Blended Families: Psychosocial Issues

What We Know

› Families in Western societies have become more diverse in structure over the past 50 years, largely due to increases in nonmarital childbearing, cohabitation, divorce, and remarriage. Although the majority of children grow up in two-parent homes, increasing numbers of children live in blended families in which one or both partners in the household have children from other unions. Blended families are themselves a heterogeneous group in terms of structure, complexity, parental marital status, their pathway to becoming a blended family, and whether the children are full-time, part-time, or visiting household members.

› Family structure is generally described in terms of the relationship between children and parental adults in a household.

• An intact family (also referred to as a traditional, original, or biological family) is one in which children live with both of their biological or adoptive parents (hereafter referred to simply as parents) in the same household.

• A stepfamily is one in which children live with one parent and one stepparent. These families are sometimes referred to in research literature as stepmother families or stepfather families.

• The term “blended family” often is used to describe stepfamilies, although it is a broader term that also encompasses families that include one or more children born or adopted in the current union.

› Family complexity refers to another dimension of blended families, the relationships between children who are stepsiblings or half-siblings.

• Children who do not have a biological parent in common are stepsiblings.

• Children who have one biological parent in common are half-siblings.

› Blended families are sometimes categorized into typologies that reflect the diversity of family relationships.

• A simple stepfamily is a family in which only one of the partners has children of his or her own.

• A complex stepfamily is a family in which both of the partners has children of their own.

• A blended simple or complex stepfamily is one in which the couple has children in common (i.e., born or adopted in the current union) and one or both parents has children of his or her own.

– Researchers in a Canadian study found that approximately 50% of couples in a stepfamily have a baby together within 10 years of their marriage.

› The research literature generally includes couples that are cohabitating as well as those that are legally married in definitions of stepfamilies and blended families.

› Families differ in terms of their pathway to becoming a blended family, which typically can include divorce, premature parental death, or nonmarital parenthood.

• In the early 20th century, the majority of children lived with their married parents in a single household. Blended families generally formed as a result of high mortality.
rates and the premature death of a parent, leading to the remarriage of the surviving parent and often having more children with the new partner\(^{(84)}\).

- Since the 1960s, nonmarital parenthood and divorce, along with cohabitation and remarriage, have become the leading pathways to blended families\(^{(84)}\).
  - In Europe, there are significant differences between countries. For instance, in western Germany, the majority of births occur within a marital relationship, whereas in eastern Germany and France over half of all births are to unmarried women, the majority of whom are cohabiting unions\(^{(54)}\).

- Multi-partner fertility (i.e., having children with more than one partner) has also given rise to more complex family structures\(^{(84)}\).

- Blended families can be formed early in a child’s life and be a part of their childhood experience or families can be created during adulthood\(^{(48)}\).

  - Blended families also differ in terms of children’s residential and custodial status. Children whose parents have separated may reside with one of their parents on a full-time, permanent basis or custody may be shared between the two parents; as a result, children often are members of two different households\(^{(56)}\). Each child in the family typically is connected to two parents and their respective households, resulting in blended families potentially being connected across households\(^{(18, 90)}\).

  - Legal custody refers to the parents’ decision-making responsibilities toward the child, such as educational decisions, financial decisions, and decisions regarding health care. Physical custody refers to the amount of time that a child lives with each parent. Custody can be awarded to one parent exclusively or can be shared by both parents, also referred to as joint custody\(^{(89)}\).

  - Because custody arrangements historically have favored full-time residence of children with their mother\(^{(88)}\), the majority of stepfamilies have consisted of a mother, her residential children, and a stepfather\(^{(10, 36)}\).

  - Researchers have noted a shift in the courts over the past 15–20 years away from awarding mothers sole physical custody of children to granting fathers shared custody\(^{(63)}\).

  - Shared physical custody has increased significantly since 1990 in many countries;\(^{(63)}\) in many Western countries, including the United States, Australia, Norway, Sweden, and the Netherlands, joint custody is now awarded in 10—30% of divorces\(^{(88)}\).

  - Children and parents who primarily reside together often are described as residential households, whereas children who reside primarily with the other parent and have at most a visiting relationship in a given household often are referred to as nonresidential\(^{(79)}\).

  - Blended families differ in terms of the frequency of contact with nonresidential children and their geographic proximity\(^{(79)}\).

Facts and Figures

- In the United States, marriage rates have declined from three quarters of all adults in 1960 to approximately one half of all adults in 2014; cohabitation has increased proportionally, and the rate of births to unmarried women increased from less than 5% in 1960 to 40% in 2014\(^{(90)}\).

- According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 813,862 divorces and annulments took place in 2014 in the United States, a rate of 3.2 per 1,000 individuals in the population\(^{(12)}\).

- The number of remarried adults in the United States increased from 14 million in 1960 to almost 42 million in 2013.\(^{(69)}\) In 21% of marriages in the United States, both partners have been married at least once before. Forty percent of men are still in their first marriage and 13% have been married twice; 37% of women are still in their first marriage and 14% have been married twice; 4% of adults have been married three times or more\(^{(52)}\).

- Same-sex couples make up approximately 1% of all married or cohabitating couples in the United States. The proportion that are married has increased since same-sex marriage was legalized in 2015\(^{(90)}\).
In the United States, 69% of children lived in a two-parent household in 2016; of these children, 92% lived with both of their biological or adoptive parents and 8% lived in a blended family. Twenty-seven percent of children lived with a single parent (23% with their mothers and 4% with their fathers) and 4% lived with someone other than a parent (e.g., a grandparent or foster parent). Researchers in a United States study determined that in 2008, 12.3% of children lived in complex families (i.e., blended families that include stepsiblings or half-siblings). Family complexity was most prevalent in married stepfamilies (53%) compared with cohabitating stepfamilies (14%). Fourteen percent of children living with two biological parents experienced family complexity.

In another study, investigators found that by age 6, more than one in six children in the United States resided with a step- or half-sibling. The actual number of children who have a stepparent is higher when children with a nonresidential stepparent are included.

In a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2011, 42% of adult respondents reported having at least one step relative: 30% had a step or half sibling, 18% had a stepparent, and 13% had a stepchild. Having a step relative was more likely among young adults, Blacks, and persons who did not graduate from college. Younger adults were more likely than older adults to have grown up with parents who were separated, divorced, or never married: 36% of respondents under 30 years of age compared with 21% of those 30–49 years old and 10% of those 50 years and older.

60% of Black respondents reported having a step relative compared with 46% of Hispanics and 39% of Whites. Black men were more likely to have a stepchild (24%) compared with Black women (14%), White men (15%), and Hispanic men (7%).

In Canada, 12% of all children under 25 years of age lived in a stepfamily in 2016. Among Canadian households consisting of common-law and married couples with children under 25 years of age, 79.7% of parents headed intact nuclear families, 9.7% were single parents, and 10.7% headed stepfamilies.

Although the number of parents in stepfamilies in Canada has not changed significantly (9% in 1995 compared with 10.7% in 2011), the proportion of parents in a complex households increased from 39% in 1995 to 51% in 2011. The proportion of parents in stepparent families who have had a child together increased from 34% in 2001 to 43% in 2011.

In the United Kingdom in 2016, 63% of dependent children lived in a married couple family, 22% lived in a single parent family, and 15% lived in a cohabitating couple family.

The total number of cohabitating families in the United Kingdom (i.e., with or without dependent children) more than doubled from 1996 to 2016, from 1.5 million to 3.3 million.

Analysis of longitudinal data in an Australian study showed that although the majority of children grew up living with both of their parents, this number decreased from 89% at 0–1 year of age to 72% at 12–13 years of age.

Researchers comparing data from France, Germany, and the Russian Federation found that the prevalence of stepfamilies was highest in eastern Germany (18%), compared with the Russian Federation (13%), western Germany (13%), and France (9%).

In a study comparing parentage of children in four countries (Australia, United States, Norway, and Sweden), investigators found that in the United States 32.8% of women had children with two or more fathers compared with 19.5% in Norway, 16.3% in Sweden, and 15.6% in Australia. Mothers who had already had two or more children by their first child’s father were less likely to go on to have more children in a subsequent relationship, whereas those who were very young when they had their first child were most likely to have children with different partners.

Blended Family Dynamics

The research literature on blended families references a number of theoretical perspectives that are helpful in understanding blended family dynamics, including family systems, developmental, and cognitive theories.

The family systems perspective views families as systems that are made up of interdependent elements; roles, subsystems, boundaries, and family processes play a role in family functioning.

Role ambiguity is a challenge during the formation of blended families. Unlike intact families, in which legal and emotional ties, and family members’ rights and responsibilities, are largely shaped by legal frameworks and social norms, blended family members have to negotiate family roles without socially defined scripts as a guide.
• Stepparents in particular assume a role for which the expectations are not clear, and may be perceived by the nonresident parent and/or child(ren) as “intruders” in the family. Stepparents in particular assume a role for which the expectations are not clear, and may be perceived by the nonresident parent and/or child(ren) as “intruders” in the family. Stepparents in particular assume a role for which the expectations are not clear, and may be perceived by the nonresident parent and/or child(ren) as “intruders” in the family.

• Negative expectations and perceptions of stepparent roles are drawn in part from myths and media portrayal of stepfamilies (e.g., wicked stepmothers). Negative expectations and perceptions of stepparent roles are drawn in part from myths and media portrayal of stepfamilies (e.g., wicked stepmothers). Negative expectations and perceptions of stepparent roles are drawn in part from myths and media portrayal of stepfamilies (e.g., wicked stepmothers).

• Children, lacking significant experience with the stepparent and understanding of their new role in the family, often do not know what to expect. Children, lacking significant experience with the stepparent and understanding of their new role in the family, often do not know what to expect. Children, lacking significant experience with the stepparent and understanding of their new role in the family, often do not know what to expect.

• Role ambiguity is associated with higher levels of conflict and dissatisfaction in families. Role ambiguity is associated with higher levels of conflict and dissatisfaction in families. Role ambiguity is associated with higher levels of conflict and dissatisfaction in families.

The functioning and interaction of various subsystems in blended families (e.g., parent-stepparent, parent-child, stepparent-child, and sibling subsystems) influences the functioning of the family as a whole.

The functioning and interaction of various subsystems in blended families (e.g., parent-stepparent, parent-child, stepparent-child, and sibling subsystems) influences the functioning of the family as a whole. The functioning and interaction of various subsystems in blended families (e.g., parent-stepparent, parent-child, stepparent-child, and sibling subsystems) influences the functioning of the family as a whole. The functioning and interaction of various subsystems in blended families (e.g., parent-stepparent, parent-child, stepparent-child, and sibling subsystems) influences the functioning of the family as a whole.

The parent and stepparent begin life as a couple with the added demands of also being parents and/or stepparents. Researchers have found that high levels of stepfamily-specific stressors (e.g., establishing roles within the stepfamily, negotiating stepparents’ roles in disciplining children, maintaining co-parenting relationships with former partners) are associated with lower marital satisfaction.

Researchers in New Zealand found that stepfamily couples were able to identify concerns they had about becoming stepparents during the courtship period, but many had not talked with each other about these issues or prepared children for changes in the family.

Parents in blended families are tasked with preparing children for their new family situation as well as navigating changes in their own relationship with the child and supporting children’s relationships with their stepparents. Parents, as the ones connecting stepfamily members, can experience high levels of stress in trying to manage boundaries between subsystems.

Parents often feel a sense of conflicted loyalty with respect to their children and their spouse; supporting one may feel like a betrayal of the other.

The relationship between stepparent and child is important to the stability of the blended family, as well as the child’s well-being, yet the quality of these relationships varies considerably.

In a study that examined young adults’ accounts of their “stepfamily origin stories,” researchers found that the majority recalled sudden family formation in which they were left out or uninformed, or which involved negative dynamics (e.g., parental infidelity, conflict, and/or substance abuse). A minority of participants described feeling like a “real” family since the beginning or experiencing a planned, incremental transition to being a blended family.

In a systematic review of research literature, investigators found that children’s perspectives on their relationships with their stepparents were determined by a number of factors, including individual characteristics, family characteristics, aspects of the interactions between the stepparent and child, and dynamics in the stepcouple relationship. Closeness with their residential parent also played an important role in their perceptions of their relationship with their stepparent.

Researchers in a small study in the United States found that relationship development between stepparents and stepchildren was influenced by a number of factors and was specific to individual stepparents; only 30% of stepchildren reported feeling the same way about each of their stepparents. Researchers identified six patterns of relationships between stepchildren and stepparents.

- When stepparents had been involved in raising the child from a young age, stepchildren generally accepted them as a parent, and as young adults they claimed them and continued to engage with them as their parents. Having a younger half-sibling in the home may also contribute to acceptance of the stepparent as a parent. Although in these families nonresident parents were for the most part still involved, these relationships did not interfere with acceptance of the stepparent as an additional parent.
- Some stepchildren indicated having a positive relationship with their stepparent from the start, which was attributed in large part to relationship building on the part of the stepparent, sharing interests and activities, and observing a positive step-couple relationship.
- Some relationships were described as “accepting with ambivalence.” This pattern was associated in most cases with nonresidential stepparents who lived at a distance and/or having a distant relationship with the nonresident parent. Although the stepchild-stepparent relationship improved gradually over time, it remained somewhat distant.
- In some cases, stepchildren (in this study, all stepdaughters) started out disliking their stepparents but at some point had a change of heart. Researchers noted that in most of these relationships, the stepparent persisted in making efforts to bond with his or her stepchildren and the adults maintained a positive couple relationship.
- Some stepchildren actively and persistently rejected their stepparents, a pattern that was associated with lack of relationship-building by stepparents.

- The final group were described as “coexisting.” These were generally stepchildren who were adolescents or young adults when their parent repartnered and, in most cases, the stepparents did not live with them, so there was little opportunity to develop a bond.

- Stepparents who spend time engaging in shared activities (e.g., chores, homework, recreational activities, conversation) with the child are more likely to report a close and mutually satisfying relationship with their stepchildren\(^{(45)}\).

- In a study that examined the perspectives of children ages 10–16 years who resided with their mothers and stepfathers, researchers concluded that the child’s perceptions of the mother-stepfather relationship was the best predictor of his or her closeness with the stepfather. Researchers noted that girls were less likely to express feeling close to their stepfathers than boys\(^{(42)}\).

- Analysis of data from National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) in the United States showed that adolescents who are close to their mothers are more likely to perceive their relationship with their stepfathers positively. Being religious and having more full siblings were also associated with more positive relationships with stepfathers. Researchers in this study also found that girls were less likely than boys to feel close to their stepfathers\(^{(53)}\).

- Researchers in a United States study found that stepparents with avoidant or anxious attachment styles, which contribute to lower relationship satisfaction and stability, were more likely to face challenges in their role as stepparents than those with a secure attachment style. Stepparents who are anxiously attached may feel more threatened by the parent’s relationship with his or her children and ex-spouse\(^{(44)}\).

- In a United States study, youth who were depressed were found to be more likely to have a positive relationship with their stepfather, whereas youth with delinquent behaviors had more challenging relationships with their stepfather\(^{(51)}\).

- In a study involving young adults who grew up as part of a stepfamily, 60% of participants felt that remarriage had a positive impact on their sense of being a family, whereas 25% reported remarriage had no impact and 15% reported it had a negative impact. Quality time spent together as a family was the most frequently identified factor that positively contributed to feeling like a family\(^{(65)}\).

- In a small qualitative study in Belgium, stepfathers described themselves as being a friend or serving “as a parent” to their stepchild while being sensitive that they are not replacing the child’s biological father. Stepfathers reported that feeling excluded from the mother-childrelationship and lacking a shared history with their stepchild are challenges, particularly early in the formation of the stepfamily\(^{(4)}\).

- In a study in Colombia, investigators found that adolescents and young adults had more difficulty developing a close, trusting relationship with stepmothers than with stepfathers\(^{(71)}\).

- Researchers in a Dutch study found that the length of time that blended families shared a residence had a strong influence on the strength of parent/stepparent relationships, more so than biological relatedness\(^{(48)}\).

- Children in intact families lived with their biological parents on average 17.7 years, whereas children in divorced families lived with their biological mother for 15.9 years and their biological father 11.1 years. They shared a residence with stepfathers approximately 8 years and with stepmothers 5.6 years.

  • There is little research regarding sibling relationships in blended families, although existing studies suggest that non-biologically-related siblings tend to have less engaged, supportive relationships with each other than biologically related siblings\(^{(82)}\).

- Analysis of data from the British Millennium Cohort study showed that among 11 year olds, sibling conflict was more likely between full siblings than half siblings\(^{(53)}\).

- In a United States study, researchers found that youth who lived with stepsiblings and/or half-siblings perceived their adjustment to their family situation more positively than youth who lived only with full biological siblings\(^{(30)}\).

  • Social norms are particularly lacking for extended family roles in stepfamilies. Stepgrandparents report finding it more challenging to find their place with stepgrandchildren than biological grandchildren. Role enactment as a stepgrandparent includes navigating various dynamics, including parental gatekeeping and expectations, and is influenced by stepgrandparents’ relationship with the parents, the child’s response to them, the expectations of their spouse (i.e., the child’s biological grandparent), the response of the child’s other grandparents, cultural stereotypes, and their own personality and perceptions of grandparenting\(^{(14)}\).

- In a small United States study, researchers found that roughly two thirds of stepgrandchildren perceived emotionally close relationships with their stepgrandparents. The children were more likely to perceive the stepgrandparent as an important
part of their family when they fulfilled traditional grandparenting roles and their parents had warm relationships with the step-grandparents and facilitated these relationships. Boundaries distinguish who is and is not a member of the family system and help to determine roles various family members should play. Co-parenting boundaries have to be renegotiated after structural changes such as divorce and remarriage. The blended family also has to deal with relationship and boundary issues with ex-spouses.

- Co-parenting refers to how parents share and support one another in carrying out childrearing responsibilities.
- In blended families, there are generally at least two co-parenting dyads: the child’s parents and the parent-­stepparent.
- Co-parenting relationships between the child’s parents can be problematic for a number of reasons. When both parents have new partners and families, competing obligations can create difficulties. Mothers may become less motivated to keep fathers involved as they invest in building a family with their new partner, and fathers may “swap” their old family for a new one when they remarry.
- Data from the National Survey of Families and Households in the United States indicate that co-parenting between resident mothers and nonresident fathers tends to be low and is more likely to decrease than increase over time.
- Parents, particularly mothers, act as “gatekeepers,” determining or strongly influencing the role of other persons in their children’s lives.
- In a study involving 19 divorced mothers in the United States, researchers examined how mothers set and modify co-parenting boundaries. Investigators reported that the mothers viewed themselves as being primarily responsible for the children, with fathers having an important co-parenting role. When mothers had a cooperative co-parenting relationship with fathers and trusted that fathers and stepmothers were responsible caregivers, they tended to expand the co-parental subsystem to include the stepparents, although not as full partners.
- In a qualitative study involving stepcouple dyads in Canada, researchers identified three co-parenting prototypes.
- Dominant biological parent: in the majority of stepfamilies, the child’s biological parent was the person primarily responsible for care and discipline of the child, with the stepparent serving as a source of support and consultation.
- Shared parenting: in some stepfamilies, often in which the stepfamily formed early in the child’s life or the child’s nonresident parent was absent, biological and stepparents shared more equally in caretaking and decision making.
- Dominant stepparent: in some stepfamilies, the stepparent was the person primarily responsible for care and discipline of the child. This was the case when the biological parent was absent or unable to parent effectively. For instance, the custodial parent might work long hours, leaving the stepparent responsible for the day-to-day care of the child. This pattern was linked with dissatisfaction in stepparents.

Family processes across multiple domains (i.e., individual, dyadic, social, cultural) also interact and shape family functioning.

- Family cohesiveness
  - Family cohesiveness, also referred to as family belonging or connectedness, can be challenging to attain in blended families.
  - Data from the Add Health study showed that the quality of the relationships that adolescents have, particularly with their mothers but also with their stepfathers, had a significant influence on their sense of family belonging. The quality of the marital relationship did not influence adolescent belonging.
  - Researchers found that Hispanic adolescents were more likely than Black or White adolescents to have a strong sense of belonging even when they did not report having more positive relationships with either mother or stepfather.
  - Investigators in a Canadian study found that couples’ means of conflict resolution were one factor that distinguished blended families that stayed together from those that separated. Couples that persevered and used fewer avoidance strategies were more likely to maintain the marital relationship.

The developmental perspective focuses on how family relationships develop over time and the challenges that occur with each stage.

- Family life cycle theory views families as going through predictable stages, beginning with the union of a couple, then having children at various stages, launching young adults, and moving into middle age and older adulthood. However, blended families deviate from these states; for instance, the parent-­stepparent dyad may enter the relationship in different stages of parenthood (e.g., one partner may have no children of his or her own, while the other has teenagers), which can lead to increased conflict.
A blended family life cycle (BFLC) guideline has been proposed for use in working with blended families. The BFLC guideline identifies specific transitions and challenges that blended families go through:

- One or both partners experience the dissolution of a previous relationship through separation, divorce, or death
- Parents who are separated or divorced establish co-parenting agreements
- A relationship is developed with a new partner
- The parent-stepparent dyad defines the stepparent’s roles and expectations
- The stepparent and ex-spouse are introduced, if appropriate
- The stepparent and child are introduced
- Parents adjust co-parenting agreements as needed to accommodate changes in family system
- Parent-stepparent dyad defines roles and boundaries with children
- The stepparent and child establishes family life through marriage or cohabitation
- The stepfamily prepares for possible birth of new child(ren)

The cognitive perspective focuses on the influence of individual family members’ cognitive processes (e.g., cognitions, behaviors, and affect) on the quality of marital relationships and blended family functioning.

- The Remarriage Belief Inventory (RMBI), a validated measure for stepfamily-specific beliefs, assesses beliefs in seven areas: “past should stay in the past,” “stepfamilies are inferior,” “success is slim,” “children are the priority,” “new partner is perfect,” “finances should be pooled,” and “adjustment comes quickly.”
- Beliefs about financial management, specifically whether finances should be pooled, have been linked with couple relationship functioning.
- Pessimistic beliefs about marriage success also are linked with relationship quality, particularly when endorsed by men.

In a United States survey, stepparents who endorsed specific beliefs regarding prioritizing biological children over their marriage, expecting stepchildren to be obedient, or perceiving stepchildren as keeping them from having enough time with their partner also reported experiencing more difficulties with stepparenting and less satisfaction in their romantic relationship.

Research literature concerning blended families has not sufficiently addressed the experiences of members of ethnic minority groups in the United States; therefore there are inadequate data regarding cultural differences and how cultural norms can influence blended family functioning.

- When they compared several large samples of Black youth in intact families and stepfamilies, researchers found no differences between the two groups in depression, self-esteem, or conflict management. One proposed reason for this is that cultural traditions including more permeable family boundaries and shared parenting may better prepare Black families to accept blended family relationships.

Sexual orientation differences
- LGBTQ parents face additional institutional and interpersonal challenges including unfavorable legal decisions regarding custody and visitation, religious beliefs and teachings, and societal biases that create barriers to forming a cohesive blended family.

Psychosocial Issues

Blended families are a diverse group whose experiences, pathways, and roles vary considerably; each member of the blended family is impacted in unique ways.

Impacts on children
- Parental divorce often precipitates a series of transitions and emotional challenges for children. In addition to experiencing the dissolution of the previous family unit and having to adjust to the absence of one parent from the family home, each parent may go on to cohabitate, remarry, and/or divorce. These transitions in turn can involve changes in home, school, and neighborhood.
- A body of research has linked divorce, family transitions, and blended families with poorer outcomes in a variety of areas, including social and emotional well-being, health and academic performance during childhood and poorer health and psychological well-being in adulthood.

Most researchers have found that children in blended families tend to have poorer cognitive, academic, emotional, and behavioral outcomes compared with children raised in intact families; however, they fare better on health outcomes and some behavioral outcomes compared with children in single-mother households. Research also suggests that children have better outcomes in married blended families compared with cohabitating stepfamilies, particularly with respect
Impacts on parents and stepparents

- Divorced parents often continue to be in conflict with ex-partners over finances, children’s living arrangements, and parenting. These tensions in some cases spill over into the current couple’s relationship, as well as potentially undermining children’s relationships with their stepparents. (11)

- Marital dissolution has been linked with adverse impacts on divorced individuals, including increased depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and health problems. (2,75)

- Divorced parents often continue to be in conflict with ex-partners over finances, children’s living arrangements, and parenting. These tensions in some cases spill over into the current couple’s relationship, as well as potentially undermining children’s relationships with their stepparents. (11)
Being a stepparent can be a rewarding experience or a frustrating, isolating one; in some instances, it is one of the partner’s first experiences with parenting.

In a United States study, researchers found that stepparents who reported high marital adjustment and nontraditional gender views had levels of stress comparable to those of biological parents, whereas those who subscribed to traditional parenting views had higher levels of stress. Researchers theorized that stepparents who value traditional family roles may have unrealistic expectations of their roles as stepparents and more difficulty accessing support than those who have more nontraditional views.

Stepparenting is associated with increased levels of stress, particularly among stepmothers.

A body of research has indicated that stepparents tend to experience more psychosocial impacts than stepfathers.

- Stepmothers face unique challenges associated with social norms that place greater caregiving expectations on mothers, negative portrayals of stepmothers, and lack of support from fathers.
- Stepmothers are less likely than stepfathers to live with stepchildren on a full-time basis, which in turn reduces their opportunity to build a close relationship with them.
- Nonresidential mothers tend to be more involved with their children than nonresidential fathers; as a result, boundary ambiguity can be more of an issue for stepmother families.
- Researchers in the United Kingdom reported finding higher levels of anxiety and depression in stepmothers than in biological mothers; stepmothers who were caring for biological and stepchildren had significantly more depression, and stepmothers whose stepchildren did not live in the home had significantly more anxiety.
- Anxiety in stepmothers often was associated with their relationship with their stepchildren’s mother and worries about how the mother would perceive them. Many stepmothers also expressed anxiety about their relationships with their stepchildren, particularly lack of acknowledgement and wanting to be liked. Stepmothers who did not have biological children in some instances lost confidence in their ability to parent their own future children. Stepmothers also expressed anxiety regarding the ambiguity of their role and lack of role models.
- Similar findings were reported in the United States, where stepmothers had almost twice the rate of depressive symptoms as biological mothers.
- Partner support was significantly associated with fewer depressive symptoms among stepmothers, particularly newer stepmothers.

In a United States study that focused on Black stepfathers, researchers found that those who had more positive relationships with their stepchildren had a greater likelihood of having more positive marital interactions and relationships, which in turn was linked with lower risk of depressive symptoms.

The economic well-being of blended families varies from country to country.

- In a comparison of stepfamilies in France, Germany, and the Russian Federation, researchers found that stepfamilies in France and western Germany experienced more economic hardship than intact families, whereas no statistically significant economic differences were noted between stepfamilies and intact families in eastern Germany and the Russian Federation.
- Remarriage is associated with economic benefits for women.

In most countries, stepparents lack the “legitimacy” and legal protections afforded to biological and adoptive parents and there is no legal protection for the stepparent-stepchild relationship. Stepparents often do not have the legal authority to act in a parental role in school and healthcare settings (e.g., consenting for education or medical services). It is generally assumed that relationships between children and stepparents end if the parent and stepparent divorce.

- In the United States, laws vary from state to state regarding stepparents’ roles, rights, and responsibilities (e.g., financial support, visitation).
- Some countries, including the United States, Germany, and Great Britain, have established mechanisms for stepparents to legally adopt their stepchildren. Adoption is a legal action that requires that the child’s nonresident parent, if living, consent to the adoption or that his or her rights are legally terminated. As a result, it tends not to be a viable alternative in situations in which the child’s other parent remains involved in his or her child’s life.

- Approximately 5% of stepchildren in the United States are legally adopted by a stepparent; in the majority of stepparent adoptions, the child’s mother is the primary caregiver.
• Some countries have introduced alternative means for stepparents to obtain limited legal rights\(^{(17,41)}\)
  – In England and Wales, the Children Act 1989 as amended included a provision for stepparents to be able to establish a legal relationship with their stepchildren without terminating the nonresidential parent’s rights and going through adoption proceedings\(^{(41)}\)
  – In Germany, stepparents were granted limited parental rights in 2001 in the form of “small custody,” which allows them to exercise responsibility for minor tasks such as taking the child for routine medical care as long as the custodial parent is in agreement\(^{(122)}\)

• The dissolution of a parent’s remarriage has various impacts on the relationship between stepparents and children. Researchers have found several patterns with respect to ongoing relationships between young adults and their former stepparents\(^{(16)}\)
  – Some young adults, particularly when they had a longstanding relationship with their stepparent, continued to consider the stepparent as family; these children were described as having “claimed” the stepparent. In these families, the parent was generally neutral or supportive of their ongoing relationship. In some instances, contact ceased during the immediate aftermath of the divorce, then resumed at a later point
  – Some young adults “disclaimed” stepparents with whom they had once been close. This occurred when stepchildren learned information that caused them to feel conflicted loyalties or reassess their relationship with their former stepparent, or when contact diminished over time
  – Some stepparents were “unclaimed,” which occurred in a variety of situations, for instance when the marriage was very brief, the child lived at a distance, or the child was too young to remember the stepparent or too old at the time of the marriage to grow close to a new parent figure

› Investigators have found that ties formed through stepfamily relationships tend to be weaker than those between biological kin\(^{(64,74)}\) and that the breakdown of intact family relationships as a result of divorce, death, and/or remarriage can adversely impact relationships between parents and their adult children\(^{(29)}\)

• Analysis of data from a large United States study indicated that adult children in stepfamilies were less likely to reside with or live in proximity to their stepmothers in later life than they were to reside with or live in proximity to their biological mothers\(^{(24)}\)

• Investigators in another study found that the likelihood of stepchild contact with an older stepparent was largely contingent on whether or not the stepparent remained married to the parent. Stepparents who were divorced or widowed had significantly less contact, although contact ceased more gradually following the parent’s death than following a divorce\(^{(64)}\)

• Stepparent respondents in a Pew Research Center survey were more likely to report feeling obligated to help their grown child (78%) than their grown stepchild (62%); and those respondents with both biological and step- or half-siblings reported were more likely to feel obligated to help their biological sibling (64%) compared with their step- or half-sibling (42%)\(^{(68)}\)

• Researchers in the Netherlands found that older parents have more contact with their adult children in biological families than in stepfamilies, and that parents have more contact with their adult children than their adult stepchildren. Parents in complex stepfamilies described their contact with their adult children as more regular and important, whereas stepparents in simple stepfamilies were more likely to perceive their contact with their adult stepchildren as regular and important. Researchers suggested that parents in complex stepfamilies may each focus more on their own children and be less connected with their stepchildren\(^{(87)}\)

• Investigators examining relationships between older adults and their adult non-resident children in France, Germany, and Russia also found that intergenerational ties were weaker in stepfamilies than in intact families\(^{(29)}\)

• Researchers in Germany found that longer duration of the stepparent-child relationship was associated with increased closeness\(^{(2)}\)

• In a Dutch study, researchers reported that boundaries in blended families appear to have become more permeable, with increasing numbers of stepparents having stepchildren in their personal network as older adults (from 63% in 1992 to 85% in 2009)\(^{(81)}\)

Treatment

› There are a variety of interventions that can be helpful to blended families depending on their stage of development and individual needs, including couple and relationship education\(^{(38)}\), pre-blended-family counseling\(^{(33)}\), parenting education\(^{(9)}\), and family counseling\(^{(24,93)}\)
Couple and relationship education (CRE) programs have been developed with the aim of improving the quality and stability of marriages. A meta-analysis published in 2012 reported that CRE is “modestly effective” in improving family functioning and parenting in stepfamilies (58).

In a study that examined the effects of CRE programs on married individuals, some in their first marriages and some in remarriages, investigators reported that both groups of participants had comparable marital functioning prior to participation and received similar benefits from attendance. Stepfamily couples received similar benefit whether they attended a generalized CRE program or one that incorporated content specific to stepfamily dynamics. Researchers noted that participants self-selected which program to attend and may have identified the one that best met their perceived needs (59).

Researchers found that stepparent participation in a co-parenting-focused community education program was associated with improved co-parenting agreement, primarily in stepmothers, as well as increased parenting efficacy in all participants and increased parental involvement among White participants (28).

Participation in a CRE program that focuses on relationships skills in blended families has been associated with increased commitment to the marital relationship and agreement on issues such as finances, parenting, and dealing with ex-partners in both married and cohabitating couples (38). Parents and facilitators also perceived numerous benefits to children, including being able to normalize their family situation, express their feelings, increase relationship skills, and gain support from peers and facilitators (39).

Stepfathers participating in a stepparent education program reported improvement in communication and family unity, becoming more aware and empathic with regard to the children’s feelings, and enhancing their parenting skills. The Smart Steps: Embrace the Journey curriculum, which includes the entire family, focuses on relationship skills (e.g., communication, conflict resolution, stress management) and addresses challenges in combining families, parenting, and dealing with nonresident parents (37).

In a study that examined the efficacy of an interactive web-based program for stepfamilies, researchers found that participants showed gains in parenting and family functioning (31).

Pre-blended-family counseling also can be helpful to blended families in the process of formation. Pre-blended-family counseling typically has four stages (33):

- Discovery involves getting to know basic information about each other through shared activities which are intended to also set the stage for relationship development and family unity.
- Education is provided regarding what to expect as a blended family. Education can include age-appropriate books or other information that alerts family members to the challenges of becoming a blended family and normalizes blended family dynamics, acknowledging the losses that precede formation of the blended family and reminding families that it will take time to form close relationships.
- Parental unification provides time for the parent-stepparent dyad to openly discuss and develop agreements in regard to parenting and discipline, then share these agreements with the children.
- Family unification provides time for children to express their feelings and concerns and for family members to discuss how the blended family will operate, as well as establishing family conferences to maintain open communication.

Parenting education can be helpful to parents navigating parenting issues and difficulties with children’s reactions and behaviors (9).

A study that tested the effectiveness of the Oregon model of Parent Management Training (PMTO) with married mother-stepfather couples found that compared to a randomly assigned control group, participants in PMTO demonstrated improvements in parenting practices, which were in turn linked with fewer externalizing behaviors in children. Participation in PMTO was also associated with enhanced relationship skills and increased marital satisfaction.

Although research has not identified an evidence-based treatment model specifically for blended families, the stepfamily research literature supports a number of different therapeutic approaches that can be useful in the treatment of blended families, including Bowenian (93), solution-focused (95), structural (93), narrative (32, 93), and emotionally focused family therapies (24, 93) as well as cognitive-behavioral approaches (92).

**What We Can Do**

- Learn about/become knowledgeable about blended families so you can accurately assess your client’s personal characteristics and health education needs; share this information with your colleagues.
Develop an awareness of your own cultural values, beliefs and biases and develop knowledge about the histories, traditions, and values of your clients. Adopt treatment methodologies that reflect the cultural needs of the client.

Internationally, social workers should practice with awareness of and adherence to the social work principles of respect for human rights and human dignity, social justice, and professional conduct as described in the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) Statement of Ethical Principles, as well as the national code of ethics that applies in the country in which they practice. For example, in the United States, social workers should adhere to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics core values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence; and become knowledgeable of the NASW ethical standards as they apply to blended families and psychosocial issues and practice accordingly.

Become knowledgeable of the dynamics and psychosocial issues common to blended families, as well as characteristics of successful stepfamilies, so you can provide research-based information and guidance to your clients.

Provide or refer clients who are considering forming a blended family to premarital education or premarital counseling that addresses unique aspects of becoming a blended family.

• Psychoeducation and counseling prior to cohabitation or remarriage can assist family members in developing realistic expectations and negotiating roles and boundaries on a preemptive basis:
  – Educate family members regarding steps involved in stepfamily formation, differences between intact families and blended families, and stressors they may face.
  – The transition to remarriage should be a gradual one, allowing children the time to get to know their future stepparent and/or stepsiblings.
  – Facilitate discussions regarding family members’ expectations regarding family life and help them develop consensus on roles and responsibilities.
  – Children and especially adolescents should be supported in addressing their emotions and fears and included in decision making.
  – Encourage parents and stepparents to acknowledge the impact of children’s past losses.
  – Educate parent-stepparent couples on the importance of supporting each other, maintaining a united front, and treating each other with empathy and mutual respect.
  – Educate parents about issues that may come up in parenting, including attachments with children/stepchildren, challenges and dilemmas involved in parenting children that are not yours, and co-parenting relationships with former partners.
  – It is beneficial for stepparents to take time to develop their relationships with both their spouse and their stepchildren; investing in these relationships builds “full membership” in the stepfamily and is associated with closer stepchild-stepparent relationships.
  – Coparenting education can be helpful in learning how to integrate roles and navigate parenting issues in a blended family.
  – Parents and stepparents should make agreements regarding how discipline will be handled; in general, it is advised that stepparents refrain from taking on a disciplinary role until they have developed a strong relationship with the child.
  – Persistence in relationship-building may be required to give children time to work through loyalty issues and opinions of other family members.
  – Promote family bonding including attuned, empathic responses to each other.
  – Discuss and make agreements regarding how to manage co-parenting relationships with ex-partners; encourage parents to maintain open communication regarding children, facilitating discussions about roles and boundaries when needed.

Provide or refer couples who are having difficulties with co-parenting or child externalizing behaviors to an evidence-based parenting program.

Provide or refer clients who are having difficulties with blended family issues to individual and/or family therapy.

• Complete a comprehensive biopsychosocial-spiritual assessment.
– Assess individual and family characteristics; interactions between parents, stepparents, and children; and step-coupledynamics(43)
– Assess stepmothers in particular for depressive symptoms(76)
- In working with children and young adults with a history of parental divorce and remarriage, obtain a full family history in order to identify whether there have been multiple family transitions and sources of stress(75)
– Explore the stepparents’ experiences and how various relationships are developing (e.g., partner relationship, stepparent/stepchild, parent/child, child’s grandparents(4))
– Explore the stepparents’ beliefs about children, particularly attitudes that children are an imposition(47)
– Explore the stepparents’ views on traditional family roles and assist family members in developing more flexible beliefs about themselves and their families(76)

• Address therapeutic goals, which may include:
– Strengthening partnership between parent-stepparent dyad and assist to develop consensus regarding parenting issues(42)
– Promoting mutual support between partners(77)
– Supporting stepparent-child relationships by encouraging flexibility and positive, open communication(43)
– Providing psychoeducation to assist family members in developing more realistic expectations(93)
– Acknowledging and addressing relational stresses, (75,77) including barriers to having a positive co-parentingrelationship with the stepchild’s other parent(77)
– Enhancing partner and family support(76)

 › Provide referrals to psychoeducational and/or support groups to increase support(70)
 • Group sessions can be helpful for couple dyads. Involvement with other blended families helps normalize issues that come up in blended families as well as conveys that they are not alone(24,94)

 › Refer clients to the following online resources for additional information
 • National Stepfamily Resource Center, http://www.stepfamilies.info/

**DSM 5 Codes**

› 309.0, 309.24, 309.28; 296.21, 296.22, 296.23, 296.24, 296.25, 296.26, 296.20, 296.31, 296.32, 296.33, 296.34, 296.35, 296.36, 296.30; 300.02

### Coding Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>M</th>
<th>Published meta-analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SR</td>
<td>Published systematic or integrative literature review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCT</td>
<td>Published randomized controlled trial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>Published research (not randomized controlled trial)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Case histories, case studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Published guidelines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RV</td>
<td>Published review of the literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RU</td>
<td>Published research utilization report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GQ</td>
<td>Published quality improvement report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>Legislation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PGR</td>
<td>Published government report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PFR</td>
<td>Published funded report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PP</td>
<td>Policies, procedures, protocols</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>Practice exemplars, stories, opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GI</td>
<td>General or background information/texts/reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U</td>
<td>Unpublished research, reviews, poster presentations or other such materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CP</td>
<td>Conference proceedings, abstracts, presentation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### References


