



National Stepfamily
Resource Center

OVERVIEW OF STEPFAMILY RESEARCH



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OBJECTIVES

- 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



WHY THE TERM “STEPFAMILY”?

A new spouse “steps” into the role of a new parent for a child, usually through marriage to a widowed parent

“New” stepfamilies are now formed by cohabitation, first marriages and other living situations where children are brought into couple relationships



HOW STEPFAMILY RESEARCH HAS EVOLVED

Growing interest since the 1990s

Deficit-comparison approach: comparing stepfamilies and nuclear families

Normative-adaptive perspective: strengths-based approach viewing stepfamilies as a legitimate family form

Negative stereotypes and labels can undermine the stability of stepfamilies



STEPFAMILY LIVING ON CHILDREN

Four general categories

- Academics/education
- Behavior issues (externalizing behaviors)
- Psychological adjustment and emotional well-being (internalizing behaviors)
- Interpersonal relationships



ACADEMICS/EDUCATION

On average, children in stepfamilies are more likely to report:

- Lower grades
- Lower achievement scores
- Fewer number of grades completed
- Being suspended or expelled from school
- Higher dropout rates
- Less frequent school attendance
- Less likely to graduate/earn GED



BEHAVIOR ISSUES (EXTERNALIZING)

On average, adolescents in stepfamilies are more likely to:

- Get involved with drugs and alcohol
- Engage in aggressive behaviors
- Be arrested
- Be involved in delinquent activities
- Participate in early sexual activity and have a child outside of marriage



PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING (INTERNALIZING BEHAVIORS)

On average, stepchildren are more likely to experience:

- Depressive symptoms
- Anxiety
- Sadness
- Fearfulness
- Other emotional problems



INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

On average, stepchildren are more likely to experience:

- Problems with siblings and peers
- Prosocial problems
 - When the quality of the mother-child relationship and the mother's psychosocial status are controlled, the differences disappear.
- Involvement with antisocial peers
- Cohabitation and marry at an early age (females)



SUMMARY OF THE FOUR AREAS

- Most differences are relatively small
- Most children in stepfamilies do well, and in some families, do much better
- Approximately 20-25% of children in divorced and remarried families experience severe emotional and behavioral problems compared to 10% in nuclear families
- Discrepancies often depend on protective factors (e.g., attachment, involvement) and child characteristics (e.g., age, sex, parental resources)



EXPLANATIONS FOR THE DIFFERENCES

Three frameworks

- Stress Models
- Stepparent/Parent Involvement and Parenting Styles
- Selection Hypothesis



STRESS MODELS

Increased stress for adults and children; spill over into other areas of life

Cumulative effects hypothesis – multiple transitions and breakups are more stressful

Stress impairs parents' abilities to parent

Economic stress and limited resources

Level of conflict between parents

“Incomplete institutionalization hypothesis”



STEPARENT/PARENT INVOLVEMENT AND PARENTING STYLES

Difficult to balance, develop, and maintain multiple relationships

Stepparents may spend less time interacting with stepchildren than parents

Lack of authoritative parenting and involvement

Feeling uncomfortable or uncertain about stepparenting role



SELECTION HYPOTHESIS

Differences in children may be related to other factors that were present prior to the formation of the stepfamily

- Parent's emotional and psychological well-being
- Level of conflict in the home prior to separation/divorce
- Poverty
- Education/lack of resources
- Socialization
- Attachment



FUTURE RESEARCH ON THE EFFECTS OF STEPFAMILY LIVING ON CHILDREN

Growing number of cohabiting stepfamilies

- Context, processes, and demographic characteristics must be explored

More within-group studies are needed



CONCLUSION

- Research results on the effects of stepfamily living on children should be interpreted with caution
- Most children/stepchildren do well and turn out fine
- “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”

(Sweeney, 2010, p. 673)

