Relationships in Stepfamilies: The Power of Children's Perceptions

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Mother  Father  Child(ren)
Maternal grandparents
Paternal grandparents
Other maternal extended family members (aunts, uncles, cousins)
Other paternal extended family members (aunts, uncles, cousins)
Parent  Stepparent  Child
Half sib
Nonresident parent
New partner (stepparent)
Maternal grandparents
Step-grandparents
Stepparent's ex partner & children
Maternal aunts, uncles, cousins
Paternal grandparents
Paternal aunts, uncles, cousins
Step aunts, uncles, cousins

The Resilience in Stepfamilies study

- Three members of 90 families interviewed (biological parent, stepparent, and child) plus where possible the non-resident parent (32).
- In 38 cases teachers also completed the SDQ plus assessments of classroom behaviour.
- Assessments of all dyadic relationships were measured in multiple ways (single-item and measures).
- Assessments of child wellbeing and family cohesion and expressiveness also made by all family members.

Measures used:
- Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ, Goodman): prosocial behaviour, anxiety, peer problems, behaviour problems, hyperactivity.
- Cohesion and expressiveness subscales of the Family Environment Scale (Moos & Moos).
- Perceptions of Strengths Questionnaire (Williams & McGee).
- Security scale (Kerns, Klepac et al).
- Warmth and hostility scale (Melby, Conger, et al).

Characteristics of sample:
- Children aged between 9 and 15
- 50 girls, 40 boys in final sample
- 60 stepfather families, 30 stepmother families
- Recruited through schools
- 66% of families had been together longer than 2 years
- Income and education higher than for New Zealand overall
Key aspects of the study:

- Multi-informant
- Comprehensive examination of children’s perspectives
- Focus on affective aspects of relationships as well as behaviour

Predictors of children’s assessments of family dynamics

Family cohesion:
- Child: quality of parent-child relationship $\beta = .306$
- Child: quality of child-stepparent relationship $\beta = .115$

Family expressiveness:
- Child: happy with parent-nonresident relationship
- Child: security in child-stepparent relationship

Predictors of child’s assessment of strengths and behaviour

Prosocial behaviour:
- Child: closeness to maternal grandparents $\beta = .286$

Strengths:
- Child: happy with child-parent relationship $\beta = .298$
- Child: closeness to stepparent $\beta = .254$

Predictors of children’s assessment of their behaviour 1

Anxiety:
- Child: quality of relationship with non-resident parent $\beta = -.239$
- Child: happy with child-parent relationship $\beta = -.236$

Hyperactivity:
- Parent: parent-stepparent conflict $\beta = -.313$
- Child: Happy with parent-child relationship $\beta = -.234$

Predictors of child’s assessment of their behaviour 2

Behaviour problems:
- Child: closeness to maternal grandparents $\beta = -.316$
- Child: quality of child-nonresident parent relationship $\beta = -.192$

Peer problems:
- Child: close to non-resident parent $\beta = -.415$

Predictors of resident parents’ assessments of family cohesion and child pro-social behaviour

Cohesion:
- Parent: parent-stepparent conflict $\beta = .242$
- Child: happiness with frequency of contact with non-resident parent $\beta = .175$

Pro-social behaviour:
- Parent: nonresident parent involvement with child’s school $\beta = .276$
- Child: closeness to parent $\beta = .250$
Predictors of parents’ assessment of child behaviour

- **Behaviour problems:**
  - Parent: quality of parent-child relationship $\beta = -0.317$
  - Child: security of relationship with non-resident parent $\beta = -0.246$

- **Hyperactivity:**
  - Child: parent-stepparent conflict $\beta = -0.306$

- **Peer problems:**
  - Parent: parent-child closeness $\beta = -0.269$
  - Parent: child-stepparent closeness $\beta = -0.205$
  - Child: closeness to maternal grandparents $\beta = -0.187$
  - Child: closeness to non-resident parent $\beta = -0.181$

Predictors of non-resident parents’ assessments of children’s behaviour

- **Prosocial behaviour:**
  - Child: frequency of holidays with non-resident parent $\beta = 0.543$

- **Behaviour problems:**
  - Nonresident parent: involvement in discipline $\beta = 0.579$
  - Child: happy with biological parents’ relationship $\beta = 0.527$

- **Anxiety:**
  - Nonresident parent: happy with relationship with resident parent $\beta = -0.445$
  - Child: happy with resident-nonresident parent relationship $\beta = -0.107$

Summary

- Children’s assessments of their relationships with biological parents and maternal grandparents tended to predict behavioural assessments.
- Their assessments of their relationships with stepparents tended to predict family dynamics and their perceptions of their strengths.
- The relationship children have with their non-resident parents is consistently associated with wellbeing, especially behaviour.
- Children’s perceptions of relationships were predominant in predicting their assessments of outcomes, as well as those of their resident and non-resident parents.

Conclusions

- It appears that dyadic relationships in stepfamilies contribute differentially to aspects of wellbeing for children and families. Much more research is needed into this.
- Children may be particularly accurate observers and assessors of dynamics in their families.
- The affective quality of relationships are powerful associates of wellbeing in stepfamilies.
- Longitudinal designs would help to clarify many of these dynamics further.