

# 5

## Step families and blended families



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## 5

## Step families and blended families

Marriage and relationship breakdown frequently involve dependent children. In 2001, 53,400 children under the age of 18 experienced the divorce of their parents. An unknown number of other children experienced the separation of their cohabiting parents. In total, almost a million children have a natural parent living elsewhere.

These relationship breakdowns frequently result in the formation of lone parent families (Chapter 4) but for many children a lone parent family may be a relatively short transition stage before parents repartner. Indeed, studies of relationship histories of some children indicate multiple transitions in and out of lone parent families into one or another type of couple family (Chapter 11).

When a parent with a dependent child partners (or repartners), a step family or a blended family is formed. Such families can bring a new security and stability to some individuals but can also involve complex and difficult relationships, as individuals and children from different families learn to live together.

### What are blended and step families?

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, a blended family consists of:

- A couple family containing two or more children.
- At least one child that is the natural child of *both* members of the couple; and
- At least one child that is the step child<sup>1</sup> of either member of the couple (ABS 1998a).

A step family consists of:

- A couple family containing one or more children.
- At least one child that is the step child of either member of the couple; and
- No child that is the natural or foster child of both members of the couple (ABS 1998a).

Based on estimates from the 2001 HILDA survey, step and blended families account for 8.9 per cent of families with children aged under 18, and 9.9 per cent of all couple families with children under 18. Using HILDA, Brandon (2004) estimates that 5.87 per cent of children under the age of 15 live with a step parent or with their parent and the parent's de facto spouse. Apart from these estimates we have little national statistical information about blended and step families. Most often, statistical information on couples with children does not distinguish between intact, blended and step families.

### How many step and blended families are there?

#### Blended

Based on the 2001 HILDA survey, *blended* families made up 4.0 per cent of *all* families with children under the age of 18. In the same year blended families made up 4.4 per cent of *couple* families with children under 18 (Table 5.1).

The proportion of blended *couple* families has risen gradually since at least 1986. In that year, 2.5 per cent of couple families with dependent children were blended families (ABS 1992). By 1997, 3.9 per cent of couple families with children under 18 (ABS 1998a) were blended families, and by 2001 this figure rose to 4.4 per cent (FaCS, 2002a).

#### Step families

In 2001, 5.5 per cent of all *couple* families with children under 18 years of age were step families. In the same year, step families made up 4.9 per cent of *all* families with children under 18 (Table 5.1). This represents a slight decline in the percentage of couple families that are step families.

Overall, the percentage of all families with children under the age of 18 that are either blended or step families is very similar to the percentage of all such families that are lone parent families (10.7 per cent).

Not all children living in blended families are step children. Some are the natural child of both parents. In 2001, of children under the age of 18, 5.6 per cent were step children (ABS 2001c).

Table 5.1 Family type of families containing a child under 18, 2001

|  | All couple families<br>with a child <18<br>% | All families<br>with a child <18<br>% |
|--|--|---------------------------------------|
| Intact couple family                         | 90.1   | 80.5                                  |
| Blended (step father)                        | 4.0  | 3.6                                   |
| Blended (step mother)                        | 0.3  | 0.3                                   |
| Blended (step mother and<br>step father)     | 0.1  | 0.1                                   |
| Step family (step father)                    | 4.0  | 3.6                                   |
| Step family (step mother)                    | 0.6  | 0.5                                   |
| Step family (step mother and<br>step father) | 0.9  | 0.8                                   |
| Lone parent family                           | -  | 10.7                                  |
| <i>N</i>                                     | 4704   | 5265                                  |

Source: HILDA, 2001 (FaCS 2002a).

### How common is marriage in step/blended families?

Step families and blended families are far more likely than intact families to consist of a cohabiting couple rather than a married couple. In the 2001 HILDA survey more than half of the step family couples (53 per cent) were cohabiting and well over a third (39 per cent) of the blended family couples were cohabiting. These figures stand in sharp contrast to less than 8 per cent of intact families with a child under 18 consisting of a cohabiting couple. Of all couple families with a child under the age of 18, 12.4 per cent were cohabiting rather than married (FaCS, 2002a).

Cohabitation is a common arrangement in step and blended families. Table 5.2 reports these rates from the 2001 HILDA survey – rates that are substantially higher than those recorded in the ABS Family Characteristics survey in 1997 (ABS 1998a).

- In 1997, just 27 per cent of blended family couples were cohabiting (39 per cent in 2001).
- In 1997, 43 per cent of couples in step families were cohabiting compared with 53 per cent in 2001.

### Which natural parent do children live with?

Most children who do not live with one of their natural parents, live with their mother. Many such children live with a lone mother rather than in a blended or step family. In 1997, just 22.8 per cent of children with a natural parent living elsewhere lived in a step or blended family. In 2001, 78.6 per cent of step children lived with their natural mother and a step father. In 2001, 4.4 per cent of all children under the age of 18 were the step child of the male parent and 1.2 per cent were the step child of the female parent (ABS 2001c).

When a child lives apart from a natural parent, the chances of living in a step or blended family increase as they get older (Table 5.3). In 1997, most pre-schoolers with a natural parent living elsewhere (92.4 per cent) lived in a lone parent household. However, by the time they reached secondary school age (12-17 years old) only two thirds (67.2 per cent) lived with a lone parent. By their teenage years, over a quarter (27.2 per cent) lived with their mother and step father while 5.6 per cent lived with their father and step mother.

### How well off financially are step and blended families?

Overall, little information is available regarding the financial circumstances of step/blended families. Most information does not distinguish between intact couple families with dependent children and step/blended families. However, some information is available that relates to the particular circumstances of step/blended families.

### Is child support received?

Since most children in step and blended families will have a natural parent living elsewhere many children in step and blended families are eligible for financial support from this parent. To what extent does this occur? Do children in step and blended families receive child support as frequently as those in lone parent families?

It is clear from Table 5.4 that lone parent families are much more likely to receive financial support from the non resident parent than those families in which the resident parent has repartnered. While 46.9 per cent of lone mothers received regular financial support from the non resident father, just 26.1 per cent and 39.1 per cent of mothers in blended and step families received such support. The disparity between mothers in lone parent families, on the one hand, and mothers in step and blended families on the other, is even greater with regard to other types of financial support (for example, school fees) where very few children living in blended or step families with their mother received this type of support.

Overall, less than half (46.3 per cent) of all lone mother families received no financial support from the non resident parent while about 70 per cent of those in blended and 56 per cent in step families with their mothers received no such financial support.

Resident mothers are much more likely than resident fathers to receive financial support from the

**Table 5.2** Marital status of couples with children under 18

|            | Intact couple<br>% | Blended<br>% | Step<br>% |
|------------|--------------------|--------------|-----------|
| Married    | 92.3               | 61.5         | 47.0      |
| Cohabiting | 7.7                | 38.5         | 53.0      |
| Total      | 3512               | 187          | 202       |

Source: HILDA 2001 (FaCS 2002a).

**Table 5.3** Children with a natural parent living elsewhere, 1997

|   | Age of child |           |            | Total<br>% |
|---|--------------|-----------|------------|------------|
|   | 0-4<br>%     | 5-11<br>% | 12-17<br>% |            |
| <b>Living with natural mother in a:</b> |              |           |            |            |
| Lone mother family                      | 88.7         | 69.7      | 54.6       | 68.0       |
| Step family                             | 5.6          | 10.7      | 15.3       | 11.3       |
| Blended family                          | 1.5          | 8.8       | 11.9       | 8.4        |
| <b>Living with natural father in a:</b> |              |           |            |            |
| Lone father family                      | 3.7          | 8.7       | 12.6       | 9.0        |
| Step family                             | **           | **        | 3.7        | 2.0        |
| Blended family                          | **           | **        | 1.9        | 1.1        |

Source: 1997 Family Characteristics Survey. Adapted from data reported in Australian Bureau of Statistics (1997c).

\*\*Too few cases

**Table 5.4 Financial support from parent living elsewhere, 2001**

| Receipt of financial support       | Family type               |          |              |          |              |          |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------|----------|--------------|----------|--------------|----------|
|                                    | Blended (n=213)           |          | Step (n=212) |          | Lone (n=557) |          |
|                                    | Recipient resident parent |          |              |          |              |          |
|                                    | Mother %                  | Father % | Mother %     | Father % | Mother %     | Father % |
| Receives regular financial support | 26.1                      | 1.0      | 39.1         | 3.9      | 46.9         | 15.6     |
| Receives other financial support   | 5.4                       | 1.0      | 10.9         | 3.9      | 24.2         | 9.1      |
| Receives just one form             | 27.9                      | 2.0      | 37.3         | 3.9      | 17.3         | 6.5      |
| Receives both forms                | 1.8                       | -        | 6.4          | 2.0      | 17.3         | 6.5      |
| Receives no financial support      | 70.3                      | 98.0     | 56.4         | 94.1     | 46.3         | 81.8     |

*Source:* HILDA, 2001 (FaCS 2002a).  
In families with a child under 18 in which a parent lives elsewhere

non resident parent. For example, while 46.9 per cent of lone mothers received regular financial support from their child’s father just 15.6 per cent of lone fathers received regular financial support from the child’s non resident mother. Similarly, while 56.4 per cent of resident mothers in step families received no financial support from the child’s non resident father, 94.1 per cent of resident fathers in step families received no financial support from the child’s non resident mother (Table 5.4).

**How common is financial hardship?**

Following divorce, families with dependent children frequently face financial hardship. Chapter four has detailed the level of poverty among lone parent families with dependent children. Those who repartner following divorce tend to be financially better off than those who remain as lone parents. The Australian Divorce Transition Project studied a national sample of people after divorce and concluded that “repartnering remains a key way out of financial difficulties for women, and hence for most children whose parents divorce” (Smyth and Weston 2000).

Figure 5.1 below shows the percentage of lone parents and repartnered parents with children who

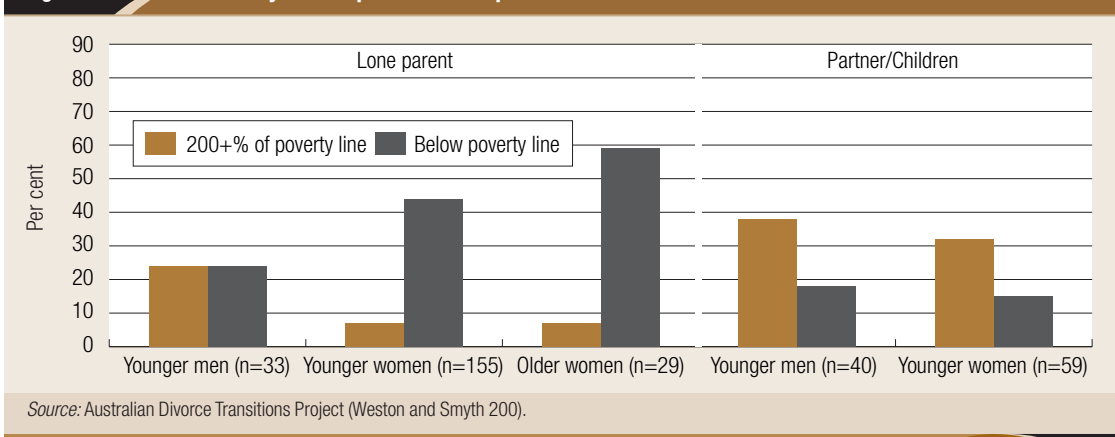
lived below the Henderson poverty line following divorce. This shows that the proportions living below the poverty line are much higher among lone parents – especially women and older lone mothers – than among those who had repartnered. Similarly, far greater proportions of those who had repartnered had a standard of living that was 200 per cent above the poverty line than was the case among lone parents.

While both repartnered mothers and fathers were financially better off than lone mothers and fathers, the difference between repartnered and lone parents was greatest among mothers. For example, 44 per cent of lone mothers were below the poverty line compared to just 15 per cent of repartnered mothers. Similarly, only 8 per cent of lone mothers were 200 per cent above the poverty line compared to about 32 per cent of repartnered mothers. Much smaller differences were evident among repartnered and lone fathers.

**How do children manage in step and blended families?**

While many blended and step families function well, there is evidence that some children in blended and step families face particular difficulties. This

**Figure 5.1 Poverty in lone parent and step/blended families**



section outlines the link between living in a step/blended family and the incidence of child abuse and mental health disorders. The evidence indicates that child abuse and neglect and child mental health disorders are more common in step and blended families than in intact families.

Care must be taken, however, not to conclude simply that step/blended families *cause* these particular difficulties. These data do not indicate whether the difficulties associated with certain types of families stem from the type of family structure, from the economic and social environments in which some family types function or from the earlier background of individuals who form blended and step families. It should also be stressed that even in those family types where children are more likely to face particular difficulties, the large majority of children in these families do not encounter these difficulties at all.

#### *Is violence and child abuse more common?*

Overseas and Australian evidence indicates that child abuse and neglect are more common in lone parent, step and blended families than in intact families (Tomison 1996). However, this does not necessarily mean that the perpetrator is the lone parent or the step parent. The perpetrator is not necessarily someone who lives with the child.

Evidence provided by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW 2003b) which collates all Australian statistics on child abuse, indicates that child abuse and maltreatment occur in blended and step families at more than twice the rate than would be expected.

In 1997, almost 16 per cent of child abuse substantiations related to children in step or blended families. However, only about 8 per cent of children lived in such families. This means that the percentage of substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect in step/blended families was twice as high as would be expected given the percentage of children living in step/blended families.

Over 46 per cent of substantiated abuse occurs in lone parent families while only approximately 18 per cent of children live in lone parent families (Table 5.5). This means that child abuse in lone parent families is about two and a half times higher than would be expected given the number of children living in such families.

Just over a quarter (26.6) of substantiated child abuse happens to children living in intact families – a much lower rate than would be expected given that three quarters of children live in such families.

While substantiated child abuse is twice as high in step and blended families than would be expected, it is important not to simply attribute this to the abusive behaviours of the step parent or cohabiting

**Table 5.5** Substantiations of child abuse by family type, 2002-03

| Family type         | % of substantiations | % of children in family type <sup>a</sup> |
|---------------------|----------------------|---|
| Intact              | 26.6                 | 74  |
| Step or blended     | 15.9                 | 8   |
| Lone parent–female  | 40.8                 | 16  |
| Lone parent–male    | 5.3                  | 2   |
| Other relatives/kin | 3.1                  |   |
| Foster              | 0.4                  |   |
| Other               | 7.8                  |   |

*Source:* Based on Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2004a). Does not include NSW. Figures collected from Victoria and Queensland are based on family type at time of investigation. Figures from other states are based on family type when abuse occurred  
<sup>a</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (1999)

partner. Of all child abuse, the biological parent is by far the most common perpetrator (63 per cent). Step parents and the parent's cohabiting partner are believed to be responsible for the child abuse in about 8 per cent of substantiated cases (AIHW 2003b) – a rate that matches the percentage of children in step families. In other words, while step and blended families have higher rates of child abuse than would be expected, step parents do not appear to have higher rates than would be expected given the number of children who live with a step parent.

It should be noted that of all fatal child maltreatment cases in Australia between 1989-92, the stereotypical offender was a young male living in a de facto relationship with the victim's mother (Strang 1995). This fact, however, should not be generalised to all forms of child maltreatment.

#### *Is mental health of children poorer?*

The child and adolescent component of the 1997 Australian National Mental Health Survey found

**Table 5.6** Mental disorder of children and adolescents (aged 6-17) by family type

| DISORDER            | Family Type |                |               |
|---------------------|-------------|----------------|---------------|
|                     | Intact %    | Step/Blended % | Lone parent % |
| <b>Males</b>        |             |                |               |
| Depressive Disorder | 3.2         | 6.6            | 6.1           |
| Conduct Disorder    | 3.0         | 9.4            | 7.3           |
| ADHD                | 13.2        | 21.6           | 20.6          |
| <b>Females</b>      |             |                |               |
| Depressive Disorder | 2.0         | 5.1            | 8.7           |
| Conduct Disorder    | 1.3         | 3.1            | 1.6           |
| ADHD                | 5.6         | 11.8           | 9.6           |

*Source:* Child and Adolescent Component of the National Survey of Mental Health and Well-being (Sawyer, M. G., F. M. Arney, et al. 2000).  
*Note:* These figures are based primarily on responses by parents about symptoms of their children using the Diagnostic Interview Schedule for Children, Version IV (Shaffer et al., 2000)

that children and adolescents in step and blended families have a higher incidence of a range of common mental health disorders than those in intact families (Table 5.6).

Overall, both male and female children in blended and step families had a rate of the three disorders (depression, conduct disorder and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) that was at least twice as high as that among children and adolescents in intact families. For example:

- 6.6 per cent of boys in step/blended families had a depressive disorder compared to 3.2 per cent of boys in intact families.
- 9.4 per cent of boys in step or blended families had evidence of a conduct disorder compared to 3 per cent of boys in intact families.
- 21.6 per cent of boys from step or blended families were diagnosed as having ADHD compared to 13.2 per cent of those from intact families.
- 5.1 per cent of girls in step or blended families had a depressive disorder compared to 2 per cent of girls in intact families.
- 11.8 per cent of girls in step or blended families were diagnosed with ADHD compared to 5.5 per cent of girls from intact families.
- Children in lone parent families generally had disorder rates similar to those in step/blended families.

### Endnote

- 1 A step child is a natural or adopted child of only one partner in a marriage or de facto relationship, within the primary family in a household (ABS 2001d).

### Highlights

- Ten per cent of couple families with children under the age of 18 are step or blended families.
- Almost as many families with a child under 18 are step or blended as are lone parent families with a child under 18 (10.7 per cent).
- 5.6 per cent of children under the age of 18 are step children.
- The couple in a step or blended family frequently cohabits rather than marries.
- Children in step or blended families mainly live with their mother.
- A relatively low percentage of children in step or blended families receive child support (around one in five compared to one in two in lone parent families).
- Financially, step or blended families are better off than lone parent families.
- Rates of substantiated child abuse are higher than expected in step or blended families but there is no evidence that this is due to step parents.
- Detected rates of various mental disorders are at least twice as high among children in step or blended families than in intact families.