

Snapshot of couple families with stepparent–child relationships

Stepparent–child relationships that cross household boundaries, through the repartnering of a non-resident parent (typically the father) are rarely documented in statistics on family types. LIXIA QU and RUTH WESTON explore the prevalence these relationships within households and those that cross household boundaries.

Stepfamilies have been around for a long time, in fairytales as in real life. In the past, when almost all couples who were living together were married to each other and divorce was rare, most stepfamilies were created through a widowed parent marrying. Under these circumstances, the children and their stepparent typically lived in the same household – except where the children had left home, usually to find employment or to marry.

Nowadays, however, stepparent–child relationships (here called “step relationships”) are far more likely to be formed after parental separation caused by relationship breakdown than after widowhood. Where parents have repartnered after separation, step relationships often cross household boundaries (here called “non-resident” step relationships). Children in households headed by a single parent, and children living with a parent and stepparent, may have a parent living elsewhere who has repartnered. In other words, the children may have a “co-resident stepparent”, a “non-resident stepparent”, or both. In addition, one or both partners in couples without any co-resident children may have stepchildren living elsewhere.

Yet most statistics on family types, including those derived from censuses, focus exclusively on relationships within the confines of household boundaries. For instance, the Australian Bureau of Statistics defines a family as “two or more persons, one of whom is at least 15 years of age, who are related by blood, marriage (registered or de facto), adoption, step or fostering; and who are usually resident in the same household” (ABS 2004: 71). As McDonald (1995) notes, this “household family” is not only easily measured, but also represents the major purchasing unit in society, and is thus the image of family that is conveyed through marketing.

Using this definition of “family”, the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimated that in 2003 there were 176,700 families with at least one child under 18 years who was a stepchild to one of the parents in a couple family (ABS 2004). In total, such families accounted for 9 per cent of all couple families



with children of this age. Of these families with co-resident step relationships, 44 per cent also included co-resident children born of the couple relationship. (Such families are classified as “blended families” by the ABS.) Of course, the proportion of families that include co-resident step relationships would be slightly

higher if families with children of all ages were included.

The present snapshot of stepfamilies is based on data from wave 3 of the *Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey*, conducted in 2003. This panel survey is funded by the Australian Government, through the Department of Family and Community Services (see Watson 2005 for details).

The snapshot focuses mainly on couple families in which at least one of the partners has a co-resident or non-resident stepchild under 18 years old. As the Australian Bureau of Statistics points out, children under 18 years have not yet attained full adult rights and typically remain reliant in some ways on their parents or guardians (ABS 2004). The existence of step relationships was examined for each partner.

Table 1 shows the proportion of couple families with stepchildren aged under 18 years who either lived inside or outside these households. The two sets of statistics focus on separate scenarios. In the first scenario, couple families were living with at least one child aged under 18 years, who was the biological child of either one or both partners. The second scenario concerns couple families in which there are no children under 18 years old living in the household (that is, either there were no children in the household at all, or all children in the household were aged 18 years and over). Thus, in this second scenario, any stepchildren under 18 years were non-resident stepchildren.

The first set of statistics indicates that, of the couple families with at least one co-resident child under 18 years old in the household, the majority (87 per cent) had no step relationships either inside or outside the household. In total, 11 per cent included co-resident step relationships – that is, at least one of the children under 18 years residing in the household was a stepchild to one of the partners in the couple relationship. (This proportion is slightly higher than the 9 per cent apparent in the *Family Characteristics Survey* undertaken in 2003 (ABS 2004)). The 11 per cent includes families with co-resident step relationships only, families with both co-resident and non-resident stepparent–child relationships, and families in which the step relationship was not recognised as such.

In the families where the step relationship was not recognised as such, the respondent who provided information about relationships within the household either maintained that the children were not related to their biological parent’s partner or were being fostered by this partner. The couples in all such

DEFINITION

In this analysis, a stepparent–child relationship within a household was established on the basis of a matrix (developed in the HILDA interviews) of the nature of relationship between all household members. A non-resident stepparent–child relationship was established if either partner in a couple family had at least one child living with the other parent, or only one partner had children living outside the household, or any non-resident children of either partner were children born at least two years before the couple started living together. Multiple-family households, same-sex couples, and the few couple family households where neither partner participated in personal interviews have been excluded. These families accounted for 4 per cent of all couple families.

families (n = 30) were cohabiting rather than (legally) married. This is not surprising, given that it can take time for members of couples to see themselves as a “couple” and for each partner and the children to perceive the new partner as a stepparent. The timing of any such recognition (if it occurs at all) can vary for different household members and for kin.

The first set of statistics in Table 1 also shows that another 2 per cent of all the couple families with children aged under 18 in the household also had non-resident stepchildren of this age. That is, one or both partners had at least one non-resident child under 18 years old by a previous relationship. These families would be classified as “intact” if the definition of “family” is based on the nature of relationships that exist between people who usually live in the same household. Once again, one or both partners or children would not necessarily recognise the step relationship.

The second half of Table 1 focuses on couple families with no children under 18 in the household. These families either had no children at all in the household or had co-resident children (step or otherwise) who were at least 18 years old. For 3 per cent of these families, one or both partners in the couple had at least one non-resident child aged under 18 years from a previous relationship. The other partner, then, would have been a stepparent to these children.

Given that most children tend to live with their mother after parental separation (84 per cent in 2003) (ABS 2004), co-resident stepparents are most likely to be men and non-resident stepparents are most likely to be women. The prevalence of these different types of relationships involving stepchildren under the age of 18 years, is shown in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1 indicates that, among co-resident stepfamilies, 84 per cent had stepfathers only, 12 per cent had stepmothers only, and 4 per cent had both a stepfather and stepmother – that is, both partners had children from previous relationships living with them.

Figure 2, on the other hand, shows that, in 85 per cent of couple families with non-resident stepchildren under 18, the stepparent was the female partner. In 11 per cent of cases, the male partner was the stepparent, and in 4 per cent, both partners were stepparents. That the proportion of non-resident step relationships involving stepmothers is virtually the same as the proportion of co-resident step relationships involving stepfathers is to be expected in any sample that is representative of the population.

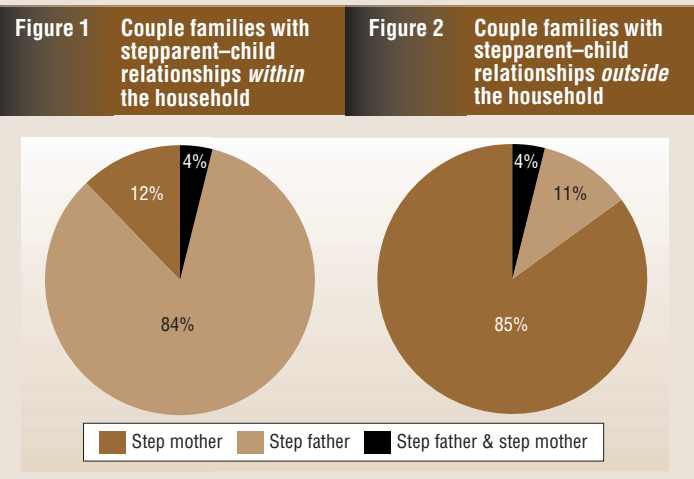
While the focus of this snapshot is on step relationships involving co-resident and non-resident children aged under 18 years, it is worth noting that 12 per cent of all couple families in the HILDA survey 2003 had only adult stepchildren. In almost all cases (97 per cent), the stepchildren were living elsewhere, with some having established their own household. It is likely that, in some cases, the step relationship encouraged stepchildren to leave home prematurely. According to Young (1987), adult children who are living with a stepparent are more likely than those living in intact families to leave home relatively early in life.

This snapshot highlights the complicated stepparent–child arrangements that exist today as a result of the changing pathways to stepfamily formation. While the discussion has focused on couple families only, it is important to note that non-resident stepchildren of one partner may be living in a family headed by an unpartnered parent (typically called “sole-parent” “single-parent” or “lone-parent” families).

In summary, with the changing pathways to stepfamilies, the proportion of families involving children who live with one biological parent and his or her new partner is no longer a

Couple families with children aged 0-17 years in the household	%
No stepchildren (<18 yrs) either in or outside household	87.0
Stepparent to non-resident children (<18 years) only	1.9
Stepparent to co-resident children (<18 years) only	7.1
Stepparent to both co-resident & non-resident children (<18 years)	2.8
Unacknowledged co-resident stepparent to children (<18 years)	1.1
Total	100.0
Number of families	1815
Couple families without children aged 0-17 years in the household	
No non-resident stepchildren (<18 years)	96.8
Stepparent to non-resident children (<18 years)	3.2
Total	100.0
Number of families	2178

Source: HILDA wave 3 (2003). Percentages are based on weighted data.



reasonably accurate indicator of the prevalence of stepparent–child relationships.

Stepparent–child relationships are more likely than in the past to cross households. While much is yet to be learned about the challenges facing these two types of step relationships (“co-resident” and “non-resident”) and the roles and responsibilities that members of the family define for themselves and the other members, it is noteworthy that couples in which one partner is a stepparent to one or more children in the household are more likely to separate than couples in “intact families” (see review by Coleman, Ganong & Fine 2000).

Given that HILDA is a longitudinal study, it will be possible to examine the quality and stability of relationships involving different types of stepparenting.

References

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