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‘One Shape Does Not Fit All’

An Exploratory Investigation of Adults’ and Children’s Views of the Stepparent and Parent Roles in Stepfamilies

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Abstract

Adults and children often experience difficulty when they begin to live in a stepfamily. Previous research suggests that problems arise in regard to the parenting and stepparenting roles adopted by the adults in stepfamilies. There is also evidence that adults and children perceive these roles differently. This thesis investigates adults' and stepchildren's perceptions and expectations of the ideal stepparent and parent roles in terms of discipline/control and warmth/support dimensions of parenting; the perceptions and expectations of adults of the roles compared with those of children; adults' and children's understandings of these roles; and the relationship between the ideal stepparent role and satisfaction in stepparent-child and parent-child relationships, and overall stepfamily satisfaction. There are two research projects in this thesis: a self-report questionnaire study and a semi-structured interview study. Twenty-six stepfamilies with 52 adults and 51 children completed a number of quantitative measures in which they rated behaviours for the ideal stepparent and parent roles, and their satisfaction with stepfamily relationships and overall stepfamily situation. Individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews were also conducted with members of 20 of these stepfamilies including 40 adults and 44 children, where emphasis was placed on understanding the meaning participants gave to these roles in order to understand the significance of these roles for adults and children.

The results indicate that the stepparent role is perceived differently, in varying degrees, from the parent role both by adults and children. However, the differences were more strongly held by children than adults. In the questionnaire study, the ideal parent role was rated significantly higher on warmth/support and discipline/control than the stepparent role by both adults and children. Children compared to adults, rated the ideal stepparent role significantly lower on warmth/support and discipline/control than the parent role. On the other hand, stepchildren's perceptions of an ideal active role for stepparents in terms of stepparent discipline/control were associated with increased satisfaction in relationships with both parents and, to greater extent, stepparents; and overall satisfaction with the stepfamily situation. Stepchildren's perceptions of an ideal active role for stepparents in terms of the stepparent warmth/support were also associated with increased satisfaction in relationships with parents. There was no association, however, between adults' perceptions of an ideal active role for stepparents and satisfaction in relationships with step/children, or the overall stepfamily situation. In the interview

study, the views of the participants fell broadly into two positions: those perceiving the parent and stepparent ought ideally to share the parenting role, and those perceiving that the parent ought ideally to maintain the primary parenting role. A majority of adults appeared to hold the ideal of a shared parenting role. However, many of these participants recognised that this was not possible due, in part, to children's responses. A minority of adults believed that the biological parent ideally maintained responsibility for both the warmth/support and discipline/control roles. Converse to adults' views, the majority of children perceived that the biological parent ought ideally to maintain both the warmth/support and discipline/control roles, although some children thought that a greater parenting role was possible for the stepparent if some conditions were met. There is some preliminary indication that there may also be diversity in views between simple and complex stepfamily members. Some children in complex stepfamilies perceived a more active disciplinary role for stepparents than children in simple stepfamilies in that an active role was perceived as affording consistency and fairness among stepsiblings. Implications for stepfamily systems and clinical work with stepfamilies are discussed along with future research directions.

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