



# A Comparison of Stepmother and Stepfather Families in Ireland

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# Introduction

- **Being part of a stepfamily is a risk factor for poorer educational, emotional, and behavioural developmental outcomes**
  - However, the effect sizes are small
    - (Amato, 2001; Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000)
- **Most children whose parents divorce or remarry do not have long-term negative outcomes**
  - (e.g. Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002)



# Family Structure vs. Family Processes

- **When family processes are taken into account, family structure has only a small relationship with child and family outcomes**
  - (e.g. Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991b)
- **There is an interactive effect between family structure and family processes**
  - Family processes are related to transitions in family structure, but those transitions also impact family processes and their effect on family members
- **It is useful to look at family structure in conjunction with family processes**



# Stepmother & Stepfather Families

- **Most residential stepfamilies are stepfather families**
- **Stepmothers often feel particularly stressed and have more problematic relationships with their stepchildren than stepfathers**
  - (Coleman & Ganong, 1997; Ihinger-Tallman, 1988)
- **Stepmothers are more involved in stepchild care and more likely to participate in limit-setting and conflict**
  - (Fine, Voydanoff, & Donnelly, 1993)



# The Irish Context

- **The support systems for divorced/remarried people are underdeveloped**
  - (Hogan, Halpenny, & Greene, 2003)
- **There has been little targeted research on stepfamilies in Ireland**
  - Much of the research in Ireland has focused primarily on children and parents who sought support after a divorce
    - (e.g. Fawcett, 2000; Halpenny, Greene, & Hogan, 2008; Hogan, Halpenny, & Greene, 2003)
  - However, these families tend to involve slightly more negative relationships, more conflict, lower marital quality, and more relationship coalitions than first marriage and are deserving of study
    - (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Coleman & Ganong, 1997; Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000)



# Aims

- **Examine demographics of Irish stepfamilies**
- **Gain an understanding of relational functioning within stepmother and stepfather families**
- **These aims were accomplished through analysis of the nine-year-old cohort of the Growing Up in Ireland data**



# Method

- **We looked at data collected from the caregivers of the 384 study children who were stepchildren**
  - 384 primary caregivers
  - 275 secondary caregivers
- **Considered a stepfamily if:**
  - Either the primary or secondary caregiver listed themselves as a stepparent
  - If the primary caregiver listed another member of the household as a stepparent
  - If the biological parent said that they were currently in a live-in, romantic relationship with someone who did not identify as the biological parent of the child



# Stepmother vs. Stepfather Families

	Stepmother Family (N=89)	Stepfather Family (N=295)
SP is Primary Caregiver	94.4%	0.0%
Married	78.3%	37.5%
Simple	90.2%	60.2%
Non-Res Parent Deceased	16.7%	8.5%

*Note:* All differences were significant using a chi-square analysis





# Romantic Relationship - Arguments

- In comparison with biological mothers in stepfather families, biological fathers in stepmother families were more likely to say they argued “most days” or “at least once a week” with their partners in general and with their partners about the children
- Stepmothers were more likely than stepfathers to say that they argued “most days” with their partner, and with their partner about the children



# Romantic Relationship - Happiness

- **No difference between biological parents in stepmother and stepfather families**
- **Stepmothers were less happy in their relationships than stepfathers**
- **No difference between stepfathers and secondary caregiver biological fathers**
- **Primary caregiver stepmothers were less happy in their relationships than biological mothers in stepfather families**



# Child-Parent Relationship

		Stepmother Family			Stepfather Family			Difference	
		n	M	SD	n	M	SD	p	d
<b>Biological Parents</b>	Conflict	63	23.06	6.81	295	23.12	9.72	>0.05	
	Closeness	63	<b>41.84</b>	6.43	295	<b>44.57</b>	4.39	0.002*	0.496
<b>Stepparents</b>	Conflict	86	25.87	8.31	214	24.35	9.18	>0.05	
	Closeness	86	41.74	5.88	214	42.79	5.52	>0.05	

*Note:* This table is comparing biological mothers in stepfather families with biological fathers in stepmother families and comparing stepfathers to stepmothers.

\*  $p < 0.05$  in an independent samples t-test



# Child-Parent Relationship

		Stepmother Family			Stepfather Family			Difference	
		n	M	SD	n	M	SD	p	d
Primary Caregiver	Conflict	84	<b>26.08</b>	8.31	295	<b>23.12</b>	9.72	0.012*	0.327
	Closeness	84	<b>41.65</b>	5.94	295	<b>44.57</b>	4.39	<0.001*	0.559
Secondary Caregiver	Conflict	58	23.08	6.75	214	24.35	9.18	>0.05	
	Closeness	58	41.76	6.64	214	42.79	5.52	>0.05	

*Note:* In order to make direct comparisons, stepmothers who were not the primary caregiver were excluded from these analyses. Comparisons are between biological mothers and stepmothers in the primary caregiver category and between biological fathers and stepfathers in the secondary caregiver category.

\*  $p < 0.05$  in an independent samples t-test analysis



# Summary

- **As compared to stepfather families, stepmothers have:**
  - Greater couple conflict
  - Lower marital satisfaction
  - Less close and more conflicted relationships with their stepchild



# Future Research

- **Changes in the relationships in these stepfamilies over time**
- **How stepmother and stepfather families develop the stepparent-stepchild and biological parent-stepparent relationships**
- **The different roles that stepmothers take and how they develop these roles**
- **Impact of the non-resident parent**



# Conclusions

- **Members of stepmother families may face particular challenges**
- **Stepmother families may be particularly likely to benefit from relationship and parenting support**
  - Programs that help to adjust stepmothers to parenting role may be particularly beneficial



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- **Hadfield, K. & Nixon, L. (2012). Comparison of relationship dynamics within stepmother and stepfather families in Ireland. *Irish Journal of Psychology*, 33(2-3), 100-106. DOI: 10.1080/03033910.2012.708900**