

Slide 1: Introduction

Hello. Welcome to this training module, which will provide an overview of some stepfamily research. My name is David Schramm and I am an assistant professor and state extension specialist in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Missouri.

Slide 2: Objectives

The body of research on stepfamilies has grown considerably over the past twenty years and I obviously will not have time to summarize even a small portion of this research. I think it will be more manageable and more meaningful to accomplish the following objectives:

At the end of this module, I hope you will be able to:

- Explain how the term “stepfamily” originated and why the term “stepfamily” is preferred
- Describe the effects of stepfamily living on children
- Articulate the possible explanations for the differences in outcomes for children living in nuclear families and stepfamilies
- Understand the complexities associated with current and future stepfamily research

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The term “stepfamily” actually originated hundreds of years ago as a way to describe how a new spouse literally “stepped into” the role of a new parent for a child, usually through marriage to a widowed parent.

Although there are a number of terms and labels used to describe stepfamilies, the actual term “stepfamily” is preferred over labels such as “blended” or “reconstituted”. Although these terms are catchy media phrases, they do not describe the family relationship or what happens when at least one person in a couple relationship brings a child from a previous relationship. The term “blended family” also tends to set up unrealistic expectations of all family members blending together like a smoothie, without any effort, which can make adjustments more difficult than they need to be.

Only a few years ago the definition of a “stepfamily household” was limited to a family formed when a parent marries someone who is not their child’s biological parent. Today, however, “new” stepfamilies are increasingly formed by cohabitation, first marriages, and other complex living situations where children are brought into couple relationships

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Stepfamily research is a relatively new and rapidly expanding area for scholars, when compared to the volumes of studies that focus on marriage, divorce, and other family relationships. In fact, the number of published research studies on stepfamilies during the 1990s alone exceeded the entire volume of studies during the previous 90 years combined (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). It was really not until the 1970s, when divorce replaced death as the leading precursor to

remarriage when stepfamily research began to receive serious attention (Cherlin, 1992). The most recent decade review of research on remarriage and stepfamilies during the 2000s demonstrates both that the interest in studying this topic continues to grow, as does the diversity and complexity of stepfamily structures, as marriage has come to be viewed as more optional than in the past (Sweeney, 2010).

I think it is also important to point out that many of the early studies on stepfamilies, particularly those published before the mid-1980s, used a deficit-comparison approach, meaning many studies looked for ways that stepfamilies were deficient or were somehow lacking, compared to nuclear families (reviewed in Coleman et al., 2000; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). More recent research has generally adopted a normative-adaptive perspective, which is a strengths-based approach that views stepfamilies as a legitimate family form rather than “imperfect copies of nuclear families” (Visher & Visher, 1979).

Unfortunately, even today there are negative stereotypes and labels for stepfamily members such as the “wicked stepmother” or the “poor abused stepchild” that the media portrays in fairy tales, motion pictures, and even college textbooks (e.g., Claxton-Oldfield, 2000; Coleman, Ganong, & Gingrich, 1985; Coleman, Ganong, & Goodwin, 1994; Leon & Angst, 2005). These harmful stereotypes and labels can set up a pattern of negative stepparent-stepchild interactions before they even meet for the first time and this has the potential for undermining the stability of the new family.

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Stepfamily Living on Children

Although time will not allow even a general overview of the expanding stepfamily literature, I will provide a summary of the single most widely addressed topic involving stepfamilies over the past 30 years, and that is the effect of stepfamily living on children.

Although the research is clear that children *can* be stable, healthy and happy in a variety of family forms, one conclusion from the research is that living in a stepfamily is associated with greater risk for a variety of negative outcomes for children when compared to living in a nuclear family, meaning a family that includes only a married man and woman and their children in common. It is important to point out, however, that most of the effects are relatively small, and some appear to dissipate over time.

These negative outcomes, or problem areas, can be divided into four general categories:

- Academic/educational (e.g., grades, test scores, completion)
- Behavior issues (externalizing behaviors)
- Psychological adjustment and emotional well-being (internalizing behaviors)
- Interpersonal relationships

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Academics/Education

When it comes to how well children living in a stepfamily do in school, compared to children living with both parents, a number of studies indicate that, on average, they do not achieve as well in their grades (Bogenschneider, 1997; Ham, 2004), on achievement test scores (Hofferth, 2006; Pong, 1997), number of grades completed (Teachman, Paasch, & Carver, 1996), and being suspended or expelled from school (Zill, 1994). The biggest differences, studies show, however, are in dropout rates, school attendance, and whether they graduate from high school or earn their GED (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Ham, 2004).

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Behavior Issues (externalizing behaviors)

Adolescent stepchildren are generally more likely to also get into more trouble with regard to externalizing behaviors, including drugs and alcohol (Hoffman, 2002), aggressive behaviors (Kowelski-Jones, 2000), being arrested (Coughlin & Vuchinich, 1996), delinquent activities (Hetherington, 1993) and participating in early sexual activity (Upchurch, Aneshense, Sucoff, & Levy-Storms, 1999), including nonmarital childbearing (Astone & Washington, 1994).

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Psychological adjustment and emotional well-being (internalizing behaviors)

Research also shows that compared with children in first-marriage families, stepchildren, on average, are more likely to experience internalizing behavior struggles such as depressive symptoms (Barrett & Turner, 2005; Zill, Morrison, & Cioro, 1993) and other emotional problems (Hanson, McLanahan, & Thomson, 1996; Hofferth, 2006).

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Interpersonal relationships

In the fourth area, interpersonal relationships, results from some studies show that stepchildren are more likely to have problems with their siblings and peers and experience prosocial problems when compared with children who live with both parents (Dunn et al. 1998). However, these same researchers also found that when they controlled for the quality of the mother-child relationship, the mother's psychosocial status and other social risk factors, then the differences just mentioned are erased (Dunn et al., 1998). Other research shows that adolescent children in stepfamilies are more likely to become involved with antisocial peers (Hetherington, 1993). One other difference that is worth mentioning is gender related, and that is one study found that stepdaughters are more likely to cohabit and to marry at an earlier age when compared with daughters who lived with both parents growing up (Aquilino, 1991).

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Summary of the Four Areas

Some prominent researchers who study stepfamilies wrote the following: “The inevitable conclusion from this large body of over 300 published studies would seem to be that children are harmed by living with stepparents, a conclusion that has been drawn many times by researchers and those reviewing the literature. If we stopped right here, then conservative pundits who would like to ban remarriage would have a good case. However, this is only part of the story”. (Ganong & Coleman, 2004, p. 147)

They go on to explain that most of the differences found between children and stepchildren are actually pretty small. For example, a researcher named Paul Amato looked at 21 studies that showed differences between children and stepchildren in academic achievement, social relationships, and internalizing and externalizing behaviors and found that the differences were fairly small. The reality is most stepchildren, some have even said between 75-80% (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002) do well in school (Pong, 1997) and have few, if any, emotional or behavioral problems (Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001). In fact, results from more recent studies show that when compared to children living with a single mother, stepchildren reported better scores related to health and behavioral outcomes, but emotional outcomes were somewhat lower (Hawkins, Amato, & King, 2007; Manning & Lamb, 2003; Sweeney, 2007; Wen, 2008).

So one take home message is that yes, on average, stepchildren are at a *greater risk* for a variety of problems when compared to children living with two parents. Scholars have looked across several large national surveys and conclude that between 20-25% of children in divorced and remarried families experience severe emotional and behavioral problems compared to 10% of children in nuclear families. However, the studies that find differences generally find *small differences*, but too often the results are generalized by the media with the implications that *all* stepchildren have problems.

It is also important to point out a few factors that promote positive adjustment or buffer some of these effects. For example, studies using national surveys have examined the relationship between family structure (including nuclear, single, and stepparents) and adolescent delinquency and found that this association depends on how close, or attached, adolescents feel to their parents and stepparents. It also depends on the level of involvement, supervision, and monitoring that takes place (Demuth & Brown, 2004; Gunnoe & Hetherington, 2004). These protective factors can really buffer children in stepfamilies from potential negative behaviors and consequences. Additionally, there are several demographic characteristics for both children, parents, and stepparents that account for some variation in outcomes, including age, sex, education, income, and relationship history (Zill, 1994).

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Explanations for the Differences

It is important to examine some possible factors and explanations that could help or hinder children, parents, and stepparents' lives and outcomes. Scholars have categorized these explanations into three frameworks (Ganong & Coleman, 2004):

- Stress models
- Stepparent/Parent Involvement and Parenting Styles
- Selection hypothesis

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Stress Models (I can condense this section if needed)

Stress models are one way of helping us to understand the effects of stepfamily living on children. When many stepfamilies are created, there tends to be increased stress in the lives of both adults and children (Henry & Lovelace, 1995). In fact, two scholars indicate that stepfamilies often experience a 5-7 year period of destabilization and increased stress, depending on the age of the children when they remarry (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). This stress can come from a variety of sources, including moving to a new residence, adjusting to a new partner and children, attending new schools, making new friends, and adapting to new rules, roles, routines and responsibilities that come with living in a stepfamily. These stresses often accumulate and may spill over into other areas of their lives, thus leading to tougher times at school and more internalizing and externalizing behavior problems (Menaghan, Kowalski-Jones, & Mott, 1997).

According to a cumulative effects hypothesis (Ganong & Coleman, 2004), children who experience multiple transitions and break-ups of parents and stepparents are even more likely to experience stress, which leads to even a greater likelihood of experiencing emotional and behavior problems (Martinez & Forgatch, 2002; Wu & Thomson, 2001), early sexual activity and childbearing, and lower cognitive and academic achievement (Bulanda & Manning, 2008; Cavanagh & Huston, 2006; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007).

Another stress-related possibility is that some parents' abilities to parent are diminished when they experience stress and are overwhelmed with the multiple changes that are taking place in the family. It can be hard to monitor children's behavior and participate in school activities, for example, when a parent is overwhelmed and stressed-out (Yeung, Linver, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002).

Economic stress has also been viewed as an explanation for differences between stepchildren and children living with married biological parents. Although having remarried or cohabiting parents in a stepfamily often brings the household income up, many children and adults have experienced financial hardship and poverty as a single parent household for a period of time, and the other conditions often related to poverty, such as dangerous neighborhoods, inadequate schools, and lack of supervision (Pong, 1997; Pong & Lu, 2001).

Another stress-related explanation is the impact of conflict – before, during, and after the process of separation or divorce between the divorcing or separating parents (Downey, 1995; Kurdek & Fine, 1993). Conflict also often arises between children and their parents, stepparents, and half

and/or stepsiblings (Barber & Lyons, 1994). There is a growing body of research showing a spill-over effect of parental or inter-adult conflict on children and the parent-child relationship, which leaves them feeling scared, stressed, and even angry (Cumming & Davies, 2002; Erel & Burman, 1995). In stepfamilies, the possibilities of conflict are greater due to the number of new relationships that must be navigated. This conflict in stepfamilies has been shown to be an explanation for poorer children's outcomes in some studies (Kurdek & Fine, 1993).

The "incomplete institutionalization hypothesis", formulated over thirty years ago (Cherlin, 1978) is another possible explanation for children in stepfamily's poorer outcomes. This notion implies that there is a lack of societal norms and social supports for stepfamilies, and expectations for stepparents are less clear than for parents so they are unsure how to relate to stepchildren. More recently, scholars have argued that it is time to move on from viewing stepfamilies as "incomplete institutions" because there are a number of other contemporary family forms, cohabiting couples, for example, that lack guidelines and roles and rules for behaviors (Pryor, 2008). Use of this phrase also views stepfamilies from a deficit perspective, rather than focusing on resiliency and strengths (Sweeney, 2010).

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Stepparent/Parent Involvement and Parenting Styles

Another framework that has been used to explain the differences in outcomes between children and stepchildren is the amount of involvement of stepparents and parents in their children and stepchildren's lives, and the style of their parenting (Ganong & Coleman, 2004).

It is often difficult to spend the needed time with children to build and maintain relationships when parents and stepparents are simultaneously working on their own relationship and managing co-parenting relationships (Pong, 1997). Results from studies show, in general, that stepparents spend less time interacting with stepchildren than parents do (Hofferth, 2006; Hofferth & Anderson, 2003). Some scholars suggest this is because they are not genetically related to them (Daly & Wilson, 1996). Others propose that mothers and even children may intentionally keep stepfathers at a distance because of the close mother-child bond that has been forged (Bray & Kelly, 2000; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Stepparents may also feel family, cultural, or societal pressure *not* to develop close relationships or play an active role in their stepchild's life (Ganong & Coleman, 1995). These factors may all contribute to the idea that children in stepfamilies experience more problems because of the lack of involvement and support.

Some scholars have hypothesized that the parenting styles of stepparents and parents may put children in stepfamilies at an increased risk for problems (Fine & Kurdek, 1992; Salem, Zimmerman, & Notaro, 1998). Similar to research findings for adolescent well-being in first-marriage families, researchers have generally found that authoritative parenting, meaning high levels of warmth and high control, result in more positive outcomes for children compared to authoritarian parenting, or low warmth and high control (Hetherington & Kelly, 1992; Nicholson, Phillips, Peterson, & Battistutta, 2002). Although many studies show mixed results, some have found that stepfathers express less affection and provide less supervision of

stepchildren (Kurdek & Fine, 1995). So the style of parenting and stepparenting has been linked to children's problems.

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Selection Hypothesis

A final possible explanation for the differences in children's outcomes is the selection hypothesis. This simply suggests that differences in children may be related to other factors that were in place or occurred prior to the formation of the stepfamily—meaning that other things may have contributed to children's problems, before the stepfamily was formed. These factors could include parent's emotional and psychological wellbeing, the level of conflict in the household prior to and during the separation and/or divorce process, poverty, education level, socialization, attachment, and a variety of other issues (Artis, 2007; Hofferth, 2006; Kiernan, 2001; Sun, 2001; Sun & Li, 2002). For example, one scholar found that there were no differences in math scores, general knowledge, sadness/loneliness, or self control when she controlled for economic resources, family stability, the mother's mental health, and the parenting practices.

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Future Research on the Effects of Stepfamily Living on Children

I think it is important to mention here that a small number of research studies on stepfamily living on children have recently begun to examine the differences and similarities in outcomes for children who transition into or reside in cohabiting stepfamilies compared to those in married stepfamilies. One scholar found that for adolescents, moving into a cohabiting stepfamily from a single-mother stepfamily actually decreased their level of well-being (Brown, 2006). Others have found that adolescents living in cohabiting stepfamilies are more likely to experience added disadvantages than adolescents living in married stepfamilies (Manning & Lamb, 2003). And teens living in a cohabiting stepfamily were more likely to be delinquent and have lower grade point averages than teens living with single unmarried mothers (Manning & Lamb, 2003). Yet other research found no differences in variables such as delinquency, substance abuse and behavioral and emotional problems (Willetts & Maroules, 2004). Instead, it was stresses, parental involvement, and parenting style that predicted well-being. So again, it is critical to understand the context and other variables that can account for some differences.

The growing number of cohabiting stepfamilies also suggests the need to conduct more within-group studies that examine various stepfamily forms and explore variables that increase the likelihood of positive outcomes for adults and children

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Conclusion

This gives you an idea of the complex issues that must be considered when trying to understand and interpret the research on the effects of stepfamily living on children. Results from research studies and articles in the media should be carefully and cautiously interpreted. Megan Sweeney, who published an article that examined the decade of remarriage and stepfamily research in the 2000s sums this up well when she wrote the following:

“An active debate in this literature remains the extent to which variation in children’s well-being results from causal effects of family structure on economic and parenting resources rather than from effects of past histories of family instability or the preexisting selective characteristics of parents and children in various family structures” (p. 673)

In conclusion, I hope you have been able to not only learn about some of the effects of stepfamily living on children, but also better understand some of the possible explanations and complex issues in interpreting this area of research. Those who study stepfamilies in the future will be faced with the challenge of studying increasingly complex stepfamily structures, such as comparing cohabiting stepfamilies with married stepfamilies. An even greater task is separating out the influence of past family histories and other selective characteristics such as SES and the cognitive and emotional well-being of parents and stepparents. So this is both an exciting and challenging time to be learning more about stepfamilies.