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The effects of co-parenting relationships with ex-spouses on couples in step-families

Claire Cartwright and Kerry Gibson

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS; 2007) approximately one in ten couple families contain resident step-children. In Wave 3 of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, 13% of households had either residential or non-residential step-children, or both (Qu & Weston, 2005). In the United States, approximately 9% of married couple households, and 12% of cohabiting households contain resident step-children (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). Step-family data are not collected in the New Zealand Census. However, 19% of the 1,265 child participants in the longitudinal Christchurch Health and Development Study had lived in a step-family between the ages of 6 and 16 years (Nicholson, Fergusson, & Horwood, 1999).

The majority of step-families are formed after divorce through the repartnering or remarriage of a parent (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). As newly formed step-couples begin to live together, they must manage a complex family transition through which they establish a new household and bring together a number of adults and

children, some of whom are unrelated (step-parents, step-children and step-siblings). Unlike first-marriage couples, newly repartnered couples do not have the luxury of getting to know each other before becoming parents and step-parents. Instead, they begin life together facing the challenges associated with developing their new couple's relationship and new step-relationships, at the same time as having to deal with multiple changes in their lives and those of their children.

Step-families are also closely linked to other households because of children's relationships with parents in other residences. When parents repartner, former spouses must continue to deal with each other over issues to do with child care, including parenting arrangements and financial support of children (Braithwaite, McBride, & Schrodt, 2003). How well parents manage these co-parenting issues affects both the step-couple and the children (Braithwaite et al., 2003).

This paper comes from the Couples in Repartnered (Step-) Families study, conducted

in New Zealand (Cartwright, 2010). The study consisted of an online questionnaire completed by 99 adults living in step-families; and interviews, both individual and joint, with 16 step-couples. The step-couples reflected back on the processes associated with repartnering and establishing a step-family. The effects of co-parenting issues with former spouses emerged as a source of stress for many step-couples, so the decision was made by the authors to examine this area of step-family life. The results present a thematic analysis of the qualitative data from the interviews that are relevant to ongoing co-parenting relationships and interactions with former spouses and the effects of these on the step-couple.

Co-parenting relationships following separation and the effect on step-couples

In a review of the step-family research conducted in the previous decade, Coleman, Ganong and Fine (2000) talked about the importance of extending step-family research beyond the step-family household. However, few researchers have since made this move. As Schrodt (2011) noted, co-parenting has been investigated in first-marriage families and divorced families, but researchers have generally neglected the investigation of co-parenting relationships and their effects in the step-family context.

To do so is important, as the remarriage of one parent brings about another family transition and its associated stressors (Coleman et al., 2000). As Christensen & Rettig (1996) noted, systems theory suggests that co-parenting relationships established between parents following divorce are likely to be disrupted with the addition of a new parental partner, and require adjustments to accommodate the presence of the step-parent. There is evidence that some former spouses struggle to accept the development of new relationships, and the arrival of new parental partners is a common stressor for divorced individuals (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). This may be particularly difficult, for example, for those who did not want to divorce and have remained single, and those who have settled into a comfortable co-parenting arrangement. American clinicians (e.g., Papernow, 2006) and researchers (e.g., Hetherington & Kelly, 2002) have noted that some former spouses feel threatened by new partners. For example, in an interview study with 35 divorced adults, the men and women talked about feeling that they were being replaced, both as a partner and a parent (Miller,

2009). Hence, having one's former spouse repartner may lead to feelings of insecurity and either disrupt settled arrangements or exacerbate ongoing difficulties.

There is evidence from studies in the United States that co-parenting relationships can deteriorate after the addition of a step-parent to the family, leading to increased stress for all family members (Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, & Pauk, 2001). Christensen & Rettig (1996) examined the effects of remarriage on co-parenting relationships in a sample of 372 women and 277 men contacted three years after their divorce. The researchers found that both the women and men in the study reported having less frequent co-parental interaction, less parenting support from former spouses, and more negative attitudes towards their former spouses. Further, in a study of 327 divorced adults' attitudes to co-parenting (Ganong, Coleman, Markham, & Rothrauff, 2011) found that repartnered mothers reported a lower level of intention to co-parent in the future compared to mothers who remained single. The authors suggested that repartnered women may have seen their new partners as being potential father replacements and that this may have affected their attitudes to co-parenting with their former spouses. Alternatively, the authors posited that the change in attitude could be as a result of increased conflict that occurred following remarriage.

On the other hand, a recent study of the interactions of 22 parenting teams including both of the former spouses and a step-parent, found that the participants expressed moderate satisfaction with their interactions with the other household, and interactions were generally not conflicted (Braithwaite et al., 2003). Interactions were mainly child-focused, were between parents, and were rarely initiated by a step-parent. The researchers concluded that this group of volunteer participants, who had been together on average 6 years, had reached a position of equilibrium. This suggests that given time a number of former spouses and their new partners can develop functional ways of interacting around the children that are satisfactory to them. There is also some evidence that contact with a former spouse who is supportive and engages in cooperative co-parenting can have a positive effect on the repartnered parent in the step-family (Weston & Macklin, 1990).

It is also important to note that some researchers believe that fathers whose children are primarily in the care of mothers can lose further contact with their children when the father remarries. However, Ganong and

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Some of the problems that arise between divorced co-parents after remarriage relate to financial issues, including support of the children.

Coleman (2004) concluded in their review of the step-family literature that the small number of studies on the effects of remarriage on father-child contact have shown mixed results. Some studies have found no change in contact between children and fathers (Stephen, Freedman, & Hess, 1994) while other studies have found a decrease in contact (McKenry, McKelvey, Leigh, & Wark, 1996). Given the evidence of the disruption to co-parenting relationships caused by repartnering, it seems likely, as Smyth (2004) concluded, that some children will have less contact with parents who remarry or repartner, but it also possible that some children will have increased contact, and contact for others will remain unchanged.

Finally, some of the problems that arise between divorced co-parents after remarriage relate to financial issues, including support of the children. Just as men fare better economically after divorce than women, women fare relatively better economically after remarriage than men (Ozawa & Yoon, 2002). Fathers who remarry are potentially placed under greater financial stress due to expectations that they will support children from the previous union, step-children, and children born to the new partnership (Hans & Coleman, 2009). Following remarriage, a father's income may thus be further stretched while a mother's is potentially added to. Further, in Hans' (2009) study of social beliefs around child support modification following remarriage, the majority of their sample of 407 people believed that it was appropriate to modify child support following remarriage to maintain an equitable agreement. It seems likely therefore that in such circumstances disagreements over child care payments may re-emerge or, if disagreements are ongoing, be exacerbated following remarriage as there is potentially more competition for economic resources.

Ganong and Coleman (2004) pointed out that many step-couples come together with "an audience of interested and powerful third parties" (p. 76), some of whom (such as former spouses and, in some instances, children) may have an investment in the relationship not succeeding. As discussed, researchers (e.g., Hetherington & Kelly, 2002) and step-family therapists (e.g., Papernow, 2006) have found that some former spouses engage in behaviours that have a negative effect on step-couples. Papernow observed that resentful or jealous former spouses can make managing child care issues difficult for parents and step-parents. Some former spouses also respond to the repartnering as a competition over the children's affection (Ganong & Coleman, 2004), fearing that they might lose their children. This

potentially increases the emotional distress associated with child care arrangements; hence, former spouses who are struggling themselves can have a significant psychological presence in the step-family (Ganong & Coleman, 2004), which in turn is likely to affect the step-couple's relationship.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from among 99 participants who had taken part in the study's online survey. At the completion of the online questionnaire, participants could volunteer to take part in a couple's interview. Sixteen couples (32 participants) were recruited in this manner. All couples were living in Auckland. Two participants were in the 30–34 age range; 16 were 35–39; 13 were 40–44; and one was over 50 years.

The couples had been living in a step-family household for between one and nine years, with a mean of 3.9 years. Ten of the couples had remarried, the remainder were cohabiting with new partners. They had between one and four children from previous unions living in their households, with a mean of 2.5 children. All the couples had children with them at least one-third of the time, and the majority had step-children in the household for at least two-thirds of the time. Four couples had children born to their relationship and one was expecting. The children from previous unions ranged in age between 4 and 14 years, with a mean of approximately 10 years.

In the group of participants, there were 12 mothers, 12 fathers, and 9 adults who did not have children from a previous marriage. Between them, they had 25 former spouses. Five of these families were step-father families, five were step-mother families, and six were complex step-families in which both adults had children of their own. However, two of the complex step-families were living mainly as step-father families due to them having irregular contact with the step-fathers' children.

Interviews

The couples were interviewed together and then separately. The joint interviews lasted between an hour and an hour and a half, and the individual interviews each lasted around 20 minutes. In the joint interviews, the couples were asked for the story of their relationship and how it began and developed. They were then asked to talk about their children's experiences and how they had responded to the formation of the new relationship and

step-family living. The couples were asked to talk about how they had worked out the care arrangements for the children; what they agreed and disagreed about; how they looked after their own relationship; what worked and what did not. They were asked to talk about the positive aspects of their relationship, how they had looked after their relationship, and any recommendations they would give to couples considering repartnering.

In the individual interviews, the participants were asked if there was anything else that was important to them that they would like to talk about. They were also asked to talk about the greatest challenges they had experienced in their family situation, and the most positive aspects of their experiences.

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed and a number of datasets were created to allow for further analysis. These included the challenges internal to the couple's relationship, the responses of children, influences external to the step-family household, positive experiences, and the parenting of children. This paper presents the analysis of the body of data taken from the interviews in regard to ongoing contact with former spouses that was in the dataset relating to influences from outside the step-family. A thematic analysis was conducted on the data using the methods described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This included the process of re-reading the data, and recording a summary of the comments made by participants in regard to interactions with former spouses and the effects of these. These comments were then examined and grouped into sets of related data. From this process, a number of themes were proposed. These proposed themes were then checked against the data to see if they fit and represented the main ideas that were present. The themes were further examined by the second author for their fit to the data and the final themes were defined. These themes are presented in the next section.

Before presenting the themes, it is important to acknowledge that this analysis is based on the step-couples' interviews. The former spouses' stories of their experiences are not included. It is also important to note that the majority of the data is about negative experiences with former spouses. Eight of the 25 parents in the group did not talk about relationships with former spouses in any significant way and four step-couples' experiences did not include issues with spouses. Hence, 12 couples (17 parents) were negatively affected by the nature of the co-parenting relationship and



the data presented in the results come from these participants.

Results of the thematic analysis

The results section presents four themes that were established from the data analysis process described above. These include: battles over children's residence and financial matters; not pulling their weight; lack of cooperation; and the other parent's negativity towards the step-parent or the new step-family. The effects that these areas had on the step-couples will be examined throughout each theme.

Battles over children's residence and financial matters

As has been well documented by previous research (Amato, 2000; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001), separated and divorced parents often continue to engage conflictually as they deal with each other over issues concerning their shared children and shared property. In this group of participants, six step-couples described conflict with former spouses over child care and support and/or joint property, which was associated with high levels of stress or distress. For five of the six couples, the discord was between fathers and their ex-wives. For some participants, the conflict with former spouses had mostly resolved at the time of the interviews, for others it was current and ongoing. Participants described a range of feelings they experienced during periods of conflict with former spouses, including feeling frustrated, anxious and exhausted, and sometimes hopeless or desperate. They also described a range of effects on the couple's own relationship. Some couples had conflict between themselves over how to handle difficulties with former spouses, others became united, and one couple considered separating. As might be expected, some also disagreed some of the time and were supportive and felt united at other times.

Separated and divorced parents often continue to engage conflictually as they deal with each other over issues concerning their shared children and shared property.

Participants described ... feeling frustrated, anxious and exhausted, and sometimes hopeless or desperate.

Three fathers who repartnered quickly after separating, including one whose new relationship pre-dated the separation from his spouse, experienced severe levels of stress that involved legal “battles” over children’s residence and financial arrangements. The couples’ stories of the beginning of their relationships were dominated by descriptions of these problems. As one step-mother said about the effects of the conflict between her partner and his ex-wife over joint property and, to a lesser extent, contact with the children:

The fact that for the first two years it was a battleground. And just constantly in your face everyday ... You never had the courting and the dating type scenario. You just go, bang, and you’re straight in and we had two and a half, three years of just absolute battle and grief.

The father talked about his experiences in similar terms, describing “a lot of nasty conflict and a lot of expensive lawyers” and two years of “war”. He also talked about his perception that his ex-wife was driven by a desire for revenge, as the quote below suggests:

I guess some of it was, I know the whole of that thing was she was out to sort of ruin me personally and there was no way that was going to happen ... For the first two years she was just irrational. Her actions were just irrational and it was driven by vengeance and anger, and trying to rationalise that with someone just doesn’t work.

Another father, who had repartnered within six months of separating, had lost regular contact with his pre-adolescent and adolescent children at the time of the interviews. He moved towns and hoped that his ex-spouse would cooperate with transporting the children, but this had not happened. For this couple, the first half of

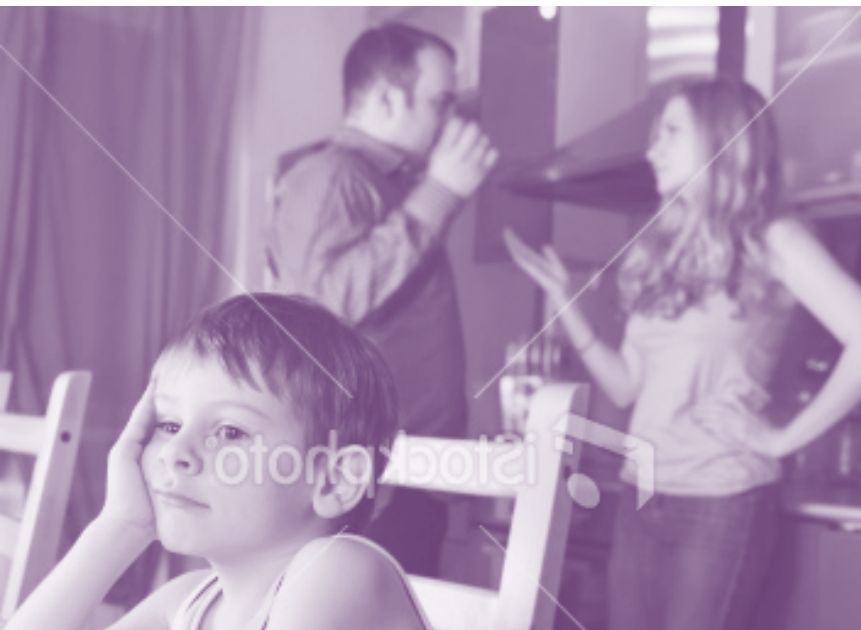
the interview was dominated by the story of his attempts to see his children, his ex-wife’s unwillingness to assist with travel, and their contact through lawyers. They talked about trying to “be united as a couple as you have so many things against you”. However, the relationship came under pressure over time, as the father missed his children more. The step-mother talked about her frustration, how she tried to assist by talking to the children’s mother, and also her annoyance at times with her partner. She had difficulty understanding why it was so difficult, given that her interactions with her own former spouse were uncomplicated:

I guess the longer it went on, the harder it became ... I’d get wound up or I’d have a knot in my stomach. I think the stress side of things came more from frustration ... I have such a simple arrangement with my son’s dad ... and I couldn’t understand why we couldn’t have that with their mother, because I knew it could be simple. Then I’d say, you know, they’re your kids, you can sort it out because she [mother] is not listening to me.

Another couple, who repartnered shortly after their former relationships had ended, had three ex-partners between them, and they experienced difficulties with all of them when they repartnered. While none of the situations were as difficult as the ones described above, the effect of having three ex-partners made their first two years together stressful. The father talked about the challenges of this over the first year, which illustrates the complexity of the issues that some step-couples face:

When we first met, the children only went to their mother’s on a Saturday night, every fortnight ... Then she [ex-wife] split up from her husband and then after that she didn’t want to work, so went for custody—shared care of the boys—so she could get the benefit. And we fought it for a year, but in the end it was too stressful, and the kids wanted to go to their mother half the time ... Just creating your own family unit to fit in with them [his ex-partners] as well, and then we had to do it with my wife’s daughter and iron that side out as well!

Two couples talked about their experiences of mothers who complained that the step-mothers were mistreating their children and how these claims were linked with attempting to have increased time with the children. As an example, one of the fathers told the story of his former spouse, who left to live overseas when the children were preschoolers. As the children grew older, they visited their mother occasionally. After the father and the step-mother married some years later, the mother accused the step-mother of mistreating the children. The step-mother talked about the effects on her at the time and how she coped with it:



I wanted out. I thought, I am not going to do this. We'd only just got married, and then I was worried because she'd sent us a copy, she'd sent the school a copy, she's sent the courts a copy ... I raised above it. I knew it wasn't true. The kids knew it wasn't true and denied it ... She was just jealous and she still is jealous because I'm bringing up her biological kids.

Finally, one mother was frightened about the welfare of her infant son. The mother separated from her ex-husband when their child was a baby, because of her concern for their physical safety, but the father attempted to gain shared care of the young child. As she said, talking about her ex-husband:

He's got a hatred for me, has a total hatred for me ... He hates the fact that [step-father] is in [son's] life.

The step-father also talked about the effects of this and his caution about getting involved:

Yeah, whether I really wanted to get myself tangled up in what was happening, a custody dispute, taking on a toddler ... So whether I was willing to adjust to that, whether I wanted to get involved in all of that and the baggage, I suppose you would call it.

This custody dispute continued for four years and was coming to an end at the time of the interviews. The mother commented, "It's gone on for four years. So now that's dealt with, I am finding it a bit hard to believe that this is it". The step-father also spoke about his approach over the recent years and how he tried to be supportive:

[Partner] was pretty highly strung there for a while. And I just had to keep telling myself I know what's causing this mess. I couldn't possibly understand how she feels, going through a custody battle, and just had to wait for it all to finish really, so at times it was pretty hard.

Hence, these couples came under what could be considered severe levels of stress, often during the early stages of their relationships, because of conflict with former spouses over children's residence and/or financial arrangements. The parents in this group appeared to feel threatened by the former spouses' attitudes towards them, the potential loss of custody of the children, or issues related to joint property. The conflict between the former spouses, including the ongoing legal "battles", sometimes affected the step-couples' relationships, becoming a source of disagreement for some of them, and making it harder for them to develop their relationship and the step-family while they were feeling under a state of "siege".

Not pulling their weight!

Another experience that some participants talked about were the ongoing feelings of frustration or sense of unfairness that arose

when some former spouses' demands or lack of contribution led to a sense of increased pressure for the step-couple. These experiences were less severe than those in the previous theme, but were an ongoing source of stress. A number of participants felt that the other parent was not pulling their weight, whether financially, in provision of child care, or both. One mother talked about her frustration at her child's father and her concern for her child that her father was not meeting his parenting responsibilities:

There's this person who's never grown up and they're not going to ... And it frustrates me, for [daughter's] sake as well. It's just that kind of responsibility thing when somebody just doesn't fundamentally get that as a parent they have a responsibility. He's never organised a holiday. He's never paid me a cent of maintenance. He's never been to any of [daughter's] important dates at school!

Couples also talked about the financial pressures they were under, and perceived that these were exacerbated by the demands of former spouses. One couple talked about the stress associated with each of them having an ex-spouse whom they perceived placed a financial burden on their household. They reported that one of the former spouses, a father, contributed nothing financially for his child; and the other former spouse, a mother, made ongoing requests for financial support for her child over and above the monthly support payment. As the couple said about the woman's former spouse:

We won't go into character assassination, but his father basically told [son], you know, he was not his responsibility. He was entirely my responsibility and not to expect anything from him. (Step-father)

He's the type of parent who won't go out and get a job to support his other two children and his [new] partner because it means paying me more child support. (Mother)

This couple also felt that the mother of his child, who was on a benefit, was also demanding. He talked about the pressure he was under and his guilt about his daughter, and appeared to feel torn between his former spouse, daughter and wife:

It was like I was paying out this money [child support], and she would say, "Our child wants to go on a school trip". I can't afford to do it and I'd be like, "What do I do now?", because I don't want any more money going out, but it's affecting my child and it would really become difficult. And then I would have my wife saying, "We can't afford to do much" ... and I would think, "I know, but my daughter is missing out", and I used to feel like I was in the middle of everything.

Some former spouses' demands or lack of contribution led to a sense of increased pressure for the step-couple.

Participants talked about an ongoing lack of cooperation from the other parent, including an unwillingness to allow some flexibility in care arrangements to fit in with contingencies, to communicate or negotiate, and/or to cooperate with a step-parent.

Another father talked about feeling similarly torn and resentful towards his ex-wife for not working and not contributing more to the financial support of their sons:

I feel resentful sometimes about forking out, because she treats us like the bank. But I don't want the children to go without. Don't get me wrong, but it does piss me off, excuse my language.

Finally, one couple talked about a mother who had given up much of the responsibility for her children, both in terms of child care and economic support, because of her changed personal circumstances. As a result, the step-mother, who was at home with her young children born to her new marriage, had become, by default, the main caregiver for her step-children, and talked about the difficulties of fulfilling a parenting role for them:

I'm not saying that [father] doesn't take responsibility, but at the moment because of what's been going on, it's just even more highlighted the fact that I'm actually the primary caregiver and making these decisions [about the step-children] and trying to feel my way through this ... I find it hard to actually understand and believe that she's just about dropped them like hot potatoes.

While this step-mother appeared to be managing well with her step-children and the couple reported the children were happy in their home, for her it came as an unexpected shock that she should become the primary caregiver for the step-children, and this was also a source of tension between the couple.

Lack of cooperation

A number of participants talked about their disappointment or frustration at what they perceived to be an ongoing lack of cooperation from the other parent, usually over care of the children. This lack of cooperation took many forms. It included an unwillingness of some spouses to allow some flexibility in care arrangements to fit in with contingencies, to communicate or negotiate, and/or to cooperate with a step-parent, when this was required. For some participants, this lack of cooperation began or was exacerbated when the parent repartnered.

One father, for example, described how he and his ex-spouse had developed a workable routine for handing over the children from one home to the other and how this had changed since he repartnered:

It'd gone from being businesslike, where we would occasionally, at hand-over time, meet in a café and have a morning tea together with the children and try to normalise things. The kids would say goodbye to me, kiss and cuddle, and off they'd go ... [Now] we'll meet

outside Burger King. You park on one side of the place, I'll park on the other, and the kids can walk over the carpark. And, you know, back to deep freeze, sort of frosty. We are back to that.

Another couple talked about problems with former partners on both sides. The father had child care issues with an ex-wife and the couple also perceived a lack of cooperation from her ex-husband (as each is both a parent and step-parent, they are referred to by gender):

Female: But then we had other issues on the other side, just trying to make everything fit, and that person [ex-husband], I don't know why, being difficult!

Male: Her dad being difficult!

Female: Just over school holidays really.

Male: Yeah, and other stuff. When he's got one person to think about, we don't understand why he was difficult.

Female: He doesn't care!

Male: Doesn't care what we do!

Female: As far as he's concerned, our family unit is none of his business.

One couple with parents living overseas had difficulty gaining permission from the children's mother to allow the children to visit their grandparents. As the step-mother said:

When we wanted to go on a holiday, and she had agreed to it, and then she withdrew her agreement. And we'd already bought the overseas tickets and the kids thought they were going. And then she's saying they they couldn't go, or it had to go through the court for the court to say, "Yes, they could go to see their grandparents". And I just hate that!

Another couple also experienced a lack of cooperation from the children's step-mother. This couple had moved house in the early stages of repartnering, and the oldest child, who normally got on well with his step-father, was objecting to the new living situation. The couple told the story of what happened when the mother rang the children's father to ask for support while they worked through the issues with the teenager:

Mother: I asked for the dad's support, which he gave me, but the woman that he's married used the opportunity to undermine us ...

Step-father: They went to their dad's that night, so we weren't there to talk about it that evening. Then the following night they came back with these questionnaires that the step-mum had written out, like, what do they feel about living here?

Mother: And using the same questionnaire to ask the children about what it was like at their place as well. Yeah, that wasn't useful.

Another mother talked about her frustration and disappointment with her daughter's father



and his unwillingness to help out, especially during the school holidays. This couple did not have any extended family support:

For us as a family, we don't have people that help us with our kids ... There's just us, so that really is where it kind of bites. You get six weeks of summer holidays and you're both working and there's this other person who's just gone. They're not there for six weeks every summer.

Hence, some of the participants talked about their disappointment and frustration at the lack of cooperation that they experienced with the other parent, or in one case, step-parent. This added to their stresses and appeared to put pressure on them as a couple. Over time, some also appeared to learn to live with the lack of cooperation and were less frustrated by it. As one mother said, referring to the decrease in the effects of problems with the former spouse, "Once it was an elephant in the room, now it's a little mouse in the field".

The other parent's negativity towards the step-parent or the new step-family

A number of parents and step-parents talked about their concerns or worries that the former parents' negativity towards the step-parent or step-family situation might adversely affect the children and the children's attitude towards the step-parent or living in a step-family, thereby undermining the efforts they were making to build the step-family and care for the children.

One mother did not allow the children to visit the new step-family household for the first few months. Over time, the step-mother became involved in picking the children up from school, assisting them with homework, helping to make lunches for them, and found

the mother's treatment of her difficult to accept. This situation came to a head and improved after the step-mother stood up for herself. Following a call where the mother had spoken rudely to her, she said:

I'm not the nanny. I'm not the receptionist. I'm bringing your children up whether you like it or not. They're with us nearly 50% of the time ... You can't even have the decency to be civil to me when I ring up or to acknowledge that fact that I'm picking them up from school! ... I said I spend my good earned money on them buying them clothes and food, and you've got the nerve to treat me like this! ... And I said we have the decency to treat [your new partner] with respect and talk to him directly!!

While this type of response might have been followed by ongoing conflict or difficulty between the mother and the step-mother, in this instance, the mother apologised and the relationship became more civil. It is also important to note that in this instance, the young children did not appear to develop any negative attitudes towards their step-mother and were reported to be moving between houses quite happily.

Another couple talked about their worries about the mother's negative attitude towards the step-mother and their concerns about how this affected the children. This couple had a relatively smooth transition into step-family life, and the greatest challenge was the ex-wife's response to the remarriage. The father talked about his ex-wife's reaction to his new partner and his concerns about this:

My ex-wife hasn't reacted at all well to [step-mother] being on the scene, and insinuated in the early part of our relationship that the girls completely disliked [step-mother] ... She wrote this vitriolic email saying about how insensitive it was for me considering marrying

Parents and step-parents talked about their concerns or worries that the former parents' negativity might adversely affect the children and the children's attitude towards the step-parent or living in a step-family.

A number of the parents observed an increase after they repartnered in the conflict they experienced with former spouses over the children's residence, child support and/or joint property.

someone who the girls obviously disliked so much ... The data didn't match what I was seeing ... I'm not paranoid about it, but I still worry to an extent what she will feed the girls about us.

A step-father also spoke about what he perceived as interference from the step-mother in the children's other home. He talked about his perceptions that the step-mother acted as if she was the mother of the children but failed to accept his role as a step-father:

I've met her a few times and she blanked me completely ... There's a couple of things she has done that I've felt have been against me ... Her interference seems to be a lot, and thinking she's the mother, whereas although I've been around less time, I don't think I'm the dad. That's been difficult.

Finally, a mother's story of her preschool child's experience provides some insight into how loyalty issues affect children. She talked about the effects on her son of the non-residential father's attempts, as she perceived it, to turn the child against his step-father. The mother talked about her concerns for her partner's feelings and for the wellbeing of her son:

The only time we've really had difficulties with [step-father] and [son] is when he's come back from his father's and, "Me and my dad hate you", this sort of stuff ... I said to [step-father] at the time, "You need to remember that this is [my ex-] talking. That is not my son because he absolutely idolises [his step-father]". [Later] I said to [my son], "Why did you say that about [step-dad]? You don't hate him", and he said, "Because my dad said". And he was so young!

Hence, some parents and step-parents experienced the other parent(s) as competing for the children, and attempting to turn the children against them or to win the children

over to their side. In only one instance, a step-mother was seen as the main instigator of the difficulties. The other instances concerned former spouses' lack of acceptance and angry responses to the step-parent or the new step-family situation.

Discussion

Previous research suggests that co-parenting relationships can deteriorate when a former spouse repartnered (Christensen & Rettig, 1996; Coleman et al., 2001). This study provides insights into how this can occur and the effects it has on step-couples. A number of the parents observed an increase after they repartnered in the conflict they experienced with former spouses over the children's residence, child support and/or joint property. This appeared to be heightened for couples where one of them had repartnered early during the post-separation period, when issues around child contact and joint property were not yet resolved, and feelings on both sides were still running high. On the other hand, disturbance in some co-parenting relationships also occurred after repartnering when the divorce had taken place some years earlier. A small number of parents perceived that former spouses were being deliberately difficult in response to their repartnering.

For some parents, the conflict over child contact and financial issues was associated with high levels of stress and added a great deal to the pressure that couples were experiencing as part of their adjustment to step-family living. It also placed stress on their relationships with each other, and this was exacerbated if they disagreed over how to manage the issues with the former spouse. It was also difficult at times for the step-parents to accept and deal with the stress associated with the conflict between their partners and former spouses. On the other hand, it is important to note that around a third of the parents who participated in the study did not talk about experiencing problems in their co-parenting relationships with former spouses as part of their adjustment to step-family living.

These results support the notion discussed earlier that remarriage and the entrance of new parental partners can destabilise family systems (Christensen & Rettig, 1996), either by exacerbating difficulties that exist or leading to new problems that need to be resolved. It also provides indirect support for previous evidence that the entrance of a new parental partner into the extended family system can lead to feelings of insecurity and a fear that the parent is not only being replaced as partner but also being replaced as a parent (Miller, 2009).



This may be particularly difficult for former spouses who observe step-couple closeness and attractive step-parent qualities. It may also be difficult for individuals who are struggling emotionally. This appeared to be so in a small number of instances discussed in the thematic analysis, in which the participants talked about the attitude of the former spouse to the step-parent and had a sense that their ex-partner was attempting to turn the children against the step-parent and perhaps the remarriage. This supports Papernow's (2006) conclusion that some former spouses engage in jealous behaviour that makes co-parenting difficult and places stress on the step-couple. In a small number of instances, couples perceived that the former spouse's negativity was directed at the step-parent. In some instances, this led to increased tensions between the step-couple and/or feelings of insecurity for the step-parent.

As found previously (Braithwaite et al., 2003), however, step-parents did not appear to deal with or negotiate with former spouses on anything but an occasional basis. This was left mainly to parents. An exception to this was a wife of a former spouse who was seen as interfering directly with the management of the children, and one step-mother who attempted to assist with resolving disagreements. She stepped back from this, however, when it was unsuccessful.

It is also important to note that some of the stressors associated with former spouses were not severe, but were an ongoing source of stress or irritation that made life more difficult for the couples at times. Some former spouses were experienced as being inflexible or refusing to negotiate special requests or one-off changes to routines to allow for special arrangements or events. Some ex-spouses were experienced as not meeting their responsibilities, either through child care (such as assisting with holidays), or in providing financial support of the children. Some parents thought that the other parent was not pulling his or her weight financially and found this added to the financial stressors they were already experiencing. There was also some evidence to support previous finding that some fathers in step-family situations feel torn between former spouses, their children and current partners, in regard to financial support (Hans & Coleman, 2009).

As researchers, we were surprised to note that five of the six co-parenting relationships that we considered came under severe levels of stress, were between repartnered fathers and their ex-wives. On the other hand, it has been found consistently that men tend to repartner more quickly than women (Cartwright, 2010)

and some men in this study repartnered within six months of separating, at a time when issues around child care and finances were still under negotiation and the relationship between the two former spouses was still emotionally fraught. Early repartnering is likely to lead to heightened distress for former spouses, especially when they have not wanted to divorce.

American researchers (e.g., Hetherington & Kelly, 2002) and step-family therapists (e.g., Papernow, 2006) have observed that repartnering parents often have unrealistically positive expectations of step-family life, believing, for example, that step-children will love their new partners as much as they do. Some step-couples in this study also appeared surprised or taken aback by their former spouses' responses to them or their new partner following repartnering, including those who repartnered quickly. It may be that some step-couples are not cognisant of the problems that can arise with former spouses if repartnering occurs quickly after a separation, before the necessary period of adjustment has taken place. The likelihood of step-couples having realistic expectations may also be affected by the lack of research in the area of co-parenting following remarriage, and also the lack of norms to guide parents and step-parents in how to relate to each other (Weston & Macklin, 1990). It might be helpful for those considering repartnering to understand that relating to former spouses can become an obstacle course if the former spouse feels threatened or believes that they have not been treated fairly. It may also be helpful for former spouses to be aware of the strong emotions that are evoked by their exes repartnering, and to have guidance about how to manage themselves during this stressful period.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study and briefly discuss future research directions. First, this sample of participants volunteered to be interviewed and may not be representative of step-couples generally. The sample may have included a greater proportion of people who had experienced considerable difficulty and wanted to talk about this to a researcher. Second, the views of former spouses were not included in this study and hence their experiences and viewpoints are missing. Research that includes all the adults involved is likely to provide greater insights into the dynamics of co-parenting within step-family situations. Third, because of the nature of the interviews, participants who told the story of the development of their relationships tended to talk only about the problems and challenges they experienced with former

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spouses. Hence, this study is informative about the types of problems that step-couples experience, but not of positive co-parenting relationships following repartnering. Around a third of the participants appeared to have non-problematic relationships with former spouses, but little data were collected about these relationships because of the focus on the step-couples' challenges and the experiences they regarded as important to them.

In terms of future research, it is important that family transition researchers in Australia and New Zealand focus more on the areas of co-parenting following remarriage, and the relationships between former spouses, parents and step-parents. No previous research has been conducted in either country in this area. The lack of research in this area may also exacerbate a lack of norms to guide repartnering parents and former spouses. In line with this, in order to better understand how co-parenting relationships work, it is also important to study well-functioning co-parenting relationships and how these develop or are maintained following the repartnering of at least one former spouse. Finally, given that the majority of separated parents will eventually repartner, and some will do so quickly, it may be desirable for educational programs and literature aimed at separated couples to include information about the stressors associated with the transition into step-family life and their potential effects on co-parenting relationships between former spouses.

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