remain in intact families.

A study of 26 instances of fatal child abuse reported that 62 percent of perpetrators were the stepfathers of the abused children and that 81 percent of perpetrators were engaged in cohabiting relationships with the victimized child’s mother (15 percent of perpetrators were married to the victimized child’s mother).\textsuperscript{261} Another study reported that children under age five were 50 times more likely to suffer fatal abuse if they lived in homes with an unrelated adult (particularly a mother’s boyfriend) than if they lived in a biologically intact family.\textsuperscript{262}


Margo Wilson and Martin Daly, professors of psychology at McMaster University, Canada, reported that children two years old and younger are 70 to 100 times more likely to be killed at the hands of stepparents than at the hands of biological parents.\textsuperscript{263} (Younger children are more vulnerable because they are so much weaker physically.) British data are milder, but the research is not as rigorous as the Canadian research. In Britain, fatal abuse of children of all ages occurs three times more frequently in stepfamilies than in intact married families.\textsuperscript{264}

C. Increased Use of Drugs and Alcohol

Parental divorce (as previously stated) predicts externalizing behavior, such as tobacco use, alcohol consumption and binge drinking,\textsuperscript{265} and marijuana use.\textsuperscript{266} Parental divorce or separation also predicts increased adolescent use of other illegal drugs.\textsuperscript{267}


Men who experienced their parents’ divorce as children (between ages seven and 16) are more likely to smoke as adults.\textsuperscript{268} Males who have experienced parental divorce are also more likely to use alcohol and drugs.\textsuperscript{269} Women who experienced parental divorce between ages seven and 16 (but not those whose parents divorced later) are more likely to smoke and to drink heavily as adults than women whose parents remained married.\textsuperscript{270}

![Graph showing the percentage who ever used hard drugs by family structure.]

### VI. Effects on Child Health: Stunted Physical and Psychological Growth

#### A. Physical Health and Longevity

Parental divorce affects their children’s physical health and longevity. Those who experience parental divorce or separation are more likely to have health problems\textsuperscript{271} (often in spite of maternal remarriage\textsuperscript{272}) such as a significant increase


in injury rates, a doubled risk of asthma, and increased risk of asthma-related emergencies. Children whose parents divorce are also more likely to contract cancer of the upper aerodigestive tract, the esophagus, anus, pancreas, lungs, and cervix. The authors add, "The results show that offspring of divorced parents have increased cancer risks at tobacco-related, alcohol-related and sex-related sites." A Swedish study showed that young men with divorced parents had a slightly heightened risk of hospitalization and significantly increased risk of mortality.

The child of divorced parents has a higher risk of premature death. According to one study, parental divorce before the age of 21 is associated with a mortality risk increase of 44 percent and a lifespan shortened by an average of 4.5 years. A child’s mortality risk increases when his parents’ divorce occurs before reaching age four.

B. Increased Emotional and Psychiatric Burdens

Divorce wreaks havoc on the psychological stability of many children. A ranking generated by seventh and eighth grade students through a study in the late 1980s ranked parental divorce as the third most stressful life event of a list of 125 life events or experiences. Parental divorce was only ranked as less stressful than the death of a parent or close family member. Furthermore, the psychological effects of divorce are persistent: Children from divorced families

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have more emotional problems\textsuperscript{283} and negative feelings\textsuperscript{284} and less psychological well-being\textsuperscript{285} than adults than those from intact families.

Upon the divorce of their parents, children experience a wide range of emotional reactions, including sadness,\textsuperscript{286} anger,\textsuperscript{287} loneliness,\textsuperscript{288} depression,\textsuperscript{289} heightened anxiety,\textsuperscript{290} worry, lower life satisfaction,\textsuperscript{291} lower self-esteem\textsuperscript{292} and self-confidence,\textsuperscript{293} fear, yearning, rejection, conflicting loyalties, and a sense of fault for their parents’ problems.\textsuperscript{294} An analysis by David Popenoe of the National


\textsuperscript{292} Catherine E. Ross and John Mirowsky, “Parental Divorce, Life-Course Disruption, and Adult Depression,” \textit{Journal of Marriage and Family} 61 (1999): 1044.


Survey of Children found that divorce was associated with a higher incidence of several mental health problems in children: depression; withdrawal from friends and family; aggressive, impulsive, or hyperactive behavior; and either behaving disruptively or withdrawing from participation in the classroom. Parental divorce may also contribute to the development of mood disorders, bipolar I disorder, dysthymia (mild chronic depression), depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

When children experience parental divorce before age five, they are particularly vulnerable to emotional conflicts at the time of their parents’ separation. They will frequently cling to their parents and “regress” to bedwetting and other behaviors more characteristic of younger children. Older children, rather than clinging, frequently withdraw from home life and seek intimacy elsewhere. If divorce occurs while the children are teenagers (12 to 15 years old), they tend to react in one of two very different ways: by attempting to avoid growing up or by attempting to “speed through” adolescence. Finally, early sexual activity, substance abuse or dependence, hostile behavior, and depression are all more likely following divorce. These reactions are most likely if the parents divorced prior to age five, slightly less so if they divorce after age 10, and seemingly least of all during the five- to 10-year-old phase.

Divorce is related to increased depression and anxiety for both boys and girls of all ages. However, boys find parental divorce more emotionally disturbing than girls do, and that “boys with divorced parents tended to be more depressed

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than those from two-parent families regardless of the psychological adjustment, level of conflict, or quality of parenting manifested by their parents.\textsuperscript{303}

Psychological problems are less severe for those whose pre-divorce families were high-conflict families.\textsuperscript{304} According to Paul Amato of the Department of Sociology at Pennsylvania State University, child and adult well-being may actually improve after the end of an extremely conflicted marriage.\textsuperscript{305}

**International Findings.** The British National Longitudinal study of children born in 1958 found that those who experienced parental divorce between ages seven through 16 experienced significant increase in their risk of psychopathology.\textsuperscript{306} A large Finnish study found that 22-year-old children of divorced parents experienced more job loss, that sons experienced more conflict with supervisors and teachers, and that daughters experienced more interpersonal conflict.\textsuperscript{307} A large sample from Sweden (over 14,000 participants) confirms the negative effects of parental divorce on mental health, no matter the socioeconomic status of the family.\textsuperscript{308} German research yields similar findings,\textsuperscript{309} as does an Australian parliamentary report.\textsuperscript{310}


C. Damaging Behaviors

Suicide. Child suicide is often triggered by thoughts that his divorced parents reject him or have lost interest in him. The fact that the suicide rate has risen along with the divorce rate is no coincidence. One study reported that risk of a suicide attempt was higher in divorced families, though the association was eliminated after controlling for adverse experiences. As the work of Patricia McCall, a sociology professor at North Carolina State University, shows, the strongest demographic indicator of suicide is the family structure within which a person resides: the divorced family structure has the highest suicide rate. 

Women from divorced families are 1.46 times as likely to attempt suicide as women from intact families. An earlier study by the same author found that women raised in divorced families are 1.33 times as likely to attempt suicide; this finding holds true even after adjusting for various confounding factors, such as age, race, and income. This link between parental divorce and the rise in adolescent suicide has been found again and again in the literature. Cross-cultural studies of Japan and the United States have clearly demonstrated the link between divorce and suicidal thought.

317 Dana Lizardi, Ronald G. Thompson, Katherine Keyes, and Deborah Hasin, “Parental Divorce, Parental Depression, and Gender Differences in Adult Offspring Suicide Attempt,” *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 197 (2009): 901.
**Destructive Behavior.** A meta-analysis of 72 studies shows that parental divorce has a very strong effect on the likelihood of engaging in juvenile delinquent acts.320 Boys from divorced families exhibit more risky behavior than boys from intact families.321 Confirming the Amato conclusion referred to earlier,322 children in high-conflict households whose parents remain married exhibit more severe destructive behavior than children whose parents actually divorce.323

**VII. Research Has Not Yet Found the Terminus of These Long-term Effects**

Unlike the experience of divorced former spouses, a child’s suffering does not reach its peak at the divorce and then level off. Rather, the effect of the parents’ divorce can be played and replayed throughout the next three decades of a child’s life.324 For instance, an Australian parliamentary study tracked children whose parents divorced in 1946, and tested them two and three decades later. Even 30 years after the divorce, negative long-term repercussions still clearly affected the income, health, and behavior of many of the grown children. As Paul Amato writes, “Though some adults and children adjust relatively quickly to divorce...others exhibit long-term deficits in functioning.”325 Children’s well-being over the long term is determined by circumstances both prior to and after their parents’ divorce.326

**Intergenerational Effects.** Divorce has a profound intergenerational effect. One study showed that “ever-divorced grandparents live significantly farther away from the parent and grandchild...report a weaker relationship with the

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parent...and are more likely to be part of a family system where both generations have divorced (13 [percent] vs. 3 [percent]).

Paul Amato and Jacob Cheadle studied the long-reaching effects of divorce across three generations and found that “[d]ivorce in the first (G1) generation was associated with lower education, more marital discord, weaker ties with mothers, and weaker ties with fathers in the third (G3) generation. These associations where mediated by family characteristics in the middle (G2) generation, including lower education, more marital discord, and greater tension in the early parent-child relationships.”

This study demonstrates that parental divorce has consequences for children and subsequent generations. Amato and Cheadle also reported in this study that “[p]arental divorce doubled the odds of divorce” in the child’s own life.

Soon to Come Increase in Costs. Of special note is the finding that children of divorce are less likely to think they should support their parents in old age. This finding portends a monumental public cost problem for the frequently-divorced baby boom generation as it becomes the dependent elderly generation in the first half of the 21st century.

Conclusion

The family is the building block of society, and marriage is its foundation. Divorce has pervasive weakening effects on children and on all of the five major institutions of society—the family, the church, the school, the marketplace, and government itself. However, this foundation is growing weaker as fewer adults marry, more adults divorce, and more adults choose single parenthood or cohabitation.

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332 Between 1960 and 1990, there has been a 41 percent decline in marriage. The number of always-single persons has risen from 21 million in 1970 to 46 million in 1996. At the same time, cohabitation has jumped from 430,000 in 1960 to 4.25 million in 1998, an increase by a factor of 10. The literature also shows that cohabitation itself is linked to an increased likelihood of divorce; those who cohabit before marriage divorce at twice the rate of those who do not. Also, 40 percent of cohabiters separate before marrying; these former cohabiters, when they finally marry, divorce at twice the rate of those who marry their first cohabiting partner and at about four times the rate of those who do not cohabit before marriage. See: Larry L. Bumpass, “What’s Happening to the Family? Interactions Between Demographic and Institutional Change,” Population Association of America, 1990 Presidential Address, *Demography* 27 (1990), 483-498.
Society’s major institutions (family, church, school, marketplace and government) all have a great interest in reducing divorce to almost zero, for it weakens each institution by weakening the human capacities of each laborer, citizen, worshiper, and student that it touches. Leaders of these institutions must shoulder their responsibility to end the culture of rejection. Policymakers, pastors, and academics all bear the responsibility to motivate them in that direction.

American children today are weaker than children of previous generations—intellectually, morally, emotionally, and physically, and our human capital is decreasing. Moreover, the American nation today is socially weaker than in the past, and the America of tomorrow will be weaker still. For instance, few are willing to point to divorce as a major contributor to our economic problem. Americans in the media and in politics are comfortable pointing at a failing educational system or at teenage unwed mothers and the deleterious effects they have on children and society, but no one likes to dwell on the pervasive and broad negative effects of divorce.

It is necessary to know reality and the facts in order that we see and understand the whole bleak picture and are moved to set about the task of rebuilding a culture of families based on marriage, a culture of love and belonging, with all the societal props and protections necessary to make this familial norm normal once again. Each and every child deserves it. The nation needs it.

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The Blended Family Life Cycle

Komal Kumar

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The Blended Family Life Cycle

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ABSTRACT

Blended families face unique challenges that differ greatly from those encountered by nuclear families. Societal stereotypes that view blended families as abnormal, taking nuclear family functioning as the prototype for all family units, create a lack of role clarity for each of the members involved. Although many strategies exist with which to help families, many are based on nuclear family systems and thus are inapplicable to blended families. The creation of a blended family life cycle specific to blended family systems could help members of a blended family create a successful family unit as they work with a counselor.

KEYWORDS

Biological parent; blended family; blended family life cycle (BFLC); counselors; family life cycle (FLC); guidelines; stepchild; stepparent

Blended family systems are on the rise in Western societies as divorce and remarriages continue to increase. According to Statistics Canada, 12% of families are blended, comprising both simple and complex family systems (Statistics Canada, 2016). In the United States, this percentage is even greater, with 40% of adults having a family member who is not biologically related to them (Zeleznikow & Zeleznikow, 2015). As a result, blended family systems account for a large share of family units (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007). In particular, blended families are defined as a family system in which a new couple partnership is formed, either through remarriage or cohabitation, that includes children from previous relationships (Gonzales, 2009). This trend usually results from either the death of a parent or divorce (Riness & Sailor, 2015).

Historically, blended families have usually occurred as a result of spousal death. Although this is still a factor, most modern blended families result from separation (Turunen, 2014). By societal standards, these families are seen as being inadequate establishments compared to nuclear family systems (Dupuis, 2010). Blended family systems face special difficulties attendant on trying to create a shared household of unrelated family members: developing a relationship with a new partner outside of a parental role, dealing with external factors such as ex-spouses, and handling child-related issues (Cartwright & Gibson, 2013). Despite the presence of many resources and much literature to help build cohesion in family therapy, some unique challenges of blended families are not readily accounted for by existing
models. For example, although the family life cycle (FLC; Gerson, 1995) does not account for diverse families of many kinds (Candib, 1989), it remains valuable in family therapy—yet it does not account for the exceptional life stages of blended families.

Despite the prevalence of blended family systems, little research has explored role expectations for members of such families or how such families work and the exceptional challenges facing them (Blyaert, Van Parys, De Mol, & Buysse, 2016). Positive relationships among members of a blended family early on can be a critical factor in the longevity and durability of the unit (Kellas et al., 2014). A heightened awareness of the components of a blended family can help its members understand and communicate with each other (Purswell & Dillman, 2013).

The rules and boundaries used in nuclear family settings are counterproductive in blended family systems (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007). A blended family will have a different structure than a nuclear family, but the lack of guidelines for such a structure can make sustaining a strong unit difficult. A blended family life cycle (BFLC) guideline designed specifically for blended families would be valuable for not only members of a blended family, but also counselors. This article highlights aspects of blended family systems, exploring negative stereotypes associated with these family dynamics, distinctive challenges for each individual involved, the effects on children, the importance of a strong couple relationship, the traditional FLC, the lack of guidelines for use with blended family systems, and it proposes an FLC unique for blended families and indicates directions for future research.

**Blended families and societal expectations**

Societal expectations often keep blended families from incorporating FLC guidelines intended for nuclear families, diminishing the family unit’s cohesion. Although blended family systems are becoming progressively more common (Gonzales, 2009) and one day might outnumber nuclear families, negative connotations still surround the blended family structure.

Representations of loving blended families who work well together are few. Rather, popular movies depict wicked stepmothers who wish to harm their stepchildren (Whiting, Smith, Barnett, & Grafsky, 2007). Blended families are thought incomplete and are portrayed as undesirable (Blyaert et al., 2016). What is more, formation of a new union with children from past relationships brings new responsibilities, and the unique challenges of forming a blended family can be exacerbated by unrealistic goals, negative stereotypes about stepparents, feelings associated with the dissolution of the first family, use of labels that reflect societal expectations, and the complicated relationship dynamics that arise when children do not live in the primary residence (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007). Issues arise in all family units, but those in
blended family systems reinforce negative stereotypes, myths, and societal expectations—including negative designations of members of the family (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007). The persistence of these negative societal beliefs about blended families makes maintaining a strong family unit difficult indeed, something exacerbated by a notable lack of guidelines for doing so.

Although it is desperately needed, blended families have few resources to which to turn, for available resources are written in an unhelpful manner judgmental of their situations (Gonzales, 2009). Negative stereotypes can place the individuals in blended families—especially stepparents—in a difficult position, lacking understanding of what their role entails and resources with which to clarify their position. In addition, the legal system does not grant stepparents any parental authority over their stepchildren (Dupuis, 2010). If blended families separate, stepchildren might not have protection from the losses incurred, creating further negative implications, such as economic loss or loss of emotional support (Coleman, Ganong, Russell, & Frye-Cox, 2015). Although blended family systems differ greatly from nuclear family systems, the traditional family unit is continuously used as a “dominant cultural norm ... in society” (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007, p. 19). This situation is problematic considering the rise of the blended family in society. Unacknowledged, the unique challenges that blended families face can lead to negative emotions and even dissolution.

Unwarranted expectations that blended families will work like nuclear family systems can lead to negative emotions such as frustration and anger (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007). The stigma surrounding blended families must be dissolved to decrease dissolution rates and help blended families survive. Better support for blended families can occur “through research, exploration, and education ... myths can be challenged, stereotypes can be altered, and positive shifts in society’s perceptions ... will become a very probable outcome” (Riness & Sailor, 2015, p. 177). Creating an FLC for blended families can heighten awareness of the distinct needs of these families. Understanding the dynamics of each member of the family and his or her experiences within the blended family will highlight the unique challenges each role presents.

**Adults in the blended family**

All individuals within a blended family system have differing challenges and experiences that influence other family members. The many triangular relations within the blended family unit influence each other: “the relationship between the husband, wife, and ex-spouse; among the husband, wife, and stepchild; among the child, nonresidential parent, and stepparent; and among the residential parent, biological child, and stepchild” (DeGreeff & Platt, 2016, p. 113). Because lack of clarity within each role creates distinct challenges, guidelines for addressing these issues are essential. The following information provides insight
into the challenges that face biological parents and stepparents, with special attention to stepparents’ and ex-spouses’ roles.

**Biological parents**

Blended family systems have widely divergent dynamics and can include the involvement of many parental figures. Biological parents might feel caught in a middle position between their spouse’s and children’s conflicting demands (Dupuis, 2010). Because the biological parent and child relationship predates the new partnership and thus acts as a sanctuary, changing existing parent–child dynamics can be difficult when a new spouse and his or her children join a household (Dupuis, 2010). When Cartwright and Gibson (2013) studied biological parents’ coparenting relationships and their effects on shared biological children, participants primarily experienced negative emotions, such as frustration or hopelessness. Findings suggested that interacting with ex-spouses elicited these emotions, with considerable conflict surrounding child custody, finances, reliability, working together, and attitudes toward the new partnership. These circumstances also created conflict over how to manage the ex-spouse, even leading to thoughts of ending the new relationship. However, viewing the ex-spouse as a common enemy united couples (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007). Moreover, unresolved emotional ties to the former partner created insecurity for the coparent when the former spouse repartnered. This type of scenario created more conflict or interrupted prior arrangements regarding the child (Cartwright & Gibson, 2013). The resulting stress and conflict saw stepparents struggling to find their place in the family unit.

**Stepparents**

Stepparents might also play the role of biological parents, but the experience of playing both roles is a study in contrasts. A stepparent introduced to a preexisting parent–child system might feel excluded and confused about the role he or she plays for the stepchild (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007). Boundaries must establish whether the stepparent is a disciplinarian for the child, acts chiefly as a friend, and contributes financially—and whether the child even responds to and accepts the stepparent. The relationship between the stepparent and stepchild is a very crucial aspect of the blended family, influencing the total dynamics of the family unit (Dupuis, 2010). Although this relationship is often perceived as a negative one by society, stepfamily development is not always a negative experience (Kellas et al., 2014).

Stepparents are not always readily accepted as parental figures by stepchildren. Coleman et al. (2015) found that stepchildren classified stepparents as “(1) claimed, (2) disclaimed, or (3) unclaimed” (p. 778). Claimed stepparents were regarded as a family member, and the relationship could continue even
after dissolution of the relationship. Disclaimed and unclaimed stepparents were never looked on as family members to begin with (Coleman et al., 2015). Stepparents might also encounter stress in dealing with ex-spouses, which could create difficulties within the couple’s relationship (Cartwright & Gibson, 2013). They might also be jealous of all internal and external family members (DeGreeff & Platt, 2016).

Creating an understanding of how a blended family system differs from a nuclear family system could help stepparents transition into their new role and give them some realistic expectations to help them prepare for the challenges ahead (Riness & Sailor, 2015). Collaborating with a spouse to establish definitive roles can help minimize conflict and frustration and create cohesion within the family as a whole (Riness & Sailor, 2015). However, although stepparents might face similar obstacles, stepmothers and stepfathers can experience their roles very differently.

**Stepmothers**
The role of the stepmother can be a particularly bewildering one, for society expects more of mothers than it does of fathers (Riness & Sailor, 2015). The few studies comparing stepmother relationships with those of stepfathers have noted how societal myths portray stepmothers as harsh figures in the family unit (Whiting et al., 2007). Societal perceptions depict blended families to be created from death of a parent, as the arrival of a stepmother into a system can only be accepted as a form of completing a nuclear family system, rather than being an addition or competition against the biological mother (Hagman, 2013). This situation can cause challenges for a stepmother entering the family, especially when the biological mother still lives. Other challenges for stepmothers include ill-defined role expectations, spousal expectations, conflict with the biological mother, and feelings of not being backed up by the spouse (Whiting et al., 2007). These challenges can leave a stepmother “feeling isolated, unsupported, and ill prepared; acting as the primary parent or rule enforcer; feeling frustrated; and feeling rewarded” (Riness & Sailor, 2015, p. 176). Although most of these feelings are negative ones, some positive associations can also be formed. A feeling of reward results when a stepmother can coconstruct her role and meaning with her stepchild and feels that she is supported by her partner as a valued member of the family (Gallardo & Mellon-Gallardo, 2007). However, stepmothers report that most conflicts arose in their relationships with their stepchildren, with whom they did not feel as connected as a biological mother does with her offspring (Whiting et al., 2007).

Stepmothers also felt as if they were blamed for issues within the blended family, were underprioritized, and were ignored even in decision making that directly affected them, and they had mixed emotions about their partners and stepchildren (Craig, Harvey-Knowles, & Johnson, 2012). They reported
feeling that their partner was unsupportive, which contributed to the perceptions of their irrelevance and fears that the partner was choosing the children first—yet also to feelings of remorse and anger about wanting the spouse but not the children (Craig et al., 2012). Although there is overlap in the experiences of stepparents of both sexes, these challenges are unique to stepmothers.

**Stepfathers**

Despite some shared characteristics of being a stepparent, a stepfather’s experience might well differ greatly from a stepmother’s experience. In a study conducted by Blyaert et al. (2016), stepfathers reported fairly positive perceptions of their experience within the blended family. Many stepfathers felt included in the blended family, accepted and loved by their stepchildren, had a constructive relationship with the biological father, and were happy with their position. However, those who were biological fathers shared a different bond with their own children than with their stepchildren. The lack of a shared history or of an experience of the child’s early developmental years, or perhaps of blood ties, could be the cause.

Their role bore some similarity to that of stepmothers, with no legal parameters in place to define a clear role for stepfathers and a lack of role models for this position (even places such as Belgium, which require stepfathers but not stepmothers to financially support their stepchildren, do not legally recognize them as parental figures; Blyaert et al., 2016). Taking on all the responsibilities of being a father but receiving none of the power or influence that comes with being a biological father can present a challenge. Blyaert et al. (2016) reported generally positive perceptions of the stepfather–stepchild relationship, but Hilton, Harris, and Rice (2015) found that stepfathers were twice as likely to abuse a stepchild as were biological fathers. The unique challenges of a blended family, and the added stress of such aspects as dealing with an ex-partner or custody battles, might account for this increased risk (Hilton et al., 2015).

**Ex-spouses**

In any blended family system, the ex-spouse can be expected to exert an enduring effect. Dupuis (2010) noted that a parenting arrangement between the biological partners that allows ex-spouses to have some influence on the new blended family system can undermine a stepparent’s role, affecting every aspect of the blended family—especially the couple’s relationship—and thus creating conflict. The shared history between biological parents, which allows them to know each other well, can diminish a former partner’s self-worth (DeGreeff & Platt, 2016). Parents who repartner tend to perceive their ex-spouse as jealous of control or the affections of the biological child, creating
feelings of animosity (DeGreeff & Platt, 2016). Also, the addition of a stepparent can increase hostility in coparental relationships, for the new stepparent’s addition to the family requires modifications and alterations to fit the new family dynamic (Cartwright & Gibson, 2013), particularly when introducing new children. The relationship dynamics of all adults involved can influence the development of children.

**Effects on children**

Children who live in blended families are at greater risk of disadvantage than are children in nuclear families. Children are in blended family systems because they have lost a biological parent, whether through death or separation (Purswell & Dillman, 2013). Feelings of loss are common for children who enter a blended family system as they compare their new family to their first family when it was stable (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006). When roles and boundaries are poorly defined early in the new family system as children try to establish their new roles, stepchildren could exhibit behavioral issues (Purswell & Dillman, 2013; Shalay & Brownlee, 2007), feeling, like stepparents, unclear about their role while yearning to fit in and be an important member (Purswell & Dillman, 2013). If cohesion within the family does not occur, negative consequences could ensue, with such children having a greater probability of engaging in criminal behavior, heightening stress in the couple relationship, and decreasing the cohesiveness of the family unit (Apel & Kaukinen, 2008). A BFLC guideline should address the unique challenges that children experience in their relationship with their parents and their potential stepsiblings or half-siblings.

**Relationship with parents**

Children who enter a blended family have access to only one of their biological parents at a time even as they must accommodate the entrance of a stepparent. Biological parents, who enter into blended family systems on their own terms, often fail to incorporate their children into the new unit, which can appear unknown and unfamiliar (Kellas et al., 2014). The quality of a child’s relationship with the biological parent significantly influences the stepparent–stepchild relationship (Jensen & Howard, 2015). Hatred between biological parents and stepparents who are involved in a child’s life can stunt development and create a negative perception of the blended family, stymieing attempts to create a cohesively blended family unit (Cartwright & Gibson, 2013). However, children who have positive relationships with their biological parents tend to view their stepparents positively as well (Jensen & Howard, 2015).
The stepparent–stepchild relationship is essential to the blended family and can make the journey a peaceful or a bumpy ride, yet it is subjective, with “factors at the individual, subsystem, and systems levels … [influencing] how stepchildren perceive their relationship with their stepparent” (Jensen & Howard, 2015, p. 146). Stepchildren might also be reticent to create a positive relationship with the new stepparent, feeling as though they are betraying the biological parent, who is not part of their unit (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007). Researchers have also indicated that a residential biological father who introduces a stepmother to his children could be perceived by the children as threatening their already established family unit (Whiting et al., 2007), thereby increasing chances of conflict and heightening the ill feeling that a stepchild might communicate to a stepparent, with loyalties tending to remain within biological bloodlines. However, when the residential biological mother introduces a stepfather to her children it does not affect the relationship with their nonresidential biological father or how close they feel to their biological mother (King, 2009).

Although children might be dealing with loss and feeling conflicted in their relationships with parents, they can experience some benefits even during separation. Halligan, Chang, and Knox (2014) studied undergraduates’ experiences when having faced the divorce of their biological parents as a child. Positive outcomes for the child included becoming compassionate as a person (65.63%), becoming open to differing perspectives (63.16%), and being happy about individual time spent with the mother (57.71%; Halligan et al., 2014). As many as 25% of respondents had faced great difficulties as a result of the divorce, but that did not affect their desire to someday marry, and it had increased their motivation to do whatever was necessary to stay married (Halligan et al., 2014).

Furthermore, well-formed blended families that feature a residential and a nonresidential parent can cause stepchildren to feel allegiances to their residential stepparent and other blended family members that can supersede allegiances to their nonresidential biological parent (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006). A positive relationship with a stepparent can benefit a child, increasing access to financial and emotional supports and acting as a protective factor for children who are dealing with the repercussions of separation from their biological family.

Although blended families are formed because of the dissolution of a prior relationship, blended families themselves can also face dissolution, causing the children to feel another loss in their lives if relationships with nonbiological members are severed with the relationship. For this reason, maintaining close ties to past stepparents can act as a protective factor during another divorce, for because the stepparent has no legally recognized protective role in the child’s life, any benefits provided continue only on a voluntary basis (Coleman et al., 2015). Biological coparents and stepparents alike should
recognize the feelings of all children involved, helping them deal with their emotions (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006).

**Siblings**

Forming blended families can be complex, for children who are joined together might be at developmental stages not aligned with their ages (Kellas et al., 2014). A blended family system can produce various sibling formations through acquisition of a stepsibling or half-sibling or changes in dynamics with full biological siblings. A stepsibling relationship is formed when one person who has children repartners with another person who has a child or children from a previous relationship; such relationships are often less caring than those that exist between biological siblings (Planitz & Feeney, 2009). A half-sibling relationship is formed when a new child is born to a repartnered couple, at least one of whom had children outside the couple’s relationship. Introduction of a half-sibling can alter the already challenging dynamics of the blended family unit for better or for worse: With the birth of a half-sibling, more resources will be needed to care for the child, increasing the costs of supporting the family unit and lessening the time that parents spend with older children (Turunen, 2014). Moreover, because a half-sibling is biologically related to both parents in a blended family system, the treatment of various children could differ, with more favor directed toward the biological child, putting an older half-sibling at a disadvantage (Turunen, 2014).

Full biological siblings who come from the same mother and father might also experience the separation of a family together. Siblings can act as mutual supports when dealing with loss or could compete for resources from their parents (Purswell & Dillman, 2013). Gatins, Kinlaw, and Dunlap (2014) examined the varying perspectives of children raised with full biological siblings and children who acquired half-siblings after separation. Their findings suggested that children who acquired half-siblings saw separation as having a positive or neutral effect, whereas those who had full siblings perceived separation as having a harmful effect. Having a half-sibling appeared to lead to better adjustment for those dealing with the loss of their biological parents—perhaps because biological parents felt threatened by a stepparent relationship, motivating them to work harder at maintaining relationships, or because the presence of more parental figures made more time available for older half-siblings (Gatins et al., 2014).

Differing sibling relationships within a blended family can affect educational results. Turunen (2014) compared the educational outcomes of Swedish children in differing sibling relationships. Their research indicated that children in a nuclear family setting who had both biological parents had the highest grades; children whose parents were separated and who had no half-siblings scored the second highest; children whose parents were
separated and who had half-siblings achieved the third highest; and children who experienced the birth of a half-sibling on both their maternal and paternal sides had the lowest grades.

Clearly, sibling variations profoundly influence all children in a blended family unit. However, certain protective factors can come from parents. For example, the mother’s having achieved a higher level of education increases the chances for good grades among children from separated households (Turunen, 2014). The strength of the couple relationship can also mitigate negative effects.

The couple relationship within the blended family

The quality of the repartnered relationship is primary to the family unit’s survival, for a strong relationship can protect against dissolution. However, the couple relationship in a blended family is often deprioritized. The varying challenges attendant on formation of a blended family can strain the couple’s relationship (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013).

In a first-time family, a shared bloodline and history connects everyone, but in a blended family, members share less history (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013). Raising children requires incredible selflessness, but the love and attachment a parent feels for his or her biological child can make such selflessness pleasurable (Gerson, 1995). In a blended family, however, step-parents might not develop similar bonds with their stepchild in the absence of biological connections (Gerson, 1995). This situation can strain the couple relationship when parental relationships with a child differ in their quality, reflecting contrasting perceptions. The couple relationship in a first-time family allows for time before children are introduced into the system (DeGreeff & Platt, 2016), as biological parents can begin preparing for drastic life changes as soon as pregnancy commences (Gerson, 1995). In a blended family, nurturing the couple relationship can be difficult thanks to lack of privacy or time (Gerson, 1995).

The ex-spouse can strongly affect the couple relationship by creating stress, whether through legal struggles, difficulties scheduling child care, reluctance to discuss or negotiate certain matters, and unwillingness to work with the stepparent when required (Cartwright & Gibson, 2013). These matters can distress the couple as they try to establish their relationship, setting a constant blockade and preventing formation of a truly blended family and bringing feelings of helplessness at the unfairness of demands (Cartwright & Gibson, 2013). Feelings of rivalry might also occur between the ex-spouse and stepparent (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007) that can exacerbate conflict if the stepparent does not feel supported by his or her partner. If a couple views the ex-spouse as an enemy, it can help them feel united (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007).
Rushing the formation of a blended family unit does not allow the couple relationship to become established and can increase the difficulty of coping with adversity. Role uncertainty in the blended family reduces marital satisfaction, especially when both partners have children from previous relationships (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013). In extreme circumstances, the couple might wish to end this new relationship (Dupuis, 2010). Greater marital satisfaction accompanies a positive transition into blended family life (Whiting et al., 2007). Because the strengths of the family system and of the couple relationship are connected, having a successful relationship in the absence of an effective blended family unit can be difficult (Dupuis, 2010). The many changes that occur in a blended family can prevent the couple from developing its relationship—and if they fail to do so, they face a greater chance of dissolution. Counseling a couple in a blended family system could help the partners understand that the challenges they face are unique and could teach them to support each other properly, thus strengthening the family unit (Gonzales, 2009). Such counseling, although it would be helpful, is not prominent in the current literature, posing a challenge to counselors who wish to help couples and other members of the blended family. Creating a BFLC that acknowledges and highlights the importance of the couple relationship could help build a strong, cohesive unit.

Counselors and blended families

Guidelines for members of a blended family and the counselors who work with them are few, leading to difficulty in identifying distinct phases, impairing counselors’ ability to help blended families. Existing research into blended family situations is often conducted with a small sample size, depends heavily on archival documents, and uses common techniques in family therapy that are normally based on nuclear family dynamics (Gonzales, 2009). As a result, blended families can be ill prepared to meet expectations in the newly formed family, with few resources for support (Gonzales, 2009).

Counseling can bring blended family members into the developmental family process, facilitating the creation of a shared system of values among all members that can foster cohesion (Dupuis, 2010). A counselor’s approach to narrative therapy reconstructs perceptions of the blended family unit to defy stereotypes of it as an anomalous system and to avoid moving forward in a manner that tries to adopt the roles of people in nuclear family systems (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007). Counselors can also use a type of blended family counseling devised by Gonzales (2009), who proposed that all soon-to-be members of a blended family proactively address the demands that might accompany the formation of a blended family system. Some members of the blended family, especially stepparent
and stepchild, might struggle to find a role within the family unit. Incorporating these varying strategies could help counselors empathize with the ambiguity of the roles each member faces, allowing them to serve as a better support by referring to guidelines for all matters pertinent to blended families (Whiting et al., 2007). It could also help members of the blended family identify their stage of formation, thereby giving them a resource to help them know how to proceed.

Origin stories are vital to a blended family’s long-term success, because they create a significant meaning of family for this unit (Kellas et al., 2014). Although various approaches can help with family issues, no current practice takes into consideration in a single unified document the unique challenges each member faces. By using guidelines, blended family members and counselors alike can be prepared to handle challenges as they arise. Preventive strategies that consider all members in their unique roles could aid the formation of a blended family in its critical early stages as well as throughout (Kellas et al., 2014). In particular, blended families should avoid proceeding with the expectations of a nuclear family (Dupuis, 2010); some specific guidelines in working with blended families could help convey how blended families differ from nuclear ones. An FLC for blended families can promote their success.

The blended family life cycle

Establishing guidelines that recognize the unique challenges that blended families face would help members of those families and their counselors address important issues while decreasing the likelihood of dissolution. Thus far, we have explored main subsystems and experiences of prominent members in the blended family systems, gaining insights into their unique challenges. Blended families vary greatly from nuclear families, which should not be the basis for blended families’ behavior. However, many established family theories, including the FLC, fail to address the diverse range of family systems and thus are of limited use (Erickson, 1998). That blended families do not fit the FLC parameters, for example, perpetuates societal stereotypes, reinforcing this family system’s variance from the norm: “(a) the launching of the single young adult, (b) the joining of families through marriage, (c) families with young children, (d) families with adolescents, (e) launching children and moving on, and (f) families in later life” (Gerson, 1995, p. 92). These life transitions, based on a nuclear family system, cannot properly represent the important changeovers that occur within a blended family, however.

Although some aspects of established family theories might relate to a blended family, such as a union of marriage to merge families, they are based solely on the assumption that people enter a union with no children from previous relationships involved (Gerson, 1995). Members of a blended family system might not be able to relate to these transitional phases or their order,
feeling excluded and strongly desiring to belong, emotions that might arise from external factors, such as negative cultural stereotypes (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007). When members of blended families and their counselors use models of family therapy based on nuclear family systems, that only perpetuates the exclusive nature of an inflexible system. Moreover, counselors who have little experience with blended families might also unconsciously adopt societal stereotypes about family functioning that are based on nuclear systems. Although they would aim to provide support, their lack of understanding and lack of access to guidelines might inadvertently cause further harm. Counselors who do not have extensive experience working with blended families might use guidelines such as the FLC to help identify the family’s stage of life, something that would not be beneficial under the circumstances. However, few other resources are available to help counselors address issues that might arise in a blended family. Counselors should help the blended family unit realize that many of its issues arise from external systems of beliefs, a realization that would help bond the family (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007).

To provide clarity for members of the family and counselors, to combat negative societal perceptions about blended families, and to address the differing challenges that each member faces, a guideline should be in place that highlights the unique transitory life stages of a blended family’s experience. A guideline could be used as a reference point to help members of blended families and counselors understand the system and identify ways of assisting a blended family.

Thus, I propose, as a beginning step, the creation of a blended family system guideline that highlights transition stages common to all blended families in a sequence of events designed to help foster their success: (a) separation, divorce, or death; (b) establishment of parenting agreements; (c) repartnering; (d) preblended family counseling to solidify the couple relationship; (e) defining of expectations and roles for the new stepparent; (f) having the stepparent meet the ex-spouse, if appropriate; (g) having the children and stepparent meet; (h) making any necessary changes to parenting agreements to accommodate the new blended family system; (i) meeting with the children to define boundaries and roles; (j) cohabitation or marriage; and (k) preparation for the possible entrance of a new child. Although these items do not represent a comprehensive guideline, it is a starting point: Every type of blended family can expect to go through these stages. Yet they differ highly from those proposed in the original FLC, for the blended family system does not operate as a nuclear family system and need not subscribe to the rules of one. Further development of the BFLC could help outline directions for blended families while helping them break societal stereotypes.
**Directions for future research**

Although I have provided the skeleton of an FLC dedicated to blended family systems, a better understanding must come from counselors and members of blended family systems. The traditional FLC assumes that all families will fit its parameters, but the diversity of blended family systems indicates otherwise. Thus, the BFLC should use a flowchart structure to account for families’ differing needs. To achieve this objective, experts in each stage should help create guidelines designed to facilitate the success of the blended family system. What is more, the experiences of all persons in the blended family differ. The experiences of the members of each category (e.g., parent, step-parent, child, stepchild) could provide guidelines for tackling the challenges faced by members of a blended family and their counselors.

The lack of legal support for all members of a blended family diminishes cohesion in the family unit and perpetuates societal stereotypes about blended family units. Appropriate legal changes could promote inclusion of the stepparent, acting as a protective factor for stepchildren if dissolution were to occur within the blended family. Similarly, providing more educational resources could help blended families be cohesive (Dupuis, 2010). Further research would also need to be conducted to see whether various cultural groups or those that are part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer community experience blended families differently. Although blended families have a high dissolution rate, many blended families persevere, and their parenting and relationship techniques could help in creating FLC guidelines for blended families.

**Conclusion**

Specific guidelines are needed that can help blended family systems withstand external factors. Family theories and counseling guidelines chiefly target nuclear families—merely witness the FLC. Family theories that do not account for the unique challenges found in blended family systems are at a disadvantage when trying to alleviate the stresses and difficulties that arise in blended families. Each member of a blended family has different experiences within the family unit, and ill-defined roles can lead to conflict that affects all participants.

The effects of the blended family do not stop within its microsystem but expand into the mesosystem and macrosystem. The children of blended families are the future, and without understanding or support, they could face constant challenges in later life. The BFLC presented in this article aims to offer guidelines with which counselors can understand the dynamics of the blended family unit, but these are still in their infancy. Yet, merely creating a BFLC challenges societal norms and heightens the chances of success in blended family systems. A comprehensive BFLC accounting for the challenges that face blended families can benefit not only the members of such families, but also the family counselors who work with these families.
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Narrative Family Therapy with Blended Families

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ABSTRACT. Blended families are an increasingly important family structure that results in complex relationships and unique stresses for the family members. There is accordingly a growing likelihood that family therapists would encounter blended families among the people who are present for therapeutic assistance. Although narrative therapy has been increasingly used by family therapists to assist families with their problems, relatively less attention has been paid in the literature to working with blended families. This article reviews some of the key issues faced by blended families and explores the application of narrative therapy with blended families.

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KEYWORDS. Narrative family therapy, blended families, stepfamilies, reconstituted families

Blended families are an increasingly important family structure strongly linked to the growing divorce rate in western societies and the high rate of childbearing outside of marriage (Luoma et al., 1999;
McMunn et al., 2001). While the blending of a family can help restore economic, social, and psychological resources that were strained by a divorce or single parenthood (Jeynes, 1999), the forming of a new family introduces its own unique difficulties and challenges. These challenges can be intensified by unrealistic expectations, myths and social constructions about stepparents, the previous history of family life, and the fact that blended families usually have complex relational structures, including the influence of biological parents living outside of the home. In this article we will review some of the issues faced by blended families and discuss how a narrative approach to family therapy is a useful method for working with blended families that are seeking therapeutic assistance.

**BLENDED FAMILY ISSUES**

When a family results from a second or even third marriage and includes children, the family is said to be “blended,” “reconstituted,” “reconstructed,” or “step.” Since the term “step” is customarily used to refer specifically to the parent-child relationship, we prefer to use the wider term “blended.” The term blended also gives recognition to the equal merging of previous family units and avoids the connotation that what was once broken is now repaired or restored. Blended families, therefore, can be defined as separate families united through marriage (Barker, 1999) or families in which one parent is not the biological parent of at least one child (Calhoun Howell, Weers, & Kleist, 1998). According to the United States National Center for Health Statistics (2002) 33 percent of first marriages end in separation or divorce within 10 years. This means that in the United States, over 1 million people get divorced every year (National Vital Statistics Report, 1999). The statistics reveal that over 75% of divorced women will remarry within 10 years (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2001), and 86% of these women will bring their biological children into their second marriage (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1989). Blended families, therefore, comprise a significant proportion of all families.

One of the prime areas of influence upon a blended family is the expectations brought to the new relationship. Visher and Visher (1996) note that blended family members may have unrealistic expectations when the new family is first united. They may believe that the love between stepparents and stepchildren will develop relatively easily and that the stepfamily adjustment period will be short (Burchardt, 1990). Additionally, they may mistakenly believe that the new family will
make up for the loss, pain, and emotionally trying experience of a divorce (Faber, 2004). These expectations have been supported by strong social assumptions about the economic benefits of remarriage and the supposed primary value of this for the children (Jeynes, 1999). When these expectations are unmet, relationship conflicts can result. Misunderstandings are created and projections of blame can arise that are readily influenced by social constructions of blended families.

A social stigma continues to be attached to being a blended family (Jones, 2003) even though statistics show that the number of nuclear families is dwindling (Haley, 2000) and that the number of blended families is on the rise. Faber (2004) has suggested that soon more people will be part of a second marriage than a first marriage. Yet, the nuclear family model continues to be held as the dominant cultural norm in our society. The research on remarriage, for instance, has tended to be based upon clinical samples and has emphasized a problem-oriented or deficit perspective (Berger, 2000; Ganong & Colemen, 1997; Golish, 2003). Since blended families do not conform to the perceived cultural norm, they are often construed as inferior, substandard, or as contributing to social problems (Carter & McGoldrick, 1990).

One consequence of stigmatization is that families can be influenced by the myths and cultural stories about evil stepmothers and stepfathers. Wald (1981) reported that one out of every six classic fairy tales depicts the stepmother as cruel. Stories of evil stepmothers, such as Cinderella, Snow White, and Hansel and Gretel, seem to have an enduring influence despite more loving or caring portrayals of blended families such as in The Brady Bunch (Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, & Pauk, 2001; Jones, 2003). Similarly, stepfathers have also been depicted negatively as in stories such as David Copperfield by Dickens, Lolita by Nabakov or in Hollywood movies such as The Stepfather and Domestic Disturbance (Claxton-Oldfield & Whitt, 2003). When feelings run high and conflict occurs within the blended family, as they inevitably will in any family, the myths and cultural stories serve to contribute to negative beliefs and negative attributions toward new family members.

In blended families, there is often confusion over roles and boundaries within the new family (Gorell-Barnes, 1997; Saint-Jacques, 1995; Taanila et al., 2002). A new stepparent must deal with his or her new role and the alliance that the spouse and the child have that predated the remarriage (Pardeck, 1989; Visher & Visher, 1996). The new stepparent may feel excluded from this relationship and remain unsure about his or her position as a parent to a stepchild. Role strain occurs when a new stepparent experiences relationship difficulties due to an inability to carry
out the intended role (Barker, 1999). Saint-Jacques (1995) concluded that consensus and clarity of expectations were necessary to avoid role strain. In particular, she mentions that competition between the stepparent and the children caused role strain for the biological parent and that uncertainty on the assumed authority role resulted in role strain for the stepparent in blended families. Taanila et al. (2002) examined boundary ambiguity associated with family member roles, especially the parent role, in blended family systems. Both physical and psychological boundaries were considered and measured in terms of closeness or distance. They reported that when clear boundaries and roles had not been established in blended families, the children tended more often to develop behavior problems. As a result of the uncertainty about the parenting role, stepparents frequently play a less active role as a parent (Visher & Visher, 1996) or overcompensate by trying to be best friends with their stepchildren (Erera-Weatherly, 1996), thus, adding to the confusion about roles and boundaries. Ambiguous boundaries and role confusion can lead to dissatisfaction in the relationships among stepfamily members and, ultimately, result in family conflict (Svare, Jay, & Mason, 2004).

All family members experience the changes and losses that coming together into a blended family brings (Visher & Visher, 1996). In remarriage, the familiar is often replaced by the unfamiliar. Children in stepfamilies may grieve the loss of their non-custodial parent, and if they have relocated, also the loss of their family home, school, and friends (Golish, 2003). They may feel conflicted about developing a rapport with their new stepparent because they believe that in doing so they would be disloyal to their non-custodial biological parent. Furthermore, the newly remarried couple may unintentionally increase the child’s feelings of anxiety and uncertainty if they undermine and/or criticize their ex-spouse (Warshak, 2000). This can occur for many reasons. The new couple may unite around a common enemy, or experience competitive feelings between the ex-spouse and the stepparent, or the former spouse may be criticized simply as a response to being deeply hurt by the dissolution of the relationship. Whatever the reason, Warshak (2000) suggests that children will suffer loyalty conflicts, inappropriate boundary violations, and will be subjected to feelings of rejection if a divorced parent does not remain involved in the child’s life. Crosbie-Burnett (1984) has highlighted how in a nuclear family a strong parental bond is supportive for children whereas in a blended family a strong parental bond threatens the child’s relationship with the biological parent. The changes and losses experienced in the divorce and remarriage experience, if not recognized or anticipated, can cause psychological
turmoil for all members of the family and can be detrimental to good family relationships.

Clearly, the stresses experienced by blended families and the complexities of the new relationships can place these families at high risk for experiencing relationship problems and dissolution of the new relationship. Not surprisingly, the divorce rate among couples in second marriages is higher than in first marriages (Booth & Edwards, 1992; Faber, 2000). Although not all blended families would need to seek therapeutic assistance, for those who do it is important to consider their specific therapeutic needs. Individual counseling is not usually recommended for blended family issues unless an individual expresses specific concerns that he or she believes must be resolved before the counselor moves on to working with the family. When dealing with family issues in therapy, the reciprocal relationships and mutual influences, such as the conflicts, role strain, and boundary issues noted earlier suggest that the family should be responded to as a social system (Nichols & Schwartz, 2004). Therefore, even if therapeutic work is conducted with a single member of the system, the counselor must consider the system as a whole when seeking solutions to difficulties within the system (White, 1989). This article will discuss a narrative approach to family therapy as a therapeutic method particularly suited to assisting blended families with their challenges.

**NARRATIVE FAMILY THERAPY**

Narrative family therapy is based on the ideas and work of Michael White (White, 1986, 1989; White & Epston, 1990). The fundamental assumption in the narrative approach is that our understanding and experience of the world is structured through language and the stories we tell about personal experiences, and that there are many possible stories and interpretations of any one experience (Nichols & Schwartz, 2004). These stories are greatly influenced by the dominant dialogue of society (Freedman & Combs, 1996), that is, society constructs our view of reality (White & Epston, 1990; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1996). Stories are influential because they determine how people think about and remember the past (Bruner, 1986) and they shape how people define themselves and their future (Dean, 1998). Therapy from this perspective involves engaging the family in a conversation in which family members can tell their story or their lived experience about their problems (Anderson & Goolishan, 1992; Sluzki, 1992; Tomm,
1989). The role of the counselor is to help the family expand its perspective on the problem and to allow them to consider alternative explanations of their problems, to move from unhelpful stories that do not adequately reflect their lived experience to developing new stories and new possibilities (Muntigl, 2004).

Counselors using the narrative model work collaboratively with clients from a position of deep respect for the family’s experience and knowledge (Carr, 1998). They listen attentively to the client’s story and ask respectful, non-imposing questions, an approach that has been described as “respectful curiosity” (Nichols & Schwartz, 2004). Questioning is a fundamental element of narrative therapy. It is used to engage family members in telling their story. When family members tell their story from each of their perspectives, they uncover how the problem has affected each member of the family. Narrative therapists typically eschew diagnosis. They believe that creating labels only reinforces society’s negative prescriptions and removes power from the family and its ability to make sense of its own experience. An essential element of narrative therapy is that the therapist searches for the client’s strengths and brings them to the foreground by inviting the family to discuss and reflect upon them. Narrative therapists also invite the client to separate themselves from the dominant cultural narratives that they have internalized and through the process of questioning and inquiry, the family is encouraged to consider different interpretations and emphases that enable them to create new meaning to their stories.

This goal can be achieved through exploring “unique outcomes” with the family or times when the problem did not occur (White & Epston, 1990). The therapist attends to the moments in the family’s life when the problem was diminished or not present and by stressing these instances the therapist helps the family to uncover how and when they have been able to positively influence the problem. Reflecting on unique outcomes allows the family to construct new and more positive stories or narratives. Meanings that people place on events in their lives do not account for the exceptions or times when the events do not follow their predictable pattern. These exceptions too easily escape notice (Smith, 1997). Narrative therapy attempts to bring these instances back to consciousness and attach meaning to them. The narrative therapist will highlight the strengths of the person and family in order to encourage richer and more positive descriptions of events that allow for new possibilities and more empowering self-narratives (Monk, Winslade, Crocket, & Epston, 1997; White, 1989; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1996). Validating the strengths and resilience of the members of the family will
encourage the family to repeat these positive anomalies. For instance, if a stepchild has withdrawn from the stepparent because the child feels guilty about forming a friendship with the stepparent, the therapist will ask if there are times when “Guilt” has not invaded the stepparent and stepchild’s time together. These times will be focused on. The therapist would then ask what was different about these times that did not allow “Guilt” to show up. Highlighting the differences and encouraging more of the positives will help to foster the changes necessary for increased occurrences when “Guilt” is absent.

This technique also removes blame from any one family member. It helps the family to see that its problems could be thought of as external entities that have a negative impact on each of them. The narrative therapist encourages the family to join forces against the problem, in the above case “Guilt,” often by finding a metaphor that emphasizes the external nature of the problem and invites the family to reflect upon the skills they have shown in previously succeeding to overcome the problem (Legowski & Brownlee, 2001). Working against an external problem in this way will also help to unite the family. This is supported by research that has shown that when a family works together toward a common goal, bonding will be enhanced (Diamond & Liddle, 1999).

Another distinguishing feature of narrative therapy is the reinforcement of the new narrative (Carr, 1998). This can be achieved by having an audience or others witness the change and support the family in their new narrative (White & Epston, 1990). The therapist may seek to put the family members in touch with a support group or others who have also undertaken reconstructing their problem-saturated story to a more positive one. Narrative therapists may also present certificates of achievement to their clients or write letters of encouragement in order to reinforce their client’s accomplishments (Jones, 2004).

**NARRATIVE THERAPY AND BLENDED FAMILY ISSUES**

Narrative therapists consider the broader historical, cultural, and political framework of the family that is often the source of problem-saturated stories (Nichols & Schwartz, 2004). As noted above, this is an important issue for blended families since they must contend with societal norms and myths about ideal family life that are not consistent with their family reality. When a blended family believes that it should conform to the ideals of a nuclear family, it can lead to unrealistic expectations about
family life. Anger, frustration, depression, and anxiety can result when these unrealistic expectations do not materialize. When family counseling is sought, a narrative counselor is in a position to help validate and normalize their blended family dynamics. By asking questions, a narrative therapist can help identify social influences upon the family’s attitudes. Several questions such as the following help the family begin to reflect upon these social influences in their lives:

How do you think your views of what it means to be a family have been shaped by what other people think it means to be a family?

How might ideas about families on TV have influenced how you expected things would be as a family?

If you were a nuclear family what might be different in how you relate to each other?

What do you think expectations about a perfect family encourage you to believe about each other?

How might expectations about what a family should be have influenced what you expect from each other?

A narrative counselor, therefore, invites the family to see their blended situation through a different lens, that is, as a “normal” blended or stepfamily as opposed to an “abnormal” nuclear family. It is this valuing of difference and multiplicity of stories that is a particular strength of the narrative approach. The counselor would encourage the family to reflect upon its strengths and to move from a “problem-saturated” story of “not shaping up” to a new story that values the complexity and challenges of their situation so that they could gain a sense of empowerment and control (Visher & Visher, 1996).

Narrative therapy is useful to help blended families establish new boundaries. In the instance of role strain and conflict, narrative therapy can help blended families determine what the individuals’ expectations are regarding their role within the family and what this means to both the individual and the family members. That is to say, the individual is helped to appreciate how he or she is affected by his/her perception of what the role is, as well his/her perception of what other family member’s roles are, and the struggles associated with trying to fulfill these role expectations. It is critical for the blended family to realize that merged families create unique circumstances that must be adapted to (Calhoun Howell, Weers, & Kleist, 1998). They must come to the realization that they
should not try to maintain all of the same boundaries that a nuclear family has. Nuclear families, for instance, are often thought of as best with exclusive boundaries around its members, whereas a blended family must necessarily have more open and inclusive boundaries (Elliot, 1997). Boundaries may have to be more flexible as other family members, such as, stepsiblings, stepparent, and non-custodial parent must be accommodated for. To help the family “normalize” the new, different boundaries the counselor could discuss with the family how the boundaries are similar to an invisible fence with a number of gates in it. Using such a metaphor would help explain the abstract concept. A blended family could think of the new family as having a fence around it, but a fence with more gates than most and that some gates need to be opened while others may need to be closed from time to time. The gates in the fence allow the passage of others into their family space. In the case of a child who is unsure of where his non-custodial father fits in the family or where his non-resident stepsiblings belong, he could think of his situation as one where he may open the gates periodically to allow them to come into the family space depending on the frequency of the visits and how close the bond is between him and the others. He would determine who gets through the gate based on criteria agreed upon by all the family members. Once the outsider is through the gate, they become a part of the family with set expectations, roles, and responsibilities. Knowing this, boundary ambiguity or confusion over who belongs in the family and what their role is, would be reduced.

As previously noted, a family member’s reaction within the new family can be viewed, in part, as a reflection of the individual’s emotional commitment to previous family stories and scripts. Participation in the new family may mean that the individual is challenged to surrender old belief systems or to redefine loyalties to previous family members. For example, if the stepchild behaves in a disrespectful way toward the stepparent, the stepparent may interpret the behavior as resentment and hostility from the child and react emotionally. Both can be caught in a loop of disparagement. By looking at these behaviors as part of loyalty conflicts and desires for closeness the family can begin to see themselves differently. By telling their stories, including different background experiences and rituals and how they feel it impacts themselves and others in the family, a greater understanding of each individual can develop as well as the emerging family relationships. A narrative therapist would encourage the family to appreciate these different beliefs and the previous experiences each member has had that may have given rise to these beliefs.
One approach to externalizing the problem with blended families could be to engage the family in considering how these previous beliefs become a presence and make themselves felt in the new family. The family can be asked to think of a metaphor or give a name to the problem such as “old life versus new life” as a way of facilitating an externalizing process with questions such as the following,

1. How is old life thinking getting in the way of your present relationships?
2. How is old life thinking getting you to argue with each other?
3. What do you think you may need to do as a family to guard against old life thinking sneaking into your lives?

An important element in forming new ideas about being a family is to have a future focus. Asking questions about where the family is headed in life helps to shift the focus away from a “problem-saturated story” to new possibilities (Madsen, 1999). It also paves the way for conversations about the family’s strengths and how these strengths will help them move in the direction they desire.

Reactions of family members, as noted earlier, are also often related to experiences of loss but expressed as hostility. Children may express their feelings by acting out and by being oppositional. A parent who responds with frustration for example by yelling or name-calling may also be experiencing the stresses of changes occurring in their lives. A narrative counselor may again use a metaphor to convey the futility of yelling and name-calling such as by comparing this behavior with that of a coach talking to and trying to get a point across to his team. However, if the team fails to hear or understand the message that the coach is trying to get across, the coach will start to yell in order to be heard and understood. The stepparent is often unaware of the fact that the child may be yelling because they are anxious, confused, or grieving and the child may not know any other way to express his or her grief over the many changes and losses that he or she has experienced. This may not be evident to the stepparent because the stepparent is focused on the negative behavior and how this behavior makes him or her feel. It would also be emphasized that the child is not the problem nor is the stepparents’ reaction, but the problem is the yelling and name-calling. This behavior is externalized and objectified. It can be given a name, such as, the “Loud Coach.” When the Loud Coach has control over the child, the impact this has on the child and the family is discussed. The incidences of when the Loud Coach has not been in control are also
examined to see what it is that the child did to take control from the Loud Coach. These strengths are reinforced through positive encouragement. The stepparents can also look at their behavior when the Loud Coach is in control to see if they have been attuned to the child’s feelings and really listening to what the child has been trying to say. Over time, the stepparent will become more aware of what the child is trying to tell them through active listening, and the child will become stronger and able to take control from the Loud Coach more often, until a point is reached where the Loud Coach is no longer an issue for the family.

Another strategy that a counselor using a narrative approach may use is to invite the family to strengthen and reinforce a new narrative about themselves. An important component in this process is for the blended family to hear from other families who have gone through similar difficulties (Carr, 1998). These “outsider witness groups” understand the issues surrounding blended families and may advise or coach the client on how to deal with their particular issue. This kind of support is crucial in order to maintain the new story that the family has authored. Families may need support in recognizing the importance of this process as a means of solidifying gains that they have made and of validating their strengths as well as commitment to each other. A support group, in addition to being able to function as an outside witness group, also has the capacity to open space for further reflection. As the group members ask the family to retell their story and ask questions and in turn tell their own stories, opportunities will arise for further awareness of the influence of dominant cultural and social stories as well as opportunities for personal reflection (Jones, 2004).

CONCLUSION

Family therapy can be viewed as a secure base from which the family can explore its conflicts without the fear of being attacked and as a base from which they can explore old and new stories about their relationships and future together (Griffith & Griffith, 1994; Nichols & Schwartz, 2004). Narrative family therapy is particularly useful in assisting blended families deal with the influence of previous histories of family life, the complicated relational structures within blended families, disappointments arising from unmet expectations, and the social myths and stigma associated with being a non-nuclear family. Although this paper has not discussed the issue of co-habiting blended families, which it has been argued should be considered as a unique group with different family
dynamics (Graefe & Lichter, 1999; Stewart, 2001), there would seem to be no reason why family therapy and in particular a narrative approach to family would not be equally as effective as a therapeutic approach with such families. One of the strong points of the narrative approach is the absence of specific rules for the therapy and the ability of a narrative therapist to creatively modify the approach depending on the particular story or circumstances of the family seeking assistance and their unique cluster of experiences and strengths.

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Supporting Blended Families to Remain Intact: A Case Study

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Supporting Blended Families to Remain Intact: 
A Case Study

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More than 40% of U.S. adults have at least one step-relative in their family. Whereas there is much research on providing support for ex-partners and their children, there has been a lesser focus on trying to keep newly blended families intact. Because many members of a failed relationship repartner and have children from these new relationships, we find there is a need to provide support for stepfamilies. The Survival Strategies Workshop provides advice on strategies for blended families. In this article, we illustrate, through the use of case studies, that most of the problems occurring in blended families are not unique and if appropriate strategies are followed the prospect of a happy future is greatly enhanced.

KEYWORDS family dispute resolution, parenting advice, stepfamilies

Pollet (2010) claimed that statistics reveal that approximately 50% of U.S. marriages end in divorce. Further, 60% of U.S. second marriages end in divorce, and about 43% of marriages are remarriages for at least one party. She claimed that although the statistics vary, estimates are that “as many as one in three American children now can expect to spend some of their childhood years living with a step-parent” (p. 529).

Earlier research by Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin (1991) noted that at that time approximately 25% of the 3.7 million cohabitating couples¹ in

¹ By cohabitating couples, we mean couples living together, whether married or not.

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the United States were households in which at least one adult brought children from prior relationships, thereby creating cohabitating stepfamily households. Wineberg and McCarthy (1998) noted that cohabitating couples are more likely (48% vs. 37%) to enter a new union with children from previous relationships than are remarried couples. Some first marriages create stepfamilies and stepparent–stepchild relationships (i.e., when never-married mothers marry a man who is not the child’s father).

Bumpass, Raley, and Sweet (1995) claimed that one third of U.S. children will live in a remarried or cohabitating stepfamily household before they reach adulthood. In fact, children in stepfamilies might have lived in several types of families before they reach adulthood, although fewer than 5% of all remarried couples incorporate three sets of children (i.e., yours, mine, and ours). Complex marital and cohabitating histories over the life course result in complex family histories for children and for adults (O’Connor, Pickering, Dunn, Golding, & the ALSPAC Study Team, 1999). For example, about 40% of adult women will at some time likely reside as a parent or stepparent in a remarried or cohabitating stepfamily household.

According to demographic information collected by the U.S. Census Bureau in the 2000 census, there were a “total of 4.4 million ‘stepchildren of householders’ in the United States in 2000; 3.3 million of these stepchildren were under eighteen years of age” (Pollet, 2010, p. 529). It has been noted that the number of stepchildren reported is under inclusive in that “the number includes ‘step-children of the householder’ but omits step-children of the householder’s spouse living in their home.” Thus how stepparents and stepchildren interact is an important issue for the welfare of U.S. families.

More recent data from the Pew Research Center’s work on social and demographic trends (Pew Research Center, 2011) indicates that in October 2010,2 more than 4 in 10 U.S. adults have at least one step-relative in their family—either a stepparent, a step- or half-sibling, or a stepchild. People with steprelatives are just as likely as others to say that family is the most important element of their life. However, they typically feel a stronger sense of obligation to their biological family members (be it a parent, a child, or a sibling) than to their steprelatives, the survey found.

In an Australian study, Qu and Weston (2005) stated that approximately 1 in 10 families that include a couple contain resident stepchildren. In Wave 3 of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey, 13% of households had either residential or nonresidential stepchildren.

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2 It says that U.S. government statistics on stepfamilies are limited. For instance, estimates of the numbers of stepfamilies from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey are based on information about the householder’s coresiding steprelatives only. Cases where a household member other than the householder has a steprelative and cases where steprelatives are living in a separate household are excluded from the count.
SOME BLENDED FAMILY CASE STUDIES

Blended families come in many forms with some common examples as follows: married couples in which one or both spouses have children from a previous relationship, families with children who are in a subsequent marriage that have children from a previous relationship, and families with children whose spouses have children from a previous relationship (Cartwright & Gibson 2013).

To provide us with a better understanding of the diversity and complex relationships in blended families, we introduce four case studies of commonly encountered families. They are used to illustrate the theory and practice discussed later in the article.

Study 1
Simon (52) and Karen (42) now have a fully blended family: Samuel (Karen’s biological child and the oldest of the five), Sally (Simon’s biological child), and the three children of their union, Lily, Rose, and Louis. Simon’s ex-partner is in a long-term relationship with Gerard. They have no joint children, nor does Gerard have any biological children. Karen’s ex-partner Henry has married Margaret. Henry and Margaret have no children from their union; however, Margaret has a son from a previous relationship.

Study 2
Phillip (38) and his partner Samantha (26) have two children: James (6) and Steve (4). They live in a detached house and Phillip’s terminally ill father resides in a granny flat behind them. They have Phillip’s children Paul (11) and Henry (13) from his first relationship living with them 50% of the time.

Study 3
Samantha (50) and Lisa (40) were both previously married and have three (Ashley [17], Thomas [14], and Joseph [12]) and two children (Samson [8] and Eve [6]), respectively, from these relationships. Although they have a close physical and emotional relationship and spend many nights and weekends together, they still have two separate households. Levin (2004) defined this as living apart together. The ex-husband of Samantha, Ian, has a new partner.

As Levin (2004) argued that some decades ago “non-marital cohabitation began to appear in the western world as a new social institution. ‘Living apart together’—the LAT relationship—is a more recent phenomenon, which seems to have the potential of becoming the third stage in the process of the social transformation of intimacy. In contrast to couples in ‘commuting marriages,’ who have one main household in common, couples living in LAT relationships have one household each” (p. 238).
Tina. There are no children from Ian’s new relationship, nor does Tina have children from other relationships.

Study 4

William (38) and Jane (35) were in a relationship for 15 years and had two boys, Peter (10) and Richard (14). Jane has repartnered and has a daughter Amanda (18 months). William has repartnered with Mary, who has two sons, Tom (11) and Wayne (14), from a previous relationship.

Table 1 indicates some of the complexity of these cases being considered in this article. Later, we indicate how the processes developed at Berwick Family Relationship Centre can be used to best manage these cases.

Graham (2010), in examining how the stepparent role is defined and negotiated in stepfamilies in New Zealand, noted, “The past few decades have witnessed an increased level of attention given to stepfamilies and their value in raising children successfully. Earlier studies were largely focused on whether children in stepfamilies were at greater risk for experiencing adjustment difficulties when compared to children in first or sole parent families” (p. 18).

Most of the research on children and stepparenting has focused on the relationships between parents who are no longer cohabitating and their children. Significant longitudinal research on this topic has been conducted in California by Wallerstein and her colleagues (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2007, 2009; Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000; Wallerstein, Lewis, & Packer Rosenthal, 2013).

Emery (2012) showed that a more cooperative approach to negotiating parenting issues can benefit parents and children not only in the short term, but even more so in the long run. Emery, Laumann-Billings, Waldron, Sbarra, and Dillon (2001) conducted an empirical study that showed the benefits of mediation (as compared to litigation) for stepparents.

As Gonzales (2009) wrote:

If merely defining a blended (or separated) family is confusing enough, consider then the thoughts and feelings of those in the middle of this new situation. It is a collision of two universes, with the hopes that these two will form one new one. One of the biggest mistakes people make, however, is underestimating the impact this “joining” will have. Children are either forced to move into a new house, or must accept into what was once “their” home a new and strange person (or persons) who is not their previous parent. This, however, is the simpler task, because there is only the stepparent to get used to.

A much more complicated endeavour involves two sets of children who must now get to know or at least learn how to live with their new siblings in addition to their new parents. Of course, this only describes the...
### TABLE 1  Four Stepfamily Cases Discussed in This Article

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Case 1</th>
<th>Case 2</th>
<th>Case 3</th>
<th>Case 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number and ages of children from each partner</td>
<td>Simon: Sally (15), Lily (9), Rose (7), Louis (1)</td>
<td>Phillip: Henry (13), Paul (11), James (6), Steven (4)</td>
<td>Samantha: Ashley (17), Thomas (14), Joseph (12)</td>
<td>William: Richard (14), Peter (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Karen: Samuel (17), Lily (9), Rose (7), Louis (1)</td>
<td>Samantha: James (6), Steven (4)</td>
<td>Lisa: Samson (8), Eve (6)</td>
<td>Jane: Amanda (18 months), Richard (14), Peter (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length between relationships</td>
<td>Simon: 4 years</td>
<td>Phillip: 2 years</td>
<td>Samantha: 6 years</td>
<td>William: 4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Karen: 4 years</td>
<td>Lisa: 2 years</td>
<td>Lisa: 2 years</td>
<td>Jane: 4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of current relationship</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there a parenting alliance with ex-partners?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No for Samantha, yes for Lisa</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the arrangements for spending time</td>
<td>Sally: 3 nights every second weekend and half school holidays with</td>
<td>Henry and Paul are in 50–50 shared care</td>
<td>Ashley: Lives 100% of his time with Ian.</td>
<td>In dispute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for all children?</td>
<td>Simon Samuel: As his father lives out of state, he visits his father</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has there been any family violence?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is grandparent input an issue?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
difficulties of transitioning to new surroundings (even if they were once familiar) and forming new relationships. It does not include other major issues such as dealing with feelings surrounding their parents' separation, the death of one of parent, or the choice one parent made to remarry (depending on the circumstances).

Clearly, the blending of families is a complicated and troubling endeavour. (p. 149)

Sweeney (2010) conducted an in-depth survey of remarriage and stepfamilies in the 21st century. She noted that stepfamilies are diverse with respect to their structures, processes, and outcomes. She argued there is new research with respect to understanding and documenting sources of stepfamily heterogeneity, particularly with respect to cohabitating stepfamilies, and further attention needs to be placed on stepfamily relationships that span multiple households or involve part-time household membership, stepmother families and children's relationships with nonresident mothers and resident biological fathers, stepfamilies formed after a nonmarital birth, and stepfamilies headed by same-sex couples. Further attention is also needed to variation in stepfamily experiences across groups defined by age, gender, race, ethnicity, or social class.

Cartwright (2010) conducted an exploratory investigation of the preparation couples undertake prior to stepfamily living. Ninety-nine stepfamily adults living in New Zealand completed an online questionnaire about the courtship period. The results suggest that couples are motivated to repartner by needs for an intimate relationship and associated benefits, although economic and resource issues precipitated cohabitation for some. Many participants had awareness of potential stepfamily challenges. However, the majority did not talk to partners about parenting issues, or how to manage the change for children, supporting earlier findings that stepfamily couples avoid communicating about difficult issues.

THE NEED FOR ORGANIZING STEPPARENTING WORKSHOPS AT BERWICK FAMILY RELATIONSHIP CENTRE

Kelly (2013) indicated in a special issue of Family Court Review on Australian family relationship centers, that the development of such centers and the enabling legislation is a richly informative and timely presentation of a bold family law reform initiative for providing integrated, community-based, and nonadversarial services to separating and divorcing parents with child-related disputes. She claimed that family relationship centers, the centrepiece of the 2006 reforms, provide a first point of entry with a highly integrated matrix of information, referral, and service options, complemented by national advice and legal information resources for parents.
Kelly (2013) claimed that “an evaluation of the objectives of the reform legislation indicated a 32% reduction in filings with the Family Court of Australia over five years, increased use of the Family Relationship Centres, reduced use of lawyers for parenting disputes, and significant reduction in costs to the Government for services” (p. 278).

As a major step in the Family Law Reforms of 2006, a series of 65 family relationship centers were funded to provide information, advice, and dispute resolution to help people reach agreement on parenting arrangements without going to court. Parkinson (2013) claimed:

Family Relationship Centres formed the centrepiece of major reforms to the family law system in Australia which were introduced from 2006 onwards. They provide information and advice and offer free or heavily subsidised mediation of parenting disputes. They are an early intervention strategy to help parents manage the transition from parenting together to parenting apart in the aftermath of separation, and are intended to lead to significant cultural change in the resolution of post-separation parenting disputes. They also play a role in strengthening intact family relationships (mainly through advice and referral). . . . While FRCs have many roles, a key purpose is as an early intervention initiative to help parents work out post-separation parenting arrangements and manage the transition from parenting together to parenting apart. (p. 195)

As part of its goal to provide early intervention initiatives to help parents work out postseparation parenting arrangements and manage the transition from parenting together to parenting apart, the Berwick Family Relationship Centre⁴ feels it important to provide advice about stepparenting. The definition of a stepfamily is a partnership with at least one adult having a child or children from a previous relationship—either through biology, history, or intentionality. It can be informal or formal. Adults can live together or apart and children can live with them full time, visit, or be absent.

Second marriages are known to be more fragile than first marriages: In the United States, 40% of remarriages occurring between 1985 and 1994 ended in permanent separation or divorce within 10 years, as compared with 32% of first marriages (Bumpass & Raley, 2007). Clark and Crompton (2006) argued that the presence of stepchildren is a prime contributor to the collapse of second marriages. They claimed that teenagers, in particular, can put any marital bond to the test. Coleman, Ganong, and Fine (2000) found that stepchildren are a prime factor in remarriage failure.

In Canada, nationally representative surveys show that the probability that the parents of children born into stepfamilies would separate before the children were 10 years old is three times higher than for children born

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⁴ See Relationships Australia (2014) for details about the Berwick Family Relationship Centre and Relationships Australia Victoria, which administers the center.
into intact two-parent families (Juby, Le Bourdais, and Marcil-Gratton, 2001). Despite the fact that there is a greater risk that stepfamilies will separate—with the negative consequences that this entails—little research has been conducted on this topic (Teachman, 2008). Teachman (2008) noted:

> Having children with other men substantially raises the risk of divorce for women. The fact that the same is not necessarily true for men (e.g., the lack of a relationship between the husband’s children living in the family and marital disruption) indicates the gendered nature of life course complexities. He concludes that gender sets the context within which life course patterns are evaluated and subsequently exerts influence on second marriages. (p. 303)

In Australia, family dispute resolution practitioners are not so much concerned with the number of marriages and divorces, as they are with relationship breakdowns and the outcomes for the children of these failed relationships. Exact figures on how many children live in blended families are difficult to obtain, because as an Australian Institute of Family Studies report indicates, “in many step and blended families the partners cohabitate rather than remarry” (de Vaus, 2004, p. 180). Statistics indicate that 30% of first marriages and 60% of second marriages end in divorce. The statistics are probably higher when you take into account the growing amount of couples who are in de facto relationships. One in three marriages is now a remarriage and one in five children will grow up in a stepfamily.

In Australia, 76% of homeless teens come from step- and sole-parent families. According to a U.S. Senate report (Homeless youth, 1980), only 30% of homeless youth come from intact families. Pryor (2013) reported on an exploratory research project that sought to better understand how to prevent homelessness in Tasmania, Australia. When asked about their transitions into homelessness, all of the young people cited family breakdown as a direct cause of homelessness. Thus research indicates that enhancing the quality of stepparenting can reduce the amount of youth homelessness.

Victoria has 15 family relationship centers, of which Relationships Australia Victoria is the lead consortium partner in four. The Berwick Family Relationship Centre, one of these four, is located in Berwick in the city of Casey. Providing family mediation advice for the city of Casey is a challenging task. Casey is a diverse and rapidly growing community that has the most residents of any municipality in Victoria. It is the third fastest growing municipality in Victoria, with a current population (as of June 2014) of approximately 281,000, with a projected population of 459,000 by 2036. A total of 12.9% of Casey residents aged 15 years and over hold bachelor's or higher degree qualifications, compared to a figure of 23.6% for the greater Melbourne area, and 26.7% of Casey residents were born in non-English-speaking countries (City of Casey, 2014).
THE STEPFAMILY SURVIVAL STRATEGIES PROGRAM AT BERWICK FAMILY RELATIONSHIP CENTRE

We now examine what strategies can be helpful for stepparents in blended families. Although these strategies are being developed for clients of Berwick Family Relationship Centre, there is no reason why similar approaches cannot be adapted for use outside Australia. Of course, such procedures need to be adapted to take into consideration local laws and cultural norms. The strategies developed are ones that parents and stepparents use in dealing with their children, rather than how they relate to their ex-partners.

Gonzales (2009) pointed out that the literature on therapeutic approaches to blended families yields very little. Michaels (2000) created the Step-family Enrichment Program, which uses a multicouple group approach aimed at helping stepfamilies with the process of family formation. Exploring perceptions of stepparents in therapy, Visher, Visher, and Pasley (1997) found that nearly half of all participants reported that therapy was not helpful, citing lack of therapist knowledge and expertise about stepfamilies as the number one reason. Therapist awareness of the unique needs of remarrying couples was also advocated by Michaels (2007), who noted that effective treatment requires knowledge of these exceptional challenges.

Gonzales (2009) argued that although some aspects of family therapy might apply to blended families, the two are in actuality quite distinctly different. One pitfall a therapist can fall into is failing to recognize and fully appreciate the scope of this difference. Gonzalez claimed that at the present, very little exists to exclusively address blended families or provide concrete interventions that serve to make this collision of two worlds a smoother endeavour.

Hurwitz (1997) claimed that “One of the biggest issues facing blended families is the lack of available resources and absence of cultural rules and guidelines. Essentially, blended families are left with no idea of what to expect and how to deal with the problems they face” (p. 3).

Gonzales (2009) claimed:

Becoming a blended family is like setting off on a long trek into the wilderness. Being prepared is one of the most critical components of such an undertaking. Although knowing a little about what to expect and being armed with as many of the anticipated necessities as possible does not guarantee a successful journey, one can only imagine what a lack of these things will likely lead to. (p. 150)

He thus introduced the concept of preblended family counseling. It is made up of four main stages:

1. Discovery. Shalay and Brownlee (2007) stated that the complexities of new relationships can put newly blended families at risk for dissolution.
Therefore, family members are guided to get to know one another and make initial bonding attempts. Most family members are likely to know a decent amount about one another, but the degree can vary greatly. In addition, blended families do not have the luxury of time, which in traditional families allows members to get to know each other through experience, trial and error, and observation.

2. Educational. The most important educational piece involves teaching families what to expect as they seek to become one family. Becoming a blended family is not easy; Kaufman (1993) claimed that all combined families are born of loss. It should, however, be noted that as more people decide to have children on their own as a matter of choice, we will see lossless blended families as they choose to partner up afterward.

3. Parental unification. Generally the parental couple faces the most challenges. The parents of a newly formed blended family are often just as confused as other family members and much more overwhelmed. They face the dual tasks of making the relationship with their new partner work and helping to shape and mold two separate entities into one family unit. These tasks are often made even more difficult because of a lack of parental unification. Essentially, parental unification refers to shared rules and expectations, as well as some agreement on discipline. Parental unification also involves an overall agreement on parenting style. Halford, Nicholson, and Sanders (2007) found that compared to first-time marrying couples, stepfamily couples tended to withdraw more from couple discussions, which “might reflect difficult issues such as negotiating parenting roles within step-families—especially discipline” (p. 481).

4. Family unification. This stage deals with more pragmatic issues, such as the feelings of family members regarding their new family (fears, hopes, expectations, etc.), what home life will be like, and the establishment of family conferences. Just as the parents are given a time and place to discuss their feelings on being a parent in a blended family, children should be given the same opportunity to openly share their feelings on becoming a blended family. At this point, family members are encouraged not to interject or interrupt another member, but to merely listen attentively and allow members to have their feelings validated.

Gonzales’s (2009) preblended family counseling can last up to 10 sessions. At Berwick Family Relationship Centre, practitioners only have 2 to 3 hours to run a workshop on stepfamily survival strategies. The program is based on a course, “Making Stepfamilies Work,” conducted by the Drummond Street Family Centre (Drummond Street Services, 2014) and the practical book of Howden (2004). The major differences between the Berwick Family Relationship Centre and Drummond Street Family Centre offerings is that the Berwick Family Relationship Centre focuses on relationships between
(step)parents and children (as stated previously) rather than between par-
ents (the more traditional approach) and that the Drummond Street Family
Centre runs a 6-week course.

The session at Berwick Family Relationship Centre focuses on practical
experiences rather than being grounded in theory. The practitioners are all
Family Dispute Resolution Practitioners, whose major role is to help fami-
lies (in the widest possible sense) resolve disputes about children, focusing
primarily on the paramount interests of the children. Generally the number
of attendees at each session is small (four or five couples, not necessarily
of opposite genders, and the occasional individual). At least one person in
the couple has a relationship with children who are not biologically their
children. The session is not run as a lecture, but as a series of discussions
and activities. The presenter commences by drawing a family tree and then
asks the couples to use dolls to represent their own families. From this fol-
lows a series of discussions and sharing of experiences incorporating some
of Gonzales’s ideas. Attendees are discouraged from taking notes, allow-
ing them to focus their full concentration on the workshop. The notes are
e-mailed after the session.

The practitioners at Berwick Family Relationship Centre wish to ensure
that parents have more awareness of the reality of stepfamilies and a sense
of not being alone, by meeting others in stepfamilies. The program allows
the (step)parents attending to share their experiences. The four case studies
mentioned earlier are discussed in more detail later.

The practitioners also hope to strengthen the participants’ relation-
ship as parents in a stepfamily. They attempt to do this by discussing
with (step)parents respectful communication and conflict resolution tech-
niques. They highlight that it is incredibly important to have respectful
communication where everyone in the family feels emotionally and phys-
ically safe. Communication in stepfamilies is vitally important due to the
added complexity of relationships that can lead to divisions along biological
lines.

They stress that conflict is necessary and healthy in relationships, but
that parties should engage in fair rather than dirty fighting. Fair fighting
involves sticking to the issue at hand, being empathetic, and choosing an
appropriate time and place to bring up grievances. Examples of dirty fighting
include violence, insults, withholding love and rewards, and using sweeping
statements. The practitioners try to encourage win–win scenarios and
resolution rather than escalation.

5 An accredited Family Dispute Resolution Practitioner meets specific standards contained in the
Australian Family Law (Family Dispute Resolution Practitioners Regulations) 2008. They are certified by
the Australian Attorney General and normally require to have studied some law, psychology, social work,
conflict management, mediation, or dispute resolution subjects.
They ask the (step)-parents to acknowledge the impact of the past and the effect that it has on the children. Stepfamilies are primarily constructed after major losses. It is vital for parents to acknowledge their children’s losses. The parents need to respectfully consider which traditions from the past family should be maintained and what new rituals can be incorporated in the newly blended family.

Practitioners encourage parents in a blended family to reach agreement on how they will discipline children in the blended family. Leman (1994) stated that “according to many family specialists, discipline of the children is the number one issue in the blended family” (p. 208). Unfortunately, most parents in blended families find themselves in trouble because they have not (or have not fully) discussed how to deal with discipline in the household.

The practitioners discuss parents’ fears, ambitions, hopes, and dislikes about their upcoming role as parents in the blended family. Parents discuss ground rules for discipline. Suggested guidelines include starting with each parent disciplining their own children and making a gradual transition. Once the parents have worked out their own guidelines, they have a family conference allowing the children to have a voice. This leads to everyone in the family having ownership of the new guidelines. Importantly, it also confirms to the children that the parents are unified.

The practitioners ask parents to keep discussions with ex-partners civil, respectful, and business-like, and restricted to practical issues about their children. Children should never be used as messengers between the parents. The practitioners suggest that parents should share information about their children with their ex-partners and inform the ex-partners about any impending cohabitation, rather than having them find out through the children.

The practitioners conclude by discussing parenting roles and providing tips for stepparents. They stress that developing relationships with your stepchildren will inevitably lead to better relationships within the whole family and especially your new partner.

1. Stepparenting relationships take time: Respect is all you can expect initially, but warmth and love can develop eventually.
2. It is important to develop a strong relationship with your stepchildren before you discipline them.
3. Seek out opportunities to spend time with your stepchildren away from the biological parent.
4. Stepparents must never attempt to replace the biological parent. Nor should they make any negative comments about the other biological parent in front of the children.
Biological parents are encouraged to do the following:

1. Create a balance between the needs of their children and those of their partner.
2. Support the stepparent when dealing with your children.
3. Develop routines and chores for your children to encourage a feeling of belonging within the stepfamily, no matter the length of time they are with you.
4. Avoid being a “Disneyland parent.” Spend time with your children engaged in everyday activities.

SOME STEPFAMILY CASE STUDIES

Study 1
We recount four incidents from this family.

AT THE WEDDING OF SIMON AND KAREN
Sally was pulling at Simon’s pants during his wedding speech. Karen was angry at Sally trying to derail the wedding and seek the limelight. Six years later Lily was pulling at Simon’s pants during Samuel’s confirmation. Rather than being angry, Karen thought this incident was very cute. This illustrates that biological parents look at their children through rose-colored glasses, whereas stepparents look at them through binoculars.

WHEN KAREN WAS PREGNANT WITH LOUIS
For the 6 months that Sally knew about the pregnancy, she did not speak to Karen. Karen found this incident very difficult to deal with, so she decided to vent her frustrations on Simon. Simon was exceedingly grateful that Karen had not been angry at Sally and was incredibly supportive of helping Karen through the situation, an example of Simon engaging in a win–win scenario. It was a mutual gain over personal victory.

SAMUEL AND MARGARET
After the first time that Samuel returned home from visiting his father in Adelaide, he proudly stated that he would like his father’s new partner Margaret to be his new mummy. Karen was initially distraught, but she eventually realized that it was good for Samuel to feel happy and content when he visits his father and that she had nothing to be concerned about. This illustrates why it is important for biological parents to give their children
permission to have good relationships with their stepparents. It is important to let children know that they should not feel guilty or disloyal if they have good relationships with their stepparents. Interestingly, 25 years down the track, Samuel has a better relationship with Margaret than he has with his biological father.

**Karen’s relationship with Simon’s mother**

Karen found it very difficult that Simon’s mother (Helen) did not accept Samuel into her family. She did not buy Samuel birthday presents nor invite him to her house. She often stated that he was not her biological grandchild. These incidents were very worrying to Simon, Karen, and the five children of their union. The situation only improved when Karen realized (based on Simon’s behavior) that the primary relationship was between Simon and herself and not Simon and his mother and that Simon was doing his best to ensure that all children felt valued and included as family members.

**Study 2**

Samantha is not coping with the four children of the two relationships. Phillip cannot provide more parenting support as the new family is financially challenged and he has to work at two jobs.

Helen was drug and alcohol addicted and barely managed to care for her two biological children 50% of the time. Due to her drug abuse, she had a history of violence toward Phillip. Phillip sought a family dispute resolution conference between himself and Helen seeking to change the arrangements so that he would only see the older children every second weekend. Helen was incapable of providing any more care for her children. Phillip confided in the practitioner that if the current situation continued it would be the end of his second relationship. The Family Dispute Resolution Practitioner suggested to Phillip and Samantha that they should attend the stepparenting program. After learning that she held unrealistic expectations for stepfamilies, Samantha felt empowered enough to persist with the situation.

**Study 3**

Ashley has been engaging in dangerous activities, including drug abuse and truancy from school. Samantha and Lisa’s same-sex relationship has been very confrontational for Samantha’s three boys and their maternal grandparents. Ian has been very disparaging regarding Samantha’s lesbian relationship, causing much turmoil for his three sons. Because of his behavior, especially toward Samantha, and his denigration of Samantha’s same-sex relationship, Ashley now lives with Ian 100% of the time and refuses to see his mother. The course leader at Berwick Family Relationship Centre
has encouraged Samantha not to engage in conflict with Ian. She suggested that Ian should be informed that Samantha is involved in a LAT relationship, rather than hearing it from the boys. Encouraging Samantha and Lisa to acknowledge the grieving processes the children are going through and having Samantha acknowledge the difficult issues that the boys are facing is also important.

Study 4

During the mediation Jane admitted that her new partner was sometimes “gruff” with his stepchildren. Peter was refusing to visit his father due to the behavior of the stepmother’s sons and the stepmother (Mary). Peter was also traumatized by the conflict between his father (William) and his stepmother, for which he felt he was the primary cause. This situation arose because his father had rewarded him with a can of soda for helping in the garden. Mary was livid because there was a rule in the new household that none of the children should have soft drinks except at dinner time.

What ensued was that the father told his two sons to ride their bikes up to the paternal grandparents’ house, which was nearby. Soon after, William packed his bags and moved to his parents’ house. He said to his 10-year-old, “I don’t know what is going on. Don’t tell your mother anything.” The next day the mother received a phone call from Peter’s teacher, very concerned because he was visibly traumatized—feeling loyalty to his father and not being able to share his concerns. Prior to the father repartnering, the parents had a cordial relationship. Even now, William often goes to Jane’s house to spend time with the boys. After this incident, Jane was so incensed at both the father and stepmother’s behavior that she immediately called Berwick Family Relationship Centre asking for stepfamily advice. William is a gentle man who is stuck between his old and new families, a situation that is making both families unhappy.

After attending the stepfamily workshop William and Mary were able to discuss their family’s discipline strategies together. They understood the difficulties faced by children and the losses the boys had gone through when their father repartnered with Mary. They were both much better armed to deal with the situations and the entailing conflicts.

The four case studies provide important examples of following the tips mentioned previously.

**EVALUATION**

Because of limited resources, and the fact that the focus at Berwick Family Relationship Centre is on providing dispute resolution support for parents in conflict, the evaluation of the step-parenting support session is necessarily
limited. At the conclusion of the workshop, questions are asked about the quality of the course and the presenter. Of more significance for this research, however, are questions on what the attendees learned and what further knowledge they required.

The attendees at the session agreed that they had learned many things including the following:

1. A better understanding of the trials all stepparents face.
2. The need to chill—to be more patient and understanding toward the children adapting to the new environment.
3. Children are not worse off in a stepfamily environment.
4. Don’t take things to heart about what the stepchildren say when they are angry; be patient and don’t take things personally.
5. The information in the workshop gave parents more insight into the problems they faced and helped improve communication between the parents and between the parents and children.

Participants also claimed that the following activities would be useful:

1. More hands-on activities.
2. Follow-up sessions in 6 to 12 months or indeed a continuation of such sessions.

One very important point learned from the program is that it is most effective when the course leaders have personal experience of stepfamilies and are able to share their experiences with attendees. Although skilled practitioners can explain current theory and practice, workshop attendees greatly value the sharing of experiences provided by most practitioners. People in stepfamilies love interacting with others who have shared the same situation.

Also of interest is that stepfamily concerns cut across socioeconomic and cultural lines—the issues discussed here are of concern to all stepfamilies. Most important, the quicker most people realize that they have unrealistic expectations of life in a stepfamily, the easier it will be to create harmony in the blended family.

**CONCLUSION**

Advice about stepparenting strategies can help blended families avoid the distress of further conflict and breakdowns. We have noted that although Australian family dispute resolution centers are primarily focused on the resolution of disputes between parents, they also have an educational role to help their clients avoid future disputes. As many of their clients have children from new relationships, it is vital for them to provide stepparenting
advice to parents who have required mediation support for the breakdown of their previous relationship. This advice can help avoid future relationship breakdown and conflict.  

By meeting others in stepfamilies, the workshop ensures that parents have more awareness of the reality of stepfamilies and a sense of not being alone. It also strengthens the relationship between parents in a blended family. This occurs by discussing with (step)parents respectful communication and conflict resolution techniques. Parents are asked to acknowledge the impact of the past and the effect that it has on the children. Parenting roles are examined and tips for stepparents are provided.

A fundamental principle behind the workshop discussions is that developing relationships with clients' stepchildren will inevitably lead to better relationships within the whole family and especially between the partners. These relationships take time; respect is all one can expect initially but warmth and love can develop eventually.

We also advise that step-parents must never attempt to replace the biological parent, nor should they make any negative comments about the other biological parent in front of the children.

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6 One client of the Berwick Family Relationship Centre has seven children from five different relationships. Negotiating child welfare arrangements in this case is very complex. Helping parents avoid further relationship breakdowns, by understanding the complexities of blended families, is of vital importance.


Spring 2012

Teaching Effective Strategies of Communication Within Blended Families

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Teaching Effective Strategies of Communication Within Blended Families

By

Pamela S. Bell

CAPSTONE PROJECT
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts
With a Major in Communications Studies

Governors State University
University Park, Illinois

2012
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INTRODUCTION

When I set out to work on my Graduate Studies final project, I really had no idea of what I wanted to do. I knew that whatever I came up with had to deal with my major in Communications Studies. I did not want to write an extensive thesis paper and nor did I have enough time in my life to do an internship for a long period of time. What I really wanted to do was something that would encompass most of the material that I had learned during my studies in Communication and I also wanted it to be something that I would feel comfortable in doing and that I would have fun doing it. Later, I had been advised that I could do a project on a topic of my choice, so I decided that I would create this workshop.

After making a choice to do this workshop, I wanted to design it in a manner where I could incorporate what I had learned in school, some of my own personal skills and personal experiences. I decided to conduct a two-day workshop on “Teaching Effective Strategies of Communication Within Blended Families”. I had facilitated many seminars and workshops before, but I chose this one because of my personal experience on the subject matter. I have been a stepmother, I have stepparents, and step siblings. Both of my parents remarried and they both have children from their current marriages. I have encountered so many negative issues being part of a step family unit and I understand the various issues that one can be faced with. It is important that we must learn to use effective communication skills.

While many studies that have been done the issues on step-parenting, and blended families, very few of them mentioned research on counseling sessions or workshops where they can come together with a mediator in a group setting and express their various concerns of being part of a step family. What I did learn from my research, was that most of the literature was based on the
issues that they faced as a family unit after the marriage. The studies revealed that most couples do not discuss these issues until after the marriage, which is one of the main reasons that problems may occur.

I thought about the Brady Bunch when I started researching this subject and how well they communicated within their family of eight people. Laughing on the inside, I remembered the original show as well as its' remake of the sitcom, the various situations in which they were able to solve problems by communicating with each other. Mike, the father would always take the time to give a lengthy speech when he wanted the kids to understand his point of views. Although his comments were often long and repetitive, he always used such excellent communication skills when there were conflicts, disputes, or family concerns.

Using this as an example, I thought it would be a good idea to center my project on utilizing good communication skills to bring unity into a few families. The dynamics of blended families are complex and this workshop is just one way that I feel that I can contribute to bringing a little harmony and unity to at least one family in the workshop.

**Literature Review**

Most of the people that I know personally either belong to stepfamilies or know someone who does. "Stepfamilies are fast becoming the norm in the United States, so much so that Americans born in the 1980s have a 1 in 2 chance of being in a stepfamily either as children or adults “ (Bernstein, 1994)”. This type of statistical information is suggesting that either there are a lot of single parents marrying for the first time, or that there are a large number of divorces and remarriages. Current research suggests, “that couples that remarry for a second time, approximately 60% of them end in divorce and those that have stepchildren are twice as likely to divorce as those with no stepchildren” (Jacobson, 1990). In both cases, these numbers represent
large numbers among these particular populations. The statistics alone are indicative that there is definitely a need for increased research on matters that include living in a stepfamily unit. The success of marriage in stepfamilies often depends upon the communication between the parents of the family unit. The “parent can be essential to the success of the stepfamily, as she or he is the only family member with a direct tie, either biological or intimate, to all other members including the child and stepparent” (Kaufman, 1993, p. 312).

Family researchers such as Burghes and De’Anth, has suggested that “in addressing specific issues in stepfamilies, there is an increasing range of different factors which in part may explain some of the difficulties that stepfamilies may be facing (Burghes, 1994; De'Anth, 1996). De’Anth (1996) further suggested that “age, gender, class, family life-cycle state, siblings, position in the family, relationship with mother and father, extended family, stepfamily formation and pre-stepfamily events, (particularly conflict between parents have all been found to be significant in different ways but there remains unexplained differences. Family changes that are a result of remarriage, divorce, death of a parent can often be very stressful for the family and will ultimately cause socioeconomic stress on the children especially when there is conflict amongst the parents. Very few of these children experience long-term negative outcomes (Burghes, 1994, p. 37)”

The parents’ main focus is typically surrounded by the demographics such as remarriage and economic factors, parenting stability and attitudes regarding marriage, however, parents “rarely focus on their “inner experiences that could contribute to the success or demise of the stepfamily” (Furstenberg, 1997, p. 58). In order to understand the parent’s experience, general
models of stepfamily formation are the most useful starting point. One such model was
developed by Papernow, who identifies certain stages within stepfamilies, which were based on a
phenomenological study of stepparents. Papernow mentions three of seven stages as it applies to
step parenting. The three stages are inclusive of: “the parent’s experience begins with unrealistic
expectations, changes to divided loyalties (with the parent feeling torn between child and
partner), and, if the couple works hard at forming a strong alliance ends in more objectivity and a
new family structure” (Papernow, 1988, p. 993).

Much of the existing research mainly encompasses studies that reflect a reader
understanding of the complexities regarding certain issues and challenges that blended families
may encounter within the family unit. However, there is not much research that is based on
communication within the blended families. Few communication researchers have yet studied
the blended family and how these groups of people come together to build a family that is
unified through harmony and love. Because of the increase in the numbers of blended families
in our society, it is important for communication scholars to focus more on the verbal and
nonverbal forms of communication in order to expand the understanding of family
communication in general, and more specifically, to increase one’s knowledge of the role that
communication plays in the family functioning of the blended family (Braithwaite, Golish,
Soukup, & Turman, 2001). It is further important that we look at the various issues such as
conflict resolution, roles, boundaries, discipline, ex-spouse interaction, and even more
importantly, the communication skills that are needed in order to establish family unity and
loyalty.

Blended family members of these families must negotiate many complex issues which
are challenging to members of these families such as redefining communication boundaries
between the various blended family subsystems (Bray & Hetherington, 1993; Papernow, 1994; Witsett & Land, 1992), managing loyalty conflicts between children and non-custodial parents, adjusting to change, and negotiating new, unfamiliar roles within and outside the family (Anderson & White, 1986; Coleman & Canong, 1995).

In order to deal with those issues that blended families may face, it is important that the parents are able to embrace the communication process, embrace and recognize their personal strengths and weaknesses which may intensify or improve their communication skills, and then join forces to work on them together in order to concentrate on some of more key issues. If one parent has good listening skills or communicates well, this could enhance the possibility to communicate with each other better. Feeling heard and understood helps to develop trust and love between people. For some families, it might be a good idea for couples to seek resources outside of the home to help in strengthening their communication skills and reinforce the relationship between them, which is often challenged in these families by the simultaneous need to build the parental relationship” (Saint-Jacques, Robitaille, Godbout, Parent, & Drapeau, p. 559).

One of the most contradictory issues within the blended family is the power of the stepparent-stepchild relationship that can place an incredible amount of stress on the married couples’ relationship. In cases like this, there is an ongoing competition within the sub-systems of the stepfamily, which causes conflict, confusion, jealously and other difficulties within the newly married couples’ relationships. Much of the problem exists because the marital dyad is competing against that of the biological parent-child dyad, which intensifies the problems between the between the stepparent and the stepchild. The biological parent has a history of attachment and comfortableness with the stepchild and the stepparent does not. (Dupuis, 2007).
Contrary to this, most couples that marry first and then have children are often able to share their view on solving problems and getting to know each other. These couples have a change to spend time together and learn about their partners' family dynamics, family rituals and family values. In fact, these couples seem more equipped with the tools that can lead to a healthy and happy family after they have children. Remarried couples, instead of beginning a fresh life together, often enter the relationship and at least one of them already is raising at least one child. Couples that are newly remarried normally do not take the time to talk during the dating period to plan for living in a stepfamily. It is rare that they establish ground rules in starting a new family or talk about role expectations, visitation of non-custodial biological parents or financial statuses. "As such, the couple misses out on a period of time in which to create shared meaning by solidifying their commitment and working out their differences" (Dupuis, 2007). "Many remarried couples with children find that they are thrust into a system where different sets of already established role relationships clash and must be renegotiated and where previously undefined step-relationships must be dealt with immediately" (Tracy, 2000, p. 96).

For some families there is almost always some sort of competition between the biological parent-child relationship and the marital relationship in which the biological parent often wins or takes sides. This type of conflict causes stress on the couple and causes them to feel like they being pulled apart from each other. Another issue of competition is the amount of time that the biological parent spends with the biological child. This also places stress on the relationship for couple. On the other hand, conflict could result in resentment of the closeness of either relationship. In most cases "this can create the triangulation of the child between the remarried couple, for the child may serve as a buffer against the couple's distress created by the lack of"
shared meaning. In other words, conflict between the stepparent and stepchild may redirect issues away from the remarried system” (Dupuis, 2007, p. 100).

Besides practicing effective communication skills, parenting classes can be helpful to move the couple along in the communication process that will help them develop communication between the parent and child relationships as well as provide the couple with skills on how to practice parenting. “Recent meta-analytic studies have demonstrated that brief, skills-based educational programs for couples increase couple satisfaction; improve communication skills; reduce negative conflict behaviors, including violence; and may prevent separation and divorce” (Gelatt, Adler-Baeder, & Seeley, 2010, p. 573).

Many stepfamilies encounter stressor that can often lead to separation or divorce. As stated previously, these families should explore options that assist them in remaining married and working out there difference. “Family stress theory provides a useful format for assessing and helping stepfamilies by explaining the remarriage experience in a way that suggests possibilities for intervention within the family and also possibilities for policy changes within a variety of institutions in our society” (Crosble-Burnett, 1989, p. 323).

Many stepchildren have reported mixed attributes regarding the influence of communication and how it affects the role of the stepparent and the patterns within the stepfamily. Stepchildren “feel tremendous ambivalence about stepparents, often experiencing the dialectical tensions of wanting both a two-parent authority system and a one-parent authority system in the stepfamily” (Schrodt, Soliz, & Braithwaite, 2008, p. 193). Most stepchildren, especially adolescents, place great emphases and worry about whether or not the stepparent plays an active or inactive role in their lives. They often resent the stepparent and a cause great conflict among the couple and the family unit.
Given the fact that most stepfamilies experience family relationship issues, there seems to be substantial inconsistencies regarding whether or not the stepparent should have an active or inactive role in the lives of their stepchildren. This seems to be a topic that often causes conflicts within almost every stepfamily, however it is often also a topic that is complicated, very controversial and it varies from family to family. Based on the “unpredictability of relationships between the step parent and child and remarried adult relationships in stepfamilies, one may assume that patterns of everyday talk and feelings of relational satisfaction in stepfamily relationships may vary” (Schrodt, Soliz, & Braithwaite, 2008, p. 111).

In most stepfamilies parents are often faced with challenges of role identity and its' relationship to disciplining of the children. “While there is substantial literature on adolescents’ within various family systems, much less research has concentrated in the area of discipline from the adolescent’s perspective” (Morin, MMolito, & Costlow, 2001, p. 282). Marriage and family therapists are placed with the task of understanding how stepfamilies differ from traditional families so they may tailor their interventions to meet the specific needs of their stepfamily clients. Many stepfamilies are founded based on loss, and can involve, divorce, death, or a severed relationship, and which can result in the possibility of the adults and children being unable to grieve appropriately for their loss. Further, step couple relationships are often faced with loyalty conflicts, where an adult feels pulled between current and former partners, or between one’s biological children and the current partner (Visher & Visher, 1979 & 1993). Patterns of interaction observed in new stepfamilies include children testing and rejecting their stepparent, and children feeling disempowered as the stepparent assumes a co-leadership role with the biological parent (Lawton & Sanders, 1994). Stepparents may feel doubly marginalized, by stepchildren who reject their authority and by their partner’s co-parenting allegiance with the
former partner (Papernow, 1993). "The conflicting and evolving needs of newly blended family members may present numerous challenges to the step-couple. The inherent developmental challenges of adolescence, combined with the complexities of divorce and remarriage, and intensified by the distress imposed by the lack of cultural understanding of these issues, leaves the adolescent in a stepfamily at risk" (Stoll, Arnaut, Fromme, & Felker-Thayer, 2005, p. 178).

The difficulty that is encountered by both the biological parent and the stepparent is unfortunately a major issue among stepfamily parent/child relationships and also by both biological and stepparents with their adolescent children. "Stepfamilies report higher levels of mother-child disagreements and lower levels of parental supervision than intact biological families. Additionally biological fathers who remarry often face difficult decisions as they respond to demands of both their children and second wives. Some stepmothers are not supportive of the father-child relationship and as a consequence these fathers neglect their children in favor of these new spouses" (Freisthler, Syare, & Harrison-Jay, 2003, p. 86).

Another perspective that emerged more strongly during the 1990s can be described as a cognitive perspective. Fine and Kurdek (1994) proposed a cognitive-developmental model of stepfamily adjustment to guide future research. The authors emphasized that people are information-processing organisms, who attempt to make sense out of their experiences of step family living. They proposed that maladjustment occurs in stepfamilies when members have different perceptions, expectations, and assumptions about stepfamily roles and relationships, which in turn lead to different interpretations and attributions in regard to events that occur within the stepfamily. "Conversely, they argue that stepfamily adjustment is likely to be associated with clear and realistic role expectations, balanced attributions about the causes of family events, and recognition that stepfamilies are different from first marriage families."
More recently, Fine, Coleman, and Ganong (1999) proposed a social constructionist approach in their investigation of the stepparent role. They argued that stepfamily members tend to create their own thoughts and characteristics about the roles of being a step-parent based on their own life experiences and on the norms of social constrictions. Some constructions will be adaptive while others will be problematic.

A cognitive perspective has also been present in the clinical literature. Visher and Visher (1988, 1996) explain that most peoples' ideas are based upon a number of unrealistic expectations that they may have observed to be common in stepfamilies. Their ideas along and expectations are often based on instant love between the stepparent and children, being able to be the healer of the distress when their partner has been divorce and all with the expectation of having the ideal family. The prevalence of unrealistic expectations or stepfamily “myths” among adults who remarry, has been supported by Hetherington and Kelly (2002) in their report of the long-term follow-up of the Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage. “The reality of stepfamily living can be very different from the expectations held by stepparents that are step parents” (Moore & Cartwright, 2005, p. 111).

The increase in the number of blended families leads us to an increased need to better understand the blended family. Many of these complexities are different from “traditional or nuclear families and are highly communicative in nature”(Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, & Turman, 2001, p. 222).

“The body of existing research has contributed to our understanding of the complexity of blended families by shedding light on some of the unique challenges these families confront” (Braithwaite, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001). In order to increase our knowledge regarding blended families, communication scholars need to research the root of understanding family.
communication in order to determine how blended families can manage issues such as setting boundaries, conflict resolution, and role negotiation through communication.

Although the most of the issues listed above are a result of a lack of communication skills, it often results in relationship problems for all members of the family. "Stepfamily couples report avoiding discussion of sensitive topics more than first-marriage couples. In the only observational study of stepfamily communication, the research finds that the stepfamily couples were more negative than first-marriage couples, and there was a similar association between negative communication and low relationship satisfaction in stepfamily and first-marriage couples. This study did not assess partner withdrawal. Negative stepfamily couple communication might reflect negative family-of-origin experiences, as in first-marriage couples. Given that negative communication predicts divorce; there could be an overrepresentation of negative communication in divorced people who then form a stepfamily. The high breakup rates in stepfamilies might reflect, at least in part, selection effects leading to high rates of negative couple communication in stepfamilies. Consistent with this possibility, in a longitudinal individuals' observed negative communication in the early stages of their first marriages, and their second. Alternatively, stepfamily communication might be influenced by the challenges that couples have to address in stepfamilies". (Halford, Nicholson, & Sanders, 2007, p. 473).

While there is little research that focus directly on factors that research focusing directly on the factors that contribute to successful stepfamily development, research has been conducted to determine what entities make certain couples in stepfamilies' successful. Kelly (1992)
reviewed 20 stepfamilies to find out what made them successful. Several major themes emerged from these interviews: flexibility, respect, patience, communication, and sense of humor.

Families were flexible with schedule changes, family responsibilities, and family boundaries. Respect, was another theme that emerged from the interviews. Family members felt it was important for everyone to show respect to each other. Respectful behavior, in contrast, was considered a realistic expectation and one way to establish a loving step relationship. Patience was an equally important characteristic in these families. They understood that it takes time for families to gain a sense of family identity, to merge into one new family. Clear communication among family members and a means to implement it were central to these families. Another theme identified in the interviews was a sense of humor. Families thought it was important to see the humor in their circumstances, to have fun together, and not take things too seriously (Michaels, 2006, p. 55).

The Step family formation can also lead to meeting new household members, forming new relationships, changes in friendships and networks (Wallerstein, Corbin, & Lewis, 1988). Once married the family needs to adapt to their new routines and activities at home and often they don’t realize that they have forgotten about their old friends and others that they use to surround themselves with (Menaghan, Kowaleski-Jones, & Mott, 1997). The same goes for those families that are formed through cohabitation or when children from multiple families are blended into one household (Tilman, 2007). Our society does not have many resources or networks of institutionalized support to help support families adjust to stepfamily life (Cherin, 1978).

In conclusion, this literature review determines that there is a relative correlation between steptfamilies and the contribution of communication skills, difficulties experienced by the
stepfamilies and structural variables that explain long-term marital satisfaction in stepfamily couples. In other words, communication is vital to the success of relations within stepfamilies, but it is mainly the spouse's communication skills that provide meaning to their marital satisfaction (Beaudry, Boisvert, Sinard, Parent, & Blais, 2004).

A recent search for studies that showed a comparison of communication in stepfamilies and in first-time marriages, the results of one study revealed when compared, showed significant results that "that stepfamily couples would be more negative than first-time couples, was not supported. In fact, stepfamily couples had much lower rates of negative communication than first-time couples, though they also showed somewhat less positive discussion than first-time couples. It was also found that partners in stepfamily couples would withdraw more from couple discussions, was supported" (Halford, Nicholson, & Sanders, 2005, p. 479).

Communication is also important in when it involves stepfamily reorganization. Reorganization of the stepfamily involves "communicating at points perceived to be critical in the development of the relationships that comprise the step family. The members of stepfamily engage in talk with one another about their relationships. Bateson (1951) first referred to this process as metacommunication or communication about communication.

He described it as involving cues and propositions about codification and relationships between the communicators. These dimensions are closely related because propositions about codification also have relationship and visa versa. As it relates to metacommunications, observing that, in order to regulate relationships, people must be able to communicate about their own communication patterns (Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990, p. 45).
Finally, we have learned that the quality of communication has been identified as the strongest predictor of long-term couple satisfaction for both men and women in a stepfamily. and has been noted that the “stepfamily couples and it has been noted that communication can alleviate or aggravate or can be a harmful cognitive process. Negative interaction models that include aversive behaviors inducing guilt, withdrawal, and violence are carried from one union to another. Thus, elements that were destructive are carried from one union to another explains that the inability to communicate effectively could partially explain a greater instability in stepfamilies” (Saint-Jacques, Robitaille, Godbout, Parent, Drapeau, & Guage, The process distinguishing stable from unstable stepfamily couples: A qualitative analysis, 2011, p. 547).
Bibliography


Goals and Objectives of Workshop

Overall Group Goals and Objectives

GOAL: Provide some essential communications skills and techniques that will be useful in promoting family harmony.

Objective: Participants will gain a better understanding of how communication techniques and strategies are key components in helping to maintain harmony and unity within the family unit.

Creative Problem Solving

Goal: Participants will be able to utilize the problem solving skills in order to effectively work through family issues and concerns.

Objectives: Provide participants' with the problem solving skills that are needed in order to solve current issues and problems in a creative manner as well as, to aid in the growth of the family through the process of communication.

Communication Skills: Listening (verbal and nonverbal), Speaking Skills

Goal: To provide lessons that will encourage the client to utilize better listening and speaking skills while communicating with each other.

Objectives: The participants will become active listeners through reinforcement and listening activities and lessons. Further, participants will be able to promote good communication, assist in solving problems, and gain
a clearer understanding of each other and the issues that they are
challenged with.

Conflict Resolution

Goal: Provide techniques, positive solutions and written information on
“conflict resolution” to help participants resolve conflicts.

Objectives: Participants will be able to utilize the skills that are necessary in order
to maintain conflict and confusion.
FACILITATORS ROLE

My role as a facilitator has taken thorough and careful planning. In order for the workshop to be productive for all participants, I will ensure that the materials will be presented in a manner in which the participants will learn and hopefully be able to utilize the workshop to their advantage in the future. My first plan of action was to choose and design a workshop that would be easy and would benefit all those that would be involved. Once I chose to do the workshop on "Teaching effective strategies of communication within blended families," I had to ensure that I selected the right population that could benefit from the workshop. I chose to target married couples or partners that were living in homes where one parent was a stepparent. I also targeted those couples that were currently experiencing problems and issues within their prospective families. My next step was to determine how much time I would need in order to provide them with the strategies that would help them in making changes within their family unit. I decided to design a two-day workshop for parents who have stepchildren. I decided to design a two-day workshop from 9:00 am until 4:00 p.m. each day. Next I wrote out the goals and objectives for each topic of discussion as well as an overall goal and objective for the workshop. My next course of action as a facilitator would be to choose a place where I could facilitate the workshop. I figured it would be a good idea for the parents to get away and plan to stay for the workshop in a local convenient hotel with a conference room. A particular hotel was chosen because of the size, availability, and the space available for the workshop. Planning my course of topics to be discussed would be my next plan of action in order to execute them through various learning styles (guided learning, lecture, activities, role-play, etc.), I also had to coordinate the time frames for each topic and activity. While designing the process, although this workshop would not be a large group of people, I have learned from past experience that smaller groups can get out of control. As a facilitator, I will need to keep the group from getting out of control due to the fact that the workshop will include various group activities, discussions, and facilitator presentations. Keeping the group in control helps to facilitate learning better and helps the participants gain meaningful knowledge from the workshop. It is
workshop flowing. My responsibilities will also include keeping the participants engaged in the workshop at all times. Prior to facilitating the workshop, it is my responsibility that I made sure that I had researched all of the information that I would need for each topic. Preparing myself mentally is also important. Another responsibility is to provide all the necessary materials and supplies and props needed for the workshop. As a facilitator, I will make sure that I have backup materials, props and written notes in the event that there are equipment failures or a participant introduces material that I have not researched or planned for. I must also make sure that I exercise good listening skills as a facilitator as well as keeping notes for additional comments and being effective in responding to their questions and concerns.
Are you experiencing problems with being a step-parent? Does your new family seem dysfunctional? WE CAN HELP!!!

We are offering a two-day workshop that will provide you with the skills that you need to build a happy and healthy new family.

We can help you in:
- Dealing with ex-spouses
- Role Identification
- Divided Loyalties
- Dealing with loss
- Establishing family unity and loyalty
- Adjustment issues
- Communication Skills
- Discipline
- Respect
- Listening Skills
- Coping Skills
- Conflict

Don't miss this great experience. It will be a 2 days of fun learning.
PDMJ Communications Specialists, Inc.

Communications Specialist/Life Coach, Facilitator

5940 Lakebluff Drive Unit 5A
Tinley Park, Illinois 60477
708-744-8813
708-744-8816
pambeltr2@gmail.com

TEK: Do not place text inside or against blue lines.
PHOTOS: blend photos that reach edge of card to gray dotted line. Click here to see how.
MATERIALS

WRITING UTENSILS
PAPER
SISSORS
FLIP CHART
COMPUTER WITH PROJECTOR OR SCREEN
MARKERS
HAT
TAPE
POSTER BOARDS
TABLES CHAIRS
EASEL
DAY ONE

TEACHING AFFECTIVE STRATEGIES AMONG BLENDED FAMILIES
APPENDIX

A
Teaching Effective Strategies of Communication Within Blended Families

Presenter: Pamela S. Bell

April 14, 2012
9:00am - 4:00pm

Tinley Park Convention Center
South Tower
Tinley Park, Illinois 60477

9:00 - 9:30 Registration
9:30 - 10:15 Welcome
10:15 - 10:45 Let's get acquainted (small group activity)
10:45 - 11:00 Break
11:00 - 11:30 PowerPoint overview of workshop
11:30 - 12:00 Discussion
12:00 - 1:00 Lunch
1:00 - 1:45 PowerPoint Communication
1:45 - 2:00 Energizer Activity
2:00 - 2:30 Discussion
2:30 - 2:45 Break
2:45 - 3:15 PowerPoint Listening Skills
3:15 - 3:40 Listening Activity
3:40 - 4:00 Wrap up
APPENDIX B
TEACHING EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES OF COMMUNICATION WITHIN BLENDED FAMILIES

Information Form

1. Names: Husband: __________________________
   Wife: __________________________

2. Phone Numbers: Home: __________________________
   Cell: __________________________

3. Please explain what you intend to gain from this workshop

   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________

THANK YOU FOR ATTENDING. LET'S HAVE SOME FUN
TEACHING EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES OF COMMUNICATION
WITHIN BLENDED FAMILIES

Please list any advantages or benefits of being a stepparent

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 
6. 
7. 
8. 
9. 
10. 

Please list any disadvantages or negative issues in being a stepparent

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 
6. 
7. 
8. 
9. 
10. 

If you have more, please feel free to use the back of the form or another sheet of paper.
|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
APPENDIX C
LET'S GET AQUAINTED ACTIVITY

This exercise is important because it allows the group to get to know each and it begins the process of communication in the group and the personal process of family communication. The group will be separated into smaller groups in order for them to bond with someone other than a family member.

The facilitator will also take part in this exercise so that the participants can get to know her as well. Once the facilitator has introduced herself, she will then get them to feel comfortable by telling them how excited she is that they are participating in this workshop and how good she feels about the good turn out. Explain that most of what they will be learning the workshop has to do with learning effective communication skills and that working together is vital to its success. Ensure the participants all have some of the same issues and that sharing information with each other is not only helpful, but also vital in learning to deal with their personal issues. This exercise is designed for the participants to get to know each other. Explain to the group that it is very important they understand that they will have to be good listeners for this lesson. THERE IS NO WRITING IN THIS EXERCISE.

EXERCISE

A. The facilitator will pair the participants with someone other than their significant other.

B. Have them introduce themselves and to share with their partner a little information about why they came to the workshop, and any other
information that they may want to share with each other that may help get better acquainted.

C. Next, the facilitator will ask each participant to introduce their partner that they were paired with and tell them to share with the others what they learned about the other person. Everyone will have an opportunity to speak.

During the break, the facilitator will record some of the responses from the participants as they relate to their issues within their blended families. The purpose of the facilitator writing this out on a flip chart is to show them they have a lot in common. Allow the participants to speak only about what they thought about the exercise. Try to deter them from discussing their issues at this time because it will be done at a later time under another lesson.
Effective Strategies of Communication Within Blended & Stepfamilies

WORKSHOP OVERVIEW
Housekeeping Rules

- Eating is permitted, however please throw your trash away.
- There are Restaurants are in the area
- Make sure you return all supplies
- Do not enter any room other than the one designated for this workshop
- Be on time for both days
All About Me

- M.A. in Communication Studies
- Life Coach
- Divorced
- Personal experience in subject matter
- Two children ages 17 & 24
What is a Stepfamily

A family formed by the remarriage of a divorced or widowed parent. It includes the new husband or wife, plus some or all of their children from a previous marriage or relationship.
Recently the definition is often expanded to include all cohabitating couples, whether married or not. Some people also apply the term to non-custodial relationships, where, “stepparent” can refer to the partner of a parent with whom the child does not live.
ISSUES WITH BLENDED & STEPFAMILIES

- Communication
- What role do I play
- Establishing family unity and loyalty
- Respect
- Adjustment Problems
- Dealing with ex-spouses
- Divided loyalties
- Discipline
SKILLS AND TECHNIQUES

- Effective listening skills
- Effective speaking skills
- Creative problem solving
- Coping skills
Relationships of our block of the basic building communication is
We have all had experiences where we have felt heard and understood.

We have had experiences where we have felt misunderstood and even ignored.
When we feel misunderstood, when we feel stressed, and more open, and more heard, we are less angry; generally, when we feel
Feeling heard and understood also helps to develop trust and love between people.
A sender conveys the message and a receiver is to whom the message is sent. In communication the sender is clear and accurately conveys the message she is trying to send. Also, the receiver clearly understands the message. Miscommunication occurs if the sender does not send a clear message and/or the receiver does not understand the message sent by the sender.
MANY THINGS CAN GET IN THE WAY OF GOOD COMMUNICATION
OBSTACLES

- When we assume we know what others are thinking, or that they should know what we are thinking.

- When we focus on what we want to say while others are talking, instead of listening to them.
OBSTACLES

- When we bring up other problems and issues unrelated to the topic.
- When we assume we know what is right for others and use our own thoughts to convince them.
COMMUNICATING TAKES PRACTICE AND EFFORT

- Communication is not something that comes naturally for most of us.

- Communication takes constant practice and vigilance.
It is through communication that we convey our thoughts, feeling and connection to each other. Developing good communication for successful relationships, whether parent, child, spouse or sibling relationships.
Question Game

Each person writes down a question they want answered in the group. Roll up the questions into a ball. Each person throws her/his question to someone else. Take turns answering the questions. You can have more than one round and ask students to ask questions that increase risk.

This exercise demonstrates that a parent has to take risk in getting to know their children or partners. Not all conversations are negative and this exercise shows them how to communicate effectively even if they are uncomfortable.
Active listening is a way of listening to others that lets them know you are working to understand the message they are sending.
#1
Make sure that your body language conveys to them that you are interested and listening.

You can make eye contact with them, turn your body toward them or nod as they are speaking to let them know that you are listening. Make sure you don't use paralanguage like ok, uh, and you know,
#2
Reduce any distractions that will keep you from focusing on their message.

Try to stop whatever you are doing that might distract you from their message. Turn off the television, stop reading, or turn off music. You may need to tell them, "I will be better able to listen to you when I am done with dinner in about 15 minutes. One cannot multi-task when trying to listen."
#3

Listen for the content and the feelings behind the words

Do not just listen to the content of what is being said,. Listen for the feeling that the person is trying to convey to you. Are they expressing joy, sadness, excitement, or anger either through their words or body language?
When the person has finished talking, paraphrase back to them what you heard them saying.

What I am hearing from you is ___. Again this allows the sender to know that you are actively listening to you.
#5

Do not offer advice to the person because it shuts down communication

The person first needs to know that you have understood them and that they have sent their message clearly to you.
APPENDIX H
LISTENING ACTIVITY

Role Play Activity

EXERCISE

1. Have participants sit in pairs facing each other, with someone they don’t know.
2. Have one person in the pair (speaker) discuss what they feel about step parenting.
3. Have the other person (listener) observe what the speaker is saying. Have them observe eye contact, posture, facial expressions, etc.
4. After each pair is complete, place them back in their original seats.
5. Ask the group to discuss what they observed they saw, heard and felt. What did they notice about the speaker? How did they react to what was being said?
6. Reemphasize the rules of being a good listener and why listening is important (from PowerPoint).
7. Explain that by practicing these listening skills it will enhance communication in not only their personal relationships but also with their children.
8. Ask participants what they learned from this experience.

When the exercise is over ask the participants to practice utilizing these listen techniques among each other and others after the workshop.
DAY TWO

TEACHING

AFFECTIVE

STRATEGIES

AMONG BLENDED

FAMILIES
Teaching Effective Strategies of Communication Within Blended Families

Presenter: Pamela S. Bell

April 15, 2012
9:00am - 3:30pm

Tinley Park Convention Center
South Tower
Tinley Park, Illinois 60477

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tr>
<td>9:00-9:15</td>
<td>Warm Up Activity</td>
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<tr>
<td>9:15-10:00</td>
<td>Discussion on Listening Exercise</td>
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<tr>
<td>10:00-10:45</td>
<td>Family Communication PowerPoint</td>
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<td>10:45-11:00</td>
<td>Break</td>
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<tr>
<td>11:00-11:30</td>
<td>Discussion on Family Communication</td>
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<td>11:30-12:00</td>
<td>Listening Activity 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>12:00-1:00</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
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<td>1:00-1:30</td>
<td>5 ways to deal with ex-souses</td>
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<td>1:30-2:15</td>
<td>Energizer</td>
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<td>2:15-2:30</td>
<td>Break</td>
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<tr>
<td>2:30-3:00</td>
<td>Recap and Discussion</td>
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<tr>
<td>3:00-3:30</td>
<td>Closing activity</td>
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<td>3:30-4:00</td>
<td>Wrap up and Evaluation</td>
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FAMILY COMMUNICATION

With more people there are more opportunities for communication breakdowns and greater chances for conflicts to arise.
When two people are involved, there is the opportunity for one relationship.

When three people are involved, there is the opportunity for three relationships.

With four, there are six possible relationships.

With five, there are ten possible relationships, and so on.
APPENDIX K
**Listening Game:** The most influential experience

Do not provide any explanation on listening before playing the game. The experience of the game should not be influenced by the input. You do not want the effect of the experience to be diluted.

Here's the listening game.

1. Divide the group of people in two by counting off into twos. The group should have even-numbered people. If the group is odd-numbered, then ask the last person whose number is 'one' to be the observer. Take all the 'ones' outside the room. (This listening game will work well when you have a co-facilitator.)

2. The co-facilitator steps out of the room with the 'ones', while you stay in the room with the 'twos'.

3. Instructions to the 'ones': "Take a few moments and reflect on an incident which had a dramatic influence in your life. It should fit into the category of 'life changing'. After a while you'll go back to the room. There you'll find your colleagues sitting in different parts of the room with an empty chair in front of them. You can take the empty chair before anybody you choose.

   "Once you are seated begin to tell that person the 'one most influential event' in your life. After you have finished, your partner will summarize what you told her."

4. Room arrangement with the 'twos' during this listening game: Get the twos to spread out in the room (not huddle around one area of the room) and sit on a chair. Other than their own chair they should have an empty chair facing them. Have the 'twos' sit on one of the pair of chairs.
5. Instructions for the 'twos': After a while the ones will come into the room and each one will occupy one of the empty chairs. So that means each one of you will have one colleague sitting in front of you.

"They will begin to tell you about an experience that they have had in their lives. Your task is to ignore them as unobtrusively as possible. Your body language will involve sitting back, not meeting their eyes, twiddling with something in your hand like pen or a pencil and possibly doodling.

"You'll continue this 'non-listening' behavior until the trainer gives you a signal like knocking on the table with a marker. (Set a signal with the 'twos' that is mutually agreeable to you and them. It should be something audible above the din as well as unobtrusive.)

"As soon as you hear the sound, transform your body language to one of listening. Lean forward; meet the speaker's eyes, stop twiddling and doodling. Once your partner has finished relating her piece, summarize to her what you heard."

Now play this listening game exactly as per your instructions above. You'll find that when the 'ones' walk in there is a momentary hesitation in choosing a partner. Then they briskly walk up and sit down in front of one person.

Some behaviors that you will notice in this listening game.

Some of them start to speak immediately, in spite of the fact their partners are not listening. Out of these some will stop talking on noticing that they are not being heard, while others will plough on. The ones who stop speaking, you'll notice will either look offended or will try and attract the attention of the listeners.

Some of them will just sit down and wait for the listeners to look up and start listening.
There's also a certain tension you'll sense because of the non-listening behavior. The listeners you'll find are squirming in their seats because they have to keep themselves from listening to their partners. They can partially hear the speakers relating 'life changing' experiences, their voices heavy with emotion and they are not expected to listen.

As the listening game reaches this point and you give the prearranged signal, there's a marked change in the emotional content of the room. There's interaction, good listening behavior from the listeners and almost a relieved continuation of the conversation by the speakers.

Some other behaviors you will notice in the room during this listening game: Anger among some of the speakers, so much so that they refuse to speak. Disinterest among the speakers, who are now completing the activity very mechanically. Sometimes there are instances of weeping, as the speakers are very hurt by the listeners' behavior. Consequently the listeners are trying their best to gain control of the situation once again.

Debrief of Listening game:

Before you begin the debrief, ask the listeners and speakers to sit in a row facing each other, the listeners in one row and the speakers in the other.

1. First ask the listeners to respond to the following questions:
   How do you feel? What are you learning?

2. You'll hear about all the behavior and feelings that you noticed while the game was in progress.

3. While the speakers want to share too, try and contain them till it's their turn to respond to the debrief questions.

4. Once again you will hear about the observations that you made earlier.
5. You'll also sense amazement and hear sheepish laughter at the discoveries they have made about themselves.

6. They will express learning styles like:

- 'I realize that I have done this with quite a few people and when it happened to me I did not like it at all. I have decided that I will never ignore people again.'
- 'I felt lousy not being able to listen to my partner especially when she was sharing something so important.'

7. Some of the other learning techniques that you need to gently bring home to them are:

- It is not every time people have something earth shattering to share. Yet whatever they do want to share is important to them and so worth listening to.
- It is also insensitive for speakers to go ahead and share whatever they want to even if the listener is not paying attention to them. It would be more fruitful if speakers listen to the body language of the listeners and deal with that first, sensitively of course. They need to take time to find out what's keeping the listener from listening.
- Not listening (either to the verbal message or the non-verbal message) is the malaise that has affected society. This malaise has resulted in competing relationships rather than in collaborative synergistic relationships.
5 WAYS TO DEAL WITH EX-SPUSES
Manage conversations by staying on matters of parenting

- It is common for the conversations of an “angry associate” and co-parents to gravitate back toward negative personal matters of the past.”
Work hard to respect the other parent and his or her household.

- For the sake of the kids, find ways of being respectable even if you honestly can’t respect your ex-spouses lifestyle or choices. Do not personally criticize them, but don’t make accuses for their behaviors.
Keep your “business meetings” impersonal to avoid excessive conflict.

Face to face interaction has the most potential for conflict.
Be sure to notice your own part of the ongoing conflict

When you attempt at trying to change other people, you inadvertently invite hostility or a lack of cooperation in return. Learn to let go of what you cannot change. It will only cause conflict in the home.
Step-parents should continue a “non-threatening” posture to the same-gender ex-spouse.

- This helps to alleviate the need of the biological mother to bad-mouth the stepparent or the new marriage in order to keep the loyalties of her children.
PM ENERGIZER

Have participants get into a circle. One person starts with one end of the yarn and passes it to someone else in the circle after they tell group that they will be commitment to utilizing the skills learned through the workshop. Afterwards, everyone takes a piece of the yarn to tie onto his or her wrist as a bracelet.
CLOSING ACTIVITY

ROSES AND THORNS

Everyone in the circle shares a high point and low point from the training with the group.

Affirmation mingle: Have the individuals mingle around in the group, and instruct them to stop in front of someone and share with them one way in which they noticed that person "shine" during the workshop. Keep switching partners so each person gets feedback and support from different members of the group – and so that people get practice giving positive feedback!
** Attitude**
Show that you are willing to understand. Put aside your own feelings and stereotypes.

** Acknowledge **
Let people know you want to listen. Show interest but not necessarily agreement.

** Clarify **
Ask questions that let the speaker know you are listening, to get more information, and to make sure you understand their story.

** Empathize **
Allow the speaker to know that you understand her/his concerns and feelings. You do not need to agree with them to understand.

** Summarize **
Review important ideas, facts, feeling, and information. Make sure you understand the main issues. Summarizing a person's statements or issues helps them know the listener heard and understood what he or she said.

Adapted from Center for Human Development, Conflict Resolution Training, 2002.
Contra Costa Health Services, TeenAge Program
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>House Cleaning Checklist</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>DAILY</strong></td>
<td><strong>WEEKLY</strong></td>
<td><strong>MONTHLY</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kitchen</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wash dishes</td>
<td>Wipe up spills in fridge</td>
<td>Dust blinds and vacuum curtains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear and wipe table</td>
<td>Throw out old food</td>
<td>Wash windows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wipe countertops and stove</td>
<td>Clean outside of appliances</td>
<td>Wipe cupboard doors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wipe the sink</td>
<td>Scrub and shine sink</td>
<td>Clean fridge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweep</td>
<td>Shake or vacuum rugs</td>
<td>Clean oven and stove hood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wipe up spots on the floor</td>
<td>Mop</td>
<td>Clean small appliances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take out trash</td>
<td></td>
<td>Wash trash can</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Bathroom</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Spray shower with shower mist</td>
<td>Mop</td>
<td>Clean showerhead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean mirror</td>
<td>Clean sink/countertop</td>
<td>Wash windows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wipe the sink and counter</td>
<td>Wipe door/knobs</td>
<td>Wash rugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean the toilet bowl</td>
<td>Clean tub</td>
<td>Wash trash can</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wipe toilet seat and rim</td>
<td>Clean outside of toilet</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Empty trash</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shake or vacuum rugs</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Bedrooms</strong></td>
<td>Change sheets</td>
<td>Straighten shoes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make bed</td>
<td>Dust</td>
<td>Straighten drawers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Straighten nightstand</td>
<td>Vacuum</td>
<td>Dust blinds/vacuum curtains</td>
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<tr>
<td>Put clothes away</td>
<td></td>
<td>Wash windows</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vacuum around the edges of room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Living/Family Rooms</strong></td>
<td>Dust</td>
<td>Clean mirrors/dust pictures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean up the clutter</td>
<td>Vacuum</td>
<td>Clean electronics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Straighten pillows/cushions</td>
<td>Straighten books, DVD's, etc.</td>
<td>Dust blinds/vacuum curtains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Straighten coffee/end tables</td>
<td>Wash windows</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wipe spots off tables</td>
<td>Vacuum couch</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vacuum around the edges of room</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Home Office</strong></td>
<td>File Papers</td>
<td>Clean mirrors/dust pictures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean up the clutter</td>
<td>Dust</td>
<td>Dust blinds/vacuum curtains</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sort mail</td>
<td>Vacuum</td>
<td>Wash windows</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vacuum around the edges of room</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Laundry / Utility Room</strong></td>
<td>Dust shelves</td>
<td>Clean insides of washer/dryer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laundry - clothes</td>
<td>Wipe washer/dryer</td>
<td>Wash windows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweep</td>
<td>Clean sink/countertops</td>
<td>Change filters on heating/AC units</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wash bedding and towels</td>
<td>Mop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Remove lint from dryer vent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Entryway / Porch</strong></td>
<td>Sweep entry and steps</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pick up clutter</td>
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http://www.vertex42.com/ExcelTemplates/house-cleaning-schedule-checklist.html
WORKSHOP EVALUATION FORM

Name of Presenter: _______________________________ Date: ________________

Title of Workshop: __________________________________________________________________________

Overall, how would you rate this workshop?

1. How would you rate the usefulness of the content?
   (1 2 3 4 5)

2. How would you rate the hands-on activities?
   (1 2 3 4 5)

3. How would you rate the presenter’s knowledge in the subject?
   (1 2 3 4 5)

4. How would you rate the presenter’s style of teaching?
   (1 2 3 4 5)

5. How would you rate the pace of the presentation?
   (Too fast Too slow Just right)

6. Was the workshop above or below your current skill level?
   (Above Below Just right)

7. What did you like best or find most useful about the presentation?

8. What skills did you learn that may help prepare you for technology integration in the classroom?

9. Were your personal learning goals for the course met?
   If "No," please describe those expectations that were not met.

10. Any other comments?
Communication Strategies

[Name]

Ifas mastered the course

Awarded this day of

Presenter Name and Title

[Name]

CERTIFICATE OF COMPLETION

[Date]