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The number of children living in stepfamilies is increasing. Most of these children have another parent (usually the father) who is not resident in the household but with whom they have some contact. Children's views of the frequency of this contact, and the quality of father-child and other family relationships, were explored in a recent UK study.



Relationships of children in stepfamilies with their non-resident fathers

Unlike the historical past when stepfamilies most often came about following the death of a parent, most stepfamilies nowadays are formed following the end of a marriage or cohabiting relationship as a result of separation or divorce (Schultz, Schultz and Olson 1991). At the same time, stepfamilies are becoming an increasingly common family form, and in the United Kingdom have been described as “the fastest growing family form in the last few decades” (Ferri and Smith 2003: 126).

This increase in stepfamilies can be tracked by a comparison of the national birth cohorts. For example, at age 30 years, 17 per cent of the men born in 1970 were stepfathers, compared with 9 per cent of those born just 12 years earlier (Ferri and Smith 2003). After parental separation or divorce, children typically live mainly with their mother – a situation that tends to apply regardless of whether or not either parent repartners. Thus, in most cases, children whose principal residence includes a stepparent are living mainly with their mother and stepfather (in

“stepfather families”) and have a non-resident father. Such families form the focus of this article.

While “father absence” after divorce continues to receive much attention (Blankenhorn 1995; Horn and Sylvester 2002), there is evidence from Australian research that the majority of children continue to have some contact with their non-resident parent (Smyth 2002). Furthermore, two recent reviews suggest that the frequency of face-to-face contact between children and their non-resident parent is increasing (Amato and Gilbreth 1999; Pryor and Rodgers 2001).

Much of the research on parenting by non-resident fathers has tended to focus on structural variables, such as the frequency or type of contact, or whether the parent provides financial support for the child, and until recently little attention has been given to the qualitative aspects of parenting by non-resident fathers. However, recent reviews have concluded that the quality of contact, and the nature and quality of relationships, are more important for children's wellbeing than structural



variables such as the amount of contact (Amato and Gilbreth 1999; Smyth 2002).

At the same time, it has also been noted that there is little good information on some of the “structural” aspects of contact arrangements, such as whether children stay overnight with their (normally) non-resident father, or only have contact of short duration during the daytime (Smyth 2002). As Smyth points out, the failure to make these distinctions could result in inaccurate assumptions about the overall amount of contact the children have with their non-resident father and its implications for children’s wellbeing.

While non-resident fathers are expected to play a continuing role in parenting their children, expectations of resident stepfathers are less clear (Cherlin and Furstenberg 1994). Members of new stepfamilies thus need to negotiate their roles and relations with respect to each other, while at the same time considering aspects of their relationship with the non-resident father. As Santrock, Warshak and Meadows (1981: 145) comment: “Remarried

families are families in transition. Remarriage represents just one event in a long sequence of events that follow in the wake of family disruption.”

In some respects, living in a stepfamily tends to be more complex for children than living in a lone-parent family. Stepfamily formation represents another “event” for children, who were most probably not involved in the decision made by their parents to separate any more than they were party to the decision of their parent to re-partner. Furthermore, several researchers have noted that relationships between stepparents and children are often difficult and that mother-child relationships tend to be poorer in stepfather families than in lone-mother families, particularly in the early years of the stepfamily (Hetherington 1993; Bray and Berger 1993; Bray 1999; Fine and Kurdek 1995; Acock and Demo 1994). Thus, at the same time as the stepfamily household is learning to become a functioning family unit, the relationship between children and their non-resident parents (typically their fathers) continues, although it may change.

Fathers who had good relationships with their children before separation are likely to endeavour to maintain such relationships after separation.

What is the nature and pattern of contact between children in stepfather families and their non-resident fathers, and what do children feel about this? Is contact associated with the quality of the relationship with their father? Is this relationship linked with the quality of relationships within the stepfather family household?

Evidence on the associations of relationships both within and outside the stepfamily is complicated and sometimes contradictory but indicates that the quality of relationships is important for the child, and for the good functioning of the stepfamily. For example, research by Furstenberg and Spanier (1984) suggested that the quality of relationships with non-resident fathers was inversely associated with the quality of relationship with stepfathers and vice versa, so that those who had the best relationships with their fathers had the most difficult relationships with their stepfathers.



This is consistent with clinical accounts that have suggested that children who have strong bonds with their biological non-resident father may feel that forming a bond with a stepfather would be disloyal to their biological father. They may consequently ignore or distance themselves from their stepfather. However, others investigating adolescent stepchildren have found little correlation between the quality of adolescents' relationships with non-resident fathers and stepfathers (Buchanan, Maccoby and Dornbusch 1996; White and Gilbreth 2001).

Independently of children's relationships with non-resident fathers, research has suggested that adult conflict continues to have a negative impact on children after divorce (Amato and Keith 1991). Thus it might be anticipated that a poor relationship between the child's biological parents might continue to have an impact on the child, despite the presence of a stepparent. It might also be suggested that if the child is caught up in the conflict between his or her parents, in these circumstances the child may be likely to have a better relationship with the stepparent, as someone independent of the conflict.

In a recent study of 184 new stepfamilies conducted in the United Kingdom, there was an opportunity to look in detail at the nature and type of contact that children living in stepfamilies had with their non-resident fathers, and to investigate the association this had with the quality of relationships with their non-resident fathers and other family members.

This paper addresses three related aspects of the research. It describes children's reports of the contact they had with their non-resident fathers, and their feelings about contact. Next, it describes the association between structural aspects of contact and the quality of children's relationships with their non-resident fathers, based on children's reports. Third, the associations between the quality of relationships with their non-resident fathers, and those with and between mothers and stepfathers are described.

The results presented are based mainly on children's accounts of contact and their feelings about it, sometimes using children's own words. Where it is relevant either for comparison or validation, information from mothers' or stepfathers' accounts has been included.

It is not proposed in this paper to describe findings on the association between contact and associated variables and outcomes for children, as these have been described elsewhere (Smith 2003). However, it is relevant to note that although structural aspects of contact were not found to be related to outcomes for children, some of the qualitative aspects of contact, and children's reports of their relationships with their non-resident fathers, were positively associated with children's wellbeing.

The UK study

The Study of Stepchildren and Step-parenting, conducted in the United Kingdom between 1998 and 2002, was a cross sectional investigation of a sample of stepfamilies that had been in existence for at least a year and not more than four years (extended from three years after the start of the study).

The families were identified by means of nearly 16,700 screening questionnaires, delivered to the parents or guardians of all children aged between seven and eleven years, via schools in three local education authority areas in and around London. Of these, nearly 10,000 (60 per cent) were completed and returned. An investigation in one school revealed no differences in family type or the number of changes children had experienced between those who did and did not return the questionnaire.

Only 840 children (8.7 per cent of children whose parents completed the questionnaire) appeared to have been living in stepfamilies (involving cohabiting as well as married partnerships), with just over half of these (434 children in 368 families) living in "new" families – that is, families formed within the previous four years. Members of 184 of these new stepfamilies took part in the research. The families omitted from the study included families who could not be contacted, or who declined involvement, or were families who proved to be ineligible on contact.

Seven of the participating stepfamilies were stepmother families, but the large majority, 177 families, were stepfather families. In each of these families the resident mother was interviewed and, provided they agreed, so was the stepfather and up to two children aged between seven and eleven years.

This article is based on the sample of 172 interviewed children who were or had been living in a stepfather family within the previous four years. Of these children, 149 were currently in stepfamilies, and 23 had been, but had also experienced the separation of their mother and new stepfather.

Interviews were conducted in the family home, separately, with different interviewers for each family member. The interviews were interviewer-led, and designed to obtain a mixture of qualitative and quantitative information. They covered a wide range of topics, which included for each participant changes that the children had experienced in the previous three–four years, the quality of relationships in the family, and the type and nature of contact between the child and the non-resident father.

Children were asked what they felt about contact with their father. More specifically, they were asked about the frequency of contact with him; where their meetings took place; whether they kept possessions at his house; his current situation; and their contact with his new partner or children. The nature of the father's parenting was also explored from the child's point of view, in relation to the "ethos" of the contact; whether they felt that they were treated normally by their parent, or spoiled; and whether they viewed their non-resident father in the same way as before the separation.

The quality of children's relationships with their mother, non-resident father and stepfather was assessed in two ways. For each of these people, children were asked about specific aspects of the relationship. For example, in relation to their non-resident father they were asked about what sort of person he was; how they got on with him; whether they enjoyed being with him; whether they confided in him; and the extent to which there was any physical contact – such as hugging. In addition, they were asked what they would change about him, or what made them angry with him. From these questions, a number of specific dimensions (such as warmth, enjoyment of company, physical contact, as well as criticism and hostility) were coded.

Main findings

The present analysis focuses primarily on the reports of children. The first sets of results outline children's accounts of contact patterns (such as frequency, whether contact involved overnight stays, and the types of activities that occurred during contact visits), and the extent to which such accounts accord with those provided by their mothers. Children's opinions about the frequency of contact they have, the extent to which they enjoyed such occasions, and their relationship with their father are then described. Next, attention is directed to links between the apparent quality of the father–child relationships and structural aspects of contact. This is followed by an analysis of children's views of their stepfather. Finally,

the strength of links between the apparent quality of father–child relationships and other relationships (mother–child, stepfather–child, mother–father and mother–stepfather) are examined.

Children's accounts of contact with their non-resident fathers

Fathers of four of the 172 children had died. Of those with living fathers, 131 children (78.0 per cent) reported that they knew their fathers, and 113 (67.3 per cent) had had contact with them in the previous year. Of the rest, 16 children (9.5 per cent) had only a vague memory of their fathers, and 21 (12.5 per cent) did not know their fathers at all. Only children who reported that they had had contact with their fathers in the previous year (65.7 per cent of the sample) were asked further questions about contact and their relationship with their father.

Children's accounts of the frequency of contact they had with their fathers are shown in Table 1. Nearly half the children who had had contact with their fathers reported at least weekly contact, and nearly three-quarters had at least monthly meetings. For the rest, contact occurred less than once a month. Five children had only had a single meeting in the past year, and two who had only had telephone contact. Fathers who lived nearer (within the immediate neighbourhood according to mothers' accounts) were more likely to have more frequent contact than those who lived further away.

Children were also asked about the pattern of contact. Table 2 shows the types of contact children reported with their fathers in the previous year. Nearly four-fifths of children (79.6 per cent) who had contact with their fathers had stayed overnight at some point in the past year, but relatively few had done so during term time weeks. Children most

Table 1 Frequency of contact with non-resident fathers in the previous 12 months (children's accounts) (N=113)

Contact	N	%
Every few days (at least weekly)	55	48.7
At least monthly	27	23.9
More than six	11	9.7
Fewer than six	13	11.5
Once	5	4.4
Telephone contact only	2	1.8
Total		100

Note: For those who reported contact in previous year (65.7 per cent of sample).

Table 2 Types of contact visits children had with their non-resident fathers

Contact	N	%
Day visits	81	73.0
Overnight stays during (term) week	25	22.5
Overnight stays during (term) weekends	71	64.0
Overnight stays during holidays	82	75.2
Longer (than 2 night) stays during holidays	67	65.7
Holidays away with father	35	36.8

Notes: For those who reported contact in previous year (65.7 per cent of sample). Percentages do not sum to 100, as children could have had several different types of contact visit.

often stayed either at weekends and/or during the holidays. Over one-third of children reported going on holiday with their fathers.

Although eight children met their fathers in the stepfamily home, for nearly three-quarters of children (73.9 per cent), contact was normally at their father's home. This did not appear to depend on the geographical distance between the stepfamily's and father's home.

Children who stayed overnight with their father on any occasion were asked if they had any possessions of their own in the father's home. Just over one-third of children (37.3 per cent) reported that they kept utility items (such as tooth brushes, or Wellington boots) there, and the same group of children also kept some clothes there. Half the children who stayed overnight had some toys, books or computer games of their own there, and a small group of six children had a pet which they considered to be theirs at their father's house. However, nearly half the children who stayed overnight (46.7 per cent) kept nothing at their father's house, and always took everything with them when they stayed.

Where the father had a new partner (69.9 per cent), or new children (23.0 per cent), or new stepchildren (7.9 per cent), contact with the father normally involved contact with these people, if not on every occasion, then at least sometimes. There were only two children who never met their father's new children when they met him.

Neither age nor the gender of the child appeared to be associated with types or patterns of contact.

Mothers' accounts of contact

Children's accounts of the frequency and pattern of contact were generally very consistent with mothers' accounts (based on slightly different questions). There was 92.9 per cent agreement on whether there had been any contact in the previous year. According to mothers, of the 100 children who had been in direct contact with their fathers two months prior to interview, the number of days of contact ranged from 1 to 56, with a median of 8.0 days. The number of separate visits ranged from 1 to 40, with a median of 4.5.

Mothers' contacts with their ex-partners paralleled children's, so that non-resident fathers who had had no contact with their children, also had no contact with their ex-partner. For most mothers, contact with the non-resident father had only been in relation to contact with the child, although one in ten mothers had had additional meetings with their ex-partners.

Children's views about contact

Children who had not seen their fathers in the previous year (32.0 per cent of the sample) were asked about their feelings for them and whether they would have liked contact. Of these, 36.1 per cent said that they had no desire for contact with their fathers, 25.5 per cent would definitely have liked some contact, and 19.1 per cent had mixed feelings (and some children felt unable to answer the question and said they

did not know). Two children would have liked contact, but only in the future.

One seven-year-old girl, who said that "sometimes" she felt she would like to see her father, said:

"I feel like if I don't get to see him when I'm older, I'm just going to have to go without."

When she was asked how that made her feel, she said:

"Sad. Sometimes I feel sad, because he's my real father and I wanted him."

The largest group of children who had not had any recent contact with their fathers, reported having no feelings for them (48.6 per cent), but 18.9 per cent of children reported warm or positive feelings for their fathers (one said, "He's still my Dad, and I still love him"). A small number of children (six children in each case) reported either angry or mixed feelings towards their fathers.



Of those children who had had some contact with their fathers in the previous year, over two-thirds of children (68.8 per cent) reported that they definitely enjoyed contact with their father, and a further 17 per cent gave a qualified positive response. A small number either had mixed feelings about contact (9.8 per cent) or negative views (4.5 per cent). In terms of how much contact children would have liked, the largest group (41.0 per cent) felt that their amount of contact was about right, but over one-third (36.1 per cent) would definitely have liked more contact, and 18.1 per cent gave a qualified positive response to more contact. Two children would have liked less contact, and two would have liked no contact.

On the whole, children who had frequent, face-to-face contact were most likely to think that these arrangements were about right (80 per cent did so, although one would have liked less contact) while nearly half of those who had less frequent or irregular contact would have liked more (47.8 per cent).

Children who had at least weekly contact with their fathers were significantly more likely than

other children to have a positive view of contact. They were also significantly more likely than the other children to say that they enjoyed spending time with their fathers – 85.7 per cent of those who had weekly contact reported this, compared with less than half (46.9 per cent) of those who had less frequent contact – and to express high warmth towards their fathers (53.6 per cent compared with 33.9 per cent).

Children were asked what sort of things they did when they visited their fathers. About half the children (50.6 per cent) described doing “ordinary things”, while nearly another one-third (30.1 per cent) described activities during the contact visits as “normal, but nice”. The remaining 19.2 per cent of children described visits that were characterised by treats and special activities. Although the numbers were small, children who described only infrequent contact with their fathers were more than three times as likely as those who had more frequent contact to

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describe the visits as characterised by treats and special activities (37.5 per cent compared with 11.9 per cent). However, there was no association between the frequency of contact and whether the child perceived that they were spoilt by their father.

Some children described specific problems in relation to visits to their father, or problems about the attitude to contact from within their current household. For a small number of children the presence of a new partner or of new children was a problem.

One boy said of his father and his father's new partner:

“They’ve no kids yet, but he will do though. My step-mother is really pushy, she really wants a child. I know it’s mean for me to say I don’t want a child, but I don’t like [stepmother] at all. She’s mean, so I wouldn’t really like the child either, ‘cos it represents her and Dad, and I don’t really like that.”

A girl said of her father's new child:

“Dad should think more of me than the baby.”

Quality of children's relationships with their fathers

More than three-quarters of children who were asked the question (78.4 per cent) reported that they viewed their father in the same way as they had done prior to the separation, but one-fifth (21.6 per cent) said that they viewed their father in a different way now. Only one child said that she viewed her father as more of a friend than a parent.

Another child, who was fairly critical of his father, said:

“Dad is like a stepdad now because he doesn’t do much with me like a real Dad.”

At another point this boy said:

“I don’t really like seeing Dad because he lets me do what I want. He’s got no control of me. He doesn’t play with me. He mostly watches TV, so I go to the caravan.”

Children who had frequent (at least monthly) contact with their fathers were more likely than those who met infrequently to consider their relationship with their father unchanged (87.3 per cent compared with 52.6 per cent).

Table 3 shows interviewers' ratings of the overall quality of the children's relationships with their fathers, based on children's accounts. Nearly three-quarters of children (72.4 per cent) were rated as having good or very good relationships with their fathers, but over one-quarter described some significant problems in their relationship – such as feeling left out of their father's current life and that he no longer had the time for them, or that they could no longer talk to their father and were not as close to their father as they had been).

Relationship quality and contact

In addition to the associations noted above between aspects of contact and children's views about it, the association between the quality of the father-child relationships and structural aspects of contact was explored. For these analyses, relationships were treated as “good” (those rated very good or good) or “poor” (mixed/ambivalent, poor distant or reserved, and poor/absent).

Children who had frequent (at least monthly) contact were more than twice as likely as those who met infrequently to have good relationships with their fathers (84.1 per cent compared with 40.0 per cent). Similarly, children who stayed overnight at the father's place were considerably more likely to have good relationships than those who did not (83.1 per cent compared with 30.4 per cent).

Since overnight stays were more common for those who had frequent contact with their fathers, this analysis was repeated within the group of children who had frequent contact (72.6 per cent). Although the strength of the association was reduced, it remained significant. On the other hand, for those who stayed overnight, there was no significant association between the quality of their relationship with their father, and whether they

kept possessions in his home. Nor was there any association between the quality of the relationship and the father's current situation, in terms of whether he had a new partner or new children.

Stepfathers and contact with the non-resident father – children's views

The majority of children also described good relationships with their stepfather, although nearly one in ten relationships was rated as very poor (Table 3). For 20 children, difficulties at home in relation to their contact with their fathers were a significant problem in their relationship with their stepfather.

In a statement that also demonstrates the difficulties of terminology within stepfamilies, one child said:

"I can't talk to Mum about my other Dad [non-resident father]. Dad [stepfather] gets jealous. I can't say anything. He'd shout."

Table 3 Quality of relationships between children and their non-resident fathers, and with stepfathers (interviewer ratings based on children's accounts)

	Fathers		Stepfathers	
	N	%	N	%
Very good	34	30.4	22	14.5
Good	47	42.0	73	48.0
Ambivalent or mixed	17	15.2	35	23.0
Poor – distant or reserved	11	9.8	9	5.9
Very poor or absent	3	2.7	13	8.5

Table 4 Associations between the qualities of relationships (children's accounts)

	Relationship with non-resident father			
	Good		Poor	
	N	%	N	%
Relationship with mother (N=112)				
Very good	44	(81)	10	(18)
Good	32	(68)	15	(32)
Poor	5	(45)	6	(54)
	(X ² =6.6, df=2, p=0.04)			
Relationship with stepfather (N=99)				
Good	51	(70)	22	(30)
Poor	12	(46)	14	(54)
	(X ² =4.7, df=1, p=0.03)			
Relationship between mother and non-resident father (N=106)				
Good	32	(94)	2	(6)
Okay	25	(78)	7	(22)
Poor	21	(52)	19	(47)
	(X ² =16.0, df=2, p<0.001)			
Relationship between mother and stepfather (N=74)*				
Good	20	(83)	4	(17)
Okay	30	(83)	6	(17)
Poor	6	(43)	8	(57)
	X ² =10.1, df=2, p=0.006			

*Not included in early interviews

Another child described how he went out to the telephone box to speak to his father, because "otherwise [stepfather] will moan about Dad's number on the phone bill".

It should be noted that stepfathers were rather more likely than children or mothers to see children's contact with their fathers as problematical. Nearly one-third of stepfathers (30.7 per cent) felt that, overall, the effects on the child of contact with their biological father were negative. One in five stepfathers (20.8 per cent) felt that contact between the child and their father weakened the stepfather's authority in the household, and a smaller number (16.7 per cent) felt that it disrupted their relationship with their stepchild.

Associated relationships of family members

The associations between the quality of the children's relationships with their non-resident fathers, their mothers and their stepfathers were investigated, based on children's reports. Table 4 shows the results of these analyses.

For all combinations there were positive associations indicating quite strong concordances between relationships. If a child described a positive relationship with their father they were also more likely than other children to describe their relationship with their mother and stepfather as positive, and also to perceive that the quality of the mother/stepfather and mother/non-resident father relationship was positive, and vice versa. For example, only about one-quarter (26.9 per cent) of children with a good relationship with their father reported their mother as having a poor relationship with him, while the majority (70.3 per cent) of those who had a poor relationship with their father also reported that the relationship between their mother and father was poor.

Discussion and conclusions

The Study of Stepchildren and Step-parenting is unusual in that it focused on stepfamilies at a particular stage in their existence. In choosing to take the child's perspective, it is recognised that in many cases children are the best informants on issues relating to their non-resident fathers, since they are usually the ones who had the most, and the most direct, contact with them. At the same time, it is a limitation of the study that the non-resident fathers were not involved, so that their perspectives are not represented.

In terms of the qualities of relationships with their fathers, the results suggest that the frequency of contact is strongly associated with children's positive views about contact, as well as the quality of the father-child relationship, although staying overnight was also associated with good quality relationships. More frequent (at least monthly) contact was also associated with the father continuing to behave in what children saw to be a normal way, rather than the relationship being characterised by special activities or treats. This is something that Simons (1996) has identified as being important for children's wellbeing after divorce.

It should be noted that the results refer to relationships that are not necessarily causal, and if there is a causal link the direction can not be determined.

Does a non-resident father have more contact with their child because they have a good relationship with them, or does the good relationship result from the higher degree of contact – or do both apply in an interactive way?

While the quality of the father–child relationships pre-separation is not known, it seems reasonable to suggest that fathers who had good relationships with their children before separation would be particularly likely to endeavour to maintain such relationships after separation. Thus the relationship before separation may determine the frequency and pattern of contact after separation, and may be more important than frequency of current contact in shaping the quality of children's subsequent relationships with their fathers.

Contrary to some other research (Wallerstein and Kelly 1980; Furstenberg and Spanier 1984), there was no evidence that having a good relationship with the non-resident father precluded children from having a good relationship with the stepfather. In fact, the results of this study suggest the opposite, according to children's perspectives. For a stepchild, having a good relationship with their father was associated with having a good relationship with their stepfather, and vice versa. There was also a strong positive link between the quality of father–child and mother–child relationships, and between father–child relationships on the one hand, and mothers' relationships with both father and stepfather on the other.

These results might suggest that the quality of relationships as described by the child could be determined to a large extent by factors within the child, so that children who are generally positive about their relationship with one person are also likely to be positive about relationships with others. Child behaviour and wellbeing, while not the topic of this paper, are clearly relevant here, as children who are well adjusted and have a positive image of themselves will be more likely to form good relationships with those around them. Equally, those around them, such as stepfathers, will find it easier to make good relationships with amenable and well-adjusted children.

While the picture presented is generally positive, with the majority of children in new stepfamilies having quite high levels of contact with their non-resident fathers, and feeling positive about this, there was evidence that for some children in stepfamilies the presence of a stepfather created additional complications relating to contact with their non-resident fathers.

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Children who are well adjusted and have a positive image of themselves will be likely to form good relationships with those around them.

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