

Outcomes for children in new stepfamilies

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Background (I)

- stepfamilies are the fastest growing family form in the UK
- cohort data show near doubling in rate of stepfathers over 12 year period
- about 8% of families are stepfamilies
- estimated that 30% of mothers spend some time in a stepfamily before they are 45

Background (II)

- most research studies have adopted the 'deficit model' comparing stepfamilies with non-stepfamilies
- results of these studies suggest that children in stepfamilies do less well
- but this may be due to factors that pre-date the stepfamily

The stepfamilies study

The study aims

- to investigate how children in stepfamilies were parented, and whether this differed from parenting in original families
- to see what was associated with good outcomes for children

Sample and methods

- sample identified by large scale screening exercise
- representative sample of 184 newly formed stepfamilies
- children aged 7 to 11
- parent, step-parent and child interviewed

Outcome measure: the 'symptom score'

- standardised interview-based assessment of child health, behaviour and well-being
- comprises 31 items (such as anxiety, fears and phobias, sadness, lies, stealing, aggressive behaviour, sleep problems, eating disorders, poor concentration, headaches, and stomach aches)
- items rated according to frequency and severity, and reflecting degree of handicap

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Variables not associated with child outcomes

- Current family status
 - Type of stepfamily; civil status; length of time in stepfamily
- History of stepfamily
 - marital status at child's birth; length of original relationship; length of lone parenthood; number of previous cohabiting relationships; number of moves;
- Relationship with non resident parent
 - contact; frequency of contact; overnight stays; (quality of relationship)

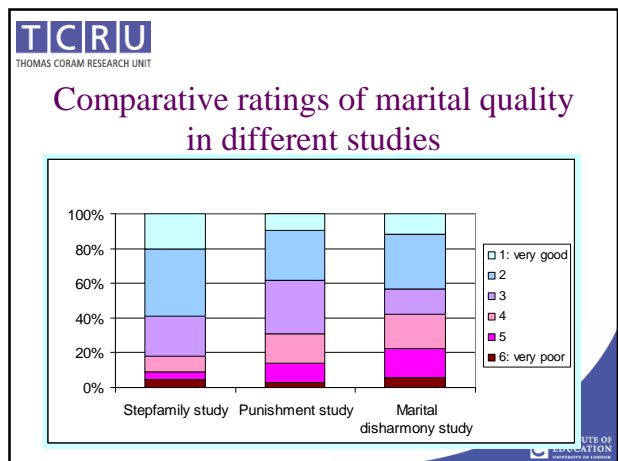
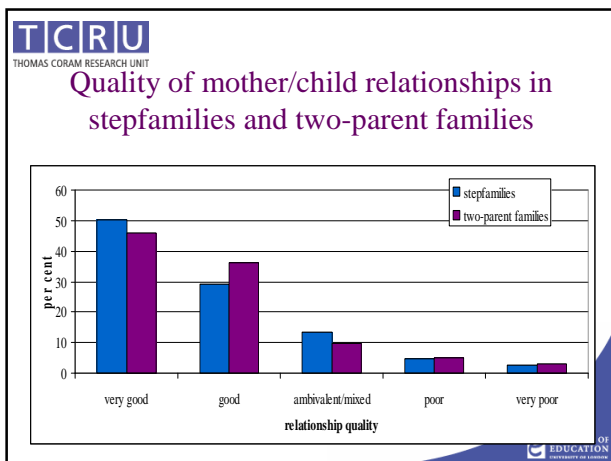
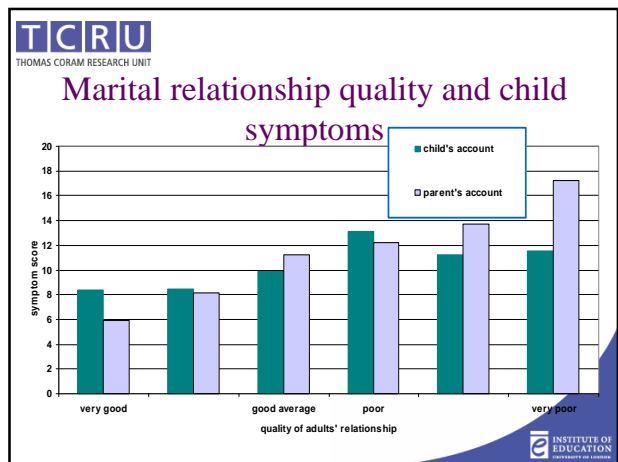
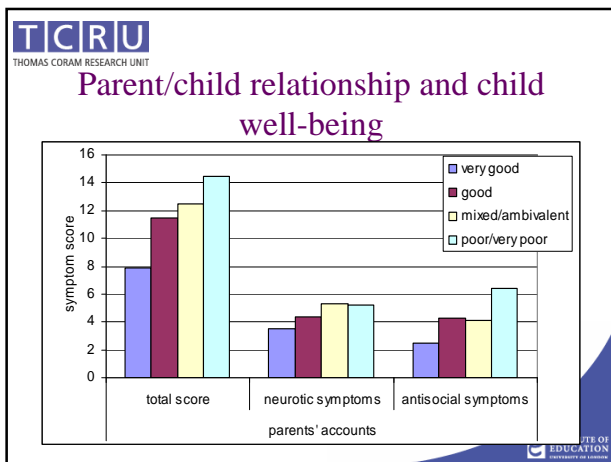
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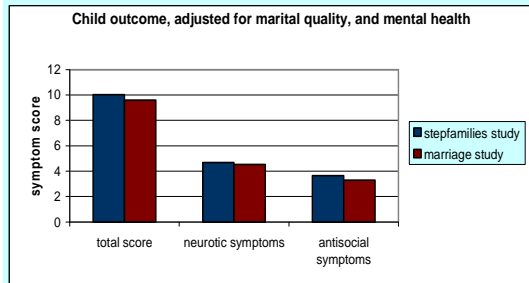
Variables associated with child outcomes

- mothers' age at first birth
- presence of new half sibling/classification of stepfamily
- (in mothers' accounts) maternal mental health
- (quality of relationship with non-resident parent)
- relationships within the household**

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Outcomes for children in stepfamilies, compared with non-stepfamilies



Conclusions

- there were strong associations between the quality of relationships within the household and child outcomes
- comparative multivariate analysis with a non-stepfamily sample showed no independent effect of stepfamily status on child outcomes