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An Exploratory Investigation of Adults’ and Children’s Perceptions of their Experiences Living in a Stepmother Family

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Clinical Psychology, the University of Auckland, 2014
Abstract

This thesis investigates the positive and challenging experiences of living in a stepmother family, from the perspectives of stepmothers, fathers and stepchildren. Grounded in family systems theory and guided by a qualitative methodology, data are obtained from individual, face-to-face semi-structured interviews with members of 17 stepmother families including 17 residential stepmothers, 17 fathers and 18 stepchildren. Using thematic analysis, data are organised into two data sets: experiences perceived as challenging, and experiences perceived as positive. Data are further organised into four overarching themes each of which has three related subthemes.

The results indicate that while participants experienced relatively common challenges they also developed strategies and coping skills that helped to counter some of these challenges. Most challenges fell broadly into two time frames: those that occurred predominantly within the initial stages of stepfamily formation; and those that occurred at times throughout the stages of stepfamily development. Common themes included participants’ difficulties adjusting to the changes that living in a stepfamily presented, challenges associated with the stepmother’s authority and dealing with the presence of the biological mother.

Main themes that emerged from data analysis of positive experiences related mostly to strategies that encouraged positive trusting relationships and included the importance of communication and support, spending time and sharing experiences together, and positive aspects of the stepmother’s authority.

Implications for stepfamily systems and clinical work with stepfamilies are discussed along with future research directions.
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Chapter One: Introduction

According to ancient marriage laws, proverbs and folk tales, stepfamilies have been a part of the social fabric in many societies since the beginning of time (Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1987). Until the late nineteenth century, the formation of stepfamilies was due primarily to the high death rate, as reflected in the term ‘step’, originating from the Old English term, ‘steop’, meaning ‘bereaved’ (Robinson & Smith, 1983). Since the 1970s however, there has been a considerable rise in the proportion of stepfamilies in Western countries, largely due to an increase in the separation and divorce rates of parents rather than death (Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). This fundamental shift gave rise to challenges notably more complex, the most significant of which is that the other parent is still alive and may remain actively involved at any time (King, 2007) inevitably resulting in multiple relational ties across households thereby complicating the relationships of the stepfamily system (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994). This is important as research has reported that higher levels of complications and complexity in stepfamilies are associated with greater amounts of conflict and stress (Higginbotham & Adler-Baeder, 2008).

Studies have identified multiple stresses that affect stepfamilies including a lack of social norms, confusion about roles, boundaries and the structure of stepfamilies, as well as loyalty conflicts and deterioration in relationships (Braithwaite, Toller, Daas, Durham, & Jones, 2008; Cartwright, 2008). Moreover, in a society which promotes the concept of a nuclear family, there remains an implicit assumption that the step-parent will assume the role of parent (Falci, 2006). Yet, researchers, clinicians and members of stepfamilies themselves report that emulating the nuclear family model frequently creates difficulties and at times compromises positive stepfamily relationships, particularly between step-parents and stepchildren (Gosselin & David, 2007). This has important implications as there is evidence stepfamilies are reportedly less stable than first time marriages (Bumpass & Raley,
2007; Sweeney, 2010) and that there is a high rate of stepfamilies ending more quickly than first time marriages, with a reported rate of divorce at approximately sixty-six percent (Faber, 2004).

Prior to 1970 the predominant focus of stepfamily research was on providing a cultural and developmental framework to understand and clarify the challenges and progression of the stepfamily system (Papernow, 1996). Since the seventies the body of literature on stepfamilies grew significantly (Pasley & Moorefield, 2004) with a number of outcome studies consistently reporting family processes to be more strongly related to stepfamily adjustment and functioning than family structure (Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011; O’Conner, Dunn, Jenkins, & Rasbash, 2006). Facilitated by the use of more sophisticated research techniques including qualitative methodologies, longitudinal studies and non-clinical families, research shifted its focus towards the investigation of individual family members’ perceptions of stepfamily living and the specific characteristics that typify these families (Berger, 2001). Such information has provided a deeper understanding of the processes and relationships that occur within stepfamilies and has led to more clarity and awareness of the diversity of remarried families (Martin-U ffi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013).

Despite these advances however, developments in stepfamily research still report a lack of in-depth, qualitative studies on stepmothers, stepmother family experiences, the development of stepmother-stepchild relationships (Afi fi, 2008) or the characteristics of stepfamilies that succeed (Michaels, 2006). Furthermore, while the complexities of stepfamilies have been established, less is known either about processes within stepmother families, individual stepmother family members’ perceptions of their experiences, or the meaning they attribute to these experiences.

In an attempt to address this gap in the literature, this study employs a qualitative research method to explore the experiences of members in stepmother families. More specifically, the study examines both the positive and challenging aspects of stepmother
family living from the perspectives of the stepmother, father and stepchild residing in a stepmother family.

Grounded in family systems theory, the study has applied a qualitative approach to gain a rich, in-depth understanding of the meanings of experiences, perceptions and reflections of stepmother family members. Data were obtained from individual, face-to-face semi-structured interviews with members of seventeen stepmother families including 17 residential stepmothers, 17 fathers and 18 stepchildren. An emphasis was placed on understanding the meaning each participant gave to both the challenging and positive aspects of living in a stepmother family. The study also aims to contribute to the body of empirical and clinical knowledge about those processes that support adaptive stepmother family functioning.

An overview of the methodological considerations and procedures of this study are discussed more fully in Chapter Two of this thesis. Chapters Three and Four present results from the thematic analysis of participants’ perceptions of the positive and the challenging experiences respectively. Chapter Five discusses the results in relation to the literature, as well as directions for future research and implications of this study for clinical practice in working with stepmother families.

To help understand the context within which this study is situated, the remainder of this chapter presents an overview of the literature on stepfamilies. Recent information on stepfamily terminology and statistics is presented along with a review of literature on stepchild adjustment outcomes and stepfamilies. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical perspectives guiding this study including literature on boundary and role ambiguity in stepfamilies, the stepparent role, loss and marital relationship quality in stepfamilies. The chapter concludes with a review of the literature on stepmother families as it relates to the aims of this thesis, with a specific focus on the stepmother experience, role,
mental health, relationships with the biological mother, stepchild and partner, and fathers’ experiences in stepmother families.

**Definition and Terminology**

The recent trend in stepfamily formation has resulted in confusion about what constitutes ‘family’ and who is considered to be a family member (Cheal, 2002). In 1979, Furstenburg (1979) was one of the first to identify the different structure of this new family type, and applied the label ‘family recycling’. Since then researchers concur that the stepfamily is a distinct, diverse family type with unique characteristics setting them apart from nuclear families (Qu & Weston, 2005).

Despite this understanding however, researchers have continued to rely on the traditional household definition for stepfamily, that is, one of the adults with a child or children from a previous relationship repartners and live together in the same household (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). The problem with this definition is that it fails to take into account the diverse pathways that lead to the formation of stepfamilies, or to the connections and interactions between the households (Qu & Weston, 2005). For example, the definition does not include families in which children reside in the household part-time, or stepfamilies where the non-resident parent has remarried.

Terminology to describe various types of stepfamily has also been problematic. Throughout the literature, a range of terms has been used, ostensibly to reduce the negative connotation associated with the term ‘stepfamily’ (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). For example researchers have employed such terms as ‘blended’, ‘reconstituted’, ‘remarried’, ‘re-partnered’, ‘merged’, ‘instant’ or ‘synergistic’ to describe stepfamilies (Pryor, 2005). More recently however, there has been a return to the use of the original ‘stepfamily’ terminology (Claxton-Oldfield, 2008).
Likewise, biological parents have been described as ‘real’ or ‘natural’ parents, and step-parents as ‘social parents’ (Howden, 2007). First marriages have also been described as ‘non-divorced’ ‘intact’, ‘normal’, ‘real’ or ‘traditional’ (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Such terms however have been criticised for inferring negative connotations, and for failing to take into account those couples who live together or co-habit.

For ease of reference, the term ‘first time marriage’ will be retained in this study on the understanding that it incorporates those couples in co-habiting relationships. As well, broadly speaking, ‘stepfamily’ denotes any family living together in the same house comprised of at least one biological parent with a child(ren) from a previous relationship, and their new partner. Stepfamilies where only one partner has children from a previous relationship are referred to as ‘simple’, and couples who both bring children to the relationship are referred to as ‘complex’. In complex families, custody and access may differ amongst the stepchildren (Higginbotham & Adler-Baeder, 2008). Stepmother families are defined as those in which women live with partners who have children from previous relationships and share a household with their partner and children for at least 30 percent of the time. The term ‘shared care’ refers to situations in which children reside with their parent for over 30 percent of the time.

Finally, legal terminology for child care has changed recently in New Zealand (Ministry of Justice, 2005a). Terms such as ‘custody’ and ‘access’ have been replaced by ‘day to day care’, and ‘contact’ respectively. For the purposes of this study however, the former terms have been retained as they more accurately reflect language used by the participants.

Statistics

The degree of complexity in stepfamilies following divorce has also impacted on gaining valid and reliable statistical data (Wilkes & Fromme, 2002). While it is well
documented that the number of stepfamilies has increased rapidly throughout the Western World since the middle of last century, there is no standard international framework for the measurement of family statistics and appropriate data to document stepfamily trends are sparse (Sweeney, 2010). In part the difficulty has stemmed from the increasing number of divorced parents who cohabit rather than remarry (Bumpass & Lu, 2000), and the increasing number of first marriages involving stepchildren (Wu & Wolf, 2001). To this end, most researchers emphasise that statistical data on stepfamilies needs to be considered with caution and reported only as estimates (Pryor, 2008).

Despite these difficulties however statistics in the United States and Canada report that about half of marriages end in divorce and that approximately nine percent of married-couple households and 11.5 percent of co-habiting couples have stepchildren (US Bureau Census, 2006). It is also estimated that one third of children will live with a step-parent before they reach adulthood. In the United Kingdom 30 percent of marriages in 1993 were remarriages with one or both partners having children (Haskey, 1994), while in Japan the figure is 25 percent (Nozawa, 2006) and in Australia 11 percent, indicating a 50 percent increase over a ten year period (Qu & Weston, 2005). Similar trends are beginning to emerge in many European countries as family structures change (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008).

In New Zealand, little is known about stepfamilies as they are not captured or reported in official statistics (Statistics, New Zealand, 2007). For example, current official statistics data collections do not take into account those children who live in two households, or distinguish between natural, step, adopted or foster children in families (Ministry of Social Development, 2004). Notwithstanding, recent reports indicate that the number of remarriages in 2005 was 34% and that just under half of all dissolved marriages (10,298 on average per annum) involved an average of 1.8 children under 17 years’ old per divorced couple, with approximately 45 percent under 10 years of age (Statistics, 2007b). At
the same time, 18 percent of non-Maori and 29 percent of Maori children had lived in a stepfamily before they reached the age of seventeen (Dharmalingam, Pool, Sceats, & Mackay, 2004).

Data on the number of stepphones have been even more difficult to collect and reports are imprecise and difficult to assess (Coleman, Troilo, & Jamison, 2008). However, there are more children living with their fathers following divorce, partly due to the increase in fathers receiving custody (Johnson et al., 2008). Given that the majority of divorced men remarry, it is likely these numbers will continue to increase in the future (Ahrons, 2007).

Current statistics report that 4.4 million (8%) of children in the United States were reported to live with their fathers following divorce and that this increases to 20 percent by adolescence (US Bureau Census, 2006). Seventeen percent of the children lived with their stepmother, and eighty percent of stepmothers were non-residential (King, 2007). In Britain, approximately 13 million women are stepmothers however it is estimated that only 2.5 million live with their stepchildren full time (Vaitilingam, 2004). In Australia, 12 percent of stepfamilies are residential stepmother households and another four percent are blended family households (Qu & Weston, 2005). Custody statistics in New Zealand are not available however the 2006 statistics on single parent families indicated that 16.6 percent of children live with their father (Ministry of Social Development, 2007).

Literature on the implications that these trends have on stepfamilies and stepmother families in particular, will now be discussed as they relate to the aims of this current study.
Literature Review: Stepfamilies

Child Adjustment Outcomes

Due to the increase in prevalence, parental separation is now considered to be a normative process in the lifecycle of families (Amato, 2000; Carr, 2004). Notwithstanding, separation and divorce typically results in parents and children experiencing significant life transitions including changes of residence, schools, financial circumstances, loss of social support and relationship changes involving reorganisation of relationships, roles and responsibilities, and association with delinquent peers (Oldehinkel, Ormel, Veenstra, DeWinter, & Verhulst, 2008). Furthermore the transitions may be on-going as parents re-partner or remarry (Cartwright, 2006; Cavanagh & Huston, 2008). This is a cause for concern as research has consistently shown family transitions create significant stress and instability for family members often resulting in a greater risk of subsequent transitions thereby compounding the stress experienced by children and adults (Bumpass & Raley, 2007; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007). For example, the New Zealand Longitudinal Christchurch Health and Development Study that studied 1265 children from birth to 21 years of age found the number of family transitions experienced was linked to higher rates of juvenile offending, abuse of illegal substances, leaving school without a qualification, early initiation into sexual activity and sexual activity with multiple partners (Fergusson, Horwood, & Lynskey, 1992). These findings have been substantiated by several studies reporting higher rates of school problems and poorer educational outcome due to multiple family transitions (Bulanda & Manning, 2008; Cavanagh & Huston, 2006; Song, Benin, & Glick, 2012).

Over the years, studies have identified specific factors that influence the impact of separation and divorce on childhood adjustment and well-being (Amato, 2000; Sweeney, 2010). These include children’s individual characteristics such as temperament, self-
esteem, social skills, age and gender (Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998); socioeconomic factors, whereby separation often results in economic decline, particularly for mothers (Morrison & Ritualo, 2000); family composition, in that children’s adjustment has been shown to vary between single-mother and single-father families. Some studies report that adolescents living in single-father families are at higher risk of developing antisocial behaviour than those living in single-mother families (Ulvester, Breivik, & Thuen, 2010), and that children living in complex stepfamilies demonstrate marked adjustment problems (Dunn, 2002; Sweeney, 2010); and parental coping skills. Studies have shown great variability in parents’ response to negative life changes and that this directly impacts on children’s capacity to adjust (Noller, Feeney, Sheenan, Darlington, & Rogers, 2008).

Differences in adjustment of children who parents separate may also be due to the nature of family relationships and dynamics before, during and after separation (Dunn, 2002). Ongoing parental conflict may determine behavioural, emotional, social and cognitive problems in children following separation particularly when the conflict is intense and involves the children (Amato & Afifi, 2006; Schrodt, 2010). Conversely, some studies report that in families with a high level of parental conflict, children experience feelings of relief, psychological growth, maturity and independence when their parents separate (Sweeney, 2010).

Concerns about the impact of separation and divorce on children have also extended to concerns about the impact of remarriage or repartnering (Coleman et al., 2000). While some variation exists, research has consistently found that children in stepfamilies, particularly those in stepmother families, are at an increased risk for negative outcomes than those in first-time marriages (Hetherington & Kelly, 2007; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). Specific factors that impact on stepchildren’s well-being include: relational, academic and behavioural problems (Cavanagh & Huston,
Adolescents in stepfamilies have been found to be more depressed, anxious, have low self-esteem (Berg, 2003; Jeynes, 2007) and tend to drop out of school, leave home and engage in early sexual activity at an earlier age than adolescents living in first-time families (Ulveseter et al., 2010). Of concern are findings that show these negative outcomes may continue into adulthood (Gosselin, 2010).

Numerous studies have also found that stepfamily formation was more disruptive for girls than boys (Sirvanli-Ozen, 2005) and, that signs of externalising behaviours are seen more frequently in boys and internalising behaviours in girls (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985; Quilino 1991). These findings were highlighted in the Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage, that involved three longitudinal studies of families (first-marriage, sole-parent and remarried) over a 20 year period (Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Results from the study found that boys and girls living in stepfamilies were less socially and academically competent, exhibited more internalising and externalising behaviours, and experienced more school related problems than those from first-time marriages. These findings were more marked for girls who were pre-adolescent at the time of remarriage and for both boys and girls in the first two years post-remarriage, and again during adolescence.

In contrast to these findings however, a number of studies on gender differences has found that while short term anomalies exist, the long-term effects are not significant and that the rate of problematic behaviour does not vary with gender in the late childhood and adolescent periods (Schmeekle, 2007). Furthermore, there are no consistent gender differences in adjustment in well-established stepfamilies (Dunn, 2002).

Similarly, while outcome data on risks of stepchildren are statistically significant, studies have shown that the effect sizes are relatively small (Coleman et al., 2000; Pryor &
Rogers, 2001). A meta-analysis of 92 family studies by Amato (1994) concluded that while divorce and remarriage increased the risk of negative outcomes for children, 43 percent of children in first-marriage families fared worse than the average child in a stepfamily, and 36 percent of children in stepfamilies fared better than the average child in a first marriage family.

These anomalies may be explained by Dunn’s (2002) review of research examining outcomes for children in stepfamilies. In this review Dunn points out that most studies focus on problems that meet clinical intervention and that while children in stepfamilies are on average more likely to have adjustment problems, the average differences are small but the individual differences are great. When children in stepfamilies are compared with those in non-stepfamilies, the findings show there is great individual variation between children within stepfamilies in their adjustment (Dunn, 2002). Likewise, in the Virginia Longitudinal Study, Hetherington and Kelly (2002) found that while there is a slight increased risk of negative outcomes for children in sole-parent and stepfamilies compared to those in first-time marriages, the majority of children in stepfamilies functioned adequately and did not experience problems of clinical significance (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Similarly a recent review of remarriage and stepfamilies by Sweeney (2010) found that living with a stepparent rather than a single mother was more often associated with poor emotional outcomes but better well-being for health and some behavioural outcomes.

Another important consideration is the consistent evidence of a ‘destabilisation’ effect following separation and remarriage due to the disruption of the family structure often leading to stress, conflict or ineffective parenting (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Research indicates that there is an average three year period of family re-organisation and adjustment, during which the negative effects on children appear to peak (Adler-Baeder, 2007). This would suggest that newly forming stepfamilies generally experience greater
stress in the family system than more established stepfamilies and may be at greater risk for conflict and adjustment difficulties.

It has also been suggested that research may have ‘problematised’ the stepchild-stepparent relationship for too long as studies are now reporting that stepchildren have identified positive aspects of having a stepparent (Lambert, 2010). These include an increase in emotional resources such as having a father, another supportive adult or another adult to learn from (Schrodt, 2006), an extended family network (Kinniburgh-White, Cartwright, & Seymour, 2010) and an increase in financial support and stability (Freishtler, Svare, & Harrison-Jay, 2003; Sweeney, 2010). There is also evidence that the negative childhood outcomes associated with stepfamily living may not extend to all racial and ethnic groups (Adler-Baeder et al., 2010).

Thus, the implications of the stresses for stepchildren often depend on the various systems both within and outside the stepfamily and point to both positive and negative effects (Cavanagh & Huston, 2008). As previously discussed, the timing of family instability in the child’s life, the number of transitions they experience, the rate of interparental conflict, quality of parenting and parental mental health status have been found to be strongly related to child adjustment (Gosselin, 2010; Hadfield & Nixon, 2012). In addition, individual characteristics and the quality of relationships within the stepfamily influence children’s sense of well-being and resilience (Leake, 2007). This will now be discussed in more detail.

**Stepparent-Stepchild Relationship:**

There is a growing consensus among researchers that many challenges facing members of stepfamilies relate to the stepparent-stepchild relationship (Church, 1999; Erera-Weatherley, 1996; Golish, 2003). As well the amount of stress stepchildren experience, their feelings of self-worth and their sense of belonging is affected by the stepparent-
stepchild relationship (King, 2007; Leake, 2007; Stoll, Arnaout, Fromme, & Felker-Thayer, 2006). This was highlighted in a study by Pryor (2005) of 90 stepfamilies in New Zealand focussing on the outcomes of children’s relationships with residential parents, stepparents and non-residential parents. Findings from the study noted that relationships with stepparents may be particularly important for children’s self-concept and that a feeling of closeness and security in the relationship with the stepparent was a major predictor of children’s perceptions of their own strengths.

Recent research endorses these findings and suggests that the quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship may be affected by a combination of internal and external factors (Ganong et al., 2011; Pryor & Rodgers, 2008) including the characteristics of stepchildren as well as their attitude and response to the step-parent (Sweeney, 2010). For example, some children express openness and reciprocate stepparents’ efforts to bond, while others may respond in ways that create distance and at times can be openly rebellious toward the stepparent (Robertson, 2008).

Age has also been implicated as a key factor in determining the quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship particularly in the earlier stages of stepfamily formation (Bray & Kelly, 1998). Problematic relationships between adolescents and their stepparents seem to be the main cause of conflict within stepfamilies while the younger child tends to consider the stepparent as a ‘real’ parent (Wilkes & Fromme, 2002; Song et al., 2012). On the other hand, adverse experiences at a young age have frequently been associated with later adjustment problems including poor social and emotional adjustment and increased tension with step-parent relationships (Cavanagh & Huston, 2008; DeLongis & Preece, 2002; Oldehinkel et al., 2008). Some studies suggest this may be due to the effect of adolescents’ previous struggles interacting with the inherent developmental task of adolescent individuation and autonomy (Bray, 2001; Crawford & Novak, 2008; Stoll et al., 2006).
Some studies have reported better adjustment and greater support for children who have more contact with their non-residential parents (Gunnoe & Hetherington, 2004; Schrodt, 2010), while other studies indicate that increased contact with the non-residential mother creates difficulties in establishing a positive stepchild-stepmother relationship (Doodson & Morley, 2006; King, 2007). Research has shown that the presence of a stepparent increases conflict between children and their non-residential parent, which in turn undermines the quality of their relationship with the stepparent (Crawford & Novak, 2008). For example, it has been found that non-residential parents can make their child feel guilty about liking the step-parent and create loyalty conflicts resulting in the stepchildren withdrawing from stepparents to reduce the tension (Braithwaite et al., 2008; Ganong et al., 2011).

Taken together and in spite of discrepant findings however, the overriding theme in all studies on stepfamily relationships indicates that the presence of stepchildren is thought to lower marital relationship quality for stepparents (Crawford & Novak, 2008; Knox & Zusman, 2001), and that this in turn leads to family instability and negative outcomes for both step-parents and stepchildren (Yu & Adler-Baeder, 2007). As well, clinicians suggest that an important protective factor for children experiencing parental divorce and re-partnering is to reduce the number of transitions (Adler-Baedler, 2007). Given that a high rate of remarriages with children end in divorce (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; van Eeden-Moorefield, & Pasley, 2008), it is vital that research focuses on what can be learned from stepfamilies with a view to minimising the negative effects of family transitions and stepfamily formation (Gosselin & David, 2007). A child operates within a family system and as such, whatever impacts upon the whole family will ultimately impact on the child. Hence the discussion will now turn its attention to the literature on the formation, structure and processes of stepfamilies within a family systems theoretical framework, with a particular focus on stepfamily outcomes, marital quality and relationship development.
Stepfamily Formation, Structure and Processes

Research has consistently shown that the diverse aspects of stepfamily functioning are directly related to the well-being of the members within the stepfamily (Fellman, Galan, & Lloreda, 2008; Dupuis, 2007) and that well-functioning stepfamilies may reduce the risks of poor child outcomes following divorce (Hetherington, 2005; Higginbotham, Skogrand, & Torres, 2010; Yu & Adler-Baeder, 2007). However, whilst remarriage may have the potential to have a positive influence on the overall functioning of the stepfamily (DeLongis & Preece, 2002; Sweeney, 2010), research has also revealed that they are, on average, less cohesive, more unstable and stressful than nuclear families (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013). Furthermore, recent studies confirm that remarriages are more likely to end in divorce (Pryor, 2004; Sweeney, 2010) experience a higher amount of stress (Fellman et al., 2008; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011) and lower amount of marital satisfaction than first-time marriages (Ganong et al., 2011; Gosselin, 2010).

A factor that is frequently implicated in the high failure rate among stepfamilies is the management of the multitude of stressors that are unique to the remarried family structure (van Eeden-Moorefield & Pasley, 2008; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). Stepfamily formation is built on a complex set of dynamics with existing biological parent-child dyads and extended family relationships, but lacking in a shared history, or understanding of family culture, traditions or expectations (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013). Negotiating and integrating such variances into a workable family unit has been shown to create considerable stress and ongoing conflict (Schmeekle, Giarrusso, Feng, & Bengtson, 2006).

While stepfamilies are generally more accepted by society now than in the past, assumptions and beliefs towards stepfamilies continue to influence stepfamily quality and functioning (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). One of the most common assumptions is that the
family should endeavour to emulate the nuclear family model therefore adjustment to the new family structure should be quick and easy (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Higginbotham & Adler-Baeder, 2008). However as previously discussed, it takes an average three year period to adjust to stepfamily living, and most stepfamilies fail within the first five years (Claxton-Oldfield, 2008; Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1987; Visher & Visher, 1988). Moreover, stepfamily roles are ambiguous and unfamiliar to new stepfamily members, creating further confusion and stress (Stewart, 2005).

Such anomalies were first noted by a number of early researchers in the field. Cherlin (1978) attributed this phenomenon to the ‘incomplete institutionalisation’ of remarriage after divorce and argued that unlike traditional nuclear families that have universal and accepted cultural norms to guide behaviour, stepfamilies lack such guidelines. Thus the stepfamily came to be recognised amongst researchers as a distinct, diverse system with unique characteristics that set it apart from the nuclear family model (Hetherington, 1987).

With this understanding, efforts were made to provide a cultural and developmental framework to understand and clarify the structure of the stepfamily (Qu & Weston, 2005), the most salient of which was the Stepfamily Cycle developmental (Papernow, 1996). Consisting of seven stages the model occurs in three phases: the early phase (Fantasy, Immersion and Awareness); the middle phase (Mobilisation and Action) in which the stepfamily restructures to deal with challenges from the first phase; and the final phase (Contact and Resolution). Following Papernow, a number of stepfamily typologies have been proposed each sharing the notion that stepfamilies share structural and dynamic characteristics (Berger, 2001; Burgoyne & Clark, 1984; Visher & Visher, 1996).

Over time however the developmental models were criticised as too descriptive and that they failed to consider diversity within the family structure or the individual dynamics of stepfamily members (Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001). There was
also a growing recognition that the processes involved in establishing and maintaining a functional stepfamily system were a major challenge for stepfamily members (Browning, Collins, & Nelson, 2006; Howden, 2007). An example lies in Braithwaite and colleagues’ (2001) process view of stepfamilies that identifies five developmental trajectories: accelerated, prolonged, stagnating, declining and high-amplitude turbulent. Their study highlighted the notion that stepfamilies have different trajectories and times for development each of which has corresponding levels of functioning. Furthermore, the developmental trajectories incorporated both the unique processes involved within each stepfamily and the individual’s own personal pattern of development (Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey & Stewart, 2001).

Thus, more recent research has shifted its focus towards investigating stepfamily processes that promote or hinder stepfamily adjustment both within and across stepfamily relationships (Gosselin & David, 2007; Whiteside, 2006). The emphasis on family process reflects a growing need for clinicians and researchers to understand more about the negative and positive impact of family transitions on individual and family members. Owing to the complexities associated with the structure and functioning of stepfamilies, it has been argued that stepfamily theory is necessary to gain a clearer understanding of these processes within stepfamilies (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). With this in mind, the following discussion presents an outline of the processes within the stepfamily system as well as the theoretical perspectives that guide this thesis.

**Theoretical Framework**

While a number of theoretical frameworks exist, stepfamily systems theory incorporating aspects of structural family systems theory (Minuchin, 1974) are widely considered to be the most useful in describing the complexities of the dynamics within the stepfamily (Berg, 2003). Not only do these perspectives encompass different family
forms, but they also guide research into investigating the different patterns of relationships, stepfamily functioning and parenting approaches that are adaptive in stepfamily situations (Golish, 2003; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Moreover, they are useful in advancing knowledge and understanding of stepfamilies which has implications for practitioners who work with these families.

Proponents of the family systems paradigm assert that stepfamilies should be viewed as a multi-dimensional, complex set of inter-related systems and subsystems, within which each member of the family participates and interacts in multiple dyads (e.g., parent-stepparent, child-parent, child-stepparent, child-child) (Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). The dynamics within and between the various dyads are determined by the specific roles of the individuals involved which in turn influence the functioning of both the family system and each individual (Dunn, 2004; Ganong et al., 2011). The multiple levels include the biological system, the individual psyche, the family system, the individual and family life cycles, the interpersonal system and societal systems, all of which impinge on the individual and the family. Creating and maintaining a balanced, functional stepfamily system is frequently challenging, particularly in the early phase of stepfamily formation, due to the inherent diversities that may exist in each of these levels (Dunn, 2004).

Added to this, stepfamily couples are challenged in their efforts to develop a strong marital bond whilst also developing parental alliances and roles (Kinninburgh-White & Cartwright, 2008; Schrodt, 2010). In this sense, family systems theory is beneficial as it incorporates Role strain theory (Pearlin, 1983) to explain roles, and how each family member’s role affects the quality of family interaction (Johnson et al., 2008). As previously discussed however, this is particularly challenging for stepfamilies as further complication is caused by the lack of clear norms guiding expectations and behaviours of stepfamily members, particularly relating to boundaries and roles (Marsiglio, 2004). A brief overview of these challenges as they pertain to stepfamilies will now be discussed.
**Boundary and role ambiguity.** Some researchers report that stepfamily boundary ambiguity is due to a lack of clarity about family composition, roles and responsibilities, frequently amongst family members themselves (Stewart, 2005). This is a concern as stepfamily research has consistently shown family boundaries and roles to be significant in stepfamilies and role strain to be associated with relatively poor family functioning, high levels of stress, instability and the eventual break down of relationships (Brown & Manning, 2009; Gosselin, 2010). It has also been suggested that the more complex the family form involving multiple households, the greater the family boundary ambiguity (Crohn, 2006; Whiting et al., 2007).

Despite the recognition of boundary ambiguity in stepfamilies and the associated stress, literature continues to rely on the traditional nuclear family model to explain stepfamily structure and processes (Malia, 2005; Whiteside, 2006). At the same time, society and frequently couples themselves, sanction the expectation that the standards and assumptions resembling first-time marriages should be enforced (Higginbotham & Adler-Baeder, 2008). Stepfamily system theorists argue however, that this assumption contributes to the stress and confusion as both models have distinct systemic differences.

Stress and ambiguity are also experienced by stepfamilies in the absence of role definition (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Coleman et al., 2000). A number of explanations have been offered including the propositions of Role Strain theory (Pearlin, 1983) whereby the roles individuals play are important sources of self-definition and as such, individuals are susceptible to stress when there is a lack of clarity about the demands, expectations or obligations associated with their role (Erera-Weatherley, 1996; Johnson et al., 2008). This has particular relevance to stepfamilies as many researchers claim there is a significant association between role strain in stepfamilies and mental health problems (Fellman et al., 2008; Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013).
Ambiguity of roles in stepfamilies is further confounded as family members frequently disagree on the role each should play (Stewart, 2005). Yet there is evidence that understanding and agreeing on the roles associated with each family member is positively related to the quality of the various stepfamily subsystems (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013). This has relevance as confusion and disagreement about the step-parent’s role has been found to influence stepchildren’s attitude toward their step-parent (Lambert, 2010) and that the step-parent role is central to adjustment and providing stability (Fellman et al., 2008). Hence, the step-parent role is an important consideration and warrants further discussion below.

**Stepparent role.** There is a growing consensus amongst researchers that many of the challenges experienced by stepfamilies relate to the role of the stepparent, in particular, the extent to which stepparents should take a parenting role in the stepchild’s life (Cartwright, 2010; Sweeney, 2010). Added to this, step-parents have poorly defined parenting rights and lack societal and legally recognised status in relation to their stepchildren, adding to the ambiguity of their role (Gately, Pike, & Murphy, 2006). As a result, stepparents are often less sure about how to relate to stepchildren, lack appropriate solutions to family problems and are less clear about expectations in regard to their role with stepchildren (Erera-Weatherley, 1996; Marsiglio, 2004; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011).

Unsurprisingly the question of how actively step-parents should parent is reported to be a frequent area of conflict, particularly when the stepparent wishes to establish limits and routines appropriate to the new family (Hadfield & Nixon, 2012; Howden, 2007; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Studies have shown that the relationship between stepchild and stepparent is less successful if the stepparent assumes the disciplinary role too early in the family’s formative stage (Cartwright, 2010; Coleman & Ganong, 1997; Freisthler et al., 2007) yet clinicians and researchers have noted that some stepparents attempt to adopt a parenting role in the early stages of stepfamily formation (Cartwright, 2003).
Connected to this is the issue of parenting style, control and authority (Felker, Fromme, Arnaut, & Stoll, 2002). Biological parents have often established a parenting strategy before a step-parent joins the family, and may prefer to retain control over childrearing decisions. This however creates conflict as research has found that stepparents often believe biological parents are too lenient, while biological parents tend to view stepparents as being overly strict or not understanding their children (Coleman & Ganong, 1997; Wilkes & Fromme, 2002). Such situations often give rise to both parent and child forming coalitions or strong alliances leaving the stepparent feeling rejected and threatened by their emotional and biological attachment (Bray, 1999; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Howden, 2007). On the other hand, while parent-child coalitions are common in stepfamilies and are linked with relationship stress and conflict, research suggests that they may be adaptive, providing that stepfamily members are not excluded and that a positive relationship with the step-parent is maintained (Anderson & White, 1986; Cartwright, 2008).

Stepfamily researchers have explored the different patterns of relationships and roles that are adaptive in stepfamilies and suggest that a functional stepparent role may differ from a biological parenting role (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). In essence, the research has found that assuming a parenting role with stepchildren does not inevitably lead to conflict and distance (Ganong et al., 2011) particularly when boundaries are permeable (Brown & Manning, 2009), and the step-parent takes a supportive role allowing the biological parent attend to the disciplining (Calsoni & Caldana, 2012; Cartwright, 2010). Furthermore, stepchildren have closer relationships with authoritative step-parents (high on warmth, moderate control and inclusion of children in decision making) combined with a warm stepparent relationship which is high on support and low on control (Bray & Berger, 1993; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). These findings have been supported by findings that suggest children are more accepting of the stepfamily formation when the parent
maintains primary responsibility for discipline allowing time for positive stepparent-child relations to develop (Bray, 1999).

In their overview of developments in stepfamily research, Ganong and Coleman (2004) suggested that stepparents are more likely to develop a positive relationship with their stepchild when they adopt a ‘quasi kin’ stance, that is, a cross between a parent and a friend, or a role similar to an aunt or uncle. It is suggested that the ‘quasi kin’ model is effective as it provides a degree of warmth (having fun, listening, empathising and supporting), whilst also providing structure (monitoring and communicating expectations). Further research has endorsed these findings in that stepchildren have been found to prefer open, flexible communication with their step-parents (Crohn, 2010; Schrodt, 2010) and to develop closer relationships when step-parents invest more in their lives (Schmeekle, 2007).

There is also evidence that stepfamilies have fewer difficulties adjusting when the stepparent is supported by their partner and when they reach agreements about their prospective roles (Fellmann et al., 2008; Schrodt, 2010). This is important as it has been argued that the conflict created from role ambiguity creates feelings of loneliness and adds to the sense of loss that family members experience while adjusting to the new stepfamily system (Dupuis, 2007). Moreover, stepparents have reported being ambivalent about being a stepparent and experience a range of unexpected feelings as they struggle to find their place in their new family system (Afifi, 2008). That an underlying sense of loss may contribute to stepfamily members’ difficulty adjusting to the new stepfamily system warrants further discussion as follows.

**Loss.** Studies report that stepfamily formation creates major losses as it frequently involves moving to new residence, disruptions in schooling, loss of social networks and activities (Dunn, 2002; Gamache, 2007). The arrival of a stepparent may be experienced by children as a loss of family identity through the loss of tradition, rituals and activities that
once characterised the family (Nicholson, Matthews, Halford, Phillips, & Whitton, 2008). In the time following separation or divorce, children often form a close parent-child bond, and may feel a sense of loss of parental time and attention and confusion about their position in their parents’ lives when the stepparent joins the family (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002; Waterman, 2001). Furthermore, some children view the biological parent’s acceptance of the stepparent in a disciplinary role as a betrayal or loss of loyalty to them as children (Cartwright, 2005), leaving them less motivated to develop a close bond (Kinniburgh-White & Cartwright, 2010).

Stepparents have also reported a sense of loss in terms of stages in their own developmental life cycle. Initial family life cycle and relationship stages may not be available to them because they have already been experienced by the biological parent, such as stepmothers or stepfathers who do not have children of their own (Gerrard, 2002). As well, children have reported a loss of childhood when their parents separate, as they often adopt a parental role by becoming the biological parent’s support or taking on household tasks that were previously the responsibility of the other parent (Sweeney, 2010). When their parent remarries however the children experience further loss as these responsibilities are typically subsumed by the stepparent. Such losses, combined with loyalty to their parent, often give rise to rejection of the stepparent which in turn, impacts on the quality of relationships within the stepfamily system (Howden, 2007). This is important as previously noted child outcomes are influenced by relationship quality and marital conflict (Sweeney, 2010). The following section therefore discusses the impact of marital quality in stepmother families.

Marital relationship quality. In line with family systems theories, many reviews in the field of stepfamily research indicate that stepfamily and couple functioning are inextricably intertwined (Wilkes & Fromme, 2002) and there is both empirical (Schrodt, Soliz, & Braithwaite, 2008) and clinical (Visher & Visher, 1988) evidence to suggest that
the quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship affects the marital relationship (Gosselin & David, 2007; Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013).

Several studies report that the effects of structural complexity and greater role ambiguity in stepfamilies impacts on marital quality and satisfaction (Afifi, 2008). For example, studies have shown that couples in complex stepfamilies report more stressors and less cohesion and agreement than couples in simple stepfamilies (Sweeney, 2010) and that the greater amount of conflict in the earlier stages of remarriage has a long-term negative effect on the quality of the marriage (Felker et al., 2002; van Eeden-Moorefield et al., 2008). These findings were supported in a study by Stokes and Wampler (2002) who reported that marital satisfaction and psychological distress in stepfamilies were negatively correlated, whereas marital satisfaction and cohesion were positively correlated. Some studies also propose that a number of personal factors may impact on the quality of the marital relationship including the prior marital history of one or both members (Dupuis, 2007), couples’ beliefs about the stepparent role (Fine & Kurdek, 1995), agreement on parenting and child-rearing issues (Sweeney, 2010) and the number and complexity of issues that parents and stepparents face (Cartwright, 2005).

On the other hand, reviews of studies comparing marital relationship quality between stepfamilies and first time marriages have provided mixed results (Coleman et al., 2000; Lansford, Cebello, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001; Shriner, 2009). Furthermore, studies are now reporting positive findings in relation to marital quality and that, whilst not without their problems, there are number of stepfamilies that provide positive, supportive environments for their children’s development (Michaels, 2006; Schrodt, 2010). More specifically, the studies report that many stepfamilies develop warm, supporting relationships when family members are flexible, have a sense of humour, work together towards establishing common goals, have realistic expectations, agree upon roles and engage in positive parenting that involves strong support, inclusion and close supervision.
Positive outcomes have also been demonstrated in stepfamilies that are aware of and respect the diversity amongst family members’ perceptions of relationships and experiences within the stepfamily (Kellas, LeClair-Underberg, & Normand, 2008). This is important as many studies emphasise that measures of relationship adjustment are related to consistency in perceptions between members of the stepfamily system (Freisthler et al., 2003; Schmeekle et al., 2006).

Hence, while overall research findings suggest that separation, divorce and stepfamily formation is stressful and associated with significant difficulties for some stepfamilies, there is evidence that many stepfamilies that do integrate well. Stepfamilies are diverse and affected by multiple internal and external factors that either enhance or limit stepfamily members’ capacity to manage the enormity of the challenges they face. Considerable diversity also exists in the dynamics and perceptions of stepfamily relationships and the roles that stepparents play in the stepchildren’s lives. At the same time, whilst major stresses occur within the initial stages of stepfamily formation, many stepfamilies manage to find ways of resolving these difficulties within the first three years of repartnering (Hetherington, 1999). Therefore, if stepfamilies can work together and negotiate problems in the early phase of stepfamily formation, then positive, supportive relationships may develop (Dunn, O’Connor, & Chen, 2005; Higginbotham & Adler-Baeder, 2008; Stoll et al., 2006).

Family systems theory is a helpful paradigm in addressing the unique challenges that stepfamilies face (Papernow, 2008). As a multidimensional model, family systems theory provides a framework that identifies complex circumstances that influence and predict diverse individual and family outcomes. Family systems theory endorses the assumption that stepfamily members’ well-being is linked with associations between relationships and is sufficiently flexible to allow for the possibility that different roles and
patterns of relationships may be more or less optimal in stepfamily situations (Schrodt, 2010). Furthermore, family systems theory recognises that family members within the stepfamily system may have different perceptions of their experiences and that these differences in perceptions can influence adjustment.

Yet despite the encouraging proliferation of stepfamily studies over the past five decades, researchers are only just beginning to understand the factors and processes that may contribute towards positive stepfamily functioning, and admit that they remain relatively uninformed in the area of stepmother families (Coleman et al., 2000; Schmeekle, 2007). This is a cause for concern as the number of stepmother families is beginning to increase as more biological fathers are gaining custody or joint custody of their children (Fisher et al., 2003; Portrie & Hill, 2005). Researchers have endorsed the need to expand on research in this field and in particular, to employ qualitative methods with a view to understanding the experiences and perceptions of stepmother family members (Fine & Kurdek, 1992; Gosselin, 2010). To this end, this current study aims to contribute to family systems theory by investigating the fathers’, the stepmothers’ and stepchildren’s perceptions of their experiences of living in a stepmother family. The discussion now turns its attention towards a review of the literature on stepmother family studies as they relate to the aims of this study.

**Stepmother Families**

While the area of stepfamily adjustment both initially and over time has become an important area of interest for researchers and clinicians, stepmother families have received little attention (Christian, 2005; Whiting et al., 2007). Furthermore, little is known about the particular dynamics involved in the development and maintenance of individual adjustment in stepmother families (Gosselin, 2010). Those who have investigated stepmother families have generally reported more confusion, conflict and overall poorer
adjustment among family members than in stepfather families (Whiting et al., 2007). There is also evidence of more boundary and role ambiguity in stepmother families than in stepfather families (Church, 2000; Gosselin & David, 2007; Gunnoe & Hetherington, 2004) which may negatively impact the quality of life for stepmothers and increase the risk for poor adjustment amongst family members (Gosselin, 2010; Whiting et al., 2007). Given the importance of the stepmother in the stepmother family, the following section focusses on factors that impact on the stepmother experience.

**The stepmother experience.** It is well documented that forming a stepfamily is more difficult for stepmothers than stepfathers (Coleman et al., 2000; Dedaic, 2001) and that stepmothers have higher rates of stress, lower self-esteem and less role satisfaction than any other parenting type (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Fellman et al., 2008; Preece & DeLongis, 2005; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011; Johnson et al., 2008). Specifically, stepmothers identify stress in relating to biological mothers, disciplining stepchildren, stepmothering without biological children, handling difficult feelings towards stepchildren, the idealisation of motherhood and a lack of boundary and role clarity (Craig & Johnson, 2011; Crohn, 2006; Nielsen, 1999; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). In a study comparing stepmother experiences with other non-biological mothering types, Waterman (2003) found a number of distinctions, the most salient of which were: the stepmother does not choose her stepchildren; stepmothers are neither legal nor permanent mothers; and, most importantly, the biological mother is alive and typically actively involved with the children.

Some researchers suggest that a major issue for stepmothers is that they face difficulties not faced by other family members in particular, the perpetuation of the ‘wicked stepmother’ stereotype (Christian, 2005; Salwen, 1990). This was highlighted by Jones (2004) in a study of narrative techniques used by stepmothers in a support group who found that stepmothers experience unique stress due to the ambiguous nature of their
role. Jones suggested that the stereotype of the ‘wicked stepmother’ was the underlying cause for this role strain and that by assuming this role contributes to feelings of insecurity and isolation for stepmothers. Further studies have endorsed these findings suggesting that prevalence of this stereotype creates a stigma amongst stepmothers that impacts their self-esteem, role and family relationships (Ceglian & Gardner, 2001; Christian, 2005; Johnson et al., 2008; Whiting et al., 2007). Studies have also shown that stepmothers tend to internalise the wicked stepmother image as part of their personal identity (Perez & Torrens, 2009; Weaver & Coleman, 2005) and may place extra strain on themselves by overcompensating to prove that they are not ‘wicked’ (Johnson et al., 2008; Jones, 2004). Furthermore, it has been suggested that stepmothers who do not feel ‘instant love’ for their stepchild may feel guilty and attempt to deny their true feelings or force the relationship rather than allowing it to develop naturally over time (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Gosselin & David, 2007).

The stepmother experience is further confounded by the lack of social and emotional support available (Craig & Johnson, 2010) leaving them to rely on their own inner resources and capabilities (Hart, 2009). While a number of self-help books on stepfamilies are available, there is a paucity of empirical evidence that establishes an understanding of stepmother experiences or that offer advice about coping with the stresses (King, 2007). With this lack of information and support, many stepmothers assign blame either to themselves or others, potentially increasing the risk for conflict in the stepfamily system and potential stepfamily dissolution (Visher & Visher, 1994; Ceglian & Gardner, 2001).

Researchers attribute the unique challenges faced by stepmothers to society’s general disregard for the stepmother role, and a concomitant lack of guidelines on expected behaviours and support (Perez & Torrens, 2009). There is little definition or social affirmation for the stepmother role within the family and all aspects of her role, as parent,
family member and part of society, are undefined and frequently undermined. These considerations will now be discussed.

**The stepmother role.** The literature has consistently reported a higher level of boundary and role ambiguity with stepmothers than for stepfathers (Gosselin, 2010; Whiting et al., 2007), and that this has the largest relationship with stepmother stress, more dissatisfaction with family relationships and poorer couple adjustment (Gosselin & David, 2007; Hart, 2009; Stewart & Shapiro, 2011). In line with role strain theory, numerous studies assert that role strain has been found to be higher for stepmothers than stepfathers (Fellman et al., 2008; Ihinger-Tallman, 1987; Johnson et al., 2008) and that stepmothers have greater difficulty than stepfathers consolidating their role to fit into the stepfamily system (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Coleman et al., 2000; Hadfield & Nixon, 2012; Hart, 2009; Perez & Torrens, 2009; Whiting et al., 2007). Furthermore, attaining a role of stepmother may not be synchronous with the stepmother’s developmental stage which, according to role strain theory, creates a greater degree of stress (Johnson et al., 2008). Studies also report that stepmothers are at considerably greater risk of developing psychological and relational problems due to role strain than do stepfathers or biological mothers (Craig & Johnson, 2011; Fellman et al., 2008). As previously discussed, gendered norms about motherhood may explain stepmother’s role strain and difficulty adjusting to their parenting role (Shapiro & Stewart, 2011).

In a review of the research on stepmothers, Nielsen (1999) identified four factors that contributed to the high level of role strain: i) society’s attitude about mothering; ii) the mother and stepmother’s personalities, attitudes and circumstances; iii) the father’s attitude and his relationship with the mother; and iv) the stepchildren’s gender and mental health. Other factors contributing to the level of stress include the place of residence of the children (Sweeney, 2010), whether or not the stepmother has her own children (Craig &
Johnson, 2011), and a lack of agreement amongst family members about the new stepmother’s role and how she should behave (Fisher et al., 2003; Michaels, 2006).

A further confounding factor contributing to role strain is that stepmothers are often functioning alongside the biological mother in a culture that holds little value for shared mothering (Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). Whilst not wanting to compete with the biological mother, many stepmothers describe difficulty reconciling society’s idealisation of mothering, or the ‘myth of mothering’, with their own feelings and experiences of being a stepmother (Howden, 2007). Societal attitudes endorse the belief that as females they should easily and immediately integrate themselves into the family and have motherly feelings toward their stepchildren (Ganong & Coleman, 1995; Nielsen, 1999). In reality however this is an unrealistic expectation as stepmothers do not have the biological connection with the stepchild (Visher & Visher, 1988). Moreover, while society expects stepmothers to be less responsible for discipline they are perceived as more responsible than men for household and childcare tasks, some of which involve closeness and nurturance (Ganong et al., 2011).

These findings have been demonstrated in a number of studies focussing on the stepmother role. A qualitative study by Levin (1997) exploring patterns of behaviour in 63 members of stepfamilies found that the role of being a stepmother is compounded by the role of being a woman. According to the socialisation of women and cultural expectations, women are expected to be responsible for household tasks, be a ‘good’ wife or partner, and take care of the children. As a stepmother however, this becomes complicated because, while they are expected to be close and caring to their stepchildren, they are also expected as stepmothers to remain distant. Thus, not only does a stepmother become confused about her role in the family but also doubts her sense of self as a person and a woman, further raising her level of stress. Stepmothers are thus caught between the only known role to
them as ‘mother’, and the reality that they are not, nor ever will be, their stepchildren’s mother.

In a similar vein a qualitative study by Weaver and Coleman (2005) found that the idealised image of mothers and the perception of motherhood greatly impacted on the conceptualisation of the stepmother role. Stepmothers in the study were influenced by gendered ideals of family roles and behaviours for women, and a perceived expectation that all women want to care for and nurture children whilst also trying to avoid appropriating the biological mother’s role. This resulted in a dilemma described by the stepmothers as “mothering, but not a mother” (Weaver & Coleman, 2005).

A recent paper by Hart (2009) based on clinical practice and observations of hundreds of stepfamilies over a 30 year period described the stepmother’s role as an ‘ongoing paradox’ explaining that amongst feelings of ambiguity and ambivalence the stepmother is expected to attach to her stepchildren yet at the same time, respect and acknowledge the children’s primary attachment to their parents and thus, maintain a distance. As a solution to this dilemma, Hart suggests that a stepmother needs to undergo a major psychological change and develop what she terms an ‘internal parental stance’. According to Hart, stepmothers need to create a maternal attachment to the child whilst also respecting the limitations imposed by the biological parents. An ‘internal parental stance’ also requires the stepmother to have the capacity to manage her experience and understanding of the child, along with the sometimes primitive feelings that are frequently evoked amidst the tensions involved in stepfamily living. Hart argues that unless the stepmother is able to develop this parental mindset, her relationship with the child is in jeopardy.

Whiting and colleagues (2007) also identified the resources and coping strategies of nine ‘successful’ stepmothers selected by a Delphi panel of 18 stepfamily research experts. Overall analysis found that open and honest communication, an accepting, flexible and
non-judgemental attitude, and finding mutually agreeable methods to resolve challenging situations had helped stepmothers develop positive relationships with their stepchild. This was facilitated by having quality time together as a family and having a solid support system including extended family and social network, and access to resources. These findings have been supported in some studies that report a link between effective communication, particularly problem solving and conflict resolution, and positive stepmother-stepchild relationships (Crohn, 2010; Gosselin, 2010).

Other researchers have provided evidence that stepmothers play a positive role in many stepfamilies (Hart, 2009; Sweeney, 2010; Vinick & Lanspery, 2000) and have identified the roles of kin-keeper, liaison, and facilitator as particularly promising in promoting positive outcomes in stepmother families (Lambert, 2010; Schmeekle, 2007). These findings were substantiated in a qualitative study by Crohn (2006) investigating the views of 19 young females who perceived themselves as having positive relationships with their stepmothers. Crohn described the role of stepmother as occurring on a continuum: “my father’s wife”, “a peer-like girlfriend”, “an older friend”, “a type of kin” or, “like another mother”. Researchers have also reported that when stepmothers adopt the role of friend, aunt or babysitter, children tend to be more open and accepting (Dunn, Davies, O’Conner, & Sturgess, 2001; Schmeekle, 2007). These findings suggest that stepchildren can be satisfied with a variety of stepmother roles, depending on the expectations they have of her and to a certain extent, to their own needs.

It has also been found that stepmothers who live with their stepchildren full time report higher levels of marital happiness, less ambivalence about their role and greater security in their relationship with stepchildren than non-residential stepmothers (Sweeney, 2010).

**Stepmothers and mental health.** Given the challenges that stepmothers face, it is not surprising that this extends to mental health issues (Shapiro & Stewart, 2011).
Researchers have found that rates of depression are twice as high for stepmothers compared with mothers in first time marriages (Dunn, 2002) and are more anxious, depressed and angry than stepfathers (Keshet, 2001). Furthermore, thoughts of suicide and suicidal attempts have also been more commonly reported by stepmothers than other parental forms (Smith, 2008). Numerous studies have also found that stepmothers’ psychological distress impacts on their ability to deal with conflict and adjust to the stepfamily (Lee-Baggy, Preece, & DeLongis, 2005).

In a recent qualitative study conducted in Australia, 10 non-residential stepmothers described high levels of parenting stress and feelings of powerlessness, which in turn were related to depressive symptoms (Henry & McCue, 2009). As well, a study by Shapiro and Stewart (2011) reported that stepmothers experience significant parenting stress, perceptions that their stepchild holds them in low regard and high levels of depressive symptoms. Other studies have also found that parenting stress and a lack of acceptance and support from the father and stepfamily members along with disagreement about expectations and perceptions of responsibility have been linked to a range of mental health outcomes for stepmothers (Feinburg, Kan, & Hetherington, 2007; Slavich, O'Donovan, Epel, & Kemeny, 2010). Indeed, high levels of depression are a cause for concern not only for stepmothers but also because of the link between maternal depression and child psychological and behavioural outcomes (Ashman, Dawson, & Pangiotides, 2008; Cheal, 2002). As previously noted, one of the major stresses for stepmothers is the presence of the biological mother and as such, warrants further discussion.

**Residential stepmother versus biological mother.** While the parent-stepparent-biological mother triangle has been described as a fundamental building block to the stepfamily system studies have consistently reported that the presence and attitude of the biological mother is a significant stressor for stepmothers (King, 2007; Nielsen, 1999; Schrodt, 2010; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2007) and influences stepfamily structure and
processes (Beaudry, Boisvert, Simard, Parent, & Blais, 2004; Schrodt et al., 2008; Svare, Jay, & Mason, 2004). Studies suggest that tensions result from the renegotiation of power and boundaries between the biological parents, whilst also balancing the non-residential mother-child relationship within the stepfamily system (Schrodt et al., 2008). Added to this, biological mothers may resent the stepmother’s involvement and can be uncooperative, intrusive and disruptive to the marital relationship thereby preventing the couple from fully entering into a new relationship, particularly if the father is still struggling to sever emotional ties with his ex-spouse (Robertson, 2008; Shriner, 2009).

In a study of eleven stepmothers exploring marital satisfaction, Knox and Zusman (2001) found that feelings of jealousy towards the biological mother and perceived lack of support from partners and family were associated with less marital happiness, increased regrets about marrying and greater thoughts about divorce. Other studies have shown that the biological mother can disrupt the stepmother’s efforts to balance family and marital relationship needs often creating a sense of competition within and between and households (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013).

There is evidence that biological mothers view the stepmother as a threat to their role as a mother and therefore maintain more frequent and consistent contact with their children than non-residential fathers (Hart, 2009; Miller, 2009). Researchers have also found increased stepmother stress and household conflict when the biological mother has not remarried as she tends to scrutinise the stepmother and have a higher level of engagement with her children (Nielsen, 1999; Hart, 2009). Such involvement may interfere with the development of a bond between stepmothers and children, creating tension for the stepmother who is taking daily care of the stepchild (Gunnoe & Hetherington, 2004). Studies have also found that if mothers identify strongly with the ‘myth of motherhood’ then stepmothers hold little chance of developing close relationships with their stepchildren (Jones, 2004).
Stepmothers have reported frustration and resentment when their authority is undermined by the biological mother (Gosselin, 2010; Hart, 2009), and described feeling powerless, inadequate, guilty, depressed and like an ‘outsider in their home’ (Coleman et al., 2008; Doodson & Morley, 2006). Studies have also described the stepmother as often left in the unenviable position of being ignored or undermined due to the non-residential mother’s influence, and tend to disengage from their relationship with their stepchild as a result (King, 2007). Such a situation is problematic given that stepmothers are largely responsible for the daily care of their partner’s children (King, 2007).

Conversely, some studies have indicated that stepmothers who regard the biological mother as a supportive resource in raising children and are able to communicate effectively are more likely to experience reduced stress and improved mental health (Schrodt, 2010). In the long run not only does this benefit the functioning of the stepfamily system, but also helps contribute to marital satisfaction and the stepmother-stepchild relationship.

**Stepmother-stepchild relationships.** While research on the stepmother-stepchild relationship is limited, it is nevertheless agreed that the stepmother has a significant impact, both directly and indirectly, on the life of the child (Hart, 2009). However, as previously discussed, several studies have described the stepmother-stepchild relationship as more complex and conflictual than the stepfather-stepchild relationship (Ceglian & Gardner, 2001; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002), possibly because stepmothers are more involved in stepchild care and are therefore more likely to be involved in limit-setting and conflict (Hadfield & Nixon, 2012).

Research has found that a stepmother’s capacity to establish a relationship with her stepchildren is largely affected by their acceptance of her role as a parent (Coleman et al., 2008; Ganong et al., 2011) yet, from the time of introduction, stepmothers are confronted with multiple challenges none the least of which is that she may be perceived by the children as a threat to the established family roles (Hart, 2009; Pann & Crosbie-Burnett,
Stepchildren may purposely resist forming a relationship with their stepmother either out of loyalty to their biological mother, fear that time spent with their mother may be threatened, or that the stepmother thwarts their hope for reconciliation with the biological parents (Sweeney, 2010; Whiting et al., 2007).

According to results from a qualitative study of 17 stepmothers (Perez & Torrens, 2009) conflicts arise when stepmothers do not share the habits and values of their stepchildren such as when they have high standards or unrealistic expectations for children’s behaviour. In turn the children may perceive the stepmother as being demanding and unreasonable, potentially creating an ongoing cycle of resentment and animosity. Ganong and colleagues (2011) also found in their qualitative study involving 32 stepdaughters and 17 stepsons, that a stepmother’s nurturing and parenting behaviours can be counterproductive in establishing positive relationships when it is unwanted by the stepchild. Likewise, other research has shown that stepchildren become resistant when the stepmother assumes the role of parent or disciplinarian, particularly in the earlier stages of the stepfamily formation and that this is associated with negative child outcomes (Cartwright, 2010; Shelton, Walters, & Harold, 2008). Added to this, many women are childless when they enter stepfamilies thus facing the challenge of fostering relationships with stepchildren with little experience of their behavioural and developmental needs (Perez & Torrens, 2009). This lack of experience, combined with opposition from their stepchildren potentially limits chances of establishing high quality, workable stepmother-stepchild relationships.

Ceglian and Gardner (2001) found that attachment theory was useful in describing the stepmother-stepchild relationship. In their study of 154 stepmothers, the authors concluded that stepmothers with secure and anxious attachment styles perceive themselves as not doing enough for their new family, while those with avoidant attachment styles show the highest levels of resentment and perceived stepchild mistreatment. Likewise,
when considering the extent to which children’s attachment to mothers is greater than to fathers, it has been suggested that children may have more difficulty accepting or adjusting to another ‘mother’ in their family (King, 2007). This is indicated in studies that have found an association between stepmother-stepchild conflict and not having full custody of their stepchild (Gosselin, 2010; Sweeney, 2010).

It has also been reported that stepmothers who experience the most conflict and frustration were those who had high control needs such as difficulty accepting the children, finding satisfaction in the father’s discipline of the children and competing for her husband’s attention (Coleman & Ganong, 1997). Connected to this is the stepmother’s history and the extent to which early conflicts have been resolved, as this will also shape her capacity to respond to her stepchildren and to her resilience in the face of the inevitable challenges of the developing relationships (Hadfield & Nixon, 2012; Keshet, 2001; Waterman, 2003).

A further complication experienced by many stepmothers is that they are sometimes left to deal with troubled teenagers who are in conflict with their mothers and have sought ‘refuge’ at their father’s home (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Stepmothers also report struggling to manage the needs of their own children, particularly if they are young, alongside those of their partner’s teenage children (Johnson et al., 2008). This is problematic as several recent studies have shown stepparents tend to favour their own children over their stepchildren adding further strain to the stepparent-stepchild relationship (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Jenkins, Simpson, Dunn, Rasbash, & O’Conner, 2003; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2007). Added to this, the stepmother’s biological children may exert powerful pressure on their mother to hold her stepchild at a distance, adding further strain on the development of positive relationships. The biological child’s situation may be further complicated by the birth of a child to the new couple, which could further threaten
their position in the new family adding further tension to the stepmother-stepchild relationship (Hart, 2009).

The stepmother-stepdaughter relationship has also been reported to be the most complex and difficult to develop (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002), and is often characterised by less affection, respect and acceptance, and higher levels of conflict than the stepfather-stepdaughter relationship (Hart, 2009; Olsen, Price, Jones, & Bergen, 2004). It has been suggested this may be due to the daughters’ ‘wife-like’ relationship with their fathers during the single-parent stage, which must be relinquished to the stepmother when she becomes a member of the family (Pasley & Moorefield, 2004).

Conversely, qualitative research highlights considerable diversity in the dynamics of stepmother-stepchild relationships with many researchers proposing that it may be easier for stepmothers to establish a positive relationship with stepdaughters (Pasley & Moorefield, 2004; Sweeney, 2010). This was highlighted in Crohn’s (2006) qualitative study whereby all 19 participants reported that the stepmother did not usurp their biological mother and that this factor underpinned their perceptions of a positive relationship with their stepmother.

Furthermore, a recent study by King (2007) found that the stepmother-stepchild relationship is not related to adolescent well-being, regardless of gender. Using data on 294 adolescents drawn from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health who live with a biological father and stepmother and have a non-residential mother, King found that adolescents who are closer to their non-residential biological mother exhibited significantly fewer internalising problems and marginally fewer externalising problems than adolescents who were less close to them. Two thirds of the adolescents in the study reported feeling close to their stepmother. Results from studies have also shown that stepchildren themselves may also impact on the quality of the stepmother-stepchild relationship. This is an important consideration and warrants further discussion.
Stepchildren’s relationship with their stepmother. The literature on children’s perceptions of relationship quality with stepmothers is relatively sparse (Smith, 2008; Sturgess, Dunn, & Davies, 2001). Of the existing literature, children in stepmother families were reported to be more anxious and hyperactive than those in stepfather families and are viewed to be at higher risk for behaviour problems (Pryor, 2004). Children also report more conflict, less support and a lower relationship quality with their stepmothers (King, 2007), and that stepmothers are detached, unsupportive and uninvolved in their lives (Whiting et al., 2007). On the other hand, studies have found that some stepchildren perceive their stepmother as intrusive when she makes the effort to be involved in their lives (Sweeney, 2010).

The stepchild-stepmother relationship is further confounded when children, particularly adolescents, do not accept their stepmother’s authority or her right to establish or enforce rules (Berg, 2003). This was highlighted in a study by Ahrons (1994) which reported that only about twenty percent of adult stepchildren felt close to their stepmother and that when compared to the half who regarded their stepfather as a parent, only one-third thought of their stepmother as a parent. Stepchildren’s relationships and judgements of stepmothers were also found to be influenced by their non-residential mother who either actively facilitated or discouraged the development of their relationship with the stepmother (Ganong et al., 2011).

More recent studies however are finding that stepchildren think and act more positively toward stepmothers who are supportive of their parents. Ganong and colleagues (2011) identified three primary motives for stepchildren to perceive their stepmother positively: personal gain, parental gain or both. Stepchildren described personal gains as: improvement in their standard of living, receiving help from their stepmother or their stepmother making an effort and showing an interest in them; and parental gain as: the
stepmother supporting their father such as economically or with household tasks or making him happy.

Other studies have echoed these results, revealing that stepmothers benefit stepchildren by bringing extra resources into the stepfamily system, provide extra supervision and act as a gender role model for their stepchildren (Crawford & Novak, 2008; Ulveseter et al., 2010). Some studies have also found a tendency for adolescents living with a stepmother to be less involved in health-compromising behaviours (Stewart & Manning, 2009). There is also evidence that a positive bond may form the longer the stepmother has been in the child’s life, and that the younger the child at the time of family formation, the quicker the adjustment and more accepting they are of the stepmother’s care (Keshet, 2001; Sweeney, 2010).

**Marital relationships in stepmother families.** Women who enter stepfamilies as their first marriage tend to place a high value on closeness, time alone, privacy and romance in their spousal relationship (Keshet, 2001). However, with the presence of children from the beginning of their relationship and the challenges of entering into an already established family unit, many stepmothers complain that their stepchildren and biological mother get in the way of their expectations of marriage. Likewise, studies on stepmother experiences have found that the father’s continued attachment to his former spouse, and placing his children’s needs before the stepmother’s was negatively related to marital satisfaction (Shriner, 2009). A number of studies support these findings, with stepmothers reporting a greater decline in relationship quality than in mothers in first-time marriages, even when controlling for the father’s age and length of their current relationship (Bouchard, 2005; Hadfield & Nixon, 2012; Shriner, 2009).

Relationship quality has also been related to the extent to which fathers support the stepmother in adopting the parental role (King, 2007; Fellman et al., 2008). Many stepmothers have reported feeling resentful when they are expected to assume considerable

Research has also found that residential stepmothers tend to experience more disagreement with their partners over childrearing issues and division of labour than stepfathers and report less marital satisfaction (Hadfield & Nixon, 2012; Sweeney, 2010). Furthermore, some studies have indicated that disagreement over parenting and lack of support from their partners frequently results in parent-child alliances leaving stepmothers feeling excluded and with little authority (Craig & Johnson, 2011; Dunn et al., 2005; Moore & Cartwright, 2005) and that this has been linked to stepmother stress and psychological distress (Gosselin, 2010).

Other studies however, have provided mixed results with some reporting that the marital quality improves when the father assumes the primary disciplinary, authoritative role, while others state that giving the stepmother authority increases her sense of control and self-efficacy in the family (Johnson et al., 2008; Perez & Torrens, 2009). When family responsibilities are organised and communicated in ways that feel compatible and acceptable to everyone has also been shown to improve marital relationship quality (Braithwaite et al., 2008; Schrodt, 2010).

Stepmother employment is another factor associated with higher marital satisfaction (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001; Shriner, 2009). Researchers have attributed this to a higher involvement by fathers (Hofferth & Anderson, 2003), and a greater sense of autonomy and financial independence for the women (Adamsons et al., 2007). As well, stepmother employment benefits children by way of improved mental health and resources which in turn has led to more positive stepmother-child interactions (Chase-Lansdale et al., 2003; Sweeney, 2010). Again however, the effect of stepmother employment is influenced
by the father’s attitude and level of support towards her (Adamsons et al., 2007) thus the discussion now turns its attention to fathers’ experiences in stepmother families.

Fathers’ experiences in stepmother families. It has been argued that the experience of the stepparent or stepchild has taken precedence in stepfamily research while parents, biological fathers in particular, are overlooked (Arnaut, Fromme, Stoll, & Felker, 2000). Yet, in stepmother families, the father is considered to be essential in determining the outcome, as they are the ones with a direct tie to all other family members (Claxton-Oldfield, Garber, & Gillchrist, 2006).

Of particular importance is the quality of the father’s involvement with their children (Hofferth & Anderson, 2003; Schenck et al., 2009). It has become increasingly recognised that fathers may not be as involved or as close to their children, particularly daughters, as are resident mothers (Adamsons et al., 2007) and that stepmothers take over more parenting responsibilities (Hawkins, Amato, & King, 2006; Sweeney, 2010). Studies have suggested that fathers may isolate themselves from their children as a way of coping with their emotional pain following separation and divorce or because they perceive themselves as inadequate as a father (Bokker, 2006). This is important as studies have revealed that a child’s self-esteem is mediated by closeness, not just to their mother, but to their father in particular (Schwartz & Finley, 2006), and that children rely on residential fathers in times of stress (Fellman et al., 2008). Furthermore, an adolescent’s closeness to their father in stepmother families is significantly associated a greater sense of belonging within their stepfamily (Leake, 2007) and fewer psychosocial problems, highlighting the important role of fathers in these families (King, 2007; Sweeney, 2010).

Some studies suggest that not only does society place relatively low expectations on fathers’ involvement in childrearing, but that fathers themselves often place unrealistic, gender-related expectations on their new partner (Bokker, 2006; Craig & Johnson, 2011; Ganong et al., 2011). This was demonstrated in a study by Bentley (2005) who identified
features that fathers expected from the stepmother: i) the stepmother’s role should be similar to that of the mother; ii) the stepmother should discipline their children whilst also being friends with them; iii) they should not be a source of tension and problems; iv) they should arrange for the daily care and have an active role in the children’s educational experience; and v) that the stepmother should plan activities with the children’s extended family members. Other studies have shown that fathers’ high expectations of the stepmother role contribute to the stepmother role strain and dysfunction of the stepfamily (Fellmann et al., 2008).

Some studies describe the father as representing the main and frequently, the only person linking all the members of the stepfamily and that fathers often report feeling caught in the middle of a triangle of conflict between his children, their mother and the stepmother (Sweeney, 2010). Fathers also report high levels of psychological distress in managing the different levels of boundaries between the stepfamily subsystems and that this in turn affects their capacity to manage these difficulties (Gosselin, 2010). This is a concern as research has shown fathers have been socialised in a way that makes it difficult for them to identify and express their emotions (Good & Sherrod, 2001) and that they tend to overestimate their emotional well-being (Cochran, 2001). In a study of 155 participants living in stepfamilies, Bernstein stressed that a father’s ability to recognise his own needs as well as the stepmother’s and children’s is essential and suggests that fathers need to adopt a ‘both/and’ approach rather than prioritising one relationship over another. This notion is endorsed by other researchers who argue that the father’s capacity to communicate with, listen to and negotiate his own needs as well as those of his marriage, his children and his new family is crucial in providing the highest chance of success for the family and in managing their own levels of personal stress (Solomon, 2003; Schrodt, 2010).
Conclusion and Study Aims

In summary, stepmother families face a number of unique challenges that have been described as more complex than stepfather families including more confusion and disagreement over boundaries and roles, greater relationship conflict, lower marital satisfaction and overall poorer adjustment among family members. Underlying the challenges that stepmother families face is the presence of the biological mother and society’s expectations about the role of women and mothering. Added to this, the predominance of the wicked stepmother stereotype creates a stigma that places significant strain on the stepmother’s self-esteem and role enactment. It is not surprising therefore, that defining the place and role of the stepmother is linked to conflict as family members try to negotiate their place and the way this relates to others in the stepfamily system.

Given the impact of the stepmother-stepchild relationship, and its potential to affect stepfamily adjustment and outcomes, researchers have indicated that it would be useful to identify strategies that work and those do not work within this relationship. Furthermore, while much has been reported about the increased risks involved in stepmother families, it is only recently that researchers have tried to understand what specific factors both hinder and promote success within this stepfamily system (Dunn et al., 2001; Goldscheider & Sassler, 2006; Hart, 2009; King, 2007).

As the research illustrates, it is important for studies to explore the diversity of perspectives within stepfamilies and the unique challenges that each stepfamily has to face. If stepfamilies can negotiate adjustment problems in the early phase of stepfamily formation, and appreciate that each family member has their own perception of their experiences, then positive, supportive relationships can develop (Amato, 2005). Indeed, researchers now recognise the need to gather information from more than one stepfamily member as studies have identified notable differences between individual stepfamily member’s perceptions of their experiences (Dunn et al., 2001; Higginbotham & Adler-
Baeder, 2008; Golish, 2003; Stoll et al., 2006). This is important as many studies emphasise that measures of relationship adjustment are related to consistency in perceptions between members of the stepfamily system (Freisthler et al., 2003; Schmeekle et al., 2006).

Researchers have argued for the importance of including qualitative research with a focus on the more in-depth perspectives of all stepfamily members. Such information can provide valuable insight into the family’s ability to adapt to stepfamily life. Given the increasing number of stepmother families and potential risks and benefits for their children it is important to continue investigating the development of stepfamily processes and relationships. In particular the pace of family change highlights the importance of exploring children’s perceptions of family transitions so that differences in their psychological adaptation may be identified and understood (Pryor, 2004).

Therefore, this thesis aims to investigate the positive and challenging experiences from the perspective of the adults and children living in stepmother families. Drawing on findings from previous stepmother family research, the study employs a qualitative research approach to investigate the perspectives and experiences of the stepmothers, stepchildren and fathers. Hence the overall aims of this current study are:

1. To investigate stepmother family members’ perceptions of challenging experiences and the strategies they found helpful towards their resolution
2. The meaning that stepmother family members attribute to these challenging experiences;
3. To investigate stepmother family members’ perceptions of positive experiences and the strategies they used towards achieving these experiences;
4. The meaning that they attribute to these positive experiences.

This study will contribute to the understanding of the adults’ and children’s’ perceptions of their experiences living in a stepmother family. The findings will contribute
further to stepfamily systems theory which is useful in both explaining stepfamily functioning as well as informing interventions that may be support stepmother family members adjust and adapt to the new stepfamily system. As this research project sits in the domain of Psychology, the research aims to add to the body of research knowledge about stepmother families as well provide useful information for stepmother family members and the clinicians who work with them. The next chapter provides an overview of the methodology and procedures of the study.
Chapter Two: Overview of Methodology

Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework and qualitative research approach used in the study. Beginning with an overview of the considerations of qualitative research and epistemological orientation of this study, the chapter then describes the methods used to gather and analyse the data. The chapter concludes with a detailed description of the procedures of thematic analysis employed in this study.

Qualitative Methodology

Historically, psychological research evolved from the positivist tradition within a highly quantitative field (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). The assumptions underlying the positivist position claim that knowledge is derived from direct observation and the application of scientific methods to draw inferences from those observations (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). Within the positivistic framework, objectivity is considered to be an integral component of inquiry, and reality is regarded as a basic set of absolute or certain truths existing in an individual’s memories, thoughts and emotions (Polkinghorne, 2006).

Over a period of years however, positivist research was criticised for its limited methodological approach to understanding the complexity of human reality and experience (Howitt & Cramer, 2011).

Thus attention shifted away from a pure form of positivism towards the influence of perception on experiencing and observing phenomena, and the way that individuals construct meaning (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). The importance of gathering useful information to contribute to theoretical and clinical development also became increasingly recognised (Merriam, 2002). The shift in focus resulted in a proliferation of qualitative methodologies in post-positivist research. While diverse in their methodological and
epistemological orientation, each approach strives to deepen an understanding of peoples’ experiences, and shares a number of characteristics that define them as qualitative approaches (Polkinghorne, 2006). These will now be discussed as they relate to the methods of present study.

Qualitative research aims to gain an emic (or insiders) account of the phenomenon being investigated by attempting to understand the phenomena from the individual’s perspective (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002; Merriam, 2002). Qualitative research also investigates individual’s experience of the phenomena and the meanings they attribute to these experiences (Howitt & Cramer, 2011). This present study attempts to understand the positive and challenging experiences of living in a stepmother family, from the perspectives of stepmothers, fathers and stepchildren, and seeks to understand the meaning they place on those experiences.

Adopting an emic view often results in a more in-depth exploration of the phenomenon of inquiry from a smaller sample of participants often through semi-structured interviews (Cartwright, 2003; Robson, 2002). The use of semi-structured interviews is useful as it is consistent and provides some structure on the one hand, but is also flexible, allowing the opportunity for clarification, or further questions if responses are unclear or new ideas emerge (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). In this present study, approximately 80 hours of interview data were obtained from individual semi-structured interviews with 34 adults and 18 stepchildren. This resulted in rich, in-depth data that has been analysed using the qualitative method of thematic analysis described later in this chapter.

Gathering information within the context of a real-world, naturalistic setting is another important characteristic of qualitative research. Not only does this reduce the potential to manipulate the phenomenon of interest, it also facilitates a positive researcher-participant relationship (Patton, 2002). Participants in this present study were interviewed
within the familiarity of their own home thereby allowing for the gathering of detailed information that reflected their actual, lived experiences.

Finally, when considering research outcomes, qualitative research is often focussed on the development of understanding rather than producing theories that apply to all people. Notwithstanding, qualitative researchers strive to draw conclusions by investigating the outcomes in relation to previous research, thereby developing further understanding about the phenomenon being examined (Merriam 2002). In this way, qualitative research can and does contribute towards the development of generalisations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

**Authenticity and Trustworthiness of Qualitative Research Methodology**

According to many researchers, the legitimacy of any research is largely determined by the extent to which outcomes are authentic and trustworthy (Morrow, 2005). The methodologies of qualitative research however differs from quantitative approaches and have been criticised for being subjective and therefore, susceptible to bias (van Manen, 2006). As a result, methodological approaches have been identified as necessary to ensure the academic authenticity and trustworthiness of qualitative research (Polkinghorne, 2006) with the common agreement that researchers must be aware and open about their perspective and approach to subjective processes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008).

As researchers are the main research tool in qualitative research, researcher subjectivity is assumed to be inherent and the strength of qualitative research is dependent, in part, on the researcher’s skill and judgement (Polkinghorne, 2006). As well, guidance by an underlying theoretical framework allows qualitative researchers to engage in processes that either limit or manage subjectivity or incorporate it in the data (Morrow, 2005).

To this end, qualitative researchers agree it is important for researchers to identify and reflect not only on the way in which their own personal experiences and assumptions
may influence the research, but also, the influence that research may have on them (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Morrow, 2005). The process of personal reflection facilitates an awareness of assumptions and biases that may arise throughout the research process as well as the implications of these assumptions for the research and its findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Qualitative researchers claim that being aware of one’s own experiences and associated perspectives throughout the entire research process ensures the accurate representation of participant responses and contributes to the credibility of the research findings (Merriam, 2002; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). For this to be achieved researchers need to consider the nature of interactions between themselves and their participants during the interview process, as well as issues that may arise, and reactions to those issues, particularly when data contradicts researchers’ assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The process of personal reflection had important implications for my role as a researcher in this present study. As a stepmother, I needed to be aware of my own level of subjectivity and contribution to the construction of meaning, as well as the potential influence this may have on the final analysis. It was important to reflect on the potential impact that my personal experiences, assumptions, beliefs and culture may have had on the research and on the way in which data was gathered and interpreted.

**Personal reflection.** My experience of living in a stepmother family started in the early 1990s when my four children’s ages ranged between five to ten years and my partner’s two children were eleven and nine years’ old. My children resided in our household for 90 percent of the time while my partner’s children were with us all for approximately 70 percent of the time. At the time our stepfamily formed, nuclear families were the norm in New Zealand, stepfamilies the exception and stepmother families relatively scarce. There were particularly stressful and seemingly insurmountable moments as the eight of us
struggled to adjust to the ever-evolving, unpredictable dynamics and complexities that are inevitable when two different families live together. It was in such moments that support and guidance from reliable and trustworthy resources and professionals who fully understood and appreciated the intricate dynamics of stepfamily living would have been helpful. Few, if any however were available.

Thus, I entered this research with various assumptions about the experiences of stepmother family living. For the most part, I had anticipated that most stepmother family members’ experiences would reflect my own. While these expectations were realised in part, and many stepmother’s accounts resonated with my own, my assumptions were constantly challenged. Thus, it was necessary for me to maintain an open mind, be aware of my emotional and cognitive responses and reflect on these throughout the entire process in order to provide an accurate representation of participants’ responses, free from the influence and bias of my own experiences, cultural ideals and values I hold about the world.

To provide further authenticity and trustworthiness, I also needed to reflect on and be transparent about the epistemological framework that guides this study. This was important as different theoretical positions assert various assumptions about the nature of data and what they represent in terms of reality that is, their assumptions about the world and knowledge. Given the emphasis this present study places on understanding participants’ actual experiences within the stepmother family system, as well as the meaning they give to their experiences, the assumptions underlying this research have more in common with critical realism. The specific aspects of critical realism that relate to the aims of this study will now be discussed.

**Critical Realism**

Amongst the number of different theoretical frameworks that exist, researchers have distinguished between three broad epistemological frameworks that guide qualitative
research: realism, contextual constructionist and radical constructionist (Sims-Schouten, Riley, & Willig, 2007). Within the realist framework three further epistemological strands have been identified: naive realism, scientific realism and critical realism. Naive realism argues that the world is as it appears to be while scientific realism claims that rigorous scientific methods are required to determine ‘true’ representations of reality.

Critical realism on the other hand, is a philosophical perspective situated within a post-positivist framework that combines the realist perspective of an objective external world with the constructionist paradigm in which meaning is constructed through social interaction and discourse (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In other words, critical realism assumes that while there is an objective reality, individuals’ experience and perceptions of reality are partially constructed by the social, cultural and historical circumstances in which they occur.

Thus, when taking the aims of this study into account, adopting the principles of critical realism offers a number of advantages. Firstly, critical realism allows for individual experiences to be considered real for each individual, whilst also acknowledging that the context in which the experiences occur may influence how individuals make sense of and recount these experiences. Secondly, critical realism allows for an analysis that acknowledges the ways in which individuals make meaning of their experiences; and thirdly, critical realism explores the impact that the stepfamily system has on those meanings. Finally, this study intends to benefit both theoretical and clinical development adding further support to adopting a critical realist stance. According to critical realism a researcher fails to provide an accurate representation of their participants’ lived experience when these factors are overlooked in analysis, thereby threatening its authenticity and trustworthiness (McEvoy & Richards, 2006).

A further consideration for this present study therefore, was selecting a method of qualitative analysis that would ensure authenticity and trustworthiness. Amongst the various methods that exist, thematic analysis conducted in accordance with the recommendations of
Braun and Clarke (2006) was deemed the best fit. The next section discusses aspects of thematic analysis that relate to the aims of this study. This will be followed by a detailed description of each stage of the thematic analysis process conducted in this study, and the steps taken to ensure validity of the results.

**Thematic Analysis**

Thematic Analysis is widely used in many qualitative methodological paradigms to identify, organise, analyse and report on broad themes that represent the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It has been described as the analysis of ‘what’ is said rather than ‘how’, and a way of intuitively ‘seeing’ what is in the data (Boyatzis, 1998).

Thematic Analysis offers a number of strengths that relate to the investigative nature of this study. First of all, thematic analysis is not driven by a particular theoretical perspective or forms of analysis thus allowing for flexibility in terms of how and why it is conducted. In this current study, there was a need to have a flexible and efficient approach to identify themes in the interviews that related to the aims of the study. Secondly, thematic analysis complements both the constructionist and realist paradigms and is compatible with critical realism (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A third advantage for the choice of thematic analysis for this study is that it is designed to generate rich, detailed and in-depth descriptions of a large body of data (Howitt & Cramer, 2011). As well, thematic analysis highlights similarities and differences across data sets, allows for clear representations of results, is easily interpreted by most readers and is useful for clinical as well as psychological interpretations. Finally, thematic analysis affords an interpretative analysis in which underlying meanings and assumptions may be identified.

Of relevance to this study is that thematic analysis may be inductive whereby analysis (coding and themes) are derived from the data itself, in this case the interview content, and is not bound by pre-conceived assumptions or theoretical influences (Braun &
Clarke, 2006). Inductive thematic analysis is also appropriate for this study as it is commonly used when investigating newer, less researched areas, such as stepmother families and the perceptions of members of the stepmother family.

Another important component of thematic analysis is that themes may be interpreted at a semantic or latent level of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study semantic thematic analysis was used to describe participants’ surface or explicit meanings of their experiences; while latent thematic analysis was employed to describe the underlying ideas and meanings that participants gave to those experiences.

A further, relevant advantage of thematic analysis for this study is that it provides a systematic guideline describing six phases of specific techniques and procedures for its use (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While listed in sequential order Thematic Analysis recognises that overlap may occur between the stages as one aspect of the analysis is checked with another. Checking therefore is an important part of the process as it improves the likelihood that missed or unanticipated content may be identified (Howitt & Cramer, 2011). Thus, in this current study, the guidelines were applied flexibly in order to provide an authentic representation of the data. A description of this procedure follows.

**Process of Thematic Analysis**

**Phase 1: Data familiarisation.** To prepare for analysis, data from face-to-face semi-structured interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriber. On their return, the transcriptions were read and re-read, while simultaneously listening to the taped interview. This was to ensure that I was familiar with the data and to check accuracy of the transcription. During this process notes and ideas for coding were pencilled onto the transcripts.

**Phase 2: Generating initial codes.** Once I felt sufficiently familiar with the data and had formed initial ideas about its content, I started to generate initial codes from the data.
The codes primarily related to the research aims but other features of interest were also identified and coded. The codes were obtained by listing ideas identified in the data, organising them and grouping the ideas as they became more pronounced in the data. The transcribed interviews were then organised according to participant number and entered into NVivo 9 (Qualitative Software Programme) which facilitated the next phase of analysis.

**Phase 3: Searching for themes.** This phase involved synthesising the codes into potential themes, analysing and deciding how codes may combine to form overarching themes, and how themes may be further categorised into smaller categories referred to as sub-themes. The depth and richness of the data obtained from the interviews favoured a latent thematic analysis. Therefore, data were also examined for themes relating to participants’ underlying emotional and psychological experiences, including the meanings they placed on these experiences.

**Phase 4: Reviewing themes.** In this phase, themes were examined to ensure that they represented the coded extracts as well as the entire data set. This was achieved by adjusting groups of themes, either by collapsing themes into one broader theme or splitting a single theme into two distinct themes. It was important to ensure that the data extracts with themes matched and that the overarching themes accurately reflected the meanings evident in the data set as a whole. Data that may have been excluded in earlier analyses was also identified during this phase.

A peer review to check the relevance and clarity of themes and accompanying extracts was conducted to contribute towards validity of the research findings (Morrow, 2005). This involved reviewing the assigned themes and extracts for coherence and meaningfulness. A report containing the list of themes accompanied with brief descriptions and 30 percent of related extracts were reviewed by a professional practitioner with a Doctorate in the field of human sciences. Discussions ensued, to ensure that the extracts
were a viable representation of the themes and that each theme was clear and distinct. Once consensus was achieved, adjustments were made accordingly.

**Phase 5: Defining and naming themes.** During this phase, the specifics of each theme were refined so that the content of each theme reflected the broader research questions. Each theme was searched for any subthemes and potential overlap between themes. The scope and content of each theme was then clearly defined and final titles were assigned.

**Phase 6: Producing the report.** This part of the process involves the identification, selection and review of extracts representing themes, relating back to the research question and producing a report of the analysis comparing findings with previous literature in the area. The primary aim at this point was to ensure the written report is balanced and provides a clear and detailed description of the themes supported by participant quotations to illustrate the meanings of the themes and salient points they made.

Equally important when producing the report is that additional measures for assessing the trustworthiness of the findings are considered as previously discussed, precise replication is typically difficult in qualitative research. Thus the validity of qualitative research relies heavily on the credibility of the description of the process of analysis and the plausibility of the approach I had taken.

The descriptors of ‘most’, ‘many’, ‘some’ or ‘few’, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), are also used to illustrate salience and provide sufficient evidence of the themes within the data. At times, the number of participants whose data fall within themes is presented to enable comparison of the proportion of participants holding similar or opposing views. Participant names have been changed or omitted to protect confidentiality.

Each theme will be discussed in detail in the next two chapters of this thesis. Before presenting the results of the thematic analysis for this study however, a description of the method involved in gaining the data will be discussed.
Method

This present study employed qualitative research methods to investigate stepmother family members’ perceptions of their experiences and the meaning they gave to these experiences. Qualitative data was obtained from stepmothers, fathers and stepchildren through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. This section of the chapter outlines the methods used in the present study.

Ethics. Ethical approval for this research was granted by the University of Auckland Participants Ethics Committee (Reference Number 2009/242). All participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet that outlined contact details for either my supervisors or myself in situations where they may feel distressed and require support in relation to issues arising in the interview process.

Participants. Participants (n=52) were recruited from a selection of advertising processes. These included placing advertisements on notice boards at a number of tertiary educational institutions in Auckland, Tauranga and Christchurch, and electronically to Social Service agencies around New Zealand that have direct contact with families and children (Se Appendix A). Advertisements were also placed in local Medical Centres and Pharmacies. Information about the study was also disseminated through the University of Auckland psychology student email list and research intranet site. The University of Auckland Communications Officer placed an advertisement on the university website and contacted newspapers in Auckland and Christchurch. An article about the study was published in the Christchurch Press. Word of mouth was also used however with respect to ethical boundaries, acquaintances and colleagues were not recruited.

Criteria for selection included stepfamilies in which the parent, stepmother and a child aged between 12 and 18 years old, had been living together for one year or more and were residing together for at least a third of the week. In line with the study’s focus on the adolescent age group, and the development of the stepchild and stepmother relationship over
time, children younger than twelve were not included. Participation required consensus from both adults and at least one child to take part in the study. All children meeting the age criteria were invited to participate when families had more than one child.

Fifty-two participants met the criteria and participated in the study. Of these 34 were adults (17 stepmothers and 17 fathers) and 18 (11 male and 7 female) were stepchildren. Stepmothers ranged in age from 31 to 56 years with a mean age of 43 years, and fathers’ ages ranged from 32 to 63 years with a mean age of 47.7 years. The mean age of stepchildren was 14.8 years. Eleven stepchildren were between the ages of 12 to 15 years of age, and seven between 16 to 18 years. When the family first formed, stepchildren ranged in age from 2 to 15 years with an average of 7.94 years.

Six families were complex with an average of five children living together with the step- and biological parents in the household between 3 to 15 years with a mean of 6 years. Eleven families were simple with an average of three stepchildren while seven of these couples also had an average of 1.3 children together after the family had formed. None of the couples in complex families had children together. Couples in nine of the families were married and eleven were cohabiting. Participants consisted primarily middle, socio-economic status of New Zealand/European descent (88 percent) while six identified themselves as New Zealand Maori (12 percent). Ten families resided in the Canterbury region, mostly in Christchurch; three lived in Tauranga and four in Auckland.

Eight of the families were households in which the children resided for 100 percent of the time. In another eight families children lived in the household for 50 percent of the time and in one family the stepchild resided in the household 40 percent of the time. In three of the complex families, both adults’ children lived with the family for 100 percent of the time, two for 50 percent of the time and in one family both adults’ children lived with them between 40 to 60 percent of the time.
**Data collection procedures.** Participants responding to the advertisement made initial contact either by telephone or email. After screening for eligibility, I outlined the aims and procedure of the study and, if they still wished to proceed, posted them further information about the study along with Participant Information Sheets (See Appendices B to F) and Confidentiality forms (see Appendices G to K). They were also informed that I would contact them within the next five days and that if they were still willing to participate, arrange a time for the interviews. The families that were willing to participate were given a choice of locations for the interview, either at their home, at an office at the university or a place that was convenient for the members of their family. All of the families elected to be interviewed at their homes on the same day either in the evenings, weekends or during the day.

**The interview schedule.** Face-to-face interviews were conducted individually with participants to develop an understanding of parents’, stepmothers’ and stepchildren’s perceptions of their experiences and the meaning they give to these experiences. The interview schedule for this study was developed using guidelines for preparing and administering a semi-structured interview (Robson, 2002). In this present study, the semi-structured interview consisted of a series of open-ended questions eliciting participants’ perceptions of the positive and challenging experiences and how they make sense of these experiences (See Appendices L to N). The first part of the interview related to describing positive experiences both when the family first formed and more recently. This was then followed by asking participants to describe situations they perceived were challenging both in the initial stage of family formation and more recently. Stepmothers and stepchildren were asked to describe their perception of their relationship with the stepfamily member while fathers were asked to reflect on their perception of the stepmother-stepchild relationship. The interview concluded with questions regarding strategies family members had found helpful or less helpful.
When necessary, prompts were used to gain greater depth and understanding or for clarification, provide examples or further thoughts or information about the question. Probing questions were also used during the interview process in an effort to gain an in-depth account of participants’ experiences and how they made sense of these (e.g., “What was that like for you?”, “How did that make you feel at the time?” “What things did you do to cope?” “What do you think made her/him do that?”). Finally, participants were asked to provide advice for other stepfamily members in their situation.

**Interview procedure.** All 52 interviews took place in their family homes. Prior to the interview, parents were asked to talk to their children to check their understanding of confidentiality and whether or not they were still comfortable about the process. Parents were also encouraged to convey their permission for the children to talk as freely as they felt comfortable about their experiences. Children were also reminded that they could stop the interview at any stage and that a parent would be available should they become distressed.

At the time of each interview, the Participant Information Sheets and consent forms were discussed together with the participants. Further questions regarding the study’s purpose, confidentiality, the audio-taped interview process and outcome of results were answered. Adults and young people 16 years and older were then asked to sign a consent form. Those children between 12 to 15 years old were asked to sign an assent form which was also signed by their parents. Stepfamily members were asked to refrain from discussing their interview experience until all interviews were complete. Once family members had decided on the order of the interviews the stepmother, father and stepchild/children were then interviewed separately. Each interview ranged in time from about 45 to 90 minutes in length, with the average interview lasting 60 minutes.

After each interview, the participants were given opportunity for feedback and debriefing if necessary. All participants were reminded about the provision of support to find
a qualified counsellor should the need arise. Families were given shopping vouchers in appreciation for their participation.

**Data analysis.** Each participant interview was initially transcribed in full by a professional transcriber who had previously signed a consent form (See Appendix O). The interviews were verbatim, with repetitions, incomplete sentences and pauses included. I listened to each of the audio-tape recordings and examined the transcriptions to familiarise myself with the data and to check the accuracy of the transcription. I then entered the transcripts into the qualitative analysis software programme (NVivo9) to assist in organisation of the data and facilitate thematic analyses. Thematic analysis was conducted according to the five-step process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as previously described. These steps included: i) Familiarisation with data; ii) Generating initial codes; iii) Searching for themes; iv) Reviewing themes; and iv) Defining and naming themes. In order to examine and compare adults’ and stepchildren’s perceptions of their experiences, the data were divided into two data sets: stepmothers’, stepchildren’s and fathers’ experiences they perceived were challenging; and stepmothers’, stepchildren’s and fathers’ experiences they perceived were positive.

A thematic analysis was then carried out on each data set. The data were explored for experiential themes and the ways that stepmothers, stepchildren and fathers gave meaning to these experiences. A theme was accepted when it represented a significant proportion of that data and was distinct from other themes. These themes represent the data across all the interviews and each of the themes was present in most of the interviews. A peer review of the data analysis was conducted by a professional clinician in the field and my supervisor.

An overview of the themes emerging from the data collected and analysed is presented in the next two chapters. Chapter Three presents the results from the thematic analysis of the challenging aspects of stepmother family living as experienced by stepmothers, fathers and stepchildren, while Chapter Four presents the positive aspects. The
descriptors of ‘most’, ‘many’, ‘some’ or ‘few’, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), are used to illustrate salience and provide sufficient evidence of the themes within the data. Quotes representing a broad cross section of the participants are provided to highlight salient features expressed through the themes. Participant names have been changed or omitted to protect confidentiality.
Chapter Three: Thematic Analysis: Challenging Experiences

This chapter presents results of the thematic analysis of data pertaining to participants’ perceptions of challenging experiences, the meaning they attribute to these experiences and the strategies they found helpful in their resolution. Four themes emerged from the data and have been organised into two different time frames. The first two themes relate to participants’ perceptions of challenges that occurred predominantly within the initial stages of stepfamily formation and have been titled: i) Stepchildren’s Challenges Adjusting to the New Lifestyle; and ii) Stepmother’s Challenges Adjusting to the New Lifestyle. Themes three and four relate to challenges that occurred at various times throughout the course of the stepfamily relationship and have been titled: iii) Challenges with Stepmother’s Authority; and iv) Challenges with the Biological Mother as shown in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Within each theme data are further organised into three subthemes relating to aspects that participants perceived to have challenged stepmother family relationships and experiences. Quotes from participants will be included to illustrate important points they made.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenging Experiences in the First Stage of Family Formation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>☀ Stepchildren’s Challenges Adjusting to the New Lifestyle</td>
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<tr>
<td>a. Adjusting to changes in lifestyle</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Confusion and uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Fathers’ response to children’s difficulties</td>
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</tbody>
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Table 2

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Challenging Experiences from Family Formation through to the Present</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>☀ Challenges with Stepmother’s Authority: Who’s in Charge?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Stepmothers establishing authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Stepchildren accepting authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Fathers’ dilemma</td>
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</table>
It is important to note that whilst each of the seventeen families interviewed described challenges that family members experienced from time to time only five described their experiences as on-going and consistently challenging. For the remaining twelve families, most challenges occurred within the initial stages of stepfamily formation and were generally resolved after a two to three year period. In a number of these families however, some challenges continued to arise from time to time, mostly due to stress or changes in the stepfamily structure. There was also some variation in perceptions with some participants perceiving an experience as challenging, whilst others, often within the same family, perceived the same or a similar experience as positive.

Timeframe 1: Challenging Experiences in the First Stage of Family Formation

Introduction. In response to the question about experiences that participants perceived as challenging, 16 stepmothers and 14 stepchildren talked about their difficulties adjusting to the changes in their new lifestyle. Every father on the other hand mostly talked about the difficulties they experienced in dealing with their partner’s or child’s struggle adjusting to these changes. Most participants alluded to factors that influenced their perceptions, which inadvertently impacted on their capacity or willingness to make the adjustments. Taken together, these included: how well family members knew each other before moving in together; participants’ previous experiences; situations in which the family formed; the ages, developmental stages and number of children; custody arrangements; the relational bond with biological parents; differences mostly in relation to personalities, backgrounds, values, expectations and parenting styles; and the emotions that various challenges evoked in participants.
a. Adjusting to changes in lifestyle. When asked to talk about experiences they perceived to be challenging when the family first formed, almost every stepchild talked about their difficulty getting used to having a stepmother in the family, as explained by some “just having her there”. Some recalled thinking they did not want the stepmother there and a number said they only decided to accept their stepmother because “she makes dad happy”. A few reflected that for them, the stepmother moving in meant giving up hope that their parents might get back together again.

It’s like, when she moved in everything changed in my life. I just wanted to be with dad and I didn’t want her in my life cause it just made things, like more complicated and I don’t know it’s just like a thing inside me that says I don’t want a stepmum. I just wanted mum and dad back together and it was like well, there’s no chance now (Participant 33, Stepchild).

Several stepchildren said they did not like the changes in their lifestyle when their stepmother joined the family with some stating that “I just wanted things to stay like they were before”. Some spoke about their difficulty coping with the change in family relationships and dynamics and a few blamed their father for ‘splitting the family up’ because their siblings moved out or chose to stay with their biological mother. Some described losing the close bond they had with their father and a few said they thought their father had “betrayed” them or that he did not care about them anymore.

I was really angry with dad. We just weren’t as close as we used to be and we started having these massive fights and kind of, all the bridges got burnt down and everyone was sort of like, at war with each other. And what hit me really hard is when he took (stepmother’s) side I felt so hurt and betrayed that he chose her over us kids. He’s my dad. He’s supposed to be loyal to us kids and protect us. I’ve already lost my mum, I don’t want to lose my father too. So I moved out (Participant 48, Stepchild).
Some stepchildren described about feeling angry about having to leave their family home to live in a new house, often in a new location. A few explained that they found this difficult as it meant leaving behind childhood memories, a familiar environment, friends or members of their extended family, or for some, having to change schools.

Just knowing that I was leaving my home that I’d been in for a long time. It was like, a bit strange and weird and I didn’t want to because, I had a real cool bedroom and yeah, it was a house that I, well, that I can remember always being in. And ‘cause I moved away from most of my friends and so I couldn’t hang out with them so I had no friends ‘cause I had to change school too (Participant 9, Stepchild).

A number of stepchildren said they felt as though they did not belong when they first moved into the new house as they could not relax or feel they could be themselves. Some explained that the new house “didn’t feel like my home” or that it felt more like their stepmother and father’s place rather than their family home. A few reflected that living in the new home gave them the sense that they were in the way or that the stepmother did not want them there.

I just feel like, since being in this house, it’s not my house any more, like it’s hers and dads. And I don’t feel like, I belong here it’s like, it feels like a hotel and my bedroom’s like a room with my bed in it and I’m just a lodger or visitor. And I just I get the feeling like she doesn’t want me around so they can have the house to themselves (Participant 21, Stepchild).

Similar experiences were described by stepchildren whose stepmothers moved into their family home. Most of these stepchildren said they resented the stepmother making changes such as redecorating, rearranging rooms or throwing out furniture as soon as she moved in. A few talked about feeling angry as they had to move out of their bedroom to make room for the stepmother. Some said that they had to share their bedroom and found this difficult as they were used to having their own bedroom or felt they had lost their privacy or a place to be by themselves.

That was a big change ‘cause I had to move out of my bedroom and the adults got that and it was my room for ages and I’ve got to share a room and that’s a pain ‘cause (brother) is always in there with me and I don’t have anywhere to go just by myself. So there were big changes and we were real angry (Participant 30, Stepchild).
Several stepchildren attributed their difficulty adjusting to the changes to the different rules and routines which some claimed “only started” when the stepmother moved in. Quite a number thought there were too many rules or that they were “unreasonable”. Several explained that they were not used to having rules when they were living alone with their father while others said they had difficulty adjusting to the stepmother’s different routines or ways of doing things.

There had to be a plan for everything like everything has a roster. It was a bit like being on camp at school or like we’re in the army. And that was a big change, big change… yeah when (stepmother) moved in she’s changed everything so yeah it’s a downside (Participant 45, Stepchild).

b. Confusion and uncertainty. When asked how they felt when the family first formed, many stepchildren described it as “weird” or “uncomfortable”. Some said they had mixed feelings or felt confused because they did not know what was happening or what to think. A few explained they felt “awkward” as they were only used to seeing their mother and father together in their home, not their stepmother as described by one stepchild.

So when she moved in it was like kind’ve weird cause like, I was uncertain what to think and I didn’t really know what’s happening and like, why’s she staying here? So, yeah I didn’t really get the whole idea of dad being with her and not mum like I’d been living with dad on one side and mum on the other side and no-one else and I was pretty confused ‘cause I kind’ve wanted her there for dad, but I kind’ve didn’t either (Participant 15, Stepchild).

Quite a few stepchildren said they felt confused because they had not been told about the changes that were going to happen or for some, that the stepmother was moving in. Some also commented that they were angry with their father because he had not talked to them first or asked their opinion about the stepmother joining the family while others said they felt hurt as they thought he did not want them there. Some stepchildren commented that their confusion and uncertainty made them feel angry with their stepmother as they blamed her for the changes.

It was pretty crap. Dad’s not good at telling us things and like he didn’t even tell me (stepmother) was moving in. Like all her stuff arrived one Saturday and so like, hey! What’s going on here? What’s happening? So I went a bit crazy like I just can’t deal with it. And like if dad told me stuff from the outset I
wouldn’t’ve reacted the same. It would’ve made a difference to how I felt about her and like, I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t’ve resented her as much as I did but I was just, I was really hurt and really angry (Participant 48, Stepchild).

Most of the older stepchildren recalled feeling confused about their role in the family when the stepmother moved in. Several explained that they had spent a long period of time alone with their father and had enjoyed relative autonomy or responsibility such as cooking meals or managing the budget. When the stepmother moved in however, much of this shifted as not only did the rules and routines change but also, in many cases, she took over, as described by one stepchild:

I was pretty angry at dad. I suppose I’d been living with dad alone and I’d had to take on a lot of the house work stuff… and then all of a sudden there’s this woman in the house and she like kind of seemed to, like I always cooked the dinner and all that kind of stuff and then she comes in and just, takes over and says she prefers to do it herself. So yeah that left me feeling well, angry (Participant 21, Stepchild).

A number of stepchildren explained that they were confused about how to behave or respond to the stepmother at the start as they did not know her very well or were uncertain how she felt about them. Several talked about feeling “uncomfortable” because they thought their stepmother would not understand how to manage children because she did not have any children of her own. A few described feeling awkward when the stepmother made the effort to talk to them, but did not know how to relate to them at their level.

She’d try and talk to me but well I just like, I didn’t know her very well and like she doesn’t have kids so it’s like she doesn’t know how to talk to me, like she doesn’t understand. And it’s just like walking on egg shells a lot’ve the time like real tense like it’s just hard to have a normal conversation. It’s like, she’s sort’ve trying too hard to make conversation about stuff and it doesn’t happen naturally (Participant 3, Stepchild).

Quite a few stepchildren attributed their confusion to their stepmother’s “indirect” way of letting them know what she wanted or how she wanted things to be done. Several explained that rather than asking or telling them directly, their stepmother tended to do or say things that implied what she wanted. Some talked about having to guess what she wanted while others said they could work it out from her body language or by picking up on “the vibes”.

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A few said that they would prefer the stepmother talking directly to them as then they would know where they stood or what they had done to upset her.

You could just sort’ve tell, just sort’ve bad vibes like her body language like she didn’t really say anything you could just tell like she sort’ve suggests things, like things aren’t said but you know something’s wrong. So I’d rather she’d get angry to my face so I know what I’ve done wrong sort of thing rather than guessing all the time, like then I’d know exactly where I stood, yeah (Participant 49, Stepchild).

Several stepchildren thought their confusion was due to their concern about upsetting their stepmother as this would invariably upset their father and result in an argument. Most said that they talked to their father about being upset with the stepmother and asked him to discuss this with her on their behalf. While some admitted this was not an ideal way of sorting out their differences, they did not feel “safe” talking directly to their stepmother as they were uncertain how she would respond.

You know it’s really bad because we’d tell dad our problems ‘cause we feel safe with him, and then dad’d tell (stepmother). And then she’d tell dad and he’d come back and tell us what she said. And it was sort’ve like we were all tiptoeing around each other worried that we’d upset her or done something wrong (Participant 42, Stepchild).

Over time however, a number of stepchildren said that they found that it was “safer” to keep their feelings to themselves or to “bottle things up” to try and prevent their father from getting into an argument with the stepmother or put him into the “awkward position” of having to take sides.

I don’t feel safe talking about it with my dad ‘cause he goes and tells (stepmother) and she gets angry and he gets upset and they start yelling. And I get scared and keep crying ‘cause I don’t want to upset Dad and put him in an awkward position. So I’ve worked out it’s best not saying anything and I’ve just decided to just bottle things up (Participant 18, Stepchild).

**c. Fathers’ response to children’s difficulties.** Several fathers said they felt responsible for “imposing” the new lifestyle onto their child, and felt guilty when they saw their child struggling to adjust to the changes that this brought about.

Well she was really upset like I’d let her down and I felt really guilty. I mean for weeks, she didn’t talk to me or listen to me and then she told me that she hated (stepmother), and why aren’t you listening to me. And there was a lot of
resentment about having someone else in our lives. Yeah, it really hurt to see her struggling and I kept wondering what on earth I’d done (Participant 8, Father).

A number of fathers talked about their child resenting the stepmother living with them and attributed this to their initial difficulty adjusting to the changes. Some thought their child’s resentment was due to the close bond they had formed in their time alone together following separation from the biological mother and that their child thought the stepmother had “come between” them. Others thought their child blamed the stepmother for disrupting the comfortable and familiar routine they had established together before she moved in.

Yeah, the kids and I know each other almost too well and we’re very close, we’ve been through a lot together so we know what to expect from each other. So when (stepmother) came along, we were in a pretty comfortable pattern and it was hard for them to move over and make room for her ‘specially as she’s so different from them (Participant 2, Father).

Some fathers talked about losing their child’s trust when the family first formed explaining that their child had become withdrawn or stopped talking to them as openly or freely as they had before when they were on their own. Quite a few blamed themselves explaining that they had spent too much time or focussed too much of their attention on the stepmother rather than being there to support their child.

Yeah well it’s sad like he just retreated into his room and stayed there, never came out. He was always a daddy’s boy and suddenly I’ve lost his trust in me. And I think he thought I was betraying him. I was just too (stepmother) focussed and I guess I was trying to make it work for her cause I didn’t want to lose her. And I feel really guilty ‘cause I just wasn’t there for him so yeah it hurts. But it’s hard, it’s a really hard situation (Participant 17, Father).

Almost every father said they tried hard to “keep everyone happy” yet, despite their best efforts, sometimes found themselves caught in the middle of the conflict between their child and partner. Some fathers said that in these situations they resorted to “taking sides” in order to “keep the peace” but that this inadvertently added to the conflict as either “side” thought he was being disloyal. A number of these fathers talked about feeling helpless in what they described as a “damned if you do, damned if you don’t”, or a “no win” situation, while a few said they thought they had let everyone down at times.
It’s a fine line between upsetting the balance and keeping everyone happy cause the kids are upset with her and come to me complaining about her and she’s upset with them and telling me I’ve got to talk to them and I feel like I’m the net in a tennis match, like a dividing line separating both sides of the battle like a no-man’s land, or a judge and jury all wrapped up in one. And I guess I feel as though I’m letting them down. You know, I’m not good as a dad and I’m no good as a husband either so, yeah (Participant 47, Father).

Thus in the initial stages of the stepfamily formation, most stepchildren had difficulty adjusting to having a stepmother in their lives and the changes in lifestyle that this created. A number of stepchildren sometimes felt uncomfortable with the stepmother as they did not know her very well and this made them uncertain about how to interact with her. Some described their sense of loss, not only of the hope that their parents would get back together again, but also of their home, their siblings or the close relationship they had enjoyed with their father. Quite a few were angry or confused as they were not consulted or informed about the changes that were going to happen in their lives. Most said they worried about upsetting their stepmother as this would also upset their father and result in an argument. Several fathers felt responsible for creating the changes in their child’s life and felt guilty when they had difficulty adjusting. Some fathers were upset about losing the close relationship with their children, particularly if they moved out of the house. A number of fathers talked about their difficulty being caught in the middle of the conflict at times and having to take sides in an attempt to resolve disagreements.

Theme 2: Stepmother’s Challenges Adjusting to the New Lifestyle

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**Introduction.** Almost every stepmother talked about their personal struggle adjusting to the changes they experienced when the family first formed. Most challenging for many stepmothers were situations they had either not anticipated or ever experienced in their lives,
such as the suddenness of the change, having to share their partner with his child, or the complex relationship dynamics within and between the two families. Several described situations in which they felt “powerless” attributing this either to their lack of rights or recognition as a stepmother, their uncertainty about the stepmother role, or their difficulty establishing authority with their stepchild. Data from this theme therefore has been organised into the following subthemes: i) Adjusting to changes in lifestyle; ii) Uncertainty about the stepmother role; iii) Dealing with differences.

a. Adjusting to changes in lifestyle. Like the stepchildren, most stepmothers referred to their difficulty adjusting to the new lifestyle at the start of the family relationship. For almost every stepmother in simple stepfamilies, the greatest challenge was dealing with the “sudden” or “dramatic” change from being a single, independent woman, to becoming an “instant stepmother” as soon as they moved in with the family, as described by one stepmother

…just add water and kid, and like in a day I’m a stepmum (Participant 31, Stepmother).

Several of these stepmothers explained that living with someone else’s child was a difficult adjustment to make either because they were not used to children or that they were not ready to accept this responsibility at their stage in life. A few commented that they were not “equipped to be a mother” or that they were not “a child-friendly” person.

It was a huge adjustment. Much more than I’d ever anticipated. I’d never had kids or never known anything about kids. It was my first foray into childrearing I suppose and I didn’t know how to deal with it. I’d always been independent and had life how I wanted it but when (partner and stepchild) moved in I had to make a huge adjustment to my thinking. I hadn’t really thought about having a step-kid. I just wasn’t interested. I’m just not a child sort of person (Participant 7, Stepmother).

For many stepmothers in both simple and complex families, adjusting to the loss of freedom or control over their lives was challenging. Several said the lack of flexibility or constraints on their time to go out “spontaneously” with their partner was difficult, especially for single
stepmothers who were not used to sharing their partners with children. Several also talked about their struggle maintaining personal boundaries, particularly when their stepchild imposed on their “personal space” such as climbing into bed with them or being in the same room when they wanted to be alone or just with their partner. Some described feeling frustrated or resentful towards both the child and their partner at these times.

I felt pretty resentful ‘cause I loved (partner) and wanted to be with him, not his kids. I didn’t want them involved in things I did with (partner) ‘cause it was our time and they were always encroaching on that and I resented that ‘cause I had these kids all of a sudden in my life that had to be factored around ‘cause you know, you couldn’t do those coupley things, you don’t have time out together ‘cause (partner) had to be there for them (Participant 10, Stepmother).

A number of stepmothers found that the strong bond between their partner and stepchild made it difficult for them to adjust to their new lifestyle. Some described feeling jealous at times as they thought their partner was spending more time or giving more attention to his child than to them. Others described feeling “left out” or as though they did not belong, particularly at times when their partner and stepchild were talking and having fun together and not making an effort to include them. Some also described feeling left out at times when their partner and stepchild talked about aspects of their past together in her presence. A few said their stepchild and partner’s close bond sometimes made them feel as though they were not important or that they took “second place” while a few explained it made them feel distant or disconnected from their stepchild.

They had such a tight bond that they wouldn’t let me in and I felt that at times I was second place, that I wasn’t as important as (stepchild) and I suppose I was quite jealous of her. Her and her dad have been in the same house together and sort of been their own little company for five years I suppose, they were this close knit team and it was hard not to feel left out at times (Participant 31, Stepmother).

b. Uncertainty about stepmother role. Most stepmothers said that they did not think about being a stepmother before they joined the family and several talked about their uncertainty taking on that role. Some attributed this to their mixed feelings about having a child in their lives explaining “I’d fallen in love with my partner, not his child”, while a few
said they were unsure of their commitment to the relationship. A few said that because of their uncertainty they “stood back” or did not make an effort to get to know their stepchild as explained by one stepmother

I hadn’t accepted the role of stepmother at that point probably ‘cause I’d fallen in love with his dad, not (stepchild) and I had mixed feelings about (stepchild) and I wasn’t sure how I felt about being in the relationship at that time. So I kept him at arm’s length cause I didn’t want to build up too much of a relationship with (stepchild) at the start (Participant 13, Stepmother).

For a number of stepmothers it was not so much uncertainty about accepting their role that was the challenge but rather, the difficulties they sometimes encountered when in that role. Whilst clear that they did not want to replace the biological mother, almost every stepmother said they were confused about what the actual role of ‘stepmother’ was. Many said that they did not know what to expect and some described “drifting into their role” without any discussion or forward planning with their partner.

It was kind’ve bizarre cause there’s this kind of presumption that I’d look after these kids but I felt like it was never clear like, what kind of role am I playing here? And I guess there’s this myth about when you’re a stepmother you’ve got to love your stepkids but that’s really hard ‘cause we just don’t have that connection. And (father) just didn’t want to talk about it so yeah, it was really hard (Participant 1, Stepmother).

Many stepmothers said that uncertainty about their role at the start was largely due to the confusion they felt about their place or where they “fit” in their new family. Several considered that they ought to be equal with their partner, or slightly below in terms of discipline, but sometimes had the perception that their place was below their stepchild or, as described by one stepmother “somewhere between the stepchild and the ground”. Some talked about thinking they did not have a place at all at times and described feeling as though they were “invisible” or “the odd one out”.

I felt like I was the odd one out, like I was what I call the invisible stepmother or the secondary stepmother. That was the kernel of those feelings of never having enough validity because I’m not their mother, because I’m not equal in terms of the kids. And even (father) put the biological mother higher than me. I’m not their mother. I’m the only one who’s not blood related. I’m this nebulous whatever I am, it’s as though I don’t exist, I don’t belong, you know, I might as well not even be here (Participant 46, Stepmother).
Several stepmothers attributed the uncertainty about their role to their stepchild’s behaviour towards them particularly when they first joined the stepfamily. Quite a few talked about feeling nervous at times or uncertain about how to respond when their stepchild was “disrespectful” or “totally ignored” them. Some explained that while they had the experience or skills to deal with children’s behaviour, their advice was overlooked either because they were perceived as “interfering” or that they were “taking over” from the parents. This left them feeling frustrated because they were unable to have any input into a situation they thought could be easily resolved. A few also spoke about feeling “inadequate” at times as despite their best efforts to engage with their stepchild or show an interest, their stepchild did not want to form a connection or accept their support.

He doesn’t want me to be his stepmum and he makes that very clear. He just wants it to be mum and dad. He can be very rude, and completely ignores me and I don’t know how to react, you know. I thought I was pretty skilled in this but I’m at a loss actually as to what to do. I just feel powerless. I want to help him but I can’t relate to him, he won’t let me in. I just don’t know where to approach him from and it hurts ‘cause no matter what I’m doing, it’s never enough and I just feel like a total failure. A failed stepmum. (Participant 28, Stepmother).

Uncertainty about the stepmother role was also attributed by several stepmothers to their lack of rights and recognition of their role. Some stepmothers talked about feeling “powerless” or “vulnerable” at times, particularly when their stepchild was misbehaving whilst in their care, as they were uncertain about their rights. About half of the described incidents in which they discovered that they did not have any legal rights as a stepmother, yet were still expected to be responsible for their stepchild’s care as described by one stepmother:

My role is just disregarded in the legal system despite the fact that she lives with me just about all the time and when (partner) is working I probably spend more time with her than he does. Yet the lawyer said to me “I hope that you’re not trying to supersede the mother are you because you have no say or legal rights”. I couldn’t believe it! Never ever had I pretended to be (stepchild’s) mother. I was totally gutted (Participant 37, Stepmother).

Some stepmothers also talked about having little recognition or appreciation of their role by friends or other parents. They described friends either avoided talking to them about their stepchild or if they did, making “patronizing” comments such as “I don’t know how you do
it” or “you must be a saint looking after someone else’s child”. One stepmother spoke about her experience of being ignored by other mothers whilst waiting for her stepchild after school.

Stepmothers just don’t have any rights. It’s like when I stand outside school waiting for (stepchild) and other mums don’t sort of take me seriously just don’t talk to me. And one mum actually said to me I wouldn’t understand because I’m not a mum (Participant 25, Stepmother).

**c. Dealing with differences.** Many stepmothers attributed the challenges in the initial stages to the merging of two different families with children brought up by different parents from different backgrounds, values and traditions. Most considered that these differences were a major source of conflict at times as they inevitably resulted in disagreements and arguments. For almost every stepmother, the most contentious differences related to parenting, communication and expectations. Some stepmothers said that, despite knowing each other well beforehand, their differences only became apparent once they had moved in together.

We’d all been getting on really well but everything changed once we started living together. I didn’t really get to see the nuts and bolts of how the family worked and all the subtle family dynamics and tensions until I moved in. And it made me realise how different we really are. And this has made it extremely difficult for us (Participant 16, Stepmother).

Many stepmothers stated that it was often not so much the differences they had with their partner that was the challenge, but rather, the way they attempted to resolve their disagreement about their differences which for quite a few was in the form of “huge rows”. A number of stepmothers attributed this to “gender differences” explaining that while they wanted their feelings validated, their partner either wanted to “fix the problem” or became defensive thinking she was criticizing their parenting or their child. Some said this sometimes left them feeling hurt or frustrated because they thought their partner “doesn’t understand” or “isn’t listening” as explained by one stepmother:

We wouldn’t row about the issue but about the processes ‘cause I’d be in the feel mode and he’d be in the thinking mode and we would miss each other cause
you know, those typical male things, he wants to fix it and all I want from him is to acknowledge that I’m upset, not analyse the situation or think I’m getting at his kids. But he just doesn’t get it, it’s like he just doesn’t listen (Participant 50, Stepmother).

Most stepmothers said that at the start, differences in expectations, particularly in relation to rules and routines often resulted in arguments. Several stepmothers explained they were concerned their stepchild was “used to having everything done for them” and thought they should “help out with the chores” or “learn to be independent”. A few stepmothers said they “needed” to initiate changes in rules and routines because the children were “out of control” or as described by one stepmother “looked as though they’d been camping out”. Some talked about trying to support their partner to establish consistent routines but were sometimes told they were “too up-tight” or that their expectations were “too high”. Several described feeling disillusioned or despondent when their help was rejected, as they thought they were acting in the family’s best interest and only wanted to reduce the amount of stress and tension.

And when I first moved in it was chaos at that house. (Father) was running around doing everything for her and as far as I’m concerned she does nothing near what she should be doing to contribute to the household, nothing. And I try and tell him to set some boundaries ‘cause you need to think ahead but he doesn’t get it. He thinks I’m unreasonable and my expectations are too high. But I’m really worried she’ll turn into a not very pleasant person who expects everything to be done for her (Participant 7, Stepmother).

Some stepmothers in complex families talked about their difficulty trying to uphold their personal standards with their own children whilst respecting their partner’s different expectations for his children at the same time. A few said they had difficulty rationalising these differences or “double standards” to their children.

So I’ve really struggled ‘cause I guess my expectations, are different from (stepchildren). And this puts me in a hard place because if I’m dealing with my children having expectations for them and then back off with his, then my kids think I’ve got double standards and say “why do we have to do this, and they don’t”? (Participant 16, Stepmother).

Hence, stepmothers described their difficulties adjusting to the change in their lifestyle once they moved in with their partner. Many found that having a child in their lives meant a loss
of personal freedom, flexibility or control and that this impacted on their willingness to accept their role as a stepmother at the start. Whilst certain they did not want to replace the biological mother, every stepmother was uncertain about their role and what it entailed. Their stepchild’s behaviour as well as the lack of recognition or rights as a stepmother sometimes left stepmothers feeling powerless. Having different expectations from their partner was a source of conflict at times, as was the way they attempted to resolve their differences. A major issue that continued to be a challenge for almost every participant at various times throughout their time together as a stepfamily was that of the stepmother’s authority. Data from their responses therefore have been organised into a separate theme the results of which are presented in the next section.

**Timeframe 2: Challenging Experiences from Family Formation through to the Present**

- **Challenges with Stepmother’s Authority: Who’s in Charge?**
  - a. Stepmothers establishing authority
  - b. Stepchildren accepting authority
  - c. Fathers’ dilemma

- **Challenges with the Biological Mother**
  - a. Moving between two households
  - b. Stepmother’s difficulties
  - c. Impact on the stepfamily

**Theme 3: Challenges with Stepmother’s Authority: Who’s in Charge?**

As discussed previously, while most families managed to resolve their difficulties within the first few years of family formation, a number of participants talked about experiences that continued to be challenging from time to time, albeit less in terms of frequency and intensity. The major on-going challenge for most participants however related to differences in opinion about the stepmothers’ authority, invariably leaving participants wondering “who is in charge?”

This theme therefore, presents results of participants’ experiences relating to the stepmother’s authority they perceived were challenging. Data have been organised into three
subthemes and are titled: i) Stepmothers establishing authority; ii) Stepchildren accepting authority; and iii) Fathers’ dilemma.

**a. Stepmothers establishing authority.** Most stepmothers considered that issues relating to authority or discipline were challenging at both a personal and a family relationship level. Whilst adamant they did not want to be responsible for disciplining their stepchild, most found themselves taking on that role at various times, largely due to their partner’s work commitments or because they were already at home caring for their own children. For many of these stepmothers, the challenge arose when their stepchild rejected their authority. Almost every stepmother talked about feeling “powerless” or not having any “control” over their stepchild’s behaviour or over their situation at times, and that this in turn left them feeling “helpless” as they did not know what to do. For most stepmothers, dealing with the feelings and “strong emotions” these experiences evoked, became a challenge in itself at times.

It was such a dramatic change ‘cause suddenly I had this kid in my care who wouldn’t do he was told and I was used to having control. But it was something I had no control over. He’s not my kid, but I’ve got to look after him I’m supposed to be in control, but I’m not allowed to be and there’s nothing I can do about it and sometimes it was a tricky situation and I didn’t know what to do (Participant 13, Stepmother).

Almost every stepmother talked about their difficulty gaining their stepchild’s respect for their authority. Several said their stepchild had told them at some stage “you can’t tell me what to do, you’re not my mother” or “Dad doesn’t make me do this”. Some talked about their stepchild “totally ignoring” their requests for help or only doing what they were asked after checking with their father first.

And it’s really hard for me to get respect ‘cause I ask him to do things and he completely ignores me, totally ignores me, and sort’ve goes to his dad to ask if it’s right he has to do it and that really gets to me. It completely undermines me. He knows I’ve no control. He just doesn’t respect me (Participant 22, Stepmother).
Several stepmothers said they did not have the confidence to assert their authority with their stepchild, particularly at the start of their relationship, as they were unsure about their boundaries or “how far” they were allowed to go. Some attributed their uncertainty to being worried about their stepchild’s response while others said they did not want to be perceived as too unreasonable or intrusive. Quite a few thought their uncertainty gave their stepchild “too much power” which in turn, exacerbated their lack of confidence.

The challenge for me was that I wasn’t sure how far to go with (stepchild). I wasn’t sure where the lie of the land was. I was sort of teetering on what was too much and what wasn’t enough and you know, I didn’t want them thinking I don’t care or I’m being unreasonable or the bad guy. But this gave them too much power. They didn’t do what I asked and they didn’t respect my authority. So I was absolutely powerless (Participant 1, Stepmother).

A number of stepmothers talked about their authority being undermined and thought this contributed to their lack of confidence or difficulty gaining their stepchild’s respect. Several attributed this to having different parenting styles or opinions about discipline from their partner. Quite a few thought that their partner’s parenting was “too lenient” or “too inconsistent” and that this made it difficult for them to establish “strong boundaries” or “consistent consequences’ with their stepchild.

There’s huge differences between (partner’s) style of parenting and mine. He’s really reluctant to make rules and boundaries and it’s been a very ad hoc parenting style, very laid back but then he’ll be quite dictatorial and make ridiculous demands on the children. And it’s made it hard ‘cause to me you need consistency and they’re so used to getting their own way they think I’m too strict and unfair (Participant 40, Stepmother).

Several stepmothers talked about their frustration at times when they were concerned about a parenting issue they considered to be important but their partner told them they were “over-reacting” or “it’s not worth worrying about”. This was particularly problematic when their partner’s decision conflicted with their own personal values or when they thought it was not in the child’s best interest. Some described the dilemma this created for them as they worried the issue would “only get worse” if they did not intervene, yet if they did, they would be perceived as “interfering” or the “bad guy”.
(Partner) tells me to let it go, just let it go. But it’s hard, because I wouldn’t be honest to myself if I did ‘cause I feel so strongly about this and I want the best but he’s got his ideas of what’s okay. But the thing is that if I don’t do anything then nothing happens and I get really worried about (Stepchild) but if I do then he just thinks I’m unreasonable. It’s a dilemma and one I’m still struggling to deal with (Participant 16, Stepmother).

Quite a few stepmothers described the difficulty they experienced when they “unwittingly” took on too much responsibility for the parenting of their stepchild. Several said they realised that the more they became involved the more the level of tension and conflict increased not just with their partners who thought they were “taking over”, but also their stepchild who perceived them as “too intrusive”. Over half of the stepmothers talked about reaching a point where they knew they had to “stand back” and let their partner deal with the responsibility.

I mean it’s reached a crisis point and I’ve backed off. She just won’t do anything I ask even the simple little chores, anything. So I’ve pulled back cause I realise it’s not doing me any good at all. It’s doing my head in. I feel like I’m worthless, an unpaid servant. I’ve totally lost my confidence and I’m sick of always being the bad guy. I’m just stretched to the limit and just constantly asking God am I worth it, am I going mad? (Participant 7, Stepmother).

While some stepmothers described feeling a sense of “immense relief” once they did “stand back” the question of responsibility remained a dilemma as they were still left alone to care for their stepchild at times. Some also found it difficult to compromise on their personal values. This predicament left a number of stepmothers feeling helpless or not knowing what to do.

I know I need to step back but it’s like being pulled by a rubber band. I’m still left to be responsible for them and I still think (stepchildren) need to have consequences. And I don’t know what to do. I’ve totally lost my confidence and I’m at a loss as to where to go from here (Participant 22, Stepmother).

According to several stepmothers, the sense of “powerlessness” or “loss of control” they experienced when trying to establish their authority, evoked “strong” emotions which some described as “innate” or “primitive” or even “primordial”. Quite a few talked about their difficulty dealing with their “intense” emotions but that no matter how hard they tried they could not stop themselves from thinking about themselves in negative terms or that they
were to blame for creating the conflict or tension within the family. Several talked about losing their confidence and feelings of self-worth at times.

It’s like deep, terrible ache ‘cause you know we’re supposed to love each other but when his kids come along it goes right out the window. It’s like my primordial instincts kick into gear and I go into survival mode. And I try really hard not to feel like this but it’s a constant battle. I just think I’m this horrible person that’s come along, you know, I’m imposing, I’ve upset everyone and I’ve made everything wrong and I’m a bad guy, big time. It’s completely knocked my self-confidence (Participant 31, Stepmother).

A number of stepmothers talked about feeling despondent at some stage, particularly when they had worked hard to make the family function well but did not receive any validation or acknowledgement for their efforts. Some also commented that when there was a lot of conflict they sometimes found themselves questioning their reason for remaining in the family. Most said they did not have anyone to talk to and over half said that they sought professional support such as counselling, and that this helped them to manage their confusion and emotional turmoil.

**b. Stepchildren accepting authority.** When asked to talk about experiences they perceived as challenging, almost every stepchild said they did not like the stepmother “telling me what to do” or “making me do chores” as they thought that “it’s not right” or “she’s not my parent”, as described by one stepchild:

It was sort of uncomfortable because it’s hard being told what to do by someone that’s not your parent. I already had a mum and I don’t need another mum to boss me around. And I just feel reluctant to do it ‘cause it’s just, I don’t feel it’s right, she can’t tell me what to do, that sort of thing (Participant 15, Stepchild).

Some stepchildren said they did not like the way the stepmother told them to do their jobs which some described as “ordering” rather than asking or “not asking in a polite way” as explained by one stepchild “if she just said please, then I’d do it”. A few also thought it was “unfair” that their stepmother was able to tell them off yet they did not feel it was their place to “answer back” or defend themselves.

The bad times was probably how she spoke to me, like it’s her bad tones of voices, like she’s demanding me like she wants me to do it right now and she
gets real angry and yells at me. And I don’t think she’s very fair to me like she doesn’t let me answer back and I’m hurt and confused and sometimes angry and sad ‘cause I don’t get my say but she’s getting her say so why can’t I have mine? (Participant 18, Stepchild).

A number of stepchildren recalled thinking that their stepmother was “strict” or “bossy” when the family first formed. Some said they resented the stepmother because they thought she had the “power” or she “thinks she’s in charge”. Quite a few talked about their stepmother “influencing” their father as they thought she “made him take her side” or “do things her way”. A few said their stepmother made their father “change” explaining that he became “uptight” or started worrying about things that were previously of no concern.

Parent has always been laid back and was pretty open to everything and then she came along and he’s changed. Like she’s taking over from dad ‘cause now she thinks she has the power. She’s like she’s the boss almost instead of dad, like her influence on dad, and makes him do things her way and like I don’t feel really safe (Participant 9, Stepchild).

Some stepchildren talked about feeling guilty and blaming themselves when their father and stepmother argued because they though the fights were “always about me”. A few spoke about being scared that the arguments might “split up the family” or that their stepmother might leave, and worried about the effect this would have on their father. A number of stepchildren said they stayed in their bedrooms to avoid the fights or to stay out of their stepmother’s way. A few talked about “crying a lot” because they felt confused or angry and some said they felt sad but did not have anyone to talk to because they “won’t understand”.

Living with dad and (stepmother) I never leave my bedroom ‘cause I can’t stand the tension and drama. I come up to eat and have a shower and then go back down to my room and I think that’s just, it’s partly ‘cause that’s who I’ve become and it’s because I want to stay out of the way ‘cause I don’t know what to do and I’ve got nowhere to go, so it’s basically saving myself (Participant 49, Stepchild).

c. Father’s dilemma. Many fathers talked about their difficulty balancing work commitments with their role as a father and partner. Whilst every father considered parenting and discipline to be their responsibility, most said they needed to rely on the stepmother to fulfil this role at times mostly due to their hours of work. Most recognised the
difficulties this created for their partner and child but said they did not know what to do as they had to work and did not have a choice.

So I don’t want to leave her with too much responsibility but it just happens that (stepmother) ends up by looking after the boys after school and you know doing all the parenting things, it kind of happens by default cause I have to work. We haven’t got any choice really. I’m not quite sure what else we can do about it. And it was really hard for them, but what can I do? (Participant 2, Father).

Quite a few fathers talked about their personal difficulty adjusting to the change from being a solo father or “being in control” of their parenting, to sharing the responsibility of their child with the stepmother. Some explained they had difficulty “letting go” as they felt protective of their child following the separation from their mother, while others said they worried how their child would respond to another adult’s authority, particularly when they did not know the stepmother very well. A few said they felt ambivalent about trusting the stepmother with the parenting as she did not have children of her own or did not understand or know how to relate to their child.

It was a pretty tough time both for the kids and me because she does things so differently. And it was a bit of a shock for the kids because all of a sudden they have someone else telling them the rules. And it was hard for me to let go and I suppose that’s trust as well, letting (stepmother) I suppose be the boss of your own kids and letting go a bit. But yeah, it’s hard when you’ve had your kids for a long time then all of a sudden someone else you’ve only known for a short time, it’s hard to sort of let them sort of take over (Participant 41, Father).

One of the most difficult challenges for many fathers related to their child resenting or rejecting the stepmother’s authority. A number of fathers attributed this to adolescence which they acknowledged was a difficult stage under normal circumstances but even more so for the stepmother. Some explained it became more problematic when the stepmother did not understand adolescence or interpreted their stepchild’s “typical teenage behaviour” as their way of “purposely” wanting to hurt them or make them angry.

The problem started when the hormones kicked in, that’s when the drama really started. (Stepchild) started getting really sullen and you know, talking back, stroppy. So of course (stepmother) picked up on that and the resentment built up. She doesn’t understand teenage kids and she takes it personally, and thinks (stepchild’s) winding her up on purpose ’cause she doesn’t like her, and then we’d have these screaming rows (Participant 8, Father).
For the most part however, several fathers thought their child had difficulty accepting the stepmother’s authority because of their differences in parenting styles and expectations. Several acknowledged they had been too “lenient” or inconsistent with their child and realised the difficulty this created when the stepmother tried to assert her authority with his child. A number of fathers explained that they were not used to enforcing discipline with their child because “this was the mother’s job” mostly due to their work commitments, or because they lacked confidence in their parenting skills. Some admitted that they had ‘overcompensated’ as they wanted to ensure their child was happy or ‘having a good time” when they were with him. Quite a few said they were nervous about coming across as too strict because they were worried their child might not want to come back, or that they might lose custody.

Well I suppose I overcompensated. I didn’t want to upset them because underneath it all I was worried that they mightn’t want to come back. So yeah, I guess it was a lack of confidence in myself as their dad. But when you’ve only got them half the time you’re not wanting to waste that time in bad days. And also there’s the guilt. You know, that if I was still with their mum they wouldn’t be going through this crap (Participant 5, Father).

On the other hand, some fathers acknowledged that they were too strict and tended to get angry with their child when they did not “do what they were asked, when they were asked”. Not only would this upset their child, but also, the stepmother who would either defend the stepchild or tell him how to be a better parent. Some said this left them feeling frustrated either because they did not always agree with the stepmother’s advice or they resented being told what was “best for my child”. A few fathers talked about feeling inadequate particularly when their child responded more positively to the stepmother than to them.

She would talk to me and tell me I need to slow things down a bit and I suppose let that control of (stepchild) go a bit like spend more time explaining things. But I find that really hard especially ‘cause we’ve been together for a long time and then (stepmother) comes along and sort of tells me the best way to parent my child. Sort of gets my back up. But the problem for me you know is she’s right ‘cause (stepchild) loves her. So there’s also this other part of me that’s saying I can’t be a very good parent (Participant 26, Father).
A number of fathers described the dilemma they experienced when the stepmother expected them to be more proactive or deal with parenting issues as they arose. A few fathers thought the stepmother was too “confrontational” and that she needed to “stand back” and let them deal with parenting in the way they knew suited their child’s personality or temperament. Some explained that they were not always in a position to respond such as when they were contacted at work and told by the stepmother “you need to sort out your child”. Other fathers explained that they preferred a less “reactive” approach or liked to take time to consider how or if they were going to respond. A number of fathers sometimes thought it was not worth “creating a fuss” but that this would inevitably add to the tension as the stepmother thought they were avoiding the issue or not being supportive.

She expects me to deal with it straight away but I think she’s too confrontational. I just try to defer it and stay relatively calm. They’re my children, and I know what I’m doing and I’ve had them for six years. I just want to shut up, or just go away for a walk and collect my thoughts but she gets frustrated with me and says I’m not confrontational, but I disagree ‘cause I don’t do angry. There’s a time and place for that and I don’t want a house full of unhappy children. I’m not skirting the issue all I’m doing is just trying to cool it down ‘cause to me it’s no big deal. The problem is, she does (Participant 2, Father).

Several fathers talked about their difficulty in situations when they agreed with their child and felt they could not support the stepmother because they thought she was being “unreasonable” or that her expectations were “too high”. Some described feeling “stuck” or “caught in the middle” because they did not want to undermine the stepmother’s authority on the one hand, but also did not want to compromise their principles in front of their children on the other.

One of the most difficult things is when I think (stepmother) is being unreasonable and you know, to them, and I can see their side clearer than hers but I don’t want to be attacking her and that’s not healthy when the boys are there ‘cause I don’t want to undermine her position but also I kind of don’t want to be unreasonable to the boys as well or let them see me going against what I believe is right. So it’s an awkward situation (Participant 29, Father).

Some fathers reflected that at times they thought it was all “too hard” or that they were “tired” of being “caught in the middle” of the conflict. A few reflected that if they had
known about the challenges that lay ahead of them they would have done things differently or not moved in with the stepmother at all until the children left home.

It’s changed the family dynamics a lot and I think that it’s hard work all the way. You’re battling against nature and society and it’s so different than the first time family. I’ve changed. My relationship with the kids has changed. Things are always changing, emotions always seem to be extreme. Yeah it’s very dynamic. A lot of things in the too hard basket (Participant 47, Father).

Hence, for most stepmothers, efforts to establish their authority presented a number of challenges especially in situations when it was undermined or rejected by their stepchild. Confusion about boundaries and differences over parenting issues sometimes challenged stepmothers’ confidence and capacity to establish their authority. Balancing the level of involvement and responsibility for their stepchild without creating conflict within the family was an on-going dilemma for some stepmothers and impacted on their emotional well-being at times. Most stepchildren said they resented the stepmother telling them what to do as they thought this was their parent’s responsibility. Several thought the stepmother had too many rules and resented the way she asked them to help out. A number thought the stepmother had control over their father when he supported her rather than them. Some stepchildren thought they were to blame when their father and stepmother argued and a number stayed in their bedrooms to avoid the fights. Some fathers experienced difficulty sharing the parenting of their child with the stepmother and resented being criticized or told what was best for his child. Some described their dilemma when they disagreed with the stepmother’s expectations or opinions about discipline. Conversely quite a few fathers acknowledged that their parenting had been either too lenient or inconsistent and some felt inadequate when their child related more positively to the stepmother’s parenting style.
**Theme 4: The Biological Mother Challenge**

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**Introduction.** Many participants spoke about the presence of the biological mother adding an extra dimension to the family dynamics which invariably created further complication to the complexities of stepfamily life. The biological mother’s presence filtered into the day-to-day functioning of the stepfamily and appeared to have a subtle impact on the perception of each family member’s experiences. Most challenging for many participants were issues relating to access and moving between the two households, the biological mother’s attitude towards stepmother and the impact of the biological mother on family relationships. Data for this theme therefore have been organised into three subthemes: i) Moving between two houses; ii) Stepmothers’ struggles; and iii) Effects on the stepfamily.

**a. Moving between two households.** Over half of the stepmothers said that access arrangements with the biological mother were a challenge, or as described by one stepmother “a nightmare”. For a few stepmothers, the access arrangements were so complicated they were unable to explain them, despite the length of time they had been in place. Some described their stepchildren as “living out of bags” because they were always moving from one house to the other, and a number expressed concern about the unsettling effect this had on their stepchild.

It’s a nightmare actually. It works for the parents but it doesn’t work for me and I don’t know it works for the kids either and I worry about that. They never stay anywhere long enough to really know where they are I feel like this is a hotel. They walk in, they sit down, they have their dinner they go to bed, they get up they go to school. I feel like all I’m doing is standing in the middle directing the traffic. So yeah, it’s hard (Participant 28, Stepmother).
Several stepmothers talked about feeling frustrated as access arrangements prevented them from providing consistency or stability for their stepchild. Some explained this was particularly challenging when there were differences in values and expectations between the two households because their stepchild had difficulty readjusting following access. Some also said it was difficult to establish consistent routines or plan ahead, especially with meals, because access arrangements kept changing, sometimes at the last minute.

That’s always been tricky I think (child) having to go between the two places you know adapting to two different houses and two sets of rules and the contrast between the expectations and parenting styles in two different households doesn’t help. And it doesn’t help when arrangements keep changing, usually to suit (mother) it just makes it so hard to give her consistency and stability. She’s so different when she comes back and it takes her a couple of days to settle back into the routine again (Participant 25, Stepmother).

For some stepmothers, access arrangements limited their capacity to develop a relationship or form a connection with their stepchild because they were never in one place long enough. A few also talked about feeling frustrated as they missed out on the opportunity to do enjoyable activities or spend quality time with their stepchild after school because they stayed with their mother until meal time.

But what I struggled with is I made an effort to be there for the kids after school but they’d go to (mother’s) place and I kept saying this is ridiculous ‘cause I’m here. Kids unload when they get home and do things that I’d like to be a part of. And that really hurt me and it was quite destructive to actually establishing a relationship with the kids (Participant 16, Stepmother).

Quite a few stepmothers said that they wanted to change the access arrangements due to the disruptive effect they had on family functioning and relationships or because they did not take their stepchild’s needs into account, especially when they reached adolescence. In a number of situations however, the biological mother was not prepared to compromise either because “it didn’t suit her” or as one stepmother said “she just wants to make things difficult for us”.

I find it really difficult having (stepchild) for such a short amount of time, per days. I’d rather have week on week off and I’ve always brought that up and it was all right when she was little ‘cause she would miss her mum but now that she’s hit puberty it’s really tricky. But her mum won’t budge because she says
it’s either her way or no way, which is all the time, full custody for her (Participant 7, Stepmother).

Some stepmothers also resented the imposition access arrangements had on their time alone with their partner or with their own children. Quite a few said this was particularly challenging when the children returned from their mother in an emotionally distressed state. A few said it took all access time for their stepchild to “settle down” and “come right” by the end of which it was time to return to their mother and repeat the cycle.

So we always have these lovely weekends and then Sunday night was like girding your loins. I put on my armour and you’d hear beep of the horn, the kids spilling out with suitcases and kids crying. They’d be irritable and just horrible, screaming and yelling. It was a nightmare. And it takes a couple of days to sort of calm them down and then they go away again and so it goes on you know, it’s crazy (Participant 40, Stepmother).

Several stepmothers, particularly those in complex stepfamilies, talked about feeling resentful when they had to combine full-time work with the care of their stepchild, while the biological mother only worked part-time or not at all. Most of these stepmothers described the situation as “unfair” or “unjust” explaining that not only did the biological mother have time for herself during her non-access week, but also, in a number of circumstances, was living with a partner who was earning an income yet was still receiving child support payments. As this was a “sensitive” issue for these stepmothers and a source of on-going conflict with their partners, they did not want to discuss their experiences during the interviews with some stating “don’t get me started” or as one stepmother claimed “it’s too painful to talk about”.

I found out that (mother) only works one day a week so I’ve been juggling a full time job, running back and forth from work to be here when the boys get home from school and she’s sitting at home all by herself yet she pulls the strings and (Partner) kowtows to her. The kids are with us most of the time, yet he still pays her child support. It’s so totally unjust. I just get so worked up about it. It eats away at me (Participant 28, Stepmother).

For most stepchildren, access arrangements were an “inconvenience” but they “just got on with it”. Some said that they did not like moving between the two households, or the constant packing and unpacking. Some talked about getting into trouble at school because
they had left books or homework at their mother’s or being frustrated when they wanted to go out but had left items of clothing “at mum’s house”.

   It doesn’t work for me ’cause it’s annoying to go back and forwards. I particularly hate packing my bag every week and I hate changing places. I’m always leaving things behind and I just don’t like change (Participant 6, Stepchild).

A few stepchildren said they would prefer to stay at their mother’s place but continued with the access arrangements because they were worried about missing their father or hurting his feelings. Some of these stepchildren explained that they wanted to stay with their mother because she was “more relaxed” and did not expect them to do as many chores as their stepmother, or did not get angry with them when they forgot. Others said that they would rather stay with their mother because their father and stepmother were “always fighting”.

   Well there’s quite a bit of difference between Dad’s house and Mum’s. Like we’ve got jobs and stuff here and (stepmother’s) real strict and she just like tries and makes us independent or something. But at mum’s like we don’t really do much because she doesn’t like care what we do the same. And like Dad and (stepmother) are always yelling and screaming at each other and it’s scary. I hate it ’cos I like seeing Dad but I like being at mum’s and I don’t want to hurt his feelings (Participant 18, Stepchild).

A few stepchildren talked about their difficulty leaving their mother following access either because they missed her or worried about her being lonely or upset. At the same time, some stepchildren said they felt guilty when they looked forward to returning to their father and at times their stepmother, as they thought they were being disloyal to their mother.

   I hate leaving mum to go and stay at dad’s. I worry that she’ll be lonely and that really plays on my mind a lot ’cause I don’t like seeing mum upset cause she cries and I feel pretty bad. It makes me feel scared about being happy at dad’s ’cause I feel guilty and like I’m being disloyal to mum so I’m just feeling torn like wanting to be at dad’s but feeling bad for mum. It’s pretty tough (Participant 39, Stepchild).

For most fathers, challenges with access arrangements related to practical issues such as transport and keeping track of where the children were, particularly when arrangements kept changing. Some talked about having to travel a substantial distance to pick up and drop off
their child at their mother’s place or their school. A number said that it was a constant struggle finishing work to pick their child up on time.

The hardest thing is the comings and goings of the children more than anything cause arrangement change quite a bit and that’s when most of the hiccups occur ‘cause it’s not translated properly and (stepmother’s) not told about the changes and I lose track of what’s happening, like what week it is (Participant 14, Father).

Some fathers expressed concern about their child’s emotional state when they returned from their mother. Many were aware the biological mother spoke negatively about the stepmother to their child, and worried about the impact this had on them or their relationship with the stepmother. Some fathers also said they were concerned about the impact that the biological mother’s lifestyle or choice of partner had on their child. A few talked about feeling helpless because they wanted to protect their child but did not have any control over what happened while in their mother’s care.

She says nasty things about us ‘cause (child) lets it slip every now and again. And I’m really concerned about the number of men (mother’s) been involved with like she was on an internet dating site with a photo of my daughter you know and I’m thinking what’s going on there but there’s nothing I can do. And I worry that (child) won’t say anything. I know she’s upset but I think it’s more she doesn’t want to be unfaithful to her mum (Participant 26, Father).

**b. Stepmothers struggles.** About half of the stepmothers interviewed talked about their difficulty coping with the biological mother’s “negative” attitude towards them whilst also trying to develop positive relationships within the family. Some explained that the biological mother’s negativity created tension within the family and interfered with their capacity to move ahead or function as a family unit.

I think the biggest challenge for me more than anything else is the ex. ‘cause there were so many things to deal with, trying to keep my relationship with (partner) thriving and establishing a relationship with (stepchild) that was taking so much energy away from it and yeah, there was the ex. It’s like she was there in the background all the time. It was like the underbelly bit of our stepfamily and it made it just complicated and incredibly complex. She had a huge influence on the way we worked, and it caused a lot of damage (Participant 46, Stepmother).
A number of stepmothers described feeling excluded or awkward when the biological mother attended the same function as the family, such as sports fixtures or school events. Quite a few talked about not knowing how to behave or where they “fit” in these situations. A number also described feeling uncomfortable when the biological mother came into their house with some saying they felt as though they were a “stranger in my own home” or that they were in the way, as described by one stepmother:

“It’s like when she’s in my home, I feel disconnected. I feel like I’m the odd one out. And it’s like, we’re the family unit, but when she’s here, they’re the family unit and I’m out there. I don’t feel like it’s my place. I feel as though I’m in the way, you know, like I don’t belong here. And no matter how hard I try to be rational, the old feelings of being left out and jealousy kick in and it hurts like a pain in my gut (Participant 34, Stepmother).

Some stepmothers also talked about feeling over-looked or invisible when the two families combined for special events such as Christmas, significant birthdays, graduations or weddings. A few described these occasions as “painful” when they were ignored or left out for example, whenever there were family photographs. Many spoke about feeling invalidated when relatives and family friends gave all the credit to the biological mother but failed to acknowledge the effort they had put into “mothering” their stepchild. A few stepmothers described feeling hurt when they realised that after all their years of “mothering” their stepchild’s first loyalty still remained with their mother even when she had not been a part of their lives.

Underneath I felt like a sense of betrayal I guess. Her mother never had anything to do with her but after all that I had to acknowledge that there was a relationship with her mother and that was important to her. I had to accept this which I did in my head, but in my heart I felt very hurt. I thought she needed me all those years and so I was the loving mother and I did all that, but I got it wrong, me all she wanted was her real mum. It hurt like crazy for a long time (Participant 37, Stepmother).

**c. Impact on the stepfamily.** Some stepmothers found it difficult when the biological mother contacted the stepchild during her non-access time often in the form of “frequent” telephone calls or arriving at the house unannounced and treating it “as though it was still theirs”. A number of these stepmothers described the biological mother’s behaviour as
“intrusive” as it imposed on their stepfamily time together or their efforts to foster a relationship with their stepchild.

Most challenging for a number of these stepmothers however, was their partner’s lack of support or reluctance to put a stop to the biological mother’s “intrusive” behaviours. Some thought that the biological mother still had “control” over their partner and that he needed to establish clear boundaries because of the disruptive effect this had on family relationships and functioning. Many of these stepmothers talked about feeling hurt, or confused and questioning where their partner’s loyalties lay.

It’s hard ‘cause she rings a lot, like constant phone calls and messages and she comes around and walks straight into the house. I feel like there are three in this marriage you know ‘cause she’s in the background stirring the pot. She expects (partner) to drop everything when she calls ‘cause that’s what he’s always done. And I’m forever saying you need to set clear boundaries and she needs to let you move on ‘cause it’s caused us real problems (Participant 28, Stepmother).

Some stepmothers thought their partner was “too scared” to stand up to the biological mother due to their concern that she might get angry and take it out on their child or apply for full-custody. Others thought their partner was worried his child might not want to come back particularly if they thought changes in their parent’s relationship were instigated by their stepmother.

The problem is he has a very volatile ex-wife who basically he doesn’t want to deal with and he’s got nice (stepmother) sitting at home looking after her children. I think he feels guilty about his kids and he’s scared he might lose custody if she gets angry. And in a sense I think he probably doesn’t want the kids to think changes have come from me ‘cause if he’s not at her beck and call, then I’ll be the bad guy (Participant 22, Stepmother).

Several stepmothers and fathers said that they wanted to establish or maintain a positive relationship with the biological mother so that they could work together in the best interest of their child. A number of stepmothers talked about making arrangements to meet with the biological mother to let her know they did not want to take over her role. Despite their best intentions however, some stepmothers said their efforts were in vain either because the biological mother was not interested or was too negative or “antagonistic” towards them.
I’ve talked to her and had the ‘I don’t want to take over from you talk’ but she won’t have it. It’s so frustrating and totally unnecessary because I think you know, there’s a great opportunity for us to communicate, and it would be so much easier if we could both work together for (stepchild). And I just want to grab her and show her it’s not about me, it’s about your child (Participant 25, Stepmother).

Quite a few stepchildren said they wished their mother and stepmother got along well together. Some talked about their difficulty understanding why there was tension between them or why the stepmother did not like their mother coming around to their house. A few said they did not like their mother criticizing their stepmother as it made them feel uncertain about trusting her or forming a relationship with her. Some said their mother’s negativity made them feel guilty or “torn” when they liked their stepmother and wanted to get to know her better.

Well mum kept on telling me bad things about (stepmother) and confused me. I didn’t like it because I liked (stepmother) but I don’t know, I felt like it was a bit like I was cheating on my mum or something because I knew my mum didn’t like (stepmother), it was something I didn’t understand and I always felt a bit torn between hers and mum’s feelings it made me feel uncomfortable (Participant 42, Stepchild).

Like the stepchildren, several fathers said that they felt upset about the tension between the biological mother and stepmother and wished they got on well together. Most described feeling torn between the two at times, and some had difficulty understanding why their continued liaison with the biological mother upset the stepmother. On the other hand, some fathers recognised that the biological mother made things difficult for them and were concerned about the impact that this had on the stepmother. Some said that they thought the biological mother felt threatened by the stepmother or worried that their child might like the stepmother more than them while others thought she was still angry with him about the break-up of their relationship, and was taking this out on the stepmother.

And then I’ve got my ex throwing firebolts into the relationship just to make it even worse, like abusive phone calls. She has been an absolute tyrant and behaves, you know, really atonically. Like she’ll completely ignore (stepmother), it’s as if she’s invisible and I mean the kids pick up on it and it’s done on purpose you know and I get angry ‘cause God it’s hard for (stepmother). (Participant 41, Father).
Hence a number of stepmothers and fathers worried about the emotional impact that moving between two houses with different rules and routines had on their child. Some stepchildren did not like the access arrangements and wanted to stay with their mother but worried about the effect this would have on their father. Some stepmothers thought the biological mother’s negative attitude made it difficult to establish a positive relationship with their stepchild. A few stepmothers resented the biological mother contacting their stepchild and partner during her non-access time and felt uncomfortable whenever they were in the biological mother’s presence. Some stepmothers thought the biological mother had control over their partner as he was worried about losing custody. Almost every adult participant wanted to have a positive relationship with the biological mother but their attempts were not always reciprocated. Some fathers described their difficulty dividing their loyalties between the stepmother, their child and the biological mother.

Overall however, despite the variation and complexity of the challenges that participants reported experiencing from time to time, most expressed a desire for a positive outcome, or as described by some participants “to make the family work”. As such, many families interviewed found ways of resolving their challenges or accepting them as part of their experience of living in a stepmother family. Thus in accordance with the aims of this thesis, family members’ perceptions of positive experiences, the strategies that they used towards achieving these and the meanings that they attributed to these positive experiences will now be presented.
Chapter Four
Thematic Analysis: Positive Experiences

Introduction

This chapter presents results of the thematic analysis of data pertaining to participants’ perceptions of positive experiences, the meaning they attribute to these experiences and the strategies that worked for them, from the time of stepfamily formation to the present. Of the seventeen families interviewed, members of three stepmother families each reported predominantly positive experiences throughout their time together as a stepfamily. Another eight experienced some challenges in the initial stage of stepfamily formation but managed to resolve most of these difficulties over time. The remaining five stepfamilies reported ongoing difficulties which, at the time of the interviews continued to be challenging. Nevertheless most family members from this latter group of stepmother families were able to recount some positive aspects of their experiences. Thus, this section represents a broad spectrum of personal accounts of participants across all the stepfamilies. Quotes from participants will be included to illustrate important points they made.

Four themes relating to participants’ perceptions of positive experiences emerged from the data: i) Spending Time and Sharing Experiences Together; ii) Effective Communication Strategies; iii) The Importance of Support; and iv) Positive aspects of stepmother’s authority. Within each theme data are further organised into three subthemes relating to strategies that participants perceived to have worked well and contributed towards developing positive experiences. Importantly, while adult participants tended to describe the specific strategies that worked well for their family, stepchildren spoke predominantly about their perceptions of these strategies. Quotes from participants will be included to illustrate important points they made.

A summary of the themes and related subthemes are presented in Table Three below.
Table 3

Overview of Stepmother Family Members’ Positive Experiences

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**Theme 1: Spending Time and Sharing Experiences Together**

When participants were asked to talk about their positive experiences almost every participant described situations where everyone was involved, relaxed, enjoying each other’s company and having fun together. Many said that spending time and sharing experiences together helped family members learn more about each other, and by so doing, develop a greater sense of belonging and feel more positive about their new family. Data from the first theme therefore have been organised into three subthemes that relate to aspects of these situations: a) Participating in enjoyable activities; b) Sharing special events and experiences; c) Benefitting from new experiences.

**a. Participating in enjoyable activities.** Many participants talked about their enjoyment or the importance of having family meals together. Several explained that family
meals often brought everyone together and provided the opportunity to talk or enjoy each other’s company. Many spoke positively about times when the family sat around the dinner table “chatting” to each other, talking about the daily news or events, making plans, laughing, telling jokes or just having a relaxing time together.

Good times were probably around food actually. Yeah, I mean, these were the best times ‘cause, we’d make the evening dinner a daily event. Like you know, making sure that everybody sits around and has a meal and I think that’s important, and just talking and joking around the table, yeah. It provided us all with a chance to be together, share information, talk about what everybody is doing. And that was good (Participant 2, Father).

Some stepmothers thought that involving the stepchildren in baking and preparing the family meals had been a helpful way to be accepted by their stepchild, particularly when they considered themselves to be better cooks than the father, as described by one stepmother:

So I said why don’t I come and cook tea because I know that the kids hated his cooking. And I knew I’d arrived when (stepdaughter) came up to me one day and said, do you mind if I don’t have dad’s chicken, I think I’m allergic to it (Participant 40, Stepmother).

Likewise, several stepchildren thought that being encouraged to help out with the meals or contribute to the discussions while they all sat around the dinner table helped them feel more positive about their new stepfamily. A number of stepchildren stated that they enjoyed family meals because their stepmother was a “good cook” or as one stepchild stated, “the menu expanded”. Some reflected that having family meals with their stepfamily made them feel “safe” explaining that before the stepmother joined the family, mealtimes were stressful either because of the on-going conflict between their parents, they were rushed due to their father’s work hours or they had to prepare their own meals.

Well I feel safe at Dad’s ‘cause we sit around the table for dinner and everyone talks about things and it’s fun. And yeah, the food’s good. (Stepmother’s) a good cook. And yeah like at mum’s we just grab food like if it’s there, like when we want it and yeah probably eat in front of the TV or stuff. But I just eat in my room ‘cause mum she’s never there so yeah, it was pretty crap (Participant 39, Stepchild).
Having holidays or going on outings together was described by many participants as positive experiences mostly because everyone was more relaxed or made more of an effort to get along together. Several explained that being away on holidays provided opportunities for all family members to be involved in enjoyable or “fun” activities such as playing cards, board games or outdoor activities. A few commented that they learned more about each other when they went on holidays together and that this had helped them feel more positive about their new lifestyle. As described by one young boy:

Yeah, going away on holidays and things it was perhaps less tension and more relaxed, it was good to get away, and it was nice to be together as a unit and doing things together. Yeah, and they would include me. And that was good, yeah, just being asked kind of made me feel like part of the family, like I belonged (Participant 12, Stepchild)

A number of stepchildren talked about how much they appreciated being included in the planning process and making decisions such as holiday destinations, buying or renovating the house or decorating their bedrooms. Some said that this helped them adjust to their new lifestyle or feel more positive about the stepmother while others explained it help them feel as though they were a valued or important member of the family

...and Dad and (stepmother) extended the house, well this house, and I remember feeling really excited cause I got my own room and she let me choose things, like the colour of the walls and my duvet. And that really made me think that she was okay (Participant 6, Stepchild).

b. Sharing special events and experiences. Several participants, particularly stepmothers and stepchildren, talked positively about being included and involved in special family occasions such as birthdays, school events, graduations or for some stepchildren, their father and stepmother’s wedding. Some thought that sharing special events helped bring family members closer together because they were all supporting each other or working together for a common cause as this stepchild explains:

... like when we were told that they were getting married we were so happy. It was like, Wow. And they came in and said, oh so, how would feel about being a bridesmaid... and then including us children in it and organising the wedding
with (stepmother) was so cool. It was really good for all of us. It was really special (Participant 48, Stepchild).

Some couples described having a baby together was a special experience that helped to develop positive family relationships. A few thought that the baby provided a ‘common blood link’ and that this helped family members feel a closer bond with each other. Some stepmothers said that having a baby demonstrated their commitment to the stepfamily and that this provided a sense of security and stability for their stepchild. Most stepmothers in simple stepfamilies explained that having a baby made them more aware of children’s developmental needs and that this improved the way they related to their stepchild.

Now that I’ve had my own child has really changed the way I think about things. It’s helped me understand that children aren’t out to get at you, they are just going through the process of growing up and learning about their world. I wished I knew that when (Stepchild) was little. I would’ve done things differently and not got so frustrated with him. It just changes your whole perspective on things (Participant 22, Stepmother).

Some participants also said that sharing distressing events had helped bring the family closer together. One stepchild talked about finding comfort from his stepmother when his closest friend had committed suicide. Three stepmothers talked positively about the support they received from the family when they had a miscarriage.

We’d had a couple of miscarriages, one was a 20 week one, so the boys actually felt like they were quite a family unit with us at that stage, cause they had kind of been involved with the funeral with a baby (Participant 1, Stepmother).

At the time of the interviews, Christchurch participants experienced a series of major earthquakes. In spite of the widespread devastation each of these participants described ways in which this tragic event inadvertently strengthened family relationships. Most talked about the special support they received from each other when they shared their traumatic experiences together or when they were overwhelmed with grief and loss. One father explained that the earthquake took his family relationships to “another level”.

It takes something like this to make you realise how incredibly important it is to have family. And I think what had happened was that the strong emotions we felt from the earthquakes and I think that’s probably what’s brought us all together, closer as well. We all sat in a circle as a family and just sat there and
talked. And that’s pretty special. We’re all feeling really good about each other (Participant 35, Father).

c. Benefitting from new experiences. A number of stepmothers talked positively about providing new opportunities for their stepchild or being able to teach them new skills. One stepmother described feeling a sense of pride and joy when she saw her stepdaughter’s confidence and self-esteem “blossom” after she had introduced her to drama classes. Some enjoyed the opportunity of providing their stepchild with the “motherly” care they believed had been missing in their lives. Several said they felt more confident about their place in the family when their stepchild accepted her care and support or appreciated the efforts that she made for them.

Yeah, a lot of things were missing in their lives. So you know I just came in and mothered pretty quickly and they just love it. And I just feel a great sense of fulfilment when (stepchildren) tell me they like me teaching them new things and they feel proud they can bake and do things their mum didn’t teach them (Participant 37, Stepmother).

At the same time, some stepmothers said they appreciated the new opportunities that their new lifestyle offered them which for some, was being a stepmother. A few talked about feeling “special” when their stepchild introduced them to friends as their ‘stepmum” or when their stepchild wrote them positive “loving” notes or cards.

And there are some lovely moments. It’s very fulfilling, and I just love being a stepmum. I feel filled when you have that affection and trust of the stepchildren. And they introduce me as their stepmum and it’s like wow, it’s really special. It’s like we’re more connected (Participant 10, Stepmother).

Several fathers appreciated having someone to share their parenting with as it gave them the opportunity to spend more time with their children or provided some relief from the pressure of balancing work and parenting responsibilities. Many spoke positively about the stepmother helping out with household tasks, in particular, preparing the meals as described by one father “my culinary skills are zero”. Others appreciated the stepmother spending time with their child or attending to their child’s needs as they had previously not had the opportunity due to their work commitments, as described by one father:
The boys are very much in love with (stepmother) because all of a sudden they were listened to a lot more and got a lot more attention, you know, she’d take them off shopping and get clothes that they want and stuff that I didn’t get round to much ‘cause I was too busy with work and looking after them. She was like a new broom bringing in lots of changes and opportunities that they could see as being good for them so they were happy (Participant 29, Father).

A number of stepchildren spoke positively about the new opportunities that the stepmother offered them such as moving into a bigger or nicer house, getting new furniture or clothes, or having the opportunity to participate in extra-curricular activities. A few stepchildren spoke about having more free time as the stepmother took over the responsibility of doing the housework, cooking the meals or looking after younger siblings from them. One stepchild talked positively about being able to go home after school as she had always been in daycare ever since she was little.

And the best thing is that I don’t have to go to daycare after school ‘cause (stepmother’s) there. Yeah, for the first time in my life I can have friends home and I can do things like she takes me to drama classes. So that’s cool ‘cause I’ve never done things like this before (Participant 27, Stepchild).

Many stepchildren also talked positively about being welcomed and supported by the stepmother’s family. Some spoke about going away on holidays with their ‘step-grandparents’ or being taken out to cafes or the movies with their ‘step-cousins’. A few explained that being part of a larger family network contributed to their sense of belonging or feeling positive about the stepmother.

The whole time I met (stepmother’s) family, I just found a whole new group of big, interesting people in my life, ‘cause they were all so nice to me, and sort of they were all really welcoming with us kids and (stepmother’s) sisters would sort’ve take me to movies and things, and I’d never had like, a sense of belonging to a family like this before and that was really nice (Participant 42, Stepchild).

Some stepchildren spoke positively about having step-siblings as they provided them with companionship or someone of their own age to talk to or confide in.

But yeah, it’s always been good having someone else there to say Happy Birthday and stuff and like to share presents with and Christmas and stuff. Yeah, it feels a lot more like family. ‘Cause before that I was just with Dad and it was a bit lonely (Participant 15, Stepchild).
Hence, many participants attributed positive experiences of their new lifestyle to occasions when they were relaxed, having fun, planning and participating in activities together. Most participants talked positively about being included in family occasions or special events and thought that this helped to develop a sense of belonging. Supporting each other through positive and difficult times was also perceived by a number of participants as helpful in fostering positive, trusting relationships. Several stepmothers felt included when their efforts to teach new skills to their stepchild were appreciated while a number of stepchild felt positive about the stepmother when she introduced them to new opportunities or experiences. Many fathers thought that ensuring everyone was included and involved in activities together helped family members to get to know each other and that this in turn helped them feel more positive about their new lifestyle.

Theme 2: Effective Communication Strategies

- Effective Communication Strategies
  - Making time to talk
  - Positive ways of talking to each other
  - The right time to talk

In response to questions about strategies that enhanced positive experiences almost every participant talked about the importance of communication. Many considered that effective communication was vital largely due to the complexities associated with two different families living together, mostly on a part time basis, with different sets of rules, routines, expectations, values, ages and stages of development. Whilst there was some diversity in the perception of effective communication, almost every participant referred to the particular aspects of communication they had found to be helpful. These have been organised into the following subthemes: a) Making the time to talk; b) Positive ways of talking to each other; c) The right time to talk. These will now be presented.
a. Making time to talk. A number of adult participants considered that making the time to talk either together as a family or one-on-one was an important strategy in building positive, trusting relationships. Several explained that by persevering and encouraging family members to ‘keep talking’ helped to keep the channels of communication. Some said that making the time to talk helped to clarify or resolve any grievances or misunderstandings when they occurred within the family.

Well our big thing is yeah we make the time to talk. And I think that one of the keys to why this family’s working well is we’re able to talk and can sit back and actually listen to each other, and sometimes that’s all it takes. We just keep on talking, and we’re open and honest say how it is, and I think this helps to sort things out ‘cause we know what everyone’s thinking (Participant 11, Father).

Several fathers and stepmothers considered that making the time to talk together as a couple was key to maintaining a positive, supportive relationship. Some explained that making the time to talk, particularly about their feelings and expectations, helped them to understand each other’s needs and therefore, respond to each other in a more caring, supportive way. Some stepmothers and a few fathers said that by making the time to talk together made it easier to accept each other’s opinions and work together towards a solution whenever there was a disagreement.

So we’re pretty good at making time to communicate with each other. We just have to. And we have a sort of open communication. We talk a lot, not just about the practical things but about our feelings because that’s important. And so we respect and trust each other and even if we don’t agree with each other we manage to accept where we’re coming from and don’t get hung up on it (Participant 50, Stepmother).

Some fathers said they were more willing to make the time to talk to their partner as they attributed their “poor communication skills” to the breakdown of their previous relationships. A number of these fathers explained that they preferred to keep things to themselves or “just move on” and appreciated the stepmother’s support in helping them express their feelings more openly. A few fathers also said they wanted to model effective skills to their children to help them learn more appropriate ways to communicate and resolve conflict.
And she’s taught me it’s more about me talking a bit more about how I feel ‘cause I don’t express my emotions as well as I could and that’s probably a male thing, and I’m very much a part of that. And she’s pretty open and direct and I like that. I know where I am with her and I feel confident enough to tell her what’s important to me, and how I feel. And that’s important for my boys to see this cause it wasn’t like that with their mum and me (Participant 5, Father).

For many stepmothers making the time to talk about their feelings with their partner and explain how they would like him to respond was important. Some said they felt more confident within themselves when their partner listened to them and let them know that they understood. A few stepmothers said they felt valued when their partner validated their feelings or demonstrated his appreciation either with hugs or affirming comments.

I really appreciated it when (partner) gives me a chance to say what I’m feeling, just gives me the time and mostly, that he doesn’t have to say anything, just cuddle me or acknowledge my feelings, or let me know I’m special to him and that’s very important to me. It makes me feel as though I’m a valued member of this family, that I belong, I’m not an outsider. And I think that in blended families you need more affirmation from your partner than with your own kids (Participant 37, Stepmother).

Making the time to talk and being available for their stepchild was also considered to be important by several stepmothers. Some spoke about making the effort to be available after school as this was often a time when their stepchild wanted to talk. Others found that preparing meals together or driving in the car were also times when their stepchild would often “chat away” to them. Likewise, several stepchildren appreciated the stepmother making an effort to be there for them or as some said “it was just good to have someone to talk to” as reflected in the following quote:

I think I’m really lucky to have her there to talk to and I’ve always known that I could talk to her and that’s something that’s always been valuable. She’s always been available for me and come, not just sort of out of obligation you know, I’ve always felt like she’s wanted to genuinely you know, she’s interested not just about school and things, but on a deeper level (Participant 3, Stepchild).

A number of stepchildren said they enjoyed times when their stepmother shared her personal experiences with them explaining that it made them feel “special” because she trusted them enough to talk about a personal aspect of her life with them. Some said they learned more about the stepmother when she shared some of her personal experiences with them and that
this helped them feel more comfortable about talking to her in return. A few said that it helped them feel as though their stepmother was interested or cared about them.

I was upset about something and she sat down and started telling me some of her stories about when she was little and it was like, she knows how I feel. And she makes me feel really special, like I’m important to her. And like, I feel comfortable with her like I can trust her so I tell her things I’m worried about and it’s just good to have someone to talk to (Participant 30, Stepchild).

Quite a few stepchildren said that when they got to know the stepmother better, they often talked more to her than to their father, and at times, their mother. Several explained they felt confident that their stepmother would not betray their trust or tell their parents, while some said their stepmother was easier to talk to than their father. Some explained that they preferred talking to the stepmother because, unlike their parents, she would ask them their opinions and talk about her ideas, rather than telling them what they “should” do.

I feel comfortable talking to her, like I know she won’t betray my trust. So yeah, like personal things I know I can ask her for advice like she asks me first before she gives me her opinion. And I know I’ve done some stupid things, but she doesn’t get on my back about it, like dad ‘cause he’ll you know, start telling me what I should’ve done and things like, you know, the lecture. It’s like, she respects me and that makes me trust her (Participant 52, Stepchild).

A few stepdaughters spoke positively about being able to talk to their stepmother about relationship issues or “girl things” explaining that their father did not always understand or as one stepchild stated “dad just doesn’t want to touch on or go there”. Similarly, some fathers talked about feeling relieved that there was a “female presence” in the home for their daughter to confide in or talk to. This was particularly marked in those families that were predominantly male or whose biological mothers were not involved in their daughters’ lives.

I think she talks more to (stepmother) than she does to me and I think that’s great because she hasn’t had a female to talk to. So she’ll ask (stepmother) for a lot of advice like you know, help me make this dress or how d’you do this so there’s that positive thing of having another female present you know, to bounce those things off. And that’s good for me ‘cause I’m not good with those sorts of things (Participant 20, Father).

b. Positive ways of talking to each other. Several adult participants said that talking to each other openly and honestly, whilst also being prepared to respect each other’s
opinions was the most effective way of communicating in their stepfamily. A number explained that this helped clarify misunderstandings or misperceptions. Some added that talking about their needs, feelings or expectations in a calm, “tactful” way helped to prevent family members from becoming defensive or unco-operative.

Communication’s a big thing you know, being open and honest, direct but in a tactful way, being clear about what you want and always considering the other person’s feelings seeing it from their side. And I think that honesty, that’s the important thing. Being honest with yourself and then being prepared to be honest with them. I think that’s the guts cause then, they know where they stand, and they like that (Participant 10, Stepmother).

Several fathers said they preferred the stepmother to talk to them in a “calm” or “rational” way without becoming “too emotional”. They also appreciated the stepmother giving reasons for their thoughts or feelings because this helped them to understand what she needed. Some said they felt more confident about sharing their own feelings with the stepmother when she communicated with him in this way while others said they were more prepared to offer their support.

It’s important to keep talking and keep looking for a way around and for her to be clear about what’s upsetting her and giving logical reasons why she feels that way ‘cause then I can understand what’s happening for her you know. And that makes it easier for me to support her ‘cause she doesn’t get caught up in all the emotional stuff and take it personally and that’s great. I couldn’t cope if she was like that (Participant 51, Father).

Some stepmothers thought that by expressing their opinions and expectations to their stepchild in an open, honest and respectful way helped to enlist their support for her authority. Several found that by offering advice when their stepchild asked for it then leaving them to make their own decisions, had been particularly helpful in gaining their stepchild’s trust and respect.

He trusts me ‘cause I won’t make a joke or anything, I won’t make fun of him you know I just, um take it as it is. And, I’m not going to go and talk to anybody about it. So I think I’ve built up his trust, just consistently proving that it’s safe to talk to me about things, and I just keep talking to him in a calm voice, framed in a simple, non-aggressive way in a language that he understands (Participant 43, Stepmother).
A few stepmothers also found that being prepared to apologise to their stepchild or admit that they may have been “wrong” helped build a closer, trusting relationship.

There needs to be a lot of give and take and I think the important thing is being able to say well okay, maybe I’m wrong, maybe this would be the better way to go, and just being able to apologise. I think that’s the key to making it work. Being able to say sorry and okay, we’ll work with it. I think that’s really helped my relationship with her (Participant 31, Stepmother).

Many stepchildren spoke about the importance of the stepmother’s “tone of voice”. Several said that they preferred their stepmother talking to them in a “calm” way or to “ask” rather than “demand” as described by one stepchild, “talk as though you were asking a friend”. A number of stepchildren said they felt more inclined to do what the stepmother wanted when she asked them “politely”. Some also talked about the importance of the stepmother talking to them at their age level or in a way that they could understand what she wanted.

Well she talks to me in a nice, calm way and if she wanted me to do something she would usually ask, she wouldn’t tell me, she’d say ‘can you do this please?’ Yeah and I’d obviously say yes, she wasn’t ordering me what to do, but being polite about it and respectful yeah and like she’ll explain things to me in a nice, calm voice and makes sure I understand (Participant 24, Stepchild).

A few stepmothers found that it had been helpful talking directly to their stepchild about their feelings or expectations from the time the family first formed. Most however thought that taking a more gradual approach and waiting until they got to know each other better had worked well for them. Some explained that as they began to feel more relaxed and accepted by their stepchild, they became more confident about talking directly to them without involving the father.

So if I had an issue I’d raise it with (Partner) first but as time went on and I became more confident enough to deal with it myself, I was okay about talking directly to (stepchild). And he opened up to me over time about you know certain things that he probably wouldn’t talk to his father about (Participant 19, Stepmother).

Some stepchildren said they preferred the stepmother talking directly to them when she was upset rather than finding out through their father. A few explained that this gave them both the opportunity to clarify any misunderstandings and to know where they stood with each other.
And (stepmother) got really upset and was like, um came down to my room and she talked to me and she was like I felt really offended with you saying that. And then I told her that Dad actually changed his mind at the last minute. And she didn’t realise that. Dad didn’t communicate with her at all. And she apologised and we ended up by all of us going out together and it was really good (Participant 48, stepchild).

When upset with the stepmother however, all stepchildren said they talked to their father first as they did not feel confident telling her how they felt, even after the family had been together for a long period of time. A number of fathers also said that they preferred their child discussing their concerns with him first as it gave them a chance to explain the stepmother’s perspective to their child. Some found this helpful in enlisting their child’s acceptance or respect for the stepmother.

Well the kids come to me first about something that (stepmother) had done and my first reaction would be to get angry with her and upset with the kids but then I trust (stepmother) and also recognise there was some substance into what she’s feeling so it gives me a chance to explain this to the kids so they can understand where she’s coming from too (Participant 51, Father).

c. The right time to talk. Several stepmothers and fathers, and a few stepchildren explained that communication was more effective when it was conducted “at the right time”. Most explained that this was when everyone had calmed down when emotions were high or as described by one stepchild:

   um, they have to be in a good mood, so timing is important (Participant 30, Stepchild).

Some participants found that family meetings were the “right time” to talk, not just about problems, but also to discuss expectations about rules, routines and discipline. Many of these participants said that family meetings were helpful because they provided an opportunity for everyone to contribute, be open and honest with each other and work together towards a solution. A few thought that family meetings worked well because everyone was involved and therefore shared some form of responsibility as described by one father, “everyone was an agent of its success”.

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We instituted kind of regular Sunday night meetings, family meetings were we would discuss issues mostly around roles and responsibilities and talk about things basically engage in some communicative practices. And that was quite important because part of the one family thing was we all had a part to play in making the house hold work. So it was a way of making the stake holders in the success of the family, making the family work (Participant 38, Father).

Some stepchildren described family meetings as helpful because they had the chance to have their say and to be heard. They also said that being encouraged to contribute to discussions about rules, expectations and discipline had made it easier to accept responsibility for household tasks. A few said that family meetings helped them to learn effective communication and problem solving skills that they were able to use in their social lives.

It was good to be involved in the decisions. They asked us our opinions and we all had some input into it and that’s important to me. So there were rules that (Stepmother) and dad made together that I liked and some I didn’t so we talked about it and we came up with punishments that were fair. And it’s good cause it’s helped heaps when I’ve got problems with my mates at school as well (Participant 39, Stepchild).

Some fathers found that using family meetings to plan practical arrangements together helped them feel less stressed or anxious about their child’s safety particularly when they were caught up at work or there was a change in access arrangements. Several stepchildren also talked about feeling less confused when they were included in the planning process as then they knew what was happening and what to expect.

Just talking through and, like, sitting down and having a family meeting and talking about it and all that type of stuff. So we all plan together, like where everyone’s going to be and when and we made up a chart, sort of roster so that everyone knew what was happening. And that’s good ‘cause everyone knows what’s was happening and stuff. So, yeah , it’s good ‘cause it’s made us feel, like, safe, yeah (Participant 36, Stepchild).

In five stepmother families the biological mother was involved in family meetings or discussions at some stage. Participants in these families said this had been particularly helpful in clarifying misunderstandings and establishing consistency between the households. Seeing their mother included in the family meetings was also perceived positively by the stepchildren as described by one young stepchild:

Mum and my stepdad came round here and they talked about what they were going to do. And my mum said that we had to do what (Stepmother) says ‘cause
when we’re here it’s their job to keep us safe. So yeah, it was good and they asked me what I thought too. So mum and my stepdad do the same things like dad and (Stepmother) do here and I think that’s good ‘cause we don’t have to keep changing all the time (Participant 45, Stepchild).

Hence most participants thought that communication had an important influence on developing positive, trusting relationships. Most spoke about the importance of making the time to talk to each other as this helped to create a sense of belonging and more confident about communicating with each other. Communication that was open, honest and direct was also considered by many participants as positive as it helped to clarify misunderstandings and reduce feelings of uncertainty. Feeling safe and trusting each other, as well as talking were important factors of positive communication for many. In addition, most participants thought that choosing the right time to talk was important. For a number of participants, this was in the form of family meetings where family members worked collaboratively towards reaching an agreement and making plans together. Some families had found it helpful involving the biological mother in family meetings.

**Theme 3: The Importance of Support**

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Almost every participant talked about the importance of support either in terms of being supported or supporting each other. This theme presents an account firstly, of the strategies adopted by couples to foster care and support for each other and the stepchild and secondly, the fathers’ and stepchildren’s perceptions of their experiences of being supported by the stepmother.

**a. Couples supporting each other.** Almost every father and stepmother said they could not have coped with the challenges associated with stepfamily life without the support
of their partner. Several thought that their family functioned well because of the support they gave to each other and some believed that supporting each other fostered respect and trust within the stepfamily. Some found that supporting each other as a couple demonstrated positive a role model to the children or that they had their best interest at heart. A number of adult participants thought that supporting each other helped to provide security and stability for the stepchildren, particularly when they had experienced conflict between their parents.

So they’ve experienced quite a lot of trauma. And so now, they’re seeing, hopefully, we’re just modelling good parenting, that this is a loving family and this is what parents do, and this is how you interact as parents with each other and with the children and you know. And I think through supporting and respecting each other, keeping things in perspective and working together towards what we believe is best for (Stepchildren), yeah is vital. And I think it’s worked cause, (Stepchild) says she feels safe with us and she’s never said that before (Participant 19, Stepmother).

Some stepmothers and fathers talked about feeling supported by their partner when they managed to work together towards an agreement. A number of stepmothers said that talking through problems with their partner provided them with the opportunity to explain their perspective and that this helped them to enlist his support. Some thought they would not have gained the stepchild’s respect for their authority without the support of her partner, as described by one stepmother:

And I always knew that if they didn’t respect my authority then I had (Father) to back me up. I don’t know what I would’ve done otherwise. I probably would’ve collapsed or fallen over (Participant 1, Stepmother).

Several fathers and some stepmothers thought that an important part of being able to support each other was having a positive attitude. Most talked about the importance of having a “healthy sense of humour” or standing back and looking at the situation from a different “less emotional” perspective. A number of fathers and some stepmothers said it was easier to remain positive by “looking on the bright side” or by relaxing and not becoming too “embroiled in the minutiae”. Some participants said that appreciating each other and focussing on the benefits that living in a stepfamily offered had helped them stay positive.
And I think the key to bringing the family together is to support each other and appreciate what we’ve got. Yeah, that’s the big thing. And I think laughter’s been one of the best things for us just being positive, you know and if things don’t happen, then, it’s not the end of the world either. Don’t sweat the small stuff, there’s more to life and you just have to keep sight of the big picture and keep supporting each other and be prepared to make compromises (Participant 23, Father).

Most fathers and stepmothers said that spending time together alone as a couple strengthened the quality of their relationship and that this made it easier to support each other particularly during difficult times. While finding time without the children was often difficult and not always possible for some, many made the effort, either by reorganising access arrangements or scheduling time on a regular basis.

We love and trust each other and I think that’s the key to success. And we make sure we have some down time so that we can rekindle our relationship and support each other. We have this child-free weekend so they’re kind of special you know that every second weekend and that’s important. It can be hard work ‘cause sometimes we can’t be bothered. But you have to make the effort ‘cause my concern is to develop us as a couple. And it’s worth it in the end. It’s like anything, the more you look after it, the more you want to (Participant 51, Father).

Some couples also thought that taking time to get to know each other well, and building a strong, stable relationship before moving in together helped them to be more supportive of each other. A few explained that taking the time to develop relationships worked well as it gave family members time to get to know each other or adjust each other’s personalities and idiosyncrasies.

We’re all really comfortable with each other. And I think that’s because we took things really gently and took time to get to know each other really well before we decided to move in together. And we’re really good together. We work together side by side. Very much together, very close, loving. I feel very secure. And I’ve never felt like I don’t belong because I never felt like it was ‘them and me’ (Participant 10, Stepmother).

Several stepmothers and some fathers thought that an important part of supporting each other was by taking the time to care for themselves. Many talked about the importance of having personal space, taking time out for themselves, continuing to participate in their personal interests or maintaining friendships. Some said that by having time alone away from the family helped them keep a balanced perspective as it gave them the opportunity to
turn their attention onto other issues outside of the family. Some stepmothers explained that making time for themselves helped them to hold onto of their personal identity and feelings of self-worth.

I believe personally that having time alone where I can take some time out for myself and be myself is essential. I’ve seen too many women lose sight of who they are because they don’t take time out for themselves and I’m determined not to let that happen to me. And I guess you need self-confidence. If I’m doubting myself then that’s when I struggle and lose my sense of self-worth so it’s imperative that I give something back to myself (Participant 50, Stepmother).

Some adult participants talked about the efforts they made to enlist the support of the biological mother as they found this invaluable in being able to support each other. They explained that having the biological mother’s support reduced the amount of conflict and confusion between the two households as they were able to work together and provide stability for the children. Some fathers spoke about feeling “relieved” when the biological mother supported the stepmother as it prevented them from getting “caught in the middle” or feeling as though they needed to defend one against the other. A few said that having the biological mother’s support meant they could focus on their new family and put all their energy into supporting family members as they adjusted to each other and their new lifestyle.

Yeah (ex-wife) and me have a good relationship and she gets on well with (stepmother) and I think that’s contributed to the smooth adjustment because you know she wasn’t poisoning (children) or anything like that. So it meant I could just get on with building up relationships in this family and know that the kids are happy, you know, things are right for them and they’re not seeing things they shouldn’t see. So yeah, I think that probably contributes immensely (Participant 44, Father).

Some stepmothers said that by having a good relationship with the biological mother they were able to discuss concerns about their stepchild together which gave them a better understanding of their stepchild and helped them interact with their stepchild more effectively. A few of these stepmothers also described feeling more confident about asserting their authority with their stepchild when they were supported by the biological mother.
She supports me and there’s no wicked stepmother or yeah. And we can talk about (stepchild) together and she can explain why he does things the way he does. So it’s really helped my relationship with him. Strengthened it really, cause it’s stopped me from getting so upset with him and it’s helped him see that we’re all working together for his best interest. It helps him feel secure and that’s fundamental to stepfamily living I think (Participant 43, Stepmother).

Finally a number of stepmothers and a few fathers found that seeking help from professional services such as counselling had improved their capacity to support each other. Some stepmothers explained that counselling helped them to view their situation from a different perspective and feel less confused about their role in the family. Some stepmothers and a few fathers also talked about feeling reassured or more confident about their parenting when they shared experiences with friends in similar situations. Some said that not only were they able to learn from each other but that they were also able to offer each other support and that this helped them feel more positive and less isolated or inadequate.

I have two friends our age group and they obviously split up, similar pasts and you certainly talk about it. And you tell them what your kids have been through and they’ve been through it too and it helps to hear how they managed. Makes you feel a helluvalot better ‘cause you know you’re not the only one. Just keep those values in place and just try not to lose the plot. It helps to hear it from a friend (Participant 32, Father).

b. Fathers’ experiences of stepmother support. A number of fathers talked positively about the support they received from the stepmother not only with the care of their child, but also in the day-to-day functioning of the household. Several said they appreciated their partner supporting them with their parenting and respecting their role as father to their child, rather than taking over this responsibility. Some reflected that the more they felt supported by their partner, the more confident they felt about entrusting their child to her care.

Well initially she’s my partner and obviously my children, my kids, and they were my responsibility really even though she was there as well and my job was well when I wasn’t there. And my concern was to try and support her with the parenting for when I was at work and she was left with the kids. And I trusted her with that otherwise I wouldn’t let her do it. They’re my kids, my responsibility, yeah (Participant 23, Father).
Some fathers described feeling less “guilty” when they were supported and encouraged by the stepmother to spend more time with their child. A few said that having the opportunity to spend “quality time” with their child not only helped them retain the close relationship they had with their child, but that it also inadvertently increased their child’s willingness to accept the stepmother into their lives.

She’s been great. I mean she just supports me, tells me to spend time with (stepchild). It’s been a huge commitment for (Stepmother) to cut down her work hours to be there for my daughter. It was incredibly special for me. And it was a huge relief ‘cause I was trying to fit everything in, make everyone happy. And in a way, it’s made me want to make more of an effort to support (Stepmother) and yeah, I really trust her (Participant 26, Father).

c. Impact of stepmothers’ support on stepchildren. A number of stepchildren talked about their father being less ‘stressed out’ and attributed this to the stepmother’s support particularly with household responsibilities. Some stated that seeing the positive affect that the stepmother’s support had on their father helped them change their attitude towards her. A few recalled making a decision to “just get on with it” and accept the stepmother in their lives, when they realised that she was not going to “take over” from their father or that there were some positive aspects about having the stepmother in the family.

Just time and realising, okay, I’m going to do it, they’re not budging, so just get on with it. I mean, it’s good for Dad cause before he had to do everything himself so now he’s less stressed out and it’s good that she’s there to help him out and like she makes Dad spend time just with me like he used to so it’s like dad’s real happy and yeah, like if he’s happy then well, I’m happy (Participant 12, Stepchild).

One stepchild talked about changing her negative attitude towards her stepmother when a close friend pointed out all the positive contributions the stepmother had offered the family, none the least of which was that her father was “the happiest he had been for twenty years”.

Another stepchild said he changed his attitude and started to accept his stepmother’s support when he saw his own mother struggling with her stepchildren and role as stepmother.

Mum’s problem is that she doesn’t know what role she should play with her stepchildren. And this has made me think what it must have been like for my (Stepmother). I didn’t really understand how bad I was toward (Stepmother) until I’ve seen it happen to mum (Participant 15, Stepchild).
Several stepchildren said they decided to accept their stepmother’s support when she made an effort to get to know them or care for them. Some spoke about their stepmother making an effort to spend one-on-one time with them such as going to a cafe or shows together. One stepchild spoke positively about her stepmother scheduling a weekly appointment so they could both do something special together. A number of stepchildren also spoke positively about the extra support their stepmother gave them when they had special events such as school dances or school trips, or during special family occasions. Some talked about appreciating the stepmother’s support with their homework, or school projects or doing “motherly” things for them, particularly when this had not been provided for them previously, as described by one stepchild.

She makes an effort to get along with me. Like, well, she’s always nice to me and goes out of her way to help me and stuff you know. Like she does all this other stuff that dad didn’t do like cleaning and things. But I’m not really used to having someone that would like fix your clothes and that sort of stuff. And I liked her reading to me and telling me about things, just having her there to talk to. I feel safe at Dad’s now and like I felt when she moved in I got my dad back (Participant 39, Stepchild).

Almost every stepchild talked about feeling supported by their stepmother when she respected their need for personal ‘space’ which for most was in the privacy of their own bedroom. Some explained that before the stepmother joined the family they had learned to be independent and that having their “own space” was important as it helped them maintain a sense of control over their lives. Several stepchildren explained that by being supported to spend time in their bedroom allowed them the freedom to deal with their emotions alone and in their own time, or to pursue their own personal interests without any interruptions or interference.

And having my own room was great. I’ve got a lot of freedom, like I’m sort of, quite independent and I can go to my room just to get away and have some space. And it’s mine. Cos they’re sort of, you know, like having two families living in the same house. So yeah, having my own room I’ve got a lot of free range in there, I can do whatever I want, and that’s important to me (Participant 3, Stepchild).
Thus supporting family members was considered to be an important component in building positive relationships as well helping stepchildren adjust to their new lifestyle. Most adults thought that supporting each other as a couple was vital not just with parenting and stepfamily functioning but also at an emotional level. Having a positive attitude helped couples continue to support each other support as did spending quality time together as a couple without the children or time alone away from the family. Maintaining personal interests and engaging in self-care activities was also considered to be important for many adult participants. Some participants benefitted from the support of the biological mother. About a quarter of adult participants sought support from professional services. Fathers appreciated the stepmother supporting him with household tasks and being encouraged to spend time with his child. A number of children said they made a decision to accept their stepmother when they saw her supporting their father or made an extra effort to support them with their interests. Several stepchildren appreciated the stepmother when she respected their need for privacy.

**Theme 4: Positive Aspects of Stepmother’s Authority**

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As discussed in Chapter Three, the question of the stepmother’s authority and level of involvement with parenting was a challenge for most families. Despite this however, the majority of families interviewed managed to work through their difficulties over time and described a number of positive strategies that had helped. Common amongst these were strategies that worked towards providing consistency and reaching agreement, clarity about
the stepmother’s role, and stepmothers’ approaches towards parenting that worked well. These will now be discussed from the perspective of the stepmother, father and stepchild.

**a. Consistency and agreement.** While a few families established their expectations of discipline and the stepmother’s role before moving in together, most stated that this evolved over time as family members adjusted to their new lifestyle and learned to trust each other. Several adult participants talked about the importance of trust and that having a strong sense of trust was essential in gaining the children’s respect for the stepmother’s authority. Many of these participants considered that building trusting relationships was achieved through consistency and working together towards agreement and that this was pivotal in providing security and stability for the children.

And I’m really proud of the fact that we’ve offered a really good solid family base here, I feel that we’ve been really constant, yeah. We’ve given him solidarity and consistency and I know he appreciates that. He feels safe and he knows where he stands. And I think that’s fundamental to building trust in the family And I think that trust is the key, the essence and you have to keep reminding yourself of that because in stepfamilies it can be so easily undermined (Participant 14, Father).

Several stepmothers and some fathers considered that presenting to the children as a united front was essential in gaining the children’s respect for the stepmother’s authority. Some fathers also thought working together as a couple prevented their children from either laying the blame on the stepmother, or thinking that she was “influencing” him or making him “take her side”. A number of these participants said that working together meant being prepared to make compromises or knowing when to “back down”. While not always easy to do, particularly when participants felt strongly about an issue, some couples said that deciding to “agree to disagree” had helped them work together through challenging situations.

Working together, yeah, so you know, if there is an issue you’ve got to be unified. And I think it’s important to back (stepmother) up when she’s got a real issue and it’s good to talk about it prior to facing the hordes and knowing what her reasoning is and working together towards a solution. And this often means
I say look I don’t agree with you but I’m happy to back you up if you feel strongly about it ‘cause it’s important for the kids to see us supporting each other. I don’t want them to think she’s sort of on their case sort of thing (Participant 41, Father).

Some fathers and many stepmothers also referred to the importance of being consistent in the fair and even distribution of household responsibilities amongst family members. This was particularly challenging in complex families as several fathers and stepmothers said that they were often criticised for favouring their own children over the stepchildren.

But the most important thing is probably the husband and wife or whatever being consistent and fair. And in our view, providing reasonable procedures and a security of limit was very important. And when you’re balancing stepchildren with your own, you have to work even harder to be fair and not let them think that you’re favouring one over the other (Participant 38, Father).

Several stepchildren, particularly those in complex stepfamilies, also talked about the importance of discipline and rules being ‘fair’, and that everyone in the family was ‘treated the same’. Some explained that being fair reduced tension within the family.

Yeah, it just needs to be fair, it needs to be, everybody needs to be happy with it cause at the start it was quite annoying cause (Stepmother) she’d always like, she sort’ve favours (stepsister) which is understandable cause she’s her daughter but it’s like, it just created tension and made me just not want to do my jobs, like, why should I? But we had a meeting to sort it out ‘cause it wasn’t fair (Participant 3, Stepchild).

**b. Clarity about stepmother’s role.** In spite of the difficulties outlined in Chapter Three, several stepmothers described positive experiences in their role when left alone to care for their stepchild. Some said that taking on a bigger share of the responsibility helped them feel more “connected” to their stepchild while others said that it helped to establish themselves as their stepmother the more they were left in that role. Some thought that by reassuring their stepchild that they did not want to replace their mother but that they were responsible for their safety and well-being while in their care had been helpful.

And yeah, they accepted me easily and I think what really helped was letting the kids know that I’m not their mum, that I think their mum’s a great mum and I’m not taking over from her but it’s my job to make sure they’re safe when they’re here with me. And, yeah they accepted that and I just love being with them (Participant 43, Stepmother).
Some stepmothers said that it was easier to establish their role when the stepchildren were younger as they tended to be more “compliant” and accepting of their authority. A few also said their stepchild accepted her role more readily when they had experienced previous difficulties or did not have a good relationship with their mother. Some talked about gaining more clarity around their role as time went on and family members became more familiar or learned to trust each other.

The children were younger, there was a lot more acceptance there. They were of an age when they were compliant and directable and they so wanted a mother that made it easier for me, they came to me, I was there for them. And they accepted me in that role and I loved it (Participant 37, Stepmother).

From the father’s perspective most thought the stepmother’s role was to support them with their parenting, but that discipline was their responsibility. At the same time, they acknowledged the dilemma this created for their partner when their work commitments required her to step in and take over the ‘parenting’ role. While some were able to put measures in place to prevent this such as working from home during the access week or rearranging their work hours, most relied on the stepmother’s care of their child at some stage. Many fathers talked about the importance of being able to trust their partner and several expressed their appreciation of the stepmother’s support in looking after their child when they could not be there to fulfil this role.

I knew that I could trust her looking after him. I knew her disposition and that she wasn’t the wicked stepmother you see I’ve always trusted her intentions towards the kids and that she would be sensitive to the kids needs and I’ve really appreciated her being there for them when I haven’t been able to. And I think trust is the key, the essence and you have to keep reminding yourself of that because in stepfamilies it can be so easily undermined (Participant 20, Father).

When asked about their perception of the stepmother’s role, almost every stepchild commented on the difference between the role of mother and that of the stepmother, but had difficulty explaining what these differences were. Many described her role as that of “family friend” and a few, as an “auntie”. Some described her role as “someone there to help me” or “like a teacher at school” or “a helper”. One stepchild described her stepmother as a “second
mother but she doesn’t have as much control over me as my real mum” and another child “caring and helpful like a mum but not loving like a mum”. Several thought that part of the stepmother’s role was to support their father with his parenting while others described her role as helping out with the housework, and for a few, cooking the meals.

Well she isn’t like my mother at all, it’s a totally different relationship, but she is, I mean she’s still sort of got that authority over me, kind of, but she is more like a friend to me, like I can talk to her about a lot of things. And I think that us kids, all of us, sort of acknowledged that dad really had a need for someone to help him, like dad’s real useless. So I think having a tidier house and rules, sort of the household was more alive and like dad, I don’t know I think it was positive like the effect it had on dad having her being around (Participant 42, Stepchild).

Despite their confusion however, almost every child was clear that it was not the stepmother’s role to discipline them. Several stepchildren said they appreciated the stepmother letting them know that she was not replacing their mother but was supporting their father.

Yeah it was good ‘cause she’s never tried to take over from our mother. Any my mum’s always been heavily involved in our lives and she still is. And (stepmother) has always acknowledged that and she’s never tried to overstep my mum. And her understanding of like where she fits in our lives, she’s still really important and she’s still as important as our mother is without trying to be like our mum, in that sense (Participant 52, Stepchild).

c. Stepmother approaches that helped. Some fathers acknowledged that their parenting was too lenient or strict but had difficulty adopting the stepmother’s consistent ‘firm but fair’ which they considered to be a more effective style of parenting. Some of these fathers thought that the stepmother was a better parent than they were because their child related more positively to the stepmother’s more “patient” or “gentle” style.

I think that because her parenting skills are better than mine they preferred her looking after them than me. She’s very patient, more than I am and she’s very good at handling difficult situations. She explains things to them better than I do and she explains why things aren’t happening the way they want it and negotiates with them whereas I tend to be dictatorial and just make a decision and, no, we’re not going to do that and that would be the end of it (Participant 38, Father).
Many stepmothers thought that taking a slow, gradual approach towards asserting their authority with their stepchild worked well for them. Some thought that this helped them to establish their ‘place’ in the family or that it allowed their stepchild time to adjust to her authority at their own pace.

I think partly, I just stood back, just took it easy, I didn’t try to make them like me or do what I asked. I knew possibly they wouldn’t and I didn’t try to make them, I just let things happen naturally as best I could and just accepted that’s how they felt and just not trying to step in there as a parent, let the parent be the parent and me, just be like an adult friend that they see every second week. And that really helped our relationship, strengthened it really. They knew they were safe and okay to come to me if they needed (Participant 50, Stepmother).

Whilst admitting that it was difficult to stand back without becoming too involved in the discipline some said that looking at the situation from their stepchild’s perspective or “putting myself in their shoes” had helped. Some also said that by walking away or reminding themselves that discipline was the parent’s ultimate responsibility had helped then keep a balanced view or avoid taking things personally.

I think I just realised that I had to stand back, and that I’m in his life, but he didn’t choose me, he just got me and I got him in my life. I needed to put myself in his situation you know, I mean, how would I feel, you know, if somebody, another person came in and tried to take over my space do you know what I mean, I was trying to put myself into their situation and I don’t have to teach him everything I know in the world, and I’m not doing any wrong by not doing that, because I’m not his mum (Participant 13, Stepmother).

Several stepchildren spoke about respecting the stepmother when she “stayed back” and “didn’t impose” or took a more gradual approach to discipline. Some said that this approach helped them feel more willing to accept her authority in time.

And she hasn’t forced herself or imposed herself on me. She just kind of just stayed back and eased her way in. She’s just let me be, you know? Not wanting to be like my mother and take over the parenting role. And she tells me that and that’s a good thing. She’s kind of stayed back and like, so when she asks me to do something I’m okay about that (Participant 27, Stepchild).

Hence, most participants found that it was easier to accept the stepmother’s authority when there was consistency in parenting styles and in the distribution of household responsibilities. Agreement and clarity about the stepmother’s role was helpful in gaining stepchildren’s respect for her authority. Several fathers perceived the stepmother in a
supportive role and someone they could trust to care for their child. Stepchildren described their stepmother as a friend or auntie and appreciated the stepmother respecting their parents’ roles. Most participants thought that an authoritative style of parenting was the ideal. A number of stepmothers found that taking a slow, gradual approach towards asserting their authority with their stepchild had worked well. Some stepchildren appreciated the stepmother’s gradual approach and thought this helped them respect her authority.
Chapter Five: Discussion

This study was conducted in an effort to address a gap in stepfamily research on stepmother families. While much is written in the literature about stepfamilies and stepfather families, less is known about the experiences of stepmothers and stepmother families. This study has therefore employed a qualitative approach to investigate stepmothers’, fathers’ and stepchildren’s perceptions of challenging and positive experiences living in a stepmother family, the meaning they give to their experiences and the strategies they found helpful and worked well for them.

As discussed in Chapter One, stepfamily systems theory, incorporating aspects of structural family systems theory (Minuchin, 1974), provide useful frameworks to examine stepfamily functioning (Dunn, 2004; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). Both perspectives are relevant to this research in helping to explain the way stepfamily members are affected by each other and the complexity of family dynamics both within and outside of the stepfamily. Thus, in line with the aims of this study, the overall results contribute to a deeper understanding of stepfamily systems theory in a number of ways.

Firstly, stepfamily systems theory recognises that the stepmother family is regarded as a multi-dimensional, complex set of inter-related systems and subsystems within which each member of the family participates and interacts. In this current study, the set of subsystems included the couple subsystem involving the stepmother and father; the father/child; stepmother/child; and biological mother/child subsystems. A major finding from this study that contributes to stepfamily systems theory is that creating and maintaining a balanced, functional stepmother family system was often challenged by the fact that only one of the adults in the couple subsystem was not a parent. Most challenges related to a lack of clarity or agreement about the stepmother’s role or acceptance of the stepmother’s authority, particularly at times when the stepmother acted like a parent. Such situations
tended to result in loyalty conflicts, father/child coalitions or fathers feeling ‘caught in the middle’.

Another contribution that this study makes to stepfamily systems theory is the influence that participants’ previous history, established behavioural patterns, roles, rules, expectations and beliefs had on stepmother family and individual functioning. According to stepfamily systems theory, when families are involved in transition, they need to replace old roles, rules and routines to develop new ones. Challenges arose when individuals and at time, subsystems, were rigid in their thinking or were reluctant to negotiate or accept the changes. This in turn appeared to impact on their capacity to adjust to their new lifestyle.

At the same time, stepfamily systems theory suggests that the boundary around the stepmother family must be semi-permeable to allow for adaptation and survival. Difficulties in the stepmother families interviewed occurred when the boundaries were not well defined particularly around the new stepfamily system and the biological mother subsystems. This tended to result in loyalty conflicts and biological parent/child coalitions.

A further contribution this study makes to stepfamily systems theory is that the participants interviewed had different perceptions of their experiences living in a stepmother family. In turn these differences tended to influence individual and stepmother family adjustment particularly in relation to the stepmother’s authority or times when the stepmother acted like a parent.

The remainder of this chapter discusses the contributions made to stepfamily systems theory in more detail. It also examines the results of the study in light of previous research regarding stepmother family experiences, and considers the implications of these results for stepfamily systems and clinical practice with stepmother families. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of this study and directions for future research.
**Data Set One: Experiences Participants Perceived as Challenging**

*Stepmothers’ perceptions of challenging experiences.* As found in previous research, almost every stepmother reported that the initial stages of stepfamily formation presented the most challenges at both a personal and family relationship level (Felker et al., 2002; Hart, 2009; Whiting et al., 2007). Many described their personal struggle adjusting to the unanticipated changes to their lifestyle none the least of which was the suddenness of becoming a stepmother as soon as the family formed. For many women, particularly those in simple stepfamilies, this involved a number of losses including autonomy, financial independence, or a sense of personal control over their lives. Quite a few were ambivalent about being in a relationship involving their partner’s child and the biological mother, which made them cautious about becoming too involved or making an effort to foster a relationship with their stepchild. This is an important finding as studies report stepmothers who show an interest or make an effort to engage with their stepchild early in the relationship are more likely to develop positive relationships with their stepchild (Ganong et al., 2011; Schmeeckle, 2007) and that more time spent with stepchildren helps stepmothers establish their roles (Orchard & Solberg, 1999).

A number of stepmothers expressed regret that they did not plan ahead or spend more time before moving in together, as they thought this would have helped them to be integrated into the family or adjust more easily to the changes. These accounts reflect findings from a New Zealand study of adult repartnering that reports adults tend to move into stepfamily living after a relatively short period of time (Cartwright, 2010). Studies have also found that families who fail to plan ahead tend to have unrealistic expectations about living together, which is potentially problematic given the challenges they face once the family is formed (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Cartwright, 2010) often resulting in disappointment, resentment and conflict (Felker et al., 2002; Papernow, 2006).
Feelings of confusion and uncertainty were common amongst many stepmothers. This was partly due to a lack of direction or understanding about their boundaries or rights as a stepmother or knowing how to relate to their stepchild. As shown in the literature however, the main source of confusion and uncertainty related to ambiguity or disagreement amongst family members about the stepmother role (Church, 1999; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). Whilst clear they did not want to replace the biological mother or be responsible for discipline, a number of stepmothers professed to unwittingly taking on a more proactive “mothering” role as they were often left to care for their stepchild due to their partners’ work commitments or the biological mother’s lack of involvement. This phenomenon may be explained in part by studies reporting that residential stepmothers consistently appear to take a traditional mother-like role in terms of household chores, child-care and organising family relationships (Johnson et al., 2008; Schmeeckle, 2007) despite fathers becoming more actively involved in parenting (Ulvester et al., 2010).

Consistent with research, discrepancies in perceptions of responsibility and expectations of parenting and discipline emerged as a source of disagreement between most stepmothers and fathers (Arnaut et al., 2000; Feinberg, Kan, & Hetherington, 2007), particularly in the early stages of stepfamily formation. Quite a few stepmothers thought they “needed” to be involved due to concern about their stepchild’s future well-being or they disagreed with their partner’s parenting style. Some described reaching a point when they realised they needed to “stand back” and let the parents take responsibility for their stepchild as their involvement tended to create tension and conflict within the family. Almost every stepmother described feeling powerless at times, particularly when their authority was undermined or rejected, or when they were unable to have any influence over situations they considered could be prevented or managed more effectively. Similar to previous studies, such circumstances sometimes resulted in parent-child alliances (Afifi, 2008; Cartwright,
leaving a number of stepmothers feeling alienated or blaming themselves for creating the conflict (Orchard & Solberg, 1999; Visher & Visher, 1990).

As found previously, the biological mother’s presence and attitude had a significant impact on stepmothers’ confidence in their role and relationship with their stepchild (Erera-Weatherley, 1996; King, 2007). Some stepmothers perceived the biological mother’s frequent contact with their stepchild as an imposition on their family boundaries and time together, adding further support to the literature (Gunnoc & Hetherington, 2004). Some described feeling “like an outsider” when in the biological mother’s presence, or “invisible” in situations when the biological mother gained all the credit for their stepchild’s achievements. A number of stepmothers resented their partner’s quick response to the biological mother’s requests which sometimes left them questioning his loyalties or commitment to their relationship. An important finding and one that has received little attention in the literature, is the impact custody and access arrangements had on stepfamily functioning and relationships. While appreciating the importance of the biological mother, several stepmothers expressed concern about the long-term effects the constant moves between the two households may have on their stepchild, particularly when their mother had different values and expectations from them. Some found access arrangements interfered with their efforts to form a relationship with their stepchild.

Research suggests that without a role to guide their behaviour, stepmothers tend to draw on their own or society’s ideals of motherhood and consequently form their own expectations about their role which, as discussed, tend to be unrealistic (Coleman et al., 2006; Orchard & Solberg, 1999; Schmeekle, 2007). These views were reflected by many women as they described their difficulty reconciling society’s norms in that stepmothers are not expected to be actively involved at a ‘mothering’ or emotional level, with their perception that some of the tasks and responsibilities they experienced involved relating to their stepchild in a nurturing, caring manner (Hart, 2009; Perez & Torrens, 2009). For some
Stepmothers, this dilemma evoked “strong” negative emotions at times which, as found in previous research, impacted on their sense of self-worth and integrity (Dainton, 1993; Levin, 1997). Almost every stepmother said they did not anticipate the “intense” emotions that being a stepmother evoked and some found that dealing with their emotions became a challenge in itself.

**Stepchildren’s perceptions of challenging experiences.** One of the overarching challenges for many stepchildren in the initial stage of stepfamily formation was their difficulty adjusting to having a stepmother in their family or the changes that this created. Consistent with previous research several stepchildren felt excluded or confused when they were not consulted or informed either about the stepmother joining the family or about the changes (Cartwright, 2005; Dunn, 2002; Stoll et al., 2006) and considered that this impacted on their attitude towards the stepmother. This is an important consideration as studies on stepchildren report that a close relationship with the stepmother may mediate adjustment difficulties and long-term well-being (Leake, 2007; Resnick et al., 1997).

Finding ways to cope with the losses incurred during stepfamily formation was a challenge for a number of stepchildren. These included leaving their family home and childhood memories, loss of friends or family members or loss of the hope their parents may reunite. Consistent with research, some described their loss of a close relationship with their father either due to the amount of time and attention he gave their stepmother (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Stoll et al., 2006; Wilkes & Fromme, 2002) or because he supported the stepmother rather than them at times of conflict. For some, the sense of loss left them feeling as though they were not important to their father or perceived his lack of support as a loss of loyalty or betrayal. These findings lend further support to studies that consistently show parent-child relationships can deteriorate when their parents remarry (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002) and that loss of parent time may undermine children’s sense of security or importance to their parent (Freisthler et al., 2003; Leake, 2007). Furthermore, a study by Cartwright &
Seymour (2005), suggests that stepchildren want support and commitment from parents and appear to expect parents to intervene during conflict and give them priority over their stepparent.

Related to this were feelings of confusion about the stepmother’s role and place in the family. Reflecting previous research (Claxton-Oldfield, Garber, & Gillchrist, 2006; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Schmeekle, 2007) the majority of stepchildren in this study resented the stepmother enforcing rules or discipline particularly in the early stages of stepfamily formation or when she adopted an authoritarian parenting style. A number of stepchildren thought their stepmother would not know how to discipline them as she lacked parenting experience or did not understand children. An important finding from this study and one that echoes research is that problems associated with the stepmother’s authority was more pronounced for those stepchildren in the early developmental stage of adolescence and were striving to establish autonomy and separate personal boundaries (Speer & Trees, 2007).

The stepmothers’ indirect pattern of communication created further confusion for a number of stepchildren. Some described their stepmother inferring what she wanted rather than asking directly which left them “second guessing” and not knowing how to respond. On the other hand, most stepchildren avoided talking directly to their stepmother whenever they were upset or angry with her, preferring to talk ‘through’ their father in order to avoid conflict. Over time however some stepchildren found that it was safer to “bottle things up” as arguments between their father and stepmother typically ensued, despite their efforts. These findings support studies reporting that stepmother families tend to have less healthy communication patterns than stepfather families (Schrodt, 2008) and that stepchildren perceive the stepmothers’ difficulty with communication as a lack of care or interest (Berg, 2003; Ceglian & Gardner, 2001). This is important as researchers argue healthy communication in stepfamilies is a crucial factor in providing stability and relational
satisfaction (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Bryant, 2006) particularly between stepchildren and step-parents (Gosselin & David, 2007).

Another key finding that emerged from the data is that most stepchildren lacked effective coping strategies or support to deal with their confusion and mixed feelings about the stepfamily, their stepmother or at times, their parents. Several talked about spending time alone in their bedrooms and, unlike findings from the literature, felt uncomfortable about confiding in friends as they thought they would not understand, or that they were being disloyal to their father (Berg, 2003; King, 2007).

**Fathers’ perceptions of challenging experiences.** Most fathers perceived themselves as the central link to all family members and as such felt responsible or guilty for “imposing” the changes on their children and partner, particularly when they had difficulty adjusting to the changes or each other. As highlighted in previous studies, several fathers experienced difficulty managing boundary and loyalty issues or were uncertain how to incorporate the stepmother into the family structure (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013). Many described feeling “caught in the middle” as they struggled between wanting to protect their child and put their needs first, whilst also wanting to nurture and support their partner and her needs. Consistent with research, some fathers perceived their role as mediator at times of conflict (Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, & Pauk, 2001) and tended to support their partners in an effort to legitimatise their authority or present to their child as a united front. Such situations however, typically resulted in children withdrawing leaving some fathers feeling guilty or stressed especially at times when they agreed with their child or felt they needed to compromise their principles to “keep the peace”. This is an important finding as research has shown children in stepmother families tend to rely on their fathers in times of stress (Bokker, 2006) and that closeness to fathers is significantly associated with fewer internalizing and externalizing problems (King, 2007), highlighting the importance of the father-child relationship.
Sharing child-care with their partner, especially when they were not confident in their partner’s parenting capacity or understanding of their child’s needs, was difficult for some fathers. Whilst acknowledging they may have overcompensated or been too lenient with their parenting, some fathers thought the stepmother was too “confrontational” or asserted their authority too soon in the relationship before their child had time to develop a sense of respect or trust. Some fathers struggled with their partners’ expectation to be more proactive and tended to withdraw, ostensibly to “keep the peace” but in fact, creating further tension as their partners thought they were avoiding the issue or taking their “child’s side”. These results appear to contradict research that reports fathers tend to act as gate-keepers and protect their child when they perceive their partners’ discipline as too confrontational (Weaver & Coleman, 2010).

**Data Set Two: Experiences Participants Perceived as Positive**

*Stepmothers’ perceptions of positive experiences.* For almost every stepmother, positive experiences were underpinned by feeling a sense of belonging or a valued member of the family. This was mostly achieved when they were included in the parent-child dyad, supported by their partner, worked together as a cohesive unit or were accepted by their stepchild. As recommended by stepfamily clinicians and researchers, engaging in affinity seeking activities and establishing a supportive, friendly relationship rather than assuming parental responsibilities too soon helped a number of stepmothers gain their stepchild’s trust and respect (Cartwright, 2010; Papernow, 2008; Visher & Visher, 1994) and feel a valued member of the family, particularly when their efforts were appreciated. Interestingly, six stepmothers perceived the birth of a mutual child helped them fit into the family and form a closer bond with their stepchild.

Consistent with the literature, there was a clear sense that stepmothers felt included and valued when their partner legitimatized their role or validated their feelings (Church,
A number of women stressed the importance of maintaining personal interests or engaging in self-care strategies which they considered helped to preserve their identity and sense of self-worth, and retain a balanced perspective. For at least half of the stepmothers, this included seeking support from therapists or other professional sources. This finding contradicts studies that argue stepmothers tend to negate their own feelings in order to keep everyone happy (Ceglian & Gardner, 2001) or feel constrained in seeking support due to the stigma associated with the ‘wicked stepmother’ stereotype (Johnson et al., 2008). Yet, the importance of social and professional support for stepmothers has been strongly recommended by numerous studies as it can provide a buffer against the unique challenges they may face (Cohen, 1988; Visher & Visher, 1994) and directly affect their sense of well-being and identity (Christian, 2007; Whiting et al., 2007).

An important theme that emerged from this study and echoes previous research was the importance stepmothers placed on maintaining a positive connection with the biological mother (Braithwaite et al., 2008; Dupuis, 2007; Schmeekle, 2007). As research has suggested, demonstrating an awareness of the importance of the biological mother without intending to usurp her role, helped to reduce loyalty conflict and their stepchild’s confusion about the roles that both women play (Orchard & Solberg, 1999; Whiting et al., 2007). As well, half of the stepmothers attested that having the biological mother’s support and cooperation helped them feel more confident about asserting their authority.

**Stepchildren’s perceptions of positive experiences.** Despite the difficulties adjusting to their new lifestyle, most stepchildren identified aspects of living in a stepfamily they perceived were helpful and that they appreciated, such as being consulted and included, having a wider range of resources, or benefitting from the new experiences or opportunities that were provided. As found previously, most stepchildren viewed some aspects of practical support from the stepmother positively when there was mutual trust and respect or when they were confident she did not want to usurp their mother’s role (Crohn, 2006; Stoll et al.,
Similar to research, stepchildren perceived discipline to be their parents’ responsibility and regarded the stepmother positively when she adopted the role of a ‘friend’ and took a gradual approach towards adopting a more authoritative stance (Crohn, 2006; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). This finding also supports Ganong and Coleman’s (2004) proposal that when children are able to define their relationships and perceive their biological parent and step-parents in separate roles they may feel less concerned about developing a closer, trusting relationship with their stepparent and become more accepting of their care and support.

That most stepchildren preferred open, honest, respectful communication with their stepmother adds further support to the research (Affifi, 2003; Braithwaite et al., 2001). Engaging in daily conversations with their stepmother and seeking her advice over personal issues reflected their satisfaction of a trusting, caring relationship with their stepmother. Interestingly, a number of stepchildren acknowledged that they talked more to their stepmother than their father or at times, their mother, as they perceived she would be more accepting of their confidences and not as judgemental or worried as their parents. This finding stands in contrast to the literature that reports children prefer to confide in their biological parents and tend to avoid talking about personal concerns with their step-parents (Golish & Caughlin, 2002; Schrodt et al., 2007). On the other hand, as studies suggest, topic avoidance generally subsides when stepchildren have developed a close, trusting relationship with their step-parent (Affifi, 2003), and that topic avoidance is reportedly higher with fathers than mothers (Crohn, 2010). However as discussed previously, most stepchildren reiterated that they avoided talking directly to their stepmother when they felt angry or upset with her, and preferred discussing this with their father.

A common theme that emerged from stepchildren’s accounts was the importance they placed on the relationship with their father and ensuring that he was “happy”. As found in Ganong and colleagues’ research (2011), a number of stepchildren in this current study
recalled making a decision to change their attitude when they acknowledged the positive effect their stepmother had on their father. As the authors propose, this may suggest that the degree to which stepchildren engage in developing a relationship with their step-parent is a function of their evaluation of their step-parents’ behaviours towards their parents. It may also suggest, as in previous studies, that stepparents’ level of involvement is less important to stepfamily functioning than their stepchild’s acceptance of their contribution (Brown, Green, & Druckman, 1990; Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1997). Related to this, several stepchildren talked about changing their attitude towards their stepmother when they perceived some form of personal gain from her contribution, adding further support to the research (King, 2007). Perceived advantages included learning new skills, being supported with school projects or events, having more free time or autonomy, or for some, having someone to talk to or share experiences with.

**Fathers perceptions of positive experiences.** Many fathers perceived that developing and maintaining a sense of trust underpinned the development of positive family functioning and relationships. As indicated in previous studies many fathers thought this was achieved by spending time together as a family, using humour and having fun together, effective problem solving together and encouraging family members to communicate with each other (Golish, 2003; Gosselin & David, 2007; Lambert, 2010). Maintaining a flexible, relaxed ‘don’t sweat the small stuff’ attitude, supporting their partner and encouraging their children to accept their stepmother into the family were perceived by most fathers as important factors in building trust within the family. Consistent with research, keeping things in perspective, focusing on each other’s needs and the positive aspects of being in a stepfamily were strategies that a number of fathers had found useful in reducing conflict and maintaining positive relationships (Michaels, 2006; Wilkes & Fromme, 2002).

As found in the literature, most fathers perceived satisfaction within the family was connected to having a strong commitment to the relationship as well as an ability to work
together as a cohesive unit and reach agreement about acceptable roles, rules, boundaries and expectations (Michaels, 2006; Tracy, 2001). For many, being prepared to compromise and maintain open, honest communication to clarify misunderstandings was essential in providing a sense of stability and security for their family. Clear communication amongst family members and a means to implement it were also important for most fathers. Some considered that family meetings or discussions were helpful as they provided the opportunity for everyone to have their say and be heard and to learn more about and understand each other. This supports previous research indicating that healthy interpersonal communication in stepfamilies is a crucial factor in promoting effective problem solving, clearer boundary management and in reducing loyalty conflicts and triangulation (Affifi, 2003; Schrodt, 2006).

Most fathers perceived support from their partner at both a practical and emotional level was key to their positive experiences. In particular fathers appreciated their partner making an effort to support their child or encouragement for them to spend one-on-one time with their child. As previously found, a number of fathers described their difficulty knowing how to relate at an emotional level (Bokker, 2006; DeLongis & Preece, 2002) and appreciated their partner’s support in identifying and expressing their feelings and needs. Consistent with therapists’ recommendations (Papernow, 1984; Visher and Visher, 1990) this involved scheduling couple time without the children or making the effort to talk together, which in turn, helped to enhance their relational skills and improve the quality of relationships within the stepfamily system.

**Clinical Implications**

The results from this study have important implications for clinical intervention as it provides insight into stepfamily formation and highlights the influence of relationships in the stepfamily system on its individual members.
Firstly, it is important that clinicians working stepmother families have a clear understanding of the unique challenges these families face within the context of social stigma and the ambiguous nature of the stepmother role. Individual perceptions and expectations of roles within the stepfamily need to be assessed and taken into account along with relationship dynamics and communication patterns. When both individual and systemic influences are assessed there is likely to be greater room for understanding and negotiating roles that meet the needs of each stepmother family as well as those of the individual family members within that family. To facilitate this process, clinicians need to support family members negotiate realistic expectations grounded in the specific needs of their family and not based on the nuclear family model. The provision of psychoeducation about processes involved in stepfamily formation may help adults and children in stepfamilies understand these differences and to normalize the challenges that stepmother families experience. Family systems approaches may be helpful in addressing the relational source of these challenges and work within the family system to improve individual and family functioning.

As the marital relationship is considered to have a major influence on stepfamily outcomes it is important that clinicians support couples to work towards a shared set of meanings and expectations and guide them in ways to negotiate and manage disagreements. Acknowledging the value of each other’s perspective and emphasizing the importance of working together may help to strengthen their bond and promote feelings of belonging, cohesion and acceptance. As well, psychoeducation on effective parenting strategies would be valuable in assisting stepmothers to understand the importance of taking time to build a friendship or mutually respectful relationship with their stepchild before attempting to adopt a disciplinary role.

Of equal importance is the provision of guidance for stepmothers to integrate themselves into the new stepfamily structure and adjust to her new role. This would involve clinicians assessing the specific needs of each stepmother in order to ameliorate the identity
difficulties they may experience in their role as stepmother and as a woman. Clinicians could then help stepmothers identify the specific strategies they used to foster positive perceptions and feelings about themselves prior to stepfamily formation, and guide them in ways to incorporate these strategies into their lives as a stepmother. Some strategies described by women in this study included maintaining personal boundaries, engaging in self-care activities, continuing with personal interests or seeking support from professional services.

As well, clinicians may need to focus on the needs of fathers and help them feel more confident about their role within the stepmother family system. This would require clinicians appreciating the difficulties fathers experience when their loyalties are torn between their child, their partner and the biological mother, in order to help fathers process and learn ways to manage their feelings of confusion and guilt. It may be necessary to identify specific ways to support fathers enhance their relational skills and express their feelings in healthy ways so they may deal with the diverse difficulties that emerge within the stepfamily system. This may also include assisting fathers in setting appropriate boundaries with the biological mother to protect their new marital relationship and stepfamily life, whilst also maintaining a workable co-parenting relationship.

Studies consistently report better adjustment for children who have contact with their non-residential mothers (Berg, 2003; Gunnoe & Hetherington, 2004; Sweeney, 2010) yet half the number of stepchildren interviewed had minimal to no contact with their biological mother. There is also evidence that fathers tend to gain primary custody of the children due to preceding family problems such as maternal mental or physical health or a high degree of family conflict (Ulveste et al., 2010), increasing the likelihood of adjustment difficulties for children (Dunn, 2002). Thus, clinicians may need to assess the impact these factors may have on each child and target their intervention towards helping children develop effective coping strategies to manage their specific needs. It may also be helpful for clinicians,
teachers and community agencies to work at a societal level to dispel the myths and misconceptions associated with stepfamilies and normalize the stepfamily experience so that stepchildren may feel more confident about seeking support from friends and professional sources.

Results from this study also highlight the importance of communication in determining stepfamily members’ overall adjustment. Accounts from almost every participant reflected a need for further support in developing effective communication and conflict resolution skills as well as positive ways of responding to differences in values, expectations and attitudes. Added to this, a general lack of information or consultation amongst family members, particularly when the family first formed, may reflect the need for clinicians to encourage couples to seek guidance, preferably before family formation, to assist them in developing realistic expectations to meet their own needs and those of the different members of the stepfamily.

Limitations

While the information provided by the participants was rich and comprehensive, this current study is not without its limitations. Firstly, the study was undertaken with a small population of stepmother families that were predominantly European and of middle class socioeconomic status. The sample also included stepfamily couples that were either married or in cohabiting relationships and there is evidence that cohabiting relationships may differ qualitatively from remarried relationships (Sweeney, 2010). This may suggest that the results of the study do not accurately represent all New Zealand stepmother families or cultural perspectives.

A second limitation is that the sample of participants varied in composition including both simple and complex families that ranged from the early stages of stepfamily formation through to those that had reached a more secure level of development. Research has
consistently shown the initial stages of stepfamily formation is the most challenging (Papernow, 2009). Such factors may have impacted on participants’ perceptions and responses, potentially influencing the overall results.

Added to this, the ages of the stepchildren interviewed ranged from early to late adolescence which, according to research, is the most difficult time in stepfamilies (Bray, 1999) and can place greater stress on parents’ capacity to parent them (Cartwright, 2005; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). Families are dynamic systems that involve change as its members progress through their individual lifecycle stages (Carr, 2006). Such change is likely to influence family members’ perspectives over time, yet this study reflects the perceptions of participants at only one point in time.

Finally it is acknowledged that the researcher is the primary tool for data collection and analysis implying a degree of subjectivity (Merriam, 2002). While peer reviews were conducted on the thematic analysis to ensure validity, another researcher may have identified somewhat different themes or provided a different emphasis using the same data set.

**Future Research**

While this study supports previous research on stepmother and stepfamily experiences, it is unique in that it employs qualitative research methodology to explore the perceptions of residential stepmothers, fathers and stepchildren living together in a stepmother family. With little qualitative research on stepmother families, and even less within the context of stepmother families in New Zealand, this study provides a platform upon which further qualitative and quantitative investigation into stepmother family members’ experiences may be conducted.

Given the reported increase in stepmother families, further research could include identifying strategies that enhance positive experiences, particularly in the transition and
formative stages of stepfamily formation. As implicated from the results in this study, strategies that warrant further investigation include ways to support stepfamily members in appreciating differences in perceptions, negotiate roles, rules and boundaries, and promote inclusivity and co-operation between members of the stepfamily system.

Identifying the implications of the unique challenges stepmothers face within the context of negative stereotypes and stigma are also important areas for future research. Likewise, the impact that the stepmother role may have on women’s identity suggests further investigation is required to explore how this affects their overall well-being. It is also important that these considerations are factored in to future research on New Zealand stepmothers and incorporates the perceptions of Maori and Pacific Island women.

As more fathers are gaining shared or full custody of their children, it is important that researchers address the effects of gendered parenting practices on fathers within a society that sanctions the “myth of motherhood” ideal. Further research is also necessary to find ways to support the father in identifying his role within the stepmother family system and understanding the importance of the father/child relationship. In addition, there is a need for research on stepchildren to explore the impact that separation from their biological mother and perceived loss of the close relationship with their father may have on their well-being.

Future research would benefit from a longitudinal perspective that focuses on family members’ experiences as they evolve and change over time along with other contextual influences such as changes in access arrangements, changes in the marital status of the non-residential mother and the presence and quality of relationships with full, half and stepsiblings. As well, when considering the impact of stepmother family stigmatization and myths, future research could explore the role of contextual supports for these families with a specific focus on developing effective coping mechanisms.
Conclusion

This study employed a qualitative research approach to investigate the positive and challenging experiences as perceived by stepmothers, stepchildren and fathers living in a stepmother family. Results from the study lend support to the previous literature that suggests stepmother families experience unique challenges when compared with stepfather families, and highlight some strategies and coping skills that help to counter some of these challenges.

Common challenges identified by participants included role and boundary ambiguity, differences and disagreement about parenting and authority, divided loyalties and mourning the loss of the previous family structure within the context of negative social expectations and norms. Stepmothers experienced difficult relationships with biological mothers, conflicted or limited support from their partners, resistance from stepchildren and difficulties balancing society’s and their own expectations about mothering whilst maintaining a sense of integrity and personal identity. Fathers felt caught between loyalties to their children, partners and biological mothers, in conjunction with work commitments and maintaining a role as father and spouse. Stepchildren experienced difficulty adjusting to the changes created by stepfamily formation amidst grieving the loss of family relationships and close bond with their father and coping with the developmental tasks associated with adolescence.

Positive experiences were underscored by feelings of inclusiveness, acceptance, respect and cohesion achieved primarily when family members worked collaboratively, had realistic expectations, communicated effectively and had a flexible, relaxed attitude. Self-care strategies, seeking professional support and co-operation from the biological mother contributed towards stepmothers’ confidence and feelings of acceptance. Legitimatising the stepmother role and feeling supported by the stepmother were important to fathers. Taking time to assert their authority, adopting the role of ‘friend’, showing an interest and making
an effort were perceived by most children as key to having a positive relationship with their stepmother.

Future longitudinal studies with a diverse population of stepmother families to investigate strategies that would increase family members’ understanding and negotiation of stepfamily roles, rules and boundaries is important to enhance a sense of belonging, strengthen relationships and improve family functioning. Given that many people are now and will be in the future, living in stepmother families it is important to continue learning more about the unique challenges and resources that they have.
PARTICIPANTS REQUIRED FOR
STEPFAMILY RESEARCH

Are you a blended or stepfamily that has a stepmother, a father and one or two stepchildren between the ages of 12-18 years?

Do you live together for at least three days a week?

Have you lived in this stepmother family for at least one year?

Stepfamilies consisting of a stepmother, father and stepchild/children (aged 12 to 18 years) are needed to participate in a study that is exploring relationships between stepmothers and their stepchildren.

Participants in the research (the stepmother, father and child) will each be interviewed for approximately one hour.

Information from the interviews will contribute towards an understanding of the experiences for family members living in a stepmother household.

Each participating family will be given a shopping voucher to the value of $75.00 in appreciation of the time and commitment involved.

This study is being undertaken by Adrienne Bartle as part of a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology.

If you are interested in participating, or would like more information
Please contact Adrienne on: 373 7599 ext 86755 or email:

a.bartle0@xtra.co.nz
or
abar175@aucklanduni.ac.nz

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 14/10/09 FOR (3) YEARS REFERENCE NUMBER 2009/242
Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet: Stepmothers

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET
(STEPMOTHERS)

Title of Project: An Exploratory Investigation of Adults’ and Children’s Perceptions of their Experiences Living in a Stepmother Family

Researcher: Adrienne Bartle, Doctoral Student, University of Auckland

To: Stepmothers

My name is Adrienne Bartle and I am a student in the Doctorate of Clinical Psychology Programme at the University of Auckland. As part of this degree, I am conducting a thesis research into the experiences and relationships in stepmother families. I am looking for stepmothers and fathers who live for a third of the week with stepchildren between the ages of 12 - 18 years of age, and have been living together as a stepfamily for at least one year.

If you meet these criteria, I would like to invite you to take part in this research. Please note however, that your involvement is voluntary and that you are under no obligation to participate.

About the Research

Findings from existing studies indicate that stepmother families face unique and additional challenges than those faced by nuclear families. Currently, there is little research in this area or on the different perspectives of individual stepfamily members and their experiences of living in a stepmother family. This current study will be investigating these experiences with a particular focus on situations that were both supportive and challenging for the father, stepmother and stepchild/children between the ages of 12 – 18 years old. The study will also be interested in learning about the way in which these situations were worked out and managed. The final report will be submitted as my Doctoral Thesis, which is a requirement of the degree I am currently undertaking.

If you wish to take part in this study, I would be interested in hearing about your thoughts, feelings and ideas about living in a stepmother family. I would also like to learn about events that have been both supportive and challenging, as well as strategies that you have used to deal with these situations. Any other ideas that you have developed for coping in these situations would also be welcome.

Through this research I hope to add to the body of knowledge that is available to guide and support stepmother families. To achieve this, I plan to interview stepmothers, fathers and stepchildren from the same family, to gain insight into the perspectives of each family member on their thoughts and understandings of living in a stepmother family.

Your Involvement

You are invited to take part in this research. If you do take part, you will be required to sign a consent form stating that you understand the reasons for the research and that you understand the procedure. I will be conducting a face-to-face interview with you either in your home, or in an office...
at the Tamaki Campus of the University of Auckland, if this is more convenient. The interview will last approximately forty-five minutes to an hour.

I am aware that it can sometimes be difficult talking about personal information. If the interview became difficult for you at any time, you will have the option of taking a break or ceasing the interview. If you wish to talk about issues that you may have found upsetting during the interview, a referral to an appropriate support service may be arranged at your request.

**Right to Withdraw**

Please note that you would be free to withdraw from your participation at any time without providing a reason. In addition, you may withdraw information from the audiotapes within one month following your interview.

**Confidentiality/Anonymity**

For research purposes, the interviews will be audio taped, although the tape may be switched off at any time at your request. Interviews will be transcribed by a professional transcriber who will have signed a Confidentiality Agreement. All audiotapes and transcriptions will be anonymous.

In accordance with the protocols of the Department of Psychology, University of Auckland, the audiotapes and transcripts will be stored in a locked cabinet on the University of Auckland premises for: i) six years for the audiotapes; and ii) ten years for the transcription. After this time, the tapes will be wiped clear and the transcripts shredded. No identifying information will be left on the tapes and no information that could be used to identify you will be included in the write up of this research or in potential publications in the future.

All the information provided during the interview will remain confidential and anonymity will be protected.

**Payment**

In order to acknowledge your time and commitment to the research, and to compensate for any costs incurred, a shopping voucher to the value of $75.00 will be given to your family at the end of the interview.

**Results**

I will be making available a general summary of these results for those participants who are interested. All information included in the summary will be anonymous. Should you like a copy you will be given a chance to request one at the time of the interview.

**Questions**

Thank you for considering taking part in this research. If you have any additional questions or wish to participate, please feel free to contact me:

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<th>Researcher</th>
<th>Supervisor</th>
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<td>Adrienne Bartle</td>
<td>Dr Claire Cartwright</td>
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For any queries regarding ethical concerns please contact:

The Chair, The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, Office of the Vice Chancellor, Research Office, Level 2, 76 Symonds Street, Auckland. Tel: 373 – 7599, ext. 87830.

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 14/10/09 FOR (3) YEARS. REFERENCE NUMBER 2009/242
Appendix C: Participant Information Sheet: Father

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET (FATHER)

Title of Project: An Exploratory Investigation of Adults’ and Children’s Perceptions of their Experiences Living in a Stepmother Family

Researcher: Adrienne Bartle, Doctoral Student, University of Auckland

To: Potential Participants

My name is Adrienne Bartle and I am a student in the Doctorate of Clinical Psychology Programme at the University of Auckland. As part of this degree, I am conducting a thesis research into the experiences and relationships in stepmother families. I am looking for stepmothers and fathers who live for a third of the week with stepchildren between the ages of 12 - 18 years of age, and have been living together as a stepfamily for at least one year.

If you meet these criteria, I would like to invite you to take part in this research. Please note however, that your involvement is voluntary and that you are under no obligation to participate.

About the Research

Findings from existing studies indicate that stepmother families face unique and additional challenges than those faced by nuclear families. Currently, there is little research in this area or on the different perspectives of individual stepfamily members and their experiences of living in a stepmother family. This current study will be investigating these experiences with a particular focus on situations that were both supportive and challenging for the father, stepmother and stepchild/children between the ages of 12 – 18 years old. The study will also be interested in learning about the way in which these situations were worked out and managed. The final report will be submitted as my Doctoral Thesis, which is a requirement of the degree I am currently undertaking.

If you wish to take part in this study, I would be interested in hearing about your thoughts, feelings and ideas about living in a stepmother family. I would also like to learn about events that have been both supportive and challenging, as well as strategies that you have used to deal with these situations. Any other ideas that you have developed for coping in these situations would also be welcome.

Through this research I hope to add to the body of knowledge that is available to guide and support stepmother families. To achieve this, I plan to interview stepmothers, fathers and stepchildren from the same family, to gain insight into the perspectives of each family member on their thoughts and understandings of living in a stepmother family.

Your Involvement

You are invited to take part in this research. If you do take part, you will be required to sign a consent form stating that you understand the reasons for the research and that you understand the
procedure. I will be conducting a face-to-face interview with you either in your home, or in an office at the Tamaki Campus of the University of Auckland if this is more convenient. The interview will last approximately forty-five minutes to an hour.

I am aware that it can sometimes be difficult talking about personal information. If the interview became difficult for you at any time, you will have the option of taking a break or ceasing the interview. If you wish to talk about issues that you may have found upsetting during the interview, a referral to an appropriate support service may be arranged at your request.

**Your Child’s Involvement**

If you or your child decides to take part in the research, your child will also be interviewed by him/herself. This will also take approximately 45 minutes to an hour, however the interview may be interrupted if your child becomes tired, upset or in need of a break. If your child is under 16 years of age, informed assent by them is required along with your written consent, before they may participate in the interview.

Any information discussed by your child during the interview will remain confidential and will be reported in a way that will not identify them as the source. The only exception to this would be in situations where the child or adolescent participant revealed that they were unsafe or at risk of serious harm. In such circumstances, it would be my responsibility to discuss the situation with my supervisor, Dr Claire Cartwright and in some circumstances, appropriate action may need to be taken to ensure their safety.

If your child is over 16 years of age, only their written consent is necessary before they may participate. The same conditions of confidentiality and anonymity as explained in this Participant Information Sheet will apply.

**Right to Withdraw**

Please note that you would be free to withdraw from your participation at any time without providing a reason. In addition, you may withdraw information from the audiotapes within one month following your interview.

**Confidentiality/Anonymity**

For research purposes, the interviews will be audio taped, although the tape may be switched off at any time at your request. Interviews will be transcribed by a professional transcriber who will have signed a Confidentiality Agreement. All audiotapes and transcriptions will be anonymous.

In accordance with the protocols of the Department of Psychology, University of Auckland, the audiotapes and transcripts will be stored in a locked cabinet on the University of Auckland premises for: i) six years for the audiotapes; and ii) ten years for the transcription. After this time, the tapes will be wiped clear and the transcripts shredded. No identifying information will be left on the tapes and no information that could be used to identify you will be included in the write up of this research or in potential publications in the future.

All the information provided during the interview will remain confidential and anonymity will be protected.

**Payment**

In order to acknowledge your time and commitment to the research, and to compensate for any costs incurred, a shopping voucher to the value of $75.00 will be given to your family at the end of the interview.
Results

I will be making available a general summary of these results for those participants who are interested. All information included in the summary will be anonymous. Should you like a copy you will be given a chance to request one at the time of the interview.

Questions

Thank you for considering taking part in this research. If you have any additional questions or wish to participate, please feel free to contact me:

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For any queries regarding ethical concerns please contact:

The Chair, The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, Office of the Vice Chancellor, Research Office, Level 2, 76 Symonds Street, Auckland. Tel: 373 – 7599, ext. 87830.

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 14/10/09 FOR (3) YEARS. REFERENCE NUMBER 2009/242
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET
(YOUTH over 16 YEARS)

Title of Project: An Exploratory Investigation of Adults’ and Children’s Perceptions of their Experiences Living in a Stepmother Family

Researcher: Adrienne Bartle, Doctoral Student, University of Auckland

To: Potential Participants

My name is Adrienne Bartle and I am a student in the Doctorate of Clinical Psychology Programme at the University of Auckland. As part of this degree, I am conducting a thesis research into the experiences and relationships in stepmother families. I am looking for stepmothers and fathers who live for a third of the week with stepchildren between the ages of 12 - 18 years of age, and have been living together as a stepfamily for at least one year.

If you meet these criteria, I would like to invite you to take part in this research. Please note however, that your involvement is voluntary and that you are under no obligation to participate.

About the Research

Findings from existing studies indicate that stepmother families face unique and additional challenges than those faced by nuclear families. Currently, there is little research in this area or on the different perspectives of individual stepfamily members and their experiences of living in a stepmother family. This current study will be investigating these experiences with a particular focus on situations that were both supportive and challenging for the father, stepmother and stepchild/children between the ages of 12 – 18 years old. The study will also be interested in learning about the way in which these situations were worked out and managed. The final report will be submitted as my Doctoral Thesis, which is a requirement of the degree I am currently undertaking.

If you wish to take part in this study, I would be interested in hearing about your thoughts, feelings and ideas about living in a stepmother family. I would also like to learn about events that have been both supportive and challenging, as well as strategies that you have used to deal with these situations. Any other ideas that you have developed for coping in these situations would also be welcome.

Through this research I hope to add to the body of knowledge that is available to guide and support stepmother families. To achieve this, I plan to interview stepmothers, fathers and stepchildren from the same family, to gain insight into the perspectives of each family member on their thoughts and understandings of living in a stepmother family.
Your Involvement

You are invited to take part in this research. If you do take part, you will be required to sign a consent form stating that you understand the reasons for the research and that you understand the procedure. I will be conducting a face-to-face interview with you either in your home, or in an office at the Tamaki Campus of the University of Auckland if this is more convenient. The interview will last approximately forty-five minutes to an hour.

I am aware that it can sometimes be difficult talking about personal information. If the interview became difficult for you at any time, you will have the option of taking a break or ceasing the interview. If you wish to talk about issues that you may have found upsetting during the interview, a referral to an appropriate support service may be arranged at your request.

Right to Withdraw

Please note that you would be free to withdraw from your participation at any time without providing a reason. In addition, you may withdraw information from the audiotapes within one month following your interview.

Confidentiality/Anonymity

For research purposes, the interviews will be audio taped, although the tape may be switched off at any time at your request. Interviews will be transcribed by a professional transcriber who will have signed a Confidentiality Agreement. All audiotapes and transcriptions will be anonymous.

In accordance with the protocols of the Department of Psychology, University of Auckland, the audiotapes will be stored in a locked cabinet on the University of Auckland premises for six years; and the transcripts will be held for ten years. After this time, the tapes will be wiped clear and the transcripts shredded. No identifying information will be left on the tapes and no information that could be used to identify you will be included in the write up of this research or in potential publications in the future.

All the information given in this interview will be confidential and reported in a way that your identity will remain anonymous. The only exception to this would be if a child or adolescent participant told me that they were not safe or at risk of serious harm. It would then be my responsibility to discuss the situation with my supervisor, Dr Claire Cartwright (Registered Clinical Psychologist), and in some circumstances it might be necessary to take steps towards ensuring their safety.

Payment

In order to acknowledge your time and commitment to the research, and to compensate for any costs incurred, a shopping voucher to the value of $75.00 will be given to your family at the end of the interview.

Results

I will be making available a general summary of these results for those participants who are interested. All information included in the summary will be anonymous. Should you like a copy you will be given a chance to request one at the time of the interview.

Questions

Thank you for considering taking part in this research. If you have any additional questions or wish to participate, please feel free to contact me:
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APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 14/10/09 FOR (3) YEARS. REFERENCE NUMBER 2009/242
Appendix E: Participant Information Sheet: Child Under 16 years of Age

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET
(Child Under 16 years)

Title of Project: An Exploratory Investigation of Adults’ and Children’s Perceptions of their Experiences Living in a Stepmother Family

Researcher: Adrienne Bartle, Doctoral Student, University of Auckland

To: Stepchild/Children under 16 years of age.

My name is Adrienne Bartle and I am studying for a Doctorate of Clinical Psychology at the University of Auckland. As part of this degree I am doing some research into stepmother families. I am looking for participants between the ages of 12 and 18 years of age who live with their father and stepmother three or more days a week, and have been living as a stepfamily for at least one year.

If this sounds like you, I would like to invite you to take part in my research. Please note that your participation is voluntary and that you do not have to take part if you do not wish.

About the Research

At the moment there is little research on the experiences of stepmother families. Also, there is not much information about situations that stepchildren have found to be helpful and those that have been difficult, or on how these situations have been worked out.

I am interested in hearing about your thoughts and ideas about living in a stepmother family. It would also be very helpful if you could think of any other ideas that you think might help the study. The information that you provide will be valuable for research and for professionals who are helping stepmother families to get along.

Your Involvement

If you wish to take part in the study I will need to make sure that you understand the reasons for the study and the process involved. If you do understand and still want to continue, I will ask you to sign a form indicating that you agree to participate and that you understand the reasons for studying and the process involved. This is called ‘informed assent’. I will also need written consent from your father before you may participate.

If you do agree to give your assent and sign the form, I will interview you for approximately 45 minutes to an hour. Once we have started the interview, you can stop at any time to have a break. If you don’t want to continue, you can stop altogether if you wish. Also, if you change your mind after the interview, you may ask for your information on the tape to be wiped up to one month from your interview.

The interviews will be either at your place, or at an office at the University of Auckland, if this is more convenient for your parents. Before the interview starts I talk to you about the interview and
make sure that you understand and still want to be interviewed. This will be a good opportunity for you to ask me any questions as well.

Confidentiality/Anonymity

When the information that is discussed during the interview is being written up as a report, it will be done in such a way that your identity will remain anonymous. Also, your information will remain confidential and will not be discussed with anyone else. The only exception to this would be in a situation where a child or adolescent participant told me that they were not safe or at risk of harm. If their situation was very serious, I would talk to my supervisor, Dr Claire Cartwright, and in some circumstances, it might be necessary to take steps towards making sure that they were safe.

Payment

Your family will be given a shopping voucher to the value of $75.00 after the interviews to thank you for your time and for helping me with my research.

Questions

Thank you for thinking about taking part in this research. If you have any questions or wish to participate, please feel free to contact me:

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APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 14/10/09 FOR (3) YEARS. REFERENCE NUMBER 2009/242
Appendix F: Participant Information Sheet: Principals

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY
Faculty of Science

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET
(PRINCIPALS)

Title of Project: An Exploratory Investigation of Adults’ and Children’s Perceptions of their Experiences Living in a Stepmother Family

Researcher: Adrienne Bartle, Doctoral Student, University of Auckland

To: School Principals

My name is Adrienne Bartle and I am a student in the Doctorate of Clinical Psychology Programme at the University of Auckland. As part of this degree, I am conducting a thesis research into the experiences and relationships in stepmother families. I am looking for stepmothers and fathers who live for a third of the week with stepchildren between the ages of 12 - 18 years of age, and have been living together as a stepfamily for at least one year.

About the Research

Findings from existing studies indicate that stepmother families face unique and additional challenges than those faced by nuclear families. Currently, there is little research in this area or on the different perspectives of individual stepfamily members and their experiences of living in a stepmother family. This current study will be investigating these experiences with a particular focus on situations that were both supportive and challenging for the father, stepmother and stepchild/children between the ages of 12 – 18 years old. The study will also be interested in learning about the way in which these situations were worked out and managed. The final report will be submitted as my Doctoral Thesis, which is a requirement of the degree I am currently undertaking.

Through this research I hope to add to the body of knowledge that is available to guide and support stepmother families. To achieve this, I plan to interview stepmothers, fathers and stepchildren from the same family, to gain insight into the perspectives of each family member on their thoughts and understandings of living in a stepmother family.

Participant Involvement in the Research

Participants involved in the research will be required to sign a consent form stating that they understand the reasons for the research and that you understand the procedure. A face-to-face interview will be held with families either in their home, or in an office at the Tamaki Campus of the University of Auckland. Each interview will last approximately forty-five minutes to an hour.

Your Involvement

Should your school decide to become involved, I will be asking you to place an advertisement in your newsletter to recruit families within your school who meet the criteria as described. There will be no further involvement for your school as any contacts will be made directly to me. I shall also be asking you to sign a consent form stating that you understand the reasons for the research and that you understand the procedure.
Right to Withdraw

Please note that your school would be free to withdraw the advertisement from the newsletter at any time without providing a reason.

Confidentiality/Anonymity

For research purposes, all information from this research project will be confidential and anonymity will be protected. Any information that is reported or published will be done in a way that will not identify its source.

Results

I will be making available a general summary of these results for those participants who are interested. All information included in the summary will be anonymous. Should you like a copy you will be given a chance to request one at the time of the interview.

Questions

Thank you for considering taking part in this research. If you have any additional questions or wish to participate, please feel free to contact me:

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APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 14/10/09 FOR (3) YEARS. REFERENCE NUMBER 2009/242
CONSENT FORM
(FATHER and STEPMOTHER)

THIS CONSENT FORM WILL BE HELD FOR A PERIOD OF SIX YEARS

Title of Project: An Exploratory Investigation of Adults’ and Children’s Perceptions of their Experiences Living in a Stepmother Family

Researcher: Adrienne Bartle

From: Participants: Father, Stepmother

- I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet relating to this research. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have them answered. I agree to take part in this research.
- I understand that I am volunteering to take part in an interview that will take approximately one hour.
- I understand that any information that I discuss during the interview will be confidential and remain anonymous.
- I understand that the researcher will not reveal to other family members, any information discussed during the interview, unless there was reason to believe that the participant is at risk.
- I understand that I may withdraw myself from the research at any time without giving reason. I can also withdraw any information provided by me without giving a reason, for up to a month after the interview.
- I understand that interviews will be audio taped and transcribed by a professional transcriber who has signed a confidentiality agreement. I understand that I can ask for the tape recorder to be turned off for a period of time.
- I understand that the audio tapes and transcriptions will be stored safely for a period of i) six years for the audiotapes and ii) ten years for the transcripts; after which they will be destroyed, in accordance with the protocols of the Department of Psychology, University of Auckland.
- I understand that a general summary of the results of this study will be sent to any participant who requested it.
- I wish to receive a summary of results and have provided the researcher with a current mailing or emailing address to which to send it. Yes/No (Delete One)

Signed: ______________________________________________________

Name: ______________________________________________________
(Please print carefully)

Date: ______________________

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 14/10/09 FOR (3) YEARS. REFERENCE NUMBER 2009/242
Appendix H: Consent Form: Youth Over 16 Years of Age

Title of Project: An Exploratory Investigation of Adults’ and Children’s Perceptions of their Experiences Living in a Stepmother Family

Researcher: Adrienne Bartle

From: Participants over 16 years of age

- I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet relating to this research. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have them answered. I agree to take part in this research.
- I understand that I am volunteering to take part in an interview that will take approximately one hour.
- I understand that any information that I discuss during the interview will be confidential and remain anonymous.
- I understand that the researcher will not reveal to other family members, any information discussed during the interview, unless there was reason to believe that the participant is at risk.
- I understand that I may withdraw myself from the research at any time without giving reason. I can also withdraw any information provided by me without giving a reason, for up to a month after the interview.
- I understand that interviews will be audio taped and transcribed by a professional transcriber who has signed a confidentiality agreement. I understand that I can ask for the tape recorder to be turned off for a period of time.
- I understand that the audio tapes and transcriptions will be stored safely for a period of i) six years for the audiotapes; and ii) ten years for the transcripts; after which they will be destroyed in accordance with the protocols of the Department of Psychology, University of Auckland.
- I understand that a general summary of the results of this study will be sent to any participant if requested.
- I wish to receive a summary of results and have provided the researcher with a current mailing or emailing address to which to send it. Yes/No (Delete One)

Signed: ____________________________________________________________

Name: _____________________________________________________________
(Please print carefully)

Date: ________________

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 14/10/09 FOR (3) YEARS. REFERENCE NUMBER 2009/242
Appendix I: Assent Form: Participants Under 16 Years of Age

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY
Faculty of Science

ASSENT FORM for PARTICIPANTS
UNDER 16 Years of Age

THIS ASSENT FORM WILL BE HELD FOR A PERIOD OF SIX YEARS

Title of Project: An Exploratory Investigation of Adults’ and Children’s Perceptions of their Experiences Living in a Stepmother Family

Researcher: Adrienne Bartle

From: Participants under 16 years of age

- I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet relating to this research.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have them answered.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- I understand that I am volunteering to take part in an interview that will take approximately one hour.
- I understand that any information that I discuss during the interview will be confidential and remain anonymous.
- I understand that the researcher will not reveal to other family members, any information discussed during the interview unless there is reason to believe that I may be at risk.
- I understand that I may withdraw myself from the research at any time without giving reason one month after the interview.
- I understand that my interview will be audio taped.
- I understand that I can ask for the tape recorder to be turned off at any time.
- I understand that the information I provide will be transcribed by a professional transcriber who has signed a confidentiality agreement form.
- I understand that my father must provide written consent before I may participate.

Name: ____________________________________________

Signed: __________________________________________

Date: ____________________________________________

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE
ON 14/10/09 FOR (3) YEARS. REFERENCE NUMBER 2009/242
Appendix J: Father Consent Form: Child Participation

FATHER CONSENT FORM
for
CHILD PARTICIPATION

THIS CONSENT FORM WIL BE HELD FOR A PERIOD OF 6 YEARS

Title of Project: An Exploratory Investigation of Adults’ and Children’s Perceptions of their Experiences Living in a Stepmother Family

Researcher: Adrienne Bartle

From: Father

I have been given and have understood an explanation of this research project which involves the participation of my child/children in an interview. I have read the Participation Information Sheet for children and have had the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered. I understand that I am responsible for signing this consent form.

I understand that my child/children may withdraw from the interview and may withdraw any information provided by them for up one month following the interview, without providing a reason.

I understand that my child/children must give their assent before they may participate.

- I allow my child/children to participate in this research
- I understand that the interview will be audio-taped
- I understand that any information given by my child/children, will be reported in a way that will not identify them as the source

Signed (Father): __________________________________________

Name: __________________________________________________ (Please print carefully)

Date: __________________________

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 14/10/09 FOR (3) YEARS. REFERENCE NUMBER 2009/242
Title of Project: An Exploratory Investigation of Adults’ and Children’s Perceptions of their Experiences Living in a Stepmother Family

Researcher: Adrienne Bartle, Doctoral Student, University of Auckland

To: School Principals

My name is Adrienne Bartle and I am a student in the Doctorate of Clinical Psychology Programme at the University of Auckland. As part of this degree, I am conducting a thesis research into the experiences and relationships in stepmother families. I am looking for stepmothers and fathers who live for a third of the week with stepchildren between the ages of 12–18 years of age, and have been living together as a stepfamily for at least one year.

About the Research

Findings from existing studies indicate that stepmother families face unique and additional challenges than those faced by nuclear families. Currently, there is little research in this area or on the different perspectives of individual stepfamily members and their experiences of living in a stepmother family. This current study will be investigating these experiences with a particular focus on situations that were both supportive and challenging for the father, stepmother and stepchild/children between the ages of 12–18 years old. The study will also be interested in learning about the way in which these situations were worked out and managed. The final report will be submitted as my Doctoral Thesis, which is a requirement of the degree I am currently undertaking.

Through this research I hope to add to the body of knowledge that is available to guide and support stepmother families. To achieve this, I plan to interview stepmothers, fathers and stepchildren from the same family, to gain insight into the perspectives of each family member on their thoughts and understandings of living in a stepmother family.

Participant Involvement in the Research

Participants involved in the research will be required to sign a consent form stating that they understand the reasons for the research and that they understand the procedure. A face-to-face interview will be held with families either in their home, or in an office at the Tamaki Campus of the University of Auckland. Each interview will last approximately forty-five minutes to an hour.

Your Involvement

Should your school decide to become involved, I will be asking you to place an advertisement in your newsletter to recruit families within your school who meet the criteria as described. There will be no further involvement for your school as any contacts will be made directly to me. I shall also be asking you to sign a consent form stating that you understand the reasons for the research and that you understand the procedure.
Right to Withdraw

Please note that your school would be free to withdraw the advertisement from the newsletter at any time without providing a reason.

Confidentiality/Anonymity

For research purposes, all information from this research project will be confidential and anonymity will be protected. Any information that is reported or published will be done in a way that will not identify its source.

Results

I will be making available a general summary of these results for those participants who are interested. All information included in the summary will be anonymous. Should you like a copy you will be given a chance to request one at the time of the interview.

Questions

Thank you for considering taking part in this research. If you have any additional questions or wish to participate, please feel free to contact me:

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<tr>
<th>Researcher</th>
<th>Supervisor</th>
<th>Head of Department</th>
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<tr>
<td>Adrienne Bartle</td>
<td>Dr Claire Cartwright</td>
<td>Professor Fred Seymour</td>
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Phone: 373 7599 ext. 86755  | Phone: 373 7599 ext. 86269  | Phone: 373 7599 ext.87830

For any queries regarding ethical concerns please contact:

The Chair, The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, Office of the Vice Chancellor, Research Office, Level 2, 76 Symonds Street, Auckland. Tel: 373-7599, ext. 87830.

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 14/10/09 FOR (3) YEARS, REFERENCE NUMBER 2009/242
Appendix L: Interview Guide for Stepmother

Interview Guide for Stepmother

Interview

The interview format will be explained to the participant including time and structure. I will explain to all participants that the interview is to explore how they perceive their experiences living in a stepmother family. Prior to commencing the interview, the consent form will be explained and signed by the participant. Any question the participant may have will be addressed.

Personal Information

The following personal information regarding the participant and partner will be asked:

- Age
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Marital Status
- Marital or committed relationship history (relevant to the child)
- Occupation

Current Stepfamily Information

The participant will be asked the following information regarding the current stepfamily situation:

- Length of time in current stepfamily
- The members of the stepfamily and their relationships to each other
- Access and custody arrangements with mother

Interview Schedule

Following the explanation of the interview process, clarification of any queries the participant may have and collection of personal details, stepmothers are then asked to think about relationships and experiences in the stepmother family from the first time they were introduced to their stepchild until the present time. Open-ended, semi-structured questions included:

Introduction

- Could you take some time to think about your relationship with your stepchild from the first time that you were introduced until the present time?
- I’m wondering if you could describe to me in as much detail as possible, how you were first introduced to your stepchild?
Prompts:
- How long had you known each other before you were introduced?
- Was it discussed with your partner before you met them?
- What was it like for you? How did you feel about this?

First Few Months

- Thinking about the first few months of living together as a stepfamily household, can you describe to me what it was like for you?
- Could you describe your expectations of your role at that time?
- Could you describe your experiences living in a stepfamily at that time?
- Can you describe how you felt about your stepchild; your partner; about yourself?
- What would you have liked to have happened? In what ways could this be achieved?

Prompts:
- Could you tell me more about that?
- What are your thoughts/feelings about this?
- How did you manage this?

Positive Experiences at the Start of the Stepmother Family Formation

This section asks questions about stepmothers’ perceptions of positive experiences pertaining to relationships within the family and family functioning when the family first formed and within the past few months prior to the interview.

- Thinking generally about living in the stepfamily could you describe in as much detail as you can experiences in the first year that worked well?
- Could you describe for me in more detail one or two positive situations within the first year where there was agreement and support?
- How did this impact on your relationship with your stepchild; your partner?
- How did this impact on your experience and your feelings about being a stepmother?
- Could you tell me what steps, if any, you took to make things work well?

Prompts:
- If I were a video camera watching the scene, what would I see? What would family members be doing?
- What did that mean for you?
- How did that make you feel?
- Could you tell me more about that?

Positive Experiences at the Current Stage of Living in a Stepmother Family:

- And thinking of the family situation within the past few months, can you tell me what is working well?
- Can you describe how this has changed over time?
- Could you describe about a specific situation that has happened recently that has worked out well?
- Can you think of another recent occasion that has worked out well?
- What did that mean for you as a stepmother; a partner; a woman?
- How has this impacted on your relationship with your stepchild/ren; your partner?

Prompts:
- If I had a video camera watching the scene, what would I see? Can you tell me more?
- What is it that is making it work so well do you think?
Challenging Experiences at the Start of Stepmother Family Formation

This section asks questions about participants’ perceptions of challenging experiences pertaining to relationships within the stepmother family and family functioning in the first year of stepfamily formation, and within the past few months prior to the interview.

- Now I’m going to ask you questions about situations that did not work well, or created conflict in some way. Could you think of situations in the first year of you all living together where there were differences or disagreements?
- What was the major source of conflict for you; your partner; your stepchild?
- Could you describe in as much detail as you can one or two specific situations that were challenging?
- How do you and your family manage challenging situations?
- How did this impact on your relationship with your stepchild/ren; your partner?
- How did this impact on your experience and your feelings about being a stepmother?
- What could have made it better or have helped the situation do you think?
- Could you describe how this may have impacted on other aspects of your life?

Prompts:
- Can you tell me more about this?
- Why do you think this happened?
- When did conflict usually occur?
- What were your thoughts at the time?
- How did this make you feel as a woman; A partner; A stepmother?

Challenging Experiences at the Current Stage of Living in a Stepmother Family

- Thinking about your situation now, can you describe what is not working very well in the stepfamily?
- What do you think has brought this about?
- Has this changed over time? In what way?
- How is conflict now managed in the family?
- How has conflict impacted on you as a woman? As a partner? As a stepmother?
- How has conflict impacted on your relationship with your partner? Your stepchild? Other aspects of your life?

Prompts:
- How did you know that your stepchild/ren weren’t happy about something?
- How did you see your role in this?
- What did this mean for you?

Ending the Interview

To draw the interview to a close I will tell the interviewee that we are near the end of the interview and ask if they have any questions about the interview or if there are any experiences they would like to add that have not been covered in the interview and they think are important. The interview closes with a question asking the interviewee what advice they would give to other women who are entering into or are in stepmother families in regards to aspects they had found helpful or may have done differently in hindsight.
Appendix M: Interview Guide for Father

Interview Guide for Father

Interview

The interview format will be explained to the participant including time and structure. I will explain to all participants that the interview is to explore how they perceive their experiences living in a stepmother family. Prior to commencing the interview, the consent form will be explained and signed by the participant. Any question the participant may have will be addressed.

Personal Information

The following personal information regarding the participant and partner will be asked:

- Age
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Marital Status
- Marital or committed relationship history (relevant to the child)
- Occupation

Current Stepfamily Information

The participant will be asked the following information regarding the current stepfamily situation:

- Length of time in current stepfamily
- The members of the stepfamily and their relationships to each other
- Access and custody arrangements with mother

Interview Schedule

Following the explanation of the interview process, clarification of any queries the participant may have and collection of personal details, participants are then asked to think about relationships and experiences in the stepmother family from the first time the stepmother was introduced until the present time. Open-ended, semi-structured questions included:

Introduction

- Can you tell me about how you first introduced your partner to your children?
- Was it discussed between you both prior to meeting the children?
- How did your child respond?
**Prompts:**
If cannot remember ask:
- At what stage of your relationship did you introduce your partner to the children?
- What was this like for you? How did you manage this?

**First Few Months**
- What was it like for you in the first few months of living in a new stepfamily household?
- How did your child react to the stepmother living with you in the first few months?
- What is your perception of what it was like for your partner at that time?
- How were roles, rules, discipline organised? Who was responsible for this?
- Could you explain how you managed any disagreement or conflict?

**Prompts:**
- Did you need to do anything differently? Could you tell me more about that?
- How did you feel in the first few months?
- How did you see your role?
- Where there some issues that had to be addressed that you had not considered before moving in together?
- How did you manage this?

**Positive experiences at the start of the stepmother family formation**
This section asks questions about participants’ perceptions of positive experiences pertaining to relationships within the stepmother family and family functioning in the first year of stepfamily formation, and within the past few months prior to the interview.

- Thinking generally about the stepfamily could you describe in as much detail as you can, experiences in the first year of stepfamily formation that worked well.
- Could you describe for me in more detail one or two positive situations within the first year where there was agreement and support?

**Prompts:**
- If I were a video camera watching the scene, what would I see? What would family members be doing?
- Could you tell me what steps, if any, you took to make things work well?
- How did this impact on your relationship with: i) your child/ren; ii) your partner; iii) your feeling about being a father
- What did that mean for you? Thoughts, feelings

**Positive Experiences at the current stage of living in a stepmother family:**
- And thinking of the family situation within the past few months, can you tell me what is working well?
- Can you describe how this has changed over time?
- Could you describe about a specific situation that has happened recently that has worked out well?
- Can you think of another recent occasion that has worked out well?

**Prompts:**
- If I had a video camera watching the scene, what would I see? Can you tell me more?
- What is it that is making it work so well do you think?
- What did that mean for you i) as a father; ii) a partner; iii) a man.
- How has this impacted on your feelings about being a father?
- How has this impacted on your relationship with: i) your child/ren; ii) your partner
Challenging Experiences at the start of stepmother family formation

This section asks questions about participants’ perceptions of challenging experiences pertaining to relationships within the stepmother family and family functioning in the first year of stepfamily formation, and within the past few months prior to the interview.

- Now I’m going to ask you questions about situations that did not work well, or created conflict in some way. Could you think of situations in the first year of you all living together where there were differences or disagreements?
- What was the major source of conflict for you? For your partner? For your child?
- What were some things that you had to consider when there was conflict in the family?
- How did you see your role in this?
- How did this impact on your relationship with your child/ren; your partner?
- Could you describe in as much detail as you can one or two specific situations that were challenging?
- How do you and your family manage challenging situations?
- What could have made it better or have helped the situation do you think?

Prompts:
- Why do you think this happened?
- When did conflict usually occur?
- What did you do to manage this?
- How did this make you feel as a partner? A Father?
- What were your thoughts at the time?
- How did you know that your stepchild/ren weren’t happy about something?

Challenging Experiences at the current stage of living in a stepmother family

- Thinking about your situation now, can you describe what is not working very well in the stepfamily?
- What do you think has brought this about?
- Has this changed over time? In what way?
- How is conflict managed in the family?

Prompts:
- What did this mean for you?
- How has conflict between your child and the stepmother impacted on you as a person; as a father; as a partner? (thoughts, feelings, behaviour)
- How has this impacted on your relationship with your stepchild/ren;
- Partner; stepfamily members’ relationships?

Ending the Interview

To draw the interview to a close I will tell the interviewee that we are near the end of the interview and ask if they have any questions about the interview or if there are any experiences they would like to add that have not been covered in the interview and they think are important. The interview closes with a question asking the interviewee what advice they would give to other fathers who are entering into or have formed stepmother families in regards to aspects they had found helpful or may have done differently in hindsight.
Appendix N: Interview Guide for Stepchild

Interview Guide for Stepchild

Interview

The interview format will be explained to the participant including time and structure. I will explain to all participants that the interview is to explore how they perceive their experiences living in a stepmother family. Prior to commencing the interview, the consent form will be explained and signed by the participant. Any question the participant may have will be addressed.

Personal Information

The following personal information regarding the participant and partner will be asked:

- Age
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Education Level/Occupation
- Interests
- Age at parents’ separation
- Age at stepmother family formation

Current Stepfamily Information

The participant will be asked the following information regarding the current stepfamily situation:

- Length of time in current stepfamily
- The members of the stepfamily and their relationships to each other
- Access and custody arrangements with mother

Interview Schedule

Following the explanation of the interview process, clarification of any queries the participant may have and collection of personal details, participants are then asked to think about relationships and experiences in the stepmother family from the first time the stepmother was introduced until the present time. Open-ended, semi-structured questions included:

Introduction

Could you take some time to think about the first time you met the stepmother?

- I’m wondering if you could tell me in as much detail as possible, how you were first introduced to your stepmother?
- What were you thinking and feeling at that time?
- What was your relationship with your father like at that stage?
**Prompts**

- Can you tell me more about that?

If they have difficulty remembering ask:

- What have you been told about the first time you met your stepmother?
- What do you think it might have been like for your?

**First Few Months**

- Thinking about the first few months of living together as a stepfamily can you describe to me what it was like for you?
- Could you describe your experiences living in a stepfamily at that time?
- Can you describe how you felt about your stepmother; your father?
- What was your relationship like with your father in the first few months?
- What would you have liked to have happened? In what ways could this have happened?

**Prompts:**

- Could you tell me more about that?
- Why do you think this might have happened?
- How did this make you feel?
- How did you manage this?
- What did your father do?

**Positive Experiences at the Start of the Stepmother Family Formation**

This section asks questions about stepmothers’ perceptions of positive experiences pertaining to relationships within the family and family functioning when the family first formed and within the past few months prior to the interview.

- Can you tell me of some good memories of the first year with your stepmother and father?
- Can you tell me about what worked well in the family at this time?
- Are you able to explain what it is that made you feel good about being in the stepfamily?
- Could you tell me about one or two times when you felt good about being in the stepfamily?
- How did this make you feel about your stepmother; your father?
- How did this impact on your experience and your feelings about being a stepmother?

**Prompts:**

- If I were a video camera watching the scene, what would I see? What would family members be doing?
- What did that mean for you?
- How did that make you feel?
- Could you tell me more about that?
- What are your thoughts about why this was a happy time?

**Positive Experiences at the Current Stage of Living in a Stepmother Family:**

- And thinking of the family situation within the past few months, can you tell me what is working well now?
- Can you describe how this has changed over time?
- Could you describe about one or two specific situations that have happened within the past few months that are working well for you or your family?
- Has this changed your relationship with your stepmother? Can you talk about how this has changed?
Challenging Experiences at the Start of Stepmother Family Formation

This section asks questions about participants’ perceptions of challenging experiences pertaining to relationships within the stepmother family and family functioning in the first year of stepfamily formation, and within the past few months prior to the interview.

- Now I’m going to ask you questions about situations that did not work well, or created conflict in some way. Can you tell me about times when the stepfamily first started, that did not work well in the family?
- What were the disagreements usually about?
- Could you describe in as much detail as you can one or two specific situations that were difficult for you? Can you tell me what happened?
- What do you do when there is disagreement or conflict in the family?
- What are your thoughts about why it was a difficult time?
- Can you tell me how the situations of conflict and disagreement between you and your stepmother and father are worked out?

Prompts:
- What did this situation make you do or feel like doing?
- How did this make you feel towards your stepmother; your father?
- What would you have liked your stepmother and your father to have done differently?
- What would that have meant for you?
- Can you tell me more about that?
- What did your father do? How did that make you feel?

Challenging Experiences at the Current Stage of Living in a Stepmother Family

- Thinking about your stepfamily now, can you describe what is not working very well in the stepfamily?
- Has this changed over time? In what way?
- How is conflict now managed in the family?
- How has conflict had an effect on you, your relationship with your stepmother and your father?
- Can you talk about things you think could have been done differently?

Prompts:
- What does this situation make you do or feel like doing?
- How does this make you feel towards your stepmother; your father?
- Is there anything you would like or your stepmother and your father to do differently now?
- What does that mean for you?

Ending the Interview

To draw the interview to a close I will tell the interviewee that we are near the end of the interview and ask if they have any questions about the interview or if there are any experiences they would like to add that have not been covered in the interview and they think are important. The interview closes with a question asking the interviewee what advice they would give to other children who are entering into or are in stepmother families in regards to aspects they had found helpful or would like to have been done differently.
Appendix O: Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY
Faculty of Science

TRANSCRIBER
CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

THIS CONSENT FORM WILL BE HELD FOR A PERIOD OF SIX YEARS

Title of Project: An Exploratory Investigation of Adults’ and Children’s Perceptions of their Experiences Living in a Stepmother Family

Researcher: Adrienne Bartle

Supervisor: Dr Claire Cartwright
Professor Fred Seymour

Transcriber:

I agree to transcribe the audiotapes for the above research project. I understand that the information contained within them is confidential and must not be disclosed, or discussed with anyone other than the researcher and her supervisors.

If I recognise the participant’s voice on the tapes, I will immediately stop transcribing and inform the researcher.

Name: ________________________________________________

Signature: _____________________________________________

Date: ________________________________

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 14/10/09 FOR (3) YEARS. REFERENCE NUMBER 2009/242
References


Freisthler, B., Svare, G. M., & Harrison-Jay, S. (2003). It was the best of times, It was the worst of times. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, 38* (3), 83–102. doi: 10.1300/J087v38n03_05


Stokes, S. B., & Wampler, R. S. (2002). Remarried clients seeking marital therapy as compared to those seeking family therapy: Differences in levels of psychological and marital distress. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, 38*(1/2), 91–107. doi: 10.1300/J087v38n01_05


