

## Stepfamilies Today

I've been asked to "set the stage" for a series of presentations about stepfamilies by providing resending information about their prevalence and general characteristics. As someone who has been studying these families since the late-1970s, observable changes in family life in general have results in changes for stepfamilies and children.

Since the 1950s, several dramatic changes have occurred in family life **(Slide #2)**. Age at marriage has increased dramatically, so that people are waiting longer to marry. Also, although fewer people are electing to marry at all, most individuals will choose this option sometime during their lives. Many have either substituted cohabitation for marriage or have used cohabitation as a step toward marriage and remarriage with varying levels of success. Thus, while marriage rates are lower, cohabitation rates are higher, suggesting we are not against forming committed relationships. Further we have witnessed a decrease in family size with fewer children born overall, but there has been an increase in out-of-wedlock births and concern over the weakening tie between marriage and childbearing.

Whether married or cohabiting, relationships remain fragile with many spouse divorcing or partners dissolving their unions. For children this results in their facing multiple transitions in the structure and functioning of their families and their lives in general, and this is increasingly of concern to scholars. Couple such transitions with the increasing economic hardship faced by many families today, but especially those with less education and resources, and family life is increasingly challenging for adults and children.

Such changes mean that children often become part of a less stable family life, experiencing multiple transitions that are reflected both in the structure of their families, as well as the structure of their lives. For example, the end of a marriage often the perceived loss of a parent as well as a relocation of the family, so children change schools, neighborhoods, friendship groups, etc. In addition, for children born outside of a marriage, life can be more tenuous, as resources are less available, including often the presence of the non-resident parent and his/her resources.

Applied to stepfamilies, these changes in American family life has resulted in our need to look beyond what was traditionally defined as a stepfamily (couple where the current marriage was a remarriage for one and he/she brought a children or children from the prior marriage into the current relationship). So today we apply a broader definition of stepfamilies **(Slide #3)**. As you can see, marriage and divorce are no longer markers of the designation as a stepfamily. This inclusionary definition means we also have to examine different types of families with greater specification than was done in the past.

In fact, some data sources do not allow us to clearly identify and describe stepfamilies for several reasons **(Slide #4)**. One report includes children under 18 in all families, whereas another report limits these children to those whose mother or father is 15-44 years of age. Too, if historical trends are what is of interest, some information, especially by racial and ethnic groups or non-marital cohabiting couples, is simply not available. Then, the collection of other valuable information that was consistently available before 1995, is not longer available due to

budget restrictions. All of this complicates our ability to provide an accurate picture of stepfamily life. With these caveats, I begin to provide a picture of those who remarry or repartner and form stepfamilies.

**(Slide #5)** Our current estimates drawn from multiple sources suggest that about 70% of all individuals will marry sometime over the course of their lifetime. Other estimates regarding those who marry suggest that about 63% will do so only once, whereas 13% will marry twice, and 3% marry 3 or more times. Any of these couples could form stepfamilies. For example, those marrying only once may be a stepfamily by virtue of one spouse having had a child or children outside of marriage, making the new spouse a stepparent.

Another way to look at these data focuses on respondents to national surveys where women and men are 15-44 years of age. Using this representative cross-section of the population shows that for women in this age group, 49% are currently married and 9% were cohabiting. Of those that were married, 20% (or about half) of their spouses had been married before and about the same amount were already parents. Of the 9% that were cohabiting, 32% of their partners had been married before (no there is no data on whether they had cohabited before), and the same percent had children from the prior marriage.

Depending on how the questions are asked, we get different data that makes it hard to compare. For example, this same recent report of men and women 15-44 showed that 27% of them had never married or cohabited, 15% had cohabited but not married, 23% had married

but not cohabited, 28% had cohabited and married, and 7% had married and cohabited with some other than their spouse about divorcing.

Our best estimates at this time suggest that under 50% of first marriage end in divorce, and about 65% make it to their 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary (**Slide #6**). Moreover, divorced individuals are not dissuaded from their marital experience to attempt remarriage, as about 75% go onto marriage again. Many of these individuals cohabit before the remarriage. Our expectation is that those who remarry will have better luck the second time, although the estimates suggest a slightly higher divorce rate for remarriages. Moreover, there is recent evidence that the median (50% mark) time for both those in first marriages and remarriages to divorce is about 8 years. Earlier estimates showed that it took much less time for those in remarriages to divorce (4.5 years) compared with those in first marriage. I see this as a good sign, as I have always argued that it is surprising that remarriages and stepfamilies do not have a higher divorce rate than those in first marriage given the complexities of stepfamily life. Perhaps you will come to agree with me from the multiple presentations that follow this one, when I suggest that there is much strength and resilience in these complicated families, even if they fail to remain intact.

Those who cohabit have more tenuous relationships than those who remarry, as cohabitation relationships change more frequently through either dissolving or marrying. In fact, by 5 years, less than about 25% remain intact; some scholars suggest that about 65% of those who cohabit go onto marry and that accounts for this decrease. Interestingly, cohabitation in general

reduces the chance a marriage will last 10 years; however, if the couple is engaged and then cohabits, probability of divorce is similar to those who never cohabited.

**(Slide #7)** Looking at stepfamilies from a child's perspective, and using the Bureau of the Census definition (child = < 18 years residing in the household), we know that about 70% of all children reside with two parents. These two parents can both be bio-parents, stepparents, or adopted parents. In addition, about 23% live with a single mother and 5% with a single father, although these single parents may include their parents' partners. Overall, our best estimates suggest about 17% of children currently reside in a stepfamily using our inclusive definition. More the 2/3 reside with a half-sibling which means there new couple have a shared child.

**(Slide #8)** Let me say just a couple of things about what these estimates do not include. About 50% of young adults 18-24 live with their parents. Although there is some data to suggest that this percentage might be lower for stepfamilies, any stepfamilies that have only children older than 17 would be excluded from these estimates. In addition, excluded from these figures are children who are less than 18 and reside with their single parent who is not repartnered or remarried (sometimes only at the time of data collection), but whose nonresident parent is would be excluded. Also excluded would be those adult children mentioned earlier. Although the data and estimates are not perfect or all-inclusive, they are what we now have available, and it is important that we look to them for additional insights about the characters of these families.

Several characteristics have been associated with stepfamilies **(Slide #9)**. For example, for those who form stepfamilies following divorce and remarriage, we know that children are typically younger rather than older when they become members of stepfamilies. This is primarily because divorces are more likely to occur earlier in a marriage rather than later. Regarding the structure of the stepfamily, equally common are *simple stepfamilies* consisting of a resident stepfather with his new spouse or partner and her children from a prior union or a *complex stepfamily* consisting of a resident stepfather (who has children from a prior union living elsewhere) and nonresident stepmother whose children from a prior union live with the new couple. Least common are simple stepfamilies consisting of a resident stepmother and her new spouse or partner and his children from a prior union. It remains true that when parents divorce or dissolve their relationships, most children continue to reside with their mothers and may continue contact with their fathers who live elsewhere. This means that most stepmothers are nonresident stepparents where his children “visit” but do not live with them daily; further, we know least about stepmothers.

Stepfamilies vary from first marriage in terms of race, education, and the number of children **(Slide #10)**. Specifically, stepfamilies formed after divorce and remarriage are most likely to be white, with less education overall, and fewer children. Although divorce is more common among African Americans, remarriage is less common. This means that African American stepfamilies are more likely to begin as re-partnerships rather than remarriages. In fact, their partnerships and re-partnerships are slightly more stable than those initiated by Hispanics and appreciably more stable than those initiated by whites; they are much less likely than whites to

move from cohabitation to marriage within 5 years (75% for whites, 40% for African Americans).

Those who elect to repartner or remarry typically have less rather than more education. For example, those with high school diplomas or less are more likely to marry, divorce, and remarry than are those with more than a high school diploma. Because education is linked with income, it is not uncommon that remarriage and repartnering is associated with low income levels. This is especially true for those who have never married but have partnered and repartnered, as unemployment is more common amongst those who have less rather than more resources. Further, there is some research showing that marriage is a goal for those with less education and lower incomes, but this goal is not necessarily achievable.

Consistent in the literature is that having more rather than less children from a prior union is linked with decreased likelihood of repartnering or remarriage for women. The same does not hold true for men. We see similar gender differences regarding education, such that more education reduces the changes of repartnering or remarriage for women but not men. Further, there is some evidence that men with nonresident children from a prior union are more likely to repartner than remarry; this effectively reduces the chances of women repartnering/remarrying.

**(Slide #11)** There is a good deal of data showing that certain family background characteristics are linked with the likelihood of forming a stepfamily. Those who have lived with both parents

at age 14 and who report that their religious beliefs are important are less likely to be in stepfamilies. In other words, parental divorce and less religiosity are associated in a lower propensity to marry; however, if they elect to marry, these individuals are more likely to divorce and remarry. Thus, there is a good deal of evidence that experiencing your parents' divorce increases the likelihood that offspring will establish less enduring relationships.

Recent studies have focused on the role of cohabitation in affecting the outcomes of marriage and remarriages. Overwhelmingly, these results suggest that cohabiting relationships are less stable than marriages, and this also holds true for repartnerships. Moreover, it is interesting to note that those who reporting cohabiting experience prior to marriage, have marriages that are less likely to endure, except in cases where cohabitation follow engagement.

Other evidence shows that premarital births reduce the chances of marriage and stepfamilies remaining intact over time, whereas births during the marriage or partnership do act to “cement” the relationships at least for about 10 years. After this point the presence of a common child fails to serve as a barrier to relationship dissolution.

Taken together, the information presented here attempted to give you a brief overview of the prevalence and general characteristics of these complicated families, whether they are formed through marriage or cohabitation (**Slide #12**). Those resulting from cohabitation represent a new form, and on which has received much less attention to date. However, like the historical change in the way stepfamilies were formed (death of spouse to divorce), the change from



marriage to cohabitation as the entry to stepfamily life brings about some unique issues that must be addressed, although there is much in common across stepfamilies.

In the following series of presentations, you will gain much knowledge from the finest scholars and clinicians in the nation about the issues facing the diversity of stepfamilies and strategies for facilitating their stability and growth. I hope that you will find this opportunity as exciting as I do.