Stepfamilies and children's adjustment

Increasing numbers of children spend periods of their childhoods as members of stepfamilies – a stepfamily being defined as one in which there is at least one dependent child from a previous relationship or marriage of one or both partners. Recent analyses from the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) indicate that one in eight dependent children will live at some stage in a family in which their birth parent has either remarried or formed a new partnership before they are 16, if current trends continue.¹ These changes in children's lives start early: most of the children (72%) identified in the OPCS analyses as living in stepfamilies started to do so before they were 10 years old. And the changes in family situations frequently continue as children grow up: parental separation and divorce rates are at least as high in second as in first marriages,² and life in a single parent family is often only temporary.³ Divorce and remarriage are not static life events but part of a complex chain of transitions that involve children in a host of other potentially stressful changes in the larger social milieu in which they grow up – changes in schools, neighbourhoods, in their relations with extended families and peers, as well as in their economic circumstances. There is often too the presence of step-siblings and the birth of half siblings: OPCS studies show that 53% of stepfamilies include a child born since the couple started living together.

What are the implications of these experiences for children's adjustment and their relationships? Current research consistently indicates that children in stepfamilies have on average a higher probability of problems in social relations, health, internalising and externalising problems*,^{4–7} and educational achievement.^{7,8} They tend to leave home earlier and with less support than those growing up with both biological parents.^{9–11}

However, two lessons are clear from this research. First, the variability in the effects of growing up in stepfamilies is striking.^{12,13} Second, although these problem outcomes are consistently found, the effect size of many of the average differences between children in step and non-step families is small. Many children in stepfamilies do very well. The recent change from a pathogenic model of the impact of divorce and remarriage to one that focuses on the diversity of changes and outcomes is of central importance.⁶ The variability in outcome raises the key questions of which children are particularly vulnerable, which factors in the children's lives are protective or act to increase the risk of problems, and what social processes are implicated in these differences.

What light does recent research shed on this variability in the outcome of children in stepfamilies? Two themes stand out in the findings of current studies. The first, highlighted in particular by large scale survey research, is the significance of multiple changes in children's lives for their outcome. The second theme, evident from the smaller scale in-depth studies of stepfamilies conducted within a psychological tradition, is the potential importance of differences in the patterns of relationships within step and non-stepfamilies. This research challenges many current assumptions about family processes and their links to children's outcome. This annotation will focus on these two themes; for reviews of research on other issues related to stepfamilies, such as the impact on adult functioning, or

legal and policy issues, the reader is referred to Booth and Dunn.¹³

Significance of multiple changes

The extent and significance of the *chain* of events and household reorganisations experienced by stepchildren is increasingly evident. Several studies report a negative relation between the number of parenting transitions experienced by children and their adjustment.^{11,14–16} Why this should be so is not yet clear. Have the children who have experienced several divorces also been exposed to more parental conflict than the children who have experienced only one divorce? Are there systematic differences in the initial parent-child relationships in these families – or differences in the children even before the first divorce? There is provocative and relevant evidence from three large scale longitudinal studies in the UK and US that children who experienced divorce had more behaviour problems and poorer academic achievement than children in intact families *before* divorce.^{9,10}

It is clear that to understand the processes underlying the links between multiple family transitions and poor outcome we need research that focuses on the relationship patterns within stepfamilies, and between stepfamily members and non-custodial parents. This need is also highlighted by one of the unexpected findings of the epidemiological studies of family structure and children's outcome: although the economic resources available to stepfamilies are significantly greater than those available to single parent families, these economic differences do not appear to exert a protective or ameliorative effect on children's outcome.⁷ Three possibilities have been proposed in explanation: that the history of marital conflict and other family stress preceding remarriage has a long term effect that additional resources cannot overcome, that some children are especially vulnerable to repeated family upheavals because of temperamental characteristics, or that the ways in which some stepfamilies function in terms of childrearing puts the children in these families at greater risk. Studies in the US provide some support for the latter view,^{7,17} and highlight the importance of understanding the patterns of relationships within stepfamilies.

Patterns of family relationships in stepfamilies

Studies of family relationships and child outcome in stepfamilies indicate that stepfamilies differ in important ways from other family forms in their patterns of functioning and relationships. These differences include both parent-child, marital and sibling relationships, and most significantly the links between these relationships.

Marital and parent-child relationships

First, the quality of the marital relationship in step-parent households bears a quite different relation to the quality of parent-child relationships and children's adjustment than it does in non-stepfamilies. A happy remarriage is not a predictor of happy step-parent-stepchild relationships, especially from the point of view of the stepchild.¹⁸ With young children, especially girls, a close marital relationship has been reported to be linked to more negative behaviour towards both custodial mothers and stepfathers, and a higher incidence of internalising and externalising behaviour.⁶

*Externalising problems includes aggressive behaviour and conduct disorder; internalising problems refers to anxiety and depression in children.

Second, although authoritative parenting (involving high warmth and firm but responsive control) is associated with good child outcome in most family structures, it is not clear that this is so for step-parents. Rather, it may lead to resentment and resistance on the part of young stepchildren.¹⁹ Hetherington and Jodl's research indicates that with young children, the most successful strategy for a step-parent is to build a warm relationship but to avoid taking the role of a controlling disciplinarian. Their findings, from several longitudinal studies of marital transitions, highlight three general points concerning parent and step-parent relationships.⁶

The first is that it is important to take into account the length of time since remarriage. Although in the early stages of a marital transition, biological parent-child relations are more disrupted and conflictual than in non-stepfamilies, over time these differences disappear. In contrast, even in 'stabilised' stepfamilies, step-parents remain more disengaged and less authoritative in the parenting of stepchildren than of their own children, or of non-divorced parents. The second point is that children's age at the time of the marital transition and their gender are also related to the pattern of relationships and children's adjustment within the stepfamily. The research indicates that early adolescence is a particularly difficult time for establishing harmonious relations within a stepfamily, with more sustained difficulties in stepfather-stepchild relations and child adjustment than in remarriages in which the children are younger. Other studies confirm that children's relations with step-parents and their adjustment outcome may differ with gender, and with the gender of the step-parent. However, the pattern of links with gender is complex and not always consistent.¹³

The third point is the significance of *children's* contribution to poor step-parent-child relationships. Children in stepfamilies were reported in the studies of Hetherington and Jodl to be more effective in altering the behaviour of parents than vice versa in the early stages of a remarriage. Externalising behaviour problems in stepchildren in early adolescence were linked to subsequent increases in negative punitive behaviour in stepfathers, while social competence was associated with increases in positive behaviour from both custodial mothers and stepfathers.

Significance of sibling relationships

Relationships with siblings can play a particularly important part in accounting for differences in the adjustment of children in stepfamilies. First, children with half or stepsiblings show a higher rate of adjustment problems than those without such siblings.^{7,8} One contributing factor here may be the increased conflict between siblings reported for stepfamilies in the early period after a marital transition.¹⁹ A second contributing factor is likely to be parental differential treatment of siblings: this is shown to be especially strongly associated with adjustment difficulties in children in stepfamilies.¹⁹ In contrast to these associations between siblings and poor adjustment, there is also evidence that sibling relationships can play a positive part in stepchildren's adjustment. Young adolescents in a US study of stepfamilies reported their siblings to be sources of support, influence, and acceptance more frequently than those in non-stepfamilies.²⁰ The quality of the sibling relationship is, then, the key: an affectionate supportive sibling relationship can act as a protective factor (S A Graham-Berman, unpublished),²¹ while a poor sibling relationship appears to increase adjustment problems over time. More generally, it is emphasised that non-parental family members – not only siblings but grandparents and other adults – play a more significant

part in the development of children and adolescents in stepfamilies than they do in non-stepfamilies,²² perhaps because of the distancing and disengagement of custodial biological parents during the early stages of remarriage. Who the non-parental provider of support and influence is apparently differs with the gender of the stepchild.²³

Future directions

The research to date has given us some strong leads to follow if we are to clarify who is vulnerable to the experiences associated with life in stepfamilies, and which of those experiences may have deleterious or protective effects. But the notable gaps in research on stepfamilies should be acknowledged. More information is needed on children's relationships with their non-custodial parents, beyond the finding that non-custodial mothers have closer relationships with their children than non-custodial fathers,²³ and on relations between non-custodial and custodial parents, which the divorce literature suggests are of central importance. Little is known about minority stepfamilies, although it is likely that the ways in which stepfamilies function will differ in different cultural groups, about what stepfathers actually do in terms of support, or about the significance of the peer group for children in stepfamilies. Much of the research on stepfamilies has not included cohabiting (rather than remarried) families, and has been based on unrepresentative samples. Little attention has been paid to selection effects – the possibility that the differences observed between step and non-step families may be due to unobserved characteristics of those who enter stepfamilies. Perhaps most important of all, we are ignorant of children's feelings and perceptions about their experiences within stepfamilies. The 1989 Children Act potentially provides children with a more powerful voice in the arrangements after parental separation; at present we know little about such views. Given the increasing numbers of children undergoing the experience of these major changes in their family worlds, it is clearly urgent that these gaps in systematic research on stepfamilies are filled.

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