

Abstract:

This paper focuses on stepfamilies, stepfatherhood and maps out stepfathers' and stepchildren's experiences in stepfamilies. The aim of the paper is threefold: a) uncover whether children in stepfamilies see their stepfathers as members of the closest family (acceptance); b) map parental styles in stepfamilies and find out whether parental styles and other factors are related to stepfather acceptance; c) Create a qualitative map of the lived experiences of children and stepfathers in stepfamilies, including their joys and frustrations.

Based on the research conducted, the paper claims that children in stepfamilies accept, for the most part, their residential stepfather as part of the closest family. This is the case even when children represent their ideal family, the family they would dream of.

Important factors in children's level of acceptance of their stepfathers include children's perception of a warm relationship on the side of the stepfather, as well as on the side of their mother, and a positive emotional climate in the family overall. Stepfathers are more likely to be accepted by children if the child's relationship with *both* residential parents is perceived by the child as loving or warm. Warm relationships with the stepfather only is also a contributing factor, as well as stepfathers lower perceived levels of parental control. Stepfather acceptance grows with time elapsed since the divorce of the biological parents, and with time spent living with the stepchildren.

Children wish to have closer relationships with their non-custodial biological father. They would also prefer if stepfathers exercised less authority over their families. Children often express a wish for the relationships among the significant adults in the family to be free of conflict. As expressed by one of the children: "I am not happy that dad has moved away, but if that's my parents' choice, then at least I want everyone to get along."

On one side, stepfathers experience many frustrations living in a stepfamily. The most prominent frustrations include issues relating to disciplining stepchildren and the relationship of the stepfather with the non-resident biological father. On the other side, stepfathers find stepfamily life enriching in many ways. The joys of having a stepfamily are related to creating a family as a unit, caring for and developing stepchildren, fostering their growth and improvements, and seeing the expressions of love by the stepchildren, of which the recipient may be the stepfather or the stepchild's half-siblings.

Key words:

Step families, step parenting, step children, non-custodial father, stepfather.

