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The study of the effects of stress on children upon entry into a stepfamily

Leslie Corkery
University of Northern Iowa

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Abstract

As of 1985, over 15 million children in the United States were members of a stepfamily. Each year one million more children are expected to become a part of a stepfamily. With one of two marriages ending in divorce, it is likely the statistics will rise (Martin & Martin, 1985). According to Winch (1971), "A stepfamily is a domestic family in which one or both parents have children from a previous union living most of the time in the same household" (p. 10). A stepfamily may have the appearance of a traditional family but they do not function in the same manner. The stages in the life cycle of stepfamilies differ dramatically from biological families. Stresses found in the natural family occur in an exaggerated form in the stepfamily. At the same time the stepfamily also encounters stresses that are not common to more traditional families.

The Study of the Effects of Stress on Children

Upon Entry Into a Stepfamily

A Research Paper

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Master of Arts

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by

Leslie Corkery

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Robert L. Frank

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Dale R. Jackson

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                           Administration and Counseling

As of 1985, over 15 million children in the United States were members of a stepfamily. Each year one million more children are expected to become a part of a stepfamily. With one of two marriages ending in divorce, it is likely the statistics will rise (Martin & Martin, 1985).

According to Winch (1971), "A stepfamily is a domestic family in which one or both parents have children from a previous union living most of the time in the same household" (p. 10). A stepfamily may have the appearance of a traditional family but they do not function in the same manner. The stages in the life cycle of stepfamilies differ dramatically from biological families. Stresses found in the natural family occur in an exaggerated form in the stepfamily. At the same time the stepfamily also encounters stresses that are not common to more traditional families.

In a sense some problems are specific to a stepfamily (Sager, Walker, Brown, Crohn, & Rodstein, 1981). Recent literature has dealt with the stresses and problems of divorce for both adults and children. A preliminary review of the literature revealed that researchers and therapists have explored not only the causes but also the effects of divorce on family members. However, with the increasing number of children becoming members of a stepfamily each year more research is also becoming available about the adjustment

problems common to the stepfamily. Researchers are beginning
to explore the stress children and adults encounter upon
entry into a stepfamily.

The purpose of this paper was to review the literature
concerning common stress factors for children entering a
stepfamily unit. Stress factors were divided into four major
categories: 1) discipline, 2) divided loyalty, 3) sex, and
4) stepsibling relationships. These categories will be
discussed individually in order to study the effects on
children.

Discipline

One of the factors that most experts agreed often created
stress for children in stepfamilies was discipline (Maddox,
1975; McClenahan, 1978; Visher & Visher, 1979; Lutz, Jacobs,
& Mason, 1981). The issue of discipline was particularly
severe because a new adult with different ideas, feelings
and behaviors entered into an established single parent home.
Stepparents dealt with an instant family; frequently without
any previously established guidelines for discipline (Visher
& Visher, 1979). Stepchildren may reject any discipline
attempt by the new stepparent in order to test the limits of
the "outsider." Often the children, especially adolescents
who did not respond well to rules even in a traditional family,
found it more difficult to accept from a stepparent who was

perceived as an interloper (Lutz, Jacobs & Mason, 1981).
Teenagers in the single parent home were often forced to
assume more responsibility and consequently were also allowed
more freedom. These children felt a strong sense of
independence which they felt was threatened by the stepparent's
discipline (Visher & Visher, 1979).

Stepchildren tended to react with suspicion when a
stepparent disciplined them because they thought the stepparent
was usurping the role of the biological parent (Stenzor,
1969). The children's suspicions, at times, encouraged them
to "test" the stepparent. One method used by children was
to play one parent against the other in order to confuse and
redirect the discipline technique.

Mowatt (1972), Steinzor (1969), and Maddox (1975),
concluded that stepparents must endure the testing experience
from the stepchildren before the children will accept their
authority. Many discipline techniques are based on the
existence of an affectional bond between parent and child.
Love and approval are strong and positive reinforcers. These
bonds of love and affection need to be developed in the
stepfamily before discipline will be effective.

Stepfamilies by their very nature meant a change in
structure for all members. This change of structure also
affected the administration of discipline (Einstein & Albert,

1986). Bowerman and Irish (1962) found in their study that stepchildren felt more uncertainty of feelings and insecurity of positions than did their counterparts in natural families. Suddenly the stepchildren found a new authority figure in the house. Yet the critical issue concerned the perceived legitimacy of that authority (Espinoza & Newman, 1979).

The child's feelings of insecurity were heightened when there were other stepsiblings living in the same home. Stepparents were believed to discriminate more often against the stepchild by using more severe discipline and showing favoritism toward their own children (Bowerman & Irish, 1962). Therefore, greater hesitancy in disciplining was somewhat justified because of the greater probability of its perceived unfairness.

Adolescents especially, were affected by the change in family structure. Accepting discipline from an outsider was especially difficult for the teenager due to their growing need for autonomy. A change in family structure threatened the control adolescents sought in their lives (Lutz, Jacobs, & Mason, 1981).

Discipline was cited by most researchers as a definite source of stress for children in the stepfamily for two primary reasons. First, children had difficulty accepting rules from an outsider. Second, the change in family structure

that occurred due to the remarriage of the biological parent
also precipitated a change in the discipline techniques.
Although discipline was an important source of stress, other
factors also affected children as they entered a stepfamily.

Divided Loyalties

Another source of stress was divided loyalties. In the
stepfamily at least one biological parent was absent from
the home yet their parent's presence was continually felt by
the children. Thus the children tried to retain their
relationship with the biological parent while at the same
time were called upon to develop a relationship with the
stepparent. As a result of this complex interaction, children
experienced divided loyalties (Visher & Visher, 1979; Einstein
& Albert, 1986). Poppin and White (1984) also found that
the loyalty a child felt toward the biological parent was
threatened upon entry into a stepfamily. This conflict was
exaggerated for the young child because they still
experienced an overwhelming longing for the absent parent
(Prosen & Farmer, 1982).

Divorced adults often competed for the children's love
and affection. Since children can not have what they really
wanted, an intact family, they sometimes exploited the
situation in order to gain privileges or possessions. Thus

the children pitted parent against parent creating feelings
of divided loyalty within themselves (Einstein & Albert, 1986).

Adolescent's loyalties were also divided because they
frequently felt compelled to choose between their natural
parents which created a "caught in the middle" feeling.
According to a study conducted by Lutz (1983) of 103
adolescents between ages of 12 and 18, 43% of the respondents
stated they experienced this "caught feeling" and 58% also
said that this created stress for them. Conversely,
Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) discussed the positive effect
on children whose parental relationships were good. These
children experienced little divided loyalties or stress if
their parents were not warring with each other.

The attitude of the natural parents toward one another
had a definite influence upon the emotional well being of
the child. Children often saw themselves as being a composite
of their biological parents. Therefore, when one parent talked
negatively about the other, the child internalized the
criticism.

Another aspect of divided loyalty that created stress
for children dealt with their growing respect and possibly
even love for their stepparent. Capaldi and McRae (1979)
stated children often viewed this respect and love as an
"either/or" proposition. Thus they felt "caught in the middle"

between the biological parent and the stepparent. Young
children felt disloyal to their natural parent if they admitted
to loving their stepparent. These feelings of disloyalty to
the natural parent tended to force the children to "stick
by" their natural parent and at times deny their growing
affection for the stepparent. This situation exacerbated if
the absent parent subtly encouraged the children to express
negative feelings about their stepparent.

Feelings of divided loyalties often created significant
amounts of stress for children in a stepfamily. Children
felt divided on three key issues. First, most children felt
ties to the absent natural parent. This emotional link to
the absent parent caused confusion for the children he/she
tried to relate to the newly merged family. Second, some
children wanted to establish an emotional bond to the
stepparent which created guilt feelings about disloyalty to
their absent parent. Finally, negative talk by the biological
parent and stepparent about the non-custodial spouse left
the child confused about whom he/she owed allegiance.
Characteristics worked in combination to create stress for
the child entering the stepfamily setting.

Sex

Sexual issues were yet another source of stress for
children living within a stepfamily. Some children experienced

difficulty in adjusting to a sexual relationship between their biological parent and another person (Rollin, 1971; Kompara, 1980). According to Fast and Cain (1966) there were no clear cut sanctions governing sexual behavior between stepparent, stepchildren and stepsiblings which intensified the normal difficulties in channeling sexual impulses of family members.

Visher and Visher (1978), Mead (1970), and Baer (1972), concluded also that the incest taboo was weakened due to the absence of biological ties between family members. Therefore, sexuality was viewed as being a greater source of conflict within the stepfamily than within the traditional family. Sexuality was especially evident in stepfamilies for two reasons. First, the new couple's expression of affection within the home brought to awareness the importance of sexual intimacy to the relationship (Einstein & Albert, 1986; Messinger, 1984). Many young people experienced feelings of anger, resentment and embarrassment with this awareness due to their anxiety about their own sexuality (Einstein & Albert, 1986). They did, however, state that an obvious affection between the parents provided a positive role model for children in terms of development of their own concept of a marital relationship.

Secondly, sexual boundaries were blurred. This occurred, in part, because children were suddenly involved in an intimate situation with people they have not grown up with (Francke, 1983; Messinger, 1984). This resulted in increased tension, confusion and inappropriate behavior. Einstein and Albert (1986) continued by stating that having a sexual attraction toward a family member was normal but the implied incest taboos prevented individuals from acting on such feelings.

Some researchers indicated that incest taboo, notwithstanding, it was not uncommon for stepfamily members to experience sexual fantasies. This increased anxiety causing them to respond with distancing behavior or even anger in an effort to cope with this issue (Sager et al., 1981). This was particularly true of adolescents who flirted with the stepparent of the opposite sex to validate his/her attractiveness. As the stepparent retreated the child may try harder to gain his/her affection causing the stepparent to retreat even further. This left the child feeling rejected and unlovable (Einstein & Albert, 1986).

According to Rosenberg and Hajal (1985) combining non-biological children of the opposite sex, particularly adolescents, generally increased the children's sexual conflict. Visher and Visher (1978) concurred that when teenagers who found themselves living in intimate situations

at a time when they were curious and intrigued by sexual

concerns may develop strong sexual fantasies and attractions

to each other.

Young children also experienced conflict with the

development of intense affectional feelings for each other.

To offset the perceived unacceptable attraction they engaged

in fighting and discordance behavior (Visher & Visher, 1978).

Therefore sexual issues had a major influence on the adjustment

of stepfamily members, particularly children and adolescents.

Due to the weakening of incest taboos they were more likely

to experience confusion and anxiety over attraction to their

stepkin.

                    Stepsibling Relationships

The final major stress factor dealt with stepsibling

relationships to each other which were confused due to the

ambiguities and lack of guidelines as to roles and positions

which were common to stepfamilies (Rosenberg & Hajal, 1985).

Children's reaction to having new brothers and sisters

typically ranged from optimism that new relationships would

fulfill unmet needs, to skepticism that sharing relationships

with more people would result in an additional loss (Rosenberg

& Hajal, 1985). Dubermam (1973) found that stepsibling

relationships were crucial to the success of stepfamilies.

As the number of non-biological children living within the

remarried family increased, so did the number of opportunities for jealously and rivalry. Children frequently reacted in a disruptive manner due to feelings of rejection, abandonment and divided loyalties. Einstein and Albert (1986) observed that when children from two different families were brought into a stepfamily, frequently rivalry intensified. Each child had to learn to share a parent after the loss of his/her traditional family as well as vie for a position within the "new" family.

Change in family birth order also added to the stress between stepsiblings (Einstein & Albert, 1986). In the merged family, first borns may no longer be the oldest child. Confusion as to roles that had been previously been based on birth order no longer applied. As children attempted to function in their new birth order feelings of jealously and rivalry caused friction and misbehavior among siblings.

Consequently, children also had difficulty establishing a personal identity within the family structure because their birth order was reshuffled. Sharing space for possessions and a lack of privacy contributed to the stress of the identity crisis. These factors combined, caused children to search for their places in the family often without much success. Thus, feeling left out or alone in their own family, children fought with their stepsiblings in order to carve a place for

themselves in the family. Goldstein and Solnit (1984) found that if stepsiblings were the same ages, the sense of rivalry maybe even more noticeable. If several children were present then the child had a tendency to feel overwhelmed. He/she felt like an outsider and consequently became more possessive of his/her own mother. Resentment between stepsiblings developed because they feared the lose of time with their own parent whom they had to share (Einstein & Albert, 1986). The process of dividing parental time, according to Rosenberg and Hajal (1985), frequently created a sense of unfairness among stepsiblings and was intensified in their relationships. Children many times were compared with each other by parents. The tendency of the natural parents was to use his/her own children as positive examples and the stepchildren as targets. This resulted in children being caught in the cross current of misuse and exploitation which finally precipitated a fight between children (Schulman, 1972).

Stepsiblings were confronted with complicated loyalty conflicts. Stepsibs struggled to maintain loyalty to old family ties while being expected to allow others loyalties to their families of origin (Rosenberg & Hajal, 1985).

In summary, the absence of guidelines, with regard to stepfamily structure, created confusion for children attempting to establish a position within the "new" familial unit.

They experienced feelings of jealousy, rejection and divided loyalties which resulted in intense rivalry and resentment.

Conclusion

This study consisted of a review of literature concerning the stress factors experienced by children upon entry into a stepfamily. Four primary stress factors were studied: 1) discipline, 2) divided loyalty, 3) sexual issues, and 4) stepsibling relationships. Two conclusions may be drawn. First, stepfamilies, by their very nature, caused restructuring of the family unit. This restructuring often left the children feeling confused about their personal identity and role in the new family unit. Also, children especially adolescents, felt anxiety over their newly emerging sexuality due to blurred sexual boundaries in the stepfamily.

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