Living in a stepfamily: The rewards and the challenges

Dr Claire Cartwright
School of Psychology
The University of Auckland
What is a stepfamily?

A family or household that includes (at least) a parent, the parent’s child/ren and the parent’s partner/spouse.

In some stepfamilies, both parents have children from previous relationships.
Stepfamilies are more complex

- The children’s other parent also has a household and may also have repartnered.

- Children can have two parents, two stepparents, siblings, and stepsiblings. They also have step-grandparents.

- They have extended families and extended stepfamilies.
Stepfamilies have always existed

In previous centuries, stepfamilies formed after the death of a spouse and parent

From the 1960s to 1980s onwards a large increase in stepfamilies forming after divorce of parents
Stepfamilies

- Initially, remarriage was seen as a positive development that would heal the hurts of divorce
History of research

- Initially American therapists drew attention in the 1970s to the unexpected challenges that their clients were facing.

- Two longitudinal studies began in the early 1980s in USA (Mavis Hetherington, James Bray and colleagues).

- A large number of studies compared the outcomes for children in non-divorced families and stepfamilies and found increased risks of adjustment difficulties.
History of research

- This “comparison deficit” approach was critiqued
- Researchers turned towards understanding more about stepfamilies and how they work
- Increasing New Zealand research in recent years
Main reasons for repartnering
Cartwright, 2011    N=99

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In love with new partner</td>
<td>89%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional support</td>
<td>49.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Practical support</td>
<td>18%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wellbeing of children</td>
<td>19%</td>
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<td>Financial support</td>
<td>6%</td>
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## Hopes (N=97)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Having a good couple’s relationship</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a family</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being good for the children</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing a role model</td>
<td>12%</td>
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# Period of “dating”

<table>
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<tr>
<th>DATING PERIOD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 – 6 Months</td>
<td>34%</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 – 12 Months</td>
<td>28%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 – 2 Months</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 – 4 Months</td>
<td>10%</td>
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Children’s responses

- Many children do not want their parents to separate

- Children adjust to separation with time and fare better if parents cooperate with each other

social.entertainment.msn.com
Children’s responses

- Children’s readiness for a parent’s repartnering – level of adjustment effects response

- Having a relationship with the parent’s new partner (and children) prior to living together helps

- Many children experience difficulties adjusting to the new stepparent and rebel against stepparent influence

- Some describe positive relationships from the beginning
Types of relationships with stepfathers
(Kinniburgh-White, Cartwright & Seymour, 2011)
What works for stepparents

- Taking time to get to know the child and build a friendly relationship
- Understanding the importance of the parent-child relationship – children need the parent’s time and attention
- Supporting the parent’s discipline of children
Stepfamily Architecture
(Papernow, 2013)

- The parent is the insider (the stepparent and children want/need the parent) and the parent feels like the “meat in the sandwich”

- The stepparent is the outsider (to the parent-children relationships)

- The children may feel like outsiders

- The children may feel torn between their separated parents, and the stepparent and parent of same gender
The couple’s relationship

- The reason the stepfamily exists

- Comes under pressure because of (added) tensions around the children and other stresses

- Needs to be nurtured—quality time

- Benefits from understanding of each other’s positions
Relationships with former spouse

Some former spouses and stepparents build friendly relationships or have non-conflicted relationships (Cartwright & Gibson, 2013)

Dealing with the ex-partners, on both sides, who make the situation difficult by acting jealous or tell the children things that are not appropriate. Routine and planning things is hard as the ex-partners never help in anyway
Relationships with former spouse

- Some former spouses talk about feeling threatened by the entrance of a new partner
- Importance of remaining respectful to the “other” parent and cooperative co-parenting
Stepmothers

- Face extra challenges

- Impact of gender expectations – women may be expected to and may expect to take on a parenting role with the children

- May include cooking meals, preparing lunches, doing the laundry, helping with homework, and discipline

- Children tend to resent stepmothers doing these activities
Anna Miller, Doctoral student, Impact of stepmother stereotypes

I’m hypercritical of myself
I question myself and my interactions
I’m cautious about what say and do
I’m constantly biting my tongue
I tread very carefully
I evaluate all my responses
I monitor myself
I try not to rock the boat
I struggle with what I’m supposed to do
I’m self-conscious
I’m paranoid about coming across as the evil stepmother
I do a lot of explaining of who I am, almost apologetically
I walk on eggshells
I’ve kept my emotions in check at all times
I’m consciously aware of everything I do and say
## Living in a stepfamily – The positives

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<tr>
<td>Being a family</td>
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<tr>
<td>Benefits of the couple’s relation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Giving guidance/having a role model</td>
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<td>Stimulating or fun environment</td>
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Fun, interesting, refreshing, vibrant, good mix of adult to adult time, and good quality time with the children, harmony and open access

My kids get to see and experience a family working

Becoming a part of their lives and being a good influence, also contributing to the family unit
References

