

CHAPTER 15



© Laurie DeVault Photography

New Beginnings: Single-Parent Families, Remarriages, and Blended Families

Outline

Single-Parent Families 526

- Characteristics of Single-Parent Families 527
- Children in Single-Parent Families 529
- Successful Single Parenting 531

Binuclear Families 532

- Mother/Stepmother–Father/Stepfather Subsystems 532
- Recoupling: Courtship in Repartnering 533

Remarriage 534

- Remarriage Rates 534
- Characteristics of Remarriage 535
- Marital Satisfaction and Stability in Remarriage 536

Blended Families 536

- A Different Kind of Family 537
- The Developmental Stages of Blended Families 538
- Problems of Women and Men in Stepfamilies 540
- Conflict in Stepfamilies 541
- Family Strengths of Blended Families 545

Summary 546

What Do YOU Think?

Are the following statements **TRUE** or **FALSE**?

You may be surprised by the answers (see answer key on the following page).

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| T | F | 1 Researchers are increasingly viewing stepfamilies as normal families. |
| T | F | 2 Divorce does not end families. |
| T | F | 3 Single parent families today are as likely to be headed by fathers as by mothers. |
| T | F | 4 Second marriages are significantly happier than first marriages. |
| T | F | 5 More than half of all marriages are remarriages for both spouses. |
| T | F | 6 Children tend to have greater power in single-parent families than in traditional nuclear families. |
| T | F | 7 Becoming a stepfamily is a process. |
| T | F | 8 Stepmothers generally experience less stress in stepfamilies than stepfathers because stepmothers are able to fulfill themselves by nurturing their stepchildren. |
| T | F | 9 Researchers are increasingly finding that remarried families and intact nuclear families are similar to each other in many important ways. |
| T | F | 10 People who remarry and those who marry for the first time tend to have similar expectations. |

When Paige was 6 and Daniel 8, their parents separated and divorced. The children continued to live with their mother, Sophia, in a single-parent household while spending weekends and holidays with their father, David. After a year, David began living with Jane, a single mother who had a 5-year-old daughter, Lisa. Three years after the divorce, Sophia married John, who had joint physical custody of his two daughters, Sally and Mary, aged 7 and 9. Some eight years after their parents divorced, Paige and Daniel's family included: two biological parents, two stepparents, three stepsisters, one stepbrother, and two half-brothers. In addition, they had assorted grandparents, step-grandparents, biological and stepparents, uncles, and cousins.

Today's families mark a definitive shift from the traditional family system, based on lifetime marriage and the intact nuclear family, to a pluralistic family system, including families created by divorce, remarriage, and births to single women. This new pluralistic family system consists of three major types of families: (1) intact nuclear families, (2) single-parent families (either never married or formerly married), and (3) stepfamilies. **Single-parent families** are families consisting of one parent and one or more children; the parent can be divorced, widowed, or never married. **Stepfamilies** are families in which one or both partners have children from a previous marriage or relationship. Stepfamilies are sometimes referred to as **blended families**.

In fact, a third of Americans are expected to marry, divorce, and remarry, at some point in their lives (Sweeney, 2002). In more than 40% of current marriages, one or both spouses are remarrying (Goldscheider and Sassler, 2006). A third of all children are likely to live in a married or cohabiting stepfamily sometime before they reach adulthood (White and Gilbreth, 2001).

To better understand the world Paige and David live in, a world that you may or may not know well, we need to examine some major patterns in our

evolving pluralistic family system. In this chapter we examine single-parent families, binuclear families, remarriage, and stepfamilies. Because of this shift to a pluralistic family system, researchers are beginning to reevaluate these family types, view them as normal rather than deviant family forms (Coleman and Ganong 1991; Pasley and Ihinger-Tallman 1987). If we shift our perspective from structure to function, the important question is no longer whether a particular family form is deviant. (If we measure "deviant" by the statistical prevalence of a family form, the traditional nuclear family may soon become deviant.) The important question becomes whether a specific family—regardless of whether it is a traditional family, a single-parent family, or a stepfamily—succeeds in performing its functions. In a practical sense, as long as a family is fulfilling its functions, it is a kind of normal family. This chapter considers these versions of normal families.

Reflections

What effect does it have on your views of single-parent families and stepfamilies to think of them as "normal" families? As "abnormal" or "deviant" families? If you were reared in a single-parent family or stepfamily, did your friends, relatives, schools, and religious groups treat your family as normal? Why?

Single-Parent Families

In the United States, as throughout the world, single-parent families have increased and continue to grow in number (Burns and Scott 1994). Although no other family type has increased in number as rapidly, single-parent families may not be accurately or adequately understood. All too often, they are still treated negatively in the popular imagination, negated as either "broken homes" or as headed by women, especially teens, who casually bear children "out of wedlock." These images are clearly inadequate, based on ideas and stereotypes that misdirect us from a more accurate understanding. The "broken home" image is based on the ideal of the "happy" traditional family; the assumed irresponsibility of single mothers is based on moralism, occasionally mixed with racism, condemning women for bearing children outside of marriage;

Answer Key for What Do You Think

- 1 True, see p. 526; 2 True, see p. 532; 3 False, see p. 528; 4 False, see p. 536; 5 False, see p. 534; 6 True, see p. 530; 7 True, see p. 538; 8 False, see p. 541; 9 False, see p. 537; 10 False, see p. 533.

and the “promiscuous teenage mother” stereotype ignores the reality that most births to single mothers are to women older than 20. Finally, although more than 80% of single, custodial parents are female, these images overlook the situations and experiences of single fathers.

Between 1970 and 2002, the percentage of children living in single-parent families more than doubled, increasing from 13% to 28% (Fields 2003).

In previous generations, the life pattern most women experienced was (1) marriage, (2) motherhood, and (3) widowhood. Single-parent families existed in the past, but they were typically the result of widowhood rather than either divorce or births to unmarried women. Significant numbers were headed by men. But a new marriage and family pattern has taken root. Its greatest effect has been on women and their children. Divorce and births to unmarried mothers are the key factors creating today’s single-parent family.

The life pattern many married women today experience is (1) marriage, (2) motherhood, (3) divorce, (4) single parenting, (5) remarriage, and (6) widowhood. For those who are not married at the time of their child’s birth, the pattern may be (1) dating or cohabitation, (2) motherhood, (3) single parenting with the later possibility but no certainty of (4) marriage, and (5) widowhood. Finally, some who marry, divorce,

and remarry, may experience subsequent divorces and or remarriages; they embody the characteristics that comprise serial monogamy.

Characteristics of Single-Parent Families

Single-parent families share a number of characteristics, including the following: creation by widowhood, divorce, or births to unmarried women; usually female headed; significance of ethnicity; poverty; diversity of living arrangements; and transitional character. In addition, some single-parent families are created intentionally through planned pregnancy, artificial insemination, and adoption. Others are headed by lesbians and gay men (Miller 1992). Finally, many single-parent households contain two cohabiting adults and are therefore not *single-adult* households (Fields 2003).

Creation by Divorce or Births to Unmarried Women

Single-parent families today are usually created by marital separation, divorce, or births to unmarried women rather than by widowhood. Throughout the world, including the United States, single-parent families created through births to unmarried women are increasing at a higher rate than are single-parent families created through divorce (Burns and Scott 1994). In 2002, 34% of all births were to unmarried women. The number of children living with an unmarried couple more than tripled between 1980 and 2000. Today, 19 million children under age 18 live in 9.4 million households with either the mother only or the father only (Fields 2003; U.S. Census Bureau 2002, Table 58).

In comparison to single parenting by widows, single parenting by divorced or never-married mothers receives considerably less social support. Widowed mothers often receive social support from their husband’s relatives. A divorced mother usually receives little assistance from her own kin and considerably less (or none) from her former partner’s relatives. Our culture is still ambivalent about divorce and tends to consider divorce-induced, single-parent families as somewhat deviant (Kissman and Allen 1993). It is even less supportive of families formed by never-married mothers. Conservatives have recently returned to earlier forms of stigmatization by characterizing children of never-married women as “illegitimate” and their mothers as “unwed mothers.”



© Laurie DeVault Photography

■ *Unmarried adolescent mothers are empowered to build successful families when they have emotional and financial support from their families, educational and employment opportunities, and childcare.*

Headed by Mothers (and Sometimes Fathers)

More than 80% of single-parent families are headed by women (Zhan and Pandey 2004). This has important economic ramifications because of gender discrimination in wages and job opportunities, as discussed in Chapter 12. Still, at least 1.9 million men are custodial single parents, raising one or more children. Like women, men take different paths to single parenthood. They either divorce or separate from their children's mothers or they raise children from relationships in which they were never married.

Significance of Ethnicity

Ethnicity remains an important demographic factor in single-parent families. In 2002, among Caucasian children, 20% lived in single-parent families; among African American children, 53% lived in such families; among Hispanics, 30% lived in single-parent families, and among Asian and Pacific Islander children, 15% lived in such households (Fields 2003). White single mothers were more likely to be divorced than their African American or Latino counterparts, who were more likely to be unmarried at the time of the birth or widowed.

Poverty

Married women usually experience a sharp drop in their income when they separate or divorce (as discussed in Chapter 14). Among unmarried single mothers, poverty and motherhood often go hand in hand. Because they are women, because they are often young, and because they are often from ethnic minorities, single mothers have few financial resources. They are under constant economic stress in trying to make ends meet (McLanahan and Booth 1991). They work for low wages, endure welfare, or both. They are unable to plan because of their constant financial uncertainty. They move more often than two-parent families as economic and living situations change, uprooting themselves and their children. They accept material support from kin but often at the price of receiving unsolicited “free advice,” especially from their mothers.

Both mother-only and father-only families are more likely to be poor than are two-parent families; in 2000, 5% of married-couple families lived in poverty compared to 12% of single-father families and 25% of

single-mother families. Clearly, however, the association between single parenthood and poverty is greater for mothers than for fathers (Zhan and Pandey 2004).

Compared to *married fathers*, single fathers are substantially less well off. They are younger, less educated, less likely to have jobs, and more likely to receive public assistance and to live in poverty. They are also more likely to be African American. Min Zhan and Shanta Pandey show that the gap between married and single fathers has grown since 1980.

Matter of Fact

Among children in divorced single-parent families, 32.4% live in poverty (U.S. Bureau of Statistics 1996).

Diversity of Living Arrangements

There are many different kinds of single-parent households. Children under age 18 are nearly five times as likely to live with a single mother as with a single father (23% to 5%) (Fields 2003). Single-parent families also show great flexibility in managing childcare and housing with limited resources. In doing so, they rely on a greater variety of household arrangements than is suggested by the umbrella heading “single-parent household.” For example, many young African American mothers live with their own mothers in a three-generation setting.

Of perhaps more interest is that many “single-parent households” actually contain the parent and his or, more often her, unmarried partner. In 2002, for example, 11% (1.8 million) of the 16.5 million children living with single mothers also lived with their mothers' unmarried partners. A third (1.1 million) of the 3.3 million children living with an unmarried father also lived with their fathers' unmarried partners (Fields 2003).

Even in the absence of parents' *live-in* partners, parents' romantic partners may play important roles in their children's lives. For example, many children of single mothers and nonresidential biological fathers have a **social father**—a male relative, family associate, or mothers' partner—“who demonstrates parental behaviors and is like a father to the child” (Jayakody and Kalil 2002).

Along these same lines, single parents, especially mothers, often rely on a combination of state or fed-

eral assistance and **private safety nets**: support from their social networks on which they can fall back in times of economic need (Hamer and Marchioro 2002; Harknett 2006).

Social support, whether from family or friends, can lead to enhanced well-being and self-esteem among economically disadvantaged single mothers. These, in return, may lead to more effective parenting, even under difficult and highly stressful conditions. Without such support, mothers raising children on their own in economically distressed, potentially dangerous, urban neighborhoods are more likely to experience psychological distress, which then negatively affects their parenting behavior (Kotchik, Dorsey, and Heller 2005).

Transitional Form

Single parenting is usually a transitional state. A single mother has strong motivation to marry or remarry because of cultural expectations, economic stress, role overload, and a need for emotional security and intimacy. The increasing presence of social fathers, including mothers' live-in romantic partners, may be part of the reason low-income families increasingly cohabit rather than marry. The presence of such men can reduce the various pushes toward marriage or remarriage (Jayakody and Kalil 2002).

Intentional Single-Parent Families

For many single women in their 30s and 40s, single parenting has become a more accepted, intentional, and less transitional lifestyle (Seltzer 2000; Gongla and Thompson 1987; Miller 1992). Some older women choose unmarried single parenting because they have not found a suitable partner and are concerned about declining fertility. They may plan their pregnancies or choose donor insemination or adoption. If their pregnancies are unplanned, they decide to bear and rear the child. Others choose single parenting because they do not want their lives and careers encumbered by the compromises necessary in marriage. Still others choose it because they don't want a husband but they do want a child.

Lesbian and Gay Single Parents

There may be 2.5 million to 3.5 million lesbian and gay single parents. Most were married before they were aware of their sexual orientation or married with

hopes of "curing" it. They became single parents as a result of divorce. Others were always aware of being lesbian or gay; they chose adoption or donor insemination to have children. Said one gay adoptive father, "I always knew I wanted to be a father." A lesbian who was artificially inseminated said, "I started to get this baby hunger. I just needed to have a child" (Miller 1992).

Children in Single-Parent Families

Children born outside of marriage tend to suffer economic disadvantages that may then lead to other educational, social, and behavioral outcomes. Their disadvantages tend to be worse than those experienced by children of divorced parents or by children in two-parent, married households (Seltzer 2000). They are more likely to engage in high-risk, "health compromising" behaviors such as cigarette smoking, drug and alcohol use, and unprotected sex; are less likely to graduate from high school and college; are more likely to have a child outside of marriage and/or during their teens; are more likely to be "idle" (out of school and out of work), have lower earnings, and suffer lower levels of psychological well-being; and are more vulnerable to divorce and marital instability as adults (King, Harris, and Heard 2004).

The bulk of research on the effects divorced, single-parent households have on children points to some negative outcomes in areas such as behavioral problems, academic performance, social and psychological adjustment, and health. The gaps between children in such households and those whose parents remain continuously married are relatively small but consistent. As Paul Amato (2000) reports, especially when exposed to associated negative life events such as having to move or change schools, the effects of living in a divorced, single-parent home can create particular adjustment difficulties. The consequences appear to be linked to the lack of economic resources but also to the reduced money, attention, guidance, and social connections—what researchers call **social capital**—that fathers provide.

Parental Stability and Loneliness

After a divorce, single parents are usually glad to have the children with them. Everything else seems to have fallen apart, but as long as divorced parents have their

children, they retain their parental function. Their children's need for them reassures them of their own importance. A mother's success as a parent becomes even more important to counteract the feelings of low self-esteem that result from divorce.

Feeling depressed, the mother knows she must bounce back for the children. Yet after a short period, she comes to realize that her children do not fill the void left by her missing spouse. The children are a chore, as well as a pleasure, and she may resent being constantly tied down by their needs. Thus, minor incidents with the children—a child's refusal to eat or a temper tantrum—may be blown out of proportion. A major disappointment for many new single parents is the discovery that they are still lonely. It seems almost paradoxical. How can a person be lonely amid all the noise and bustle that accompany children? However, children do not ordinarily function as attachment figures; they can never be potential partners. Any attempt to make them so is harmful to both parent and child. Yet children remain the central figures in the lives of single parents. This situation leads to a second paradox: although children do not completely fulfill a person, they rank higher in most single mothers' priorities than anything else.

Changed Family Structure

A single-parent family is not the same as a two-parent family with one parent temporarily absent. The permanent absence of one parent dramatically changes the way in which the parenting adult relates to the children. Generally, the mother becomes closer and more responsive to her children. Her authority role changes, too. A greater distinction between parents and children exists in two-parent homes. Rules are developed by both mothers and fathers. Parents generally have an implicit understanding to back each other up in childrearing matters and to enforce mutually agreed-on rules. In the single-parent family, no other partner is available to help maintain such agreements; as a result, the children may find themselves in a more egalitarian situation with more power to negotiate rules. They can be more stubborn, cry more often and louder, whine, pout, and throw temper tantrums. Any parent who has tried to convince children to do something they do not want to do knows how soon an adult can be worn down.

Additional “handicaps” faced by single-parent families include the following:

- With only one adult in the household, if that adult is distressed, overwhelmed, or angry, the tone of the whole house is affected (Coontz 1997).
- Facing more intense time pressures, single parents are less able to participate in their children's schooling, and spend less time monitoring their children's homework (Coontz 1997).
- Parental depression, especially among custodial mothers, can affect their abilities to parent effectively and thus exposes their children to more “adjustment problems” (Amato 2000).
- Single mothers with higher levels of life stresses and less time for themselves are more likely to be anxious and to transmit their anxiety to their children. Repeated experiences of transmitted anxiety from mother to child can lead to chronic distress in children (Larson and Gillman 1999).

On the “plus side,” children in single-parent homes may also learn more responsibility, spend more time talking with their custodial parent, and face less pressure to conform to more traditional gender roles (Coontz 1997). They may learn to help with kitchen chores, to clean up their messes, or to be more considerate. In the single-parent setting, the children are encouraged to recognize the work their mother does and the importance of cooperation.

Although single parents continue to demonstrate love and creativity in the face of adversity, research on their children reveals some negative long-term consequences. In adolescence and young adulthood, children from single-parent families had fewer years of education and were more likely to drop out of high school. They had lower earnings and were more likely to be poor. They were more likely to initiate sex earlier, become pregnant in their teens, and cohabit but not marry earlier (Furstenberg and Teitler 1994). Furthermore, they were more likely to divorce. These conclusions are consistent for Caucasians, African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans. The reviewers note that socioeconomic status accounts for some, but not all, of the effects. Some effects are attributed to family structure.

Harriette Pipes McAdoo (1988, 1996) traces the cause to poverty, not to single parenthood. She notes that African American families are able to meet their children's needs in a variety of structures. “The major problem arising from female-headed families is poverty,” she writes (McAdoo 1988). “The

impoverishment of Black families has been more detrimental than the actual structural arrangement.”

Successful Single Parenting

Single parenting is difficult, but for many single parents, the problems are manageable. Almost two-thirds of divorced single parents found that single parenting grows easier over time (Richards and Schmiede 1993). As we discuss single parenting, it is important to note that many of the characteristics of successful single parents and their families are shared by all successful families.

Characteristics of Successful Single Parents

In-depth interviews with successful single parents found certain themes running through their lives (Olsen and Haynes 1993):

- *Acceptance of responsibilities and challenges of single parenthood.* Successful single parents saw themselves as primarily responsible for their families; they were determined to do the best they could under varying circumstances.
- *Parenting as first priority.* In balancing family and work roles, their parenting role ranked highest. Romantic relationships were balanced with family needs.
- *Consistent, nonpunitive discipline.* Successful single parents realized that their children’s development required discipline. They adopted an authoritative style of discipline that respected their children and helped them develop autonomy.
- *Emphasis on open communication.* They valued and encouraged expression of their children’s feelings and ideas. Parents similarly expressed their feelings.
- *Fostering individuality supported by the family.* Children were encouraged to develop their own interests and goals; differences were valued by the family.
- *Recognition of the need for self-nurturance.* Single parents realized that they needed time for themselves. They needed to maintain an independent self that they achieved through other activities, such as dating, music, dancing, reading, classes, and trips.
- *Dedication to rituals and traditions.* Single parents maintained or developed family rituals and traditions, such as bedtime stories; family prayer or

meditation; sit-down family dinners at least once a week; picnics on Sundays; visits to Grandma’s; or watching television or going for walks together.

Single-Parent Family Strengths

Although most studies emphasize the stress of single parenting, some studies view it as building strength and confidence, especially for women (Amato 2000; Coontz 1997). A study of 60 white single mothers and 11 white single fathers (most of whom were divorced) identified five family strengths associated with successful single parenting (Richards and Schmiede 1993):

- *Parenting skills.* Successful single parents the ability to take on both expressive and instrumental roles and traits. Single mothers may teach their children household repairs or car maintenance; single fathers may become more expressive and involved in their children’s daily lives.
- *Personal growth.* Developing a positive attitude toward the changes that have taken place in their lives helps single parents, as does feeling success and pride in overcoming obstacles.
- *Communication.* Through good communication, single parents can develop trust and a sense of honesty with their children, as well as an ability to convey their ideas and feelings clearly to their children and friends.
- *Family management.* Successful single parents develop the ability to coordinate family, school, and work activities and to schedule meals, appointments, family time, and alone time.
- *Financial support.* Developing the ability to become financially self-supporting and independent is important to single parents.

Among the single parents in the study, more than 60% identified parenting skills as one of their family strengths. In addition, 40% identified family management as a strength in their families (Richards and Schmiede 1993). About 25% identified personal growth and communication among their family strengths.

Barbara Risman’s (1986) research on custodial single fathers showed their abilities to be attentive, nurturing caregivers to their children. Rather than relying on paid help or female social supports, men became the nurturers in their children’s lives. They were involved in their personal, social, and academic lives and saw to it that their emotional and physical needs were

met. To Risman, they affirmatively answer the question in her title, “Can Men Mother?”

Reflections

If you are or have been a member of a single-parent family, what were its strengths and problems? What do you know of the strengths and problems of friends and relatives in single-parent families?

Binuclear Families

One of the most complex and ambiguous relationships in contemporary America is what some researchers call the **binuclear family**—a postdivorce family system with children (Ahrons and Rodgers 1987; Ganong and Coleman 1994). It is the original nuclear family divided in two. The binuclear family consists of two nuclear families—the maternal nuclear family headed by the mother (the ex-wife) and the paternal one headed by the father (the ex-husband). Both single-parent families and stepfamilies are forms of binuclear families.

Divorce ends a marriage but not a family. It dissolves the husband–wife relationship but not necessarily the father–mother, mother–child, or father–child relationship. The family reorganizes itself into a binuclear family. In this new family, ex-husbands and

ex-wives may continue to relate to each other and to their children, although in substantially altered ways. The significance of the maternal and paternal components of the binuclear family varies. In families with joint physical custody, the maternal and paternal families may be equally important to their children. In single-parent families headed by women, the paternal family component may be minimal.

To clarify the different relationships, researchers Constance Ahrons and Roy Rodgers (1987) divide the binuclear family into five subsystems: former spouse, remarried couple, parent–child, sibling (step-siblings and half-siblings), and mother/stepmother–father/stepfather.

Reflections

Are you a part of a binuclear family? If so, in what role? Which subsystems are functional or dysfunctional in your binuclear family? How do you imagine that conflict within the former spouse subsystem would affect children in a binuclear family?

Mother/Stepmother–Father/Stepfather Subsystems

The relationship between new spouses and former spouses often influences the remarried family. The former spouse can be an intruder in the new marriage and a source of conflict between the remarried

■ *Entered into with great enthusiasm, blending families is a complex process. In addition to new spousal roles, families must craft new parent-child relationships and new sibling relationships.*



Margaret Joanne Cotton Photography

couple. Other times, the former spouse is a handy scapegoat for displacing problems. Much of current spouse–former spouse interaction depends on how the ex-spouses feel about each other.

Recoupling: Courtship in Repartnering

Certain norms governing courtship before first marriage are fairly well understood. As courtship progresses, individuals spend more time together; at the same time, their family and friends limit time and energy demands because “they’re in love.” Courtship norms for second and subsequent marriages, however, are not so clear (Ganong and Coleman 1994; Rodgers and Conrad 1986).

For example, when is it acceptable for formerly married (and presumably sexually experienced) men and women to become sexually involved? What type of commitment validates “premarital” sex among postmarital men and women? How long should courtship last before a commitment to marriage is made? Should the couple cohabit? Without clear norms, courtship following divorce can be plagued by uncertainty about what to expect.

Remarriage courtships tend to be short, unless preceded by cohabitation. If we consider postdivorce cohabitation as an end point, even an intermediate one, in the “courtship process,” the process is shorter than would be indicated by marriage dates. Research on how postdivorce cohabitation affects the timing of remarriage shows that postdivorce cohabitation tends to lead to a longer waiting time until remarriage than is experienced by those who don’t cohabit before remarrying (Xu, Hudspeth, and Bartkowski 2006).

As noted earlier, almost one-third of divorced individuals marry within a year of their divorces. This may indicate, however, that they knew their future partners before they were divorced. If neither partner has children, courtship for remarriage may resemble courtship before the first marriage, with one major exception: The memory of the earlier marriage exists as a model for the second marriage. Courtship may trigger old fears, regrets, habits of relating, wounds, or doubts. At the same time, having experienced the day-to-day living of marriage, the partners may have more realistic expectations. Their courtship may be complicated if one or both are noncustodial parents. In that event, visiting children present an additional element.

Cohabitation

Increases in the rates of cohabitation in the United States include many divorced women and men who cohabit before or instead of remarrying. As great an increase as has occurred in premarital cohabitation, *postdivorce* cohabitation is even more common (Xu, Hudspeth, and Bartkowski 2006). Thus, although remarriage rates have declined in recent years, “recoupling” through cohabitation remains common (Coleman, Ganong, and Fine 2000).

Larry Ganong and Marilyn Coleman (1994) describe cohabitation as “the primary way people prepare for remarriage,” making it a major difference between first-time marriages and remarriages. This may reflect the desire to test compatibility in a “trial marriage” to prevent later marital regrets (Buunk and van Driel 1989). However, couples who lived together before remarriage did not discuss stepfamily issues any more than did those who did not cohabit (Ganong and Coleman 1994).

- Remarital happiness is about 28% lower for postdivorce cohabiters than for noncohabiters.
- Remarital instability is around 65% greater for cohabiters than for noncohabiters.
- As of now, it is impossible to determine whether postdivorce cohabitation or the types of individuals who cohabit (the selection effect) are responsible for the effect cohabitation has on remarriages. This should be familiar; we posed the same question about the effects of cohabitation on first marriages.

Matter of Fact

Recent research has found that having children in the home has a strong positive effect on economic distress and a strong negative effect on income (Shapiro 1996).

Courtship and Children

Courtship before remarriage differs considerably from that preceding a first marriage if one or both members in the dating relationship are custodial parents. Single parents are not often a part of the singles world because such participation requires leisure and money, which single parents generally lack. Children rapidly consume both of these resources.

Although single parents may wish to find a new partner, their children usually remain the central figures in their lives. This creates a number of new problems. First, the single parent's decision to go out at night may lead to guilt feelings about the children. If a single mother works and her children are in day care, for example, should she go out in the evening or stay at home with them? Second, a single parent must look at a potential partner as a potential parent. A person may be a good companion and listener and be fun to be with, but if he or she does not want to assume parental responsibilities, the relationship will often stagnate or be broken off. A single parent's new companion may be interested in assuming parental responsibilities, but the children may regard him or her as an intruder and try to sabotage the new relationship.

A single parent may also have to decide whether to permit a lover to spend the night when children are in the home. This is often an important symbolic act. For one thing, it brings the children into the parent's new relationship. If the couple has no commitment, the parent may fear the consequences of the children's emotional involvement with the lover; if the couple breaks up, the children may be adversely affected.

Remarriage

The eighteenth-century writer Samuel Johnson described **remarriage**—a marriage in which one or both partners have been previously married—as “the triumph of hope over experience.” Americans are a hopeful people. Many newly divorced men and women express great wariness about marrying again, yet they are actively searching for mates. Women often view their divorced time as important for their development as individuals, whereas men, who often complain that they were pressured into marriage before they were ready, become restless as “born-again bachelors” (Furstenberg 1980).

Remarriage Rates

More than 40% of all marriages in the United States are marriages in which at least one partner has been previously married (Coleman, Ganong, and Fine 2000; Goldscheider and Sassler 2006). Of those, 20% remarry

other divorced men and women, and approximately 22% marry never-married individuals (U.S. Census Bureau 1996). One out of ten marriages is a third marriage for one or both partners (Goldscheider and Sassler 2006).

Remarriage is common among divorced people, especially men, who have higher remarriage rates than women (Coleman, Ganong, and Fine 2000). Still, 54% of divorced women remarry within 5 years, and 75% remarry within 10 years (Bramlett and Mosher 2002).

In recent years, the remarriage rate has slightly declined. The decline may be partly the result of the desire on the part of divorced men and women to avoid the legal responsibilities accompanying marriage. Instead of remarrying, many are choosing to cohabit.

Paul de Graaf and Matthijs Kalmijn (2003) report that nearly all research indicates that the likelihood of remarriage is negatively affected by the presence of children and by the adult's age. The age effect, however, appears to be stronger for women. Remarriage is more likely among white divorced women and among younger women—women 25 years or younger at the time of divorce. Eighty percent of these younger women remarry within 10 years, compared to 68% of women older than 25 years at the breakup of their marriage.

African American women are less likely than Caucasian or Hispanic women to remarry. Within 5 years after a divorce, approximately 33% of black women, 44% of Hispanic women, and nearly 60% of white women had entered a remarriage (Bramlett and Mosher 2002).

In addition to age and ethnicity, socioeconomic variables such as education may affect remarriage rates, although research that has identified effects is not consistent. Education appears to work differently for women's and men's likelihood of remarriage, raising a man's likelihood of remarriage but reducing a woman's (Coleman, Ganong, and Fine 2000).

Gender

There are a number of reasons that more men than women remarry. First, divorced women tend to be older than never-married women. Given the tendency for men to marry women younger than themselves and that older women are seen as less attractive and therefore less desirable as spouses, women face more competition and possess fewer “resources” to bring to a remarriage. They are also more likely to have custody of children, which can reduce both the ease with

which they socialize or date and their appeal as potential spouses.

Presence of Children

Children lower the probability of remarriage for both women and men, but especially for women (Coleman, Ganong, and Fine 2000). The effects are most marked when a woman has three or more children. Most research, however, is 15 to 20 years old, and the increased incidence of single-parent families and stepfamilies may have decreased some of the negative effect of children. Whereas researchers generally speculate that children are a “cost” in remarriage, some point out that some men may regard children as a “benefit” in the form of a ready-made family (Ganong and Coleman 1994). Some research suggests that the stepparent with no biological children experiences the most negative effect (MacDonald and DeMaris 1995).

Initiator Status

Research suggests that initiators will be more likely to remarry than noninitiators (see Chapter 14). In their decisions about seeking a divorce, initiators may factor in the prospect for reentering marriage. They also may be “better prepared emotionally” than noninitiators to remarry. The advantage initiators have over noninitiators may be temporary because noninitiators lag behind initiators in the process of adjusting to and accepting the ending of their marriages (Sweeney 2002). Indeed, Megan Sweeney found that initiators enter new relationships “substantially more quickly than noninitiators,” with the effect operating for the first 3 years after separation for men’s remarriage patterns.

Need, Attractiveness, or Opportunity?

For women, the highest remarriage rate takes place in the 20s; it declines by a quarter in the 30s and by two-thirds in the 40s. What’s going on that accounts for the changing probabilities? First, they may have less drive to remarry. Second, they are more likely to have characteristics that affect their suitability to potential partners. Finally, the pool of eligible and available partners is smaller for remarriage, and grows smaller as women age. More potential partners of their same age will be already married. As a result of these processes, men and women may be willing to “settle for less.” They

may choose someone they would not have chosen when they were younger (Ganong and Coleman 1994).

The Remarriage Marketplace

There are three main contexts from which divorced women and men might find another partner: in the workplace, through leisure activities, and through their social network. Women and men who are employed and who are socially integrated are more likely to find a new partner. Employment affects their opportunities to remarry by adding the workplace as a venue in which they are likely to meet potential partners.

Matter of Fact

Research has concluded that remarriage indeed offers enhanced psychological well-being (Shapiro 1996).

Reflections

If you were seeking a marital partner, would you consider a previously married person? Why or why not? Would it make a difference if he or she already had children?

Characteristics of Remarriage

Remarriage is different from first marriage in a number of ways. First, the new partners get to know each other during a time of significant changes in life relationships, confusion, guilt, stress, and mixed feelings about the past (Keshet 1980). They have great hope that they will not repeat past mistakes, but there is also often some fear that the hurts of the previous marriage will recur (McGoldrick and Carter 1989). The past is still part of the present. A Talmudic scholar once commented, “When a divorced man marries a divorced woman, four go to bed.”

Remarriages occur later than first marriages. People are at different stages in their life cycles and may have different goals. Divorced people may have different expectations of their new marriages. A woman who already has had children may enter a second marriage with strong career goals. In her first marriage, raising children may have been more important.

In an early study of second marriages in Pennsylvania, Frank Furstenberg (1980) discovered that three-fourths of the couples had a different conception of love than couples in their first marriages. Two-thirds thought they were less likely to stay in an unhappy marriage; they had already survived one divorce and knew they could make it through another. Four out of five believed their ideas of marriage had changed.

Marital Satisfaction and Stability in Remarriage

According to various studies, remarried people are about as satisfied or happy in their second marriages as they were in their first marriages. As in first marriages, marital satisfaction appears to decline with the passage of time (Coleman and Ganong 1991). Yet although marital happiness and satisfaction may be similar in first and second marriages, remarried couples are more likely to divorce. As Marilyn Coleman, Larry Ganong, and Mark Fine (2000) note, “serial remarriages are increasingly common.”

How do we account for this paradox? Researchers have suggested several reasons for the higher divorce rate in remarriage. (See Ganong and Coleman 1994 for a discussion of various models explaining the greater fragility of remarriage.)

First, people who remarry after divorce often have a different outlook on marital stability and are more likely to use divorce to resolve an unhappy marriage (Booth and Edwards 1992). Frank Furstenberg and Graham Spanier (1987) note that they were continually struck by the willingness of remarried individuals to dissolve unhappy marriages: “Regardless of how unattractive they thought this eventuality, most indicated that after having endured a first marriage to the breaking point they were unwilling to be miserable again simply for the sake of preserving the union.”

Second, despite its prevalence, remarriage remains an “incomplete institution” (Cherlin 1981). Society has not evolved norms, customs, and traditions to guide couples in their second marriages. There are no rules, for example, defining a stepfather’s responsibility to a child: Is he a friend, a father, a sort of uncle, or what? Nor are there rules establishing the relationship between an individual’s former spouse and his or her present partner: Are they friends, acquaintances, rivals, or strangers? Remarriages don’t receive the same

family and kin support as do first marriages (Goldenberg and Goldenberg 1994).

Third, remarriages are subject to stresses that are not present in first marriages. The vulnerability of remarriage to divorce is especially real if children from a prior relationship are in the home (Booth and Edwards 1992). Children can make the formation of the husband–wife relationship more difficult because they compete for their parents’ love, energy, and attention. In such families, time together alone becomes a precious and all-too-rare commodity. Furthermore, although children have little influence in selecting their parent’s new husband or wife, they have immense power in “deselecting” them Marilyn Ihinger-Tallman and Kay Pasley (1987):

Children can create divisiveness between spouses and siblings by acting in ways that accentuate differences between them. Children have the power to set parent against stepparent, siblings against parents, and stepsiblings against siblings.

The divorce-proneness of remarriages seems to lessen and become more like that of first marriages as people age. People who enter remarriage after turning 40 may face a lower divorce likelihood than that found among first marriages (Coleman, Ganong, and Fine 2000).

Blended Families

Remarriages that include children are different from those that do not. These *blended families* that emerge from remarriage with children are traditionally known as *stepfamilies*. They are also sometimes called *reconstituted*, *restructured*, or *remarried families* by social scientists—names that emphasize their structural differences from other families. Attempting to focus more on the positive aspect of blending (and striving to steer clear of the negative connotations of “steps” as in “evil stepmother”), some refer to new stepchildren or step-parents as “bonus” children or “bonus” parents. A website for Bonus Families (<http://www.bonusfamilies.com/>), a nonprofit organization whose goal is to promote “peaceful coexistence between divorced or separated parents and their new families,” suggests that at different phases different terms may be more appropriate or acceptable:

At first you may not feel like a family. The label step-family seems just fine because no one really knows

their place and may hate being there, but as you get to know each other, you blend a little. Now you are at the second level, a blended family. The ultimate goal, however, is to become a bonus family. In a bonus family you feel appreciated for who you are even though you are not biologically related to everyone in the family. You play an active role in the new family *and* your family has developed a way to solve conflicts where everyone feels respected and cared for.

Satirist Art Buchwald, however, called them “tangled families.” In alluding to the complexity of relationships that result, his term comes close to the truth in some cases. Whatever we decide to call them, there soon may be more stepfamilies in America than any other family form (Pill 1990). If we care about families, we need to understand and support stepfamilies.

A Different Kind of Family

When we enter a stepfamily, many of us expect to recreate a family identical to an intact family. The intact nuclear family becomes the model against which we judge our successes and failures. But researchers believe that blended families are significantly different from intact families (Ganong and Coleman 1994; Papernow 1993; Pill 1990). If we try to make our feelings and relationships in a stepfamily identical to those of an intact family, we are bound to fail. But if we recognize that the stepfamily works differently and provides different satisfactions and challenges, we can appreciate the richness it brings us and have a successful stepfamily.

Structural Differences

Six structural characteristics make the stepfamily different from the traditional first-marriage family (Visher and Visher 1979, 1991). Each one is laden with potential difficulties.

1. *Almost all the members in a stepfamily have lost an important primary relationship.* The children may mourn the loss of their parent or parents, and the spouses may mourn the loss of their former mates. Anger and hostility may be displaced onto the new stepparent.
2. *One biological parent typically lives outside the current family.* In stepfamilies that form after divorce,

the absent former spouse may either support or interfere with the new family. Power struggles may occur between the absent parent and the custodial parent, and there may be jealousy between the absent parent and the stepparent.

3. *The relationship between a parent and his or her children predates the relationship between the new partners.* Children have often spent considerable time in a single-parent family structure. They have formed close and different bonds with the parent. A new husband or wife may seem to be an interloper in the children’s special relationship with the parent. A new stepparent may find that he or she must compete with the children for the parent’s attention. The stepparent may even be excluded from the parent–child system.
4. *Stepparent roles are ill defined.* No one knows quite what he or she is supposed to do as a stepparent. remarried families tend to model themselves after traditional nuclear families, so stepparents often expect that their role will be similar to the parent role. However, some are reluctant to assume an active parenting role, and some attempt to assume such a role too quickly. Children may resist the efforts made by stepparents to become involved in their lives. Most stepparents try role after role until they find one that fits.
5. *Many children in stepfamilies are also members of a noncustodial parent’s household.* Each home may have differing rules and expectations. When conflict arises, children may try to play one household against the other. Furthermore, as Emily and John Visher (1979) observe:

The lack of clear role definition, the conflict of loyalties that such children experience, the emotional reaction to the altered family pattern, and the loss of closeness with their parent who is now married to another person create inner turmoil and confused and unpredictable outward behavior in many children.

6. *Children in stepfamilies have at least one extra pair of grandparents.* Children gain a new set of step-grandparents, but the role these new grandparents are to play is usually not clear. A study by Graham Spanier and Frank Furstenberg (1980) found that step-grandparents were usually quick to accept their “instant” grandchildren.

Numerous researchers have found that children in stepfamilies exhibit about the same number of

adjustment problems as children in single-parent families and more problems than children in original, two-parent families (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991; McLenahan and Sandefor 1994; Nicholson, Ferguson, and Horwood 1999; Coleman, Ganong, and Fine 2000). Others suggest that stepfamily life may be more difficult for children than living in a single-parent household.

In addition, research reveals that relations between stepparents and their stepchildren are often of “low quality,” characterized by less frequent activities together than between biological parents and children, less warmth and support from stepparents to stepchildren, and less involvement by stepparents in monitoring and controlling their stepchildren’s activities (Stewart 2005).

A new partner is “a second pair of eyes and hands” who can share in the various, often burdensome, tasks of childrearing. Likewise, new partners can be sources of emotional and social support, strengthening the mother’s authority in the household, assisting her with difficult decisions, comforting her when parenting is stressful, and potentially inhibiting her from acting in negative or hurtful ways toward her children. Certainly, these effects will be for the better for children (Thomson et al. 2001).

The Developmental Stages of Blended Families

Individuals and families blend into and become a stepfamily through a process—through a series of developmental stages. Each person—the biological parent, the stepparent, and the stepchild (or children)—experiences the process differently. For family members, it involves seven stages, according to a study of stepfamilies by Patricia Papernow (1993). The early stages are fantasy, immersion, and awareness; the middle stages are mobilization and action; and the later stages are contact and resolution.

It takes most stepfamilies about 7 years to complete the developmental process. Some may complete it in 4 years, and others take many, many years. Some only go through a few of the stages and become stuck. Others split up with divorce. But many are successful. Becoming a stepfamily is a slow process that moves in small ways to transform strangers into family members.

Early Stages: Fantasy, Immersion, and Awareness

The early stages in becoming a stepfamily include the courtship and early period of remarriage, when each individual has his or her fantasy of their new family. It is a time when the adults (and sometimes the children) hope for an “instant” nuclear family that will fulfill their dreams of how families should be. They have not yet realized that stepfamilies are different from nuclear families.

FANTASY STAGE. During the fantasy stage, biological parents hope that the new partner will be a better spouse and parent than the previous partner. They want their children to be loved, adored, and cared for by their new partners. They expect their children to love the new parent as much as they do.

New stepparents fantasize that they will be loving parents who are accepted and loved by their new stepchildren. They believe that they can ease the load of the new spouse, who may have been a single parent for years. One stepmother recalled her fantasy: “I would meet the children and they would gradually get to know me and think I was wonderful. . . . I just knew they would love me to pieces. I mean, how could they not?” (Papernow 1993). Of course, they did not.

The children, meanwhile, may have quite different fantasies. They may still feel the loss of their original families. Their fantasies are often that their parents will get back together. Others fear they may “lose” their parent to an interloper, the new stepparent. Some fear that their new family may “fail” again. Still others are concerned about upheavals in their lives, such as moving, going to new schools, and so on.

IMMERSION STAGE. The immersion stage is the “sink-or-swim” stage in a stepfamily. Reality replaces fantasy. “We thought we would just add the kids to this wonderful relationship we’d developed. Instead we spent three years in a sort of Cold War over them,” recalled one stepparent (Papernow 1993).

For children, a man’s transformation from “Mom’s date” to stepfather may be the equivalent of the transformation from Dr. Jekyll to Mr. Hyde. Suddenly an outsider becomes an insider—with authority, as described by one 12-year-old (whose new stepmother also had children): “In the beginning it’s fun. Then you realize that your whole life is going to change. Everything changes . . . now there’s all these new people and new rules” (Papernow 1993). Children may also

feel disloyal to their absent biological parent if they show affection to a stepparent. (Biological parents can make a difference: They can let their children know it's okay to love a stepparent.)

AWARENESS STAGE. The awareness stage in stepfamily development is reached when family members “map” the territory. This stage involves individual and joint family tasks. The individual task is for each member to identify and name the feelings he or she experiences in being in the new stepfamily. A key feeling for stepparents to acknowledge is feeling like an outsider. They need to become aware of feelings of aloneness; they must discover their own needs; and they must set some distance between themselves and their stepchildren. They need to understand why their stepchildren are not warmly welcoming them, as they had expected.

Biological parents need to become aware of unresolved feelings from their earlier marriages and from being single parents. They may feel pulled from the multiple demands of their children and their partners. Biological parents may feel resentment toward their children, their partners, or both (Papernow 1993).

Children in the awareness stage often feel “bumped” from their close relationship with the single parent. They miss cuddling in bed in the morning, the bedtime story, the wholehearted attention. When a new stepparent moves in, their feelings of loss over their parents’ divorce are often rekindled. Loyalty issues resurface. If they are not pressured into feeling “wonderful” about their new family, however, they can slowly learn to appreciate the benefits of an added parent and friend who will play with them or take their places.

Middle Stages: Mobilization and Action

In the middle stages of stepfamily development, family members are more clear about their feelings and relationships with one another. They have given up many of their fantasies. They understand more of their own needs. They have mapped the new territory. The family, however, remains biologically oriented. Parent–child relationships are central. In this stage, changes involve the emotional structure of the family.

MOBILIZATION STAGE. In the mobilization stage, family members recognize differences. Conflict becomes more open. Members mobilize around their unmet needs. A stepmother described this change: “I started realizing that I’m different than Jim [the husband] is, and

I’m going to be a different person than he is. I spent years trying to be just like him and be sweet and always gentle with his daughter. But I’m not always that way. I think I made a decision that what I was seeing was right” (Papernow 1993). The challenge in this stage is to resolve differences while building the stepfamily’s sense of family.

Stepparents begin to take a stand. They stop trying to be the ideal parent. They no longer are satisfied with being outsiders. Instead, they want their needs met. They begin to make demands on their stepchildren: to pick up their clothes, be polite, do the dishes. Similarly, they make demands on their partners to be consulted; they often take positions regarding their partners’ former spouses. Because stepparents make their presence known in this stage, the family begins to change. The family begins to integrate the stepparent into its functioning. In doing so, the stepparent ceases being an outsider and the family increasingly becomes a real stepfamily.

For biological parents, the mobilization stage can be frightening. The stepparents’ desire for change leaves biological parents torn. Biological parents feel they must protect their children and yet satisfy the needs of their partners.

Children often attempt to resolve loyalty issues at this stage. They have been tugged and pulled in opposite directions by angry parents too long. Often the adults paid no attention to them. Finally, the children have had enough and can articulate their feelings. After hearing her parents squabble one time too many, one girl reflected: “I thought, this stinks. It’s horrible. After the 50 millionth time I said, ‘That’s your problem. Talk to each other about it,’ and they didn’t do it again” (Papernow 1993).

ACTION STAGE. In the action stage, the family begins to take major steps in reorganizing itself as a stepfamily. It creates new norms and family rituals. Although members have different feelings and needs, they begin to accept each other. Most important, stepfamily members develop shared, realistic expectations and act on them.

Stepcouples begin to develop their own relationship independent from the children. They also begin working together as a parental team. Stepparents begin to take on disciplinary and decision-making roles; they are supported by the biological parents. Stepparents begin to develop relationships with their stepchildren independent of the biological parents. Stepparent–stepchild bonds are strengthened.

Later Stages: Contact and Resolution

The later stages in stepfamily development involve solidifying the stepfamily. Much of the hard work has been accomplished in the middle stages.

CONTACT STAGE. In the contact stage, stepfamily members make intimate contact with one another. Their relationships become genuine. They communicate with a sense of ease and intimacy. The couple relationship becomes a sanctuary from everyday family life. The stepparent becomes an “intimate outsider” with whom stepchildren can talk about things “too hot” for their biological parents, such as sex, drugs, their feelings about the divorce, and religion.

For the stepparent, a clear role finally emerges—what is now called the **stepparent role**. The role varies from stepparent to stepparent and from stepfamily to stepfamily because, as shown earlier, it is undefined in our society. It is mutually suitable to both the individual and the different family members.

RESOLUTION STAGE. The stepfamily is solid in its resolution stage. It no longer requires the close attention and work of the middle stages. Family members feel that earlier issues have been resolved.

Not all relationships in stepfamily are necessarily the same; they may differ according to the personalities of each individual. Some relationships develop more closely than others. But in any case, there is a sense of acceptance. The stepfamily has made it and has benefited from the effort.

Reflections

If you are a member of a stepfamily, what were your experiences at the different stages? If you are not, ask friends or relatives who are members what their experiences were at the different stages. If you were to become a stepparent, how would you handle each stage?

Problems of Women and Men in Stepfamilies

Most people go into stepfamily relationships expecting to recreate the traditional nuclear family: they are full of love, hope, and energy. Although women and men may enter stepfamilies equally hopeful, they do not experience the same things.

Women in Stepfamilies

Stepmothers tend to experience more problematic family relationships than do stepfathers (Santrock and Sitterle 1987; Kurdek and Fine 1993; Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan 1999). To various degrees, women enter stepfamilies with certain feelings and hopes. Stepmothers generally expect to do the following (Visher and Visher 1979, 1991):

- Make up to the children for the divorce or provide children whose mothers have died with a maternal figure
- Create a happy, close-knit family and a new nuclear family
- Keep everyone happy
- Prove that they are not wicked stepmothers
- Love the stepchild instantly and as much as their biological children
- Receive instant love from their stepchildren

Needless to say, most women are disappointed. Expectations of total love, happiness, and the like would be unrealistic in any kind of family, be it a traditional family or a stepfamily. The warmer a woman is to her stepchildren, the more hostile they may become to her because they feel she is trying to replace their “real” mother. If a stepmother tries to meet everyone’s needs—especially her stepchildren’s, which are often contradictory, excessive, and distancing—she is likely to exhaust herself emotionally and physically. It takes time for her and her children to become emotionally integrated as a family.

One thing that makes stepmothering more difficult than stepfathering is the role women typically play in childrearing. Women are expected to and expect to become nurturing, primary caregivers, although this role may not be adequately acknowledged or appreciated by their stepchildren. Consequently, there are more opportunities for them to encounter stress and experience conflict with their stepchildren, and thus poorer relationships with their stepchildren may occur.

Stepchildren tend to view relationships with stepmothers as more stressful than relationships with stepfathers. If their biological mothers are still living, they may feel their stepmothers threaten their relationships with their birth mothers (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan 1999). Stepmothers married to men who have their children full-time often experience greater problems than stepmothers whose children are with them part-time or occasionally (Furstenberg and Nord

1985). Bitter custody fights may leave children emotionally troubled and hostile to stepmothers. In other instances, children (especially adolescents) may have moved into their father's home because their mother could no longer handle them. In either case, the stepmother may be required to parent children who have special needs or problems. Stepmothers may find these relationships especially difficult. Typically, stepmother-stepdaughter relationships are the most problematic (Clingempeel et al. 1984). Relationships become even more difficult when the stepmothers never intended to become full-time stepparents.

Men in Stepfamilies

Different expectations are placed on men in stepfamilies. Because men are generally less involved in childrearing, they usually have few "cruel stepparent" myths to counter. Nevertheless, men entering stepparenting roles may find certain areas particularly difficult at first (Visher and Visher 1991). A critical factor in a man's stepparenting is whether he has children of his own. If he does, they are more likely to live with his ex-wife. In this case, the stepfather may experience guilt and confusion in his stepparenting because he feels he should be parenting his own children. When his children visit, he may try to be "Superdad," spending all his time with them and taking them to special places. His wife and stepchildren may feel excluded and angry.

A stepfather usually joins an already established single-parent family. He may find himself having to squeeze into it. The longer a single-parent family has been functioning, the more difficult it usually is to reorganize it. The children may resent his "interfering" with their relationship with their mother. His ways of handling the children may be different from his wife's, resulting in conflict with her or with her children (Marsiglio 2004; Wallerstein and Kelly 1980b).

Working out rules of family behavior is often the area in which a stepfamily encounters its first real difficulties. Although the mother usually wants help with discipline, she often feels protective if the stepfather's style is different from hers. To allow a stepparent to discipline a child requires trust from the biological parent and a willingness to let go. Disciplining often elicits a child's testing response: "You're not my real father. I don't have to do what you tell me." Homes are more positive when parents include children in decision making and are supportive (Barber and Lyons 1994). Nevertheless, disciplining establishes legitimacy, because only a parent or parent figure is expected to

discipline in our culture. Disciplining may be the first step toward family integration, because it establishes the stepparent's presence and authority in the family.

In comparison to birth parents, stepfathers tend to have more limited and less positive relationships with their stepchildren. They communicate less, display less warmth and affection, and are typically less involved. Some research also indicates that among divorced, noncustodial fathers, remarriage and stepfathering may lead to development of closer relationships with stepchildren than with their biological children.

The new stepfather's expectations are important. Although the motivations to stepparent are often quite different from those of biological parents, research from the 1987–1988 National Survey of Families and Households shows that 55% of stepfathers found it somewhat or definitely true that having stepchildren was just as satisfying as having their own children (Sweet, Bumpass, and Call 1988). Despite this, stepparents tend to view themselves as less effective than natural fathers view themselves (Beer 1992).

However, the process of **paternal claiming**, embracing stepchildren as if they were biological children and becoming involved in the processes of nurturing, providing for, and protecting them, is a two-way process. Stepfathers must build an appropriate identity, but both birth mothers and the stepchildren also help create or hinder the development of a sense of familial "we-ness" (Marsiglio 2004). The complex role that the stepfather brings to his family often creates role ambiguity and confusion that takes time to work out. However, the potential for deep, mutually gratifying, and meaningful relationships between stepfathers and stepchildren is there, as illustrated in the *Real Families* feature, "Claiming Them as Their Own: Stepfather-Stepchild Relationships."

Conflict in Stepfamilies

Achieving family solidarity in the stepfamily is a complex task. When a new parent enters the former single-parent family, the family system is thrown off balance. Where equilibrium once existed, there is now disequilibrium. A period of tension and conflict usually marks the entry of new people into the family system. Questions arise about them: Who are they? What are their rights and their limits? Rules change. The mother may have relied on television as a babysitter, for example, permitting the children unrestricted viewing in the afternoon. The new stepfather, however, may want

Real Families

Claiming Them as Their Own: Stepfather-Stepchild Relationships



Sometimes I feel like I'm on the outside looking in because—sometimes I wish she was mine. I guess because we're just that close . . . in my heart, I feel like I'm her father. . . . I know in reality, I'm not but, I'm going to give her all the benefit that a father should. I'm going to make sure she gets those benefits. Even though her dad is giving them to her, she is given a little extra and I figure that extra go a long way. . . .

Sociologist William Marsiglio conducted interview research with a diverse group of 36 stepfathers, including the 35-year-old stepfather just quoted. Of the men, 25 were married, 7 more cohabited with their female partners, and 4 lived apart from their partners. They ranged in age from 20–54, with an average of 36 years of age. Educationally, 16 of the men were college graduates, 12 more graduated high school and attended some college, and 8 had either just completed or failed to complete high school. Racially, 27 of the men were Caucasian and 9 were African American. In addition 22 men had biological children of their own, and 11 were living with at least one of “their own” biological children. Marsiglio (2004, 34) wanted to uncover men's experiences of “claiming stepchildren” and identified 10 properties of the claiming process.

Among these properties is the *degree of deliberativeness*—how much thought men give to their relationships with their stepchildren and how conscious and deliberate they are in coming to orient themselves to their stepchildren as “their” children.

Although some men experience the paternal claiming process gradually, as events unfold that may include key turning points, some men, like 41-year-old Terry, decide at the outset that the relationship is to be “all or nothing.” As he told Marsiglio:

It was like, if I'm coming into this relationship, then I'm coming in a hundred percent. I'm either going to be an all husband and an all father or nothing at all. I can't have like half a relationship. I can't be half a father. Where do you draw the line? . . . If I'm going to love you, I'm going to be your father. I'm going to be there all the way.

Other properties include the degree to which they have and use opportunities to be involved across a range of paternal behaviors; the extent to which they find themselves thinking about, mindful of, or daydreaming about their stepchildren in ways that biological fathers do; and the degree to which they seek and are publicly acknowledged as a father figure by others: schoolteachers, coaches, neighbors, and—in the case of adoptions—the law.

Marsiglio (2004) also identified five conditions that encourage men to perceive their stepchildren as their own: the stepfather's identification with the stepchild, the stepfather's personality, the birth mother's involvement, the stepchildren's perceptions and reactions, and the biological father's presence and involvement.

Here is how the first condition—the degree to which stepfathers identify with their stepchildren, seeing similarities in personalities, interests, or personalities—was expressed by a man Marsiglio calls Thomas:

They're my kids. I look at them like they're my boys, I tell everybody,

they're my boys. And I don't want to take nothing away from (Danny's) dad, but I've raised them for so long now, I mean . . . you have a child in your home for the amount of time that I have, you feed them and long enough, they'll start acting and looking just like you, you know what I'm saying? They just do. They just call me, call me “dad.”

For men who have biological children, perceiving that stepchildren are their own may mean coming to feel similarly toward their stepchildren and biological children. Marsiglio's interview with 30-year-old Brandon, revealed how this was experienced:

I really don't (feel differently toward stepchildren). I mean, I thought initially when we first, we all moved in together that maybe—I was a little worried, how am I going to feel towards them? But now . . . I consider them my kids even though I'm not the biological father. I don't really try to step in to take—for them to call me dad or anything like that—but I don't really see them as any different. I mean . . . I'll do my best to protect them and treat them fairly.

These sorts of reactions may not be commonplace, but neither are they aberrations. Some stepfather–stepchild ties become quite powerful, becoming the equivalent of relationships between biological parents and children. Thus, when we read or hear generalizations about distance or deficiency in stepparent–stepchild relationships, we would do well to remember the words and sentiments expressed by Marsiglio's interviewees. We would also be well advised to consider some factors that might enhance or facilitate the paternal claiming process.

to limit the children's afternoon viewing, and this creates tension. To the children, everything seemed fine until this stepfather came along. He has disrupted their old pattern. Chaos and confusion will be the norm until a new pattern is established, but it takes time for people to adjust to new roles, demands, limits, and rules.

Conflict takes place in all families: traditional nuclear families, single-parent families, and stepfamilies. If some family members do not like each other, they will bicker, argue, tease, and fight. Sometimes they have no better reason for disruptive behavior than that they are bored or frustrated and want to take it out on someone. These are fundamentally personal conflicts. Other conflicts are about definite issues: dating, use of the car, manners, television, or friends, for example. These conflicts can be between partners, between parents and children, or among the children themselves. Certain types of stepfamily conflicts, however, are of a frequency, intensity, or nature that distinguishes them from conflicts in traditional nuclear families. Recent research on how conflict affects children in stepfather households found that parental conflict does not account for children's lower level of well-being (Hanson, McLanahan, and Thompson 1996). These conflicts are about favoritism; divided loyalties; discipline; and money, goods, and services.

Favoritism

Favoritism exists in families of first marriages, as well as in stepfamilies. In stepfamilies, however, the favoritism often takes a different form. Whereas a parent may favor a child in a biological family on the basis of age, sex, or personality, in stepfamilies favoritism tends to run along kinship lines. A child is favored by one or the other parent because he or she is the parent's biological child. If a new child is born to the remarried couple, they may favor him or her as a child of their joint love. In American culture, where parents are expected to treat children equally, favoritism based on kinship seems particularly unfair.

Divided Loyalties

"How can you stand that lousy, low-down, sneaky, nasty mother (or father) of yours?" demands a hostile parent. It is one of the most painful questions children can confront, because it forces them to take sides against someone they love. One study (Lutz 1983) found that about half of the adolescents studied confronted situations in which one divorced parent talked

negatively about the other. Almost half of the adolescents felt themselves "caught in the middle." Three-quarters found such talk stressful.

Divided loyalties put children in no-win situations, forcing them not only to choose between parents but also to reject new stepparents. Children feel disloyal to one parent for loving the other parent or stepparent. But as shown in the last chapter, divided loyalties, like favoritism, can exist in traditional nuclear families as well. This is especially true of conflict-ridden families in which warring parents seek their children as allies.

Reflections

Think about conflicts involving favoritism, loyalty, discipline, and the distribution of resources. Do you experience them in your family of orientation? If so, how are they similar to, or different from, stepfamily conflicts? If you are in a stepfamily, do you experience them in your current family? How are these conflicts similar or different in your original family versus your current family? If you are a parent or stepparent, how are these issues played out in your current family?

Discipline

Researchers generally agree that discipline issues are among the most important causes of conflict among remarried families (Ihinger-Tallman and Pasley 1987). Discipline is especially difficult to deal with if the child is not the person's biological child. Disciplining a stepchild often gives rise to conflicting feelings within the stepparent. Stepparents may feel that they are overreacting to the child's behavior, that their feelings are out of control, and that they are being censured by the child's biological parent. Compensating for fears of unfairness, the stepparent may become overly tolerant.

The specific discipline problems vary from family to family, but a common problem is interference by the biological parent with the stepparent (Mills 1984). The biological parent may feel resentful or overreact to the stepparent's disciplining if he or she has been reluctant to give the stepparent authority. As one biological mother who believed she had a good remarriage stated (Ihinger-Tallman and Pasley 1987):

Sometimes I feel he is too harsh in disciplining, or he doesn't have the patience to explain why he is punishing and to carry through in a calm manner,

Understanding Yourself

Parental Images: Biological Parents versus Stepparents



We seem to hold various images or stereotypes of parenting adults, depending on whether they are biological parents or stepparents. Such images affect how we feel about families and stepparents (Coleman and Ganong 1987). The following instrument (modeled after one devised in Ganong and Coleman 1983) will help give you a sense of how you perceive parents and stepparents.

The instrument consists of nine dimensions of feelings presented in a bipolar fashion—that is, as opposites, such as hateful/affectionate, bad/good, and so on. You can respond to these feelings on a 7-point scale, with 1 representing the negative pole and 7 representing the positive pole. For example, say you were using this instrument to determine your perceptions about dogs. You might feel that dogs are quite affectionate, so you would give them a 7 on the hateful/affectionate dimension. But you might also feel that dogs are unfair, so you would rank them 2 on the unfair/fair continuum.

To use this instrument, take four separate sheets of paper. On the first sheet, write Stepmother; on the second, Stepfather; on the third, Biological Mother; and on the fourth, Biological Father. On each sheet, write the numbers 1 to 9 in a column, with each number representing a dimension. Number 1 would represent

hateful/affectionate, and so on. Then, using the 7-point scale on each sheet, score your general impressions about biological parents and stepparents.

After you've completed these ratings, compare your responses for stepmother, stepfather, biological mother, and biological father. Do you find differences? If so, how do you account for them?

Parental Images Survey

	Negative			Positive			
1 Hateful/affectionate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2 Bad/good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3 Unfair/fair	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4 Cruel/kind	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5 Unloving/loving	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6 Strict/not strict	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7 Disagreeable/agreeable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8 Rude/friendly	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9 Unlikable/likable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

which causes me to have to step into the matter (which I probably shouldn't do). . . . I do realize that it was probably hard for my husband to enter marriage and the responsibility of a family instantly . . . but this has remained a problem.

As a result of interference, the biological parent implies that the stepparent is wrong and undermines his or her status in the family. Over time, the stepparent may decrease involvement in the family as a parent figure.

Money, Goods, and Services

Problems of allocating money, goods, and services exist in all families, but they can be especially difficult in stepfamilies. In first marriages, husbands and wives

form an economic unit in which one or both may produce income for the family; husband and wife are interdependent. Following divorce, the binuclear family consists of two economic units: the custodial family and the noncustodial family. Both must provide separate housing, which dramatically increases their basic expenses. Despite their separation, the two households may nevertheless continue to be extremely interdependent. The mother in the custodial single-parent family, for example, probably has reduced income. She may be employed but still dependent on child support payments or TANF (see Chapter 12). She may have to rely more extensively on childcare, which may drain her resources dramatically. The father in the noncustodial family may make child support payments or contribute to medical or school expenses, which depletes his income. Both households have to deal with

financial instability. Custodial parents can't count on always receiving their child support payments, which makes it difficult to undertake financial planning.

When one or both of the former partners remarry, their financial situation may be altered significantly. Upon remarriage, the mother receives less income from her former partner or lower welfare benefits. Instead, her new partner becomes an important contributor to the family income. At this point, a major problem in stepfamilies arises. What responsibility does the stepfather have in supporting his stepchildren? Should he or the biological father provide financial support? Because there are no norms, each family must work out its own solution.

Stepfamilies typically have resolved the problem of distributing their economic resources by using a one-pot or two-pot pattern (Fishman 1983). In the *one-pot* pattern, families pool their resources and distribute them according to need rather than biological relationship. It doesn't matter whether the child is a biological child or a stepchild. One-pot families typically have relatively limited resources and consistently fail to receive child support from the noncustodial biological parent. By sharing their resources, one-pot families increase the likelihood of family cohesion.

In *two-pot* families, resources are distributed by biological relationship; need is secondary. These families tend to have a higher income, and one or both parents have former spouses who regularly contribute to the support of their biological children. Expenses relating to children are generally handled separately; usually there are no shared checking or savings accounts. Two-pot families maintain strong bonds among members of the first family. For these families, a major problem is achieving cohesion in the stepfamily while maintaining separate checking accounts.

Just as economic resources need to be redistributed following divorce and remarriage, so do goods and services (not to mention affection). Whereas a two-bedroom home or apartment may have provided plenty of space for a single-parent family with two children, a stepfamily with additional residing or visiting stepsiblings can experience instant overcrowding. Rooms, bicycles, and toys, for example, need to be shared; larger quarters may have to be found. Time becomes a precious commodity for harried parents and stepparents in a stepfamily. When visiting stepchildren arrive, duties are doubled. Stepchildren compete with parents and other children for time and affection.

It may appear that remarried families are confronted with many difficulties, but traditional nuclear

families also encounter financial, loyalty, and discipline problems. We need to put these problems in perspective. (After all, half of all current marriages end in divorce, which suggests that first marriages are not problem free.) When all is said and done, the problems that remarried families face may not be any more overwhelming than those faced by traditional nuclear families (Ihinger-Tallman and Pasley 1987).

Family Strengths of Blended Families

Because we have traditionally viewed stepfamilies as deviant, we have often ignored their strengths. Instead, we have seen only their problems. We end this chapter by focusing on the strengths of blended families.

Family Functioning

Although traditional nuclear families may be structurally less complicated than stepfamilies, stepfamilies are nevertheless able to fulfill traditional family functions. A binuclear single-parent, custodial, or noncustodial family may provide more companionship, love, and security than the particular traditional nuclear family it replaces. If the nuclear family was ravaged by conflict or violence, for example, the single-parent family or stepfamily that replaces it may be considerably better, and because children now see happy parents, they have positive role models of marriage partners (Rutter 1994). Second families may not have as much emotional closeness as first families, but they generally experience less trauma and crisis (Ihinger-Tallman and Pasley 1987).

New partners may have greater objectivity regarding old problems or relationships. Opportunity presents itself for flexibility and patience. As family boundaries expand, individuals grow and adapt to new personalities and ways of being. In addition, new partners are sometimes able to intervene between former spouses to resolve long-standing disagreements, such as custody or childcare arrangements.

Effect on Children

As shown, blended families are often associated with problematic outcomes for children. But potentially, blended families can offer children benefits that can compensate for the negative consequences of divorce and of living with a single parent. Remember the

notion of “bonus families” introduced earlier? Here are some ways in which stepfamilies offer children some bonuses:

- Children gain multiple role models from which to choose. Instead of having only one mother or father after whom to model themselves, children may have two mothers or fathers: the biological parents and the stepparents.
- Children gain greater flexibility. They may be introduced to new ideas, different values, or alternative politics. For example, biological parents may be unable to encourage certain interests, such as music or model airplanes, whereas a stepparent may play the piano or be a die-hard modeler. In such cases, that stepparent can assist the stepchildren in pursuing their development. In addition, children often have alternative living arrangements that enlarge their perspectives.
- Stepparents may act as a sounding board for their children’s concerns. They may be a source of support or information in areas in which the biological parents feel unknowledgeable or uncomfortable.
- Children may gain additional siblings, either as stepsiblings or half-siblings, and consequently gain more experience in interacting, cooperating, and learning to settle disputes among peers.
- Children gain an additional extended kin network, which may become at least as important and loving as their original kin network.
- A child’s economic situation is often improved, especially if a single mother remarried.
- Children may gain parents who are happily married. Most research indicates that children are significantly better adjusted in happily remarried families than in conflict-ridden nuclear families.

It is clear that the American family is no longer what it was through most of the last century. The rise of the single-parent family and stepfamily, however, does not imply an end to the nuclear family. Rather, these forms provide different paths that contemporary families take as they strive to fulfill the hopes, needs, and desires of their members, and they are becoming as American as Beaver Cleaver’s family and apple pie.

Summary

- Many of today’s families depart from the traditional family system, based on lifetime marriage and the intact nuclear family.
- Our pluralistic family system consists of three major types of families: (1) intact nuclear families, (2) single-parent families (either never married or formerly married), and (3) stepfamilies.
- Single-parent families tend to be created by divorce or births to unmarried women, are generally headed by women, are predominantly African American or Latino, are usually poor, involve a variety of household types, and are usually a transitional stage.
- Because of gender discrimination and inequality in wages or job opportunities, many female-headed families face economic hardship.
- Single, custodial fathers take different paths to single parenthood. Most likely reasons fathers obtain custody are because mothers are financially unable to provide adequate care for children, mothers are physically or psychologically unfit, or mothers do not want full-time responsibility for raising children.
- Both mother-only and father-only families are more likely to be poor than are two-parent families.
- Many “single-parent households” actually contain the parent and his or, her unmarried partner. Even in the absence of parents’ live-in partners, parents’ romantic partners may play important roles in children’s lives.
- Many children of single mothers and nonresidential biological fathers have a *social father*—a male relative, family associate, or mothers’ partner who behaves like a father to the child.
- Single parents, especially mothers, often come to rely on a combination of state or federal assistance and *private safety nets*: support from their social networks on which they can fall back in times of economic need. These can be the sources of emergency transportation, financial help, childcare, and emotional support, all of which may make a difference

between success or failure in finding and keeping a job and in raising a child with less distress.

- Children of single parents are more likely to engage in high risk, “health compromising” behaviors and to suffer a variety of educational, economic and personal costs. These consequences appear to be linked to the lack of economic resources and to reduced money, attention, guidance, and social connections—what researchers call *social capital*—from fathers.
- Relations between the parent and his or her children change after divorce: the single parent generally tends to be emotionally closer but to have less authority. Family strengths associated with successful single parenting include parenting skills, personal growth, communication, family management, and financial support.
- The *binuclear family* is a postdivorce family system with children. It consists of two nuclear families: the mother-headed family and the father-headed family.
- Courtship for second marriage lacks clear norms. Courtship is complicated by the presence of children because remarriage involves the formation of a stepfamily.
- Cohabitation is more common in the “courtship” process leading to remarriages. As with cohabitation in first marriages, cohabitation before remarriages leads to higher rates of marital instability.
- Remarriage rates are lower for those who have children and as adults age. More men than women remarry. Those who initiate the divorce are more likely to remarry within 3 years than noninitiators.
- Explanations of remarriage focus on factors such as need, attractiveness, and opportunity.
- Remarriage differs from first marriage in several ways.
- Remarried couples are more likely to divorce than couples in their first marriages. This may be because of their willingness to use divorce as a means of resolving an unhappy marriage or because remarriage is an “incomplete institution.” Stresses accompanying stepfamily formation may also be a contributing factor.
- The stepfamily or blended family differs from the original family because almost all members have lost an important primary relationship, one biological parent lives outside the current family, the relationship between a parent and his or her children predates the new marital relationship, *step-parent roles* are ill defined.
- Traditionally, researchers viewed stepfamilies from a “deficit” perspective, assuming that stepfamilies are very different from traditional nuclear families. More recently, stepfamilies have been viewed as normal families.
- Research in the United States and a number of other countries reveals some hazards of stepfamilies for children including: academic difficulties; higher risk of physical and mental health problems, earlier onset of sexual activity; greater risk of dropping out of school and of involvement in substance use and criminal activity. Some research indicates that girls adjust less well than boys to stepfamily life.
- Relations between stepparents and their stepchildren have been characterized as “disengaged.”
- Becoming a stepfamily is a process—a series of developmental stages. Each person—the biological parent, the stepparent, and the stepchild (or children)—experiences the process differently. For family members, it involves seven stages. The early stages are fantasy, immersion, and awareness; the middle stages are mobilization and action; the later stages are contact and resolution.
- Although both often experience difficulty in being integrated into the family, stepmothers tend to experience greater stress in stepfamilies than do stepfathers. The warmer a woman is to her stepchildren, the more hostile they may become to her because they feel she is trying to replace their “real” mother.
- Men are generally less involved in childrearing, they usually have few “cruel stepparent” myths to counter. A stepfather usually joins an already established single-parent family. The longer a single-parent family has been functioning, the more difficult it usually is to reorganize it.
- Despite the aforementioned difficulties, many men attempt paternal claiming of stepchildren, embracing them as though they were their own children.
- A key issue for stepfamilies is family solidarity—the feeling of oneness with the family. Conflict in stepfamilies is often over favoritism; divided loyalties; discipline; and money, goods, and services. The

addition of a new baby into a stepfamily neither solidifies nor divides the family.

- Stepfamily strengths may include improved family functioning and reduced conflict between former spouses. Children may gain multiple role models, more flexibility, concerned stepparents, additional siblings, additional kin, improved economic situation, and happily married parents.

Key Terms

binuclear family 532	single-parent families 526
blended families 526	social capital 529
paternal claiming 541	social father 528
private safety nets 529	stepfamilies 526
remarriage 534	stepparent role 540

Resources on the Internet

Companion Website for This Book

<http://www.thomsonedu.com/sociology/strong>

Gain an even better understanding of this chapter by going to the companion website for additional study resources. Take advantage of the Pre- and Post-Test quizzing tool, which is designed to help you grasp difficult concepts by referring you back to review specific pages in the chapter for questions you answer incorrectly. Use the flash cards to master key terms and check out the many other study aids you'll find there. Visit the Marriage and Family Resource Center on the site. You'll also find special features such as access to InfoTrac[®] College Edition (a database that allows you access to more than 18 million full-length articles from 5,000 periodicals and journals), as well as GSS Data and Census information to help you with your research projects and papers.