

Relationships in Stepfamilies: The Power of Children's Perceptions

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Introduction

The complex dynamics associated with stepfamilies remain poorly understood, particularly in regard to their impact on family and individual wellbeing. This is in part because of the diversity of stepfamily households, and of the transitions experienced before stepfamilies are formed. In particular, little is known of the role that children play in stepfamilies, although we do know that stepchildren are comparatively powerful in determining the nature of the stepparent-stepchild relationship (O'Connor, 1997). In this paper, the findings from a study of 90 stepfamilies in New Zealand are discussed.

The study 'Resilience in Stepfamilies' involved interviews with biological parents, stepparents, and children aged between 9 and 15 years in 90 stepfamilies. Nonresident parents were interviewed in 32 of these families, and teacher assessments of children's behaviour were also obtained in 38 families. Sixty families were stepfather families (resident biological children of the mother) and 30 were stepmother families. Sixty-six percent of the stepfamilies had been together for more than two years.

Assessments of the quality of relationships were obtained from all informants. Measures of closeness and happiness with relationships (single-items), and quality and trust in relationships (multiple item measures) were obtained. The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) was completed by all informants; children completed a measure of their self concept and teachers reported on classroom behaviour. Members of the stepfamily household also completed measures of family cohesion and expressiveness.

Correlations were computed amongst relationship assessment variables from all informants, and regressions carried out to determine significant predictors of variance in outcomes. For children's assessments of outcomes (SDQ scores, self concept, family cohesion and expressiveness, 13 of 14 predictors were children's assessments of relationships. For biological parents' assessments of outcomes, six of twelve significant predictors were children's assessments and the remainder were biological parents' assessments. For non-resident parents' assessments of outcomes, five of eight significant predictors were children's assessments and three were those of the non-resident parents. Classroom behaviours were predicted by teachers' SDQ scores, but also by children's own SDQ scores and, in two cases, the assessments of stepparents.

Children's assessments of the quality of their relationships with their biological parents (resident and non-resident) were primarily predictive of their assessments of their behaviour on the SDQ. Their closeness to their maternal grandparents was also predictive of behaviour scores. Their assessment of their relationship with their stepparent was predictive of family cohesion and expressiveness, and of their self concept. The children's assessments of the relationship with their non-resident parents were predictive of their resident parents' assessments of family cohesion, and of behaviour and peer problems. Their non-resident parents' assessments of

their behaviour were primarily predicted by the children's assessments of the child-nonresident parent relationship.

The findings of this study are indicative of the complexity of relationships and their interactions in stepfamilies. To date there has been little attention given to the differences amongst the perceptions of individual family members in their associations with outcomes, or to the comparative contributions of the dyadic relationships in stepfamilies to children's wellbeing and to that of their families in stepfamily households.

These results suggest that children's perceptions of the quality of relationships are powerfully associated with both their own perceptions of wellbeing, and with their parents' perceptions of wellbeing. With one exception (parents' perception of parent-stepparent conflict) only their own assessments of relationships predicted their assessments of outcomes. More significantly, over half of the outcomes assessed by parents were predicted by children's assessments of relationships. This adds powerful support to previously mostly qualitative work done in eliciting children's voices, and in gauging their importance for individual and family wellbeing (e.g. Dunn et al 2001, Gollop et al, 2000, Smart et al 2000).

Of equal interest is the finding that dyadic relationships contribute differentially to aspects of wellbeing. For children, the relationship with non-resident parents was particularly salient for behavioural outcomes, especially peer relationships. This finding extends the work of White and Gilbreth (White & Gilbreth 2001). The children's assessment of this relationship was also predictive of their resident and non-resident parents' assessments of behavioural outcomes. The child-stepparent relationship as assessed by children was predictive of family outcomes and self concept, while the resident parent-child relationship was predictive of behaviours and self concept.

Taken together, these findings indicate that relationships in stepfamilies exert differential influences on outcomes for children, and a nuanced approach is needed in order to understand a complex set of family dynamics. In particular, the views and perspectives of children appear to be particularly important in predicting wellbeing in stepfamilies. It would be of interest to carry out similar and comparative studies in other family structures.

References.

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