

Effective parenting in stepfamilies: Empirical evidence of what works

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Abstract

Objective: The purpose of this study was to examine research evidence about effective childrearing in stepfamilies (i.e., parenting practices that contribute to children's physical, cognitive, and emotional well-being).

Background: Stepfamilies are increasingly common. Studies show that children in stepfamilies tend to be at higher risk for negative outcomes than children in first-married biological-parent families. As research on stepfamilies has expanded, researchers have made strides in identifying parenting practices that promote positive outcomes for children in stepfamilies.

Method: We reviewed 37 studies that contained empirical evidence of effective parenting by biological or adoptive parents of children in stepfamilies.

Results: Researchers have identified numerous actions employed by parents that are linked to children's positive outcomes. Effective parenting practices fall broadly into five domains: (a) maintaining close parent–child bonds, (b) establishing appropriate parent–child communication boundaries, (c) exercising parental control, (d) supporting stepparent–stepchild relationship development, and (e) facilitating stepfamily cohesion.

Conclusions: Effective childrearing in stepfamilies involves carefully managing competing family needs, such as the need to balance shared family time with one-on-one parent–child time or the need to establish open parent–child communication boundaries in some areas but closed boundaries in others.

Implications: Parents have available to them a number of empirically supported action items linked to child well-being in stepfamilies.

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KEY WORDS

childrearing, remarriage, stepchild, stepfamilies, stepparent, systematic review

In the United States and across the world, stepfamilies are increasingly common (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016; Gath, 2016; Payne, 2019). The share of children who live with two biological parents has declined steadily over the last 6 decades, while the share of children who live with a parent and stepparent has increased (Pew Research Center, 2015). Nearly a quarter (24%) of first unions (cohabitation or marriage), 65% of second unions, and 74% of third unions form stepfamilies (Guzzo, 2016). Approximately 10% of American children live in stepfamilies at a given point in time (Eickmeyer, 2017), and by adulthood, more than four-in-ten Americans (42%) report having at least one step-relative (i.e., a stepparent, stepchild, half- or stepsibling; Pew Research Center, 2011).

As the prevalence of stepfamilies has increased, so too has research on stepfamily dynamics. A major focus of this research has been on the well-being of stepchildren. Family structure frequently has been analyzed as a predictor of child well-being, whereby children in stepfamilies are compared to children in first-married biological-parent families on a host of developmental outcomes (Jensen & Sanner, 2021). On average, researchers consistently report that children in stepfamilies are at slightly higher risk for negative outcomes than children living with both parents (Coleman & Ganong, 1990; Coleman et al., 2000; Raley & Sweeney, 2020; Sanner et al., 2018; Sweeney, 2010).

Multiple reasons have been proposed for stepchildren's poorer outcomes, and most of them point to children and adults experiencing greater stress due to family structure transitions (i.e., separation, divorce, and parental repartnering/stepfamily formation; Jensen et al., 2017; Schafer et al., 2017). For example, parental repartnering is associated with several changes children may experience—housing relocations, with potential loss of friends, neighborhoods, schools, and communities. In addition, parental repartnering frequently results in modifications in household income, reduced time with one or both parents, adapting to new household members (e.g., stepparents, stepsiblings), adjusting to new household dynamics and routines, and building relationships with new extended kin (e.g., step-grandparents [Chapman et al., 2016] and other stepfamily members).

In response to evidence that children in stepfamilies fare worse than children in two-biological-parent families, researchers have sought to identify factors and processes that promote positive outcomes among stepchildren (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). One major focus has been on parental childrearing as a potential buffer. Parents may be key resources for helping their children adjust positively to stepfamily life. How parents respond to their children's needs, and the strategies they use to foster warm, supportive, and cohesive family environments, is likely to affect children's levels of well-being.

Parents in stepfamilies, however, face unique challenges to childrearing that parents in nuclear families may not face. For instance, in stepfamilies childrearing happens simultaneously with the development of many new relationships. Biological parents must build and nurture new couple bonds, as well as potentially new relationships with stepchildren and other kin (e.g., in-laws), while maintaining and nurturing parent-child connections (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Stepfamilies also are unique in that the parent-child relationship predates the romantic partnership, meaning that the parent-child dyad has more shared history (Papernow, 1987). Although shared history may facilitate closer parent-child bonds, particularly when repartnering occurs following a lengthy period of time residing in a single-parent household (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002), it also positions biological parents for potential loyalty binds, as parents may experience guilt when dividing time and attention between children and new partners. For example, to make stepparents not feel like family outsiders, parents may focus

more time and attention on developing a strong couple bond while reducing time with their children (Visser & Visser, 1996). Childrearing in stepfamilies is complex, and parents may be faced with multiple, sometimes competing, demands on their time and attention. Identifying parenting practices that help children respond to changes they encounter and that lead to positive outcomes for them remains an important scholarly task.

In general, research on stepfamilies has been characterized by a focus on problems and pathology over resilience and functionality (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Stepfamily researchers have long called for greater use of *normative-adaptive perspectives* to studying stepfamilies (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). While this perspective does not deny the possibility of problems in stepfamilies or attempt to mask stepfamily challenges, it does seek to avoid focusing solely on the negative dimensions (e.g., stress and strain) of stepfamily life. This perspective calls for an agenda of stepfamily research that sheds light on both the positive *and* negative experiences of stepfamilies—exploring complexity, tensions, and ambivalence within stepfamilies—and that raises research questions that seek to identify factors related to effective stepfamily functioning. Guided by a normative-adaptive perspective, the purpose of this systematic review was to examine research on effective parenting in stepfamilies, defined as parental behaviors that contribute to children's physical, cognitive, and emotional well-being. We focused specifically on effective parenting by biological or adoptive parents (as compared to effective stepparenting in stepfamilies [Ganong et al., 2021b] or effective coparenting in stepfamilies [Ganong et al., *in press*]).

STUDY CHARACTERISTICS OF RESEARCH ON EFFECTIVE PARENTING IN STEPFAMILIES

The sampling strategy, inclusion criteria, and coding and analytic methods for this project may be found in Ganong et al.'s (2021a) overview of the What Works in Childrearing in Stepfamilies Project. We identified 37 studies that included at least one finding about effective parental childrearing in stepfamilies.

Most studies were conducted in the United States (92%), with one from Switzerland and two from New Zealand. The majority of studies were quantitative (65%), with about one-third qualitative, and only one mixed method investigation. First authors were from five disciplines: family science (11), psychology (10), sociology (eight), communication studies (four), and social work (three), with one author's discipline unidentifiable. Just over a third (35%) of the studies were of national samples; of these, 77% were large representative samples (e.g., National Survey of Children's Health [NSCH], National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health [Add Health], National Longitudinal Survey of Youth [NLSY], and National Survey of Families and Households [NSFH]). Although some of these data sets are longitudinal, only five studies about effective parenting in stepfamilies were longitudinal. Most studies were cross-sectional convenience samples (59%), or studies of only one wave of a longitudinal data set (24%). All reviewed studies were correlational study designs—a point which warrants consideration. Research on childrearing in stepfamilies has not sufficiently established causal links; researchers have identified parenting practices *linked* with certain outcomes but cannot determine that these behaviors *cause* these outcomes, and these results should be interpreted accordingly.

About 70% sampled one individual per stepfamily, usually the stepchild (77% of these), with five sampling parents only. Of the six studies with data from two individuals, half were child and parent and half were stepparent and biological parent pairs. Seven studies sampled triads comprised of parents, stepparents, and stepchildren (one also included two teachers). Sample sizes ranged from less than 10 to 2085. The mean sample size for studies of individual respondents was 675.25, for dyads, $M = 402.6$, and for triads, $M = 66.75$. Most samples were of

White respondents (only or primarily), with only a few including enough Black or Latinx respondents to examine them separately. None of the studies had enough Asian or Pacific Islander participants to analyze. Slightly over one quarter (27%) of the studies did not include information about the racial/ethnic makeup of the samples. Nearly 30% did not identify the socioeconomic status of study participants. When social class was assessed, respondents were often classified simply as middle class (30% of studies), with 27% of the samples having a range of socioeconomic statuses represented. Over 75% of the studies examined both mothers and fathers; three focused on only fathers and four only on mothers. Finally, most studies were guided by theory (11 were not). The most widely used theory was family systems, either as the sole theory ($n = 9$) or with other theories ($n = 6$). Additional theories utilized more than once included communication privacy management ($n = 2$), life course ($n = 2$), social capital ($n = 2$), and social constructionism ($n = 2$).

RESULTS

Within the scope of our larger review of What Works in Stepfamilies, studies reported in this paper explicitly addressed effective parenting in stepfamilies. Researchers identified parenting practices in five domains that are linked to positive outcomes in children: (a) maintaining close parent–child bonds, (b) establishing appropriate parent–child communication boundaries, (c) exercising parental control, (d) supporting stepparent–stepchild relationship development, and (e) facilitating stepfamily cohesion.

Maintaining close parent–child bonds

Given that stepfamily formation accompanies a number of transitions for parents and children, a major focus has been on how to maintain closeness and continuity in parent–child relationships in this time of change. Indeed, studies show that close parent–child relationships mitigate the stress children experience both during and after the transition to stepfamily life (Jensen et al., 2017; King, 2006). Closer parent–child ties are related to a number of positive outcomes for children in stepfamilies, including *youth flourishing* (i.e., the degree to which youth follow through with tasks, control their emotions, demonstrate curiosity, and are interested in school; Beckmeyer et al., 2020); *feelings of stepfamily belonging* (i.e., feelings of inclusion in stepfamilies, of being understood, of having fun together, and of being given attention; King et al., 2015); and lower levels of *internalizing and externalizing problems* (e.g., mental health problems, aggressive and delinquent behaviors; King, 2006; King, 2007; Schenck et al., 2009).

Maintaining close parent–child relationships may sound like a straightforward charge, but studies suggest that many parents struggle to invest in their relationships in ways that children perceive as equitable and unchanged during stepfamily formation. Youth perceptions of parent–child ties indicate less closeness, warmth, and parental involvement after remarriage (Day & Acock, 2004; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Many stepchildren worry about and are sensitive to perceived changes in their relationships with parents when parents repartner, describing fear, jealousy, and sadness over perceptions that parent–child relationships have taken a back seat to their parents' efforts to nurture bonds with new partners and their partners' children (Cartwright, 2005; Landon et al., 2022). Although parents may feel that they are successfully sharing their time between children, new partners, and new stepchildren, children may have very different perceptions of the changing nature of parent–child bonds. It appears that to “make new family but keep the old” requires considerable effort and intentionality on parents' behalf. So, what have studies found regarding what

parents do to effectively maintain close ties with children and bolster their well-being across the transition to stepfamily life?

Maintaining regular contact

First and foremost, preserving close ties with children after stepfamily formation requires maintaining regular contact and involvement (Petren et al., 2019). When children reside primarily with one parent after parental separation, their frequency of contact with nonresidential parents is linked to closer relationships with that parent and greater child well-being (Bray, 1999; Bronstein et al., 1994; Bzostek, 2008; Golish, 2003; King, 2007; Salem et al., 1998; Schwartz & Finley, 2006; Sweeney, 2007; Troilo & Coleman, 2013; Zimmerman et al., 1995). For example, among youth in father–stepmother households, more frequent contact with nonresidential mothers is linked to closer mother–adolescent and stepmother–adolescent relationships, which in turn are linked to fewer internalizing and externalizing problems (King, 2007). Similarly, among youth in mother–stepfather households, more frequent contact with nonresidential fathers is linked to children’s better behavioral adjustment (Bray, 1999; Bronstein et al., 1994; Bzostek, 2008), more positive self-concepts (Bronstein et al., 1994), less substance use (Salem et al., 1998), fewer depressive symptoms (Sweeney, 2007), and fewer psychological problems, especially for boys (Bronstein et al., 1994). Golish (2003) identified continual contact with nonresidential biological parents as one of the characteristics that distinguished strong stepfamilies from stepfamilies having difficulties—71% of strong stepfamilies reported that children had frequent contact with nonresidential parents, compared to 44% of stepfamilies experiencing more problems.

Clearly, the frequency of contact between parents and children matters for preserving close ties. However, the nature of contact with parents (also called *parental involvement*) can take many forms. It was measured in a variety of ways in the reviewed studies, ranging from the frequency of overnight stays, in-person interactions, phone calls, and exchanges of letters with parents (e.g., King, 2007) to composite scores measuring specific behaviors and interactions with parents, such as shopping, attending religious services, or talking about schoolwork or grades (e.g., Sweeney, 2007). These studies suggest that children can benefit from a variety of forms of interaction with nonresidential parents.

Protecting one-on-one time

Studies suggests that not all shared time with children has equal returns. Shared one-on-one time, or being together without others present, appears to be particularly beneficial (Cartwright, 2005; Kelley, 1992). When parents repartner, they often are eager for their children to bond with their significant others. To facilitate this bonding, parents may use family leisure time as an opportunity to engage in shared family activities with children, partners, and stepchildren alike (Ganong et al., 2021). In addition, nonresidential parents who have less frequent contact with their children may be highly motivated to capitalize on children’s visits by spending time as a group, engaging in activities that include children’s new stepparents and stepsiblings.

Although facilitating shared family time is indeed important, facilitating stepfamily bonding may be successful only insofar as parents also maintain one-on-one time with children throughout the transition to stepfamily life (Cartwright, 2005; Kelley, 1992). Losing parental time and attention may be particularly difficult given that children likely lived in single-parent households where parent–child ties may have become especially close prior to the entrance of a stepparent. Kelley (1992) found that in well-adjusted stepfamilies, parents were intentional about

setting aside one-on-one time with children, without other family members. The children in Cartwright's (2005) study who felt they had maintained close relationships with parents expressed approval of how their parents had managed the transition and prioritized their relationships. The parent-child dyads who were most satisfied were those who carefully guarded their alone time together. Activities such as playing games or sports, being helped with homework, shopping, going on trips, being in the car together, watching television together, or just talking one-on-one can provide important and meaningful opportunities to connect (Cartwright, 2005).

Displaying warmth

Children in stepfamilies also appear to benefit from regular displays of warmth and affection from their parents (Fine & Kurdek, 1992; Fine et al., 1993; Haberstroh et al., 1998; Hetherington et al., 1992; King et al., 2015). Behavioral examples of parental warmth toward children include praising, hugging, spending time, playing or working on projects, reading to them, having private talks, and eating meals together (Fine et al., 1993). In stepfamilies, these behaviors are positively related to parent-child relationship quality and negatively related to children's psychological maladjustment and behavior problems (Fine et al., 1993). Children's perceptions of parental warmth also are linked to feelings of stepfamily belonging (King et al., 2015), higher grades and self-esteem (Fine & Kurdek, 1992), and higher levels of child positivity (i.e., being warm, assertive, communicative, encouraging, and with a positive mood), which in turn are linked to fewer externalizing problem behaviors and higher academic achievement (Hetherington et al., 1992). Bonding with children by reading together—even picture books—also is linked to positive outcomes; when parents in stepfamilies read with children at least three times per week, children's standardized scores in reading improved from kindergarten to fifth grade (Shriner et al., 2009).

Establishing appropriate communication boundaries

Another major focus of research on effective parenting in stepfamilies has been on establishing appropriate parent-child communication boundaries regarding how much and what information they communicate to children (Afifi, 2003; Braithwaite et al., 2008; Kang & Ganong, 2020). On the one hand, intimate conversation between parents and children is beneficial to child well-being (e.g., Beckmeyer et al., 2020). On the other hand, openness in some areas, such as coparenting conflict in stepfamilies, can undermine both child well-being and parent-child relationship quality (e.g., Amato & Afifi, 2006). So, how do parents effectively balance the need for both openness and closedness in parent-child communication?

Focusing on children

When conversation is focused on children's thoughts, feelings, and needs, open communication proves beneficial. When children freely share their ideas and talk openly with parents about what is going on in their lives (e.g., about grades, school, friends, dating), they experience more positive outcomes, including youth flourishing (Beckmeyer et al., 2020) and feelings of stepfamily belonging (King et al., 2015). Child-centered dialogue communicates to children that parents care about them and that they matter, and *matter*ing to parents (i.e., feeling noticed and being an object of concern) is related to fewer internalizing and externalizing problems for children in stepfamilies (Schenck et al., 2009). Children who maintain close relationships with parents after

their parents repartner point to the importance of their parents listening to them, supporting them, and showing genuine interest in their day-to-day lives (Cartwright, 2005). In fact, knowing children's friends, a reflection of interest in and familiarity with children's lives, is related to greater youth flourishing and participation in extracurricular activities for children in stepfamilies (Beckmeyer et al., 2020). Openness between parents and children is not only good for the parent-child relationship, but also for the stepparent-stepchild relationship; for instance, when children perceive mothers as more responsive and available, they report closer relationships with stepfathers (Jensen & Shafer, 2013). Although open communication may be beneficial to parent-child ties, too much openness on certain topics can be problematic. Which topics should parents avoid in the best interests of their children?

Exercising restraint

Researchers generally find that effective parents in stepfamilies avoid talking with children about (a) circumstances surrounding the divorce, and (b) negative information about the child's other parent (Afifi, 2003; Braithwaite et al., 2008; Metts et al., 2017). Many children in stepfamilies feel they are exposed by biological parents to more private information about their parents and parents' relationships than what most children know about their parents (Braithwaite et al., 2008). Researchers find that inappropriate disclosures have consequences both for child adjustment outcomes and for parent-child relationships (Afifi et al., 2007; Metts et al., 2017). Effective parents do not reveal too much information to children, protecting them from feeling as if they are taking on adult concerns that they are not emotionally or cognitively equipped to handle or feeling pressured to choose one parent over the other (Ahrns, 2007; Braithwaite et al., 2008; Cartwright, 2005). For example, refraining from disclosing divorce-related details is linked to positive outcomes; when stepchildren perceive that their mothers have withheld details about the circumstances or reasons of the divorce, they report significantly higher levels of stepfamily satisfaction (Metts et al., 2017).

Stepchildren ultimately want their parents to understand that, "at their core, the children are just children" and should not be involved in matters that are beyond the child's emotional and maturity threshold (Braithwaite et al., 2008, p. 44). Children also do not want to serve as "go-betweens," and they want to be left out of issues that make them feel caught in their parents' disagreements (Afifi, 2003; Braithwaite et al., 2008). They prefer that coparents communicate directly to each other. In one study, researchers concluded that if parents find themselves prefacing or concluding their disclosures with statements such as, "I know you guys don't need to be hearing this" or "I shouldn't be saying this", then parents should self-monitor (Braithwaite et al., 2008, p. 41). Studies show that exercising restraint consistently yields better outcomes than badmouthing the other parent (Ahrns, 2007; Arditti & Prouty, 1999). In fact, there is evidence that children are more drawn to the parent who does not over-disclose, pull them into loyalty dilemmas, or retaliate against the badmouthing parent, and they respect the parent for their restraint over time (Arditti & Prouty, 1999). Ultimately, stepchildren want to feel centered in the attention and concern of their parents, rather than caught in the middle between them (Braithwaite et al., 2008). As one stepchild explained, "Think about your kids and not yourself, no matter how much pain you guys have put each other through, the effects of what is going on is going to affect your kids for a long time" (Braithwaite et al., 2008, p. 43).

Establishing rules

Effective coparents in stepfamilies manage informational boundaries with children by making and trying to abide by explicit rules about (a) what is appropriate and inappropriate to disclose,

(b) not talking badly about the other parent, and (c) not putting children in the middle of parental conflicts (Afifi, 2003; Kang & Ganong, 2020). Effective coparents also monitor the information they share with their children, so as not to overwhelm or stress them (Golish, 2003; Jamison et al., 2014). If coparents are not able to agree on communication rules together, individual parents who set communication rules for themselves can also reduce harmful disclosures that benefit their children's well-being (Afifi, 2003).

Exercising parental control

In addition to maintaining parent-child closeness and establishing appropriate parent-child communication boundaries, a third focus in the stepfamily parenting literature concerns best practices for monitoring, disciplining, and exercising parental control. The transitions that accompany stepfamily formation can disrupt family rules and routines. These changes may affect the extent to which parents, who also are negotiating changes in the family system, have the bandwidth to monitor children's activities to the extent they did before. *Parental control*, or the extent to which parents set limits for children, monitor their activities, and enforce rules, has been connected with positive child outcomes in stepfamilies (Brown & Rinelli, 2010; Fine & Kurdek, 1992; Fine et al., 1993; Hetherington et al., 1992; Sweeney, 2007; Willetts & Maroules, 2004). For example, the extent to which parents know children's friends, their friends' parents, their teachers, and their whereabouts when not at home is related to fewer behavioral and emotional problems for children in stepfamilies (Willetts & Maroules, 2004). Parental monitoring (or *parental supervision*) also is positively related to children's grades, self-esteem, and levels of warmth and positivity (Fine & Kurdek, 1992; Hetherington et al., 1992). Higher parental control by fathers in father-stepmother families is linked to lower levels of children's psychological maladjustment (e.g., sadness, depression) and higher quality mother-child relationships (Fine et al., 1993). Higher maternal control in mother-stepfather families is linked to lower odds of adolescents smoking or drinking alcohol (Brown & Rinelli, 2010). Examples of parental control in one study included placing limits on (a) the amount of television the child watches and the type of programs he or she watches; (b) whether children are allowed to be at home alone before school, after school, at night, and overnight; (c) whether children are supposed to let parents know where they are when away from home; and (d) whether children are required to complete chores or homework before playing, watching television, or going out (Fine et al., 1993).

Regarding discipline, consensus across studies is that child adjustment and stepfamily functioning is best when biological parents continue to be the primary disciplinarian, especially early in stepfamily formation, and especially with adolescents (Bray, 1999; Cartwright, 2005; Cartwright et al., 2009; Golish, 2003; Kelley, 1992; Michaels, 2006; Moore & Cartwright, 2005). Strong stepfamilies and struggling stepfamilies alike appear to struggle with ambiguity in parental roles, particularly surrounding the role of disciplinarian (Golish, 2003). Stepchildren and stepfamily therapists agree that biological parents ought to be responsible for discipline (Cartwright, 2005), and that stepparents can best contribute to effective childrearing by supporting parents' efforts (see Ganong et al., 2021b, for a full review of effective stepparenting). Even as stepparents gradually become more active coparents over time (e.g., more involved in childrearing decision-making), stepfamilies appear to operate best when biological parents are ultimately supported by stepparents in their disciplinary decisions (Ganong et al., 2015).

Finally, one study examined the specific type of disciplinary style used by biological parents in stepfamilies and found that, when parents use a reasoning-based disciplinary style, children in stepfamilies experience fewer depressive symptoms (Sweeney, 2007). Specifically, when adolescents did something of consequence wrong and mothers talked with them about it and helped them understand why it was wrong, adolescents in stepfamilies fared better.

Supporting stepparent–stepchild relationship development

A fourth theme in effective parenting in stepfamilies concerns parents' role in the development of stepparent–stepchild relationships, or the relationship between their partner and children. Some researchers suggest that the stepparent–stepchild relationship may be the most critical relationship to stepfamily functioning and a determinant of the survival of the (re)marriage (e.g., Crosbie-Burnett, 1984). Researchers and clinicians have identified the development of positive stepparent–stepchild ties as a critical stepfamily task (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Given that close relationships with stepparents are linked to positive outcomes for stepchildren (King, 2006, 2007; White & Gilbreth, 2001), what parents do to support the development of these relationships has received some empirical attention.

First, parents support stepparent–stepchild ties by having closer relationships and greater involvement with children themselves. Research generally supports a spillover effect between parent–child closeness and stepparent–stepchild closeness in that closeness to residential parents is positively associated with closeness to residential stepparents (King, 2006, 2007). Moreover, when parents are more highly involved and offer more support to children (e.g., with practical matters, household chores, giving advice), their spouses also are more involved with children (van Houdt et al., 2020). Therefore, many of the behaviors identified in the section “Maintaining Close Parent–Child Bonds” have benefits that may extend beyond the parent–child subsystem into stepparent–stepchild relationships.

Close relationships with parents, however, do not guarantee close relationships with stepparents. Parents support the development of stepparent–stepchild ties by *allowing* stepparents to be involved and by actively encouraging involvement. Gatekeeping is defined as “functions exercised by one or both parents that determine who will have access to their children and the nature of that access” (Pruett et al., 2003, p. 171). This may sound straightforward, but many mothers and fathers, intentionally or unintentionally, limit interactions between stepparents and stepchildren, also known as *restrictive gatekeeping* (Ganong et al., 2015; Ganong et al., 2020). Examples of restrictive gatekeeping include telling stepparents what they can and cannot do with stepchildren, supervising stepparents' interactions with stepchildren, criticizing stepparents' parenting abilities, and saying sarcastic comments while stepparents are interacting with stepchildren (Ganong et al., 2020). When parents engage in these behaviors often, stepparents engage in fewer *affinity-seeking behaviors* with stepchildren, actions intentionally performed to get stepchildren to like them and to feel positive toward them, which negatively impacts stepparent–stepchild relationship development (Ganong et al., 2020).

Parents may engage in restrictive gatekeeping for a variety of reasons, including being uncertain about the competence of stepparents as caregivers, wanting to protect the safety and well-being of their children, wanting to protect their role as primary parents, and wanting to maintain continuity of parent–child relationships and family dynamics (Ganong et al., 2015; Pruett et al., 2003). If stepparents have proven themselves to be unfit caregivers or harmful influences, there are good reasons to engage in restrictive gatekeeping and limit children's access to stepparents. Assuming, however, that stepparents are responsible and trustworthy adults, creating space for stepparents to interact with stepchildren, or *gate-opening*, is necessary for developing close ties. Given the benefits of stepparents' affinity-seeking (Ganong et al., 1999; Ganong et al., 2019), parents should be cognizant of the extent to which they needlessly restrict stepparents' interactions with stepchildren.

A third way in which parents support the development of stepparent–stepchild relationships is by carefully navigating their role as mediators of stepparent–stepchild conflict. Conflict in family relationships is inevitable, including between stepparents and stepchildren, and how parents handle conflict between their partners and children is of consequence (Coleman et al., 2001). On the one hand, when children view their mothers as open and responsive in terms of communication about stepfathers, they report closer relationships with stepfathers

(Jensen & Shafer, 2013). Parents' willingness to listen to children, as opposed to becoming defensive about children's issues with stepparents, may make children less likely to hold resentful feelings toward stepparents and thus facilitate relationships with them (Jensen & Shafer, 2013). At the same time, communication between parents and children that consistently excludes stepparents can result in triangulation, whereby conflict between stepparents and stepchildren is handled solely through parents, who become the mediator of all conflict. When parents remove themselves from the middle of stepparent–stepchild conflict and encourage stepparents and stepchildren to discuss problems openly and directly with each other, stepchildren describe better relationships with stepparents (Afifi, 2003). Afifi found that openness and direct confrontation in stepfamilies was one of the most effective tactics for minimizing loyalty conflicts.

Finally, parents support stepparent–stepchild relationships by minimizing children's exposure to conflict between parents and stepparents. Communicating a united front as a couple is effective not only for reducing triangulation in stepfamilies (Afifi, 2003), but also for promoting closer bonds between stepparents and stepchildren (Jensen & Schafer, 2013). One strategy parents use is to delay answers to children's questions until they have time to consult their partner and formulate a response (Afifi, 2003). When children feel that parents and stepparents agree on parenting issues and argue infrequently, they are more likely to report closer relationships to their stepparents (Jensen & Schafer, 2013).

Facilitating stepfamily cohesion

The final theme in effective parenting in stepfamilies concerns what parents do to facilitate stepfamily cohesion. Building solidarity as a family unit is a challenge experienced by nearly all stepfamilies (Golish, 2003). Stepfamily formation involves the merging of two sets of pre-established family traditions, routines, patterns of interaction, and shared meanings, and establishing a shared identity can be challenging. Fortunately, researchers have identified specific parenting strategies that are linked to greater stepfamily cohesion.

First, efforts to organize shared family time are key; spending time together as a family is important for both individual and family well-being (Baxter et al., 1999; Beckmeyer et al., 2020; Braithwaite et al., 1998; Fine et al., 1993; Henry & Lovelace, 1995; Hutchinson et al., 2007; Metts et al., 2013; Struss et al., 2001; Willetts & Maroules, 2004). One successful strategy is having shared family meals. The more nights per week parents in stepfamilies report having shared family meals (i.e., meals with everyone in the household present), the more positive outcomes their children experience (Beckmeyer et al., 2020). Specifically, having shared meals is linked to youth adjustment, stepfamily cohesion, and children's involvement in extracurricular activities (Beckmeyer et al., 2020; Fine et al., 1993; Hutchinson et al., 2007; Struss et al., 2001). Other routine shared activities such as going for walks, playing games, and even doing household chores together has been found to contribute to feelings of continuity and stability among adolescents in stepfamilies and to generate feelings of stepfamily belonging (Hutchinson et al., 2007). When stepfamilies engage in shared activities and daily routines more frequently, adolescents in stepfamilies also engage in less delinquent behavior, use fewer illegal substances, have fewer behavioral and emotional problems, and are more satisfied with stepfamily life (Henry & Lovelace, 1995; Willetts & Maroules, 2004). Some evidence suggests that cohabiting stepfamilies in particular may benefit from shared family activities; family meals, for instance, had a stronger positive association with positive developmental outcomes for youth living in cohabiting stepfamilies compared with youth in married stepfamilies (Beckmeyer et al., 2020).

Although studies show that family time is indeed important, these findings should be considered alongside the evidence that protecting one-on-one time between parents and children is

critical to strong parent–child bonds that promote child well-being in stepfamilies. Without a strong parent–child relationship, it is unlikely that parents’ efforts to promote stepfamily cohesion will be well received by children. Parenting practices found to promote children’s best outcomes appear to involve a delicate balance of facilitating shared family time and preserving one-on-one time with children.

Summary of what works

Researchers have made great strides in identifying parenting practices that promote positive outcomes for children in stepfamilies. These practices generally fall within the domains of (a) maintaining close parent–child bonds, (b) establishing appropriate parent–child communication boundaries, (c) exercising parental control, (d) supporting stepparent–stepchild relationship development, and (e) facilitating stepfamily cohesion. Specific behaviors that are linked with children’s well-being include maintaining regular contact and involvement during and after stepfamily formation; intentionally setting aside one-on-one time with children and spending quality time together; displaying warmth and affection; engaging in child-centered dialogue; establishing rules about (a) what is appropriate and inappropriate to disclose, (b) not talking badly about the other parent, and (c) not putting children in the middle of parental conflicts; monitoring children’s activities; maintaining the role of primary disciplinarian, with stepparents supporting parents’ disciplinary decisions; using a reasoning-based disciplinary style whereby parents talk with children about what they did wrong and help them understand why it was wrong; facilitating stepparent–stepchild interactions by minimizing restrictive gatekeeping behaviors; encouraging stepparents and stepchildren to discuss problems openly and directly with each other; minimizing children’s exposure to conflict between parents and stepparents; and organizing shared family time, such as shared family meals.

DISCUSSION

As stepfamilies became more common, researchers studied the implications of stepfamily living for child well-being, identifying numerous specific parenting behaviors linked to greater child outcomes. As a whole, this research suggests that effective parenting in stepfamilies involves managing competing family needs. For example, there is a need for both shared family time and one-on-one parent–child time. There is a need for parents to maintain open communication boundaries in some areas while maintaining closed communication boundaries in others. There is a need for parents to be both open and responsive to children’s concerns about stepparents and to encourage them to discuss problems directly. There is a need to exercise parental control (e.g., monitoring children’s activities) but not so much that it restricts stepparents’ involvement and undermines stepparent–stepchild relationship development. Parents are balancing a number of individual and family needs as they employ strategies that maximize their child’s well-being across the transition to stepfamily life.

To be sure, all families and relationships involve managing competing needs. Researchers have called these opposing motivations that contradict one another *relational dialectics* (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010). For instance, relationship parties manage the tension of autonomy versus connection, wanting both independence and freedom in relationships but also wanting intimacy and belonging. People also manage the tension of openness versus closedness, wanting both self-disclosure and privacy in families. Another contradiction is stability versus change—people find comfort in familiarity and routine yet yearn for novelty and excitement. Tensions and contradictions are inherent to family life, but the structural complexity of stepfamilies may make tensions surrounding competing family needs even more salient.

For instance, stepfamily formation not only increases the number of family subsystems within and across households, but also brings together family members who lack shared history—a context ripe for negotiating inevitable tensions and feelings of ambivalence. Moreover, stepfamily formation happens against the backdrop of cultural narratives that paint stepfamilies as either dysfunctional (e.g., *Cinderella*) or harmonious (e.g., *The Brady Bunch*), neither of which accurately depict the complex, meaningful, and nuanced realities of most stepfamilies (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Sanner & Coleman, 2017). At the same time, the bonds that hold stepfamilies together may not be as durable as first-family bonds, at least early in the lives of stepfamilies, making dialectic tensions in stepfamilies feel more stressful and perhaps harder to manage.

Parents' roles in stepfamilies are in many ways similar to their parental roles as single parents prior to the creation of the stepfamily household, but within a socio-emotional context that is dramatically different. Biological parents love their new romantic partners, and they love their children from prior unions, and yet those partners and children may be unsure of each other as they build new relationships, making the parent the fulcrum of an emotionally charged triangle that has enormous implications for couple and family stability. Parents are asked to do a lot, in other words, to facilitate individual and stepfamily well-being. Because parents are the main reason that stepchildren and stepparents are in relationships with each other, the parental role in stepfamilies may be particularly stressful and parents may need guidance in how to manage their roles and new relationships in stepfamilies.

Future research on what works

Although our understanding of effective parenting in stepfamilies has improved over the last several decades, major gaps in our knowledge remain. Most problematic is that this literature overwhelmingly relies on White, middle-class samples in heteronormative stepfamilies (e.g., mother–stepfather families, father–stepmother families). The lack of attention to racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual diversity in stepfamilies is troubling—researchers *must* do better to address the perpetual centering of White family experiences in this literature. This is particularly important given recent evidence that suggests that what we know to be true for White stepfamilies may not hold for Black, Hispanic, or Indigenous stepfamilies (Burton & Hardaway, 2012; Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis, 1993; Cross, 2020; Limb et al., 2020). For example, the very notion that family structure is consequential to child well-being appears to be true primarily for White youth (Cross, 2020). Using over 30 years of national data that tracked children's living arrangements from birth to adulthood, Cross found that living in a stepfamily does not carry the same costs for Black youth as for their White peers. For Black youth, access to resources is generally more important than family structure, suggesting that for families experiencing stress and unequal access to resources resulting from historic and contemporary structural racism, additional stress incurred by living apart from a biological parent is only marginally impactful (Cross, 2020).

Findings such as this highlight the need to better understand families in context, particularly when seeking to better understand how, and under what conditions, certain parenting practices may or may not yield positive returns. Although parents may have power to promote children's well-being in stepfamilies by employing certain parenting practices, we are wary of reinforcing a narrative that the extent to which families struggle or thrive rests entirely in the hands of family members. Though our goal is to empower parents by offering resources grounded in empirical evidence, we acknowledge that the stressors families experience, and the extent to which parents have the bandwidth to employ these parenting practices, is shaped by larger social forces, including the extent to which families are supported at the local, state, and federal levels. We believe that it is critical to move beyond family-level explanations of why families struggle

or thrive to confront socially structured privilege and oppression; that is, to connect family-structure research to the discussion of how and why our systems, laws, and policies have been designed to benefit some family structures to the disadvantage and exclusion of others (Letiecq, 2019). A discussion of “What Works in Stepfamilies” is incomplete without recognizing that our systems, institutions, and governing officials play key roles in shaping and supporting communities that are conducive to promoting effective parenting. Families cannot be understood outside of the larger social contexts in which they are embedded, and research opportunities are ripe for better connecting family dynamics to these larger social forces.

In addition to assessing contexts, more research is needed on what parents do to help their children adjust to stepfamily changes they encounter. In particular, more investigations are warranted on how much and what to communicate to children, and when. Additionally, more needs to be known about how parents can facilitate stepparent–stepchild bonding. Weaver and Coleman (2010) examined mother’s roles vis à vis stepfathers and stepchildren, but research is needed that examines the developmental outcomes for children when mothers and fathers engage in different gate-closing/gate-opening strategies. Gathering the perspectives of both adults and children may be beneficial in exploring effective behaviors that result in positive outcomes. Finally, there is a great need for more diverse designs in studies of what works for effective parenting in stepfamilies. For example, much of what we know about stepfamilies comes from cross-sectional study designs; more longitudinal research is critical to examining how associations between parenting behaviors and child outcomes change over time with respect to children’s ages and developmental contexts. Promising opportunities lie ahead as researchers seek to better understand the complex interactions of family contexts, parenting practices, and individual and relational well-being in stepfamilies.

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