The challenges facing children in step families

What we know, don't know, and how to fill in the gaps

LINDSAY MITCHELL, JUNE 2020

FAMILY FIRST NEW ZEALAND
WHANAU TAHI AOTEAROA

About the author

LINDSAY MITCHELL has been researching and commenting on welfare since 2001. Many of her articles have been published in mainstream media and she has appeared on radio, television and before select committees discussing issues relating to welfare.

In 2009 her paper, *Māori and Welfare*, was published by the *New Zealand Business Roundtable*. She mentored beneficiary families during the 2000s and more recently worked as a volunteer at Rimutaka prison teaching English as a second language.

She has also kept a blog since 2005 and counts herself as a rarity in blog survival rates. When she isn't writing and researching, Lindsay paints and exhibits, specialising in Māori portraiture.

Lindsay has written four previous reports for Family First NZ - *Child Poverty & Family Structure: What is the evidence telling us?* and *Child Abuse & Family Structure: What is the evidence telling us?* were published in 2016, *Imprisonment & Family Structure: What is the evidence telling us?* was published in 2018, and *Families: Ever Fewer, Or No Children: How worried should we be?* was published in 2019.

About Family First NZ

Family First NZ is a charitable organisation formed in 2006, and registered as a charity with the Charities Commission. Its purposes and aims are:

- to promote and advance research and policy regarding family and marriage
- to participate in social analysis and debate surrounding issues relating to and affecting the family
- to educate the public in their understanding of the institutional, legal and moral framework that makes a just and democratic society possible
- to produce and publish relevant and stimulating material in newspapers, magazines, and other media relating to issues affecting families
- to speak up about issues relating to families that are in the public domain

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tel: 09 261 2426

fax: 09 261 2520

email: admin@familyfirst.org.nz

web: www.familyfirst.nz

post: PO Box 276-133, Manukau City 2241, New Zealand

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Executive Summary

Many children's lives today are marked by family turmoil. They live with parents who experience multiple relationship transitions leading to fractured family and friend networks, changes of neighbourhoods and schools. These children live with loss and torn loyalties which may affect them into adulthood. Yet, surprisingly little is known about the nature and parameters of the problem in New Zealand.

Statistics New Zealand estimates 9.3 percent of children live in stepfamilies at any given time while one in five children experience being in a stepfamily by age 17.

The aetiology of stepfamilies has changed. Whereas early last century stepfamilies generally formed through remarriage after the death of a spouse, today cohabitation or marriage dissolution, or an early unintended birth to a single mother and later partnering, are more likely pathways. Rates of multi partner fertility (MPF) – men and women having children with more than one partner - are increasing internationally.

Stepfamilies are becoming more prevalent. One in 10 children born after 1970 had lived in a blended family before they turned five, compared with one in 20 children born before 1970.

The number of parental relationship transitions that children in stepfamilies experience varies significantly. The Christchurch Health and Development Longitudinal Study reported that nearly one in five children had experienced three or more family transitions by the age of nine. The more recent Growing Up in New Zealand data showed 17 percent of mothers experienced 1-4 relationship transitions before their child turned five.

Stepfamilies are less stable than first families. In the Christchurch cohort, stepfamily life ended within five years for 40 percent of children who were under ten years old when the stepfamily had formed.

There are nevertheless real advantages for sole and/or separated parents who re-partner. From the adult's perspective, the desire for an intimate, adult relationship is fulfilled. From the child's viewpoint, there are now two adults potentially available to share parenting, and two adult earners in the household improving living standards.

But stepchildren face numerous challenges when parents re-partner. Step-sibling conflict, losing the attention of the biological parent to a new partner, constantly moving between two homes, not being consulted or informed about change, the loss of hope that biological parents would reconcile, conflict of loyalty to biological and stepparent, and rebellion against stepparent control are all physical and emotional problems experienced by children in these families.

On average stepfamily children do less well than those in either first-marriage families or stable lone-parent families. They experience poorer educational outcomes and higher risk of poverty. They are subject to higher incidence of depression, physical maltreatment and sexual abuse. They are more likely to leave home early, experience instability in their own relationships and their risks of offending and incarceration are greater.

Most stepchildren do however manage the challenges. If new parental relationships survive, stepparents can provide important resources for children's development and emotional well-being especially if the child retains a strong relationship with the non-resident biological parent (most often the father). The quality of the parental relationship is as important as the quality of the adult-child relationship.

Some stepchildren experience minimal transitions and relative stability. The greater the number of transitions experienced, the worse the child outcomes tend to be.

Evidence about variation in child outcomes dependent on whether the family features a stepfather or

stepmother (significantly less common) is mixed. Some points to stepmother families more often resembling original two parent families, while other evidence finds stepmother families are particularly risky for boys.

While children adjust better to stepparents at younger ages, they also suffer more when bonds are broken with biological parents during the very early formative years. Forming stepfamilies with adolescent children is especially problematic. Boys appear more adversely affected by divorce whereas girls are more negatively affected by remarriage.

Evidence as to whether outcomes are dependent on the marital status of the biological and stepparent is also mixed, with variability across ethnicity, though it appears the greater stability and longevity of marriage over cohabitation adds to child stability and security.

Some scholars argue that the increased risks associated with living in a stepfamily arise from factors that were present prior to the formation of the stepfamily. People who have difficulty in establishing and maintaining relationships carry traits that 'select' them into sole parenthood or multiple relationships. These characteristics can be passed on to their children genetically or through poor parenting. Other studies however find significant differences between children with divorced and children with continuously married parents even after controlling for personality traits such as depression and antisocial behaviour in parents.

Looking to the future, family complexity, especially among the disadvantaged and more poorly educated, will persist if MPF rates continue to increase. However, some factors associated with this phenomenon, for example the declining teen birth rate, may give rise to optimism that family disruption could decrease.

Returning to the present though, New Zealand has no hard data on MPF or its close corollary, stepfamilies and to this end, four recommendations are made about how to collect this data using existing surveys and longitudinal studies in order to substantially improve our knowledge.

Understanding what is driving children's wellbeing (or otherwise) is fundamental to any country's future. If there are shortfalls that can be made up, or circumstances that can be avoided, we can only go forward from a position of knowledge.

Introduction

Increasingly children live with parents who experience multiple relationship transitions leading to fractured family and friend networks, changes of neighbourhood and schools. These children live with loss, conflicted loyalties and deprivation of parental resources which may affect them into adulthood. Surprisingly little is known about the nature and parameters of the problem in New Zealand. In an attempt to fill the gaps this paper draws on overseas research as well as limited local research.

The first half of the paper focuses on definitions and data; the second, on evidence about the experience of and effects on children of living in stepfamilies.

In conclusion, recommendations are made to the government for collecting New Zealand data in ways consistent with similar countries.

DEFINITION OF STEPFAMILY

The origin of 'stepchild' is the Old English word 'steopcild' meaning orphan.[1] In the past an orphan became a stepchild through the remarriage of his or her surviving parent. The status of the stepchild was recognised through legal adoption. Consequently, some researchers continue to confine the use of the term 'step' families to married parents saving the term 'blended' families for cohabiting couples. That practise is not commonplace though.

Today the definition of a stepfamily is neither static nor straightforward. In New Zealand:

> "Statistics NZ defines stepfamilies as a 'couple family' usually residing in the same household with at least one child who is the biological or adopted child of one partner but not the other. Blended stepfamilies are those in which there is at least one child of only one member of the couple (stepchild) and one child of both members of the couple. Non-blended stepfamilies contain only stepchildren (Statistics NZ, 2009)."[2]

No mention is made of the relationship status of the 'couple'.

Taking a different tack, in *Patterns of Family Formation and Change in New Zealand (2004)* demographers stated a preference for the term 'blended' over 'step' family but noted that, "…usage of the term is not consistent in the literature." Nevertheless, "…we define a blended family as one where a woman has a second or subsequent partner and co-residing children either of her own from a previous union (or unions) or of her partner from a previous union (or unions), or where both partners have children from previous unions. This definition encompasses families where a woman has not only entered into a second or subsequent partnership, but where we also have evidence of co-resident stepchildren. If the blended family includes children from previous unions of both partners, we denote this as a full-blended family; if it includes children from a previous union (or unions) of one partner only, then we denote it as a partial-blended family. This is regardless of whether or not the woman and her partner together have their own biological children."[3]

Adding to the confusion, Patricia L. Papernow of the US Institute for Stepfamily Education introduces two more concepts: "Stepfamilies take many forms: only one adult may bring children ("simple" stepfamily). Both adults may bring children ("complex" stepfamily). Adult stepcouples may be married or (increasingly) unmarried cohabiting. Previous parenting relationships may have ended with divorce, death, or, in the case of unmarried cohabiting partners, neither."[4]

> *The popularity of "step-" as a combining form is now so well-established that you might even hear of a "stepcat" or "stepdog" - pets that come with one's new wife or husband, or belong to one's stepmom, stepdad or stepsibling.*
>
> Deseret News, Utah

The plot thickens further though. *Diverse Families*, a New Zealand Encyclopedia article, states, "Some couples jointly parent children from previous relationships. But some new partners are not involved in parenting – these households have been referred to as 'recombined' rather than 'blended' families."[5]

From the Australian Bureau of Statistics:

> "Step families are those formed when parents re-partner following separation or death of their partner and there is at least one step child aged 0-17 years of either member of the couple, but no natural or adopted child aged 0-17 years from the couple.
>
> A blended family contains at least one step child aged 0-17 years but also at least one natural or adopted child aged 0-17 years of both parents."[6]

While the conciseness appeals, the definition omits stepfamilies that aren't re-partnerships. For instance, a stepfather family formed after an earlier lone birth to the mother, or a first family same-sex couple.

> *"Biological families have family trees. Stepfamilies have family forests."*
>
> Stepfamilies Australia

Last but not least, with legal application to the problem of definition, the New Zealand Law Commission in 2017 determined that, "Stepfamily means a couple with children where at least one of the adults is not the biological or adoptive parent of one or more of the children. Stepfamilies include couples who are married, in a civil union or in a de facto relationship. Stepfamilies also include blended families, which is a stepfamily where, in addition to stepchildren, at least one child is the biological or adopted child of both partners."[7]

This broadens the definition enough to capture most permutations.

The above definitions alert to not only the complexity of today's families, but also the variation in research methodology employed in gathering data, some of which is featured in this paper.

STATISTICAL PREVALENCE OF STEPFAMILIES

Information about the prevalence of stepfamilies in New Zealand has been gathered from surveys and longitudinal studies but there are many significant and surprising gaps in our knowledge of family forms.[8] Unlike Australia, the UK and the US, New Zealand does not count stepfamilies in the five-yearly census of population and dwellings. In 2020, Statistics New Zealand (SNZ) confirmed that, "…there is no data for stepfamilies from the 2018 Census."[9]

Point-in-time prevalence

In 2016 however, SNZ analysed data from their Survey of Family, Income, and Employment (SoFIE), a longitudinal survey conducted from 2002–2011 which included over 22,000 New Zealanders (approximately 11,500 households). They found that **9.3 percent** of children were living in a stepfamily (married and cohabiting couples)[10] at the final wave of data collection, which approximated international stepfamily prevalence rates such as 9.0 percent of dependent children living in stepfamilies in England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2014), and 7.0 percent of all families with children aged 0 to 17 reported as stepfamilies in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011).[11]

The most recently published child data (2009) from the United States Census Bureau reports; "10 percent (5.3 million) lived with a biological parent and a stepparent, usually with a biological mother and a stepfather (4.1 million)."[12]

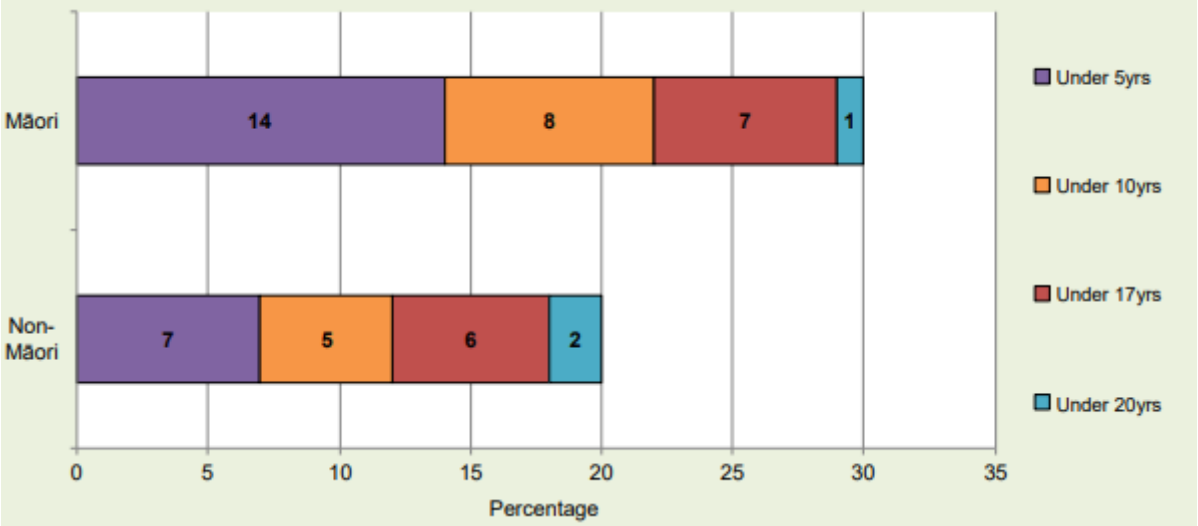
A point-in-time 2007 Roy Mackenzie Centre for the Study of Families survey also found that approximately 10.9 percent of 2,000 parents or caregivers were living in stepfamilies.[13]

Lifetime incidence

For lifetime incidence, the Christchurch Health and Development Study (CHDS) indicated 18.4% of 1,265 children were likely to live in a stepfamily before they reached the age of 17.[14] With a cohort aged 17 in 1994, this data is somewhat dated.

Similarly-timed United States research (1995) found a higher lifetime incidence: "…[W]hen cohabitation is taken into account, about two-fifths of all women and 30% of all children are likely to spend some time in a stepfamily."[15]

Also rather dated is data from the New Zealand Women: Family, Education and Employment (NZW:FEE) survey of females aged 20–59 in 1995 which provides the lifetime proportion of children who have ever lived in a step family before a given age. For Māori children, the total lifetime incidence at age nineteen was 30%; for non-Māori, 20 percent.



Source: RELATIONSHIPS AND FAMILIES IN CONTEMPORARY NEW ZEALAND, New Zealand Law Commission, 2017

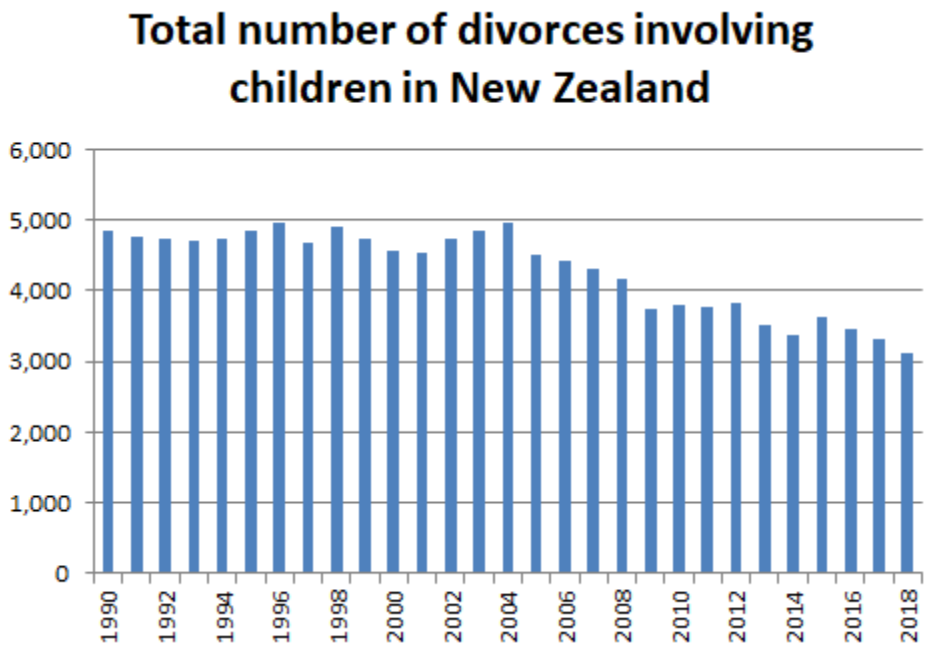
CHANGING AETIOLOGY OF STEPFAMILIES

The aetiology of stepfamilies has changed. Early last century they were mostly formed through remarriage after the death of a spouse. The Australian Institute of Family Studies provides an interesting statistic:

> "In past centuries, when life expectancy was so much shorter and health more precarious, stepfamilies were common because of the death of a parent. Women often died in childbirth and it was not unusual for a man to have two or three wives in his lifetime or for a woman to have more than one husband. In Sweden, for example, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, 26% of all marriages were remarriages after the death of a spouse."[16]

Today, re-partnering after a separation from cohabitation or marriage, or an early lone birth with later partnering, are the more likely pathways.

In New Zealand, divorces involving children are declining:



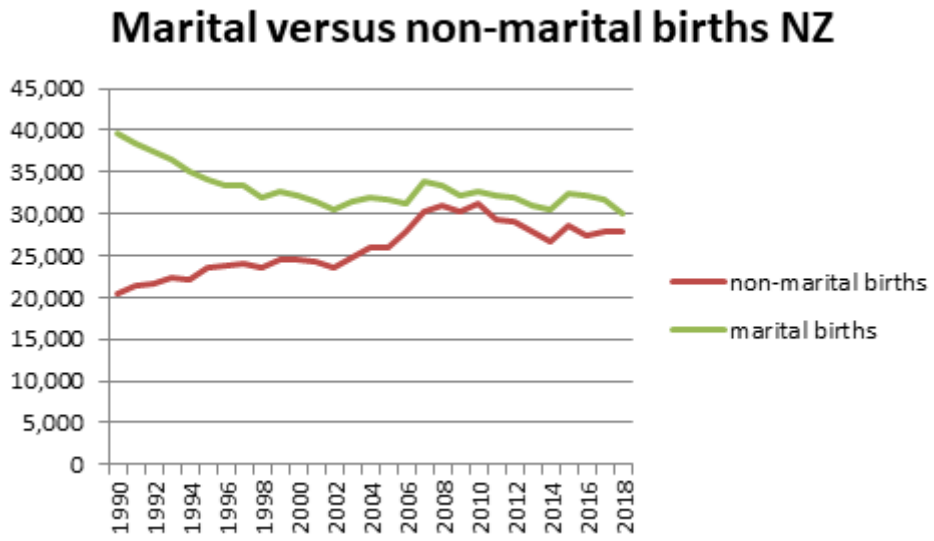
Data Source: InfoShare, Statistics New Zealand, Divorces involving children aged under 17 years (marriages and civil unions) (Annual-Dec)

But there is no commensurate data for cohabiting dissolutions involving children.

According to SNZ, "In the 1996 Census, there were just over 236,000 people in de facto partnerships. This rose to more than 409,000 in the 2013 Census. The decline in the marriage rate may be because couples prefer to live together but not marry." [17]

Additionally, "Māori are significantly more likely to live in a de facto relationship compared to any other ethnic group. In 2013, 40% of Māori who were partnered were in a de facto relationship" [18] contributing to the de facto rate tending, "… to be higher in New Zealand than in other comparable countries." [19] In 2011, the rate in New Zealand was 16% compared to the OECD average of 10 percent of adults aged 20 and over.

On their own, these pieces of information do not tell us how many children are involved in cohabitations, but the non-marital percentage of all births climbed steadily through the 1990s and early 2000s to remain relatively steady over the last 12 years.



Data Source: InfoShare, Statistics New Zealand, Live births by nuptiality (Māori and total population) (Annual-Dec)

Today, children are almost as likely to be born to a cohabiting or single mother as they are to a married mother.

Add to this that most single mothers do not stay single. Four out of five children born to a mother living by herself experience the partnering of their mother before the age of 16.[20]

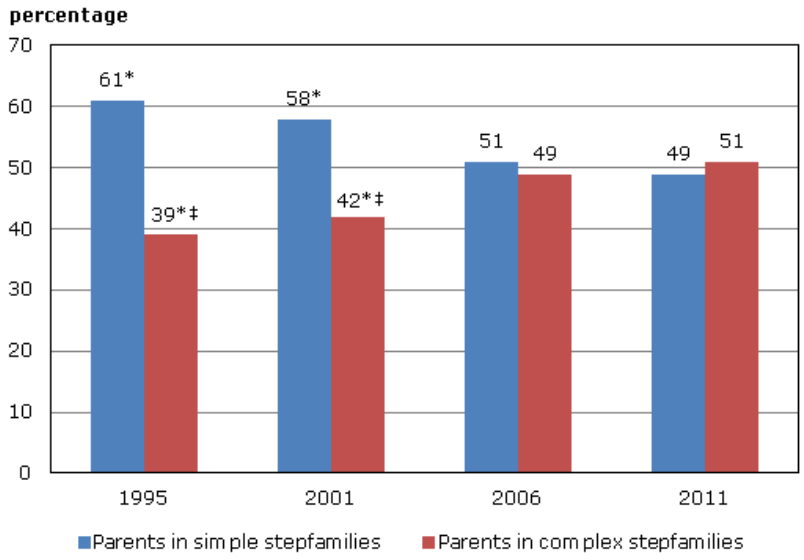
Multi partner fertility

The rise in unions over a lifetime[21] means men and women are increasingly having children with more than one partner; a phenomenon known as 'multi partner fertility' (MPF). New Zealand has no definitive data about the rates of MPF. Australia fares only slightly better.

According to researchers from Monash University, "In Australia even basic information about the prevalence of multi partner fertility is not available, and this is primarily because of the lack of adequate data."

They did however interrogate Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA), an Australian nationally representative longitudinal survey of over 13,000 individuals aged 15 and over, and found, "The dominant trend … is one of a stable majority having all their children within the same marriage, but that an increasing number in the younger cohorts have experienced multi partner fertility." Specifically, "An estimated 12 percent of men, and 16 percent of women, who were born between 1960 and 1968 and who have two or more children, have had children in more than one marriage." The authors concluded, "Multi partner fertility is a growing phenomenon in Australia and other western-industrialised countries."[22]

In Canada, this is evidenced by the changing nature of stepfamilies. The growth of complex stepfamilies is, "…primarily attributable to an increase in the number who have had children together"[23] i.e., children with a second partner.



Source: Being a parent in a stepfamily: A profile, Mireille Vézina, Statistics Canada

The study *Childbearing Across Partnerships in Australia, the United States, Norway and Sweden* was published in 2014. The methodology and findings were described as follows:

> "We use survey-based union and birth histories in Australia and the United States and data from national population registers in Norway and Sweden to estimate the likelihood of experiencing childbearing across partnerships at any point in the childbearing career. We find that births with new partners constitute a substantial proportion of all births in each country we study."[24]

Table 1 Percentage of women who had children with two or more fathers

	Australia		United States		Norway		Sweden	
	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number
Parity								
Two	11.6	1,017	25.6	2,987	13.4	358,699	10.1	627,027
Three	16.3	530	35.9	2,159	24.9	196,008	23.3	285,996
Four	25.5	161	49.6	795	36.2	49,082	35.9	75,494
Five	35.8	43	57.4	248	41.2	12,917	41.3	20,282
Two or More	15.6	2,132	32.8	7,334	19.5	616,706	16.3	1,064,130
All Mothers	12.2	2,824	23.3	10,500	15.9	766,623	12.6	1,373,522

Notes: Women born in 1952–1991, children born ages 16–45, singleton first birth, second birth exposure 1+ year. U.S. estimates are weighted (see text), number unweighted.

Sources: Australia: HILDA (2008). United States: NSFG (1995 and 2006–2008). Sweden: registers (1968–2007). Norway: registers (1970–2007).

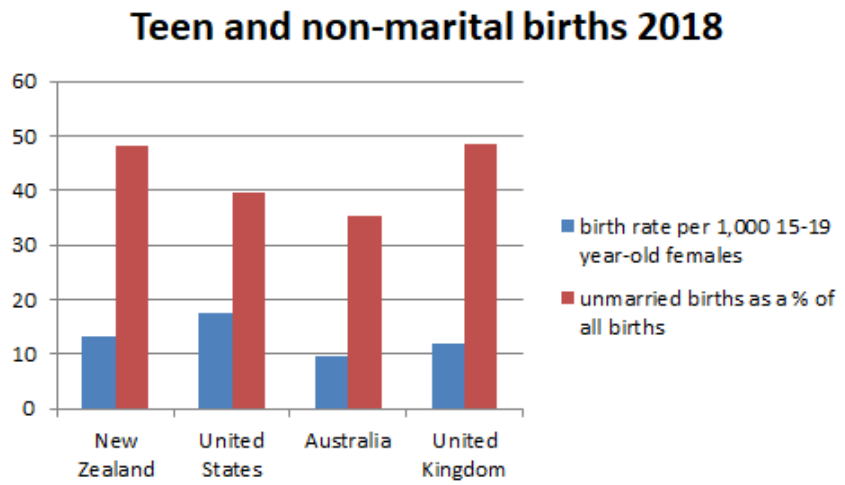
Source: Childbearing Across Partnerships in Australia, the United States, Norway, and Sweden, Elizabeth Thomson, Marcia J. Carlson, Ann Evans, Trude Lappegård

The data shows the US (23.3%) as an outlier amongst the four countries studied, with almost double the rates of Australia (12.2%) and Sweden (12.6%). Why? "Differences between the United States and other countries are largely due to the higher proportion of first births to mothers living alone, as opposed to cohabiting or married mothers … In the United States, first births occur disproportionately to very young mothers: nearly one-third of births occurred to teenage women, compared with 8 % to 15 % in the other countries." [25]

MPF is known to be strongly associated with teen, unmarried and unplanned births. US sociologist Karen Guzzo writes:

> "The United States has fairly high rates of teenage, non-marital, and unintended childbearing in addition to high rates of dissolution among non-residential unions, cohabitations, and even marriages. As such, men and women are increasingly exposed to, and actually are, having children with more than one partner, a phenomenon known as 'multiple-partner fertility,' or MPF." [26]

In respect of the first two factors - teen and non-marital births - how does New Zealand compare to the US?



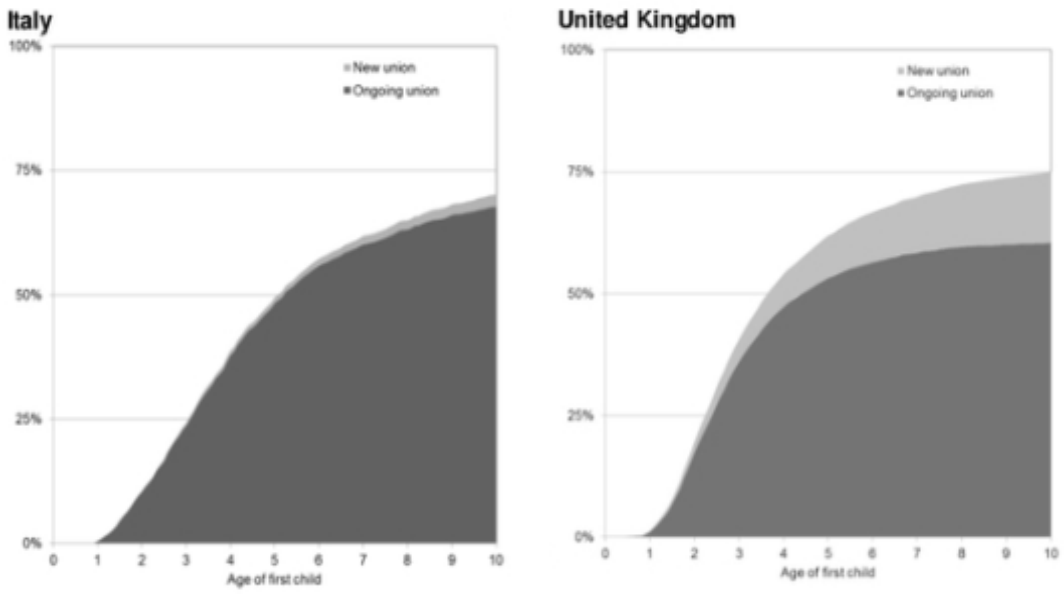
Data sources: Statistics New Zealand, Center for Disease Control United States, Australian Bureau of Statistics and Office of National Statistics United Kingdom

Compared to the US, New Zealand has a lower teen birth rate but a higher non-marital percentage of all births. Both rates are higher than Australia's but very similar to the United Kingdom's.

Data about MPF in the United Kingdom is also scarce. But a study examining separation and second births in Western European found large differences in post-separation fertility behaviour across European countries: "For Spain and Italy, we find that only a negligibly small proportion of the population have a second child after separating from the parent of their firstborn child. The countries with the highest proportion of second children with a new partner are the United Kingdom, Germany and Finland."

Higher separation rates lead to greater likelihood of second or more births with a new partner. In the United Kingdom 16% of parents were not in a union at the birth of their first child; by age 5 the proportion of separated parents had risen to 20% and by age 10, to 24%, proportions surpassed only by East Germany with 27% separation by age 10.[27] (In New Zealand, the CHDS cohort born 1976 showed 16% of parents had separated by child aged 5. The UK data is for children born 1990 or later).

Below, the risk incidence of a second birth in a new union is plotted against the age of first child. The first graph is for Italy where it is relatively rare for unions with children to dissolve. The second shows that in the United Kingdom three quarters of mothers had a second birth by the time their first child was 10 years old. One in five was in a new union.



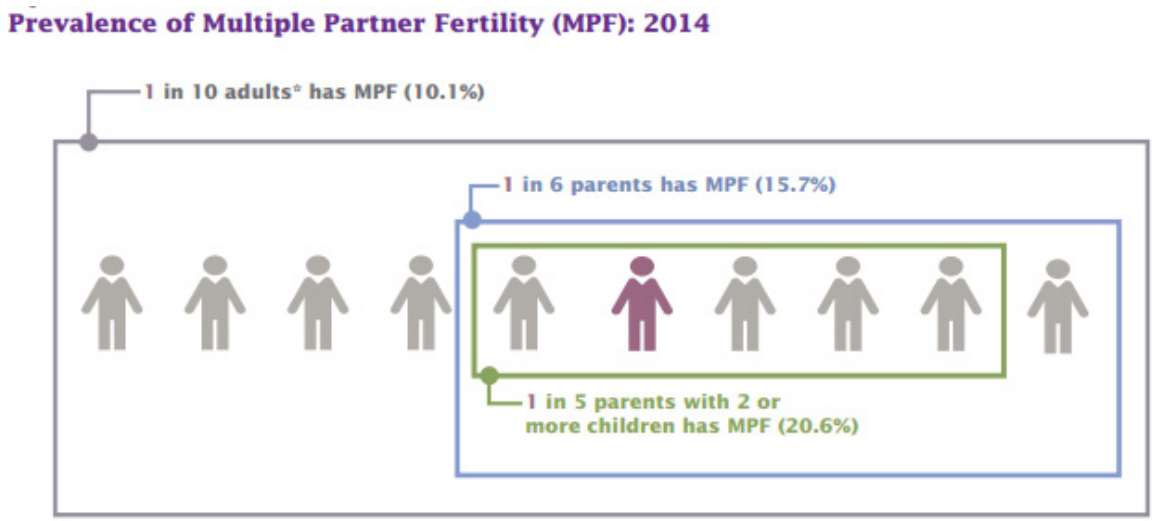
Source: Social policies, separation, and second birth spacing in Western Europe, Demographic Research, July-December 2017

Returning to what is known in this country, New Zealand's teen and non-marital birth rates are very similar to those of the United Kingdom. It wouldn't be unreasonable to speculate similar separation rates and post separation fertility i.e., an MPF rate of one in five mothers.

In respect of the third factor associated with MPF - unintended childbirth - in 2008, over half (53%) of NZ pregnancies were unplanned.[28] In the US, 45% of pregnancies were unintentional between 2009 -2013[29] and estimates for the UK in 2009 are similar at around half of all pregnancies.[30] The GUiNZ study found that 40% of the births were unplanned.[31]

To date, the study of MPF has been mostly concentrated in the US, the only country to gather definitive data. According to the US Census Bureau:

"The 2014 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) is the first nationally-representative survey to include a direct question about multiple partner fertility. Based on survey responses to this question, 10.1 percent of all adults aged 15 or older have had children with more than one partner, or roughly one out of every ten adults." [32]



Source: Multiple Partner Fertility Research Brief, Household Economic Studies, US Census Bureau

Depending on the denominator group i.e., all adults, all parents or all parents with 2 or more children, the likelihood of MPF increases.

Other US cumulative estimates show that, "… about 13 percent of men aged 40 to 44 and 19 percent of women aged 41 to 49 have children with more than one partner, with a higher prevalence among the disadvantaged. Compared to parents with two or more children by only one partner, people with MPF become parents at younger ages, largely with unintended first births, and often do so outside of marriage." [33]

> *"Couples want to consolidate their new union by parenthood, which leads us to expect additional childbearing, irrespective of the number of previously born children."*
>
> Centre for Population Change, United Kingdom

MPF may also increase overall fertility. British demographers write, "Progression to third and fourth birth is more common among women who have had multiple marriages or cohabiting partnerships during their reproductive years. This is consistent with the notion that a re-partnered couple may have a desire for a shared child to consolidate their relationship, described as a 'commitment effect'." [34]

On balance then, in the absence of local data, it seems safe to assume that New Zealand does not vary greatly from the experience of either the US or the UK which both record an MPF rate of around one in five mothers. This phenomenon adds to a growing prevalence of stepfamilies.

GROWING PREVALENCE OF STEPFAMILIES

Other data supports the growing prevalence of stepfamilies.

Divorce is an increasingly common experience. According to Statistics New Zealand, "… 38 percent of New Zealanders who married in 1992 had divorced before their silver wedding anniversary (25 years). This compares with 35 percent for those who married in 1982, and 30 percent for those who married in 1972." [35]

In 2018, the Family Court granted 3,105 divorces involving 5,598 children aged under 17.[36] In the same year, of

20,949 marriages 5,916 were remarriages – 28 percent[37] up from 16 percent in 1971.[38] That trend is mirrored in the US.[39]

Additionally, around one in 10 children born after 1970 had lived in a blended family before they turned five, compared with one in 20 children born before 1970.[40]

Demographers Ian Pool et al write, "Rates of separation from marriage have increased, as have rates of repartnering. These changes have had significant implications for the shape of families: in particular, they have fuelled the growth of sole-parent families and blended families[41]… The increases in propensity to separate have also been mirrored by increases in propensity to repartner."[42]

They touch on the variation between Māori and non-Māori fertility patterns:

> "For Māori women, an equally important pattern for the entire family life cycle is the propensity for early union formation (and dissolution) and early childbearing. Both Māori and non-Māori women today are more likely to get divorced and remarried than was true for their mothers' generation, and children today are more likely to have stepsiblings as they grow up."[43]

Researchers who investigated relationship transitions in the GUiNZ data concluded, "… being unpartnered or in an unstable relationship is a relatively common experience that is increasing in our society, and increases in frequency as children grow older."[44]

The following US Pew Center findings[45] illustrate the increasing likelihood of having a step relative at each decreasing age group:

Demographics of Stepfamilies

% who have...

	Any step relative	Step or half sibling	Step-parent	Step-child
Men	40	27	17	15
Women	44	33	19	12
18-29	52	44	33	2
30-49	45	35	23	14
50-64	39	23	10	18
65+	34	16	2	22

Source: A Portrait of Stepfamilies, Pew Research Center, 2011

Further US evidence of the growing prevalence of stepfamilies is provided in *Divorce, Repartnering, and Stepfamilies: A Decade in Review (2020):*

> "Among married adults older than age 50, the share in a remarriage (rather than a first marriage) increased from 19% in 1980 to 30% in 2015 (Lin et al., 2018), and among all coresidential couples in which one partner was older than age 50 in recent years, a remarkable 41% had at least one child from a previous relationship."[46]

VARIABILITY OF RELATIONSHIP TRANSITIONS

Children's experience of parental relationship transitions varies greatly among stepfamilies.

Some children in stepfamilies will experience zero transitions, and only the presence of older half-siblings. These are the biological children of the new continuously co-resident couple.

Other children will experience just one or two transitions; either the singular movement from having a birth lone parent to a partnered parent, or the separation and re-partnering of the biological custodial parent.

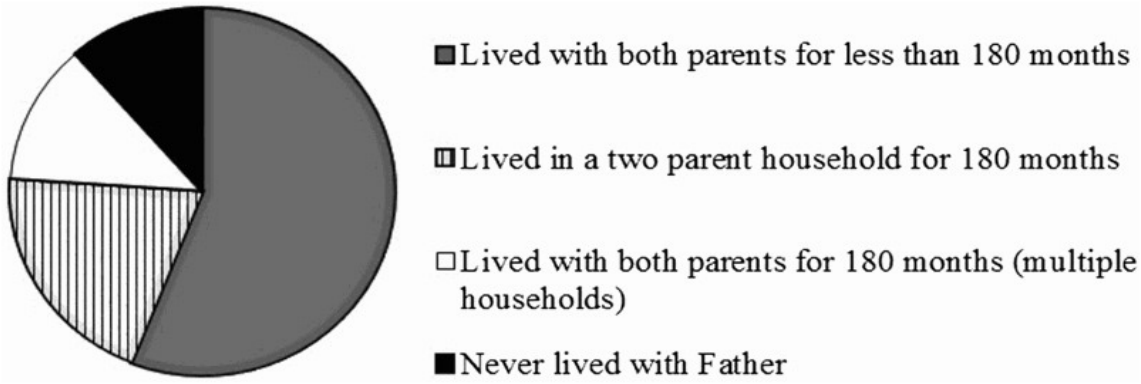
Some children experience three or more transitions. Remarriages more frequently end in divorce than first marriages, exposing children to further transitions. Non co-resident unions and even cohabitations can be transient affairs.

A glimpse of this changeability is afforded by the CHDS 1976 cohort:

> "16 percent of those born into a two-parent family had experienced family breakdown by five years, but over 70 percent re-entered a two-parent family within five years. Around 70 percent of those born to a single (unpartnered) parent entered a two-parent family by the age of five. Just over half (55 percent) of remarriages ended in breakdown within four years, and almost a fifth of the CHDS sample had lived in a stepfamily for some period between birth and 16 years." [47]

Furthermore, "The Christchurch Longitudinal Study reported that nearly one in five children had experienced three or more family transitions by the age of nine." [48]

Additional insight comes from the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study which analysed subset data from the original 1973 cohort. As parents of the next generation - children born between 1991 and 1995 - cohort members were surveyed about their living arrangements during their offspring's first 15 years. Of the 209 children, only 20 percent lived with both parents in the same house for the duration, 12 percent never lived with their biological father, and 12 percent remained in shared parental care after parents separated. The remainder lived with both parents for less than 180 months.



Source: The dynamic, complex and diverse living and care arrangements of young New Zealanders: implications for policy, 2016, JL Sligo, HM McAnally, JE Tansley, JM Baxter, AE Bolton, KM Skillander & RJ Hancox

The study states: "Only a quarter (26%) had the same parental care for their whole lives, while others experienced up to eight changes in care arrangements."

The authors caution, however, about study limitations due to the nature of the cohort. "This is not a random sample of New Zealand teenagers. All participants had at least one parent born in Dunedin and some were from the same families. The participants had relatively young parents at birth (median mothers' age was 22) and young parenthood may be associated with educational and socioeconomic disadvantage. However, the

parents of these participants were not extremely young: there were very few teenage parents."[49]

More recently, GUiNZ has been tracking children born at the other end of the country, in the Auckland, Counties-Manukau and Waikato DHB regions during 2009/10.

In 2018, Ministry of Social Development (MSD) research titled, *'The influences of social connectedness on behaviour in young children: A longitudinal investigation using GUiNZ data'* revealed relatively high levels of change in family structure, even pre-birth.

A key finding was, "1095 (17.3%) of mothers were categorised as having experienced 1-4 relationship transitions from pregnancy to the 4.5-year interview."[50]

Relationship transitions were characterised as, "…the count of the entrances and exits by biological parents, romantic partners, or spouses."[51]

Participants assessed, "…ranged from 6,853 at the antenatal interview to 6,156 at the 4.5-year interview,"[52] an attrition rate of ten percent. It's likely that some – if not a majority – of mothers who became uncontactable or refused to engage (participation instability) also experienced relationship instability. (Factors leading to attrition in a female longitudinal Australian study included being younger, less educated, a current smoker, having poorer health and money-management skills, and being born in a non-English speaking country.)[53]

Returning to the GUiNZ data, "…the identity of the specific partner was not identified at points 3 and 4 [2 year and 4.5-year interviews], so it is possible the mother might have re-partnered over the time frame."[54]

Therefore, a minimum of 1 in 6 children in the cohort experienced maternal relationship transitions before they were five years old.

STEPFAMILY INSTABILITY

According to SNZ, "International research indicates that stepfamilies are not very stable, with over one quarter of stepfamilies dissolving in the first year. Using a New Zealand sample, Dharmalingam and colleagues (2004) found that stepfamily life ended within five years for 40 percent of children who were under ten years of age when the stepfamily had formed."[55]

The New Zealand sample referred to was NZW:FEE (1995). More specifically, "Around a quarter of women had spent some time living in a blended family, with children from a previous union of one or both partners. Children's experience of blended families was generally short: for nearly half, the spell had ended within five years."[56]

SoFIE, a large-scale longitudinal survey by SNZ, provided the following insights:

> "We found that stepfamilies were indeed more likely to break up than nonstep two parent families. Across the eight study waves (seven transitions), 2.0 percent of all adults in two parent non-step families with at least one dependent child broke up per wave on average (range: 1.1 to 3.2 percent). In comparison, 9.2 percent of adults in stepfamilies broke up per wave on average (range: 7.2 to 10.9 percent)."[57]

The CHDS showed that the risk of breakdown in second families (stepfamilies) was considerably higher than for first families, with only 15% of first marriages failing over a 6-year period compared with 49% of second families (stepfamilies). Interestingly, however,

> "Stepfamilies were somewhat more prone to failure in the first 2 years compared with equivalent first families: thereafter they were slightly more stable than corresponding first families."[58]

This pattern was also identified by American researchers: "After ten years, about 37% of remarriages have dissolved, compared to about 30% of first marriages (Sweet & Bumpass 1987). The difference is concentrated in

the first several years, during which time people in remarriages have substantially higher rates of divorce than do people in first marriages."[59]

Factors suggested for the greater instability of remarriages or re-partnerships include a preference for a more casual, less formal relationship.

In Canada, "One characteristic of stepfamily parents is that they are more likely to be in a common-law union. According to data from the 2011 GSS [General Social Survey], 48% of parents aged 20 to 64 living in stepfamilies were living common-law. For parents in intact families, the proportion was 14%."[60] From the UK census: "While 11% of couple families with dependent children were stepfamilies in 2011, this varied by partnership status: 9% of married couple families with dependent children were stepfamilies, while 20% of cohabiting couple families with dependent children were stepfamilies."[61]

US evidence finds that divorced people commonly re-partnered, but often substituted cohabitation for remarriage.

> "We interpret this pattern as an indication that remarriage, like first marriage, is becoming less obligatory and socially regulated. It follows that informal unions are generally less stable and secure arrangements. About one out of seven people who eventually remarry live with a different partner between marriages. Indeed, the provisional nature of informal unions may be part of their appeal for individuals who may be hesitant, at least temporarily, to recommit to formal marriage. So, the velocity of transitions into and out of unions has surely increased since cohabitation became more widely acceptable in the United States. Accordingly, official marriage statistics are rapidly becoming unreliable indicators of patterns of family formation and reconstitution."[62]

The same study also points out that remarried people have already demonstrated, "a willingness to resort to divorce when unsatisfied in marriage."[63] Hence the propensity of remarried people to divorce is higher.

A second factor for greater instability of stepfamilies was identified by American sociologists, who concluded that the presence of stepchildren had a destabilising influence on remarriages, but that the higher divorce rate for stepfamilies was confined to those where both partners brought children from previous marriages. From a sample of 1,673 married individuals, they found, "Although remarriages, as marriages, can be just as happy as first marriages respondents with stepchildren report significantly less satisfaction with their family life than respondents with biological children."[64]

Similarly, "In a three-year longitudinal study, Alan Booth and John Edwards (1992) found that both the presence of stepchildren (a measure of stepfamily complexity) and a teenage first marriage (a measure of the selection of particular kinds of people into remarriage) accounted for portions of the higher divorce rate among the remarried."[65]

A within-family longitudinal study including biological and stepfamilies investigated mutual influences between marital conflict and children's behaviour problems, finding a feedback loop: "Marital conflict about children predicted change in children's behaviour. Children's behaviour also predicted an increase in marital conflict, particularly in stepfamilies."[66]

Perhaps too, whatever conflict of temperament that drove the biological parents apart revisits the relationship between the custodial parent and child over time.

Challenges stepchildren face

There are real advantages for sole and/or separated parents who re-partner. From the adult's perspective, the desire for an intimate, adult relationship is fulfilled. From the child's viewpoint, there are now two adults potentially available to share parenting, and two adult earners in the household improving living standards.

My own daughter made a comment as a school child: "I wish you and Dad would get divorced." Taken aback I asked why. "So I could have two houses and two bedrooms and two sets of clothes," a rather mercenary response born out of observing peer experiences. Do the advantages of re-partnering outweigh the disadvantages?

In *Stepfamilies and Resilience*, a report prepared for MSD, psychologist Dr Jan Pryor wrote, "… we know that children living in stepfamilies do less well on average than those in either first-marriage families or stable lone-parent families." [67]

Emeritus American Professor Paul Amato, whose life work has comprised the study of marriage, divorce and related topics, differs slightly, saying, "Studies consistently indicate that children in stepfamilies exhibit more problems than do children with continuously married parents and about the same number of problems as do children with single parents." [68] (Note that Pryor's statement included the descriptor 'stable' in prefacing 'lone-parent families'.)

MSD's Journal of Social Policy published advisor Ross Mackay's 'personal' reading of the research literature which adds another angle: "Fergusson et al. (1986) found that, among children who had experienced a parental separation, those whose parents reconciled or whose mother remarried exhibited more behavioural difficulties than children who remained in a single-parent family. Baydar (1988) found that, although divorce was not negatively related to mothers' reports of children's behavioural and emotional problems, remarriage was." [69]

The commonality between these three assessments of the research is that stepfamilies increase risks of negative outcomes for children.

But why?

Blood is thicker than water

Children are the product of their biological parents' genes. Character traits knit together forming threads that join parents and offspring, building mutual empathy and understanding. Just as the parent's personality helps explain the child, so too the child explains the parent, who, observing a child's emotional responses and behaviour, recalls their younger self.

These hereditary reflections are missing in the non-biological relationship.

In the late 1990s, New Zealand social scientist Robin Fleming produced a local study of stepfamilies:

> "The 'blood' relationship between natural parents and their children, and between natural siblings, is a powerful symbol which evokes a sense of common family membership, and without this symbol, the relationship between step-kin lacks a conceptual blueprint.
>
> Use of the 'step' kin terms might be expected to transfer the cultural blueprint for a parent—child or sibling relationship through a social fiction of relatedness, but in the majority of the families this did not occur. Almost all the children in the study called their parents' new partners by their first names, not 'Mum and Dad'. They reserved 'Mum' and 'Dad' for their biological parents whether or not they saw much of them, and whether or not they were still alive. Most of the new partners said they resisted being called 'Mum' or 'Dad' by their partner's children." [70]

Ross MacKay neatly points out the obvious: "Unlike the relationship between mother and stepfather, that between stepfather and stepchild is not a relationship of choice, which means that goodwill may sometimes be in short supply, at least in the early stages of establishing a stepfamily."[71] In a similar vein Paul Amato acknowledges that, "Although the great majority of parents view the formation of a stepfamily positively, children tend to be less enthusiastic."[72]

As well as adjusting to a stepparent, the child is often expected to accept new step-siblings in the moment, or as later additions.

Sibling conflict

In *Diverse Families*, New Zealand writers suggest relationships with younger step-siblings can act as "…the 'glue' binding many different family members," but that relationships between older children of stepparents may be more difficult, especially if there is an issue of personal space.[73]

Additionally, there's the non-trivial matter of where the child fits in the pecking order. He may have been the eldest in the original family but not in the newly formed stepfamily.

> *"'Blended family' is a commonly used term for stepfamily. Although the phrase captures the human longing for closeness and oneness, it is misleading. Becoming a stepfamily proves to be less like blending a smoothie and more like asking a group of Japanese and a group of Italians to live intimately together."*
>
> Patricia L Papernow,
> Institute for Stepfamily Education

As well as adapting to new step-siblings, the child is frequently dealing simultaneously with another major adjustment - loss of parental attention.

Loss of parental attention

It's not unusual for a child to identify more strongly with one particular parent; to share more characteristics and greater rapport.

If the parent more strongly identified with is also the parent who becomes the non-resident, that is a compounding blow for the child. Rubbing salt into the wound, the child is then expected to accept a replacement parent with no immediate ability to understand what makes him or her tick.

Loss of parental attention is also especially pertinent when moving from a lone parent-child relationship. Through interviews, Auckland psychologist Claire Cartwright explored the personal experiences of those forming new families:

> "Because I was working (as a sole-parent), I'd come home after work and she would always be there for attention and I'd give her all my time, stories at night etcetera. And we've had stories every night up until Nathan came (laughs) because he felt that it was just time for her to settle down and do her own reading. So I think that was one thing she regretted. (Mother of Mandy, 12 years)"[74]

Exacerbating the diminishment of the custodial parent's attention is the loss of daily contact with, and attention from, the non-custodial or non-resident parent - usually the father. Paul Amato writes:

> "One of the most frequent complaints that children had about their post-divorce years was that they did not have enough time with their fathers – a complaint that was especially common among children raised in mother sole custody."[75]

Even separating couples who try to share their children equitably impose new practical problems and dilemmas.

Moving between houses

In *Diverse Families*, the authors suggest that although children wanted to share time with both parents, transitioning between households was difficult, especially when there was conflict between the parents and different household rules.[76]

American scholar Elizabeth Marquardt's national survey of 1,500 young adults (about half from divorced families) found children often felt torn between two households. Notwithstanding the best efforts of divorced parents (Marquardt hates the term 'the good divorce' calling it an 'adult-centered vision'), children could suffer lifetime emotional scars and have trouble with their own intimate relationships as adults. They felt divided between two sets of different values; were asked to keep secrets about the different households. Without clear guidance on what was right or wrong, they relied on friends and siblings.

According to The Step Family Foundation of New York, "[Marquardt's] major conclusion is that children whose parents divorce must go from living in one world that seemed safe to going back and forth between two homes that often feel like 'polar opposites.' The kids must do what their parents had always done for them: develop a clear view of what to think, what to believe and how to behave, especially in the moral and spiritual realms. 'It becomes the child's job to synthesize these two worlds.'"[77]

Children may initially move between two singular divorced or separated parents, but over time this arrangement tends to involve a stepparent, if only temporarily.

Not in the loop

Claire Cartwright refers to the frustration children feel about not being in the loop:

> "The results from this study suggest that some children experience a lack of consultation or information about changes connected with re-partnering. This emerged most strongly from the interviews with the young adults and the children. Some of the young adults recalled that they were either not consulted or not given adequate information in regard to re-partnering. Examples of this included partners moving into the family home early on in the adult relationship, with little discussion or preparation; parents planning to marry without telling children; and for 2 of the 28 young adults, being taken away suddenly from a parent."[78]

In later work (2014) surveying the 'courtship period' of 99 stepfamilies, Cartwright found, "Many participants had awareness of potential stepfamily challenges. However, the majority did not talk to partners about parenting issues, or how to manage the change for children, supporting earlier findings that stepfamily couples avoid communicating about difficult issues. The results also suggest that many children received little preparation or communication about the decision to repartner and live in a stepfamily."[79]

Loss of hope in parental reconciliation

The remarriage of a parent can also signify the last nail in the coffin for those children wanting Mum and Dad to get back together.

From a therapist's viewpoint, "Re-partnering can also denote the end of any fantasies or hopes a child might have of the parents reuniting: I think sometimes just a sense of grief from the children because it's putting an end to that fantasy of the parents (reuniting)."[80]

Conflicted loyalties

According to Paul Amato, "Some children experience loyalty conflicts and fear that becoming emotionally close to a stepparent implies betraying the nonresident biological parent."[81]

From Claire Cartwright's testimonies:

> "I really hated the family politics that came along with stepfamilies. You can't tell one family what you did. Or you can't tell your Mum what you did with your Dad. You certainly can't tell your Dad what you're doing with your stepdad because then he gets pi**ed off. Plus the fact that neither parent talks to each other. In fact, I have no idea what I'm going to do at my graduation next year because neither of them still talks to each other. (Angela, 19 years)"[82]

Heavy-handed stepfathers unwelcome

Cartwright suggests that children and adolescents, "… do not expect a stepfather to take on [a disciplinary] role and are likely to rebel against it."[83]

> *"Stepparents quickly discover that they have been issued only a limited license to parent."*
>
> Andrew J. Cherlin, Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr

Amato gives context to the resentment and rebellion: "… early relationships between stepparents and stepchildren are often tense. Children, especially adolescents, become accustomed to a substantial degree of autonomy in single-parent households. They may resent the monitoring and supervision by stepparents and react with hostility when stepparents attempt to exert authority."[84]

NEGATIVE OUTCOMES

In summary, the above provides a very brief overview of the challenges that stepchildren face. Outcomes are the manifestation of those challenges, notwithstanding they may also be associated with other pre-existing hereditary and environmental factors.

Poorer educational achievement

More than one study has identified poorer academic outcomes for stepchildren. In the US, "…educational outcomes for both types of children in blended families—stepchildren and their half-siblings who are the joint children of both parents—are similar to each other and substantially worse than outcomes for children reared in traditional nuclear families." However, "When controls for other variables are introduced, the relationship between family structure and children's educational outcomes weakens substantially and is often statistically insignificant."[85] Other variables include, for example, family income.

American academic Lisa Gennetian found, "… living in a blended family and living in some types of single mother families, appears to have a small, unfavourable relationship with children's achievement…"[86]

While, "Beller & Chung (1992) find mixed effects of the presence of a stepfather for various educational outcome measures, and these effects also depend on the gender of the child,"[87] poorer educational outcomes seem particularly negatively affected by the number of transitions children experience (see p26).

In 2008, researchers using the US National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (N= 1,769), found that shared biological children in blended families have worse outcomes than children in simple two-parent families, even though they reside with both of their biological parents: "These differences occur for academic performance, delinquency, school detachment, and depression. Current explanations in the family literature do not account for the poorer outcomes of shared children in blended families. We suggest that the presence of half-siblings creates a unique family situation that is not accurately represented in the current family literature."[88] The implication is that the worse outcomes are somehow related to the presence of a step-sibling.

According to US academic Kathryn Harker Tillman, adolescents living with half- or stepsiblings, on average,

have lower grades and more school-related behaviour problems which do not improve over time.[89]

Higher risk of poverty

Using the receipt of public assistance as a marker of poverty, US data analysis found, "Nearly one in five children (18.7%) were in families that received public assistance. The levels varied dramatically by family structure, ranging from a low of 8.3% for children in families with two biological married parents to a high of 45.6% for children living in single-mother families. Receipt of public assistance was relatively low among both children in **married stepfamilies (17.5%)** and single-father families (15.9%). In the two types of cohabiting families, similar proportions of children received public assistance: 29.8% in families with two biological cohabiting parents and **24.5% in cohabiting stepfamilies."** [90] *(author's emphasis)*

> "MARTIN: I guess the final question I would have for you is ... Are the families poor because they are in these complex relationships or are they in these complex relationships because they're poor?
>
> CANCIAN: There is certainly some of both. But I would argue that we have more evidence for families entering into complex relationships because they bring disadvantage to the table. So for example, even with father involvement, it's hard to disentangle whether a mom goes on to have a new relationship because the father she had her first child with is not involved or whether that father reduces his involvement because she's moved on to another relationship. It's always pretty hard to disentangle those. But I think we have pretty strong evidence that both of those are the case."
>
> *Michel Martin, National Public Radio (NPR) interviewing Professor Maria Cancian, University of Wisconsin, 2011*

Though an analysis of Canadian stepfamilies found that, "There is no significant difference between the family income of parents in stepfamilies and those in intact families," at the same time, "… nearly one in five stepfamily parents (18%) was unable to meet a scheduled financial obligation at least once in the past year, compared with 11% of intact-family parents." The conclusion was that, "…results suggest that stepfamily parents face more economic challenges and expenses than intact-family parents. [91]

Depression

In 2016, a US study using 1,142 respondents who experienced parental divorce and a subsequent transition to stepfamily life reported, "Congruent with prior research, we find that retrospective reports of divorce and stepfamily stress is associated with higher depressive symptoms in emerging adults (18–30 years of age). We also find that stress induced by parental divorce and subsequent stepfamily formation significantly interact to increase depressive symptoms in this population." [92]

In NZ, the MSD paper *The influences of social connectedness on behaviour in young children: A longitudinal investigation using GUiNZ data* notes, "…[F]amilies marked by parent/caretaker relationship transitions tend to raise children who exhibit higher levels of problem behaviour [aggression, anxiety] and lower levels of prosocial behaviour [kindness, consideration]." [93]

Not surprisingly though, the risks of anxiety/depression can be ameliorated by the quality of relationships. Small qualitative studies find this repeatedly. From the US:

> "Results from longitudinal structural equation modelling indicate that higher quality mother–child and

stepfather–child relationships are directly associated with reductions in depression during adolescence and indirectly associated with reductions in depression during emerging and young adulthood via prior levels of depression; higher quality stepcouple relationships are directly associated with reductions in depression during emerging and young adulthood." [94]

Maltreatment

According to Amato, in the US, "…stepchildren are overrepresented in official reports of child abuse." [95] This is fleshed out by the United States Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (2010) which reported, "Children living with one parent who had an unmarried partner in the household had the highest incidence of Harm Standard [96] maltreatment (57.2 per 1,000). Their rate is more than eight times greater than the rate for children living with two married biological parents." [97] The incidence for 'other married' parents (as opposed to biological married parents) was 24.4 per 1,000.

A New Zealand review of the research into prevention of physical or psychological maltreatment stated, "Studies suggest that mothers' young boyfriends, step-fathers and 'substitute parents', with similar risk factors to abusive fathers i.e., criminal histories, poor impulse control, a pattern of violence to their partners and with inappropriate expectations of children's behaviour, pose a particular risk to children and at a much higher level than step-mothers or fathers' partners." [98]

At the extreme end of the abuse spectrum, using New Zealand police data on 91 child homicides from 1991 to 2000, Marie Connolly and Mike Doolan concluded, "A number of the children were killed by a parent's de facto partner. While being step-parented is identified in the literature as a risk factor, within this small study the issue was more to do with the quality of the relationship between the caregiver and the child rather than the step-parenting relationship per se. Poor attachment bonds were apparent and the de facto partner's attitude to the child was either emotionally ambivalent, or hostile." [99]

Sexual abuse

Childhood sexual abuse is the least common of abuse types (the others being physical, emotional and neglect). New Zealand researchers found, "In an Otago study of women's experiences of CSA (Anderson et al 1993), a third of the respondents reported being abused before age 16, with family members comprising over a third of abusers. Overall, about one in eight women had been sexually abused by family members … In the Otago sample, almost a quarter of intrafamilial abusers were not living in the same household, and stepfathers were more likely to abuse than biological fathers." [100]

Interviews with the CHDS participants uncovered a much lower rate but the same distinction: "Childhood sexual abuse by natural parents was uncommon and only two out of 1025 young people questioned reported this type of abuse, with a further seven reporting abuse involving a step-parent." [101]

In 2012, the government's White Paper into Vulnerable Children quoted results from an anonymous questionnaire survey amongst American college students: "… girls from stepfather families were five times more vulnerable to the risk of sexual abuse than girls in intact families." [102]

Flying the nest

According to analysis of the NZW:FEE data:

> "Children who were living with their mother and a stepfather had the highest likelihood of leaving home at an early age, followed by those who were living with a sole mother. Those who were least likely to leave home early were children living with both original parents. This tendency was more pronounced for female

children than for male children: indeed, from the age of 10 on, female children were more likely than male children to leave home if they lived with their mother and a stepfather. The presence of a stepfather, then, appears to increase the probability that children will leave home at an early age, especially for females." [103]

In Robin Fleming's New Zealand study of 33 remarriages, "…some parent's new partners found it difficult to love or even like their partner's children. Many of the people in my study believed they should love their new partner's children, but struggled to find that feeling in themselves. Feelings towards a partner's child could be good or bad depending on how well the two got along. When they were bad however, there could be open hostility. There were several examples of teenage children leaving home to escape conflict with a step-parent. Without love and acceptance, it is difficult to give children the personal support they need." [104]

In the US, scholars Andrew Cherlin and Frank Furstenberg describe the early departure finding as "well-established", particularly for girls:

> "Interviews in 1980 and 1983 with a national sample of currently married persons suggested that tensions between stepchildren and their parents and stepparents cause the early home-leaving. Those who had stepchildren in their households reported more family problems involving children. The authors hypothesize that one way these problems are resolved is by encouraging, or arranging for, the stepchildren to leave the household. During the three years between interviews, 51% of all the teenage stepchildren had left the households, compared to 35% of all the teenage biological children. Some may have chosen to live with their other parent, some may have been forced to do so, and some may have left to go to school, establish their own residence, cohabit, or marry (White & Booth 1985). If this effect is indeed more pronounced for girls, it suggests that the "friction" in the household may be due to the disruption of the mother-daughter bond or to the presence of the mother's male sexual partner, whose relationship to the daughter is ambiguous." [105]

A British study of 23-year-olds reported the likelihood of leaving due to "friction at home" was greater than for those who had not lived in stepfamily households. [106]

Those teenagers who didn't actually leave home spent less time there. According to Cartwright, "In one longitudinal study, one third of adolescent boys and one quarter of adolescent girls in stepfamilies disengaged from their families and spent little time at home." [107]

This distancing pattern continues into young adulthood when, "… young adults from stepfamilies, compared to those from first-marriage families, have been found to live further away from their parents, to see them less frequently, to give them less support, and to receive less support from them." [108]

Intergenerational transmission of marital instability

Using data from the American National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Paul Amato and Jennifer Kane found, "[Female] Offspring with single parents and remarried parents had an elevated risk of nonmarital births and nonmarital cohabitation."

Their analysis provided some support for the 'escape from stress' perspective. The most plausible perspective for the link though appeared to be that, "…transitions to non-traditional family formation are elevated among youth with single parents and remarried parents, given that both groups of parents have modelled disruption as a solution to an unsatisfying relationship." [109]

About the intergenerational transmission of relationship instability Amato and Patterson speculate, "…people who see relationships as transitory may not make the kinds of investments that strengthen unions over the long haul, and they may be quick to jettison troubled relationships." [110]

Risk of incarceration

A large-scale study again utilising the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (>6,000) in the US reported, "… youths in stepparent households face incarceration odds almost three times as high as those in mother-father families, and significantly higher than those in single-parent households." [111]

POSITIVE OUTCOMES

Despite all of the above, Jan Pryor reminds us that, "…the majority of children who grow up in stepfamilies flourish. Risk is just that – an increased likelihood statistically but by no means a certainty. Most stepfamilies are successful; they overcome the challenges of establishing an often-complicated household." [112]

Cherlin and Furstenberg are also reassuring, if slightly less so. In a reconsideration of their earlier research into stepfamilies, they conclude, "We see some troubling indications that the cultural, legal, and social anomalies associated with 'recycling the family' place a considerable burden on a growing number of children--even if most children seem capable of managing that burden without serious effects." [113]

A recurring theme emerges from the literature. If stepfamilies survive their formative years, they tend to survive long term. Amato writes:

> "Although relationships in many stepfamilies are tense, stepparents are still able to make positive contributions to their stepchildren's lives. If stepfamilies survive the early 'crisis' stage, then close and supportive relationships between stepparents and stepchildren often develop. Research suggests that these relationships can serve as important resources for children's development and emotional well-being." [114]

Continuing quality relationships between all parties – adults, children, biological and step – improve child outcomes. Especially, "The children of divorce tended to do well if mothers and father, regardless of remarriage, resumed parenting roles, putting differences aside, and allowing the children continuing relationships with both parents." [115]

Ross Mackay wrote, "Although step-families tend to have lower levels of cohesion than intact first families, those with higher levels of cohesion tend to have higher levels of family satisfaction and lower levels of stress. Thus step-families can benefit from higher levels of cohesion." [116] In social science 'social cohesion' can be defined as a willingness to cooperate with each other to survive and prosper.[117]

The negative effects of father absence have been extensively examined over recent decades. A replacement 'father' can be a meaningful addition to a child's life.

MacKay points out a caveat though:

> "There is empirical evidence that social fathers can have a positive influence on children's development, although it appears that this may vary depending on who the father figure is. Jayakody and Kalil (2002) reported that male relatives (e.g. uncles or grandfathers) can have a positive influence on children's schooling. This appeared to come about through an indirect impact on the mother's mental health." But, "… where the father figure was the mother's romantic partner, children had lower levels of emotional adjustment." [118]

Some children see having two homes as a positive. *Diverse Families* describes this:

> "Children cared for by both parents were often more positive about moving between households than their mothers and fathers were. Interviews with children indicate that some saw themselves as part of two quite separate families, while others saw themselves as part of one large, complex family that included aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents from both households." [119]

Stepfamily relationships may also be shouldering the blame for what is actually a hangover from the separation of the biological parents, thus detracting from potential positives. Cherlin and Furstenberg allude to this:

> "A thorough review of the literature by White (1993) provides a wealth of evidence showing that intergenerational ties between children and their stepparents are less robust than ties between children and biological parents. Nonetheless, a good deal of variation exists depending on conditions such as the length of time in stepfamilies, the quality of relations between the biological parents and their offspring, and the gender of the stepparent. In short, as White demonstrates, the effects of stepfamily life are far from uniform, and some portion of the presumed effect may be due to divorce rather than remarriage." [120]

In 2004, the Lavender Islands survey of over four hundred gay, lesbian and bisexual parents and stepparents looked at impacts on children. Some children reported teasing and had to be careful about bringing friends home, "… but most were very positive about their family life." [121]

NUMBER OF RELATIONSHIP TRANSITIONS MATTERS

As detailed earlier, the available evidence points to increasing rather than decreasing numbers of relationship transitions experienced by children over time.

In an exploration of change in family formation, Paul Amato notes, "… [S]ome studies indicate that the number of transitions that children experience while growing up (including multiple parental divorces, cohabitations, and remarriages) is a good predictor of their behavioural and emotional problems as adolescents and young adults." [122]

Divorce, Repartnering and Stepfamilies: A Decade in Review, published in January 2020, reported, "An extensive body of work makes it clear that the more family structure transitions children face, the lower their level of well-being on average. This pattern holds across multiple domains of well-being, including problem behaviour, health, and emotional well-being, as well as socioeconomic attainment and relationship stability in adulthood." [123]

In the absence of equivalent New Zealand research, Mackay describes an American study by William Aquilano: "Aquilino (1996) reported that the experience of multiple transitions and multiple family types, among a sample of children not born into an intact biological family, was associated with lower educational attainment and greatly increased the likelihood that children would try to establish an independent household and enter the labour force at an early age." [124]

More recently, in New Zealand, GUiNZ research found, "Children raised in families that had experienced relationship transition(s) … reported higher externalising and internalising behaviour, and lower prosocial behaviour… 'externalising' behaviours refer to expressions of anger such as fighting, yelling at others, and destruction of property, whereas 'internalising' behaviour refers to inward expressions of dysfunction such as anxious and depressive symptoms… prosocial behaviours [are those] such as being kind and considerate towards others." [125]

But Jan Pryor draws a distinction regarding numbers of transitions: "…[T]he risks for children in stepfamilies who have experienced only two transitions are no higher than for those whose parents have separated and not re-partnered." She acknowledges, too, UK research showing, "…children in 're-disrupted' families (those who had experienced more than one parental divorce) reported lower levels of happiness than children from other family types, and lower social self-image than those in original families."

An association between multiple transitions and poor educational outcomes also appears: "Children who have experienced more than two transitions report more school problems (Cockett and Tripp 1994) and have lower grades and achievement scores (Kurdek, Fine et al. 1995)." [126]

It is likely that transitions entail changes in the school attended and interrupted curriculums, along with adjustments to new peers.

This education deficit carries through to later teen years when, "Adolescents who have experienced three or more family types are significantly less likely to enter post-secondary education than those in lone-parent families, and are more likely to live independently and to be in the labour force by the age of 18 (Aquilino 1996) and to have had a non-marital birth (Wu and Martinson 1993). In adulthood, those who have experienced more than one parental divorce are comparatively less likely to be close to their mothers, and more likely to have marital problems and marital instability, and to experience their own divorce (Amato and Booth 1991)" [127]

Pryor highlights other evidence from the CHDS: "In New Zealand, the total number of family changes was positively associated with levels of offending in 11–13 year olds." And along similar lines, "In the United States, 12 year olds who had experienced more than two family changes were more likely than those who had experienced none to show disruptive behaviour in school." [128]

On a closing note though, MacKay reflects:

> "It may be that the impact of multiple transitions depends to some extent on the circumstances associated with transitions. Where transitions are well managed and conducted with goodwill, they may do little damage, while transitions that are chaotic, unpredictable and infused with rancour and disputation may have malign effects on children's wellbeing." [129]

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN STEPMOTHER/STEPFATHER HOUSEHOLDS

Most stepfamilies feature stepdads – not stepmums. In Jan Pryor's *Stepfamilies and Resilience* study sample, 60 families had stepfathers; 30 had stepmothers. In the last reported US census, 77% of stepfamilies had stepfathers.[130] In 2011, 85 percent of UK stepfamilies featured children from the woman's previous relationships (suggesting the presence of stepfathers) and only 11 percent from the man's.[131]

Pryor found remarkably few differences in outcomes for children in stepmother and stepfather households. "There is only sparse literature on the dynamics of stepmother families, since they are comparatively uncommon; the impression from the little research that is available is that they are difficult households to establish and maintain (Pryor and Rodgers 2001). Our finding that children in stepmother households were more anxious and hyperactive than those in stepfather households, and that expressiveness was higher from the children's perspectives, supports this impression. However, the similarities were more apparent than the differences." [132]

A large data source (n=16,207) collected by Alfred Kinsey in the United States from 1938 to 1963 afforded the opportunity to look at the effects of family structure on sexual maturity, reproduction, and risk-taking. The results surprised: "…[F]or both sexes, living with a single mother or mother and stepfather during childhood was often associated with faster progression to life history events and greater propensity for risk-taking behaviours. However, living with a single father or father and stepmother was typically not significantly different to having both natural parents for these outcomes. Our results withstand adjustment for socioeconomic status, age, ethnicity, age at puberty (where applicable), and sibling configuration."

The researchers had originally theorised that, "…mother-present family types would confer higher levels of parental investment compared with father-present families due to a mother's genetic certainty and the typically higher investment of mothers compared to fathers in our species… We predicted that mother plus stepfather families would more closely resemble intact families than father plus stepmother, but found quite the opposite: father plus stepmother families were in fact most like intact families of all our family structures, whereas mother plus stepfather was the least like intact families." [133]

Conversely, though, using the US National Longitudinal Survey of Youth involving over 6,000 males and commencing in 1979, Cynthia Harper and Sara MacLanahan found, "…youths from stepparent families are even more vulnerable to the risk of incarceration, especially those in father-stepmother households, which suggests that the re-marriage may present even greater difficulties for male children than father absence." [134]

DIFFERENCES IN STEPCHILD AGE AND GENDER

According to Cherlin and Furstenberg, "… the younger the child, the more likely he or she is to consider the stepparent to be a 'real' parent (Marsiglio 1992). The evidence isn't precise enough to establish an age cut-off for emotional bonding. Still, we suspect that if the stepparent arrives during the pre-school years (before the child is five), it is possible to establish a parent-like relationship; but if the stepparent arrives much later, strong bonds form much more rarely. Research shows that children establish strong bonds of attachment to their parents, whom they rely on for security, within their first year or two." [135]

The last observation is echoed in the CHDS cohort, with researchers stating:

> "The younger the age of the child at the time of separation, the lower their subsequent parental attachment and the more likely they were to perceive both their mother and father as less caring and more overprotective. No gender differences were found in children's responses to parental separation. These findings persisted after control for the confounding effects of family social background, marital conflict, parenting, child behaviour, and remarriage. Results supported the importance of the early childhood years for the development of a secure and enduring attachment relationship between children and their parents." [136]

It may be that it is easier for the adults if the stepfamily is formed when the child is young, though not necessarily for the child.

Pryor reinforces this in part:

> "Earlier research has indicated that it is easier for stepfamilies to adapt when children are young… We know, too, that significant challenges are faced by stepfamilies that form when children are adolescent…"

Adolescent children may not be, "… old enough to be set on a course of autonomy seeking, but may be too old to find adapting to new parenting figures completely straightforward." [137]

Amato describes a gender difference found in an American study:

> "Mavis Hetherington and her colleagues studied 144 preschool children, half from recently divorced maternal-custody families and half from continuously married two-parent families. During the first year of the study, the children with divorced parents exhibited more behavioural and emotional problems than did the children with continuously married parents. Two years after divorce, however, children with divorced parents no longer exhibited an elevated number of problems (although a few difficulties lingered for boys). Despite this temporary improvement, a later wave of data collection revealed that the remarriage of the custodial mother was followed by additional problems among the children, especially daughters." [138]

In Hetherington's own words, "Divorce had more adverse effects for boys, remarriage was more disruptive for girls." [139]

Conversely, the CHDS paper, *Effects on Later Adjustment of Living in a Stepfamily During Childhood and Adolescence found,* "…no significant differences in outcomes for boys and girls exposed to stepfamilies." [140]

DIFFERENCES IN MARITAL STATUS OF STEPFAMILIES

Amato summarised relevant studies:

> "Christine Buchanan, Eleanor Maccoby, and Sanford Dornbusch found that adolescents had fewer emotional and behaviour problems following divorce if their mothers remarried than if they cohabited with a partner. Similarly, two studies of African American families found that children were better off in certain respects if they lived with stepfathers than with their mother's cohabiting partners. In contrast, Susan Brown found no significant differences between children in married and cohabiting stepfamilies. Although these data suggest that children may be better off if single mothers marry their partners rather than cohabit, the small number of studies on this topic makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions." [141]

It is worth noting that different ethnicities produce differing results. We know that in New Zealand, generally speaking, Māori family formation varies from Pakeha. Māori childbearing occurs younger, as does African American and Hispanic.[142] Amato expands on the African American studies: "One study found that in African American families (but not European American families), children who lived with stepfathers were less likely to drop out of high school or (among daughters) have a nonmarital birth. Similarly, a study of African Americans living in high-poverty neighbourhoods found that girls living with their mothers and stepfathers were less likely than girls living with single mothers to become sexually active or pregnant. Interestingly, **the protective effect of a stepfather held only when mothers were married and not when they were cohabiting."** [143] *(author's emphasis)*

It is possible that much of the positive effect derives from the greater stability and longevity of marriage when compared to cohabitation. It is hard to over-emphasise the importance of physical and emotional stability and security to children.

SEPARATING THE EFFECT OF STEPFAMILIES FROM ASSOCIATED FACTORS

While the evidence confirms that stepchildren, on average, experience worse outcomes than those from intact families, and even single parent families, the cause and effect process is still controversial.

When CHDS data was used to examine later life effects of having lived in a stepfamily, numerous elevated risks were identified. But when the risks were adjusted for 'confounding effects' the researchers concluded that, "… although young people exposed to living in a stepfamily had increased risks of poor psychosocial outcomes, much of this association appeared to be spurious, and arose from confounding social, contextual, and individual factors that were present prior to the formation of the stepfamily." Other pre-existing factors included, for example, "…family history of instability, adversity, and conflict." [144]

This conclusion aligns with the 'selection' theory. Amato explains: "…many poorly adjusted individuals either never marry in the first place or see their marriages end in divorce. In other words, these people carry traits that 'select' them into single parenthood. Parents can transmit these problematic traits to their children either through genetic inheritance or inept parenting. For example, a mother with an antisocial personality may pass this genetic predisposition to her children. Her personality also may contribute to her marriage's ending in divorce. Her children will thus be at risk of exhibiting antisocial behaviour, but the risk has little to do with the divorce." Or, it follows, a remarriage.

Similarly, Cherlin and Furstenberg observe, "…children and parents with unmeasured personal characteristics that impair family cohesion could be disproportionately represented in the population of divorced and remarried families." [145]

But Amato also casts doubt on the selection theory, or at least the absoluteness of it. Although the following passage relates to comparisons between married and single parents its relevance lies in the knowledge that many single parents go on to re-partner. His explanation is quoted in full:

"Because researchers cannot conduct a true experiment and randomly allocate children to live with single or married parents, it is difficult to rule out the selection perspective. Nevertheless, many studies cast doubt on it. For example, some have found significant differences between children with divorced and continuously married parents even after controlling for personality traits such as depression and antisocial behaviour in parents. Others have found higher rates of problems among children with single parents, using statistical methods that adjust for unmeasured variables that, in principle, should include parents' personality traits as well as many genetic influences. And a few studies have found that the link between parental divorce and children's problems is similar for adopted and biological children - a finding that cannot be explained by genetic transmission. Another study, based on a large sample of twins, found that growing up in a single-parent family predicted depression in adulthood even with genetic resemblance controlled statistically. Although some degree of selection still may be operating, the weight of the evidence strongly suggests that growing up without two biological parents in the home increases children's risk of a variety of cognitive, emotional, and social problems." [146]

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

In *More Partners, More Kids* Karen Guzzo is pessimistic for children:

"Family complexity is unlikely to disappear; if current trends are any indication, we can expect more complexity in the future, concentrated among the least advantaged segments of our population. The increasing proportion of births outside of marriage shows no signs of reversal, and the proportion of births that are unintended has remained stubbornly high over the past decade (Finer and Zolna 2011). Cohabiting unions are increasingly unstable, and there is even some evidence that divorce rates are increasing (Kennedy and Ruggles 2013). Analyses here and elsewhere (Guzzo and Furstenberg 2007a) suggest that MPF is likely to rise over time. The consequences of family complexity, in turn, will also be larger for disadvantaged groups, given lower rates of paternity establishment, child support, and nonresidential father involvement." [147]

In practice, "…children may cumulatively receive fewer parental resources during their childhood and adolescence, as they may experience spells with only one parent or very short-term relationships with a parent figure (Cancian, Meyer, & Cook, 2011)." [148]

In 2020, Guzzo reviewed the pathways to parenthood and found, "…the one commonality that has emerged from existing research is that MPF is much more common among less-advantaged individuals." [149]

The parental resources available are not only scarcer but have to stretch further.

In an American study of male MPF, "… we found that multiple-partner fertility was more prevalent among certain groups: older men, African-American men (compared with white men and Hispanic men), and men who grew up in households that were not headed by two biological parents. We also found that men were more likely to have children with multiple partners if they had their first sexual experience at a young age, if they fathered their first child at a young age, and if they were neither married to nor cohabiting with the mother of their first child at the time of the child's birth. In addition, we found that multiple-partner fertility often occurred in conjunction with problem behaviours, including incarceration and drug use. Also, our analyses showed that although most fathers with multiple-partner fertility had children with just two partners, men who fathered children with more than one woman had more children, on average, than did fathers of two or more children with the same mother." [150]

With fertility rates on the decline in all western nations, a picture is emerging of fewer men fathering more children with disadvantaged and less educated mothers.

In a four-country analysis featured earlier, researchers studying MPF in Australia, United States, Norway, and Sweden wrote, "… Women who had their first birth at a very young age or who are less well-educated are most likely to have children with different partners. The educational gradient in childbearing across partnerships is also consistently negative across countries, particularly in contrast to educational gradients in childbearing with the same partner." [151]

An interesting twist is found in further Norwegian research into male MPF:

> "Multi-partner fertility … is positively associated with both disadvantage and advantage, as higher-order birth-risks with a new partner are more prevalent among men with low as well as high socioeconomic status. An intervening factor among the former may be more unstable unions and higher dissolution risks, while the elevated risk among the latter may be associated with their higher preferences for children as well as features that make these men more attractive as partners and fathers of future children." [152]

In 2016, using data from the US Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (N=3,062), it was determined, "Multi partner fertility was robustly related to self-reported delinquency and teacher-reported behaviour problems among children born to married mothers." [153]

Again, calling extensively on US research because NZ has no similar analysis, earlier work by Guzzo found that, "... maternal multipartnered fertility remained a significant predictor of both drug use and the timing of first sex even after accounting for selection into this family form and controlling for the adolescent's experience of poverty, unemployment, and educational disadvantage at the time of birth and throughout childhood."

Recalling the prior discussion about the effects of exposure to living in a step family after controlling for other factors, Guzzo emphasises the effect of MPF as distinct from associated disadvantages:

> "We found that among adolescents living with mother, having half-siblings increases the chances that an adolescent engages in risky behaviour relative to those with only full-siblings. These findings, taken in conjunction with work indicating that paternal multipartnered fertility is associated with poorer outcomes among young children (Bronte-Tinkew, Horowitz, and Scott 2009), provides strong evidence that multipartnered fertility is detrimental for children and adolescents, and **this is true beyond the substantial disadvantages occurring in non-intact families experiencing instability."** [154]
> *(author emphasis)*

But while Guzzo appears pessimistic about the US outlook, there are a few trends that bode well for the future.

The first is the steep decrease in teen births in New Zealand and similar countries. Children of very young parents frequently go on to experience stepfamilies and multiple transitions in care arrangements. Unsurprisingly, the Australia, United States, Norway, and Sweden study confirms, "…women having their first birth at a very young age were most likely to have children with different partners." [155] Proportionately fewer children are being born to the very young.

The second is a trend to delayed parenthood and first children being born into more stable partnerships. From the just-quoted paper, "…Women whose first births occurred at age 30 or older were somewhat less likely to have subsequent births but were especially unlikely to have them with a different partner." [156]

Third, in New Zealand at least, the incidence of non-marital births appears to have levelled off.

Fourth, in the US, unintended pregnancies fell from 59% in 1981 to 45% in 2011.[157] There is no longitudinal data for NZ but the trend may also be down given the abortion rate is falling.

Returning to the present though, New Zealand has no hard data on MPF or its close corollary, stepfamilies.

Four recommendations for government

In 1999, Robin Fleming wrote:

> "The high levels of divorce and remarriage in New Zealand suggest that a significant and growing proportion of all families will be families of remarriage. Approximately one marriage in three will end in divorce, and in one in three of all marriages, one or both partners have been previously married. Failure to identify these family types in census or household survey data means that they remain invisible and easily ignored."[158]

Twenty years on, the case remains. **New Zealand needs better data on stepfamilies.**

1. That could be achieved simply and inexpensively by asking an additional census question regarding the respondent's relationship(s) to dependent child(ren). In Australia the relevant question reads, "What is the person's relationship to Person 1?" with an option to mark, "Stepchild of Person 1."[159]

   The next New Zealand census is not due, however, until 2023, and there is even doubt about whether census collection will persist into the future. The UK's chief statistician Prof Sir Ian Diamond has warned that their country's 2021 census may be the last with preference being given to other survey methods in the future.[160] Should that eventuate in New Zealand, there is an alternative option.

2. Statistics New Zealand currently conducts the Household Economic Survey, the official source of New Zealand's child poverty statistics. In order to more accurately gauge the various aspects of poverty, the sample was increased from 3,500 households a year to 20,000 households in 2018.[161] The section of the questionnaire that pertains to Child Material Wellbeing asks the respondent about the presence of children under 15 in the household and whether the respondent is the parent.[162] This question presents an opportunity to ascertain whether the respondent is the parent, stepparent, grandparent or has another relationship to the child/ren in the household (simultaneously capturing information about dependent grandchildren, another growing group about which little is known.) The data could then be used to identify to what degree the relationship status affects children's material hardship and deprivation. But it would also be available to inform other policy areas.

3. In order to increase our knowledge about MPF, the next collection wave in the GUiNZ longitudinal study could, for instance, feature two questions: "Have you had a child with a different partner since the birth of the cohort child?" and "Does the cohort child have an older half-sibling(s)?"

4. Finally, an analysis of those lost to the GUiNZ study should be conducted. This could emulate Australian work[163] which investigated lost respondent's circumstances and characteristics at earlier waves. These mothers and their children may be especially subject to relationship turmoil and as such, among New Zealand's most vulnerable individuals.

   Understanding what is driving children's wellbeing (or otherwise) is fundamental to any country's future. If there are shortfalls that can be made up, or circumstances that can be avoided, we can only go forward from a position of knowledge.

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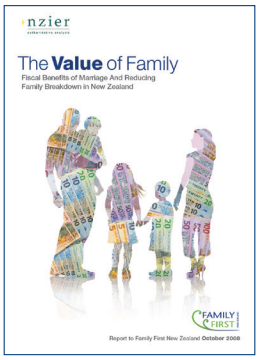

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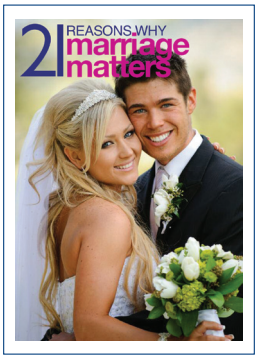

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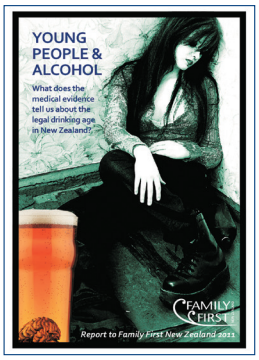

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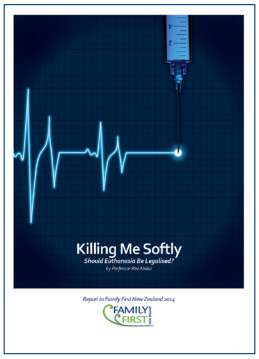
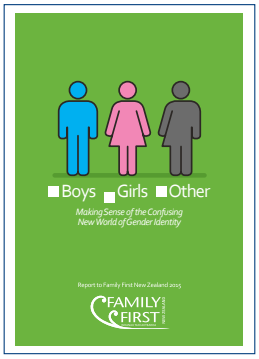
Daycare: 2012

Sex Education: 2013



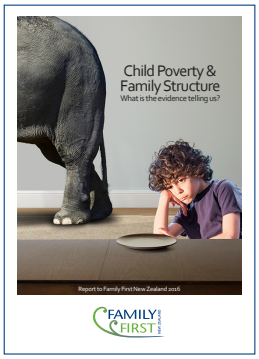
Euthanasia: 2014

Screentime: 2015



Gender Identity: 2015

Anti-Smacking Law: 2016



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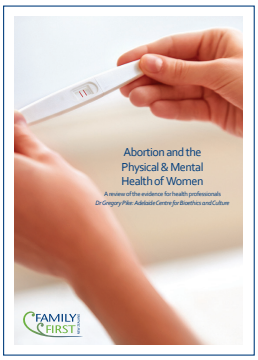
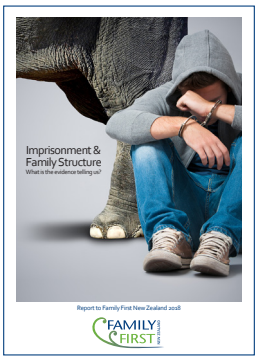
Child Abuse: 2016



Abortion & Health: 2018

Why Mothers Matter: 2018



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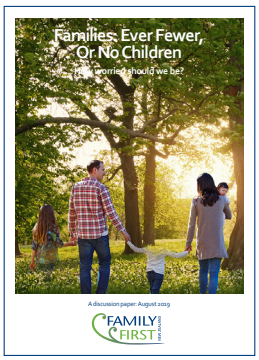
Dinner & Family Life: 2018

Why Fathers Matter: 2018

Children Transitioning: 2018



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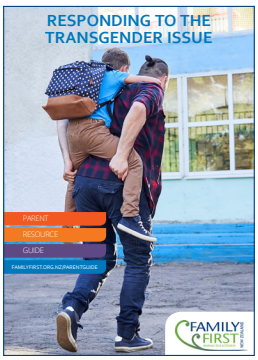

Parent Guide – Gender: 2019

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