An Exploratory Investigation of Parenting Practices in Stepfamilies

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There has been little research into parenting in stepfamilies. In this study, 66 New Zealand stepfamily parents completed an online questionnaire that examined four areas of parenting that have emerged as important for stepfamily functioning in international research. These included parent and stepparent preparation for parenting roles; the discipline of children in the early stages; the maintenance of childcare activities by parents; and, conflict between parents and children. As with overseas research, the majority did not discuss the management of children prior to repartnering. One in four parents attempted to share discipline with stepparents during the first year, a practice that has previously been found to be problematic. On the other hand, parents reported maintaining most childcare activities, and stepparents assisted with less intimate activities, such as housework and transport. Discipline, the stepparent role, and children's loss of status were common areas of disagreement between parents and children.

Researchers have concluded that children in stepfamilies are at increased risk of negative outcomes compared to children in first-marriage families (Amato, 2006; Bray, 1999; Coleman, Ganong & Fine, 2000; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002); and, also compared to children in sole-parent families in the areas of educational achievement, early-home leaving, and early sexual activity (Rodgers & Pryor, 1998). On the other hand, some parents, stepparents and children appear to find ways of relating to each other that are adaptive and established stepfamilies can provide good environments for child and adolescent development (Hetherington, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Despite the increased risks of negative child outcomes and the importance of biological parents to children, recent reviews have concluded that stepfamily researchers have given little attention to parenting and parent-child relationships in stepfamilies and instead have focused more on stepparent-child relationships and child outcomes (Cartwright, 2008; Coleman et al., 2000). Much of what we know about parents' experiences of raising children in stepfamily situations comes from longitudinal studies that have examined all stepfamily relationships (e.g., Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Bray, 1999). This current study allows for an exploratory investigation of a number of areas of parenting in New Zealand stepfamilies. It is part of a larger study, Couples Experiences in Repartnered (Step) Families, in which 99 stepfamily adults completed an online questionnaire that explored a number of different aspects of living in a stepfamily, including couples' preparation for repartnering and the challenges and rewards of parenting and stepparenting. A section of the questionnaire was completed by parents only (not stepparents). This section explored four areas that have emerged as important in overseas research and the results allow for a comparison with overseas studies. These areas include parents' preparation for the parent and stepparent roles; the discipline of children in the early stages of stepfamily formation; the childcare activities carried out by parents and stepparents; and, the areas of disagreement between parents and children. The background to each of these areas will be discussed.

The challenges of parenting in a stepfamily

Although authoritative parenting is associated with positive adjustment of children in all types of families, including stepfamilies, parents in stepfamilies are less likely to parent authoritatively (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Selection factors may account, in part, for this finding; that is, there may be a greater proportion of parents with personal difficulties in the repartnered population. However, parents who repartner after separation or divorce experience a further family transition with its associated stresses, challenges and changes. This transition involves a reorganization of family roles, rules, and the development of new steprelationships (Hetherington, 1999; Papernow, 2006), and these changes can place stress on parent-child relationships (Cartwright, 2008).

Parent-child relationships in stepfamilies

Early evidence of problems in parent-child relationships emerged from the first longitudinal study in the USA that investigated stepfamily relationships

in the 26 months after remarriage (Hetherington and Clingempeel, 1992). The researchers found that relationships between mothers and children were disrupted during the first two years and were more conflicted than those in non-divorced and established sole-parent families. Parenting by mothers had mostly recovered after two years, although children in stepfamilies still had more adjustment difficulties compared to those in non-divorced families (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Similarly, Bray and associates (Bray, 1999; Bray & Kelly, 1998) in the longitudinal Developmental Issues in Stepfamilies Study (DIS) found that relationships between parents and children were often fraught in the early months of stepfamily formation. Mothers in stepfamilies reported much higher levels of stress (three times higher than non-divorced mothers), experienced increased parenting difficulties, and were observed to be less attuned to their children (Bray & Kelly, 1998). On the other hand, children were observed to compete with the new stepparent over the parent's time and energy and to experience a sense of parental abandonment (Bray & Kelly, 1998). Although parent-child relationships improved over time, more difficulties were experienced again with children during adolescence compared to non-divorced families (Bray, 1999). These findings of increased discord between parents and children during the first two years of stepfamily living and again during adolescence (compared to those in first marriages) were supported by results from the Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Differences have also been found in children's feelings towards parents in stepfamilies and their satisfaction with the family situation compared to children from first-marriage families. Children in stepfamilies have been found to be less warm, less communicative, and more negative towards their mothers (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994); to report more unhappiness (Cockett & Tripp, 1994); to rate their family climates as more conflicted (Barber & Lyons, 1994; Kurdek & Fine, 1993); and, to rate parents as more hostile and rejecting (Shelton, Walters, & Harold,

2008). Adolescents in stepfamilies in Australia (Young, 1987), New Zealand (Hillcoat-Nalletamby, Dharmalingam, Koopman-Boyden, & Pool, 1999) and Britain (Kiernan, 1992) were also found to leave home at a younger age and were more likely to cite conflict as a reason for doing so. This current study examines parents' reports of areas of disagreement between themselves and their children in stepfamilies.

Preparing for parent and stepparent roles

Despite the challenging nature of the tasks ahead of parents, there is some evidence that many parents enter stepfamily living with little preparation or planning (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Ganong & Coleman, 1989; Smith, 2008). In the recent UK New Stepfamily Study (Smith, 2008), 150 mothers from a representative sample of British stepfamilies were interviewed, along with children and some stepfathers, about aspects of their stepfamily experiences. Only a third of mothers reported that they had discussed some aspect of the stepfather's role before cohabiting. The majority did not discuss this beforehand. Similarly, in an American context, Bray concluded from observing families in the DIS that many couples remarried without preparing for the challenges they would face or even understanding what lay ahead (Bray & Kelly, 1998). This current study asked parents if they talked about parent and stepparent responsibilities in the early stages of relationship formation.

Parent and stepparent activities and roles

Children's negative responses to the changed family situation and issues around management and care of stepchildren pose the greatest challenge for parents and for stepfamily couples (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; O'Connor & Insabella, 1999). Stepfamily researchers, when investigating parenting and stepparenting, have often examined the two dimensions or general classes of parenting - warmth and control (Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Fine et al, 1998).

As mentioned previously,

relationships with mothers are more conflicted in the first two years of stepfamily living (Bray, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002) and children may receive less attention and support from mothers due to the competition of the new couples' relationship for time and attention (Bray, 1999; Thomson, McLanahan, & Curtin, 1992). These results were supported by a series of qualitative studies conducted in New Zealand that investigated the parent-child relationship and the stepfamily processes that impacted on this relationship (Cartwright, 2005; Cartwright & Seymour, 2002). A common theme that emerged across the studies was children's distress at a loss of time and attention that resulted from the presence of the new parental partner.

A British study also suggests that stepparents may engage in regular childcare activities. The Step-Parenting in the 1990s study in Great Britain (Ferri & Smith, 1998) investigated the sharing of childcare and other domestic work by first-marriage and stepfamily couples. They found that stepfathers were actively involved in caring for and bringing up children, and in some cases, more so than biological fathers in first-marriage families. According to the reports of both mothers and stepfathers, six out of ten stepfathers shared equally in the care of the stepchildren compared to half the men in first-marriage families. The great majority of stepmothers also played a role in childcare and some stepmothers had taken major responsibility for the care of children. On the surface, stepparents taking responsibility for childcare may seem positive and parents may welcome it. However, the results from the qualitative studies, previously mentioned, indicate that it may be disadvantageous for children if stepparents take over too many activities as this may result in less time with parents – a change which may be considered undesirable by many children. This current study examined parents' reports of the activities and roles that they maintained with children and those that stepparents shared or took over.

Discipline of children

Problems around discipline are often

at the centre of stepfamily dysfunction and can result in conflict between parents and children, stepparents and stepchildren, and couples (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Papernow, 2006). After two decades of research, researchers and clinicians tend to agree that stepparents' attempts to take on a disciplinary role trigger resistance in children and are associated with adjustment difficulties and negative child outcomes (e.g., Bray, 1999; Coleman et al., 2000; Papernow, 2006). On the other hand, in established stepfamilies, some adolescents may respond well to an authoritative stepparent style (Hetherington, 1999). Though clinicians and researchers have made considerable progress towards understanding the problems associated with discipline in stepfamilies, there is ongoing evidence that parents and stepparents continue to struggle with issues around discipline and the stepparent role (Coleman et al., 2000) and it is unclear if research and clinical knowledge has filtered down to parents and stepparents. This study, therefore, examined parents' reports of parent and stepparent responsibility for discipline in the early stages of stepfamily formation.

As mentioned previously, the data reported and analysed in this current paper comes from a study conducted in New Zealand. This study used an online questionnaire that was completed by 99 adults living in stepfamily households. The results provide insight into current parenting practices in a group of New Zealand stepfamilies.

Method

Recruitment

The study was advertised through a number of different methods. The majority of participants responded to a newspaper article published in several community newspapers in greater Auckland. It was advertised on websites accessed by health and mental health workers, on one website accessed by men's groups, on a TV channel, and on a Radio website. It was also advertised amongst separated adults who had attended a programme in Auckland two years earlier. The programme, "Children in the Middle" was designed to assist separated parents to manage care issues with regard to their children (Gillard, 2006).

Participants

Participants came from a range of different stepfamily types and reflect the diversity and complexity of stepfamilies. These included simple and complex stepmother and stepfather families, some with mutual children, and with a mix of residential and non-residential children.

Ninety-nine adults completed the questionnaire. Sixty-six parents completed the section of the questionnaire titled Being a Parent in a Stepfamily. Their ages ranged from 30 to 34 years ($n = 4$), 35 to 39 years ($n = 21$), 40 to 44 years ($n = 20$), 45 to 49 years ($n = 15$) and 50 to 54 ($n = 6$). The cultural background of 11 participants is unknown. Of the remaining participants, 12 came from culturally mixed stepfamilies containing European, Maori and/or Pacific Island parents, partners or children. Forty-one participants lived in stepfamilies in which all members were Pakeha New Zealanders. Of the 66 parents, 45 were women and 21 were men. Of the women, 29 were both mothers and stepmothers, and 16 were mothers only. Of the 21 men, 12 were fathers and stepfathers, and 9 were fathers only. Hence, 41 participants had both children and stepchildren. Eleven of the participants had a mutual child, and three were expecting a mutual child.

All of the participants had children staying in the house at least 4 days a fortnight, except two parents whose previously residential children had left home; and 62 participants had children in the household at least half the time or more. There was an average of 2.8 resident children per household, with a range of one to eight. Another 37 children were spending time in a stepfamily household (less than 4 days a fortnight); and, 25 children were non-resident, either because they had grown up and left home, or changed residence to live with another parent. Including both resident and non-resident children, there was an average of 3.7 children per stepfamily household.

Procedure

The questionnaire was developed, and following ethics approval from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, was placed online using a survey website. A participant information sheet and a secure link to the online website were provided to participants who expressed interest in the study. The questionnaire contained a series of multiple-choice and open-ended questions and some participants responded in-depth to the latter. It could be completed in 30 minutes although some participants reported taking longer.

Sixty-six parents responded to the questions below. Some questions provided multiple-choice responses; some were open-ended and provided participants with as much space as needed; and, some questions had spaces that allowed participants to create lists. The questions include:

1. When you first began living together, how did you and your partner work out who would do what with the children?

2. When you first lived in the stepfamily household, who did the disciplining of the children?

3. As the parent, what roles or activities did you continue with your children? Please list as many as you can and in order of importance (e.g., I continued to make breakfast for them, get lunches…, put to bed).

4. Were there any roles or activities that you did less of, or that your partner took over or shared?

5. Where there any issues that you and your child/ren disagreed about or had conflict over?

6. Please give some more detail about disagreements between you and your children. Write as much or as little as you would like.

Data analysis

Four of the questions generated qualitative data. Categorical analyses of the qualitative data were conducted for each question using the methods described by Bowling (1997). The data were examined and the responses were grouped into categories of related data. These categories were further examined for consistency. Sometimes smaller categories were placed together to

create a broader category (for example, in stepparent activities, responses around housework and shopping for the household were put together in a category titled "household work and chores").

Two questions were multiple-choice. The frequencies of responses were collated and percentages calculated. Some questions provided participants with an "Other" response, which allowed them to comment further. During data analysis, these responses were examined and placed under the response that most closely fitted. However, the "other" responses were also examined for content and the results of these analyses are also reported. As will be seen in the results, participants occasionally ticked two boxes as they perceived that these were both relevant to them.

Results

The results section presents an analysis of the responses to the six questions outlined previously.

When you first began living together, how did you and your partner work out who would do what with the children?

Participants were given six choices of answer to this question. Some participants ticked more than one box. For example, one mother said,

The two boxes I have ticked seem contradictory, however for some things we never talked about it, it just fell into place, and over others we argued all the time and couldn't agree.

Of the 66 participants, 41% indicated that they did not talk about the care of children in the early stages of stepfamily living. Of the remainder, 45.5% said they had not talked about it, but did so as the issues arose and worked it out; 12.1% talked about it as the issues arose but we not able to agree; 9.1% never talked about it, but it fell into place; and 3% (2) argued all the time and could not agree. (Please note that the percentages indicate the number of participants who selected each of the responses, and as some participants ticked two choices, the sum is greater than 100%).

The fourteen participants who

ticked "Other" referred in different ways to the complexity of the situation. For example, as one mother said:

We keep on talking about it as life goes on. Just because we think we have agreed doesn't mean that things go smoothly!

Overall, these results support previous studies that suggest that the majority of stepfamily couples do not talk ahead of time about how they will manage the care and discipline of children and attempt to deal with the issues as they arise.

Discipline of the children

As discussed previously, issues around discipline impact child and stepfamily adjustment. Early adoption of a discipline role for stepparents is associated with negative outcomes for children (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). This question aimed to examine parents' approaches to discipline in the early stages of stepfamily living.

When you first lived in the stepfamily household, who did the disciplining of children?

The participants were given three choices: 76.9% of parents indicated that they had taken care of the discipline of their own children; 1.5% said that the stepparent had done most of the discipline; and 24.6% said that they had shared the discipline. Some participants also commented in the "Other" category that attempts to share discipline had not worked. As one woman said,

I, as the woman, and one who had higher expectations, did most of the discipline of his children as well as mine. This wasn't particularly sensible or successful.

Another said,

My kids had major issues with him stepping in and disciplining.

Hence, analysis of this data suggests that the majority of parents continued to take responsibility for disciplining their children in the early stages, although around a quarter shared responsibility. Some parents commented that these attempts at sharing were problematic. These difficulties also emerge in the analysis of areas of disagreement between parents and children.

Parent and stepparent activities and roles

The next two questions examined parents' reports of their own and their partners' (stepparents') childcare activities. The participants were provided with 8 boxes in which they could list activities that they did with their children.

As the parent, what roles or activities did you continue with your children?

Sixty-five parents completed this question. Overall, there were 301 responses to this question, an average of 4 to 5 responses per parent. Eleven parents wrote in the 8 boxes that were supplied with 55% listing 5 or more responses. Seven broad categories of responses emerged from the categorical analysis of the data. These included: providing warmth or support; child-care routines; provision of food; school activities; providing transport; supporting social and extra-curricula activities; and "other" (a category of less frequently occurring responses). The most common response (57) was the provision of food in the form of meals or school lunches. Examples of statements include: "Make school lunches" and "organize the dinner".

Forty-nine responses were in the warmth or support category. These included comments about making time for children,

Spend time alone with them – go for a walk together, and talk, go to movies without my partner, go shopping together.

Some referred to providing emotional support or assistance with problems.

I provided emotional support and understanding. I hold the history of their experience.

Others made comments such as "constant reassuring that they were okay", "emotional support - important", and "encouraged him with any problems".

Fifty-three responses related to child-care routines. These routines were mainly for younger children. It can be argued that these activities are also support activities as they fulfil an important childcare role. These included activities to do with bathing

or showering, dressing, putting to bed, reading to the child in bed, or getting the child out of bed in the morning.

Forty participants named involvement or support for social or extra-curricular activities. These included children of all ages. Examples were: "Watched their soccer and rugby matches" and "organize social activities and weekend outings". Forty-six responses were school-related activities. These included helping them with homework or encouraging reading or study (18 named assistance with homework); helping them to prepare for going to school; and, taking part in parent-teacher meetings.

Some less frequently occurring responses did not fit under any of the above categories. These were examined, and included: responses related to doing house-work, and shopping (18); providing financial support or buying items for the children (8); guiding children or helping them with choices or decisions (6); and, comments about sharing roles with other family members (5).

Were there any roles or activities that you did less of or that your partner took over or shared?

There were a smaller number of responses to this question. Overall, parents named 160 (compared to 301) childcare activities that the stepparents do. Ten parents stated that they continued to do all or most of the childcare activities. Three main broad categories of stepparent activities emerged from the categorical analysis. These were: household work and chores; extra-curricula activities; and, preparation of food and mealtimes. Thirty-six responses were related to household work and chores. Examples of responses in this category are: "shared the housework" and "washing the clothes, shopping for clothes". The next most common category was food preparation and sharing mealtime. Twenty-seven responses related to preparing food, or sharing the preparation of food. These included: "getting him to cook meals (I get home later)", and "my partner made lunches for school as he also makes his lunch".

The next category included stepparent engagement with extra-curricular activities. Seven participants mentioned play activities and having fun. Others mentioned a range of sporting and leisure activities. Examples include: "playtime and at home entertainment", "boys activities (sport, scouts, outdoor activities)" and "playing games with her". Participants reported that stepparents also contributed to transport to school or to extracurricular activities. Other less frequent responses included assisting with routines (8), school related activities or homework (5), and support and warmth activities (8). These results suggest that stepparents in this group are less engaged with children than parents, and are involved in less intimate activities.

Disagreements with children

As discussed, there is evidence of increased negativity in parent-child relationships during the early period of stepfamily formation and again during adolescence. In order to examine areas of disagreement between parents and children, the participants were asked the following two questions. Were there any issues that you and your child/ren disagreed about or had conflict over? Please give some more detail about disagreements between you and your children. Write as much or as little as you would like.

Sixty-two participants answered the first question and 49 participants answered the second question. The qualitative data from these two questions were combined and a categorical analysis was conducted. Nineteen commented that they had no problems with their children, for example:

My children are very cooperative and understanding. They don't complain and try hard to get on well in the family.

Some of this group referred to the children's age, for example, "There aren't any. He is too young", and "no, too young". Others commented that the disagreements with children were normal or that they did not perceive the disagreements with their children to be related to being in a stepfamily, for example,

I'm not sure that there are any that are specific to being in a stepfamily. Most are the usual disagreements about bedtimes, household chores etc.

Five categories of responses emerged from the remaining data. These were titled: discipline and rules; the "other" parent; loss of position or place; the stepparent's role; and, mutual children and stepsiblings. Fifty-one responses related to issues around discipline and rules. Some of the responses were brief, for example, "that the oldest child should help out more", "rules and boundaries", and "manners".

Some also made comments about discipline issues that related to the stepparent.

Manners, language and boundaries. They both at different times didn't think they needed to uphold them, and that if I can let (stepfather) do what he liked, then they should too. They are slowly getting the concept of being a child/young adult and having rules to go by and an adult not always having the same set of rules.

Twenty-seven responses were in the category titled: loss of position or place. This category included a number of responses about children's difficulties with parents' repartnering, and the ensuing changes. Some parents said that children had difficulty accepting a change in position or role, for example, "feeling like they were second", and, "(arguing about) who had the right to sit in the front seat of my car (her or her step father). The mother below talks about her sons' concerns about the potential loss of the "team" they had developed.

The boys felt they didn't know him well enough for him to have moved in, I had known him for years as a friend, but he was new to them. The boys had grown up with no male in my house and the eldest had essentially become the Alpha male, with the other one often trying for that place too. They thought the team and "mates" we were would be jeopardized.

Parents also talked about their children's concerns about having to share parents with stepparents or stepsiblings, and loss of time with parents. Examples included: "my sons worried about me making enough time for them", "having to share me", "they resented time I spent

with my partner and his children away from them", and "my son liked to know he was loved more than my partner".

Some also mentioned a change in the child's position in the family, for example "loss of position in family structure from oldest to middle child", and also the child's loss of control associated with the presence of the stepsiblings,

We had a lot of problems with my son, especially at first as he was not used to having to share his toys etcetera as was an only child. He was also used to having his own room and did not like having to share. The other children sometimes ganged up on him and he always got the blame for any disagreements between them and I had to constantly tell him off for hitting the other children, as he would react badly to them being in his way or using his things. This has improved a bit over time. They are more used to each other.

Twenty-five participants named issues around the stepparent role or the child's relationship with the stepparent as sources of disagreement. Half the comments were about discipline but were put in this category as they related directly to stepparent discipline. Examples included: "My elder son resented the one occasion I asked my partner to step in and discipline him", and "If Jim (stepfather) disciplines my son, my son doesn't like being told what to do by Jim, and my son feels harassed by my husband".

Other comments related to discomfort or confusion about the role of the stepparent, for example,

Having two fathers wasn't easy, and what my kids have found really hard is not being able to name the relationship of my partner and his children. They will not use the step-term and I agree with them.

Loyalty issues were also mentioned by a small number of participants.

The really hard thing is loyalty to their other parent, and being able to accept my partner in the 'father' role without conflict.

Thirteen responses concerned the

ex-partner or custody arrangements. Finally, 18 responses concerned disagreements about the impact of relationships with stepsiblings or mutual children. Responses included: "his children bringing many friends over for meals and staying over" and "my son perceiving he was treated differently from the others". Three parents referred to their children's difficulty with the presence of a mutual child.

My son struggled a lot with new baby and suddenly being one of three children. We experienced a great deal of conflict and behavioral issues with him. (Mother).

As can be seen from these comments, issues of disagreement about stepsiblings or mutual children were also often related to children's experience of a loss of place or position in the family or in the relationship with the biological parent.

Discussion

This study investigated 66 New Zealand stepfamily parents' reports of preparation for the parent and stepparent roles, responsibility for discipline in the early stages of living in a stepfamily, responsibility for childcare, and areas of disagreement between parents and children. These are areas that have emerged as important in international research and this study examines these areas in a New Zealand context. Similar to the results from a recent British study (Smith, 2008), around 60% of parents reported that they did not talk ahead of time about the care and management of children. This lack of preparation may be due to unrealistically positive expectations held by many adults prior to repartnering (Papernow, 2006). However, recent research evidence suggests that stepfamily couples may avoid sensitive topics more than first-marriage couples (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003) and be more likely to withdraw from discussions about difficult issues (Halford, Nicholson, & Sanders, 2007). Hence, the lack of planning may be due to avoidance of issues that might cause disruption to the newly developing couples' relationship. This lack of planning is potentially problematic given the challenges that repartnering couples face as they enter stepfamily

life.

Stepfamily researchers and clinicians have concluded that it works best for stepparents to build a friendship or a workable relationship with stepchildren prior to attempting any type of disciplinary role (Coleman et al., 2000; Papernow, 2006; Rodwell, 2003). Approximately a quarter of the parents in this study attempted to share responsibility for the discipline of children with the stepparents in the first year, although several of them commented on the problems associated with this. Problems associated with stepparent discipline also emerged as a source of disagreement between parents and children. This finding suggests that the guidance provided by stepfamily therapists and researchers (e.g. Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Papernow, 2006; Rodwell, 2002), regarding caution around stepparent discipline, may not be filtering down to some stepfamily adults and this is further supported by the surprise that some parents expressed at children's negative responses to stepparent attempts at discipline.

The areas of disagreement between parents and children that emerged demonstrate the challenges that parents face in the maintenance of positive relationships with children from previous unions and provide some explanation for the findings of increased negativity in parent-child relationships after remarriage compared to those in established sole-parent and first-marriage families (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Parents reported disagreements around a number of issues that are not relevant for first-marriage or sole-parent families and only arise in stepfamily situations: issues around children's acceptance of the new parental partner; stepparent roles and behaviours; stepparent discipline; the changes in family structure and children's place or position; loss of time with parents; and, the presence of non-biologically related children in the household. Repartnered parents and children simply have more potential issues to disagree about (Ferri & Smith, 1998; O'Connor & Insabella, 1999) and this study demonstrates that for some parents and children, these disagreements are about fundamental issues including the acceptability of

the parent's choice to repartner and children's perceptions of change in their status in the family and the life of the parent.

In regard to childcare activities, parents in this study appeared to take main responsibility for looking after children. According to parents' reports, the most common stepparent activities were extra-curricular activities, providing transport, and food preparation. This appears to differ from results of the Stepparenting in the 1990s Study in Britain (Ferri & Smith, 1998) as many British stepfathers and mothers reported that stepfathers were doing half of the childcare although much less housework. This current study suggests that stepparents are doing considerably less childcare and are engaged mainly in activities that involve less intimate interactions with children, including food preparation and housework. The current results are similar to those of O'Connor & Insabella (1999) who found that stepfamily parents in the longitudinal Non-Shared Environment of Adolescents Study (NSEAD) in the USA did more with their children than stepparents did. Though women in the NSEAD Study did more than men, the "ownness" of children significantly impacted the engagement with childcare and both mothers and fathers in stepfamilies reported that they assumed greater responsibility for children who were not the children of the partner. This suggests that cultural differences may impact parenting choices in stepfamilies. However, it is important to note that the different findings may reflect the different methodologies of the studies.

Some parents in this study reported that children were concerned about the perceived loss of parental time and position in their parents' lives. As argued earlier, it is important that researchers do not assume it is desirable for stepparents to become equally responsible for childcare given children's sensitivity to a loss of parental time and attention (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002; Papernow, 2006). It is also important for researchers not to assume that stepparent attention is equivalent to parent attention. It is the latter that children most need and benefit from (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002).

In terms of limitations, this study has been an exploratory investigation of some areas of parenting in New Zealand stepfamilies but did not allow for a full exploration of the issues that were covered. For example, participants were asked to create a list of the activities they engaged in with children. This did not provide in-depth information about the frequency and duration of these activities. Second, this sample was not necessarily representative of the New Zealand population. Even though New Zealand has a high per capita use of the internet, the participants were self-selected and the online status of the study may have discouraged or been inaccessible to some potential participants. Third, the sample included parents who had lived in a stepfamily for less than a year through to some who lived in established stepfamilies. This, combined with the qualitative data, meant that it was not possible to compare parenting practices in new and established stepfamilies. Fourth, this study relied on the reports of parents only and a full understanding of the parent-child relationship needs to include children's experiences and viewpoints.

On the other hand, the study does provide a strong argument for more focus on parenting in stepfamilies in New Zealand. Unlike the USA and Australia, New Zealand does not have a Stepfamily Association that disseminates information and provides education and support. In terms of future research directions, it may be timely to investigate the educational needs of stepfamily adults in New Zealand and also their access to stepfamily resources. It is also important to investigate the preparation that adults engage in prior to repartnering, including the ways in which they prepare children for stepfamily living and the difficulties, if any, they and their children experience in this regard. In order to gain a fuller understanding of the issues facing parents in stepfamilies, it is also important to include the experiences and views of stepfathers and children. Finally, there is a need to investigate cultural differences in the experiences of parenting in stepfamilies in order to be able to develop culturally appropriate information and resources.

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