

Children and Stepfamilies: A Snapshot

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A Substantial Percentage of Children live in Stepfamilies.

- *More than half the Americans alive today have been, are now, or eventually will be in one or more stepfamily situations during their lives. One third of all children alive today are expected to become stepchildren before they reach the age of 18. One out of every three Americans is currently a stepparent, stepchild, or stepsibling or some other member of a stepfamily.*
- *Between 1980 and 1990 the number of stepfamilies increased 36%, to 5.3 million.*
- *By the year 2000 more Americans will be living in stepfamilies than in nuclear families.*
- *African-American children are most likely to live in stepfamilies. 32.3% of black children under 18 residing in married-couple families do so with a stepparent, compared with 16.1% of Hispanic origin children and 14.6% of white children.*

Stepfamily Situations in America

Of the custodial parents who have chosen to remarry we know the following:

- *86% of stepfamilies are composed of biological mother and stepfather.*
- *The dramatic upsurge of people living in stepfamilies is largely do to America's increasing divorce rate, which has grown by 70%. As two-thirds of the divorced and widowed choose to remarry the number of stepfamilies is growing proportionately.*

*The other major factor influencing the number of people living in stepfamilies is the fact that a substantial number of children entering stepfamilies are born out of wedlock. A third of children entering stepfamilies do so after birth to an unmarried mother, a situation that is four times more common in black stepfamilies than white stepfamilies.¹ Finally, the mode of entry into stepfamilies also varies drastically with the age of children: while a majority of preschoolers entering stepfamilies do so after nonmarital birth, the *least* frequent mode of entry for these young children (16%) fits the traditional conception of a stepfamily as formed*

¹ This calculation includes children born to cohabiting (but unmarried) parents.

by parental remarriage following a marital disruption which involved the child. Only among children entering stepfamilies over age 10 does this traditional conception of stepfamily formation approach one-half. *As a result, half of all children who spend some part of their childhood with a custodial mother will eventually live for some period of time with a stepfather.* Over 60% of these second marriages will fail.

- *The stability of remarriages varies by race.* Remarriages are more stable than first marriages for blacks, although the overall divorce rates are higher for blacks than whites in both first and subsequent marriages. Marital stability increases with the number of husband's children in the household, especially if it is the wife's first marriage.
- *While the creation of a satisfactory stepfamily situation is often difficult, it is most difficult for the parents of adolescent children.* The highest divorce rates for remarried families involve individuals with custody of children from previous marriages; if these children happen to be adolescents, the rates are even higher.

Numerous Factors Influence the Decision to Form a Stepfamily

- *Income is related to the probability of remarriage.* The more money a divorced male has, the more likely he is to remarry. There is, however, an inverse relationship between income and remarriage for women.
- *Remarriage rates vary by race.* Blacks remarry more slowly than whites; remarriage occurs within 5 years of divorce for 42% of black women and 55% of white women. Hispanics are less likely to remarry than either blacks or whites.
- *Age is a factor in remarriage rates of women but not men.* Younger women remarry more quickly than older women. Women divorced after 40 are less likely to remarry.
- *Children are a factor in remarriage rates of women but not men.*
- *Women with children, divorced prior to age 25, have lower remarriage rates than women without children.* Women older than 35 with children, however, have a higher rate of remarriage than those without children.
- *Education level, religious background, and upbringing also influence a woman's decision to remarry.* Women the most likely to remarry are less educated, less apt to have experienced a stable parental marriage, and less likely to be Catholic. Remarriage for women appears to be more likely when they have been raised or live in a culture more tolerant of divorce and remarriage.

Stepfamilies vs. Two-Parent Biological Families

- While it is important to be aware of the risks associated with generalizing about stepfamilies, it is also possible to draw some important conclusions from the body of

work already done on stepfamilies.²

What is known about the life outcomes for children of stepfamily formation?

- *Compared with children from two-parent nuclear families, children from stepparent families have higher deviance rates (e.g. contact with the law, arrests runaways, school discipline, and truancy); report more susceptibility to pressure from friends to engage in deviant behavior; present to clinics more severe behavioral problems; are found by parents to be more difficult to manage and report lower self concepts.*
- *Children who live in stepfamilies during adolescence have lower GPAs, poorer attendance records, and more problems with school authorities than their peers who grow up with both their parents. Children in stepfamilies are also less likely to stay in school continuously, graduate from high school, attend college, and graduate from college.*
- *Children raised in stepfamilies marry at younger ages. Stepchildren are significantly more likely than children from intact families to marry early.*
- *Teens in stepfamilies are three times more likely than teens living with their nuclear families to have needed psychological help within the last year.*
- *Despite the fact that children in stepfamilies seem to be at greater risk of adjustment problems, most of these children are doing fine. According to clinical tests, between 2/3 and 3/4 of children in stepfamilies (and even more if the child is living in well established stepfamily) do not exhibit serious emotional or behavioral problems. In the long run, the response of most children to the challenges of life in a stepfamily seems to be characterized by resiliency and adaptability.*

How does the creation of a stepfamily influence child development & parent/child interaction?

- *Children who live with stepparents during adolescence receive less encouragement and less help with school work than children who live with both natural parents. These differences in parental behavior and supervision, however, appear to account for little of the difference in educational attainment between children from intact and non-intact families.*
- *Children in stepfamilies are often disadvantaged because their relationships with stepparents are characterized by less closeness and greater conflict than parent-child relationships.*
- *Adolescents in stepfamilies experience higher levels of mother-adolescent disagreement, lower levels of mother-adolescent interaction and maternal supervision, and lower levels*

² Though mother/stepfather stepfamilies are the most common, when husbands' and wives' custody status relevant to previous marriages are considered, at least nine different types of stepfamilies are possible.

of socio-emotional and global well-being than children raised in nuclear families.

The creation of a stepfamily produces a structure significantly different from the biological parenting arrangement it replaces; a fact that holds both opportunity and challenge for individuals involved.

- *While stepfamilies may be similar to nuclear families in economic terms, the two family types are not identical in other ways.* Annual family income values for both groups are virtually equal (though, if the stepfather is paying child support for a child living in another household the real income of the stepfamily is likely to be lower). Parental education, however, is also lower in stepfamilies than in original two-parent families. Additionally, stepfamilies are also less economically secure, as is reflected by noticeable differences in home ownership, home equity, savings, and investments. Other structural strains in stepfamily life are evident in the higher employment rates and longer working hours of remarried vs. originally married mothers, the higher likelihood of minority status for at least one of the parents, the higher likelihood of differences in religious identification, and the larger numbers and older ages of children, compared to original two-parent families.
- *Stepparents are not necessarily any less well equipped to handle parenting situations than biological parents, rather stepfamilies are forced to confront problem areas biological families are able to avoid.* Researchers report stepfamilies have more conflict about child-rearing and the financial support of children, less cohesion, ambiguous or disparate role expectations, more stress, and more problems in child-rearing and child adjustment than families in first marriages.
- *The negative effects of stepfamily status are strongest where it is the rarest and least institutionalized.* The effects of stepfamily status, for example, are stronger for Whites and Asians than for African-Americans with Hispanics somewhere in between.

By law, stepparents are not allowed the same level of authority a child's biological parent possesses.

- *The current "law of stepfamilies" consists of a series of limited exceptions on the premise that stepparents and stepchildren are legal strangers to each other.* Furthermore, the exceptions that validate stepparent-stepchild relations for a particular limited purpose (with regard to inheritance, school check-out, surgery approval, etc) are not consistent from one state to another.
- *Although there is some expectation that stepparents will assume a parental role, remarriage in the US does not confer stepparents with any legal ties to stepchildren.* For example, in most states stepparents cannot authorize emergency medical treatment for their stepchildren without express permission from the children's parent or legal guardian. (Kaufman, 1993).

Stepfamilies vs. Single-Parent Families

Single parents should not feel obligated to remarry in order to create a better life for their children.

- *On the whole, most studies have found that the creation of a stepfamily makes children neither better or worse off than children in single parent homes.* While some studies have shown that living with a stepfather has positive benefits for some children, nevertheless others have found that living with a stepfather (i.e. the creation of a stepfamily) neither reduces nor improves a child's chances of graduating from high school or avoiding a teenage birth.
- *The first few years of living in a stepfamily are particularly difficult for children.* In the early stages of a remarriage, stepchildren are less well-adjusted than children in stabilized families headed by a divorced, custodial mother. Other studies, however, indicate that these additional behavior problems disappear over time.
- *Remarriage, in itself, does not alter the psychological well being of adolescents one way or the other.* While "disturbed adolescent functioning" is much more common among teens in stepfamilies than teens in intact families, psychologists find these levels of disturbance to be equally common among teens in stepfamilies and teens in single parent families.
- *Living in a mother/stepfather family has as many negative effects as living in a mother-only family.* Contrary to what might be expected, children living in stepfamilies are equally at risk for involvement in deviant behavior as their peers living in single parent households. An additional adult in the home seems to make little difference in terms of adolescent's deviance if that adult is a stepfather. It is the biological intactness of the adolescent's household--which adults, rather than the number of adults present--that attenuates rates of deviance.
- *The average child raised in a stepfamily is doing about the same as the average child raised by a single mother.*

Reasons for Differences in Life Outcomes of Children Raised in Stepfamilies

I. Income

- *In terms of family income stepfamilies resemble nuclear families, though stepfamily income is slightly lower.* According to the US Census Bureau, single parent families have the highest poverty rate (26.5%) and two-parent intact families have the lowest (5.3%). Stepfamily poverty rates (8.7%) are very close to those of two parent families.
- *Despite the fact that the amount of money and time available to children in stepparent families roughly approximates that of two-parent families--child outcomes suggest that something is missing.* Significant differences between stepparent and two-parent families in patterns of parental behavior suggest that something other than the number of adults in the household and household income determines child outcomes. Lower achievement could occur either because stepparents are less willing to invest time and money in unrelated children, or because the latter are more likely to reject the affections of stepparents. Families in which children have been raised by a single mother for some time, the stepfather maybe viewed as an intruder or competitor for the mother's time. This pattern may also be related to the changes in social capital and residential mobility associated with remarriage (below).

II. Residential Mobility

- *Children who live with both parents experience the least residential mobility of all children, whereas children in stepfamilies experience the most.*
- *Efforts to minimize residential mobility in families undergoing a remarriage benefit children.* The disruption of social ties resulting from forced changes of location (either changes in neighborhood or school district) is a critical, and often unnecessary, mechanism underlying the lower school achievement of children in stepfamilies. The fact that a large proportion of children from stepfamilies report no residential mobility indicates that it is often possible for a single parent to remarry without forcing children to get used to new homes, neighborhoods, and schools.
- *Residential mobility seriously influences a child's school experience by threatening educational continuity and increasing the likelihood of dropout.* 33% of children in stepfamilies between grades 5 and 10 change schools because of moves two or more times (as opposed to 12% in two parent families) and almost 25% of children living in stepfamilies are forced to change schools three or more times (as opposed to 6% in two parent families). Residential mobility also accounts for between 35 and 40% of the difference in attendance and dropout rates between children in stepfamilies and two-parent families.
- *Residential mobility is the single most important factor determining a stepchild's likelihood to succeed.* While some children do move into *better* neighborhoods and

schools as a result of a parental remarriage, residential mobility still accounts for as much as 60% of the overall negative difference between children in stepfamilies and children in two-parent families.

III. Parent Involvement in Stepfamilies

While a divorce sometimes strengthens a child's relationship with his or her custodial parent, that parent's decision to remarry often has the opposite affect.

- *Parents in stepfamilies are less likely to be involved in children's activities involving large time commitments.* These types of commitments include such things as volunteering at school or coaching a sports team. Remarried parents are also less likely to be involved in their child's religious activities. In addition, some studies show that parents in stepfamilies are substantially less likely to engage in even one-time activities like helping with special projects, chaperoning class trips, or attending plays, concerts, and sports events.
- *Remarried mothers are less involved with their children than both still married and never married mothers.* While decreased mother/child time spent together is usually replaced by stepfather/stepchild time spent together, such arrangements usually result in changes in the *quality* (though perhaps not the *quantity*) of parenting involvement.
- *With the formation of stepfamily children often lose the role of confidant to their custodial parent.* Children of single parents are more likely than other children to spend time talking to their parents--that is, in single parent families children often assume the role of confidant. This does not remain the case if the single parent remarries. After the stepparent (usually a stepfather) moves in, studies show the level of involvement between the biological parent and child declines, probably because the parent devotes more time to his or her new spouse.

Stepparents interact with stepchildren in different ways than custodial parents interact with resident biological children.³

- *At all times in the remarriage children report feeling less close to stepparents than to biological custodial parents.*
- *Stepparents are more disengaged and less authoritative in the parenting of stepchildren than in parenting their own children.* This finding remains true even in restabilized stepfamilies. Stepparents are also less authoritative and more disengaged than are nondivorced parents.
- *Stepparents are far less willing to contribute to college tuition than parents in intact marriages.*

³ The quality of stepparent-child relations is not affected by reproduction in remarriage.

Remarriage and child support payments.

- *The remarriage of a biological father does not mean that child support payments to any non-custodial children will decrease.* Conventional belief has long been that the remarriage of a noncustodial parent (father) would result in a decrease in child support payments and compliance. Somewhat surprisingly, the few studies performed do not support this premise. One study found no effect of remarriage upon child support payments and another reported that compliance actually increased when the noncustodial parent remarried.

Stepfather Involvement:

While a remarriage definitely affects a parent's relationship with his or her children, that child also develops a relationship with his or her new stepparent (be it good or bad). As the vast majority of stepparents in America are men, much is known about their situation:

- *Stepfathers are less likely to be committed to children's welfare than biological fathers.* Stepfathers are also less likely to serve as a check on the mother's behavior than biological fathers. Rather than assisting with the responsibilities of parenting, stepfathers sometimes compete with the child for the mother's time, adding to the mother's and the child's level of stress.
- *After two years of marriage stepfathers are often disengaged from their stepchildren.* These stepfathers demonstrate low levels of involvement, rapport, control, discipline, and monitoring.
- *When asked to evaluate their families, children respond that stepfathers provide less support, control, and punishment than biological fathers in intact families.* Stepfather involvement, however, is positively associated with the number of years stepfamilies have been together.
- *Despite these things, the social behavior of children in stepfather families is not necessarily less competent than that of children living in divorced or intact families.* Data suggest that such factors as parenting behavior, age of child, and level of marital conflict in any type of family structure are implicated as possible explanations of a child's social behavior.
- *The benefits of having a stepfather are most likely to be enjoyed by pre-adolescent boys when the remarriage occurs at an early age.* Studies suggest that boys enjoy more benefits of having a stepfather than girls and that younger children are more willing to accept the presence of a stepfather than adolescents.

The Influence of Gender

Girls in stepfamilies:

- *Girls have more difficulty relating to stepfathers than boys.* Stepparent-stepdaughter relationships are more problematic than stepparent-stepson relationships. Social science studies focusing on stepchildren, stepparents, and biological parents all reveal lower ratings on “love” and higher ratings on “detachment” dimensions for stepparent-stepdaughter relationships. Girls also emit a lower proportion of positive verbal and a higher proportion of negative problem solving behavior toward their stepparents than boys.
- *In stepfather families there is also a trend for girls to show more anger toward their mothers than boys.* Girls in stepfamilies are also more anxious than girls in intact families.
- *Girls in stepfamilies seem to be treated differently than boys.* Both parents in stepfamilies encourage less emotional independence in their daughters than in their sons. Remarried mothers of girls engage in less meaningful verbal interaction than remarried mothers of boys and stepfathers of both boys and girls.
- *Girls are also treated differently in stepfamilies than in nuclear families.* In biologically intact families older girls are treated more permissively than younger ones; in stepfamilies the reverse is true: girls in stepfamilies are treated less permissively as they grow older.
- *More antagonistic, disruptive behavior towards both parents in a stepfamily is found among younger girls, whereas increasingly noncommunicative, sullen, and avoidant behavior is more common among adolescent girls.* Relations between younger stepsons and their stepfathers, in contrast, improve over time.
- *Adolescence is often a particularly difficult time for the stepfathers of young girls.* Among more stabilized stepfamilies, a stepfather’s control increases over time for stepsons--but not for stepdaughters--when the remarriage occurs at a young age. Adolescence, however, creates renewed conflict between stepfathers and stepdaughters, even if parental remarriage occurred in early childhood.
- *While boys seem to become more accustomed to stepfamily dynamics over time, girls do not.* After two years, pre-adolescent girls growing up with a warm, supportive, authoritarian stepfather demonstrate more acting out and antisocial behaviors than girls in either divorced or nondivorced families. Pre-adolescent boys, in contrast, show no more behavior problems than boys in nondivorced families.
- *Being raised in a stepfamily influences the way women think about sexual relations as an adult.* Female college students whose parents had divorced and remarried are more likely to have premarital intercourse than females whose parents are still married.

Boys in stepfamilies:

- *The benefits of having a stepfather seem to be greater for boys than they are for girls.*
- *Boys in stepfather families also show more mature behavior than boys from mother-custody-divorced homes. Mothers of boys in stepfather families seem to make more meaningful statements to their sons than the un-remarried mothers of boys.*
- *There is some evidence that the presence of a stepfather reduces negative behavior manifested by boys in the aftermath of divorce.*
- *Since the mother-son relationship after divorce is often more problematic than the mother-daughter relationship, boys may welcome the same sex figure while girls may fear a stepfather will disrupt the mother-daughter bond.*
- *There is much evidence to support the belief that a stepfather's presence is a positive event in the boy's life, and that these benefits of parental remarriage are more likely to be enjoyed if the remarriage of his custodial parent occurs while the boy is young.*

Other Factors to Consider

Many behavior problems associated with children raised in stepfamilies are likely caused by pre-existing conflicts experienced by these children, not the fact that they are being raised by a stepparent.

- *Children whose parents choose to divorce are likely to have experienced considerable conflict in the home before their parent's decision to dissolve their marriage. For this reason it is not surprising that these children demonstrate some difficulties relating to others prior to their parents' divorce. These problems are then exacerbated by the stresses associated with their parents' marital transitions. Thus, individual predispositions and problems in family relations preceding divorce and remarriage contribute significantly to problem behavior often not noticed until after the formation of a stepfamily.*
- *The extent to which stepchildren's disadvantage is due to parental remarriage rather than their previous experience in single-parent households is inadequately understood.*
- *Entering a stepfamily increases a child's likelihood of experiencing a series of sometimes difficult family transitions. Many children entering stepfamilies go through not only the disruption of this newly-formed family unit but also multiple subsequent family transitions before reaching the age of 18. Each of these changes in family structure increase the number of stressful transitions such children experience.⁴*

⁴ One study shows that the presence of stepsiblings significantly increase the odds of early home-leaving-- suggesting that some problems associated with parental remarriage are present over-and-above the deficits of past experience.

- *There is reason to expect that children and adolescents most at risk for behavioral and emotional problems are not those in stepfamilies, but those who have experienced multiple parental divorces and, consequently, multiple parenting transitions. What negatively affects children's well-being is not so much the kind of family structure in which they happen to reside, but the history of the quality and consistency of the parenting they receive.*
- *It appears to be the conflict associated with the creation of stepfamilies, as opposed to the type of family formation itself, that harms children.⁵ Adolescents in happy and supportive stepfamilies tend to be better adjusted than adolescents in conflict-ridden first-parent families. Divorce and remarriage can also remove children from stressful or acrimonious family relationships and provide additional resources for children.*

Abuse in Stepfamilies:

- *Stepfathers are more likely to be sexually abusive than biological fathers. Approximately one out of every six women who had a stepfather as a principal figure in her childhood years was sexually abused by him, compared to only one out of every 40 women who had a biological father.*
- *While many studies report that children are more likely to be abused by a stepparent than a biological parent, the overall rate of violence is significantly lower for stepchildren than for all other children. Another reports argue that biological parents are more likely than nonbiological parents to severely abuse or kill their children.*

Caveats to Research

It is inaccurate to think of all stepfamilies as being identical. For a great while all stepfamilies have been crudely grouped together without regard to stepfamily complexity; such conventional approaches obscure actual stepfamily situations in a number of ways. One group of researchers cautions that the following guidelines should be kept in mind when thinking about stepfamilies:

- *Always focus adequate attention to the variation and structural complexities of step families. Many who seek to understand the lives of stepfamilies are blinded by the enormous complexity of stepfamily forms. Differences caused by variant custody patterns (divorce vs death of parent), questions of income, sex of parent and sex of child variations, contact with the nonresident parent, age of child at remarriage, and the ramifications of sibling and step-sibling interactions should no longer be ignored. Also, while most stepfamilies are assumed to be stepfather households, the presence (and validity) of stepmother households, households where both parents are stepparents, post-bereavement families, cohabiting, and nonresidential stepfamilies should not be ignored.*

⁵Another piece of evidence for the argument that it is interparental conflict that decreases a child's well-being is found from the fact that children of divorce reveal more problems than those who lose a parent through death. Children in both situations find themselves being raised by only one parent, but children whose parents divorce are additionally forced to confront the fact that their parents *chose* to separate.

- *Do not highlight only the problems of stepfamilies while ignoring positive outcome variables.* By highlighting only the problems associated with stepfamilies many ignore the fact that many children are undeniably better off in a caring stepfamily as opposed to, for example, an abusive, unhappy, or unloving nuclear family home. Researchers are often guilty of this and, for example, repeatedly compare the self-esteem or problems of children in stepfamilies with children in other family types instead of attempting to pinpoint the factors contributing to positive self-esteem in other stepfamily children.
- *Take care not to evaluate the functionality of stepfamilies only on the basis of nuclear family norms.* There is no evidence that behavior identified as optimal functioning in nuclear families is the same behavior seen as optimal functioning in stepfamilies, and repeated attempts to highlight these apparent differences may obscure possible functional alternatives possible in steprelationships. Comparing stepparent-child to parent-child relationships on emotional closeness also makes little sense; there may be fundamental differences in how these two types of relationships *should* function.
- *Remember that stepphouseholds and stepfamilies are not necessarily the same thing.* A stepfamily *household* is one in which at least one adult is a stepparent to a child residing with them. A stepfamily is a broader group that may contain members who do not reside full time in the household but who are nonetheless significant family members. It is likely, especially for children, that stepphouseholds and stepfamilies are different psychologically, emotionally, and physically. Another common, but inaccurate, practice is to treat remarriage and the beginning of a stepfamily as a static event, rather than a process that may have begun with previous marriage and family experiences. Remarriage is a legal marker rather than a physical or experiential one.