'One Shape Does Not Fit All'

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

Vicki Marie Mobley

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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Chapter One
Introduction

This thesis aims to investigate and compare adults' and children's perceptions and expectations of the parent and the stepparent role from the perspective of adults and children residing in stepfamilies. This will add to the body of empirical and clinical knowledge about parent and stepparent roles that support stepfamily relationships and adaptive stepfamily functioning.

Background

The proportion of children living in stepfamilies in Western countries has risen considerably over the last thirty years following an increase in the rates of separation and divorce of married and cohabitating couples with children (Wise, 2003). Overseas and recent New Zealand research results indicate that children and adolescents often struggle to adapt to a new family situation and to accept a stepparent figure (Cartwright, 2008; Hetherington, 2003). The addition of a stepparent often improves children's standard of living and sometimes the availability of supervision and support with everyday life (Amato, 2005; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). However, studies most consistently indicate that children in stepfamilies exhibit more problems and poorer outcomes than do children with continuously married parents (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Although children have lived in stepfamilies throughout history, remarriage began to be viewed as a "social problem" from the early 1970s as repartnering began to follow parental divorce more often than parental mortality (Coleman, Ganong & Warzinik, 2007, p. 32). This trend has created much more complex stepfamilies than existed earlier and has been associated with increased stress for family members. Stepchildren are now often required to manage transitions in living between two households as well as manage multiple relationships with stepsiblings, half-siblings and sometimes three or four adults in parental roles (e.g., a mother and stepfather, and a father and stepmother) (Coleman et al., 2007; Falci, 2006).

Similarly, adults in stepfamilies may also experience increased difficulties. Parents report that they often have difficulty assisting children with the transition into stepfamily living and parent-child relationships can also deteriorate, especially in the first two years (Cartwright, 2008). There is also a lack of norms for how stepfamilies should function

and adaptive stepfamily roles (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Stepparents often report that they feel uncertain about their role in the stepfamily, particularly the degree to which they ought to be actively involved in parenting behaviours. Similarly, clinicians and researchers studying stepfamilies report that loyalty conflicts are pronounced in stepfamilies and the stepparent-child relationship is particularly challenging. This may, in part, be due to ambiguities and variations in stepfamily members' beliefs and preference of the kinds of roles that are acceptable (Cartwright, Farnsworth, & Mobley, 2009; Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1998; Gamache, 2007; Papernow, 2006).

On the other hand, mass media, film, and television series such as the Brady Bunch model a myth that 'instant love', 'instant family', and automatic parental status are what can be realistically expected in a newly formed stepfamily (Coleman et al., 2007). Faced with uncertainty about roles, social stigmas, and cultural pressure to assume the same kind of role as a biological parent, it is not surprising that stepfamily members often enter the stepfamily emulating the ''nuclear'' family model (Gamache, 1997; 2007). Unfortunately, observations from researchers, clinicians, and stepfamilies themselves suggest that the adoption of the 'nuclear' model based on biological parent roles often creates difficulties and may compromise stepfamily relationships, particularly between stepparents and children. As one stepmother said, "stepfamilies curdle, they don't blend" (cited in Pryor, 2008, p.576). Similarly, clinicians may also adopt a 'nuclear' family 'map' to address stepfamily issues (Felker, Fromme, Arnaut, & Stoll, 2002; Gosselin & David, 2007). However, as Papernow (2008) argues, the "results are frustrating, debilitating, and potentially dangerous as trying to navigate the streets of New York using a map of Boston" (p.423).

Hence, the 'nuclear' model, based on biological parent roles, may not be an adaptive model, especially in the early stages of stepfamily formation. In response to these issues, experienced stepfamily clinicians emphasise that it is important that researchers and clinicians understand more about the challenges, roles and relationship dynamics that are unique to the stepfamily (Gold, 2010; Papernow, 2008). Although researchers have given attention to a number of areas relevant to stepfamily processes and relationships in the past decades, relatively little is known about the expectation of parents, stepparents, and children who are currently living in stepfamily households and their perception of the stepfamily member roles. Furthermore, stepfamily researchers have tended to focus on

the stepparent-child relationship and relatively less attention has been afforded to the parent-child relationship (Cartwright, 2005; Ganong & Coleman, 2004) nor the views of children (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001; Schrodt, 2006c). In addressing these issues Coleman, Ganong and Fine (2000), in their review of stepfamily research, make recommendations for an increase in qualitative studies with the focus on understanding the "experiences, perceptions and reflections" of all stepfamily members (p.137).

Further research is still required to investigate the types of stepfamily responses and roles that are perceived as acceptable to stepfamily members, along with the expectations held by adults and children within the stepfamily. Additional qualitative research is required to draw meaning from stepfamily members' experiences and perceptions of both the stepparent and parent roles within the stepfamily from the perspective of all family members. To this end, this thesis research investigates ideal adult roles in stepfamilies and the views held by stepfamily members about these roles. The research is guided by family systems and cognitive theoretical perspectives and comprises both qualitative and quantitative research approaches. The primary qualitative research component involves parents, stepparents and children's, from 20 stepfamilies, participation in semi-structured face-to-face interviews eliciting their views on stepfamily roles and relationships. The quantitative component includes the completion of a self-report questionnaire by the parent, stepparent, and at least one child from 26 stepfamilies in order to elicit views and perceived ideals about stepfamily roles, and parenting and stepparenting behaviours. The measures included the Step/Parent Behaviour Inventory (SPBI), which is an adaptation of the Stepparent Behaviour Inventory (SBI); the Stepparent Role Questionnaire (SRQ); and the Stepfamily Relationship Satisfaction Scale (SRSS).

An overview of the methodological considerations and procedures of the study are discussed more fully in Chapter Two of this thesis. The qualitative findings of face-to-face interviews with stepfamily members are then presented in the following chapters Three, Four, and Five of the thesis. More specifically, Chapter Three presents the results of the thematic analysis of data pertaining to adults' and children's views about the stepparent role in regard to discipline and control dimensions of parenting. Chapter Four present the results of the thematic analysis of data pertaining to adults' and children's views about the stepparent role in regard to warmth and support dimensions of parenting. Chapter Five presents the results of the thematic analysis of data pertaining to adults' and children's views regarding the parent role in the stepfamily. The quantitative results of

the completed self-report questionnaires are provided in Chapter Six. Finally, Chapter Seven provides conclusion and discussion of the overall findings including clinical implications and directions for future research.

The remainder of this current chapter presents a review of the relevant literature providing context for the research that follows. This is preceded, however, by a brief overview of the definition of terms used throughout this thesis.

Definition of Terms

Many terms have been used to define and describe stepfamilies. These include 'reconstituted', 'blended', 'binuclear', 'reorganised', 'merged' (Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Hetherington, 1999a; Papernow, 2006), 'repartnered' families, and families of 'remarriage' (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002; Pryor, 2005; Rodwell, 2002). However, as Ganong and Coleman (2004) suggest, the proliferation of terms may be less of a of disagreement between social scientists than an attempt to rename stepfamily positions in order to reduce the negative associations attached to the 'stepfamily' term. Nonetheless, after some experimentation in the literature, there has been a return to the use of the 'stepfamily' terms (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002; Claxton-Oldfield, 2008; Kelly, 1996).

Similarly, the use of language has varied in describing biological parents as 'real' or 'natural' parents and identifying first-marriage families as 'non-divorced' (Hetherington, 1999b), 'intact', 'normal', 'real' or 'traditional' (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Unfortunately, as Ganong and Coleman (2004) point out, these terms may infer that other families are unnatural, abnormal, or unreal. On the other hand, the alternate term 'first-marriage' is also problematic in that it does not infer inclusion of cohabiting couple families along with those who are of legal marriage.

It can also be argued that the label 'stepfamily' is commonly understood and provides for the naming of relationships within the stepfamily (e.g., stepparent, stepchild, and stepsibling). Hence, a more useful solution may be researchers and clinicians working towards changing the social stigmas against stepfamilies rather than creating alternative terms (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002; Claxton-Oldfield, 2008). For the purposes of this thesis the term 'stepfamily' is used to denote any family that includes one biological parent with children and his or her new partner and includes cohabiting couple relationships as well as those of legal marriage. Stepfamilies where only one partner has

children from a previous relationship are referred to as 'simple stepfamilies'. When both adults bring children to the relationship they are referred to as 'complex stepfamilies'. In complex stepfamilies both adults are stepparents to different children in the stepfamily and they may also share a biological child together from the current union (Baham, Weimer, Braver, & Fabricius, 2008). Complex stepfamilies may consist of households in which children of both adults are living in the stepfamily most of the time, and households in which one of the adult's children are visiting on a regular basis and the other adult's children are resident (Shultz, Shultz, & Olsen, 1991).

For reasons of simplicity the terms 'first-marriage' or 'non-divorced' are used to denote any family that includes two biological parents and their children residing in the same household, and families where only one biological parent is present are referred to as 'sole-parent' families. Furthermore, the term parent will denote biological parent and the term parent-child refers to the relationship between the parent and child. The term stepparent is used to denote the parent's partner who is not the biological parent and the term stepparent–child is used when referring to the relationship between a stepparent and stepchild. Similarly, non-residential parent-child refers to the relationship between the child and the second biological parent not residing within the stepfamily.

While earlier research has tended to exclude cohabiting couple stepfamilies, cohabitation is now a common and accepted form of living arrangement for many stepfamilies (Cartwright, 2010; Stewart, 2007). In Australia, repartnered couples are more likely to be in a de facto marriage compared to those in first marriages (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004). Similarly, in New Zealand, two in five men and women aged between 15 and 44 are in de facto relationships (Statistics New Zealand, 2007). In line with this trend, both married and cohabiting stepfamilies have been included in more recent stepfamily studies from Britain (Smith, Robertson, Dixon, Quigley, & Whitehead, 2001), New Zealand (Cartwright, 2005, 2010; Pryor 2005), and America (Baham,Weimer, Braver, & Fabricius, 2008). Given the accepted status of cohabiting relationships in New Zealand, Australia and Britain, this thesis study also includes cohabiting and remarried couple stepfamilies.

Literature Review

Remarriage and stepfamilies were the focus of very little research prior to 1970, however, the body of knowledge regarding stepfamilies has grown significantly since the 1990s (Pasley & Moorefield, 2004). Four major areas of research are addressed in this chapter providing the context for this thesis. These areas include recent demographic trends and stepfamily adjustment outcomes; the family systems and cognitive perspectives of stepfamily functioning; the parent role and parent-child relationship; the stepparent role and the stepparent-child relationship; and stepchildren's responses and influences on stepfamily roles and relationships.

Demographic Trends and Stepfamily Outcomes

As previously mentioned, the proportion of children living in stepfamilies in Western countries has risen considerably over the last thirty years (Wise, 2003). It has been estimated that one-third of the United States population are currently members of stepfamilies, including approximately 10 million children under the age of 18 years (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). In the United Kingdom, around 55 percent of couples divorcing have children (Rodgers & Pryor, 1998) and it is estimated that approximately 2.5 million children grow up in stepfamilies (Coleman, Troilo, & Jamison, 2008). Recent Australian statistics suggest that around one in ten couple families in Australia are stepfamilies (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). Similarly, in wave three of the Household, Income, and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, 13 percent of households had either residential, non-residential stepchildren, or both (Qu & Weston, 2005). Stepfamily data has not been collected in the New Zealand census, however, the annual divorce rate is around 12 marriages per 1000 existing marriages compared with the United States at around 20 divorces per 1000 marriages (American Bureau of Statistics, 2008). Almost half of the divorces in New Zealand in 2008 involved children under the age of 18 years and one third of the legal marriages involved at least one partner for whom this was a remarriage (Statistics NZ, 2008). A further estimate may be gained from the Christchurch Health and Development Study in which approximately 18 percent of the 1265 cohort (1 in 6) lived in a stepfamily for a period of time between six and 16 years of age (Nicholson, Fergusson & Horwood, 1999). Similarly, Dharmalingham, Peol, Sceats, and Mackay (2004) estimate that 18 to 20 percent of children in New Zealand reside in stepfamilies for a period of time before age 17 years.

Hence, many children are living or will live in a stepfamily household. However, overseas and recent New Zealand research indicates that children and adolescents often struggle to adapt to a new family situation and to accept a stepparent figure (Cartwright, 2005; Pryor, 2005). The addition of a stepparent often improves children's standard of living and sometimes the availability of supervision and support with everyday life (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). However, studies most consistently indicate that children in stepfamilies, on average, exhibit more problems and poorer outcomes than do children with continuously married parents (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Furthermore, adults in stepfamilies report greater levels of stress (Bray, 1999; Visher & Visher, 2003), greater exposure to sources of conflict (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000) and higher levels of depression (Ferri & Smith, 1998; Foley, Pickles, Rutter, & Gardner, 2004; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994) compared to those in first-marriage families.

Child Adjustment Outcomes

In response to the increased prevalence of stepfamilies over recent decades, concerns about the impact of divorce upon children have extended to concerns about the impact of remarriage or repartnering (Coleman et al., 2000; Wise, 2003). As previously mentioned, in the last decade, empirical research consistently demonstrates that children in stepfamilies are at increased risk for negative outcomes compared to children in first-marriage families (Bray, 1999; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Jeynes, 2006). Outcomes for children and adolescents in stepfamilies are similar to those from sole-parent families (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). However, adolescents from stepfamilies do less well educationally and gain fewer qualifications compared to adolescents from sole-parent families (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Kiernan, 1992; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). They also leave home earlier, engage in earlier sexual activity and experience earlier parenthood compared to adolescents from sole-parent families (Rodgers & Pryor, 1998; Smith, 2008).

Hetherington and associates have conducted three longitudinal studies of divorce and remarriage. The Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage followed families (first-marriage, sole-parent, and remarried) for 20 years (Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Hetherington and associates found that both boys and girls residing in stepfamilies displayed less social and academic competence, exhibited more internalizing (dysthymia, depression, anxiety, social

withdrawal, low self-esteem) and externalizing behaviours (aggression, antisocial, acting out behaviour) and experienced more school related problems than those from first-marriage families. 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. These patterns are consistent with findings from Bray's Developmental Issues in Stepfamily Research Project in which 60 first-marriage families and stepfamilies at varying stages of formation (6 months, 2.5 years, and 5-7 years) were compared and followed up four years later (Bray & Berger, 1993; Bray & Kelly, 1998). The findings are further substantiated by the American National Education Longitudinal Study (Lee, Burkam, Zimiles & Ladewski, 1994), which concluded that young adolescents in non first-marriage family situations are susceptible to adjustment problems. This was particularly marked for pre-adolescent girls living in a stepfather family situation and is supported by Hetherington and Kelly's (2002) conclusion that while boys experience more adjustment difficulties in sole-parent families, girls do more so in stepfamilies. Similarly, in a New Zealand study of 90 stepfamilies, Pryor (2005) focused on children's relationships with residential parents, non-residential parents, stepparents, and associated child outcomes. The findings suggest that relationships with stepparents may be particularly important for children's self concept. A feeling of closeness and security in the relationship with the stepparent was found to be a major predictor of children's perceptions of their own strengths.

A review of stepfamily literature in the 1980s and 1990s (Coleman et al., 2000) concluded that most studies found increased risks of negative outcomes for children and adolescents in stepfamilies. Stepchildren were found to be at particular risk for educational difficulties, and for internalising and externalising behaviours. Of concern are findings that show that these negative outcomes may continue into early adult life. Analysis of data from the British National Child Development Study indicates that adolescents from stepfamilies are more likely to leave home earlier, form early sexual relationships or partnerships, and become parents at a younger age than those from first-marriage families (Kiernan, 1992). These findings are mirrored in the New Zealand longitudinal Christchurch Health and Development Study (Nicholson & Sanders, 1999), which concluded that adolescents from stepfamilies are at risk for juvenile offending, abuse of illegal substances, leaving school without a qualification, early initiation into sexual activity, and sexual activity with multiple partners.

However, as Coleman et al. (2000) point out, while significant differences are found in outcomes for children and adolescents in stepfamilies compared to those in first-marriage families, the effect sizes tend to be quite small. Amato's (1994) meta-analysis of 92 family studies 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 the children in stepfamilies fared better than the average child in a first-marriage family. Similarly, Hetherington and Kelly (2002) found in the Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage that 20 to 25 percent of children in sole-parent and stepfamilies compared with 10 percent of children in first-marriage families develop adjustment problems. Hence, while there is an increased risk of negative outcomes, it is important to acknowledge that the majority (approximately 75 to 80 percent) of children in stepfamilies function adequately and do not experience problems of clinical significance (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Wise, 2003).

It is also important to note the consistent evidence of a 'stabilisation' effect following divorce and remarriage (Hetherington, 1999b). Clinical evaluation and research findings suggest there is an average three year period of individual and family re-organisation and adjustment during which the negative effects on children appear to peak (Adler-Baeder, 2007). Hence, 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 is evident from the family literature that child outcomes are also impacted by the number of marital transitions (Jeynes, 2006) and marital conflict (Hanson, McLanahan, & Thomson, 1996). Hence, marital quality and the couple relationship is an important consideration when addressing child outcomes, and warrant further discussion below.

Marital Quality and Couple Relationship Outcomes

Clinicians suggest that an important protective factor for children experiencing parental divorce and remarriage is to reduce the number of transitions (Adler-Baeder, 2007). In this regard, it is particularly concerning that there is greater risk of divorce for remarriage (Clingempeel, 1981; Pasley, Dollahite, & Ihinger-Tallman, 1993); and higher stress (Lee-Baggley, Preece, & DeLongis, 2005), and lower marital satisfaction (Gosselin & David, 2007) in adults of remarriage with children than adults of first marriages.

In a recent study of marital satisfaction Knox and Zusman (2001) found that for women in stepfamilies economic obligations to stepchildren, feelings of jealousy towards their husband's former partner, and perceived lack of support from friends and family were associated with less marital happiness, increased regrets about marrying, and more contemplation of divorce. There is further evidence to suggest that poor relationships between stepparents and children can also threaten the quality and stability of the marital relationship (Crosbie-Burnett, 1984). Others have suggested that the effects of structural complexity and greater role ambiguity in stepfamilies effects marital quality and satisfaction (Afifi, 2008). This view is supported by the findings of Clingempeel's (1981) study in which adult participants residing in simple stepfamilies registered higher marital quality than adults from complex stepfamilies. Similarly, Shultz et al. (1991) found that couples in complex stepfamilies reported more stressors, fewer strengths, and less positive agreement about the stressors and strengths in their families than couples in simple stepfamilies. Conversely, it has been argued that it is neither the structural complexity nor the presence of children, per se, that impacts the marital relationship but rather the ways in which adults negotiate these issues (Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1997). To this end, there is research suggesting several variables may affect marital quality including beliefs about the stepparent role (Kurdek & Fine, 1991), consensus between the couple about how to enact the stepparent role (Bray, Berger, & Boethel, 1995; Fine & Kurdek, 1995), agreement on parenting and child rearing decisions (Bray, et al., 1994; Kurdek & Fine, 1991; Palisi, Orleans, Caddell, & Korn, 1991), and the enormity of issues that parents and stepparents have to face (Cartwright, 2010).

Hence, while the research findings appear to demonstrate that the transitions of divorce and repartnering are stressful and associated with significant and ongoing difficulties for some stepfamilies, importantly, some stepfamilies do integrate successfully and provide suitable environments for children's development. If stepfamilies can negotiate early adjustment 'crises' then close and supportive relationships can develop (Amato, 2005) and serve as important resources for children's development and emotional wellbeing (Amato, 2005; White & Gilbreth, 2001). Given the prevalence of stepfamilies, and the increased risk of negative outcomes, it is important that researchers continue to investigate stepfamily processes, roles, and relationships that are adaptive and support stepfamily stability.

As such, stepfamily researchers have more recently given attention to understanding the factors that promote or hinder stepfamily adjustment. There has been a progression away from the use of the pathogenic model which anticipates and focuses on negative outcomes for children and adults of divorce and remarriage in comparison to other family forms such as first-marriage and sole-parent families (Pasley & Moorefield, 2004). This emphasis on family process, rather than family structure per se, responds to a growing need for clinicians and researchers to not only describe but also understand how and when family transitions and relationships can be damaging and, alternatively, adaptive to the family members involved (Gosselin & David, 2007).

The following section presents the theoretical perspectives guiding this thesis. Discussion then turns to what is known about specific stepfamily roles and the influence of these roles on stepfamily relationships and adjustment.

Theoretical Frameworks

It is argued that stepfamily theory is necessary for describing and explaining the ways in which stepfamilies function and associated outcomes, however, many stepfamily studies have been atheoretical in the past (Robila & Taylor, 2001). A number of theoretical frameworks are currently guiding stepfamily research including family systems perspectives and, to a lesser degree, cognitive theory. Stepfamily research guided by family systems theory investigates the different patterns of relationships and the different roles that are adaptive in stepfamily situations (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Cognitive theory posits that cognitive processes are important as stepfamily members' expectations and interpretations of stepfamily roles and relationships may impact on stepfamily adjustment (Fine & Kurdek, 1994b). This thesis is guided by family systems and cognitive theory perspectives, both of which are examined further below.

Family Systems Theory

Family systems theory is particularly important as advances in the development of understanding of stepfamily systems have implications for the practice of clinical psychologists and other mental health professionals who work with these families. A number of stepfamily researchers have applied family systems theory as a framework for analysing stepfamily functioning (e.g., Golish, 2003; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington, 1999a). Family systems theorists examine the relationships between different subsystems (e.g., the parent-child, stepparent-child, marital, or sibling) and

`recognise that these sub-systems mutually influence and inter-relate (Hetherington, 1999a; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). To this end, creating and maintaining a harmonious and mutually supportive family environment may be more challenging for stepfamilies because of their diverse histories, non-biological ties, more complex structures, and ambiguities regarding responsibility and roles (Hetherington, 1999a). Nevertheless, as discussed, research suggests an initial integration process involving stress, disruption and reorganisation of established family relationships along with the formation of new step-relationships is required (Hetherington, 1999a) and this process may take three to four years (Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1997; Papernow, 2008). Stepfamily couples are also challenged with developing strong marital bonds while simultaneously developing parenting alliances that include an adaptive stepparent role during this transition (Bray, 1999; Kinniburgh-White & Cartwright, 2010).

Historically, research literature on family processes has relied heavily on the norm of the 'nuclear' family model (Gamache, 1997). Stepfamily systems theorists suggest that although adults in stepfamilies often attempt to establish a family unit that functions as a first-marriage 'nuclear' family (Cherlin, 1994; Papernow, 2008) there are systemic differences which may not make this the most conducive approach (Hetherington, 1999a; Svare, Jay & Mason, 2004). Furthermore, unlike first-marriage families, stepfamilies lack a shared history (Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998) or 'middle ground' (Papernow, 2008) from which to develop relationships. They must negotiate family roles, rituals, and routines in their 'new' family with those of their 'old' family (Braithwaite, Toller, Daas, Durham, & Jones, 2008) while sometimes still grieving the loss of their previous family form (Afifi, 2008). Hence, while the marital subsystem may be considered the 'cornerstone' of good family functioning and child wellbeing in first-marriage families (Bray, 1999; Hetherington 1999a), it is perhaps not surprising that the stepparent-child relationship appears to be more pivotal and strongly associated with positive adjustment in stepfamilies (Coleman et al, 2000). A close couple's relationship may, in fact, be difficult for some children in stepfamilies (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994) and evidence suggests that coalitions or strong alliances between parents and children in stepfamilies are common (Anderson & White, 1986; Bray, 1999; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). While this may be considered maladaptive in the 'nuclear' family form, research suggests that this is may be normative and adaptive for stepfamilies as long as this is not at the exclusion of stepfamily members and a positive relationship with the stepparent is maintained (Bray et al., 1994; Cartwright, 2008).

Some of the difficulties experienced in stepfamily formation may also be due to stepfamily members being at differing stages in the family life cycle. A common example has been observed when the newly partnered couple are working toward forming a close family with adolescent children who, in contrast, are beginning to individuate from the family (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Hence, family theorists recognise that the process of developing into a functioning stepfamily is a major challenge for stepfamily members (Browning, Collins, & Nelson, 2006; Hetherington, 1999b; Papernow, 2008). To this end, family systems theory supports the assumption that stepfamily members' wellbeing is linked with associations between relationships and allows for the possibility that different roles and patterns of relationships may be more or less optimal in stepfamily situations (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). This present study contributes to stepfamily systems theory through the investigation of stepfamily member's views of stepfamily roles, particularly those parent and stepparent roles perceived as challenging or supportive of relationships with children and stepfamily adjustment.

Cognitive Perspectives

Over the last 15 years, a number of different but related cognitive perspectives have been adopted to examine the role of cognitions in stepfamily life including social cognition theory (Fine & Kurdek 1994b; Fine et al, 1998; Gamache, 2000, 2007) and cognitive schema theory (Schrodt, 2006a, 2006b). This emerging framework, or cognitive perspective, has been utilised to further the understanding of relationships and role expectations in stepfamilies, particularly the stepparent-child relationship (Fine & Kurdek, 1994b; Fine et al., 1998; Gamache, 2007; Schrodt, 2006a, 2006b). From the cognitive perspective, intrapersonal cognitive structures and processes influence how we perceive our social environment (Gamache, 2000). These cognitive structures also include self-schema or generalisations about the self. The self-schema organises and guides the processing of information from our social experiences and, in turn, influences how we perceive our social environment and our perceptions of others (Gamache, 2000; Schrodt, 2006b). This cognitive perspective suggests that stepfamily members interpret and communicate with each other based on the organised cognitive structures, or schema, that represent their relational knowledge and expectations of each other (Schrodt, 2006b).

Fine and Kurdek (1994b) presented a 'multidimensional cognitive-developmental model' of stepfamily adjustment. The model posits that some of the difficulties experienced by stepfamily members are attributable to differences in beliefs, perceptions and expectations about stepfamily relationships and roles, and the differences in how stepfamily members interpret events. The model suggests that stepfamily members observe other members' behaviours towards them, within stepfamily situations, and interpret those behaviours in ways that can impact either negatively or positively on these relationships. However, members may not always be aware of the meaning that each stepfamily member attaches to these stepfamily events, and ambiguities or differences in understanding (e.g., between stepchildren and stepparents or parents, or between stepparents and parents) may be problematic for the stepfamily.

Fine et al. (1998) investigated this 'multidimensional cognitive-developmental model' by examining the perceptions held by stepfamily members of the stepparent role. They also examined consistency in the perceptions of the stepparent role among stepparents, parents, and children in relation to adjustment in stepfamilies. Three measures were developed: the Stepparent Role Questionnaire (SRQ) assessing actual and ideal labels assigned to the stepparent role (used also in this thesis research); the Stepparent Behaviour Inventory (SBI) assessing actual and ideal expectations of the stepparent role in relation to warmth/support and discipline/control dimensions of parenting (an adapted version used also in this thesis research); and the Stepparent Role Clarity Inventory assessing levels of clarity and certainty about the stepparent role. Stepfamily adjustment measures were included measuring mental health symptoms, satisfaction with stepparenting and the stepparent-child relationship, marital satisfaction, and family strengths. Findings indicated that the stepparents and parents perceived that the stepparent should play an active parenting role; however, children were more likely to perceive that the stepparent should assume the less active position of 'friend'. Consistency in role perceptions among family members was moderately strongly related to the interpersonal dimensions of adjustment in stepfamilies.

Drawing on social cognitive theory, Gamache (2000, 2007) suggests that a new construct, 'parental status' can be used to better understand the divergences in stepfamily members' perceptions of the stepparent role. Parental status is defined as a "social cognition that addresses the degree to which the stepparent is perceived as a parent by the stepchild, residential parent, and the stepparent" (Gamache, 2007, p.21). The degree to

which the stepparent is considered a parent impacts the way in which the child and stepparent relate and how these interactions are interpreted and evaluated by children, stepparents, and parents. However, the degree to which the stepparent is granted parental status is fundamentally influenced by the individual beliefs and cultural stereotypes stepfamily members' hold about the stepparent role (Gamache, 2000). To this end, a stepparent-child relationship in which the stepparent is assumed to have "high parental status" may involve "high levels of emotional closeness and discipline behaviours". A stepparent-child relationship in which "low parental status" is assumed may, on the other hand, be "more distant and exclude parental nurturing and limit-setting" (Gamache, 2007, p.21). Gamache developed a measure for parental status, the Parental Status Inventory (PSI). The 14-item scale examined the degree to which the stepparent is perceived as a parent by the stepchild, stepparent, and residential parent and attained good reliability (Cronbach's alpha .97). The PSI construct demonstrated an inverse association between parental status and age of the stepchild at the time the stepfamily formed; and a positive association between parental status and attachment and closeness to the stepparent, and time in the stepfamily residence.

The cognitive perspective has been further utilised recently to understand and assess the ways in which stepchildren interpret stepfamily experiences including the ways in which they synthesise, categorise, and make sense of their stepparents' behaviour (Schrodt, 2006b). Drawing on cognitive schema theory, Schrodt (2006a, 2006b) has investigated the dimensions of stepfamily communication that may contribute to stepchildren's perceptions of stepfamily functioning. Two measures were developed: the Stepfamily Life Index (SLI) assessing stepchildren's perceptions of the stepfamily (Schrodt, 2006a), and the Stepparent Relationship Index (SRI) assessing stepchildren's perceptions of their stepparent relationship (Schrodt, 2006b). Schrodt (2006b) found that stepchildren's perceptions of the stepparent relationship consisted of three dimensions of relational schemata including 'positive regard', 'parental authority', and 'affective certainty'. 'Positive regard' refers to the degree to which stepchildren hold stepparents in high esteem and signifies relationships in which stepparents and stepchildren relate in ways that are respectful. Consistent with previous findings indicating it is important that stepparents engage affinity-seeking strategies (e.g., Ganong et al., 1999) and develop friendships (e.g., Fine et al., 1998) with stepchildren, the stepchildren in this study confirmed the importance of feelings of affection and admiration toward the stepparent as key in predicting how they experienced the stepparent relationship. 'Stepparent

authority' refers to the degree to which stepchildren grant a stepparent the power to determine, influence, or judge behaviours and actions that are appropriate or inappropriate for the stepchild (Schrodt, 2006b). This dimension of the SRI was associated with time, as stepchildren were somewhat more likely to grant stepparental authority over time. Schrodt (2006b) notes that the first two dimensions of the SRI, positive regard and stepparent authority, mirror the classic parenting dimensions of warmth/support and discipline/control. Taken with previous research on the stepparent role (e.g., Fine et al., 1998), these results provide further evidence to suggest that stepchildren perceive stepparent relationships in terms of respectful, supportive behaviours, as well as authoritative behaviours and control (Schrodt, 2006b). The final dimension, 'affective certainty' refers to the degree to which stepchildren perceive they have definite or secure relationships with stepparents, such that they know how the stepparent feels about them, and they in turn, have communicated feelings to the stepparent. This dimension of the SRI was moderately positively associated with perceptions of positive regard and stepparent authority. All three dimensions of the SRI were associated positively with stepchildren's perceptions of closeness with their stepparents. Cognitive schema theory posits that shared schematic concepts allow individuals to communicate and exchange ideas easily (Wicks, 1992). Taking this into consideration, and given that cognitive systems guide, direct, and alter conversational behaviour, Schrodt (2006b) concludes that research grounded in cognitive theory can assist in understanding the ways in which stepchildren interpret new stepfamily experiences, including those with their stepparents.

There is considerable variability in how stepfamily members perceive the stepparent role and stepfamily relations (Afifi, 2008). From a social cognitive perspective, stepparents and children are often faced with the complex task of developing new relational schema within a context of relational uncertainty (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003a) and ambiguity (Schrodt, 2006b). Notably, Golish (2003) found that children tended to have a more pessimistic view of their stepfamily than their parents and that this was more closely aligned with stepparents' views. Similarly, Kurdek and Fine (1991) found that mothers had a more optimistic perspective of their stepfamily and reported greater satisfaction with the stepparent-child relationship than did the stepparents. One explanation offered is that parents may minimise potential problem areas in their stepfamily and avoid talking about challenges for fear of conflict (Ganong & Coleman, 1994) and dampening of hopes for the future (Golish, 2003). On the other hand, stepfamily members also engage in

behaviours and communication patterns to help manage information, solve problems, clarify roles, and define an inclusive identity and adaptive boundaries (Gosselin & David, 2007).

Hence, from cognitive and family systems perspectives, there are ambiguities or uncertainties about stepfamily roles, in particular that of the stepparent and the responsibilities and limits of this role. To this end, family systems theory supports the assumption that stepfamily members' wellbeing is linked with associations between relationships and allows for the possibility that different roles and patterns of relationships may be more or less optimal in stepfamily situations (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). The adoption of cognitive frameworks for understanding the ways in which stepfamily members interpret stepfamily experiences and relationships may assist in understanding the commonalities and differences in stepfamily members' perceptions and expectations of these stepfamily relationships and roles.

My experience and training in clinical psychology and cognitive therapy has provided impetus for the adoption of a cognitive framework in this study and my appreciation of emphasis on cognitive processing, inherent in the cognitive theoretical perspectives. Similarly, training in family based therapies has fostered my appreciation of family systems perspectives for further understanding stepfamily functioning and expectation of roles.

The next section presents a review of the literature in regard to stepfamily roles, in particular the parent and stepparent role, and the bi-directional influence of adult's and children's responses to these roles and patterns of relating.

The Parent Role and the Parent-Child Relationship

Most stepfamily relationship research has focused on the stepparent-child relationship; however, some attention has been given to understanding how relationships between parents and children change as a result of divorce and remarriage (Cartwright, 2008; Smith, 2008). Although less focus has been given to the parent-child relationship, considerable evidence suggests that the parent-child relationship may be compromised through the stepfamily transition (Bray & Berger, 1993; Cartwright & Seymour, 2002; Cartwright, 2003; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). Children in stepfamilies have been found to be less warm and responsive, and more hostile and negative towards their mothers

(Hetherington & Jodl, 1994) and can experience a loss of parental attention and loyalty with the entrance of the parent's new partner or stepsiblings (Bray, 1999; Cartwright & Seymour, 2002). Adolescents are more likely to disengage from their stepfamilies, spend more time away, and leave home earlier (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994).

As the majority of children remain with mothers after separation most of the research on stepfamilies, to date, has been conducted on the stepfather family (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). Researchers have found that many mother-child relationships are problematic, particularly for girls, who are observed to be more demanding, hostile, coercive and less warm towards mothers than girls in sole-parent and first-marriage families (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Mother-son relationships, on the other hand, have been observed to be more disengaged following repartnering (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Solomon, 1995) and less coercive and conflicted compared to those in sole-parent families (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Researchers have suggested that the cohesive bond that can develop between mothers and daughters during a period of sole-parenting may be challenged when a new partner enters the family and that this may account for the increased difficulties in the mother-daughter relationships at repartnering (Amato, 2004; Orbuch, Thornton, & Cancio, 2000)

Clinicians and researchers have observed the difficulties stepparents often encounter when attempting to enter the family in which strong and relatively impermeable boundaries have developed between the parent and child (Afifi, 2008; Baxter, Braithwaite, & Bryant, 2006; Golish, 2003). The entry of an uninvited adult may be experienced by children as an intrusion into the relationship they have with their resident parent (usually mother) whose time and attention is shared between them and the new partner (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002; Ganong & Coleman, 1994). This may be experienced by children as a sense of abandonment or betrayal (Bray, 1999; Cartwright & Seymour, 2002). Competition for time and attention may ensue with parents experiencing torn loyalties (Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). Loyalty issues further arise during partner and child conflict. This may be especially distressing for children and adolescents when there is a perception that the parent is more committed to the partner than the child when taking their partner's side during disagreements between children and stepparents (Cartwright, 2003).

Parents in stepfamilies also report higher personal levels of stress and parenting difficulties with their children than parents from first-marriage families (Bray & Kelly,

1998; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Greatest difficulties are experienced in the two year period following separation and again following repartnering (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). In particular, there is some evidence of a decline in monitoring and attention given to children, increased inconsistency in discipline, and less time spent communicating and demonstrating warmth and affection following repartnering (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). However, there is research to suggest parenting recovers after two years as role strain and adjustment demands diminish (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Little is known about adult and children's expectations of parents' roles after repartnering. In order to gain a broad picture of the adolescents and young adults' perceptions and expectations of the parent role within a stepfamily, Moore and Cartwright (2005) conducted a study in which 65 young adults from different family forms completed a questionnaire that included a stepfamily vignette and four questions designed to elicit expectations of mothers' behaviour following remarriage. When asked what children would expect from remarried mothers the majority of participants thought that the mother should maintain primary responsibility for disciplining the children, and confirmed that warmth and support roles were important. However, while half of the participants thought that the mother ought to give priority to the children, the other half thought that she ought to give priority to both the children and her partner. This finding is echoed in the accounts of parents in stepfamilies who often describe experiencing divided loyalties between protecting and supporting children and attempting to manage conflict and support their partner (Cartwright, 2003; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Visher & Visher, 1990).

Similarly, Cartwright (2005), as part of a larger study, conducted interviews with stepfamily clinicians, young adults, and mother and child participants in stepfamilies to elicit their views of how the parent-child relationship was impacted across the family transition. The combined themes that emerged included the importance of parental time and attention; continuation in the role of parent and taking care of the child; inclusion in consultation and the sharing of information; and being respectful of the non-residential parent.

The findings suggest that parents and children experience significant stress and challenges to their relationship during repartnering which are not experienced by those from first-marriage and sole-parent families (Cartwright, 2008). However, it is important

to note that many parents and children develop ways of relating that are adaptive and supportive in stepfamilies and many of these difficulties resolve within two years of repartnering (Hetherington, 2003). Similarly, children in non-clinical stepfamilies have been found to be warm, assertive and able to communicate effectively and positively with parents and stepparents (Bray, 1992). It is, however, important that researchers continue to focus on understanding parenting as well as stepparenting practices in stepfamilies and that parents are provided with guidance about how they can best assist children with the transition in ways that support relationships with both parents and stepparents (Cartwright, 2008)

The Stepparent Role and the Stepparent-Child Relationship

As discussed previously, there is a growing consensus among researchers that many of the challenges facing members of stepfamilies revolve around the role of the stepparent and the stepparent-child relationship (Church, 1999; Crosbie-Burnett, 1984; Erera-Weatherly, 1996; Fine et al., 1998; Golish, 2003) and, in essence, the degree to which stepparents should take a parenting role in stepchildren's lives (Fine et al., 1998; Golish, 2007). It is also often observed that couples enter into stepfamily living with an assumption that the transition will be smooth (Bray & Kelly, 1998) and with unrealistically positive perceptions of the stepparent-child relationship (Cohen & Fowers, 2005; Visher & Visher, 1990). However, as Ganong and Coleman (1994, 2004) note, it is the stepparent-child relationship that is typically considered to be the most challenging and stressful relationship in stepfamilies. Unlike freely chosen relationships, step-relationships are often involuntary and born of losses and change (Gamache, 2007; Visher & Visher, 1994), leaving less motivation for children and stepparents to develop close bonds (Bray, 1999; Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & Martin, 1999; Kinniburgh-White & Cartwright, 2010).

Furthermore, stress and ambiguity are experienced by stepfamilies in the absence of role definition, societal norms, institutionalised social support, and socially accepted methods of problem solving for stepfamilies (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Coleman et.al, 2000). 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 (Bulcroft, Carmody & Bulcroft, 1998; Fine et al., 1998, Marsiglio, 2004). This lack of clarity is problematic in light of evidence suggesting that

stepparent role clarity is related to adjustment in stepfamilies (Fine et al., 1998). Kurdek and Fine (1991) found that stepparent role ambiguity was negatively related to stepfathers' reports of stepparenting satisfaction and mothers' reports of family, marital, and life satisfaction. Similarly, Fine, Kurdek, and Hennigen (1992) found stepchildren's reports of ambiguity in the stepmother's role were negatively related to perceived self competence.

Variability in Role Perception and Stepparenting Approaches

The findings discussed above suggest there may be considerable variability in how stepfamily members define the stepparent role and that there is likely to be more variability in role perceptions among individuals in stepfamilies than those in first-marriage families. As a result, stepfamily researchers and clinicians have observed that stepfamilies differ in the approaches taken to negotiate these roles. For example, Erera-Weatherly (1996) found that some stepparents tried to share an active parenting role with parents, some tried to act as friends to their stepchildren, others were still trying to define a role, and some stepparents were not involved with their stepchildren. Similarly, Levin (1997) observed that some stepfamilies attempted to 'reconstruct' the 'nuclear' family, some aimed to avoid it by 'innovating' something new, while others adopted a 'wait and see' stance in order to find behaviour that fitted well. Of note, these themes of attraction, aversion, or indifference to the 'nuclear' family model were expressed by the type of stepparent-child relationship that existed or was desired, particularly in relation to the degree in which the stepparent actively took a parent-like role (Gamache, 2000).

In a more recent qualitative study (Svare et al., 2004), four approaches to stepparenting were observed: the 'replication family' in which stepparents and parents attempt to emulate the 'nuclear' family model with the stepparent adopting a primary disciplinary role, similar to Erera-Weatherley (1996) 'birth family' and Ganong, Coleman and Weaver (2002) 'first-marriage family'; the 'assistant parent' in which stepparents do not make decisions about rules but enforce the parent's rules in the absence of the parent and develop emotional connections with stepchildren more like a friend; the 'third parent', and the 'extended family' in which stepparents are co-parenting with the parent, or the parent and non residential parent, respectively. Participants in the study talked about developing an approach in response to the need of the family and filling a gap in the family created by divorce.

Two studies focused on stepmother roles. Church (1999) investigated stepmothers' views of kinship ties and identified five models of kinship which influenced perceptions of their roles. These included: the 'nuclear' model in which the stepparent perceives the stepfamily as a nuclear family and wants to be acknowledged as a mother; the 'extended' model in which the stepparent defines the stepfamily broadly and does not try to take on a mother role; the 'couple' model in which the stepparent's primary focus is on the relationship with the partner; the 'biological' model in which the stepparent defines the stepfamily along biological lines and focuses primarily on her own children; and 'no family' model in which stepparents perceives themselves as separate and unrelated to anyone in the stepfamily. These stepmothers' ideas about family were connected to how they defined their role, the kind of relationships they aspired to, and the conflicts they experienced. Views were also shaped by personal needs, own experiences of family of origin, and others' expectations of their role.

In a more recent qualitative study (Weaver & Coleman, 2005), the idealised image of mothers and the perception of solitary motherhood greatly influenced how the stepmother role was conceptualised. The stepmothers in this study were influenced by gendered ideals of appropriate family roles and behaviours for women and a perceived expectation that all women want to care for and nurture children, while simultaneously trying to avoid usurping the biological mother's position. This resulted in a dilemma that was described as "mothering but not a mother" (Weaver & Coleman, 2005, p.483). Role conceptualisation included: 'mothering but not mother' roles in which stepmothers defined their stepparent role as some version of mothering but not that of a mother such as friend, responsible and caring adult, provider of emotional support, and mentor; 'other focused' roles in which stepmother roles focused on others' needs and responses such as being a liaison between the partner and the children's biological mother or a facilitator of the relationship between the partner and the children; and 'outsider' roles in which stepmothers were involved only on the periphery of stepchildren's lives, or as partners of the children's fathers with no direct role in the stepchildren's lives. Factors identified as influencing the conceptualisation of the stepmother role included issues relating to the biological mothers, their partner, their stepchildren, their own biological children, and the extended family; the resources available; and negative cultural myths of the stepmother.

Hence, variability in views of the stepparent role is often expressed in beliefs regarding how actively stepparents should parent (Fine et al., 1998; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Two

broad dimensions of parenting behaviours – 'discipline/control' and 'warmth/support' – have been identified as important determinants of children's and adolescents' development (Fine et al., 1998). The discipline/control dimension of parenting refers to the degree to which parents set and enforce limits and monitor children's activities and behaviour; whereas the warmth/support dimension refers to the extent to which parents support, spend time with, and communicate with their children (Fine et al., 1998; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001).

Research findings are somewhat inconsistent in regard to whether the content of the stepparent role is defined as a less active one than the parent role (Fine et al., 1998). Giles-Sims and Finkelhor (1984) found that while over one half of adults in stepfamilies thought that stepparents should share equally in parenting, 40 percent thought parents should have greater responsibility. Similarly, Fine and Kurdek (1994a) found parents expected stepparents to be less active in parenting activities than parents are. Conversely, Marsiglio (1992), using data from the National Survey of Families and Households, found that almost two thirds of stepfathers disagreed to some extent that 'stepparents don't have the full responsibility of a parent'. However, around a third agreed at least somewhat that a 'stepparent is more like a friend than a parent to stepchildren'. In this study, stepfathers reported 'father-like' perceptions more often when they were residing in a complex stepfamily, when the stepchildren were younger, and when satisfied with the relationship with their partner. Clinicians have noted the difficulties that stepparents in complex stepfamilies, in particular, face when attempting to fulfil the role of parent to biological children and 'parent figure' to their stepchildren, which may account for their adoption of a more universal approach (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2000).

Overall, although ambiguous and challenging, these stepparent-child relationships have been found pivotal to the adaptive functioning of the stepfamily unit (Crosbie-Burnett, 1984; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002), marital stability (Jodl, Bridges, Kim, Mitchell & Chan, 1999) and child and adolescent adjustment outcomes (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002) and are therefore considered an important ongoing focus for stepfamily researchers. To this end, stepfamily researchers, guided by family systems theory, have investigated the different patterns of relationships and the different roles that are adaptive in stepfamily situations (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Pertinent research regarding the discipline/control and

warmth/support dimensions of the stepparent role is examined further in the following section of this chapter.

The Stepparent Role: Discipline/Control and Warmth/Support Parenting Behaviours

As discussed previously, clinicians and researchers have observed that some stepparents attempt to adopt a parenting role in the early stages of stepfamily living and some parents encourage new partners to take on a disciplinary role (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Cartwright, 2003). However, many children express a dislike of discipline from stepparents, even when they perceive the relationship as supportive and close (Coleman & Ganong, 1997) leading researchers and clinicians to conclude that stepparent discipline, at least in the early stages, can be associated with negative outcomes for children (Hetherington, 1993; Papernow, 2008). In fact, some clinicians and researcher contend that when stepfamilies engage in traditional 'nuclear' family forms, roles, and ways of relating, discontentment and problems within the stepfamily are inevitable, particularly during the early stages of stepfamily formation, and when children are preadolescent or adolescent (Bray & Berger, 1993; Browning, 1994; Hetherington, 1999a; Visher & Visher, 1990).

Hence, while many stepfamily couples prefer to form a parenting alliance akin to the 'nuclear' family model of shared responsibility (Bray, 1999; Fine et al., 1998) recent findings suggest that stepfamilies differ from first-marriage families (Ganong & Coleman, 2004) and that a functional stepparent role may be different from a parenting role (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). While authoritative parenting, characterized by warmth and support and moderate discipline, is associated with positive child adjustment in first-marriage families (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001), overall, stepfamily research suggests that positive adjustment in children and adolescents in stepfamilies is most often associated with close relations with an authoritative parent (high on warmth, moderate on control, and inclusion of children in decision making) coupled with a warm stepparent relationship which is high on support and low on control (Bray & Berger, 1993; Crosbie-Burnett & Giles-Sims, 1994; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). These conclusions are supported by findings that suggest children are more accepting of the stepfamily transition when the parent maintains primary responsibility for discipline (Bray & Berger, 1993; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002), allowing time for positive stepparent-child relations to develop before moving toward a secondary parent role supporting the biological parent (Bray, 1999). However, a more active authoritative stepparent role may be conducive to positive child outcomes in stepfamilies in which the residential parent

adopts a non-authoritative parenting style or abdicates from parental responsibilities, and when children are younger (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Nicholson, Phillips, Peterson & Battistutta, 2002; Svare et al., 2004).

These findings are supported in a recent qualitative study (Crohn, 2006) investigating the views of young women who perceived themselves as having positive relationships with their stepmothers. Five styles of positive stepmother roles were identified: my 'father's wife', a 'peer-like girlfriend', an 'older friend', a 'type of kin', and like 'another mother'. Interestingly, participants in all categories did not describe the same intensity of connection, closeness, and availability from their stepmothers as they did their biological mothers; and none of the stepmother roles described included strong disciplinary and control functions. The author concludes that these variations in well-functioning stepmother roles support the importance of paying attention to in-group differences in stepparent-child relations, and points to the significance of issues of discipline and control in the stepparent-child relationship.

In line with the previously mentioned pattern of high warmth and low control, "laid-back" stepparents have been found to be more successful in building relationships with stepchildren than "take-charge" stepparents who exert control (Ganong et al., 1999, p.10). Ganong et al. (1999) study of the process in which stepparents, mostly stepfathers, attempt to elicit liking (affinity) from their stepchildren identified three patterns of behaviour. Findings suggest that 'continuous affinity-seekers', who regularly attempted to become friends both before and during the remarriage, had the most cohesive relationships with their stepchildren compared to 'early affinity-seekers, who discontinued efforts and took on a parent role after moving into the household, and 'non-seekers' who made relatively few attempts at any time. The 'continuous affinity-seekers' were more likely to engage in one on one activities that were chosen by the child and to communicate warmth and understanding of children's needs and interests. Similarly, in a recent New Zealand qualitative study (Kinniburgh-White & Cartwright, 2010), five of the 25 young adult participants told narratives of continual positive regard in which relationships with stepfathers began positively and continued to develop and deepen across the childhood and adolescent years. These stepfathers were perceived as warm, supportive, and/or generous. The findings above suggest that affinity-seeking efforts may be more effective when continuously maintained and that stepparent discipline and

control behaviours may also influence relationship processes (Ganong & Coleman, 2004).

Ganong and Coleman (2004) suggest a key to understanding how stepchildren also affect relationship building efforts by stepparents may lay in how they define their relationships with both non-residential parents and stepparents. Frequent contact with non-residential parents may reduce the time available for stepparent-child interactions and lead stepparents to feel less inclined to be actively involved in parenting. Furthermore, involved non-residential parents may resent stepparent involvement and make it difficult for stepparents to take an active role in stepchildren's lives (Robertson, 2008). On the other hand, White and Gilbreth (2001) found support for an 'accumulation model' in which relationships with stepparents serve as additions to stepchildren's lives rather than as replacements, or at the expense of the non-residential parent relationship. Support for the 'accumulation model' is also found in Pryor's (2005) New Zealand study, which concludes that children are capable of adding parenting figures to their lives without needing to substitute or lose others. However, it may be that this is contingent on clear role and boundary definition. Ganong and Coleman (2004) speculate that children who are able to define their relationships and perceive their non-residential parent and stepparent as fulfilling unique and separate roles could be freer to develop close relationships with both adults and accepting of stepparents' affinity seeking gestures.

Qualitative research interviews by Svare et al. (2004) substantiate this assumption in their reporting that stepparents vary widely in the extent to which they are involved in parenting in response to a 'gap' in the divorced family and contingent upon the needs of the spouse, children, and stepparent. They conclude that an 'extended families' team approach characterised by the stepparent co-parenting with the biological parent in the home and a further extension to include the non-residential parent, while challenging, may be the optimal approach in that it offers "expanded opportunities for love, guidance, financial and human resources for the children" (p.96). These researchers conclude that as stepfamilies are not institutionalised forms, stepparenting approaches need to "expand or contract" as appropriate to fit the individual needs of the children and adults involved.

In a similar vein, Ganong and Coleman (2004) in an overview of the recent developments in stepfamily research, hypothesise that an effective stepparent moves in and out of the parent role as appropriate and is able to function like a parent while recognising that they are not a parent. This has been termed 'quasi-kin' and described as

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a cross between a parent and a friend (Ganong et al., 1999) or a role akin to that of aunt or uncle (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). It is suggested that the 'quasi-kin' model may be optimal for developing and enhancing stepparent-child relationships in that it demonstrates a degree of warmth (having fun, listening, empathising, and helping with problems) while providing structure (monitoring, and communicating expectations). Some dimensions of control may be exerted by the stepparent (monitoring, and assisting in enforcement of the parent's rules) but some are not (disciplining, and establishing new rules). The balance between engaging in daily parenting activities and taking a secondary or 'back foot' stance as the parent makes major decisions regarding children can be challenging and is an approach more often adopted with older and non-residential stepchildren (Ganong & Coleman, 2004).

Similarly, stepfamily clinicians, Visher and Visher (1996); and researchers and reviewers, Coleman et al. (2000) and Ganong and Coleman (2004) argue that the most conducive model for step-relations may be based on friendship. Fostering a friendship is less likely to elicit opposition from any party that may feel threatened, including non-residential parents (Ganong et al., 1999) and avoids the tensions, previously mentioned, in taking a disciplinary role.

Drawing on cognitive perspectives, Gamache (2007) further suggests that the parental status construct can be used to clarify the ways in which stepfamily members view the stepparent role. Stepfamily members and clinicians may use this construct as a way of communicating about the roles and expectations in the stepfamily and as a means of addressing issues of authority and discipline in the stepparent–child relationship. Clarifying stepfamily members' perceptions of parental status may also help members' understanding of each other and the attuning of expectations (Gamache, 2000, 2007).

Hence, as Braithwaite, Olsen, Golish, Soukup, and Turman (2001) assert, stepfamilies do not follow a single trajectory and, when viewed alone, developmental stage models over simplify and fail to recognise stepfamily processes and diversity. Furthermore, the findings suggest there may be a wide range of possible stepfamily relationships. Rather than one 'best' model there may more likely be a range of stepparenting models that are appropriate in different contexts (Gamache, 2000).

Overall then, the findings discussed suggest that many stepchildren experience difficulty in developing relationships with stepparents and may resist or rebel against stepparents

who adopt roles they do not agree with (Adler-Baeder, 2007; Kinniburgh-White & Cartwright, 2010). Further, the quality of the stepparent-child relationship may be influenced by a number of factors including the age and gender of the stepchild, contact with the non-residential parent, stepfamily complexity, and duration of time since the stepfamily formed (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). It has also been noted that the nature of the stepparent-child relationship is shaped by the attitudes and behaviours of the child as well as the stepparent (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992) and this, importantly, warrants further discussion below.

Children's Responses and Influence on Stepfamily Outcomes

Hetherington and Clingempeel (1992) have described stepparents as 'polite strangers' in the lives of their partner's children. Pryor (2005) describes attempts to achieve a role in the new family as a 'crawling occupation' in which attempts to build a relationship with their stepchildren are often rebuffed especially in the early years (Bray, 1999; Pryor, 2005). Clinicians assert that many stepparents attempt to fill the role of the parent (Ganong & Coleman, 2004), however as previously mentioned, children may be more likely to want a stepparent to be a friend (Cartwright et al, 2009; Fine et al., 1998; Pryor, 2005). As a result, initially enthusiastic stepparents can become frustrated, emotionally remote, less involved, and disengaged in the first years (Anderson, Greene, Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1999; Bray, 1999). This is substantiated by the research findings of an earlier longitudinal study (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992) in which hostility and externalising behaviour in adolescent stepchildren was associated with subsequent increases in negative, punitive, and coercive behaviours in stepparents. The researchers concluded that the adolescents in these stepfamilies had greater influence in shaping stepparents' behaviour than stepparents had in shaping stepchildren's behaviours in the early stages (2 years) of stepfamily life.

In this vein, some researchers (Anderson & White, 1986; Ceglian & Gardner, 2000; Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1997) suggest that, in fact, it may not be so much the level of involvement the stepparent has with the child that is critical but rather, whether that level is mutually acceptable. To this end, Anderson and White (1986) compared well adjusted stepfamilies and stepfamilies experiencing difficulties. The well adjusted stepfamilies reported reciprocal positive involvement between stepchildren and stepfathers and had overall healthier functioning. A similar study (Brown, Green & Druckman, 1990) compared stepfamilies with and without child focused problems and found that the

amount of nurturing, befriending, and discipline by the stepparents in each group did not differ, but the children in the problem group responded less reciprocally to the stepparents' initiatives. Hence, the findings point to the significant influence of children in stepfamilies.

In line with these findings, clinicians who work with stepfamilies often encourage stepparents to build initial bonds slowly while allowing children to take the lead as to how fast the relationship develops (Papernow, 2008; Visher & Visher, 1994). Over-involved behaviour by the stepparent when it is unwanted by children may in fact be counter-productive (Crosbie-Burnett, 1984). A longitudinal Australian study of stepfamilies in the early stages of formation by Funder (1996) exploring stepparent involvement on the child's wellbeing, showed that children who liked their stepfather were not only happier at home but that 'liking' was associated more strongly with happiness than high involvement with the stepparent. The children who were happier at home were those who reported low involvement with a stepfather whom they liked, followed by children who had no direct involvement with a stepfather they liked. Children in a 'cold stand-off' with little involvement nor affection for their stepfather were the unhappiest indicating that the patterns of involvement and affection/liking have a significant impact on children's happiness and perhaps ultimately the success of the stepparent-child relationship.

As well as establishing distance, stepchildren can also behave in ways that foster a closer relationship with their stepparent. Some children are observed engaging in deliberate affinity seeking behaviours such as playing games or expressing affection toward stepparents (Ganong et al., 1999). This may be easier for children when they perceive the stepparent is also making an effort to build a relationship with them and when they ideally would like their stepparent to behave more like a biological parent (Ganong et al., 1999). Younger children particularly may also be more open to fostering relationships with stepparents (Hogan, Halpenny, & Greene, 2003).

These anomalies in degrees of involvement and closeness preferred by stepchildren may be partially explained by further recent qualitative studies. There is evidence to suggest that stepchildren experience inner contradictions in relationships with stepparents, which may result in some stepchildren maintaining emotional distance from stepparents, while simultaneously desiring closeness (Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004). Further 'dialectic' tensions may be experienced through a preference for authority to

reside with parents, while also expressing a desire for the stepparent to share this authority; and desiring open communication with stepparents, while resisting closeness and communicating with a lack of candour (Baxter et al., 2004).

Similarly, Afifi and Schrodt (2003) found that adolescents and young adult stepchildren experienced more uncertainty about family relationships than peers in first-marriage families and were more likely to engage in topic avoidance with stepparents. From a family systems perspective, this may be recognised as a normative process of developing into a functioning stepfamily (Browning, Collins, & Nelson, 2006; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington, 1999a; Papernow, 2008) in that the redefinition of internal boundaries involving rules, roles, tasks, and close ties within the stepfamily is required as well as external boundaries, defining who is or is not part of the stepfamily (Bray, 1999; Hetherington, 1999a). As such, clinicians and researchers have observed that stepparents often feel like 'outsiders' because of pre-existing ties between residential parents and children (Kelly, 1996; Papernow, 2008). Stepfamily members may also disagree on who is considered 'in' or 'out' of their stepfamily (Schmeeckle, Giarrusso, & Du Feng, 2006) and use communication as a way to demarcate boundaries (Afifi, 2008; Baxter et al., 2006). For example, Golish and Caughlin (2002) suggest that children may avoid talking about certain topics with their stepparents as a way of signalling that they are not yet part of the family. In addition, stepfamily members may establish metaphorical 'privacy boundaries' around themselves, or relationships within the stepfamily, in order to control personal information that is perceived private (Caughlin, Golish, Olsen, Sargent, Cook, & Petronio, 2000). They are more like to share personal information with one another when a sense of solidarity and trust has developed (Petronio, 2002). These findings help explain the contradictions and ambivalence some stepchildren display towards stepparents. They also signal the value of furthering research efforts towards understanding the role of children's cognitions on the development of the stepparent-child relationship.

Conclusion and Study Aims

In summary, the stepparent-child relationship is perhaps the most complex and challenging relationship to foster within the stepfamily. While clinicians identify the development of positive stepparent-child relationships as an important task of stepfamily life (Browning et al., 2006; Papernow, 2008; Visher & Visher, 1996), researchers are

only beginning to understand those factors and processes that may (or may not) contribute to adaptive and satisfying stepparent-child relationships. It seems that stepparents have the difficult task of developing a role and relationship with stepchildren and managing issues of ambiguity, control, and authority; stepchildren must often contend with their desire for openness and closeness in the face of similar feelings of uncertainty, avoidance, and resistance towards stepparents' efforts to exert authority and have a presence in their life (Baxter et al., 2004; Schrodt, 2006b). Given the influence of stepchildren and the ambiguity associated with the stepparent role, it is important to continue to investigate adults' and children's perceptions of the stepparent role and the relationship between perceptions of ideal stepparenting roles and satisfaction with stepfamily relationships.

Further research is, therefore, required to investigate the types of stepparent responses and roles that are acceptable to children and conducive with their adjustment. The findings suggest several possible roles that stepparents can adopt such as 'parent', 'stepparent', 'quasi-kin', and 'friend'. However, although the dimensions of discipline/control and warmth/support appear to be important in fostering adaptive stepparent-child relationships, research, to date, has primarily considered the perspective of adults in stepfamilies, leading some researchers (Amato, 1994; Baxter et al., 2004; Dunn, Davies, O'Connor, & Sturgess, 2001; Gamache, 1997) to call for greater attention to the experiences of children in stepfamilies. Additionally, Coleman et al. (2000) and Portrie and Hill (2005) have argued for the importance of including qualitative studies with a focus on the more in-depth perspectives of all stepfamily members.

In response to these gaps in the literature, this thesis aims to investigate the stepparent and parent roles from the perspective of adults and children living in stepfamilies. This thesis study includes a questionnaire study (as outlined in the abstract) that uses quantitative measures to examine ideal parent and stepparent roles; and an interview study that investigates adults' and children's perceptions of these roles. Comparisons between simple and complex stepfamily systems are also considered.

Hence, through a qualitative and quantitative research approach, the overall aims of this thesis study are:

1. To investigate parents', stepparents', and stepchildren's perceptions of the ideal stepparent and parent roles in terms of warmth/support and discipline/control parenting behaviours in stepfamilies.

2. To compare the perceptions and expectations of adults with those of children.

3. To examine the relationship between ideal stepparent role perceptions and satisfaction with the stepparent-child and parent-child relationships; and stepfamily satisfaction.

This study will contribute to the understanding of the roles adopted by adults in stepfamilies and the views held by stepfamily members of stepfamily roles. The findings will further contribute to stepfamily systems theory and cognitive theory relating to the stepfamily system. This will be useful in both explaining stepfamily functioning and informing interventions that may be appropriate to support adaptive functioning in stepfamilies. As this research project sits in the domain of psychology, the research aims to add to the body of research knowledge about stepfamilies, as well as be clinically useful to stepfamily members and the clinicians who work with them. The following chapter provides an overview of the methodology and procedures of the study.

Chapter Two
Research Methodology

It is important to outline the methodology that underpins this present study. Because stepfamilies present complex issues, a multi-strategy approach was taken. Drawing on findings from previous stepfamily research (Fine et al., 1998), a quantitative approach was incorporated to complement and augment the predominantly qualitative approach of the study. Twenty-six stepfamilies with 52 adults and 51 children completed a number of quantitative measures in which they rated aspects of parenting behaviours for the ideal stepparent and parent roles, their satisfaction with stepfamily relationships, and the stepfamily situation. Interviews were also conducted with 20 of these stepfamilies including 40 adults and 44 children.

Two methods of data analysis were used in this study. A thematic analysis allowed for an investigation of the common core themes that emerged across the participant interviews with regard to stepfamily members' perceptions of the stepparent and parent role. This analysis was derived from the data obtained from semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 20 participant stepfamilies. The second, quantitative analysis examined participants' expectations and perceptions of the ideal stepparent and parent role. This analysis was derived from the data obtained from the completed self-report questionnaires of 26 participant stepfamilies.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the epistemological orientation and methodological considerations of this study. It presents the methods of the study, including data collection and data analysis. A discussion of the merits considered in adopting the dual approach is also provided. This is followed by a description of the qualitative and quantitative methods and the procedures of analyses adopted in this study.

Epistemological Orientation

Although some positivist researchers argue that positivist and post-positivist paradigms are incompatible, others (e.g., Kelle, 2006; Morse, Niehaus, Wolfe, & Wilkins, 2006; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003) take an integrationist position and argue that quantitative and qualitative approaches can be used in a complementary way to study a given phenomenon of inquiry. I am interested in the integrationist position and in finding ways

of utilising the strengths of qualitative approaches to complement research from the traditional quantitative paradigm. Because this thesis study is within the field of stepfamily research and my emphasis on research outcomes that will contribute to theory development and be clinically useful, the assumptions underlying this research have more in common with critical realist assumptions (Robson, 2002) than with alternative paradigms. However, this research is also influenced and shares concerns with the approaches that fall under an interpretive phenomenological framework (Smith & Osborn, 2008). These critical realist and post-positivist influences will be discussed further now.

Interpretive qualitative research aims to investigate how participants make sense of their personal and social worlds and is particularly interested in the meanings that experiences, events, or states hold for participants (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Interpretive qualitative approaches have their philosophical roots in phenomenology, which examines participants' lived experience and the 'lived meanings' that their everyday experiences hold (van Manen, 2006). Grounded in personal experience, the interpretive research approach is concerned with an individual's personal perception or account of an object or event as opposed to the production of an objective statement of the object or event (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Interpretive approaches place emphasis on the human capacity for reflection on self and experience. They argue that as human beings, we interpret the events that occur in our lives while reflecting upon and making sense of ourselves and others. As we engage in interpretive activity, the interpretations and meanings we make influence our perceptions and how we respond in the future (Merriam, 2002b). Hence, the interpretive perspective is compatible with the cognitive perspective in stepfamily research as the cognitive perspective emphasises the cognitive processing of stepfamily relationships and events. Both place emphasis on meaning-making activity.

In the present study, I am interested in stepfamily members' perceptions and expectations of the stepparent and parent role; and how they make sense of and give meaning to these roles. Importantly, however, as Smith and Osborn (2008) assert, access to the participant's personal world and an 'insider's perspective' depends on, and is complicated by, the researcher's own conceptions: "The participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world" (p. 53). Thus, in this study, a two-stage interpretation process is involved as I, as researcher, engage in interpretation of their interpretations of the

stepparent and parent roles. Although a self-aware researcher can minimise the influence of her perspective (van Manen, 2006), it is acknowledged and accepted that many aspects of this research will be influenced by the interplay between researcher, participant, and subject matter.

It is perhaps timely then at this point in the thesis to acknowledge my own interests and personal experience with the subject matter of this study. Although not currently residing in a stepfamily, my children and I experienced stepfamily living for a period of one year some eight years ago. I acknowledge I have direct experience and can relate with some of the content of the participants' experiences. I believe that, on the whole, this has enhanced my engagement with the material and rapport with participants rather than an alternate possible outcome of personal investment in the outcomes of the study (the research approaches I used to ensure the validity of the analysis are outlined later in this chapter).

Interpretive research approaches can also be placed within or share assumptions with a social constructivist framework (Madill, Jordan, & Shirley, 2000). As previously discussed, interpretive research places emphasis on how individuals construct meaning within social situations and experiences. I recognise the impact of culture, especially cultural ideas of family, on peoples' experiences of self and others in families. However, the emphasis on lived experience and the attempt to understand the specific experiences undergone by individuals, present in this study, situates the approach within a critical realist framework (Cartwright, 2003; Crossley, 2000). Because I aim for this research to be clinically applicable, my epistemological orientation is furthermore slanted towards the critical realist position. Hence, although I acknowledge that the views of my participants will necessarily be coloured by the process in which they were recounted and interpreted, they must be accepted as having a basis in the participants' realities if they are to be of use in guiding stepfamily members or those working with stepfamilies.

Methodological Considerations

Historically, psychological research has developed out of a positivist perspective within a highly quantitative field (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). The positivist paradigm focuses on efforts to verify or falsify a *priori* hypotheses based on the assumption that reality exists and is apprehendable through the use of scientific methods (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). A criticism of this paradigm by many psychology researchers has been that it is guided by

the belief in a single objective reality, that human behaviour is predictable, and all behaviour has a distinct cause (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). However, it is arguable that psychological research rarely fits this profile and prediction of behaviour is probabilistic at best (Kelle, 2006; Waszak & Sines, 2003). In order to be able to investigate aspects of human experience more fully, a proliferation of qualitative approaches have developed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Merriam, 2002b). While these approaches are diverse and sometimes opposed in their methodological and epistemological orientation, they share a number of characteristics that distinguish them as qualitative approaches (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

Firstly, qualitative research often places importance on obtaining an emic (or insider) view of the phenomenon of inquiry (Bryman, 2001; Cartwright & Seymour, 2002). This present study places value on understanding peoples' perceptions and expectations of the parent and stepparent role from the perspective of parents, stepparents, and stepchildren who are living in stepfamilies and currently experiencing the phenomenon of inquiry. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Coleman et al. (2000) in their review of stepfamily research, called for an increase in qualitative studies to focus on understanding "the experiences, perceptions and reflections" of stepfamily members (p.1307). In an earlier review, Ganong and Coleman (1994) stressed the importance of understanding the views of all stepfamily members rather than interpreting views from one group of informants alone (e.g., stepparents or parents). In line with these recommendations, the present study was designed to include face-to-face interviews with parents, stepparents, and stepchildren.

Second, this valuing of the emic view often leads to a more in-depth exploration of the phenomenon of inquiry from a smaller sample of participants (Cartwright, 2003; Merriam, 2002a). In this study approximately 70 hours of interview data were obtained from individual interviews with 40 adults and 44 stepchildren. This lead to the generation of 'information-rich' (Merriam, 2002a) data that has been analysed using the qualitative methods of analysis described later in this chapter.

In regard to research outcomes, qualitative research is often focused on the development of understanding in contrast to an emphasis on generalisable findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Merriam, 2002b). However, some qualitative researchers have explored the use of quantitative techniques for richer exploration and cross-validation of qualitative data (Waszak & Sines, 2003). Some quantification of findings from qualitative research may

be helpful in uncovering the generality of the phenomena being described (Bryman, 2001). Of similar merit, researchers in the field of psychology have posited that the adoption of a dual methods approach involving qualitative methods in conjunction with more traditional quantitative methods allows a researcher to take a more constructionist view when data derived from positivist-orientated studies yield results that are limited or not useful (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). In this way, qualitative research can and does contribute toward the development of generalisations (Baum, 1995).

The theoretical drive of this research was predominantly one of investigation rather than testing, however, the findings of Fine and Kurdek (1994a, 1994b) and Fine et al. (1998) allowed for the generation of research questions and the exploratory testing of assumptions. A research design that placed greatest emphasis on the collection of qualitative data was most suited to investigate more fully adults' and stepchildren's perceptions of the parent and stepparent role and processes that underlay these. Self-report inventories developed by Fine et al. (1998) were used and provided a deductive platform from which the more predominant inductive qualitative approach of interviewing was embarked upon. Adopting a dual approach, this study uses quantitative data gathered from the self-report inventories to complement the primary qualitative data gathered from semi-structured interviews. Utilising these two types of research approaches allows the researcher to both measure and attempt to explain the perceptions and expectations that stepfamily members in this study reported (Morse et al., 2006). The specific methods and procedures used in collecting the data and conducting the analyses are now presented.

Methods

This study utilised quantitative and qualitative research methods to investigate stepfamily members' perceptions and expectations of ideal parent and stepparent roles within the stepfamily. Qualitative data was obtained through face-to-face interviews with participants. Completion of the self-report questionnaire produced quantitative data. This section of the chapter outlines the methods used in the present study. Ethical approval for this research was granted by the University of Auckland Participants Ethics Committee.

Participants

Participant stepfamilies were recruited in several ways. A significant number of stepfamilies *(n=14)* were sourced from a data base of adults in the 'Families in

Transition Study' conducted between the University of Auckland and the Roy McKenzie Centre for Family Studies at Victoria University. A large proportion of these stepfamilies *(n=12)* included an adult who had completed a 4 hour educational programme called 'Children in the Middle'. A researcher collating the data base initially contacted participants to gather demographic information and consent to participate in future family research projects. I then telephoned those adults who agreed to participate in future studies and who were residing in stepfamilies, and invited them to participate in the current thesis research project. The additional stepfamilies *(n=11)* were recruited through advertisements and articles placed in several school newsletters and local newspapers. Adults living in stepfamilies were invited to contact me by telephone or email which I followed up by way of a return telephone call. Information about the study was also disseminated through the University of Auckland psychology student email list and research intranet site. Word of mouth was also used, although in respect of ethical boundaries, acquaintances and work colleagues were not recruited.

Participants were selected from stepfamilies in which the parent, stepparent and a child (aged between 9 and 18 years) were currently residing for at least 50 percent of the time and had been doing so for at least six months. Participation required consensus from both adults and at least one child to take part in the study. In the case of stepfamilies with more than one child, all children meeting the age criteria were invited to participate.

Twenty-six stepfamilies participated in the questionnaire study. Four stepfamilies were stepmother stepfamilies, eight were stepfather stepfamilies, and 14 were complex stepfamilies. Eleven of the complex stepfamilies were households in which both adults' children were living in the stepfamily at least 50 percent of the time. Three of the complex stepfamilies were households in which one of the adult's children was living in the household on a regular basis less than 50 percent of the time. Fourteen of the stepfamilies had been living together for three to eight years. Twelve of the stepfamilies had lived together for less than three years. Fifty-one stepchildren (28 male and 23 female) from the 26 stepfamilies participated in the study. Eighteen of the children were residing in simple stepfamilies and 33 of the children were residing in complex stepfamilies. Twenty-four percent of the stepchildren were between 9 and 10 years. The remaining 76 percent pre/adolescents were between 11 and 18 years.

The majority (20 from 26) of the participant stepfamilies agreed to take part in completing both the questionnaire and interview studies. Of these 20 stepfamilies, seven

were simple stepfamilies and 13 were complex stepfamilies. Forty-four children from the 20 stepfamilies participated in the study. Twelve of the children were residing in simple stepfamilies and 32 of the children were residing in complex stepfamilies.

The participant stepfamilies were generally New Zealand European of middle socioeconomic status, residing in Auckland. Three of the adult participants identified themselves as Western European, and two participants as New Zealand Maori.

Data Collection Procedures

Initial conversation with participant stepfamilies was by way of a telephone call with an adult in the stepfamily. After screening for eligibility, I explained that the research was focused on understanding more about parents, stepparents and children's views about relating to each other in a stepfamily and I was interested in all the members' views about ideal stepparent and parent roles. I explained that the study was in two parts and that the family could choose to take part in the written questionnaire only, or both the questionnaire and interview. At this point, most participants wished to speak to their families before making the decision for the family to take part. I reiterated that while I would appreciate their taking part in both studies they were under no pressure to do so and, if they did agree to take part, they could withdraw from the study at any time. Adult and child versions of a Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix A) were posted out to the families to provide further information and a time to call back was made.

The families that agreed to take part in the interview study were given a choice of locations for the interview, either at their home, their workplace if this was more convenient for one of the adults, or an office at the university if preferred. All of the stepfamilies chose to be interviewed in their homes at a single time, either on one evening or during the day on a weekend. They also chose to complete the questionnaires at the time of the interviews rather than them being posted out prior to the interviews.

A further six families consented to completing the questionnaire component of the study only. Participant Information Sheets, a questionnaire pack, and stamped return envelopes were posted to these families. All packs were completed and returned.

The Interview Schedule

Face-to-face interviews were conducted individually with participants to develop an understanding of parents', stepparents', and stepchildren's views of the parent and stepparent role. The interview schedule for this study was developed using guidelines for

preparing and administering a semi-structured interview (Robson, 2002). The semi-structured interview method of data collection offers consistency and structure while affording flexibility (Robson, 2002) and the opportunity for clarification and extension if responses are unclear or vague. Furthermore, engagement in open-ended questioning may result in rich and in-depth data, leading to an understanding of issues that differ from what the researcher anticipated (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003).

The semi-structured interview in the present study consisted of a schedule of questions pertaining to a vignette, followed by a series of open-ended questions eliciting participants' views about parent and stepparent roles. This method has been used previously to investigate perceptions of the stepparent role (Schwebel, Fine, & Renner, 1991) and parent role (Moore & Cartwright, 2005) in stepfamilies; and the responsibilities of non-custodial fathers towards their children (Ganong & Coleman, 1999). Questions were asked of participants following the presentation of a stepfamily vignette. The vignette and open-ended schedules are outlined below (see Appendix E for the interview schedule including the vignettes).

Vignette

In the present study, the vignette was developed to focus on the stepparent role in regard to first, the warmth/support and second, the control/discipline dimensions of parenting. Two versions of the vignette (child and adolescent) were designed so as to be developmentally appropriate and realistic for the age of the children in the family interviewed. The gender of the child in each vignette was matched to the gender of the participating child. Each version described situations in which the stepfamily encountered a problem or opportunity to which the stepparent could respond (e.g., *John moved school this year. Although he thinks the new school is okay, he is finding it hard to make new friends. He is also finding the new maths programme hard to understand and is worried that he is not keeping up with the class. Who should talk to John about this, the parent or the stepparent, and can you tell me why? What do you think it would be like if the stepparent tried?*). For each situation, questions were asked eliciting participants' views on, (a) who in the stepfamily should respond to the situation, and (b) how it would be for the stepchild if the stepparent responded. This was developed as an opportunity to further investigate participants' perceptions of the stepparent role, particularly in relation to the parent role.

Open ended questions

In the second half of the interview, participants were asked a number of questions to elicit their personal views about the parent and stepparent roles in general. As a bridge from the vignette, and to encourage ease of disclosure, I emphasised that there was no right or wrong answers; rather they could draw on the ideas they had formed from personal or others' experiences to answer the questions. To promote further ease, the schedule opened with a general and positive focus on their perceptions of stepfamily life, and the remaining questions throughout the schedule were asked in the third person tense (e.g., *What kinds of things do you think children find difficult or don't like in stepfamilies?*). Furthermore, the wording of questions for children was constructed differently to adult interviews in order to fit the needs and abilities of children (see Appendix E).

Initial questions in the schedule were designed to elicit ideas and ideals of stepfamily, and perceived similarities and differences between the parent and stepparent roles (e.g., *What do you think the parent's role is in the family? What do you think the stepparent's role is in the family? Do the roles differ in anyway? How are they the same?*).

A list of prompt questions was developed to encourage depth and breadth to the scope of the subject discussed and for clarification (e.g., *Are there things you think a stepparent should do or work well? Are there things you think a stepparent shouldn't do or don't work well?*). Generally, the prompt questions were used once participants had exhausted their initial train of thought and if pertinent expected areas of address within the scope of the question had not been verbalised. Additional questions were asked in relation to the importance of the number of years living in a stepfamily and finally advice they would give, based on their experiences. This was designed to gain further insight into their expectations of the parent and stepparent roles, and further explore the complexities of, and influences on the perceived stepfamily member roles.

Interview Procedure

Forty adults and 44 children completed individual face-to-face interviews. Parents were encouraged to talk to children prior to my arrival to ascertain if they were still comfortable about doing the interview, and to convey their permission to their child/ren for them to talk as freely as they felt comfortable about their views and stepfamily life. The order of the interviews within the family was chosen by the participants themselves. At the beginning of each interview the participant was given another explanation of the

study and the specific interview process. This addressed the information they had been given in the Participant Information Sheet. I explained that I was particularly interested in their personal views; especially given they had experience of living in a stepfamily. I also explained that the interview was confidential and that I would not discuss what they said with other members of their stepfamily, unless I learnt of something that was significantly concerning about their or someone else's safety. The interviews were audio-taped and it was explained that the tape or the interview could be stopped at any point if the participant was uncomfortable. Adults were asked to sign a consent form prior to the interview. Children were asked to sign an assent form which was signed also by their parent prior to each interview.

The individual adult interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. The individual interviews with children lasted between 20 and 45 minutes. Stepfamily members were asked to refrain from discussing their interview experience with each other until after all the members had completed their interviews. I encouraged the family to discuss their experience of the interview with each other afterwards and offered the parent support in finding a qualified counsellor should any need arise. As discussed above, the interview began with the introduction of the vignettes followed by open ended questions.

Self-Report Questionnaire

Questionnaires were completed by the parent, stepparent, and stepchildren participants at the time of face-to-face interview. As previously mentioned, a further six stepfamilies who declined to take part in the interviews, completed self-report questionnaire. The questionnaire schedule consisted of a battery of self-report instruments: the Step/Parent Behaviour Inventory, the Stepparent Role Questionnaire, and the Stepfamily Relationship Satisfaction Scale. Each of these measures is outlined below.

The Step/Parent Behaviour Inventory (SPBI)

This Step/Parent Behaviour Inventory (SPBI) is an adaptation of the Stepparent Behaviour Inventory (SBI) (Fine et al., 1998) measuring role expectations (see Appendix D). Nine items in the SBI assess the discipline/control dimension of parenting and nine items assess the warmth/support dimension of parenting. Using a Likert scale from one to seven (rarely or never to extremely often or always), respondents are asked to rate how actively a stepparent should *ideally* engage in the parenting behaviours and how often they *actually* behave in these ways. For the purpose of this thesis, the SBI (Fine et al., 1998) was adapted (with permission from the authors) to include a rating scale for the

parent role additional to the stepparent role. This provides for a comparison between the parent role and the stepparent role for both adults and children. Because the current thesis aims to investigate participants' perceptions and expectations of the stepparent and parent role, respondents were asked to rate how actively the stepparent and the parent should *ideally* engage in the parenting behaviours (e.g., adults and children were asked to rate, *How often do you personally believe each adult ideally should behave in these ways in a stepfamily?*). Parallel items to rate were provided for the parent role and the stepparent role. The child version of the inventory was adapted with language appropriate for child and adolescent participants where necessary (see Appendix D).

The Stepparent Role Questionnaire (SRQ)

This questionnaire was also developed by Fine et al. (1998) and assesses labels assigned to the *ideal* and *actual* role of the stepparent. Stepparents are given a list of possible labels such as 'friend, teacher, parent, aunt or uncle, stepparent etc.' and are asked to choose which relationship best describes their ideal way of relating with their stepchild, and which label best describes their actual current relationship. Because I was investigating participants' perceptions and expectations of the ideal stepparent role, only the *ideal* role descriptor was used for the purposes of this study. For example, stepparents were asked, *Which relationship best describes your ideal way to relate to your stepchildren?* Parallel questions were asked of parents and stepchildren regarding the stepparent role (see Appendix D).

The Stepfamily Relationship Satisfaction Scale (SRSS)

This scale has been developed for this study and measures general levels of perceived closeness and relationship satisfaction between the parent, stepparent and child dyads as well as the stepfamily unit as a whole (see Appendix D). Using a Likert scale from 1 to 5 (not at all to very much), participants were asked to '*circle the number which seems to be most close to how things are for you*' in relation to the level of satisfaction with the stepfamily situation and the family relationships. Adults were asked to rate levels of satisfaction in terms of their relationships with biological children and the stepchildren living in the household at least 50 percent of the time. Children were asked to rate levels of satisfaction in terms of their relationships with parents and stepparents in the stepfamily household taking part in this study.

Questionnaire procedure

As mentioned previously, 20 stepfamilies (consisting of 40 adults and 44 stepchildren) completed the questionnaires in their homes at the time of their face-to-face individual interviews. Questionnaires were completed individually prior to each participant's interview and collected by the researcher at the time to ensure confidentiality. Participants were asked to refrain from discussing or sharing their responses with each other until all participant family members had completed their face-to-face interviews.

A further six stepfamilies (comprising of 12 adults and 7 stepchildren), who had declined a face-to-face interview, completed the questionnaires via post. Each of these families received a questionnaire pack which included a Participant Information Sheet, a set of the written self-report instruments, and an individual envelope for each participant. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaires independently to protect confidentiality and avoid influencing each others' opinions. Parents were asked to explain the instruments to children but allow them to complete the questionnaires privately. Individual envelopes were enclosed for each participant to seal their completed questionnaires in and for placement in a larger stamped envelope provided for return to the university by post.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

Data from the collected questionnaires were entered into SPSS version 17. Data screening indicated that the item and scale scores were not normally distributed, and therefore, non-parametric tests were used to answer the research questions. Also, due to the large number of individual tests, a more stringent alpha of .001 was used to control for Type 1 error. Analyses were performed and interpreted in consultation with a consultant familiar with statistical analyses in psychology research. The following tests were performed on the data; descriptive analyses, Chi-square, Wilcoxon signed ranks, Mann-Whitney U, and Spearman's rho correlations. The quantitative results are presented in Chapter Six of the thesis.

Qualitative Analysis

The completion of the face-to-face interviews with the participants resulted in data for qualitative analysis. Each participant interview was initially transcribed in full by a professional transcriber. The interviews were verbatim, with repetitions, incomplete

sentences, and pauses included. I listened to the audio-tape recordings and examined the participant stepfamily transcriptions to familiarise myself with the data and to check the accuracy of transcription.

In order to examine and compare the adults' and stepchildren's perceptions of the parent and stepparent role, the initial interview data was divided into two data sets: adult participants' responses and child participants' responses. Each of these data sets was then divided into two categories of data. The first category within the two data sets included all comments that were made by participants in relation to the behaviour or responsibility of a parent in a stepfamily. These data sets were titled Parent Role – Adults' Views; Parent Role – Children's Views. The second category within each data set included all comments that were made by participants in relation to a stepparent behaviour or responsibility. These data sets were titled Stepparent Role – Adults' Views; Stepparent Role – Children's Views. Data from this second category was systematically examined to explore participants' perceptions of the stepparent role. Comments describing discipline and control dimensions of parenting were put into categories titled Discipline and Control – Adults' Views; Discipline and Control – Children's Views. All segments of data that involved comments describing warmth and support parenting behaviours were put into categories titled Warmth and Support – Adults' Views; Warmth and Support – Children's Views (see Figure 1 for a diagrammatic representation of this process below).

Figure 1. *Generation of the categories of data*
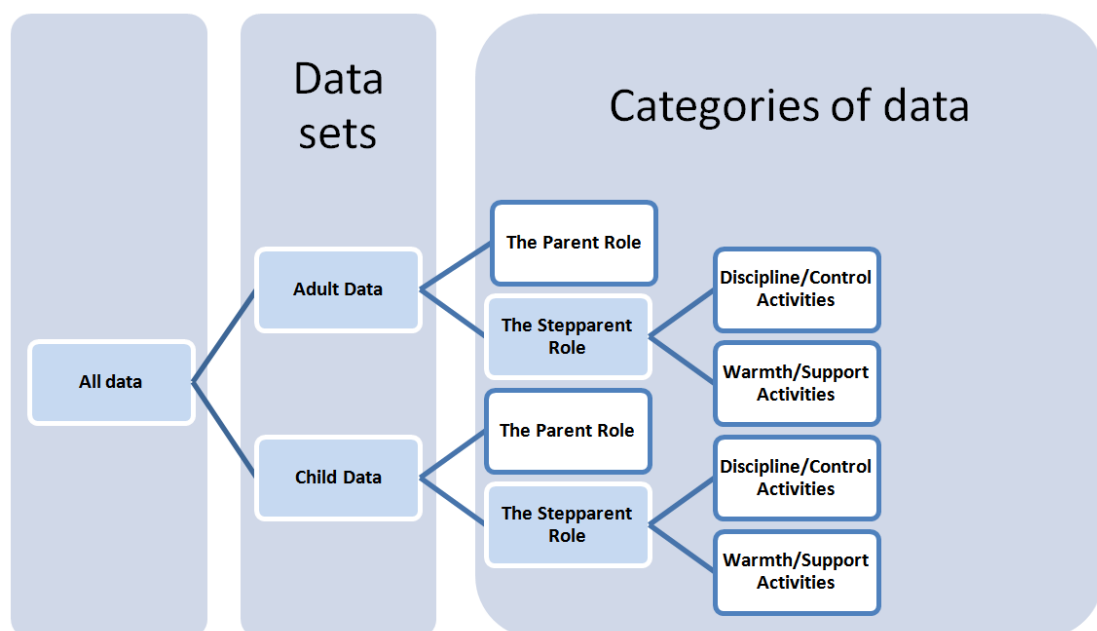
Note. In summary, six categories of data were established. These include: The Parent Role, The Stepparent Role – Discipline/Control Activities, and The Stepparent Role – Warmth /Support Activities for each adults' views and children's views.

A thematic analysis was then conducted on each of the six categories of data using the methods described by Braun and Clarke (2006) outlined below. The qualitative computer package NVivo version 7 was used to assist with the management of the data.

Generating initial codes and searching for themes

This phase of the thematic analysis involved the production of initial codes once I had read and familiarised oneself with the data. Coding depends, to some degree, on whether analyses are "theory driven", therefore, employing a more deductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). In the present analysis, the generation of initial codes pertaining to the parent role; and the stepparent role in relation to the warmth/support and discipline/control dimensions of parenting, was guided by established theories of parenting behaviour.

Preliminary coding of the data sets was done manually. This entailed an examination of all segments of data from ten of the adult and ten of the child participants initially. This process was the same for each data set. The data were printed out and notes were written in the margins of the texts identifying codes. These were then colour coded to give a visual representation of each code (Bowling, 2002; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

A more inductive approach was then employed in the coding of the data within these sets. This entailed working systematically through each data set, giving full and equal attention to each data item and, thereby, allowing a basis of repeated patterns or themes to form as described below.

Defining and naming themes

The data was examined to see which groups of codes represented a theme. Themes are broader than codes; therefore, a theme will often group together several codes. Analysis of the codes involves consideration of the relationship between codes and how different codes may combine to form an overarching theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For example, many adults in the present study thought that the stepparent and the parent ought ideally to share an equal disciplinary role. A number of these participants described factors which in reality prevented them from achieving or pursuing this goal. These factors were coded (disagreement between the parent and stepparent, quality of the stepparent-child relationship, longevity of the stepfamily and age of the stepchild) and formed the theme of 'Impediments to an ideal'. Using this process, three themes were identified in each of

the six categories. Each theme produced a number of sub-themes providing structure and bringing coherence to the main theme (see Table 1).

Reviewing themes

The entire data from all 40 adult and 44 child participant responses were then re-examined and placed into the themes using the NVivo software package. All themes were then reviewed to ensure they were coherent, discrete, and internally consistent. The validity of the individual themes was also considered in terms of fit to the data set and their combined ability to "'accurately reflect[s] the meanings evident in the data set as a whole" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91). For example, three themes ('Sharing the disciplinary role', 'Impediments to an ideal', and 'Parent maintains primary disciplinary role') emerged within the category titled Discipline and Control – Adults' Views representing the three divergent positions that were held by individuals in the adult group regarding the stepparent role. Combined, these themes (to be presented in Chapter Three) provide an accurate reflection of the views of the adult group as a whole.

The thematic analysis was then peer-reviewed by another researcher in the field of family relationships who examined the proposed themes, and at least thirty percent of the data for fit under each assigned theme. When discrepancies occurred, regarding either the themes or sections of data within the themes, this was discussed until agreement was reached and amendments made. The integrity of analysis was overseen by my primary supervisor who also reviewed sections of the proposed themes provided checks in regard to the quality of analysis and thematic clarity.

Producing the report

It is important that additional measures for assessing the trustworthiness of findings are considered, particularly in that precise replication is usually very difficult in qualitative research. To this end, the validity of qualitative research relies heavily on the credibility of the description of the process of analysis and the plausibility of the approach the researcher has taken (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The descriptions of the process of data analysis, and the descriptions of the findings should be of sufficient detail to provide an audit trail from which the credibility of the decisions made in the course of the research, and the validity of the findings may be judged by the reader (Merriam, 2002a). Discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of the research and the process of analysis in the present study are intended to provide transparency and enough information for the reader to assess for oneself the reliability and validity of these findings.

In addition, the descriptors as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) of most, many, some or few are used at times to indicate the salience and provide sufficient evidence of the themes within the data. However, the number of participants whose data falls within themes is also given in order to be able to compare the proportions of participants holding similar or different views. Quotes are provided to illustrate salient features expressed through the themes, however, participant names have been changed or omitted to protect confidentiality. The quotes, nonetheless, represent a broad cross section of the participants.

Each theme will be discussed in detail in the next chapters of this thesis followed by a presentation of results derived from the quantitative analyses in Chapter Six. Chapter Three presents the results from the thematic analysis of the discipline and control dimensions of parenting in relation to the stepparent role. Chapter Four presents the results from the thematic analysis of the warmth and support dimensions of parenting in relation to the stepparent role. Chapter Five presents the results from the thematic analysis of participants' perceptions of the parent role in the stepfamily.

In that none of the participants believed that a parent should abdicate from their preordained disciplinary or nurturing role on entering a stepfamily, the direction of discussion within the 'Discipline and Control' and 'Warmth and Support' categories largely pertains to participants' views of the stepparent role in relation to the parent role in these domains. Discussion within the 'Parent Role' category describes participants' views of the parent role specific to the stepfamily system, and additional to their upheld traditional disciplinary and nurturing role prior to stepfamily living.

An overview of the themes emerging from these three categories of data (Discipline and Control, Warmth and Support, Parent Role) is presented in Table 1 below. Additional tables at the beginning of Chapter Three, Chapter Four, and Chapter Five provide an overview of the themes and sub-themes relevant to the data presented in each chapter.

Table 1

Overview of the categories of data and themes

ADULTS' VIEWS	CHILDREN'S VIEWS
THE STEPPARENT ROLE	THE STEPPARENT ROLE

Discipline and Control
  ❖ Sharing the disciplinary role
  ❖ Impediments to an ideal
  ❖ Parent maintains primary disciplinary role
	Discipline and Control
	  ❖ Stepparents can discipline too
	  ❖ Sharing discipline but only if...
	  ❖ Disciplining is the parent's job

Warmth and Support
  ❖ Sharing the warmth and support role
  ❖ Considerations on the ideal
  ❖ Parent as primary caregiver
	Warmth and Support
	  ❖ Stepparents can care and help too
	  ❖ Caring and helping but only if...
	  ❖ Stepparent as friend

THE PARENT ROLE	THE PARENT ROLE

Parent Role Within the Stepfamily
  ❖ Facilitating transition and stepfamily cohesion
  ❖ Managing boundary and loyalty conflicts
  ❖ Nurturing the parent-child relationship
	Parent Role Within the Stepfamily
	  ❖ Helping children get used to stepfamily life
	  ❖ Making things happy and fair
	  ❖ Checking in and talking

Chapter Three

Thematic Analysis: Discipline and Control

This chapter presents the results of thematic analysis of adults' and children's views of the stepparent role in relation to the discipline and control dimensions of parenting. Three themes emerged from the analyses of the Adult and Child categories of data, which will be discussed below. The themes emerging from the Adult data are titled: Sharing the disciplinary role, Impediments to the ideal, and Parent maintains primary disciplinary role. Themes emerging from the Child data are titled: Stepparents can discipline too, Sharing discipline but only if..., and Disciplining is the parent's job. Table 2 below contains an overview of these themes and subthemes.

Table 2

Overview of the discipline and control themes and sub-themes

ADULTS' VIEWS	CHILDREN'S VIEWS
Discipline and Control	**Discipline and Control**

❖ Sharing the disciplinary role
  a. Consistency and balance
  b. Legitimacy of the stepparent role
	❖ Stepparents can discipline too
	  a. You know "where things are at" and what to expect
	  b. It makes things fair

❖ Impediments to the ideal
  a. Disagreement between the parent and stepparent
  b. Quality of the stepparent-child relationship
  c. Longevity and age of the stepchild
	❖ Sharing discipline but only if...
	  a. The parent makes the rule or says okay
	  b. It's fair and what you're used to
	  c. There is trust and respect
	  d. The stepfamily has been together awhile

❖ Parent maintains primary disciplinary role
  a. Parental responsibility and authority
  b. Different values and expectations
  c. What children want
	❖ Disciplining is the parent's job
	  a. It's not the stepparent's "job"
	  b. Stepparents aren't as "good at it"
	  c. It "doesn't feel right"

As will be noted in the presentation of the results of the thematic analysis, participants' views of discipline pertained to the authority to set, monitor, and enforce rules and consequences; and the right to impose values or influence decisions and choices, which were often perceived as attempts to exert control.

<p style="text-align:center;">**Discipline and Control: Adults' Views**</p>

This section presents the results of the thematic analysis of the data pertaining to adults' views of the stepparent role in regard to the discipline and control dimensions of parenting. Three themes emerged: Sharing the disciplinary role, Impediments to the ideal, and Parent maintains the primary disciplinary role.

Sharing the disciplinary role

Twenty-nine of the 40 adults (72.5%) indicated that they would ideally like stepparents and parents to actively share responsibility for discipline, even though in reality they experienced this as difficult or unattainable. Eighteen out of the total 26 adults (69%) residing in complex stepfamilies in this study and 11 out of the total 14 adults (79%) residing in simple stepfamilies fell in this group.

Some of these participants had reluctantly withdrawn or "given up" actively pursuing the ideal. Only one of these 29 participants thought that stepparents ought to take as active a role as parents in overall disciplining regardless of difficulties. Most of the participants, however, described a position of "waiting" and "allowing" while they continued "working towards" the ideal, as preconditions and constraints were met.

While the majority of the participants in this group perceived it more judicious for the stepparent to be less actively involved in discipline, for at least a period of time, they believed that a shared disciplinarian role would better allow for consistency in parenting practices and a more balanced approach when there were perceived deficits or extremes in parenting styles. They also perceived that active stepparent involvement in discipline was an important avenue towards affirming respect for stepparents and legitimising their rights and a parenting role within the stepfamily. Hence, for these participants the ideal of a shared disciplinary parenting role remained important.

Consistency and balance

Many of the participants who held this ideal talked about the importance of both the adults "being on the same page", not allowing the children to "play one [adult] off against the other", and the necessity for discipline to be applied equally across step and biological children. One adult explained,

> The parent and the stepparent decide [the rules]. It has got to be a joint effort otherwise the child will find a weak point. It has got to be a family pow wow

around the table so that it's showing a united front on the decisions in the household (Female, stepfamily 1 year).

These issues of consistency and equality among all stepfamily members seemed particularly salient for the adults in complex stepfamilies, as one adult who was both father and stepfather said,

Has the stepparent got kids or hasn't got kids? ... If they have got kids also what we've tried to do in our situation is making it a family unit. So the parent and stepparent become one. That's the key I think and that's the vital thing ... The [role is]same, exactly the same so they become the parents for all the kids, yeah ... The key is to make sure that both of them do it equally really. I mean yeah I suppose if it's not your job and you're constantly disciplining them about something obviously you need to go talk to the other parent and share that responsibility (Male, stepfamily 3 years).

Some of these participants viewed the stepparents' disciplinary input as necessary and complementary to the parent role either in making up for a perceived deficit in parenting practice, or balancing a parental approach perceived as too severe or lenient, as one adult said,

Well some of the changes, like Shelley has been on her own for a while so the kids had sort of filled up the gap that was otherwise replaced by the father and so, therefore, the male approach to acceptable boundaries, discipline was allowed to slack off a bit. So, and of course I turn up and suddenly there's that ... and they still play us off a bit but, yeah, I don't think it's any different to husband and wife though (Male, stepfamily 2 years).

Many of these participants also talked about wanting to avoid one adult being viewed by the children as the "good guy" and the other as the "bad guy". They hoped that by taking a more equal disciplinary approach this could be avoided, as the following quotes suggest,

If it's always the stepparent doing that ... I think there could be, if the stepparent is the dominant person about making the rules in the house I feel that there could be some resentment so it does need to be balance ... so there's rules in every household and that's governed by both parents who live in the house (Female, stepfamily 3 years).

Both [discipline] together, the parent and stepparent together ... You have to let the children know that the parents are equal so that one doesn't become the good one who's confided in only and the other one as the discipline one (Male, stepfamily 4 years).

Legitimacy of the stepparent role

Some adults reported that the recognition of a stepparent's authority to discipline was important in affirming respect and the rights of stepparents within the stepfamily, as well as establishing a legitimate parent-like role, as illustrated by the following quote,

> That's where the respect thing comes, is it there or is it not? ... You know if there's respect in that family unit, whether its step or whole or full or halves or whatever the hell it is, then it's [discipline is] going to happen anyway. I can only speak from sort of experience ... Yeah it should be a respect for an adult and especially a member of their family whether ... you're the stepparent or the parent, or whatever you happen to be, I don't think there's any separation or any difference in the roles (Male, stepfamily 3 years).

> As long as the rules are seen as coming from both sides then I think it's fine ... the stepparent needs to be there, to be part of that, yeah, otherwise you've got one effective and one ineffective (Male, stepfamily1 year).

Other participants emphasised that it was important that both adults supported and reinforced each others' disciplining so as neither party was undermined,

> Well I think both [adults] should make the rules. It's a family home and everybody should work together but I don't think the stepparent should take on that role solely. I think they need the support of the, definitely of the parent. Pointless exercise if the stepparent tries to do something and the parent's not backing it up (Female, stepfamily 5 years).

Some participants felt that because it was both adults' home, both had the right to an equal say in the rules of the house. A stepmother residing in a complex stepfamily said,

> If it's your house you do make rules, it doesn't matter whose children are in the house, there are rules for the house anyway and they can come from both (Female, stepfamily 5 years).

So, while the adults in this category perceived difficulties in attaining a shared disciplinary role, they also believed it was important that they pursued this ideal as a way of respecting and legitimising the stepparent's rights and role in the stepfamily and providing children consistency and balance through shared parenting practices. Although some of the adults appeared frustrated or disheartened by constraints on this ideal, most were accepting and hopeful that this could be achieved over time.

Impediments to the ideal

As outlined above, 28 of the 29 (97%) adults who held the ideal of a shared disciplinary role described a number of preconditions and constraints on stepparents actively adopting

this role. The pre-conditions or constraints included the impact of disagreements between the parent and stepparent, the quality of the stepparent-child relationship, longevity of the stepfamily, and the age of the child. These were viewed as short or longer term impediments to acquiring a shared disciplinary role and it was thought more judicious for stepparents to take a less active role in discipline until the issues receded.

Disagreement between the parent and stepparent

Many of the participants described difficulties arising as a result of different values or expectations, levels of tolerance for behaviours, and parenting styles between step-couples,

> It like troubles me, cos I think there's, I don't think it's a particularly good relationship at the moment with [my partner] and [son], so he finds it quite challenging with her ... So, yes [my partner] has a different level of tolerance for him ... although [she] does well, she sort of thinks "He should know better" or "He should be more respectful" (Male, stepfamily 2 years).

These differences resulted in conflicting loyalties for some parents and made sanctioning the stepparent's style of discipline difficult or unacceptable. One parent explained,

> [My partner] likes to have meetings about everything and everything documented ... whereas I'm much more laid back like that and, you know, she likes to have roster and jobs for the kids to do and things like that ... so that's a massive area of conflict, which I'm for the children, I'm on the easygoing side ... Frankly, I'm happy with the way she is with [my son] when she backs off a bit it's fine ... so she's backed off deliberately. She doesn't want to, it's not her choice. She'd rather take an active parenting role (Male, stepfamily 4 years).

However, as the following quote suggests, some adults also viewed it problematic when parents did not support stepparent discipline,

> She [stepchild] probably would end up resentful of [her stepfather], especially if the mother is not backing up the stepfather or if he's seen to be stepping on the mother to make her see his way. Our parenting discussions are done away from the child (Male, stepfamily 1 year).

On the other hand, some parents expressed frustration when they perceived that a stepparent was ambivalent or did not want to take an equal disciplinary role. As two mothers said,

> He [stepfather] reckons that the parent should make all the decisions and stepparent should just support ... he's a real softie, real caring. I'll say 'No,

you sort it', because in my ideal world, husband is the father of the home ... it's just he'd rather be the softie and I be the meanie but I try and share it (Female, simple stepfamily 2 years).

I've got slightly strict guidelines and I'm consistent and I've got clear boundaries and I follow through and [my partner] completely doesn't and that's the problem. I can say x and he'll go, mm-hmm mm-hmm and then he'll walk away and go, y! ... he'll say that he agrees with me and then he'll go and try and be the good guy ... So no, we don't have a united front (Female, stepfamily 2 years).

A few stepparents acknowledged that enactment of their ideal disciplinary role was also sometimes influenced by a non-residential parent's views. One adult explained,

We don't have a divide in this household, although I would say I am a bit more cautious with [my partner's] children knowing what his ex-wife is like about me reprimanding the children, but luckily we've never had a major (Female, stepfamily 1 year).

Some of the adults in this group attributed differences in parenting values and levels of tolerance for children's behaviours to a dissimilar shared parenting history when one adult had little or no prior experience of parenting or had not parented children of a similar age to the stepchildren before,

Until you've got your own kids you don't really realise how to discipline them properly ... I think that comes from having your own kids and experience of being around kids. It's not something that you just learn overnight ... I think they should aim for it though eventually. They should aim to draw it all in line 50/50, but I mean you couldn't' put a time frame on that (Male, stepfamily 3 years).

Quality of the stepparent-child relationship

Many of the adults also reported that the quality of the relationship between the stepparent and the stepchild influenced the degree to which stepparent discipline was accepted by the stepchild, and legitimised by the parent. As the following quotes suggest,

Ideally it would be both parents in the house [disciplining] ... but it does depend on the dynamics between the stepparent and the child ... I'd say it depends on the dynamics. Ideally in a perfect world if the home is all happy both the parents would be involved, the stepparent and the real parent (Male, stepfamily 1 year).

If the situation is such that it's really comfortable and people are getting on and have a similar understanding, there's no problem [with a stepparent

disciplining]. It really depends on the stepfather-child relationship I think (Female, stepfamily 4 years).

Important influences mentioned by the adult participants included the character and personality of the stepparent, and the degree of trust and respect that had been developed,

> I think it depends on the relationship between [the child] and stepfather, yeah, often [stepparent discipline] would be fine especially if there's respect there and the emotional bank account is positive. Do you understand that as a concept? – if something that's perceived as bad comes along then it's not too damaging (Female, stepfamily 2 years).

Longevity of the stepfamily and the age of the stepchild

Many participants also talked about the importance of allowing time for a stepchild and stepparent "bond" to develop before the stepparent adopts a more active disciplinary role. These participants held the view that greater length of time in the stepfamily afforded the stepparent greater disciplinary rights and that the ideal shared disciplinary role was rarely attainable or appropriate in the early stages of stepfamily life, as the following quote illustrates,

> It's still early days at eight months. I think the stepparent needs to step back and let the parent do that sort of disciplining, particularly when they're both there. The stepparent can back up and support ... I think over time the stepparent's role will become more of a parent role but I think that sort of thing will take a long time (Male, stepfamily 2 years).

Some participants also talked about the perception that the active stepparent disciplinary role was accepted more easily by younger children and less easily by adolescents, and that needed to be considered,

> Age has a big part in it. When you get stepkids older, they're very set in their ways of this and how things are. When they're younger it's much easier but when they get older at fifteen, you can't start, I mean they play one [parent] off against the other ... You have all these issues of things we don't have with the little ones, control that you don't have. So it's hard to enforce rules, it's hard to enforce ideals (Female, stepfamily 2 years).

In summary, the adults in this group believed there were advantages in sharing an active disciplinary role. They felt encouraged to hold onto this ideal despite a number of preconditions and constraints that made the pursuit difficult or unattainable. The preconditions and constraints identified by the adults included disagreements between couples arising from differing values or expectations, levels of tolerance for behaviours,

and parenting styles. These differences resulted in some parents experiencing conflicted loyalties, or disappointment or frustration when partners did not share an active disciplinary ideal. Secondly, these adults perceived that a shared disciplinary role was dependant on the quality of the stepparent-child relationship. To this end, a stepparent's personality and the development of trust and respect between the stepparent and child were seen as influencing children's acceptance of stepparent discipline. Thirdly, many of these adults believed the longevity of the stepfamily and the age of stepchildren influenced the degree to which stepparent authority was accepted or deemed appropriate. To this end, many thought that younger aged children and more time living as a stepfamily increased the likelihood of acceptance of stepparent discipline.

Parent maintains a primary disciplinary role

Eleven of the 40 adults (27.5%) perceived that stepparents should take a secondary disciplinary role to parents. Eight out of the total 26 adults (31%) residing in complex stepfamilies in this study and 3 out of the total 14 adults (21%) residing in simple stepfamilies fell in this group.

Six of the 11 adults perceived that stepparents ought to, or could, share equally in setting rules for stepchildren but that they ought not to be as actively involved as parents in day-to-day monitoring and enforcement. Two of these 11 adults thought stepparents ought to actively share in the monitoring and enforcing of rules that were set primarily by the parent. The remaining three adults in this group believed stepparents ought to be less actively involved than parents in both the setting and enforcement of rules and discipline.

In contrast to participants who held the ideal of sharing discipline and control activities, these adults did not appear to hold the ideal of a shared disciplinary role. Rather, these adults thought that the stepparent did not have equal parental responsibility or authority; children accepted discipline more favourably from the parent; and that inevitably there are differences in values and expectations between the stepparent and parent. The participants talked about these issues as contributing to the belief that it was more appropriate for a parent to maintain the primary disciplinary role.

Parental responsibility and authority

Many of these adults described the stepparent role as one of "backing up" and supporting the parent's discipline. This included taking a primary disciplinary role if the parent was not present, and contributing to discussions about rules and expectations of behaviour.

However, for these adults, there was an assumption that the parent remained the primary enforcer of discipline or would "have the last say" on rules and disciplinary decisions. One parent said,

> I'm still the primary authoritarian, obviously she's [stepmother is] with them before and after school and I'm not, so I back her up if she has to do something. With the same respect she has to watch out [when disciplining my children]... but, you know, she knows the boundaries I've set beforehand and vice versa (Male, stepfamily 1 year).

This view was supported by some stepparents also, as illustrated by the following quotes,

> Yeah so that you recognise as the stepparent you do have a different role to being the parent I think and I mean my view is that you want to be as good a friends as you can with the stepchildren and parent them when you need to but don't parent them when the other parent is in the room and can do it (Male, stepfamily 2 ½ years).

> [Stepparents are] not the main disciplinarian, they should back up the parent. You know the parent has the lead ... Odds on favourite that it would come out better if the parent did it. If the parent's not around it would be okay for the stepparent to (Male, stepfamily 2 years).

For some of the stepparents it appeared important that they felt they were not undermining the parent or overstepping the authority afforded them by taking a more active disciplinary role,

> I think the stepparent is an invited role and obviously you have to have the invitation of the parent to be involved in that. Yeah, it's a delegated authority if you like ... you have kind of differences as well ... and I, unless [my partner] has wanted me to be involved, I've taken on a very much supportive role, but not an active role (Male, stepfamily 7 months).

Other stepparents talked about the importance of respecting stepchildren's and parents' views by not strongly imposing their own values,

> When the parent's not there, the stepparent takes on the primary disciplinary role. It's important that stepparents shouldn't try and take over and be the parent though. They shouldn't impose their own beliefs on a child ... you can't discipline the child within your own values and totally disregard the discipline framework of the parent that's already there (Male, stepfamily 8 years).

Hence, some perceived the importance of respecting the parent's role and not over stepping the authority granted rather than automatically afforded to them.

Different values and expectations

Many of the participants talked about different values and parenting expectations between the adults. These differences were seen as problematic if adults in a stepfamily attempted to share a disciplinary role, as one adult said,

> [My partner] thinks I should be stricter [but] only as much as its exactly how she wants because if I do complain about her kids or tell them off, and she hasn't thought of it, then there's trouble that way too, so it is a balancing act. So I tend to back off anyway, but I would anyway, so it doesn't make much difference to me ... So the main conflict is actually between the parents and not either's [children] (Male, stepfamily 4 years).

Problems talked about by the participants included the potential for loyalty conflicts between a parent and child, and conflict between the stepparent and parent, or non-residential parent, as one stepparent explained,

> I don't try to take her Dad's role ... I don't step in and discipline, because both her parents are soft, so I won't step in and be the ogre. So, it could upset both the parents just for the sake of providing some discipline, but I've decided that I'm not going to go there and do that (Male, stepfamily 7 years).

One parent in a described a conflicted loyalty when her parenting expectations were different from her partners,

> While he [stepfather] doesn't discipline them, he certainly tells them if they're doing something they shouldn't be doing ... [and] occasionally I think, "Oh, perhaps he's a little bit harder than he needed to be". I definitely feel my heckles go up occasionally, you know, if he's telling the girls off about something or I feel a bit uncomfortable about him saying negative things to them ... a couple of times it's caused conflict and discussion ... [and he] will often just step back a little bit (Female, stepfamily 7months).

Another parent talked about finding the differences between his and his partner's parenting style difficult to accept, particularly when he was not able to maintain his ideal primary disciplinary role, as described in the following quote,

> There's an inequity which causes problem for us ... [My partner] is more authoritarian which causes issues with me and my children. I spend time away with work a lot and I find it difficult, leaving, leaving her here with them. When I go, and, you know I worry about her imposing her own will on the stepchildren without reference to me, and to me that's not right ... It's hard if I know what she is doing is impacting on my kids (Male, stepfamily 8 years).

What children want

Some stepparents in this category talked about their perception that stepchildren listen to or "respect" the rules and discipline from parents more than stepparents and saw this as another reason for the parent to maintain the primary role. As one participant said when discussing the vignettes,

> [Stepparent discipline] is probably intrusive for him [child] ... It would be harder if he was closer to his real mum. He might think, you know, "Who the heck are you", to his stepmum ... probably tell her to get stuffed (Male, stepfamily 8 years).

Some of the parents also reported that they perceived their children were more easily distressed by a stepparent's reprimands and viewed the discipline as 'harsher' if administered by their stepparent. Many of these participants talked about feeling concerned that a more active stepparent disciplinary role would cause conflict or distancing in the child and stepparent's relationship and impact the parent-child relationship. One adult explained,

> Oh I think [a stepparent taking an equal disciplinary role] would really unsettle him [stepchild] and, unless he absolutely idolised the guy and was willing to walk on water for him, I think he'd probably lose respect for his mother and he'd also resent the stepfather ... so it would cause tension on the relationships (Male, stepfamily 4 years).

In summary, less than a third of adult participants thought that stepparents should take a less active disciplinary role than parents. These adults did not hold the ideal of a shared disciplinary parenting role. Rather, they perceived that it was more appropriate or advantageous for the parent to maintain the primary discipline role for a number of reasons. One reason given by adults in this category included believing that a shared disciplinary role undermined parental responsibility and authority. As such, stepparent discipline was viewed by many of these adults as an "invited" support role. Many of these stepparents were mindful of not wanting to undermine or "over step" the authority afforded them by taking a more active role in discipline or by strongly imposing their own values. Some participants in this category perceived that different values and parenting expectations between adults would inevitably cause difficulties when attempting to share a disciplinary role, which provided another reason for the belief that it is more appropriate for parents to maintain the primary disciplinarian role. Additionally, many of the adults in this category thought that discipline was accepted

more favourably from parents than stepparents. Hence, some adults thought that children were more respectful of rules and less distressed by discipline administered by parents and there was less tension on the parent-child and stepparent-child relationships when the parent maintained the primary disciplinarian role.

<div align="center">**Discipline and Control: Children's Views**</div>

This section presents the results of the thematic analysis of the data pertaining to children's views of the stepparent role in regard to the discipline and control dimensions of parenting. Three themes emerged: Stepparents can discipline too, Sharing discipline but only if..., and Disciplining is the parent's job.

Stepparents can discipline too

Sixteen of the 44 children (36%) perceived it was appropriate for stepparents to actively share a disciplinary role with parents. However, 11 of these participants indicated it was only permissible for a stepparent to take an active disciplinary role when a number of preconditions were met. Only five of the 16 stepchildren advocated that stepparents equally share the setting of rules and the enforcement of discipline regardless of preconditions. These participants were all residing in complex stepfamilies. Twelve out of the 16 children (75%) in this group advocating stepparent discipline were residing in complex stepfamilies. In all, 4 out of the total 12 children (33%) residing in simple stepfamilies in this study, and 12 out of the total 32 children (38%) residing in complex stepfamilies fell in this group.

The reasons the 16 participants gave for supporting a more active stepparent role included provision of consistency and clarity, in that the children knew what to expect, and a sense of fairness.

You know "where things are at" and what to expect

Some of the children talked about liking that they knew what was expected of them and what to expect from both the parent and stepparent when rules were uniformly set and consistently enforced by both adults, as one stepchild said,

> It shouldn't just be the mum making [the rules] up, it should be may be like both of them together because then you know what you have to do and you know what you don't do (James, aged 13 years).

It makes things fair

Many of the children in this group talked about the importance of rules and discipline being applied consistently to all siblings and stepsiblings. Despite sometimes experiencing stepparent discipline as difficult, many of these participants appeared to appreciate the sense of fairness experienced when both their parent and stepparent adopted an equal and consistent approach with all the stepsiblings. Issues of fairness and consistency were particularly relevant to children in complex stepfamilies. As three children residing in complex stepfamilies explained,

> They shouldn't treat their stepkids nicer so disciplining, they should do the same to the stepkids as their own ... Yes, they should do the same as the parent ... the stepkids might not like it but they have to get used to it and settle into the new life (Amanda, aged 10 years).

> Some of the rules are difficult if one has them and the other family doesn't. You can get into fights to start with so it has to be one rule, but each family wants their own ones still ... [you should] accept some of the rules that get changed cos you can get into fights otherwise, try and accept the stepparent cos it's not really going to change (Rachael, aged 12 years).

> The stepparent should be able to punish like every child, like if one child is naughty from the other side of the family he should be able to punish on that side otherwise it's sort of like different rules for different families ... there should be rules but all the same for every child (John, aged 13 years).

Some of the participants mentioned concern for the stepparents' rights and thought that it was fair if a stepparent had equal rights to discipline,

> [The stepmother] is in charge too, not just the Dad. I think that as a stepparent they should have just as much of the right in their new home and with the other family as the husband or wife (Helen, aged 10 years).

Sharing discipline but only if...

As outlined above, 11 of the 44 stepchildren (25%) indicated it was permissible for stepparents to share an active disciplinary role with parents when a number of preconditions were met. Preconditions or contributors to the stepchildren's acceptance of stepparent discipline included rules and discipline being sanctioned by the parent, the quality and style of the discipline, the quality of the stepparent-child relationship, and longevity of the stepfamily. Interestingly, the latter two preconditions were similar to those described previously by some adults.

The parent makes the rule or says okay

Many of the children talked about the importance of stepparent discipline being based upon a known 'household' rule set by the parent and stepparent together; or a rule set by, or in the least agreed to, by the parent. These children appeared to resent or find it difficult to accept the enforcement of rules that were newly imposed on them by the stepparent or were not sanctioned by the parent, as one child said,

> [If the stepfather made up rules] I think she would feel a bit annoyed and may be a bit angry at him and her mum because she would want her mum to tell her about these things and make them up with the stepparent (Sarah, aged 16 years).

However, as the following response to a vignette suggests, some of these children thought that stepparent enforcement or monitoring was acceptable when rules were established by or agreed to by the parent,

> It must be the parent's [rule], the one that's made up the rule, so then if the stepparent's doing [the enforcing] the child wouldn't mind (Luke, aged 12 years).

It's fair and what you're used to

Many of these participants thought a stepparent's discipline was acceptable if it was perceived as reasonable, "fair", and similar to the parent's style of discipline. One child said,

> She might get annoyed [if her stepmother made up rules]. It depends on what the rules were. She would probably feel it's unfair if her father doesn't have a say but even more annoying if it's rules she doesn't like (Sarah, aged 16 years).

The style and tone of delivery also appeared to be important to the stepchildren's acceptance of discipline. This is illustrated below by a 15 year old boy who was living equal amounts of time with his mother and father. He described accepting and respecting guidance, which included discipline, from his stepfather. This was in contrast to discipline from his stepmother, which he experienced as difficult,

> It's a discipline thing, there's ways about going about it because with my stepmum it's the way that she's kind of disciplining ... For example at the dinner table, you know, she's going "sit up, arms off the table, you're not allowed like this ... no slurping ... you have to keep your chin up, and I'm being really serious about this", and then dad is just sitting there. And she's like "Well I'm training you", and that's the point, she's turned it into boot

camp ... He [stepfather] goes about it in a way that's not like yelling at you ... it's just reminding you in a nice way ... I listen because of the way it's done but with my stepmum, too much. Just too many rules and like, "If you ever do drugs I'm kicking you out of the house"... there's a lot of stuff like that, a lot of threats (Peter, aged 15 years).

There is respect and trust

Most of the children who thought stepparent discipline could be acceptable thought it was important that stepchildren develop trust and respect for the stepparent and saw this as a necessary precondition to stepchildren's acceptance of stepparent discipline. For many this included being able to trust that the stepparent 'knew' the stepchild well enough (what the child is capable of, how the child will react, what the child is used to) to make appropriate parenting decisions,

> Well it's not always advisable [for stepparents to discipline]. It's like the stepparents don't always know what [the children] can and can't do and the way they react if they do this thing or if they don't do this thing ... It would be quite unfair ... because his dad has known him for like his life and [his stepmother] doesn't know how he behaves and how he acts to stuff and she might make up this new rule that makes it really hard ... [So] when they first, um, live together the discipline is normally left up to the parent but after they've been together for like 12 months or so it changes and both parents do it (Andrew, 12 years).

> Well [stepparents] have to take it lightly and they have to start moving up as they get to know you more because they have to know you more to do the right things, so they have to move up and up as they know you more and more. Eventually they're just, they know you when they know what you do and everything ... They have to be a proper parent just like your real one and, um, eventually you get used to them and you can actually be a really good family (Michael, aged 12 years).

Others thought stepchildren 'knowing' the stepparent adequately ("getting used to them", being able to "read" them, understanding the stepparent's reasoning) was important to the development of trust and the acceptance of stepparent discipline,

> As you've been longer with the stepparent you get used to them being around so you're more likely to let them do more stuff. You want to spend more time with them. With the differences in disciplining, you get more used to the stepparent and understand their reasoning more so you can accept it more (Sarah, aged 16 years).

> You have to learn to trust them and trust their decisions ... when you learn to trust them and how they think and how they act, and you know what they're

like when they're angry and when they're happy, they just become a normal parent because you trust their decisions (Jessica, aged 18 years).

The stepfamily has been together awhile

Many of the children perceived that the disciplinary role should remain primarily with the parent in the initial stages of stepfamily life. However, there was some support for the stepparent moving toward a more equal role once bonds were formed, and trust and respect for the stepparent had developed with time,

> I think both the parent and stepparent should work out the discipline stuff together and then both do it ... [but] at the beginning you need to do just a bit together to get to know each other and different systems of things and then you become the same. The stepparent should do nice things with the kids and do that the same all the way through. But the discipline should be less at the beginning cos you don't know each other well and kids don't really accept their stepparent to start off with (Amanda, aged 12 years).

Similarly, one child residing in a simple stepfamily explained,

> Sometimes you don't really know your stepparent so the child won't be sure of them and if they're making the right choices ... yes, it takes about two or three years to get to know each other and help out but after that the stepparent should do the same jobs as the parent. The first two or three years the parent is the role model to the stepparent. They could make up the rules after that (Hannah, aged 9 years).

In summary, while around a third of the child participants indicated it was appropriate for stepparents to share an active disciplinary role with parents many of these children also expressed ambivalence toward stepparents actively engaging the role. On the one hand, they appreciated knowing "where things were at" and what to expect when the disciplinary role was shared. They also valued the consistency and a sense of fairness from shared parenting, especially for those living in complex stepfamilies with stepsiblings. On the other hand, many of these children talked about experiencing stepparent discipline as difficult. The majority of the children in this group, therefore, talked about stepparent discipline more from a view that it was permissible or "okay" rather than something they particularly valued or wanted. To this end, many of the children viewed a shared stepparent disciplinary role as permissible only when a number of preconditions had been met. Preconditions included that the parent set the rules or, at least, agreed with the rules and that the stepparent discipline was perceived as fair and similar to the parent's style of discipline. Additionally, children in this category thought

it was important that stepparents and children knew each other adequately for trust and respect to have developed before accepting stepparent discipline. In this vein, many of these children thought that discipline should remain primarily with parents in the initial stages until the stepfamily had been living together for awhile. Hence, these children were reasonably accepting and talked about it being "okay" for both the parent and stepparent to "do the disciplining" once these preconditions were met. This was often viewed as something that could happen "in time".

Disciplining is the parent's job

In contrast to the participants above, a majority 28 out of the 44 children (64%) asserted that stepparents should maintain a secondary discipline role to parents. These children perceived that stepparents should continue to have "less say" in "the making up of the rules", and "do less of the disciplining" than parents. Four of the 28 children in this category advocated for stepparents having an equal say in the setting of rules but not an equal role in the enforcement of discipline. Conversely, two children advocated for stepparents sharing in discipline with parents but not having an equal say in the setting of rules. All of these six participants were residing in complex stepfamilies. However, the remaining 22 children in this category thought stepparents ought to share a less active role in both the setting and enforcement of rules and discipline or have no disciplinary role at all. In all, eight out of the total 12 children (67%) residing in simple stepfamilies in this study and 20 out of the total 32 children (62%) residing in complex stepfamilies fell in this group.

The reasons these children gave for affording the stepparent less authority included a perception that it was not the stepparent's "job", stepparents were not as "good at it", and that stepparent discipline did not "feel right".

It's not the stepparent's "job"

Some participants felt strongly that a stepparent should have no part in disciplining and that this role lay firmly with the parent. Most of the stepchildren, however, conceded that a stepparent could have some part in "helping" or "backing up" the parent but that it remained primarily the parent's "job", as the quotes below illustrate,

> [Stepparents] should ask the parent how to make friends with their kids and
> how to get along with them ... The stepparents should stay out of doing stuff
> that the parent does but should ask if there's anything they can do. The

disciplining, they should ask if they can do that when the parent's out but let the parent do it otherwise (Hannah, aged 9 years).

The parent should be in charge of the discipline more cos that's what they've always had. The stepparent should do some of it, like have a say what happens, but it should be the parent who does more of it (Vanessa, aged 14 years).

Many of these children referred to a stepparent as not being "the real parent". Some of the participants thought children respected and listened to what the parent said more than the stepparent or perceived that disciplining was not the stepparent's "job", as the following quotes suggest,

I think it should be her dad [deciding the consequences]. I think she would be less likely to tolerate them [stepparent consequences] and she would use the whole "You're not my real parent" line (Sasha, aged 14 years).

I would kind of think, that like, "You're not my mum, you can't really tell me to go do my homework. That's my dad's job not your job" (Daniel, aged 10 years).

Some people have had their stepparents since they were born, you know, since they were quite young but I don't think they should do [disciplining]. They can just help out ... I think really it should be his mum [disciplining] because it's his mum (Adam, aged 14 years).

With my stepmum, I don't really feel that she's a parent. So I don't actually take on board what she says ... A [stepparent should] probably be more of a friend role ... just more of a friend than anything (Claire, aged 11 years).

For some stepchildren, discipline from a stepparent was experienced as an encroachment on the relationship with the parent and a loss of the parent's role, as the children in the following quotes explained,

Some stepparents try to be like or do the parent's job. From my point of view they shouldn't make up the rules because I feel that's one of the major parts of parenting for parents, not stepparents ... because, this is going to sound really weird but it's like, no matter how long with your family you can't change blood, they still wouldn't be blood relatives so they still don't have the right (Hayley, aged 13 years).

I think that setting rules and boundaries can sometimes make kids feel like, feeling that they're pushing into your family ... They can do some of it but I don't think that they should be doing too much because it will just make a child feel really, feel like they're just taking over what their life was (Rebecca, aged 13 years).

Hence, stepparent discipline could be seen as taking something away from the parent's role.

Stepparents aren't as "good at it"

Some of the participants advocated that a parent was better resourced to discipline their biological child than a stepparent. An assumption that the stepparent did not have the necessary experience at parenting, or did not know the child and what the child was used to appeared to contribute to the children taking this position. As an 11 year old girl living in a complex stepfamily asserted, "They shouldn't be allowed to punish us as much as your proper parent does because they don't know that much about you". To this end, some of the children talked about feeling concerned that a stepparent may be too severe in their delivery of discipline or "make the rules too hard" for the child to follow,

> Her mum [should discipline], she can tell it more calmly and knows how to say it and what voice to use with her children ... the stepparent hasn't been with the kids a lot so they don't know the tone of voice that the parents do. So if the parent's away the stepparent should speak really calmly (Ashley, aged 9 years).

> Most stepparents think they should perform the role of the former parent but they shouldn't because it's harder for the kids ... the stepparent shouldn't do as much because they're not used to the routine of everyday life (Claire, aged 11 years).

> I think that a stepparent should use discipline but not so much that the child would hate it, like if he told me off and I got really upset I might not want to come back to the house ... Yeah, so not too much, they should be less harsh on the stepkids and let the parent take care of it (Kelly, aged 12 years).

Some children experienced harsh or authoritarian styles of stepparent discipline as difficult and, therefore, would have preferred that their stepparent had a less active disciplinary role, as one child said,

> There's a lot of threats. Quite often may be two a day from [my stepfather] and he hasn't got a right to that. He calls me a lot of names because I yell at him ... he has to do things his way. He's quite pedantic and quite a control freak, which sounds really mean, but that's how I look at [my stepfather] and his behaviour. Quite often I don't see how mum could actually like him (Amy, aged 13 years).

Other children thought that stepchildren reacted negatively to stepparent discipline even if it was a similar style to the parent's discipline. This contributed to their view that it

was more appropriate for the parent to maintain the primary discipline role, as the following quote suggests,

> Most stepparents think they should perform the role of the former parent but they shouldn't do as much because they're not used to the routine of everyday life ... and they shouldn't yell or shout. It's okay if the parent says it that way because it's normal but not if the stepparent does (Rebecca, aged 11 years).

It doesn't "feel right"

Some of the participants described a sense of 'wrongness' about stepparent discipline. Terms used to convey this included feeling "weird", "wrong", "uncomfortable", "irritating", or "mean", as expressed by stepchildren in the following quotes,

> It's just weird if someone tries to tell you what you can and can't do if they're not really your parent (Dan, aged 13 years).

> If the stepparent makes the rules and does the disciplining, it's kind of like your friend bossing you around. It's irritating, like it repels you, you don't like them as much (Matthew, aged 15 years).

In summary, the majority of child participants thought that stepparents ought to be less involved than parents in the setting or monitoring of rules and the enforcement of discipline. Many of these children perceived that it was not the stepparent's "job" to actively share responsibility for discipline. Rather, their role was to "back up" and support the parent in their disciplinary role. Many of these children also perceived that stepparents were not as "good at it" as parents either because they lacked parenting experience, did not know and understand the child, or that stepparent discipline was at times too harsh. Some of the children thought that stepchildren received the same discipline from the parent more easily than from the stepparent. However, while acknowledging stepchildren's expectations may contribute to difficulties in accepting stepparent discipline, most of these children described experiencing a continued feeling of 'wrongness' and discomfort from stepparent discipline, which contributed further to the belief that parents ought to maintain the primary disciplinary role. Some of the children also believed that stepparent discipline took something away from the parent's role and the relationship between the child and the parent.

Chapter Four

Thematic Analysis: Warmth and Support

This chapter presents the thematic analysis of adults' and children's views of the stepparent role in relation to the warmth and support dimension of parenting. Three themes emerged from the analyses of the Adult and Child categories of data, which will be discussed below. The themes emerging from the Adult data are titled: Sharing the warmth and support role, Considerations on the ideal of shared warmth and support, Parent as primary caregiver. Themes emerging from the child data are titled: Stepparents can care and help too, Caring and helping but only if..., and Stepparent as friend. Table 3 below contains an overview of the themes and subthemes.

Table 3

Overview of the warmth and support themes and sub-themes

ADULTS' VIEWS	CHILDREN'S VIEWS
Warmth and Support	**Warmth and Support**

❖ Sharing the warmth and support role
  a. Complementing or 'filling a gap'
  b. Promoting inclusion and cohesion
	❖ Stepparents can care and help too
	  a. Another adult "to go to"
	  b. More fun and practical support

❖ Considerations on the ideal
  a. Reciprocity and quality of the stepparent-child relationship
  b. Different perceptions and ideals
  c. Gendered roles
	❖ Caring and helping but only if...
	  a. Liking, "getting on", and "earning" through friendship
	  b. Not "taking the parent's place"
	  c. Stepchildren's pace and space

❖ Parent as primary caregiver
  a. Loyalty and kinship issues
  b. Intimacy and personal boundary considerations
	❖ Stepparent as friend
	  a. Not "too close": Everyday talk, not "feelings" or "personal stuff"
	  b. Practical and non-intimate tasks

As will be noted in the presentation of the results of the thematic analysis, participants' views of warmth and support parenting behaviours pertained to both emotional and practical aspects of care; and the preconditions upon which the stepparent warmth and support role was accepted or deemed appropriate.

Warmth and Support: Adults' Views

This section presents the results of the thematic analysis of the data pertaining to adults' views of the stepparent role in regard to the warmth and support dimensions of parenting. Three themes emerged: Sharing the warmth and support role, Considerations on the ideal of shared warmth and support, Parent as primary caregiver.

Sharing the warmth and support role

Twenty-six of the 40 adults (65%) indicated that ideally stepparents ought to share an active role in the warmth and support activities of parenting. However, only four of the 26 adults advocated that stepparents take as active a role in the warmth and support activities with children regardless of considerations. These four participants talked about the importance of "taking on" and "treating them [stepchildren] as your own", and attaining the "normal family". Stepparent support was appreciated and viewed necessary to the re-establishment and completion of a family unit. Twenty-two of the adult participants, however, perceived that the appropriateness of this role was dependent on a number of considerations which are discussed in the subsequent theme titled Considerations on the ideal of shared warmth and support. The reasons the 26 participants in this theme gave for continuing to support the ideal of an active warmth and support stepparent role included an assumption that the role was beneficial in complementing or 'filling a gap' in parenting practices, and in promoting inclusion and cohesion within the stepfamily.

Complementing or 'filling a gap'

Many of these participants viewed the stepparent as an additional resource, an "extra person" for children to draw on for practical and emotional support, or new skills and advice, as one mother said,

> It's about that whole balance. It's the same in any relationship you know, what you aren't so great in the other person will kind of compensate for and vice versa and ...Yeah, and then in turn it brings different dimensions in, different learning, things and opportunities and stuff I guess (Female, stepfamily 10 months).

Some of these adults perceived that stepparent warmth and support compensated for perceived deficits in the nurturing role of a non-residential parent, or complemented and "filled a gap" in the single residential parent role when in a sole-parent family,

I guess it's generally, it gives either of the children on either side another person, another parent to be there for advice, or whatever, and completeness of what's generally conceived of as a family ... generally, it's perceived to be okay to be a single parent and that sort of thing but it's not easy you know. You always look, hey, I could do it, but it wouldn't be quite as much fun. All the bases aren't covered you know ... So you have more opportunity to, um, do the job properly I suppose (Male, stepfamily 2 years).

Promoting inclusion and cohesion

Many of these adults also perceived that stepparent support and involvement was necessary in fostering stepchildren's feelings of being cared for and accepted by the stepparent, and their sense of belonging in the stepfamily, as one adult asserted,

[Stepparents] get involved basically. Involve themselves in doing things that the kids like. So involve yourself with things like, you know I take [my stepson] out, buy him clothes and do stuff like that. And he likes that sort of stuff. I take him to sports and stuff like ... I make muffins and cakes and I do things to make him feel like he's one of my children. I'd like to think I treat him as much as I possibly can the same (Female, stepfamily 2 years).

Hence, while the adults in this group perceived that the appropriateness of a shared warmth and support parenting role was dependent on a number of considerations, they also believed that sharing the role could foster inclusion and cohesion in stepfamilies through children feeling cared for by both adults, as well as complementing or 'filling a gap' when there were perceived differences or deficits in parenting styles or abilities, or that which exists for sole-parents.

Considerations on the ideal

As outlined above, 22 of the 26 adults (85%) held the ideal of a shared warmth and support parenting role, however, they perceived that the appropriateness of this role was dependent on a number of considerations. One stepmother reflected this when saying, "I would hope that in time it's as close to natural love as it can possibly be ... of course that's the ideal, and I know it doesn't always happen that way". The participants in this category considered a number of issues when discussing the legitimacy and appropriateness of stepparent warmth and support. This included reciprocity and the quality of the stepparent-child relationship, different perceptions and ideals, and gendered roles.

Reciprocity and the quality of the stepparent-child relationship

Many of these participants perceived that the degree to which a warmth or support role was appropriate for stepparents was dependent upon the strength and quality of the stepparent-child relationship, and the child's level of comfort and acceptance of the stepparent. The degree to which the child and stepparent "got on" and "knew each other" were considered important. Two of the adults explained,

> It depends what his relationship with his stepmum is like, whether she's somebody that he can relate to, whether she is somebody that he feels uncomfortable with or feels that he's competing with, yeah; how involved she is and how involved she wants to be (Male, stepfamily 3 years).

> I think it really depends on the relationship between a child and a parent and the step-parent ... Ideally both should try [to support and advise] without invading the child's space too much...You've got to be really sensitive to that dynamic as well ... I think it could be positive or negative depending on [the stepchild's] view of the step parent, and how the family dynamics was working (Male, stepfamily 7 months).

To this end, some of the adults indicated it was important that parents and stepparents have realistic expectations about the stepparent-child relationship. This included accepting that the relationship may not be easily developed, especially in the short term, and that stepparent warmth may not always be easily reciprocated by the stepchild,

> May be the [step] kids might not like you ... You can't expect it, it certainly makes it hard but you can't expect it all to be sunshine and roses you know. Just because [their parent] really likes you, doesn't mean it's going to be reciprocated and especially not straight away (Female, 10 months).

> Hopefully they [stepchildren] look up to me and respect me ... It's quite difficult initially to try and stay relaxed and just sort of go with the flow a little bit. Don't expect to be accepted straight away. And understand that if your intention is to be there for the long term then that's the way you've got to look at it. Rome wasn't built in a day. Building any relationship I think is going to take some time (Male, stepfamily 10 months).

As illustrated in the quotes above, most of these participants thought it took time for the stepparent-child relationship to develop. While holding hope that relationships would become closer and deepen, many of the adults perceived that this could not be "forced" or "pushed". These adults perceived it more advantageous for stepparents to step back and not "rush" the relationship. They talked about the importance of the stepparent being

approachable and available while allowing the relationship to develop at its own pace, which was determined in part by the child,

> It's positive if the stepparent doesn't go woof, like come in being overpowering, too affectionate. Let them come to him. Let the child approach the stepparent, um, they like it if the stepparent's not coming in and taking over the home and the child's life. The stepparent can be loving, but too much too soon can be overwhelming (Female, stepfamily 7 years).

> If stepparents are forcing themselves too fast, like too quickly, being and doing things together too much or all moving in too quickly the kids get confused. Go at each others' pace. Don't rush it or force yourself on each other. It's good to have space, let the kids have space ... Mainly, just don't force people into things or you're just asking for trouble (Female, stepfamily 8 months).

One stepfather described how he tentatively initiated a closer relationship with his stepchildren by showing his appreciation of their acceptance of him into their lives,

> I think I did really well in my relationship cos I sent a card to the individual boys to thank them for welcoming me into the family. I wrote them a letter, to each of them, thanking them for welcoming me into the family and telling them how much I love their mother and how much she meant to me and how much it meant for me to be a part of their lives. And that went down very well, sort of personal, heartfelt thank you to them ... Yeah, just sort of came to me and I was talking to somebody else and, we were sort of sharing a few ideas and I did it (Male, stepfamily 2 years).

As outlined previously, four of the 26 adults in this category thought that stepparents ought to take as active a role as parents in the warmth and support activities of parenting regardless of considerations. In contrast to the views of the participants above, these adults perceived it more necessary for stepparents to step forward and assertively engage warmth and support parenting behaviours. They perceived that children appreciated warmth and support from stepparents and that this was a positive avenue for strengthening the stepparent-child relationship.

> In essence you need to treat [stepchildren] as you would your own ... They need support from both parents ... so your role is the same as it would be whether they're step or your own ... And the role in the family, you take on a parenting role; love, compassion, caring, time, discipline, very similar ... if anything, a stepparent needs to go over the top because they don't have unconditional love so, therefore, they need to earn it and to do that, they need to actually be slightly, put slightly more effort into it than what they would because it's not unconditional. Gotta earn it. And kids are very judgmental.

They look out for everything, every fault....Yep. So they need to put more effort in to actually doing stuff and making it known that they care cos they can't just assume (Female, stepfamily 2 years).

Irrespective of whether the participants in this category advocated stepping back or stepping forward, most talked about the value of stepparents engaging in fun one-on-one and family activities as a way of developing relationships with stepchildren and traversing the challenges described above. One stepfather explained,

I think when the stepparent can be directly involved in doing, you know, one on one things with one or both of the [step]children but particularly one at a time and in an area of their interest, I think it's a really good thing to do. It builds a better relationship and stuff, yeah, so one-on-one activities. I guess it just goes towards once again communication, it starts establishing those channels if you like, open them a bit so that when the need does come to talk they feel comfortable enough to approach you (Male, simple stepfamily 10 months).

Different perceptions and ideals

Some stepparents described feeling uneasy or unsure of the appropriate level of involvement and support to offer stepchildren. They talked about feeling uncertain about how acceptable their involvement would be to the parent or child; and concern that their involvement may influence or encroach on children's relationships with the parents. This resulted in some stepparents taking a tentative approach, or "holding back" from engaging in the warmth and support parenting behaviours more than they would have like, as the following quotes suggest,

Even in my own way, I desire to be in a parental role, but you're not trying to replace the original parent ... It's important not to offend your partner by taking too active or too passive a role in the family ... Don't let resentment take hold (Male, stepfamily 7 months).

Well I think [stepparents are] just the same as the parent really but they have to be aware, realise that there's dangers as there are differences ...because they're not your children, there's not the bonds there, not the depths as there is in a natural family...You know, you've got to be careful that you don't upset the relationship between the parent and the natural children because the bonds are already there (Male, stepfamily 4 years).

Personally as the stepparent you want to be close to them but you don't want to be trying to take over the role of the parent that they go and visit ...You just have to be so careful ... don't try and come between the children and their parents, that is something that I have seen (Female, stepfamily 5 years).

On the other hand, four parents in this group conveyed they would like partners to be more involved and active in a nurturing role than they perceived them to be at the time of interview. They perceived that this would be beneficial for the children and, in complex stepfamilies, could discourage "favouritism" among stepsiblings, as one parent said,

> He [stepfather] puts his eldest child who's seven, a boy, on a pedestal and of course my son, who doesn't get the attention from [his stepfather] ... wants to knock that young one off the pedestal. He's forever putting him down, telling him he's wrong, cos he actually wants [his stepfather's] attention, saying, hey look at me, I'm actually better than him, I know more than him and I can do it better than him (Female, stepfamily 2 years).

Gendered roles

Some of the adults in this category perceived that the gender of the stepparent was influential to how the warmth and support role was defined. As one stepmother in a complex stepfamily explained, "I think you need to take on a role that needs to be taken on in the family, like doing the girlie things with the girls as a stepmother". Similarly, some mothers talked about appreciating the contribution partners brought to their sons' lives,

> I have noticed my son's behaviour has improved and my role hasn't changed as such but instead of trying to be father and mother to my child ... just having a male around the house to teach my son different things and stuff that I just wouldn't know about like building things and stuff they have been doing (Female, stepfamily 2 years).

In summary, while around two-thirds of the adult participants thought that ideally stepparents ought to share a warmth and support parenting role, they also perceived there were a number of considerations which influenced whether it was appropriate to actively engage this role. The strength of reciprocity and quality of the stepparent-child relationship was identified as an important consideration. They thought it important to gauge and fostering children's level of comfort and acceptance of stepparent warmth and support before granting the legitimacy of stepparents taking this role. To this end, many of these participants thought that it was important that relationships were given time to develop and that adults had realistic expectations of what stepchildren were able to accept, which was often less stepparent support and warmth than the adults ideally wanted. These adults also considered that different perceptions and ideals of the stepparent role between the parent and stepparent influenced the level of stepparent engagement in warmth and support activities. To this end, many of the stepparents in this

group talked about taking a less active role than they desired because they were uncertain about how acceptable a more active warmth and support role would be to their partner or stepchild. Conversely, some of the parents in this category reported that they would like their partner to more actively engage in warmth and support activities with their children than their partners desired. Thirdly, some mentioned gender considerations as important to the type and quality of support and warmth that stepparents provided.

Parent as primary caregiver

Fourteen of the 40 adults (35%) perceived that stepparents should take a secondary role to parents in the warmth and support activities of parenting. Fifty percent of the adults residing in simple stepfamilies took this view compared to 27% of the adults residing in complex stepfamilies. In contrast to participants in the former themes above, these adults did not appear to hold the ideal of an equally shared warmth and support parenting role. Rather, these adults talked about a number of issues which, in their view, influenced or challenged the appropriateness and legitimacy of stepparents engaging in this role. These included loyalty and kinship, and intimacy and personal boundary issues. These participants talked about these issues as contributing to the belief that it is more appropriate for the parent to maintain the primary warmth and support parenting role.

Loyalty and kinship

Many of these adults talked about the importance of a stepparent not displacing or taking the place of the biological parents. Some stepparents were concerned that an equally shared warmth and support parenting role could usurp non-residential parents' role and cause loyalty conflicts. One adult described,

> While they're in your care then you act as supervisor, guidance, moral support, all those sorts of things. You certainly act as a friend, someone they can confide in and recognise that you're not a substitute for their mother or their father, whichever one is not around ... Your partner is the easy one because she's an adult but the children will have a lot of anxiety and anger towards you and you're going to have to deal with that ... try and get to know the kids without being a surrogate dad (Male, stepfamily 2 ½ years).

Others made reference to stepparents not being "blood" parents or sharing biological "bonds" or "ties" with stepchildren. In their view this afforded parents a greater nurturing role than stepparents because they were "closer" to their children, they held a shared "history", and they "knew" their children better than stepparents. There was also an

assumption that children preferred warmth and support from parents than from stepparents because of these inherent biological ties, as the following quote suggests,

> Blood is always thicker. You know it's important that you are in line, however, you've got to know that blood is always thicker and that children will always go to their parent, or think of their parent more, no matter what you do or how much work you put in, um, it's the parent that they will always stick with or, um, have a closer bond with ... You can never take the place of a blood mother or father and don't try to (Female, stepfamily 8 years).

Intimacy and personal boundary considerations

Many of the adults in this theme described limits for stepparents in levels of intimacy and supportive parenting behaviours, which differed from the parent role. A few parents perceived their children were uncomfortable receiving physical affection, such as hugs from their stepparent. One father said,

> [Stepmother] was very demonstrative and touchy and wanting to hug, and my eldest daughter found that too much and was uncomfortable with it, so she's not living here anymore, she's living with her mum (Male, stepfamily 8 years).

Similarly, some stepfathers talked about refraining from demonstrating physical affection toward their stepchildren because they were concerned that it would be rebuffed or misinterpreted as a sexual overture. Additional areas of support mentioned as less appropriate for stepparents concerned communicating about sexual maturation and bodily functions, including; sex education, medical care for illness and nursing stepchildren when they were unwell; and enquiring about "personal" matters with stepchildren,

> More personal things, like for instance, [my daughter] coming into her teenage years and her bodily changes and things like that. I mean, her dad might talk to her about a few things, but there's no way [her stepfather] would. Same with [my stepson], I wouldn't talk to him about anything particularly personal (Female, stepfamily 2 years).

Most of the adults in this category perceived it more acceptable for stepparents to offer stepchildren support in school and sporting activities, or provide practical help or advice such as help with homework and transport. Many stepparents talked about pursuing fun, one-on-one and family activities as a productive and comfortable way of demonstrating care and developing relationships with stepchildren, as one stepfather said,

> Yeah, I think I do more, may be a little bit more of the playing. At least I think I'm more up for the playing, for doing stuff. So [stepdaughter] plays netball, so every Wednesday afternoon I finish work early and go and stand in the rain and watch her play netball. Always rains on Wednesday, so there's a lot of that (Male, stepfamily 2 ½ years).

In summary, around two-thirds of the adult participants perceived that stepparents ought to take a secondary role to parents in warmth and support activities. These adults did not hold the ideal of a shared role. Rather, they perceived it more appropriate for parents to maintain the primary warmth and support parenting role and talked about a number of issues which influenced this view. These included issues of loyalty and kinship, and the consideration of intimacy and personal boundary issues. To this end, these adults perceived that the parent-child relationship uniquely provided biological "bonds", closeness, and the shared "history" necessary for a more intimate warmth and support parenting role. Some of these adults were also concerned that sharing warmth and support parenting activities could create loyalty conflicts and negatively impact the parent-child relationship. Many also perceived that children were less comfortable and accepting of physical warmth and affection from stepparents, and stepparent support in areas involving illness or bodily functions, and "personal" matters. For these adults, stepparent support and warmth was demonstrated more appropriately through providing children with practical help or advice and sharing fun one-on-one and family activities.

Warmth and Support: Children's Views

This section presents the results of the thematic analysis of the data pertaining to children's views of the stepparent role in regard to the warmth and support dimension of parenting. Three themes emerged: Stepparents can care and help too, Caring and helping but only if..., and Stepparent as friend.

Stepparents can care and help too

Twenty-two of the 44 stepchildren (50%) were supportive of stepparents sharing an active role in the warmth and support activities of parenting. Eleven of these 22 participants, however, indicated it was only acceptable or appropriate for stepparents to actively engage in warmth and support behaviours once preconditions were met. The preconditions are discussed in a subsequent theme titled 'Caring and helping but only if...' These 22 participants talked appreciatively about contributions that stepparents can make to stepchildren's and parents' lives and viewed stepparents as potential additional

caregivers as well as resources for stepchildren "to go to" particularly for advice, practical support, and fun.

Another adult "to go to"

Some of the children thought that having another available adult to meet children's care needs or "go to" if they wanted help or advice was valuable, as one stepchild said,

> I would just like the stepparent to do what my real parent does ... you get to know another adult better. Another bonus is that instead of having, it seems more like it is normal, like having another male adult in the house, or if it's female, it sort of balances it up ... because you're so used to having two people. Just people have more attention for you, like instead of one person trying to do all the stuff the stepparent can help out ... or if the child asks for help, they should give the child help (Megan, aged 10 years).

Hence, some of these participants especially valued an additional adult being in the home to fill the support role. Others sought out and appreciated the alternative perspectives or skills that stepparents provided,

> [The stepchild] should ask both of them for help, he might get double the amount of advice ... just sort of every now and then [stepparents] help, or quite often, help the other child that's their stepchild and it's sort of like another role model and teacher sort of (Adam, aged 11 years).

> They can both give advice and sometimes that mingles and you take bits from each idea and come up with a really good idea kind of ... the stepparent has different points and a different side of the story than what the kid has and the other parent has ... Sometimes the different points of view help to solve the problem (Michael, aged 12 years).

More fun and practical support

Many of these participants described an appreciation of stepparents' efforts to get to know them and spend time with them. This often encompassed "having fun" and "doing lots of stuff" together such as fishing, swimming, playing sports and games, going on trips, and going out for dinner. Practical support such as help with homework and driving children to school and sports was also appreciated,

> Well we like to go away on holiday and stuff and we like to play sports. Yeah, we play it together on weekends, like, we have games of basketball and stuff ... and we like to go to the beach and swimming pools and go out to restaurants and stuff (Abby, aged 11 years).

> Well I like it when [my stepfather] is nice to me. He plays games with me and things like that. Yeah, like may be taking us to the beach when it's sunny and we play cricket outside sometimes too (Jack, aged 10 years).

Some of these children referenced the value of stepchildren and stepparents being "kind" or "nice" to each other. They encouraged stepchildren as well as stepparents to "make an effort", co-operate, and be open to strengthening relationships. One child advised,

> Don't be hostile to the stepparent just because your other parent has moved out because that doesn't really help. And also try and make an effort to get to know them [stepparent] and stuff, because you may find that you like them (Peter, aged 13 years).

Hence, the children in this group perceived there were advantages in having another adult available to children for attention and care. They valued the alternative perspectives or skills that stepparents could bring and thought that stepparents could form closer relationships with stepchildren through fun activities and providing practical support. Some of these children thought that children, themselves, had a part in influencing the degree of warmth and support engendered and accepted in relationships with stepparents and encouraged children to be open to and co-operative of closer relationships with stepparents when this was reciprocated.

Caring and helping but only if...

As outlined above, 11 of these 22 children indicated it was only acceptable or appropriate for stepparents to actively engage in warmth and support parenting behaviours once a number of preconditions were met. The preconditions to children accepting an active warmth and support stepparent role included liking, "getting on", and perceiving stepparents' had "earned" the right through friendship; an assurance that stepparents were not "taking the parents' place"; and the evolvement of the role at the child's pace.

Liking, "getting on", and "earning" through friendship

Many of these children talked about feeling more comfortable and accepting of stepparent support (particularly emotional support such as being comforted, talking, and asking advice) if they liked the stepparent, and "got on" with them. One child explained,

> It depends on their attitude ... if he gets along with his stepdad, yeah, it depends on the relationship...Like, you know, I get on with [my stepdad] so I can talk to him. I'll talk to him about stuff but, you know, if you don't get on with them then I think I wouldn't go and talk to him if I didn't really get on

with him. So, yeah ... as they get to know each other and get on closer terms and stuff they'll start talking to them (Robert, aged 16 years).

Some of the attributes and behaviours of stepparents which encouraged liking and "getting on" included being "nice", "kind", "generous", "encouraging", noncritical, non-judgemental, or a "friend". Three of the children in this group mentioned the importance of stepparents treating all step/siblings fairly.

Many of these participants also talked about accepting stepparent support more readily if they perceived that stepparents had "earned" the role and their trust. This was fostered when children perceived that stepparents were taking a genuine interest and making an effort to get to know them or do things for them. This included help with homework and transport, one-on-one activities, and family outings, as two children described,

> Early on you don't know them, you don't trust them, you have no relationship with them. They haven't proven themselves to be anything, you might not even get on with them ... It's almost like forming a friend, you know, they've had to earn the friendship and you have to earn their friendship ... [My stepmother] genuinely tried to be our friend and she'd take me out and, you know, she'd buy me a book and get an apple pie from McDonalds, those are kind of my earliest memories. You know, she'd help me with my homework and really being what I would think is a desirable stepparent, like a parent but also a friend (Peter, aged 15 years).

> As a stepdad, he goes out of his way to do things that are, you know, being generous by doing those things for me. You know the way he does that (Henry, aged 14 years).

Not "taking the parents' place"

Some of these children described a need for reassurance that stepparents were not replacing or "taking the parents' place". This was compromised, for some of the stepchildren, if they perceived stepparents were criticising or competing with their non-residential parents' nurturing role, or if a stepparent stepped into a disciplinary role. One child explained,

> The stepparent really needs to make sure that they make it clear that they never want to take your actual parent's place. I mean they can try and be like a parent ... they can be good, like a parent, but they should never take that place away. And that' how I see my stepmother is when she's constantly criticising my mum saying, "Oh well, your mother obviously hasn't taught you very well. Sometimes I think I do a better job of mothering you than your

real mum". That's actually quite hurtful and hard to cope with you know (Matthew, aged 15 years).

Stepchildren's pace and space

Many of the children in this category indicated that developing relationships and accepting affection and support from stepparents were "difficult at first", however, this progressed with time as they "got to know" stepparents and "got used to it". They talked about the importance of stepparents' efforts, such as playing games and offering practical support. They thought that engagement of these activities encouraged trust and rapport, which allowed them to feel more comfortable about receiving emotional support from stepparents, as the following quotes suggests,

> At first they might find it hard, you know, to get along with them but over time it will be good for them. Like, they'll break the ice and stuff. It will become easier as you get to know them better, you will get along with them more. And, you know, you might think it's all big and scary and I don't really like it but also you do get more opportunities with stepparents and do things with them that you usually wouldn't do and stuff like that ... Yeah, you might find it hard to begin with but over time you will get used to it (Richard, aged 14 years,).

> You start to latch onto the stepparent like another parent to you. You might think of them as stepmum or stepdad but you're closer to them just knowing them. It might change the way you relate with each other. You might do more stuff together, helping them with their homework ... doing family outings, doing stuff together, and then you discuss stuff with them (Robert aged 16 years).

In summary, while around half of the child participants were supportive of stepparents sharing an active role in warmth and support activities, half of these children indicated this was only acceptable when a number of preconditions were met. An important precondition identified by these children was that they were able to like and "get on" with the stepparent. This was influenced by stepparents' character and personality and their ability to have "earned" children's acceptance and trust through doing things with and for children. Some of these children found it harder to accept stepparent warmth and support when they perceived stepparents were "taking their parent's place". This was experienced as stepparents criticising or competing with their parent or when stepparents took a disciplinary role. Many of these children thought it was important that children be given time and space to get know and get used to stepparents before it was appropriate for stepparents to more fully share in warmth and support parenting activities. They

valued stepparent support in practical help and fun activities as precursors to developing a closer relationship and feeling more accepting of emotional support.

Stepparent as friend

In contrast to participants above, 22 of the 44 stepchildren (50%) perceived it was unacceptable or inappropriate for stepparents to take an active warmth and support parenting role. They described stepparents as being "a close member of the family" but "not really your parent", a "friend" or a "guardian if your parent's not there". Many viewed relationships with stepparents as being "not as close" as that with parents, which contributed to their belief that it was more appropriate for parents to maintain the primary warmth and support role. One adolescent said,

> She would probably not like it and not really listen [to her stepparent] because he's actually not family, so you don't want to discuss things and problems ... [Stepparents should] just like be your friend, keeping you company and doing things with you (Craig, aged 14 years).

Hence, these children advocated for stepparents taking a less active warmth and support role in which they are not "too close" to stepchildren. In such, these children thought that stepparents ought to engage in everyday talk with stepchildren but not discuss "feelings" or "personal stuff", and that they primarily provide practical support or involve themselves in fun, non-intimate tasks with stepchildren.

Not "too close": Everyday talk, not "feelings" or "personal stuff"

Many of the stepchildren, in this category, asserted that stepparents were not parents and advocated that they "shouldn't try to be the parent". They perceived it inappropriate for stepparents to be "too close", "familiar", "smothering", "friendly", or "taking care of you too much". They described feeling uncomfortable, "awkward", "weird", or "odd" when they experienced stepparents this way,

> I don't see [a stepparent] as another parent, but a close member of the family ... They [stepparents] shouldn't think that you're their child ... It depends on the relationship and how long you've been with them ... but they shouldn't get too close and too familiar though ... It would be nice if the child can direct how they would like the relationship to work ... like the stepparent not bombard them or be over nice to them (Joshua, aged 15 years).

Many advised giving stepchildren psychological and physical "space". For some children this included having their own bedroom to retreat to, and stepparents not hugging or kissing them. Others felt strongly that stepparents should not be involved in personal

matters that affected stepchildren or areas that impacted on school or social life, as illustrated in the following quotes,

> It helps if the stepparent doesn't try to act too friendly, like give you some space. [Stepchildren don't like] their stepmother smothering them and not giving them any room ... Adults should know that the kids will find it really weird and won't like it (Rose, aged 14 years).

> If they [stepparents] try and invade into your personal life, ask you questions that, or try and get you to do things that you don't want to do necessarily, like more personal matters, if they try and get into your social life and things. I don't think that's appropriate for them to impact on your whole social life, I don't think that's good (Heather, aged 14 years).

> Yeah, like I'd rather [my stepfather] do the jobs that wouldn't involve me rather than the jobs that effect me. So, like homework, and room cleaning, and school trips, I'd rather him keep out of that sort of thing (Jacquie, aged 13 years).

Some children appreciated stepparents asking and advising them about day-to-day activities or concerns, and the sense of companionship this provided. However, many of these children viewed stepparents' attempts to talk about "personal stuff", problems, or how children were feeling as problematic and unwarranted, as the following quotes suggest,

> It's okay for them [stepparents] to talk to you and help you out with stuff but not personal stuff I feel. No, I wouldn't feel comfortable, not personal stuff to my stepparent. Just things like homework stuff like that, practical stuff (Mark, aged 15 years).

> It's pretty much the same as what they do with their birth kids but they shouldn't expect their stepkids to be as comfortable with them. The stepparent shouldn't ask heaps of personal questions of the stepchild ... They really shouldn't ask the really personal questions (Heather, aged 14 years).

Practical and non-intimate tasks

Most of the children in this theme talked about the appropriateness of stepparents helping them with one-on-one and household tasks. This included teaching and "making things" with stepchildren; and cook, cleaning, washing, "fixing things", and 'doing jobs around the house". Many of these children also valued stepparents "having fun" with them which included activities together that they both enjoyed, and family outings or games, as two children said,

He [stepparent] helps us, like work and getting all the jobs and stuff around the house and he does a lot of that sort of thing. He always does the gas bottles and takes stuff to the dump ... He lets us do all the fun things, like use our boat and slug gun and he even let me use his unicycle. He just changes everything, he makes heaps of stuff really fun (Tom, aged 9 years).

You should go out to mini golf, for example, and the stepparent should go. They should watch the kids play sport and get involved in activities, like going out to dinner is good (Helen, aged 9 years).

In summary, half of the child participants perceived it was unacceptable or inappropriate for stepparents to engage as actively in warmth and support activities as parents. While these children described appreciating some aspects of practical support from stepparents, efforts to engage intimately or stepparent attempts to involve themselves in stepchildren's personal or social lives were accepted less favourably. To this end, many of these children and adolescents preferred that stepparents were not "too close" and that they engaged in talk about everyday matters rather than "feelings" or "personal stuff". Most, however, appreciated stepparent support in practical and non-intimate tasks such as help with making things and doing household tasks, as well as doing fun activities and games. Unlike the participants in the previous category, who appreciated stepparents establishing a friendship as a means towards a more active warmth and support parenting role, these stepchildren appeared to view the role of the stepparent as more like that of friend.

Overall then, the thematic analysis of the adults' and children's views of the stepparent role suggest that adults viewed a more active role for the stepparent in relation to both discipline/control and warmth/support activities of parenting. In terms of the discipline and control dimension of parenting, around three quarters of the adults thought that the stepparent ought ideally to share the disciplinary role, while almost two-thirds of the children thought that the parent ought ideally to maintain the primary disciplinary role. Similarly, around two-thirds of adults, compared to one-half of children, thought that stepparents ought ideally to actively share in warmth and support activities of parenting. However, adults and children who did hold the ideal of shared warmth and support parenting also saw this as possible only if certain preconditions were met. For the adult participants this included issues pertaining to reciprocity and the quality of the stepparent-child relationship, shared ideals, and gendered roles. For the child participants this included liking and "getting on", assurance that stepparents were not "taking the

parents' place", and evolvement of the role at the child's pace. These qualitative findings are further supported by the quantitative results presented in Chapter Six.

Chapter Five

Thematic Analysis: The Parent Role

This chapter presents the results of the thematic analysis of data pertaining to the parent role in the stepfamily. This data concerned adults' and stepchildren's perceptions and expectations of the parent role within the stepfamily. This encompassed participants' views about parenting practices within the stepfamily system independent of the stepparent role. Three themes emerged from the analyses of the Adult and Child categories of data, which will be discussed below. The themes emerging from the Adult data are titled: Facilitating transition and stepfamily cohesion, Managing boundary and loyalty conflicts, and Nurturing the parent-child relationship. The themes emerging from the Child data are titled: Helping children get used to stepfamily life, Making things happy and fair, Checking in and talking. Table 4 below contains an overview of these themes and subthemes.

Table 4

Overview of the parent role themes and sub-themes

ADULTS' VIEWS	CHILDREN'S VIEWS
Parent Role Specific to the Stepfamily	**Parent Role Specific to the Stepfamily**

❖ Facilitating transition and stepfamily cohesion
 	
  a. Preparing for and pacing the transition
 	
  b. Fostering stepfamily relationships
 	
  c. Helping children adjust
	❖ Helping children get used to stepfamily life
	
	  a. Parenting "the same as before"
	
	  b. Letting children know what's happening
	
	  c. Helping " getting to know each other"

❖ Managing boundary and loyalty conflicts
 	
  a. Fostering a respectful co-parenting relationship with the non-residential parent
 	
  b. Managing divided loyalties
	❖ Making things happy and fair
	
	  a. Adults "getting along" and not arguing
	
	  b. Sharing attention and "making things fair"

❖ Nurturing the parent-child relationship
 	
  a. Spending one-on-one time
 	
  b. Maintaining primary responsibility and care
	❖ Checking in and talking
	
	  a. Spending time, looking after feelings and upsets

The results of the analysis are presented below. There is no order of importance of the themes. Each of the themes discussed include quotes in order to illustrate the themes. The number of participants who provided data under each theme is also given as an indication of how prevalent the theme is for both adults and children.

The Parent Role: Adults' Views

This section presents the results from the analysis of data pertaining to the adults' views about the parent role. Three themes emerged from the analysis of data pertaining to adults' views about the parent role: Facilitating transitions and stepfamily cohesion, Managing boundary and loyalty conflicts, and Nurturing the parent-child relationship, each of which is presented below.

Facilitating transitions and stepfamily cohesion

Twenty-two of the 40 adults (55%) talked about parents playing an important role in facilitating a comfortable transition for biological children into stepfamily life and strengthening the cohesion of the stepfamily unit. These adults encouraged parents to prepare for and pace the transition, actively foster stepfamily relationships, and continue assisting biological children with adjustment.

Preparing for and pacing the transition

Some adult participants advocated that parents prepare, plan, and "take things slowly" during the transition to stepfamily life. This included parents choosing partners carefully, introducing stepfamily members gradually, not "moving in together" too quickly, reading material about stepfamilies, and preparing biological children through informing and asking for their opinion or input. As the following adults described,

> Blending a family you've got to involve the kids, you've got to talk to them about what's going on and ask their opinion. Ask them what they're thinking, get some feedback but they need to be involved. If you're going to find a house together, get them to come along with you, you know, what do you think of this place? You know, is it what we're looking for? Um yeah, make them feel like they're part of the life, it's not just mum's met a new man and we're going to live with him. Make it a family thing ... I just think you need to plan, involve the kids, don't rush in (Female, stepfamily 1 year).

> I don't think you should hurry to live together either, we took our time. We'd been together for two years, over two years, and just starting, at the start have a weekend together. I don't think you need to ram it down their throat too

quickly. I think change is better if it happens more slowly (Male, stepfamily 2 years).

Fostering stepfamily relationships

Many adults talked about the importance of parents enabling or assisting stepsibling and stepparent-child relationships. Some of the adults suggested that parents actively encourage family or one-on-one activities as a way for stepfamily members to "get to know" and "get used to" each other. A few of the adults encouraged parents to purposefully allow or create opportunities for stepchildren and stepparents to interact alone, as one father explained,

> I talked about giving space, you know allowing that, to foster that by allowing them to develop their own relationship ... creating opportunities where they are actually, again just together on their own, yeah (Father, stepfamily 5 years).

Some of the adults encouraged parents to build new stepfamily memories and traditions as a way of bridging the transition and developing stepfamily cohesion, as the following quotes suggest,

> I think, yeah, it is a really big thing moving in two families together... so I think, yeah, take it easy, plan some fun stuff, um, set up new traditions. You know, work out how you're going to celebrate birthdays, what things are important to this new family? How do they celebrate Christmas? Do they celebrate Mother's and Father's Day? What are they going to do for the stepparents in these relationships? The more you can sort those things out before you actually blend your family and also explain all this to the kids (Female, stepfamily 1 year).

> [Parents should] pay attention to the children and their needs and then finally to pay attention to the family ... like having dinner time, building a sense of family but also having a place for everybody to have their own input or their own, like a team ... And, you know, memories, take photos, build memories, create things to talk about, shared experiences (Female, stepfamily 2 ½ years).

Helping children to adjust

Many adults thought it was important that parents attend to and remain sensitive to the difficulties and needs of biological children especially during the early stages of stepfamily life when relationships and routines were unfamiliar. This included being available to listen and talk through concerns or worries, and making allowances for

children as they adjust to stepparents and stepfamily life. For those in complex stepfamilies, this means also adjusting to stepsiblings, as one father explained,

> Recognise that its probably difficult, well it's going to be difficult for the children as well both in terms of their relationship with the stepparent, their relationship with the other children and also managing that sort of change and sort of relationship with their own parent ... Yeah, but also being sensitive to the needs of the children so when you're sitting down watching TV and you're sitting together, I'm sitting together with [my partner], well you know, often we'll have somebody that will come and sit in between us, you know, so you've sort of got to make, you have to make room and sort of accommodate that (Male, stepfamily 5 years).

Some parents also referred to the importance of helping biological children feel like they were at home in their new environment by ensuring they had their own personal belongings and that they had their own space,

> I think just making the kids feel comfortable in their new home too. Ensuring that it becomes their home and that they don't feel like they're just visiting. Especially in our situation, we've moved into [my partner's] home, and it's [my stepchild's] home. Just making sure that they've got something special of their own, they've got their own things, their own space. And helping with the adjustment of having brothers too (Female, stepfamily 6 months).

Managing boundary and loyalty conflicts

Twenty-seven of the 40 (61%) adults talked about experiencing difficulties in managing boundary and loyalty issues in stepfamilies. They encouraged parents to foster respectful co-parenting relationships with non-residential parents and described some of the ways in which divided loyalties between stepfamily members were experienced and managed by parents.

Fostering a respectful co-parenting relationship with the non-residential parent

Many adults perceived it important for parents to co-operate and foster to the best of their abilities, a respectful and non-conflicted co-parenting relationship with their children's other biological parent. This was often talked about in terms of being beneficial to children and, therefore, worthwhile. As such, many advocated that parents refrain from arguing in front of children or "using children as a tools" or "go betweens" in disputes,

> [Parents] be there for the children and not there fighting ... understand that it's not their fight, the stuff from the divorce, it's not the children that should wear it ... and being bitter about their break-ups and using their children as a

tool to get at each other. I mean, I know the kids get upset if we are arguing and all that kind of thing, that must be the hardest bit for the children (Male, stepfamily 2 years).

Some adults also asserted it was important to support children's relationships with parents by not criticising ex-partners in front of children and explaining to children that liking a stepparent was not being disloyal to the other parent, as illustrated in the following quotes,

> [Parents] shouldn't run their partners down, their ex-partners. That's a really big thing ... You should try and be, you know, the relationships are really important to keep. It doesn't matter what happens, for the sake of the children you need, you know, I'm always positive, never say anything bad about their father (Female, stepfamily 2 years).

> How do you tell mum "I actually like this person", so I think you get that in quite a few relationships where it would be difficult for the child to say "I actually like this stepparent" without it hurting the feelings of the other parent, and I think that would be the same for [my child] as well. She really likes [her stepfather] and she loves her dad. But he doesn't try to replace him, but it's getting the children to understand that you're not actually trying to do that at all. They're allowed to love both (Female, stepfamily 5 years).

Managing divided loyalties

Many parents talked about feeling "torn" between conflicted loyalties to their biological children and their partners. They described struggling with the desire to validate and put their children's needs first and the need to support their partners and protect and nurture these relationships also,

> [My partner] is in love with me and not necessarily in love with the children. It's, the stepparent might have me in mind first, and while I've got him in mind, I've also got the children in mind (Female, stepfamily 2 years).

> You need a strong relationship in a stepfamily, you need to have quality time as a couple and get that communication going because I think it's harder on your relationship than you anticipate ... As a parent I felt guilty. I was torn sometimes between the two things, you know, I had two loyalties and it was like I felt sometimes in a situation where I had to choose between them, and I didn't want to be in that situation, so I found that emotionally took its toll (Female, stepfamily 2 ½ years).

This resulted in some participants feeling like they were the "peacemaker", "the 'glue' that held it all together", or that they were forced to "wear two hats". Some of the parents described themselves taking on a role as protector or mediator in response to perceived

threats to children's wellbeing, or conflict between children and stepparents, or in complex stepfamilies conflict between stepsiblings, as the following quote suggests,

> The parent's role is to protect and to nurture your own children and try and make that sort of transition more comfortable. For me, it's been like, I've felt like a bit of a peacemaker at times and forever trying to find a balance between acknowledging that there's other children and things that are sort of important to them, but also acknowledging that there's other children in the family too and not playing favourites. It's kind of to try and find some balance I suppose. Trying to sort of keep the peace, mediation I guess (Male, stepfamily 3 years).

Nurturing the parent-child relationship

Thirty-seven of the 40 adults (93%) talked about the importance of parents continuing to attend to the needs of biological children and the parent-child bond within the stepfamily. This included parents ensuring they spent one-on-one time in fun activities or talking with children, and that they maintained primary responsibility for day-to-day needs and major decisions impacting children's lives.

Spending one-on-one time

Some of the adults acknowledged that their time and attention was often stretched by the demands of stepfamily life. They voiced concern that this could result in children feeling "displaced" and, therefore feeling "overlooked" by the stepfamily or by the parent's relationship with the stepparent. In response, many of the adults asserted it was important for parents to continue nurturing relationships with biological children through shared one-on-one activities, and being available for talking and confiding,

> I think [parents] need to be careful to give kids individual attention, but I think you have to be very careful to try and to reinforce to your children that they are loved and are special, and that they are not being overtaken by the new family (Male, stepfamily 6 months).

> I have an open relationship with my children, because you feel free to talk and see how they feel. I think a child should feel free to come and secure, you know, to come and talk to the parent, what they think, how they feel (Female, stepfamily 3 years).

Maintaining primary responsibility and care

Many parents asserted that their parental role did not change as a result of being in a stepfamily. They talked about the "ultimate responsibility" for a child remaining with the biological parent after repartnering. This included provision for basic food, clothing,

schooling, and medical needs; and making major decisions in children's lives such as the school they go to or what sports they play. Two parents said,

> Things like ensuring they've got the right uniform, equipment, things for school. Like the [parent is] the main person who liaises with the school and kind of things. Ensuring that things are done like homework, keeping a watchful eye on them, making sure they are getting things done, setting the boundaries and rules. Checking in that they're okay, like being affectionate, making sure the child is okay with things. The role is the same as if they were a parent in any other family really (Female, stepfamily 2 years).

> The parent always takes the dominant ... if things are of any seriousness it's up to the mother because she's his mother ... the parent is ultimately still the one whose responsible for schooling and major decisions like that, not the stepparents I don't think (Male, stepfamily 4 years).

In summary, adults' perceived that important aspects of the parent role within a stepfamily included parents facilitating transitions and stepfamily relationships, managing boundary and loyalty conflicts, and ensuring that relationships with biological children were maintained. In complex stepfamilies, it was perceived extra attention was also necessary for facilitating stepsibling relationships and ensuring time and resources are shared equally among stepsiblings.

The Parent Role: Children's Views

Three themes emerged: Helping children get used to stepfamily life, Making things happy and fair, and Checking in and talking.

Helping children get used to stepfamily life

Twenty-seven of the 44 children (61%) talked about appreciating parental support in helping them adapt and "get used" to stepfamily life. This included parents providing stability and reassurance by maintaining their prior parental role, helping stepfamily members "getting to know each other" through shared activities, and informing and giving children notice and time to adjust.

Parenting the same as before

Many children strongly asserted that parents ought to maintain the parental role established prior to repartnering. This included parents "looking after children the same as before", and reassuring children they were available and "still there for them", as the following quotes suggest,

[Parents should] be there to look after all the kids. But look out more and have more responsibility and make up rules for their own child, more than the others, and organise their own children. Otherwise pretty much the same as before they went into the step family, just the normal parent ... and make sure that they are still there, and it hasn't changed the family life and they still, still have it how it was and if they reassure the children (Tabitha, aged 16 years).

Doing everything they did before they broke up because they shouldn't be giving up their role of being a parent for, just because they've moved to a different family or changed partners (Paul, aged 15 years).

Helping "getting to know each other"

Some children talked about valuing parents initiating stepfamily activities or including stepparents in activities as a way of helping them "get to know" and feel comfortable with stepfamily members, as the following quotes illustrate,

[Stepchildren] like spending time with their parent and stepparent ... together is better because then you get to know them (Michael, aged 13 years).

[Parents] should pay more attention to like hugging you and having fun and combine you with the stepparents so they get to know you. Especially for the first two or three months (Matthew, aged 15 years).

When stepsiblings are involved, this also means,

[Parents should] just play more games so the children get used to the other children in the other family (Andrew, aged 11 years).

Letting children know what's happening

Many children thought it important for parents to give children notice and allow them time to get to know stepparents, and stepsiblings in complex stepfamilies before moving into living together, as the following quotes illustrate,

You slowly become friends and you slowly progress and then you're like real good friends and stuff. You can't rush it, you never rush it otherwise something doesn't work. So you have to be like slow, just get to know them ... You can't, you have to like let it settle first, like you don't just go, if you meet a person, you don't move in like straight away like a month after you've met, it's like a year and just go to their house stay nights, you've got to get used to them first and get to know them (Ben, aged 13 years).

I guess getting to know the stepparent before they move in. Just getting to know them before they sort of jump into your life, there's nothing worse than having a stranger there every day (Joseph, aged 14 years).

On the other hand, some children felt strongly that parents ought to be open and honest in keeping children informed about progression in the parent-stepparent relationship. They described feeling annoyed, hurt, or disrespected when parents were not timely in telling them about developments or when they perceived that the nature of the relationship was being concealed,

> Before we moved in with [my stepfather] they were like "What do you think about this?" Whereas when my dad got engaged, I was the last, me and [my sister] were the last ones to find out. And that to me that was more awful than anything else, finding out that your whole family had known and you were the last to find out ... So that wasn't really respecting us kids because our lives have been affected because of it, for better or for worse, but it's the way that they didn't respect us. Because mum and [my stepfather] realised that their lives affect us (Matthew, aged 15 years).

> With [my stepfather] I found out because I guessed, "Mum are you and [stepfather] together now?" because he started spending lots of time like coming over alot...I'd rather she just told us (Aimee, aged 13 years).

Making things happy and fair

Twenty-one of the 44 children (48%) talked about the parent's role in the negotiation of conflict and the management of divided loyalties and other issues that occurred between stepfamily members or with non-residential parents. This included that parents try to "get along' and not argue with adults and that they share their time and attention with children.

Adults "getting along" and not arguing

Some of the children experienced conflict between biological parents as particularly difficult. This included parents arguing, criticising each other, ignoring, or "not talking" to each other, as one child said,

> I don't like it if [my stepmother] or my dad don't talk to my mum and I don't like it, to think, that my parents don't like each other even though I love them both very, very dearly. I love my dad as much as I love my mum and I know that they don't love each other anymore and they don't really like each other and it makes it quite hard really (Helen, aged 10 years).

Many of the children advocated that adults try not to argue or criticise each other in front of children, and that the parents try to talk and "get along",

> Well I like it when mum and dad talk nicely to each other, and I didn't like it when they yelled at each other because they got angry with each other and

they sweared at each other and yelled at each other and I didn't like that (Samantha, aged 11 years).

Others described feeling uncomfortable or worried that the stepfamily may 'break up'' when stepparents and parents argued,

> They should not fight around the children ... Try not to fight around the kids because the kids feel they have something to do with it and you're doing something to break them up when they do that (Amanda, aged 11 years).

Hence, many children commented on the importance of separated parents, and parents and stepparents maintaining non-conflicted relationships.

Sharing attention and making things fair

Many children also talked about the possibility of children finding it difficult if they have to share the parent's time with the stepparent and feeling left out, as the following quote suggests,

> I think the stepfamily they'd probably find it difficult because you're going between the houses and you're not always spending the time with your parent, and the stepparent is spending the time with them and you might feel that you're a bit left out (Helen, aged 10 years).

> [Stepchildren find it difficult when parents] are may be concentrating more on the relationship with the stepparent rather than the kids and spending more time with the stepparent. Going out a lot with them. Getting things for them. Forgetting about the kids and going off and having a good time (Jack, aged 14 years).

Others found it particularly difficult when they perceived they were being "left out" of holidays and stepfamily plans, or that resources were not shared equally in stepfamilies when stepsiblings are present, as one child described,

> Dad and [stepmother] tend to live in this little world where they don't think; they go off on five or six week holidays and don't take us, pretty much every year. That's not very nice, and we just get chucked off to other family for the weeks. That's not really respecting us ... It's the way that [my stepmother] is pushing dad into saying I don't want the kids with us on the holiday, and that's not really a family. It's very dysfunctional ... It's the way they go on holiday and leave us, that's abandonment (Peter, aged 15 years).

Many of the children advocated that parents give attention and one-on-one time to biological children,

> May be spend a little more time because the kids will feel like the new stepdad is more important ... Make everything equal between the kids ...Yeah and everything has to be fair (Rose, aged 18 years).

> Parents like should still spend as much time as you spend with the child before your relationship so then you've still got like a strong connection. So what you don't do is just, like if you did fun stuff before you had that relationship and then all of a sudden you stopped and its sort of like all blah and, you sort of, you're not as close to your parent and, then and, you feel like not as important (Paul, aged 13 years).

Hence, children perceived time with parents was important in order to maintain relationships and reassure children that they remained important in parents' lives.

Checking in and talking

Similar to the adult participants, 42 of the 44 children (96%) made reference to the importance of parents attending to children's emotional needs through spending time with them and talking.

Spending time, looking after feelings and upsets

Some children talked about appreciating parents taking time to "check in" on their wellbeing and asking them if "everything was okay",

> [The parent's job] is making sure we do our jobs, like helping around the family [and] even though you're doing dinner you can still stop and have a little break and just talk to your son or something for a bit (Ben, aged 9 years).

> Um, [parents] should be giving their real children a lot of attention ... make sure that everything is going okay with the children, like still have talks to them and stuff (Rose, aged 13 years).

Many of the children also valued being able to talk to parents about "emotional stuff" or "feelings", and being able to turn to parents for support when upset. They also sought out parents and felt more comfortable with the parent fulfilling this role compared to the stepparent, as the following quotes suggest,

> [The parent's job] is more of the emotional side of the children. And then I guess the stepparent is just helping out with everything else (Paul, aged 15 years).

> The parent should like try and have more of a relationship with their children, like help them with how they feel and perhaps if they like this person, just about anything. I think they should be talking to them about stuff that their

kids might not feel comfortable about talking to their stepparent about (Alice, aged 12 years).

In summary, children's views on the parent role in a stepfamily echoed many of the adults' views particularly around the themes of support with the stepfamily transition, fostering co-operation and equity, and continuing to provide emotional support and time together with children. Children also perceived it important that parents maintained a primary parenting role as in the first-marriage family. This was perceived particularly important in providing continuity and reassurance that children remained important in parents' lives.

Chapter Six
Quantitative Results

This chapter presents results from the analyses of data obtained from participants' completion of the self-report questionnaire. Fifty-two adults and 51 children completed the self-report questionnaire. The questionnaire included three self-report measures: the Stepparent Role Questionnaire (SRQ), the Step/Parent Behaviour Inventory (SPBI), and the Stepfamily Relationship Satisfaction Scale (SRSS). These measures are described more fully within the methods section of Chapter Two (see page 33). The purpose of the self-report questionnaire was to investigate adult and child participants' perceptions of the ideal parenting behaviours for adults in a parent role and adults in a stepparent role. The degree to which participants perceived the stepparent role as similar or different in content to the parent role and the particular parenting behaviours perceived more or less appropriate to the specific roles was of particular interest. Furthermore, the questionnaire component of the study aimed to investigate relationships between participants' perceptions of the ideal stepparent and parent roles and levels of satisfaction with stepfamily relations.

This questionnaire study, using quantitative methods, was designed to complement the qualitative component of the thesis. It was guided by the following research questions:

1. Do adults' and children's perceptions of ideal stepparent roles and ideal parent roles differ in terms of the discipline and control activities of parenting?

2. Do adults' and children's perceptions of ideal stepparent roles and ideal parent roles differ in terms of the warmth and support activities of parenting?

3. What is the relationship between perceptions of ideal parenting and stepparenting roles and satisfaction with parent-child and stepparent-child relationships; and stepfamily situation?

Two approaches were used to compare adults' and children's perceptions of the stepparent and parent roles. First, participants' responses on the SRQ allowed for comparison of stepfamily members' preferences for the label which most closely described their perception of the ideal stepparent role. This measure was also used by Fine et al. (1998) to examine within family consistency. Second, participants' ratings on

the SPBI allowed for an examination and comparison of adult's and children's perceptions and expectations of how actively stepparents and parents should ideally engage in discipline/control and warmth/support parenting activities. A third approach, incorporating the SRSS, was used to investigate the relationships between adults' and children's perceptions of the stepparent and parent roles and level of satisfaction in stepfamily relations. The SRQ, the SPBI, and the SRSS are described more fully now. Each of these measures is examined separately and results pertaining to the measures are presented below.

The Stepparent Role Questionnaire

Adult and child participants completed the Stepparent Role Questionnaire (SRQ). Participants were given a list of possible labels such as 'friend', 'teacher', 'parent', 'aunt or uncle', 'stepparent' and were asked to choose which relationship best described their *ideal* way of relating with a stepchild. For example, stepparents were asked, 'Which relationship best describes your *ideal* way to relate to your stepchildren?' Parallel questions were asked of parents and stepchildren regarding the stepparent role (see Appendix D).

In the current study, 52 adult and 51 child participants completed the SRQ. Adults who were both parents and stepparents were asked to choose the ideal role for their partner as a stepparent, and the ideal role for themselves as stepparent. All but two participants rated the same ideal role for their partner as a stepparent as the ideal role they rated for self as a stepparent. These two were excluded from the analysis. Due to small frequencies in a number of the categories for the ideal stepparent role, some of these categories (distant relative, teacher, advisor, aunt or uncle) were collapsed into an 'other' category. Hence, the final categories for analysis were 'parent', 'stepparent', 'friend', and 'other'. Table 5 presents adult and child frequencies of descriptor labels chosen for the ideal stepparent role.

Table 5

Frequencies of Stepparent Role Questionnaire labels

Role Descriptor Label	Adults (*n* = 50)	Children (*n* = 51)
Parent	16 (32%)	11 (21.6%)
Stepparent	22 (44%)	15 (29.4%)
Friend	5 (10%)	13 (25.55)
Other	7 (14%)	12 (23.5%)

In order to investigate the relationship between the chosen descriptor label and group (adult or child) a Chi-square test was performed. Seventy six percent of the adults identified 'parent' or 'stepparent' as the ideal stepparent role; 'friend' or 'other' were chosen by 24% of adults. By contrast, 49% of the children identified 'friend' or 'other' as the ideal descriptor. 'Stepparent' was identified as the ideal stepparent role by 29.4% of children compared to 44% of adults. Similarly, the 'parent' descriptor was chosen by fewer children (21.6%) than adults. However, these findings were not statistically significant (*p*>.05).

The SRQ data was also analysed to examine the relationship between stepfamily type (simple or complex) and the chosen descriptor label for the ideal stepparent role. Respondents were identified as parent-only, stepparent-only, parent-and-stepparent, child-simple, and child-complex. The parent-only, stepparent-only, and child-simple respondents were those who resided in simple stepfamilies. The parent-and-stepparent, and child-complex were participants residing in complex stepfamilies. Table 6 presents the frequencies of descriptors by family type. A Chi-square analysis was performed. Of stepparent-only participants, 25% identified 'parent' as the ideal stepparent role compared to 41.7% of parent-only participants, who perceived 'parent' as the ideal stepparent role. The 'friend' descriptor was chosen by 16.7% of the stepparent-only participants compared with none of the parent-only participants. Of child participants, 38.9% of children in simple stepfamilies chose 'friend' as the ideal descriptor compared to 18.2% of the children in complex stepfamilies, who chose the 'stepparent' label. However, none of the differences reached statistical significance (*p*>.05).

Table 6

Frequencies of ideal stepparent roles on the Stepparent Role Questionnaire for simple and complex stepfamily members

Descriptor label	Simple Stepfamily (*n* = 12)			Complex Stepfamily (*n* = 13)	
	Parent-only	Stepparent-only	Simple-child	Adult – stepparent & parent	Complex-child
Parent	5 (41.7%)	3 (25.0%)	4 (22.2%)	8 (30.8%)	7 (21.2%)
Stepparent	5 (41.7%)	5 (41.7%)	3 (16.7%)	12 (46.2%)	12 (36.4%)
Friend	0	2 (16.7%)	7 (38.9%)	3 (11.5%)	6 (18.2%)
Other	2 (16.6%)	2 (16.7%)	4 (22.2%)	3 (11.5%)	8 (24.2%)

The Step/Parent Behaviour Inventory

As discussed in Chapter Two, the Step/Parent Behaviour Inventory (SPBI) is an adaptation of the Stepparent Behaviour Inventory (Fine et al., 1998) measuring role expectations (see Appendix D). On the Stepparent Behaviour Inventory, nine items assess the discipline/control dimension of parenting and nine items assess the warmth/support dimension of parenting. Using a Likert scale from 1 to 7 (rarely or never to extremely often or always), respondents are asked to rate how actively a stepparent should ideally engage in the parenting behaviours and how often they actually behave in these ways. For the purpose of this thesis, the Stepparent Behaviour Inventory (Fine et al., 1998) was adapted (with permission from the author) to include a Likert rating scale of parenting behaviours for the parent role in addition to the stepparent role (see Appendix D for the adapted versions used in this thesis study). The adaptation of the inventory was designed to allow for a comparison of ratings for ideal parent and stepparent behaviours. Respondents were asked to rate how actively a stepparent and parent should *ideally* engage in the parenting behaviours. For example, stepparents were asked to rate *How often do you personally believe each adult ideally should behave in these ways in a stepfamily?* Parallel questions were asked of parents and stepchildren about both the parent and stepparent role (see Appendix D).

Participants completed the SPBI. Data from the inventory for both the Likert subscale scores and individual item Likert scores showed skewed distributions; therefore,

nonparametric tests were adopted. Due to the larger number of tests, a more stringent alpha level of .001 was applied to control for Type 1 error.

Two methods were used to compare adult and child perceptions of how actively parents and stepparents should ideally engage in parenting behaviours. First, a Wilcoxon signed ranks test was applied to examine difference in perceptions in relation to subscale scores (warmth/support and discipline/control) between the parent role and the stepparent role for both the adults and children. Means and standard deviations by stepfamily member on the subscales of the SPBI are presented in Table 7, as are results of tests of significance of difference between ratings of parent and stepparent for adults and children along each of the SPBI subscales. Overall, both adults and children rated the ideal parent role significantly more active in parenting behaviours than the ideal stepparent role for both the discipline/control and warmth/support behaviours.

Table 7

Comparison of the Step/Parent Behaviour Inventory subscale scores of adults and children for the ideal parent role and the ideal stepparent role

Likert Subscales	Parent Role			Stepparent Role			Difference
	N	*M*	*SD*	*N*	*M*	*SD*	*W*
Adults							
Discipline/Control	52	6.52	0.47	52	5.94	0.70	5.585*
Warmth/Support	52	6.29	0.60	52	5.84	0.70	5.521*
Children							
Discipline/Control	51	5.92	0.80	51	5.12	1.19	5.065*
Warmth/Support	51	5.86	0.83	51	5.05	1.10	5.497*

*Note. * p<.001*

Second, in order to investigate whether adults and children differed significantly in their perceptions of how a parent ought ideally to engage in discipline/control and warmth/support behaviours and how actively a stepparent ought to engage in discipline/control and warmth/support parenting behaviours a Mann-Whitney U test was applied. A Mann-Whitney U test was performed to compare adult and children subscale scores (warmth/support and discipline/control) for both the ideal parent role and then the ideal

stepparent role. Table 8 presents means and standard deviations by stepfamily member on the subscales of the SPBI.

On average, adults produced significantly higher Likert ratings on the discipline/control subscale for stepparents, the warmth/support subscale for stepparents, and the discipline/control subscale for parents compared to children. However, there was no significant difference between adults' and children' perceptions of the ideal warmth/support behaviours for parents ($p>.001$).

Table 8

Comparison of adults' and children's subscale scores on the Step/Parent Behaviour Inventory for ideal parent and stepparent roles

Likert Subscales	Adults			Children			Difference
	N	*M*	*SD*	*N*	*M*	*SD*	*U*
Parent Role							
Discipline/Control	52	6.52	0.47	51	5.92	0.80	648.5*
Warmth/Support	52	6.29	0.60	51	5.86	0.83	890.0
Stepparent Role							
Discipline/Control	52	5.94	0.70	51	5.12	1.19	683.0*
Warmth/Support	52	5.84	0.70	51	5.05	1.10	746.0*

*Note. * p<.001*

Overall, these findings suggest that adults perceived that parents and stepparents should engage more actively in discipline/control activities, and stepparents in warmth/support activities than children thought ideal. The adults and children had similar perceptions of the ideal warmth/support role for parents.

A number of additional methods were adopted to further compare adults' and children's perceptions of how actively stepparents and parents should ideally engage in specific parenting behaviours. First, a Mann-Whitney U test was performed to examine the difference in perceptions between the adults and children in relation to each of the individual items for both the parent role and the stepparent role. To control for type one error a more stringent alpha level of .001 was applied to each comparison.

As can be seen in Table 9, adults and children differed significantly *(p<.01)* in all aspects of their perception of the ideal parenting behaviours for the stepparent role with the exception of 'complementing children', 'helping with and making sure children do their homework', 'helping children solve conflicts', and 'disciplining children when rules are not followed'. The results suggest that adults perceive stepparents ought ideally to engage more actively in the remaining items of parenting behaviours on the inventory, than children perceive stepparents ought to do so.

Table 9

Mean scores for adults and children on ideal parenting behaviours for the stepparent role and the parent role items of the Step/Parent Behaviour Inventory and their comparison   Note. p**<.001 p*<.01

Item		Stepparent Role			Parent Role		
	Ideally how often do you think a parent or stepparent should	Child X	Adult X	U	Child X	Adult X	U
1.	ask the child how his or her day went	5.00	6.35	646**	5.86	6.56	874.5**
2.	hug the child	4.27	5.23	954.5*	5.98	6.38	1102.5
3.	do a fun activity with the child (play games, go to a movie etc.)	4.67	5.58	805**	5.14	5.75	960*
4.	complement the child	5.63	6.38	1057	5.98	6.46	1258.5
5.	try to spend time with the child	5.22	5.85	989.5*	6.00	6.29	1177
6.	Help the child with homework	5.00	5.44	1161.5	5.69	5.94	1146
7.	give advice to the child	4.90	5.62	985*	5.63	6.10	1043
8.	when the child has conflicts with other children, help him or her figure out how to solve it	5.29	5.90	1124	5.88	6.31	1103.5
9.	comfort the child when he or she is upset	5.51	6.23	990.5*	6.59	6.79	1274
10.	make sure that the child does his or her homework	5.53	5.60	1292.5	6.25	6.31	1316.5
11.	ask the child how he or she is doing in school	5.14	5.88	903.5*	5.92	6.42	997*
12.	set rules that the child has to follow	4.63	5.83	748.5**	5.65	6.52	824**
13.	enforce rules that the parent sets for his or her child to follow	5.49	6.10	1023*	6.22	6.73	909**
14.	discipline the child when rules are not followed	4.61	5.40	1038	5.80	6.54	929.5*
15.	try to make sure that the child don't make the wrong kinds of friends	4.22	5.50	807**	4.84	5.92	881.5*
16.	try to teach the child right from wrong	5.69	6.54	886**	6.33	6.73	1049*
17.	know where the child is and whom he or she is with	5.29	6.29	836.5*	6.04	6.79	834.5*
18.	when the child does something wrong, explain to him or her why	5.53	6.33	899*	6.25	6.75	951.5*

Adults and children also differed significantly in aspects of their perception of the ideal parenting behaviours for the parent role with the exception of 'hugging' and 'complementing children', 'helping with and making sure children do their homework', 'spending time with children', 'giving advice', 'helping solve conflicts with other children', and 'comforting children when they are upset'. The results suggest that adults perceive parents ought ideally to engage more actively in the remaining items of parenting behaviours on the inventory than children perceive parents ought to do so.

Second, a Wilcoxon signed-rank test was applied to examine differences in parent and stepparent scores for both the adults and the children. To control for Type One error a more stringent alpha level of .001 was applied to each comparison.

As can be seen in Table 10, adults rated 13 of the 18 items on the inventory significantly higher for the parent role than the stepparent role ($p<.001$). The exceptions were 'complementing' and 'doing a fun activity with children', 'asking children how their day went', 'helping them solve conflicts with other children', and 'trying to teach children right from wrong'. The results suggest that the adults perceive that a stepparent should function in some parent-like ways and yet assume a less active role than the parent in most dimensions of parenting.

Children rated all items on the inventory significantly higher for the parent role than the stepparent role, apart from 'do a fun activity with the children', suggesting that their view of the ideal stepparent role is less active than the ideal parent role, compared to adults' views of these roles.

Table 10

Mean scores on the ideal parenting behaviours for the parent role and the stepparent role items of the Step/Parent Behaviour Inventory for adult and child participants and their comparison

Item		Adults			Children		
	Ideally how often do you think a parent or stepparent should	P Role X	SP Role X	W	P Role X	SP Role X	W
1.	ask the child how his or her day went	6.56	6.35	2.598	5.86	5.00	4.172**
2.	hug the child	6.38	5.23	3.813**	5.98	4.27	3.841**
3.	do a fun activity with the child (play games, go to a movie etc.)	5.75	5.58	1.727	5.14	4.67	2.99*
4.	complement the child	6.46	6.38	1.265	5.98	5.63	3.218**
5.	try to spend time with the child	6.29	5.85	3.660**	6.00	5.22	4.521**
6.	help the child with homework	5.92	5.44	3.793**	5.69	5.00	3.345**
7.	give advice to the child	6.10	5.62	3.813**	5.63	4.90	3.473**
8.	when the child has conflicts with other children, help him or her figure out how to solve it	6.31	5.90	2.966	5.88	5.29	3.353**
9.	comfort the child when he or she is upset	6.79	6.23	3.559**	6.59	5.51	4.530**
10.	make sure that the child does his or her homework	6.31	5.60	4.396**	6.25	5.53	3.879**
11.	ask the child how he or she is doing in school	6.42	5.88	3.817**	5.92	5.14	4.091**
12.	set rules that the child has to follow	6.52	5.83	3.767**	5.65	4.63	3.820**
13.	enforce rules that the parent sets for his or her child to follow	6.73	6.10	3.796**	6.22	5.49	3.771**
14.	discipline the child when rules are not followed	6.54	5.40	4.737**	5.80	4.61	4.154**
15.	try to make sure that the child don't make the wrong kinds of friends	5.92	5.50	3.372**	4.84	4.22	3.300**
16.	try to teach the child right from wrong	6.73	6.54	2.232	6.33	5.69	3.566**
17.	know where the child is and whom he or she is with	6.79	6.29	3.305**	6.04	5.29	3.902**
18.	when the child does something wrong, explain to him or her why it was wrong	6.75	6.33	3.376**	6.25	5.53	3.888**

Note. P Role = Parent role, SP role = Stepparent role
*** p<.001 * p<.01*

Perceptions of the Parent and Stepparent Roles and Satisfaction with the Stepfamily, and Stepfamily Relationships

Participants also completed the Stepfamily Relationship Satisfaction Scale (SRSS). This scale was developed for this study and measures general levels of perceived closeness and relationship satisfaction between the parent, stepparent and child dyads as well as the stepfamily unit as a whole (see Appendix D). Using a Likert scale from 1 to 5 (not at all

to very much), participants were asked to *'circle the number which seems to be most close to how things are for you'* in relation to level of satisfaction with their stepfamily situation and their stepfamily relationships. Adults were asked to rate levels of satisfaction in terms of their relationships with biological children and the stepchildren living in the household at least 50 percent of the time. Children were asked to rate levels of satisfaction in terms of their relationships with parents and stepparents in the stepfamily household taking part in this study.

In order to investigate the relationship between adults' and children's perceptions of ideal parent and stepparent roles and perceived levels of satisfaction in relationships with parents and stepparents (child participants) or children and stepchildren (adult participants), and satisfaction with the overall stepfamily situation, correlation analyses were performed. Spearman's rho correlation analysis were performed on the Step/Parent Behaviour Inventory subscale scores (discipline/control and warmth/support) and three item scores on the Stepfamily Relationship Satisfaction Scale (item 1 – how satisfied are you with your stepfamily situation, item 2 – how satisfied are you with your relationship with your parent/biological child, and item 3 – how satisfied are you with your relationship with your stepparent/stepchild. See Appendix D). The analyses were performed separately for the adult and child data and are presented in Table 11.

Table 11

Correlations (Spearman's rho) between ideal parent and stepparent parenting behaviours and levels of satisfaction for adults and children

	Parent Role		Stepparent Role	
Item	Discipline	Warmth	Discipline	Warmth
Adult Satisfaction				
Overall satisfaction	.070	.029	.004	.101
Child relationship	.032	.297	.083	.169
Stepchild relationship	.032	.194	.020	.217
Child Satisfaction				
Overall satisfaction	.256	.116	.550**	.241
Parent relationship	.380*	.303	.386*	.362*
Stepparent relationship	.370*	.300	.429*	.337

Note. Discipline = Ideal Discipline and Control SPBI subscale scores; Warmth = Ideal Warmth and Support SPBI subscale scores
** p<.001
* p<.01

As can be seen in Table 11, children's higher ratings for ideal stepparent discipline/control and stepparent warmth/support were significantly related to increased satisfaction in relationships with parents. Increased satisfaction in relationships with stepparents was significantly related to higher ratings for ideal stepparent discipline/control. Of interest, while overall satisfaction with the stepfamily situation was also significantly related to higher ratings for ideal stepparent discipline/control, it was not significantly related to ideal stepparent warmth/support ($p>.05$). 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.

Overall, in regard to the quantitative research questions, the results of this study suggest that children and adults do, on the whole, perceive the ideal parent role as largely different to the stepparent role. These differences in perceptions between the stepparent and parent role are more marked, however, for children compared to adults. Similarly, both adults and children rated the discipline/control and the warmth/support behaviours as less ideal for stepparents than parents on the SPBI. Notably, however, the adults' thought that stepparents ought ideally to engage more actively in discipline/control activities and warmth/support activities, and parents in discipline/control activities than children thought ideal. This finding is substantiated by the differences in frequency scores between adults and children of the ideal stepparent descriptor on the SRQ. Around half of the children, compared to around one quarter of adults, chose the label of 'friend' or 'other', rather than the 'parent' or 'stepparent' as the ideal role for a stepparent. Further analysis of the quantitative data suggests that there may be specific activities that are more or less acceptable to stepchildren. Children rated all items on the Step/Parent Behaviour Inventory significantly higher for the parent role than the stepparent role, apart from item 3 – do a fun activity with the child.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that there may be differences in perceptions of the stepparent role between simple and complex stepfamily members. This is reflected in the results of the SRQ showing a trend towards higher frequency scores for the 'friend' stepparent descriptor for children in simple stepfamilies compared to children residing in complex stepfamilies. Similarly, adults residing in simple stepfamilies chose the 'friend' descriptor more often than adults in complex stepfamilies, who more often chose the label 'parent', although none of these differences reached statistical significance.

Finally, the children in this study who perceived a more active ideal stepparent disciplinary role were more satisfied with relationships with stepparents, parents, and the overall stepfamily situation.

Chapter Seven

Discussion

This chapter examines the results of the study in the light of previous research regarding stepfamily relationships and roles, and considers the implications of these results for stepfamily systems, clinical practice with stepfamilies, and future research directions. A brief summary of the results is presented below. These include results from both the questionnaire and interviews. These results are then discussed in greater depth in the following section.

Summary of the Main Findings

The Questionnaire

1. Adults and children perceived the parent role as different from the stepparent role. The ideal parent role was rated significantly higher on warmth/support and discipline/control than the stepparent role by both adults and children.

2. Children compared to adults, rated the ideal stepparent role significantly lower on warmth/support and discipline/control than the parent role, and conversely rated the ideal parent role significantly higher on warmth/support and discipline/control.

3. 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 stepparent warmth/support were also associated with increased satisfaction in relationships with parents.

4. 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.

The Interview

5. A majority of adults appeared to hold the ideal of a shared parenting role for the stepparent. However, many of these participants recognised that this was not possible due, in part, to children's responses.

6. A minority of adults believed that the biological parent ideally maintained responsibility for both the warmth/support and discipline/control roles.

7. 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 (to be discussed).

8. There is some preliminary indication that there may also be diversity in views between simple and complex stepfamily members.

The Cognitive Perspective: Parent and Stepparent Roles

This study adopted a cognitive perspective. As discussed in Chapter One, this perspective emerged in the 1990's and a number of studies have been conducted that emphasise the cognitive processing of stepfamily events, relationships, and roles, including ideals and expectations of adults and children in regard to these roles. The results of this study are now discussed further, examining initially the stepparent role and then the parent role.

The Stepparent Role

Overall the role of the stepparent was perceived as being different, in varying degrees, from the parent role by both adults and children, although these differences were perceived more strongly by the children than the adults in this 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.

In terms of the disciplinary role, the majority of children in this study perceived that parents ought ideally to maintain the primary disciplinary role. Conversely, the majority of the adults perceived that the parent and stepparent ought ideally to share the parenting role. Similar to previous findings (Fine et al., 1998), around half of the children in this present study, compared to around one-quarter of adults, chose the label of 'friend' or 'other' rather than the 'parent' or 'stepparent' as the ideal role for a stepparent on the SRQ, although the differences were not statistically significant.

These results were also mirrored in the qualitative thematic analysis of children's and adults' views about the stepparent disciplinary role. Almost two-thirds of children, compared to around one quarter of adults, perceived that parents ought ideally to

maintain the primary disciplinary role. Interestingly, the role of the stepparent as a 'friend' was important both to children who thought that parents ought ideally to maintain a primary disciplinary role and to those who thought that stepparents could share the disciplinary role when conditions were met. For this latter group of children, a stepparent fostering a friendship was viewed as important for building rapport and trust, which was perceived necessary to stepchildren's acceptance, in time, of stepparent authority and a disciplinary role. These findings support previous research suggesting that stepparent affinity-seeking plays an important part in the development of the stepparent-child relationship (Ganong et al., 1999), along with the development of positive regard (Shrodt, 2006b).

In a similar vein, both adults and children rated the discipline/control and the warmth/support behaviours as less ideal for stepparents than parents on the SPBI. Of particular interest, are some items on the SPBI on which adults and children disagreed most strongly. These included the stepparent 'setting rules', 'knowing where and who the child is with', 'making sure the child does not make the wrong friends', and 'trying to teach the child right from wrong'. These results suggest that adults perceived stepparents ought to engage more actively in these parenting behaviours than children thought they ought to. These findings were also reflected in the thematic analysis themes 'it's not the stepparent's job' to discipline, and the 'not too close' of the qualitative data, in which children talked about preferring that stepparents engage themselves in everyday matters but not enquire about "feelings" or involve themselves in stepchildren's "personal stuff". These findings support Schrodt, Braithwaite, Soliz, Tye-Williams, Miller, Normand, & Harrigan's (2007) finding that children in stepfamilies engage most frequently in non-intimate, mundane 'everyday talk' with stepparents, and least frequently in relationship talk, serious conversations, and talking about problems.

As previously mentioned, in the qualitative analysis of this thesis, around three-quarters of the adults perceived that parents and stepparents ought ideally to share the parenting role. While the adults who took this position perceived difficulties in attaining a shared disciplinary role, most believed it was important that adults in stepfamilies pursued this ideal as a way of respecting and legitimising the stepparent's position in the stepfamily, and providing children with consistency and balance through shared parenting practices. Similar to previous findings (Bray et al., 1994; Fine & Kurdek, 1995), these adults perceived difficulties, however, in actually pursing this ideal including disagreements

arising from different parenting values, expectations of children's behaviour, and parenting styles. As noted also in previous research, children's negative responses to stepparent discipline was also seen as an important impediment to negotiating the stepparent role (Crohn, 2006; Cartwright et al, 2009; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). As found by Anderson et al. (1999) and Bray (1999), some of the adults in this study appeared frustrated or disheartened by constraints on this ideal, although most remained hopeful that this could be achieved with time.

Around one-quarter of adults did not hold the ideal of a shared disciplinary parenting role. They were concerned that a shared disciplinary role would undermine the parent's responsibility and authority and were mindful of not wanting to "over step" the authority afforded them by taking a more active role or by strongly imposing personal values. Stepparent discipline was viewed by many of these adults as an 'invited' support role. As found in previous studies, some of these adults also perceived that different values and parenting practices between couples would inevitably cause difficulties (Arnaut, Fromme, Stoll, & Felker, 2000) and that children accepted discipline more favourably from parents than stepparents. This assumption is further supported by the findings of the thematic analysis of the children's interviews. The majority of the children perceived that the parent ought to maintain the primary disciplinary role and stepparents ought to be less involved in the setting or monitoring of rules and the enforcement of discipline than parents, similar to Coleman and Ganong (1997) and Ganong and Coleman (2004). They perceived that it was not the stepparent's "job" to actively share responsibility for discipline and some thought that stepparents were not as "good at it" either because they lacked parenting experience or did not know and understand the child. Some of the children were aware that they experienced the same discipline from stepparents more harshly than from a parent, however, most of these children experienced a continued feeling of "wrongness" and discomfort from stepparent discipline, furthering the belief that parents ought to maintain the primary disciplinary role.

Some of these concerns were also shared by a minority of the children in this study who believed that parents and stepparents ought ideally to share the disciplinary role. While these children expressed some resistance towards stepparents actively engaging in the role, they perceived there were benefits and advantages which gave primacy over parents' maintaining the primary disciplinary role. Perceived advantages included children understanding parent and stepparent expectations, consistency, and a sense of

fairness if there were stepsiblings present. However, it is important to acknowledge that even with perceived benefits, stepparent authority may still be unacceptable. Similar to Ganong and Coleman (2004), most of these children indicated that the shared disciplinary role was only permissible when a number of preconditions were met. These included children perceiving that the stepparent discipline was fair and similar to their parent's style of discipline; and rules were set or, at least agreed to, by the parent. Furthermore, as found previously (Gamache, 2000; Papernow, 2008; Schrodt, 2006b; Visher & Visher, 1994), it was also important to children that the stepfamily had been living together for sometime in order for familiarity, trust and respect to have developed before accepting stepparent discipline.

On the other hand, in the quantitative analyses of this thesis research, stepchildren's perceptions of an ideal active role for stepparents (ratings on the SPBI) in terms of discipline/control were associated with increased satisfaction in relationships with parents, stepparents, and the overall stepfamily situation (ratings on the SRSS). Similarly, Fine, Voydanoff and Donnelly (1993) found an association between stepparent control and less psychological maladjustment in stepchildren of stepfather stepfamilies. Gamache (2000) also demonstrated a positive association between parental status and attachment and closeness to the stepparent. Hetherington, Henderson, & Reiss (1999) also argued that while children may initially resent an authoritative stepparent, in the longer term, stepfamilies with an authoritative stepparent are more often characterised as having healthier relationships. In a similar vein, Schrodt's (2006c) typological investigation of communication and mental health of stepchildren in a range of stepfamilies found that children in the closest, most cohesive stepfamilies (termed 'bonded stepfamilies') reported positive regard for their stepparent and perceived the stepparent as exercising parental authority in the stepfamily. While it is possible to interpret these findings as indication that stepparent discipline and authority facilitates closer relationships and stepchildren's satisfaction in relationships with stepparents, the qualitative findings of this thesis research, along with interpretations of Schrodt (2006b, 2006c) findings, more plausibly suggests that stepchildren who enjoy positive relationships and are satisfied with their relationships with stepparents are more likely to perceive an active parental role as appropriate for stepparents including the granting of authority and discipline.

Overall, the findings of this thesis support the findings of previous research advising that parents ought to maintain the primary disciplinary role, at least, in the early stages of stepfamily living (Crosbie-Burnett & Giles-Sims, 1994; Hetherington, 2002; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). On the other hand, some stepchildren were accepting, in principle, of stepparent discipline and authority if trust and respect were present. Like the adults who valued a shared disciplinary role, the quality of stepparent-child relationship was perceived to be an important prerequisite in the granting and acceptance of stepparent discipline (Bray, 1999). As noted previously (Gamache, 2000, Robertson, 2008), both adults and children thought that time was important for these influences to develop.

In terms of the warmth and support, the majority of adults perceived that the parent and stepparent ought ideally to share the parenting role. The children were less opposed to stepparent warmth and support compared to discipline; nonetheless, around one-half of the children believed parents ought ideally to maintain the primary warmth and support role. Similar to the acceptance of stepparent discipline, many of the children who were supportive of stepparents sharing an active role in warmth and support activities indicated that this was only acceptable when a number of preconditions were met. As found previously, these included stepchildren liking and "getting on" with the stepparent (Funder, 1996); and similar to Cartwright et al. (2009) and Kinniburgh-White and Cartwright (2010), children's perceptions of the stepparents' character or personality and their ability to have "earned" children's acceptance and trust were also important. Like Cartwright et al. (2009) and Chron (2006), some children believed it harder to accept stepparent warmth and support when they perceived stepparents were "taking the parent's place", for example, when stepparents criticised residential or non-residential parents or when stepparents took a disciplinary role. This finding supports Ganong and Coleman's (2004) proposal that children who are able to define their relationships and perceive their non-residential parent and stepparent as fulfilling unique and separate roles may be freer to develop close relationships with both adults and accepting of stepparents warmth and support behaviours. Many children also thought it was important that children be given time and space to get to know the stepparent and, similar to Ganong & Coleman (2004), thought that stepparent support in practical support and fun activities was important. These could act as precursors to developing a closer relationship and feeling more accepting of emotional support.

Interestingly, these intimacy considerations are also mirrored in the responses analysed qualitatively of the remaining half of the children who held the view that the parent ought ideally to maintain the primary warmth and support role. As found previously, these children viewed some aspects of practical support from stepparents positively, however, efforts to engage intimately or stepparent attempts to involve themselves in stepchildren's personal or social lives were thought to be less appropriate (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Baxter et al., 2004; Caughlin et al., 2000). To this end, most of these children thought that stepparent support in practical and non-intimate tasks was important and, similar to the adults, fun activities and games with stepparents were viewed positively (see also Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Unlike the children who thought a shared warmth and support role for stepparents acceptable and appreciated stepparents establishing a friendship as a means towards this more active parenting role, these children appeared to view the ideal role of the stepparent as more like that of friend, as has been found elsewhere (Fine et al., 1998; Visher & Visher, 1996).

The quantitative analyses suggest that there may be specific stepparent parenting behaviours that are more or less acceptable to stepchildren. Children rated all items on the SPBI significantly higher for the parent role than the stepparent role, apart from 'doing a fun activity with the child'. This finding is consistent with the content of the thematic analysis of the children's views about the warmth and support stepparent role, in which many children in this study talked about appreciating stepparents engaging in fun family and one-on-one activities, as well as previous findings (Ganong & Coleman, 1999; Golish, 2003). Interestingly, however, children rated items 'do a fun activity'; and 'ask the child how his or her day went', significantly lower than the adults for these items on the stepparent role. This is perhaps also reflected in the emergence of the 'not too close' and the 'stepchildren's pace and space' thematic analysis sub-themes in which children talked about not wanting stepparents to "smother" or be "too friendly" (similar to Anderson & White, 1986; Ceglian & Gardner, 2000; Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1997) and the need for time to feel comfortable and accept support (similar to Papernow, 2008; Visher & Visher, 1994).

Similarly, most adults who held the view that the parent and stepparent ought ideally to share the warmth and support role perceived there were a number of considerations which influenced whether it was appropriate to actively engage in these activities. They believed that the strength and quality of the stepparent-child relationship was an

important consideration in both fostering and gauging children's level of comfort and acceptance of stepparent warmth and support and influenced the perceived legitimacy of stepparents taking this role. Similar to the recommendations of stepfamily clinicians (Adler-Baeder, 2007; Papernow, 2008; Visher & Visher, 1994), many of these adults thought that it was important that relationships were given time to develop. Similar to others (Cohen & Fowers, 2005; Papernow, 2006), they also thought that it was important that adults had realistic expectations of what stepchildren were able to accept and recognised this was often less stepparent warmth and support than adults ideally wanted. Some parents and stepparents did not agree on the role and perceived that this impacted on stepparent engagement in warmth and support activities. To this end, many stepparents took a less active role than they desired because they were uncertain about how acceptable a more active warmth and support role would be to the parent or stepchild. As found previously, gender considerations were also seen as important to the type of support and warmth that stepparents provided (Robertson, 2008; Weaver & Coleman, 2005).

A minority of the adults did not hold the ideal of a shared warmth and support parenting role. Rather they perceived the stepparent-child relationship as less intimate and perceived it more appropriate for parents to maintain a primary caregiver role. As in previous studies (Marsiglio, 2004; Weaver & Coleman, 2005), loyalty and kinship issues were important factors influencing this view including the perception that parents uniquely provided the biological "bonds", closeness, and shared "history" necessary for a more intimate warmth and support parenting role. As found previously (Weaver & Coleman, 2005), some of these adults were also concerned that sharing warmth and support parenting activities could create loyalty conflicts and negatively impact the parent-child relationship. Many of these adults thought that children were less comfortable and accepting of physical warmth and affection from stepparents, and support in areas involving health or bodily functions, and "personal" matters. Hence, as prominent in the literature, they thought that stepparent warmth and support was demonstrated more appropriately through practical help (Cartwright et al., 2009) and sharing one-on-one and family activities with stepchildren (Ganong & Coleman, 1999; 2004).

Overall, these findings suggest that some adults and children in stepfamilies would ideally like the parent and stepparent to share the warmth and support parenting role. For

both adults and children this was, however, contingent on children's comfort and acceptance of stepparent warmth and support and the quality of the stepparent-child relationship (similar to Cartwright et al., 2009; Cartwright & Kinniburgh-White, 2010). As found in previous studies, stepparents providing practical assistance (Cartwright et al., 2009), engaging in fun on-on-one and family activities (Ganong & Coleman, 1999, 2004), and gradually developing a supportive relationship (Papernow, 2008; Schrodt, 2006b; Visher & Visher, 1994) were viewed commonly by adults and children as important and acceptable avenues for developing the stepparent-child relationship. Also, similar to Cartwright & Kinniburgh-White (2010) and Ganong et al. (1999), establishing trust and friendship appeared important to children's perceptions of a more active stepparent role. Stepparent discipline, especially in the absence of established trust and friendship, may jeopardise children's acceptance of a closer stepparent warmth and support parenting role and, in turn, the granting of authority and acceptance of a shared disciplinary role (Ganong & Coleman, 2004).

Hence, the findings of this study support current literature suggesting there is variability in stepfamilies and the degree of stepparent involvement that is considered acceptable (Gamache, 2007; Papernow, 2008). As mentioned, the participants' views in this study broadly fell into two camps: those participants perceiving that the parent and stepparent ought ideally to share the parenting role, and those perceiving that the parent ought ideally to maintain the primary parent role. Drawing on cognitive perspectives, Gamache (2007) suggests that the parental status construct can be used to clarify the ways in which stepfamily members view the stepparent role. Parental status is defined as a "social cognition that addresses the degree to which the stepparent is perceived as a parent by the stepchild, residential parent, and the stepparent" (Gamache, 2007, p.21). As in an example given by Gamache (2007), if a parent attributes a higher level of parental status to the stepparent than does the stepparent, the parent will likely expect greater participation in daily parenting for the stepparent. On the other hand, when a stepparent assumes higher parental status than attributed by the parent or child, conflict may arise as children reject the discipline and authority of a stepparent and the perceived interference in their relationship with the parent.

To this end, stepfamily clinicians advise that stepparent-child relationships are more often characterised by liking and affection when stepparents give attention to developing friendships with stepchildren before they attempt to discipline and set rules (Papernow,

2006; Visher & Visher, 1996). The results of this study indicate that this advice to stepparents is sound. The findings of this study also support Papernow's (2006, p.39) observation that "the reality that stepparents cannot assume even an authoritative parenting role can be both relieving and disappointing". Some of the adults in this study appeared to accept a secondary stepparent parenting role. The majority of the adults, however, appeared to be coming to grips with the fact that although they would like for the stepparent and parent share the parenting role, in practicality, that could not work because of children's responses and reactions.

Hence, rather than a prescribed static stepparent role, as Gamache (2007) contends, stepfamily consensus around the stepparent's parental status may better allow stepfamily members to negotiate family life in a way that respects both the stepparent's role and ongoing stepfamily relationships (Gamache, 2007). Stepfamily members and clinicians may use this construct as a way of communicating about the roles and expectations in the stepfamily and as a means of addressing issues of authority and discipline, and warmth and support in the stepparent–child relationship. Clarifying stepfamily members' perceptions of parental status may also help members' understanding of each other and the attuning of expectations. Gamache (2007) further suggests that discussion of parental status may help normalise the experiences of stepfamily members and provide reassurance to adults that parental status can be expected to develop over time.

The Parent Role

The adults and children held similar views regarding the role of parents in stepfamilies. While on average, adults gave higher ratings than children on the discipline/control subscale scores of the SPBI for the parent role, there was no significant difference between adults' and children's perceptions of the ideal warmth/support behaviours for parents. Similar to Cartwright (2005) and Papernow (2006), parents, stepparents, and stepchildren emphasised the importance of parents continuing in the parental role as prior to the stepfamily transition providing stability and reassurance (Cartwright, 2008; Kinniburgh-White & Cartwright, 2010). Importantly, as found by previous researchers and clinicians (Cartwright, 2005; Papernow, 2006; Weaver & Coleman, 2010), both adults and children perceived an expanded role for parents in providing support with the stepfamily transition; fostering cooperation and equity; and providing emotional support and time with children, which was viewed additional to the first-marriage parent role.

Many of the adults talked about parents playing an important role in facilitating a comfortable transition for biological children into stepfamily life, which included strengthening the cohesion of the stepfamily unit. Similar to the recommendations of stepfamily clinicians (Adler-Baeder, 2007; Cartwright, 2008; Papernow, 2006; Visher & Visher, 2003), many adults thought that parents ought to attend to and remain sensitive to the difficulties and needs of biological children especially during the early stages of stepfamily life when relationships and routines were unfamiliar. Similar to Adler-Baeder (2007) and Braithwaite et al. (1998), this also included building new stepfamily memories and traditions, and ensuring children had their own belongings and personal space (Rodwell, 2002).

Many of the adults thought that the parent should actively foster stepfamily relationships through shared family activities. Similarly, many of the children thought that parents ought to provide children with support in helping them adapt and "get used" to stepfamily life which included parents helping stepfamily members getting to "know each other" through shared activities. Marsiglio (2004) similarly noted stepfathers reported that some mothers engaged in facilitating developing relationship between stepfathers and stepchildren. Interestingly, Papernow (2006, 2008) advises that biological and step-relationships are better "compartmentalised" in the earlier stages of stepfamily living through regular time in one-on-one relationships until sufficient familiarity or "middle ground" has developed within the stepfamily (p.38).

Many of the adults thought that parents ought to prepare for and pace the transition into stepfamily living. A recent study of adult repartnering in New Zealand suggests that adults, on the whole, move into stepfamily living after a relatively short period of time (Cartwright, 2010). Many children also commented that it was important that parents informed and gave children notice about events and time to adjust. These findings support previous qualitative research regarding the parent-child relationship in which children talked about the importance of parents maintaining communication about the transition and allowing children time to adjust (Braithwaite et al., 2008; Cartwright & Seymour, 2002).

In a similar vein, many adults talked about experiencing difficulties in managing boundary and loyalty issues in stepfamilies and described some of the ways in which divided loyalties between stepfamily members were experienced and managed by parents. Many parents talked about feeling "torn" between conflicted loyalties to their

biological children and their partner. They described struggling with the desire to validate and put their children's needs first against supporting their partner and wanting to protect and nurture this relationship also. This resulted in some participants feeling like they were the "peacemaker", "the 'glue' that held it all together", or that they were forced to "wear two hats". As found previously, some adults perceived that parents took on a role as protector or mediator (Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, & Pauk, 2001; Weaver & Coleman, 2010) in response to perceived threats to children's wellbeing, or conflict between children and stepparents or stepsiblings. These findings are echoed in the accounts of parents in previous stepfamily research studies who describe experiencing divided loyalties between protecting and supporting children and attempting to manage conflict and support their partner (Cartwright, 2003; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Visher & Visher, 1990), which can be a tiring and stressful aspect of the parent role in stepfamilies (Browning et al., 2006; Cartwright, 2008).

Like the children in this study, both parents and stepparents thought parents should foster respectful co-parenting relationships with non-residential parents; a theme that has emerged as important in previous studies (Braithwaite et al., 2008; Cartwright, 2005; Dupuis, 2007; Visher & Visher, 2003).

As found previously, children appeared to benefit from a warm and supportive relationship with parents in stepfamilies, just as they do in first-marriage families (Bray, 1999; Cartwright, 2008; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). This was reflected in both the quantitative and qualitative findings of this study. While on average, adults produced higher ratings than children on the discipline/control subscale scores of the SPBI for the parent and stepparent role, and the warmth/support subscale scores for the stepparent role, there was no significant difference between adults' and children's perceptions of the ideal warmth/support behaviours for parents. The shared value placed on the warmth and support aspects of parenting is further substantiated in the findings of the thematic analysis. Almost all of the children made reference to the importance of parents attending to children's emotional needs through spending time with them and talking; a theme that has emerged as important in previous studies (Cartwright, 2005; Papernow, 2008). Many of the children also thought that children needed to be able to talk to parents about "emotional stuff" or "feelings", and be able to turn to parents for support when upset. Many of these children thought that children felt more comfortable with the parent

fulfilling this role compared to their stepparent and perceived this as an important aspect of the parent role.

Clearly both the adults and children in this study valued and perceived it important to nurture the parent-child relationship. This is not surprising in that as the parent-child relationship is formed prior to the stepfamily, this relationship has a unique history and a likely ease in interactions that the new stepfamily may not have developed (Dupuis, 2010; Papernow, 2008). Hence, as Dupuis (2010) notes, this biological relationship can become a "sanctuary of sorts" within the stepfamily (p.243).

A Family Systems Perspective

As discussed previously, stepfamily researchers and clinicians suggest that adults in stepfamilies often attempt to establish a family unit that functions similarly to a first-marriage family (Cherlin, 1994; Gamache, 1997; Papernow, 2008). In this study, many adults appeared to hold the ideal of sharing parenting roles, as occurs in first-marriage families, although many parents and stepparents recognised that this ideal was difficult to attain. Felker et al. (2002), in their qualitative study, suggested a pervasive theme of joining but never arriving at the state of "being joined" (p.139). Similarly, in this study, although some were pursuing the ideal, none of the participant families appeared to have arrived at the 'nuclear' family form.

These results provide insight into the difficulties that stepfamily couples experience as they attempt to develop strong marital bonds while simultaneously developing parenting alliances that include an adaptive stepparent role (Arnaut et al., 2000; Bray, 1999; Kinniburgh-White & Cartwright, 2010). They are faced with attempting to form a parenting alliance when there may be differences of views and expectations of the stepparent role between the parent and stepparent, and the adults and children (Felker et al., 2002).

In complex stepfamilies, both adults are parents to children in the household. The findings from this thesis study suggest that adult and child members of complex stepfamilies may have additional considerations, for example, fairness between stepsiblings that influence the perceptions of the ideal stepparent role. For example, only 18.2% of children in complex stepfamilies chose 'friend' as the ideal descriptor for the stepparent role on the SRQ compared to 38.9% of children in simple stepfamilies.

Similarly, 16.7% of adults residing in simple stepfamilies chose 'friend' compared to 11.5% of adults in complex stepfamilies. While these results were not statistically significant, they do suggest the possibility of differences between simple and complex stepfamilies in perceptions of the stepparent role. These potential differences between simple and complex stepfamily members are further supported by the thematic analysis of children's views about the stepparent disciplinary role. When they were residing in complex stepfamilies, children talked about issues of fairness, consistency, and clarity which appeared to be associated with perceptions that both adults needed to share parenting roles, to some degree, in order to deal with issues of fairness and clarity. This finding may be explained, in part, by the provision for consistency and clarity in knowing what to expect, or a shared relational schemata (Schrodt, 2006a; 2006b), and the sense of fairness through shared parenting when both of the adults are parents to some children. Similarly, Marsiglio (2004) noted stepfathers reported 'father-like' perceptions of their role more often when they were residing in a complex stepfamily. This question of difference between simple and complex stepfamily members' ideals has not been previously studied but may provide important insight into children's views of stepfamilies in future research.

Finally, the results suggest that the parent role within the stepfamily may differ from the parent role within first-marriages as parents have to expand their activities to accommodate the needs of children and relationships, especially perhaps the stepparent-child relationship. Evidence suggests that coalitions or strong alliances between parents and children in stepfamilies are common (Afifi, 2008; Bray, 1999; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). While this may be considered maladaptive in the 'nuclear' family form, the findings of this study support previous research suggesting that this may be normative and adaptive for stepfamilies as long as the stepparent is not alienated in this process (Bray et al., 1994; Cartwright, 2008). It may, in fact, be viewed as necessary in traversing the additional roles and challenges that stepfamilies face (Dupuis, 2010). As Papernow (2006, 2008) argues, the parent-child relationship is established and has developed a thick 'middle ground'. Hence, the maintenance of this relationship and the parenting role appears especially important to children.

Clinical Implications

There are a number of implications that this study has for clinical work with stepfamilies. The results from this study suggest that in terms of an adaptive stepparent role, 'one shape does not fit all'. It is important for clinicians to hold in mind the possibility that stepfamily members may hold different views and expectations of stepfamily roles. Many adults may be working towards the ideal of a 'nuclear' family form and the desire to adopt shared parenting roles. While some adults accept that this may not be possible, because of children's responses, they may still strive towards it. Conversely, many children do not want to recreate the 'nuclear' family form. Some children, however, perceive benefits and are more allowing of a shared parenting role between the parent and stepparent, with time, and when pre-conditions are met. To this end, some children may be more accepting of stepparent discipline especially when the rules and discipline are perceived as fair and similar to the parent, are agreed to by the parent, and when trust and respect has developed between the child and stepparent. Shared parenting roles may be more acceptable to children in complex stepfamilies as they place emphasis on the importance of equity between all stepsiblings in the family. Children in complex stepfamilies may be more willing to accept parenting from their stepparent just as their stepsiblings are required to accept parenting from their parent.

The important areas of agreement between adults and children regarding the stepparent role that emerged from this study were the quality of the stepparent-child relationship, parents maintaining the setting of rules, and the importance of parents maintaining warmth and support activities and time with biological children. Adults and children also viewed friendship and stepparent involvement in practical support and fun activities positively. To this end, it seems fundamental that clinicians assist stepparents to work towards developing a positive reciprocal relationship with stepchildren before attempting to move toward a shared parenting role. As found previously (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002), stepparent discipline, when applied too early or in the absence of a mutually positive relationship between the stepparent and child, jeopardises children's acceptance of both a shared stepparent disciplinary role and a shared warmth and support role.

In assessing and working with stepfamilies, it is important that individual perceptions and expectations of the stepfamily members' roles within a stepfamily situation are assessed and taken into consideration, as well as the relationship dynamics and the overall functioning of the stepfamily as a whole. When both individual and systemic

influences are assessed there is likely to be greater room for understanding and negotiating roles that will fit each unique stepfamily and the particular individual needs of the different stepfamily members within that stepfamily at a particular time.

This study underscores the importance of clinicians being trained in working with stepfamilies so as to have an understanding of the important differences and needs of stepfamilies. This recommendation is supported by previous research (Pasley & Minton, 1997) which found that stepfamily couples who had been to therapists who had not been trained in working with stepfamilies reported negative experiences and sometimes deterioration in the state of their marriages. Similarly, stepfamily clinicians (Papernow, 2008; Visher & Visher, 1994) also assert it is important that clinicians understand that stepfamilies function differently, that there are differences between the parent and stepparent role, and that it is important that clinical interventions are based on this knowledge.

This current study supports Papernow's (2008) recommendations that psycho-education is desirable in enabling adults and children to understand these differences in stepfamilies and in normalising the difficulties that stepfamilies experience. It may also be necessary to assist parents and stepparents who are disappointed in not being able to adopt a 'nuclear' family ideal with understanding of some of the activities and behaviours that may support this and that with time they may be able to move closer to this ideal.

Finally, future development and clinical application of the Step/parent Behaviour Inventory (SPBI) developed for this study may be worthwhile. Stepfamily researchers have developed a number of measures that are easy to complete that examine adults' and children's views of the stepparent role, for example, the Parental Status Inventory (Gamache, 2000), the Stepfamily Index (Schrodt, 2006a), and the Stepparent Relationship Index (Schrodt, 2006b). Further use of stepfamily measures in clinical situations could alert clinicians to some of the issues that stepfamilies are likely to face.

Study Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this study. Foremost, this study used participants who were self-selected and who were largely European of middle socioeconomic status, and the results may not, therefore, accurately represent all New Zealand stepfamilies or cultural perspectives. Similarly, a large proportion of the participant stepfamilies were

recruited from adults who had completed the 'Children in the Middle' programme. It is possible that the adults in these stepfamilies were more attuned to the needs of children in families of transition either by the very nature of their self-selection into the programme and/or as a result of exposure to the content of the programme. Although all of the participants were residing in stepfamilies for a significant period of time, they had been in a stepfamily for differing periods of time, something that may impact on their views of the ideal parent and stepparent role. The sample also included both stepfamily couples that were married and those in cohabitating relationships. Although this may reflect the fact that there are many stepfamilies as a result of cohabiting, there is some evidence from the United States that cohabitating relationships may differ qualitatively from remarried relationships (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004). Furthermore, the sample included a range of stepfamilies including stepmother, stepfather, simple and complex stepfamilies. While the strength of this is that it allows for initial examination across a range of stepfamilies, there is not a large enough sample size to be able to compare the different stepfamily types using quantitative methods.

While the study investigates the views of participants, it examined only the ideals and expectations of roles. It did not examine the actual behaviours and enactment of the roles. In addition, the study allows for examination of the ideals and expectations at a single point in time. It is possible that the expectations and views of participants change over time.

Finally, it is acknowledged that the researcher is the primary tool for data collection and analyses of a large component of this thesis. As with all qualitative research this implies there is a degree of subjectivity in the qualitative analysis (Merriam, 2002a). While peer reviews were conducted on the thematic analysis to ensure validity, another researcher may have identified somewhat different themes or provided different emphasis using the same data set.

Future Research Directions

Most stepfamily research has investigated parent and stepparent roles in European simple stepfather families. It is important that researchers include stepmother and complex stepfamilies, as well as stepfamilies of differing ethnicities. It is particularly important that future New Zealand stepfamily research includes stepfamilies of Maori decent.

From a clinical perspective, it is important that clinicians and researchers investigate measures that enhance stepfamily members' ability to identify differences in perceived ideal stepfamily roles and strategies for exploring shared solutions.

Preliminary findings of this study suggest there may be differences in perceptions of the ideal stepparent role, particularly in relation to the disciplinary role, between stepfamily members in simple and complex stepfamilies. Given that many stepfamilies are complex, it is important that further research includes complex stepfamily participants and comparisons between the stepfamily forms may be useful.

The results of this study also suggest that the parent role is expanded in the stepfamily context in order to meet the unique needs of children and stepfamily relationships. Previous research suggests that the parent-child relationship may be compromised during the family transition. Further research is necessary to find ways to best support the role of the parent and the needs of both children and parents in the stepfamily at the same time as developing a positive relationship between stepparents and children.

The results of this study represent adults' and children's perspectives at a given time. It is possible that perceptions and expectations of the parent and stepparent role change with time in the stepfamily. Longitudinal studies that examine participants' views of the development of stepfamily roles at varying points over the transition of stepfamily life are desirable.

Summary

This thesis research underscores the challenges stepfamilies face. The findings suggest there is a diversity of views between stepfamily members in regard to the ideal stepparent role. Friendship is perceived key to children's relationships with stepparents, either as a vehicle towards acceptance of a more active parenting role or as an adaptive stepparent role.

In working clinically with stepfamilies, it may be important to assess individual perceptions of stepfamily roles and to provide psycho-education leading to realistic expectations and communication. Attention may be given to negotiating roles as a prerequisite to the adaptive functioning of the stepfamily as a whole. Future research into strategies that enhance stepfamily members' understanding and negotiation of stepfamily

roles is important in order to strengthen stepfamily relationships and functioning, and in normalising stepfamilies as unique and adaptive family forms.

This study contributes to the understanding of the roles adopted by adults in stepfamilies and the views held by stepfamily members of stepfamily roles. The findings further contribute to family systems and cognitive theory relating to the stepfamily system. This will be useful in both explaining stepfamily functioning and informing interventions that may be appropriate to support adaptive functioning in stepfamilies. Given that many children now live in stepfamilies, are at risk for negative outcomes, and there is increased stress and re-divorce for adults repartnering, it is timely and important researchers continue to work towards understanding what aids stepfamily functioning and what does not. It is equally important that clinicians, researchers, and stepfamily members continue to embrace and support the potential of stepfamilies for providing adaptive and positive environments in which to flourish. A shared understanding and acceptance of the diversity of stepfamily roles appears an important prerequisite.

Appendices

Appendix A: Participant Information Sheets

Participant Information Sheet – Adult version

THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND
NEW ZEALAND
Te Whare Wānanga o Tāmaki Makaurau

Building 734, Tamaki Campus
261 Morrin Road, Glen Innes
Auckland, New Zealand
Telephone 64 9 373 7599
Facsimile 64 9 373 7043

The University of Auckland
Private Bag 92019
Auckland, New Zealand

Participant Information

We invite you to take part in a study exploring
Parenting and Stepparenting Roles in New Zealand Stepfamilies.

My name is Vicki Mobley and I am a Doctoral student in the Clinical Psychology programme at the University of Auckland. This study is part of my Doctoral research and will be supervised by Doctor Claire Cartwright and Associate Professor Fred Seymour.

Purpose of the research

The proportion of children living in stepfamilies has risen considerably over the last thirty years, however, recent research results indicate that children and adolescents often struggle to adapt to a new family situation and the acceptance of new parenting roles. Similarly, adults in stepfamilies sometimes report difficulties in adjusting to stepfamily living.

This research focuses on understanding parents', stepparents', and children's views of how to relate to each other in stepfamily situations. If you take part in this research, I will be interested in your views about ideal stepparent and parent roles in the stepfamily.

This research will assist in understanding the types of stepfamily situations that adults and children have difficulty with, as well as understanding the types of stepfamily situations that work well and are enjoyed. Through this research I hope to add to the body of knowledge which is available to guide parents and stepparents in stepfamilies.

Your involvement

You, your partner, and a child in your stepfamily are invited to take part in this study. If you do take part, this will involve all the three members completing a set of questionnaires. The questionnaires will take about 15 – 20 minutes to complete. We recommend that you each fill these out independently as it is important that people express their views without influence from others in the family. Each family member can complete theirs and place it in an individual envelope which will be provided. We request that the parent then place the 3 envelopes in the enclosed free post envelope and return via post to the university.

There is a second phase to this research project. This will involve a face-to-face interview with members of some of the stepfamilies who have completed the above mentioned questionnaires in order to gain a more detailed understanding. You, your partner, and the child in your stepfamily that complete the questionnaires are invited to take part in this second phase of the study also.

If you do take part, this will involve one face-to face interview with each adult, and one interview in which I will interview your child alone. The adult interview will take about 1 to 1 ½ hours to complete and the interview with your child about ½ to ¾ of an hour. For research purposes the interviews will be audio-taped, although the tape could be turned off at any point if this was requested and the interview can be interrupted if you or your child became tired, upset or needed a break. Our experience suggests that these sorts of interviews are a positive experience for individuals and their family members, however, in the unlikely event that you or your child became upset during or after the interview I would be able to refer you to appropriate counselling agencies or family support services if you requested this.

If you do take part, the interviews can be conducted at your home or in my office at the University of Auckland, whichever you prefer. It may be helpful if, as parent and stepparent, you could verbally give your child permission to talk about his/her experiences and thoughts about your stepfamily.

I will telephone to discuss the study with you further in the coming weeks. If you feel your family may be interested in participating in this second phase of the study and/or the questionnaire we can confirm a convenient time to do the interviews or post out the questionnaires.

An invitation to attend a complementary educational evening on stepfamily adjustment, which will include the findings and recommendations from pertinent New Zealand and overseas stepfamily research, will be offered to all members of the stepfamilies participating in this study once the data has been collected.

Confidentiality

I would like you to take part in this research but you are under no obligation to do so. It is completely voluntary and anyone who does take part can withdraw their data from the study up to one month after returning their questionnaires and 7 days after the face-to-face interview should you take part in the second phase of the study (as outlined above). All the information is kept in a manner that will ensure anonymity and will be kept in a secure, locked facility at the University of Auckland for 3 years. The written questionnaires will then be shredded and the audio-tapes wiped. Only the researchers will have access to the information that you have given in the study. I will not share anything that you have said with other members of your family nor their information with you. The only exception to this would be if I learnt something from you or your step/child, which meant that you or they were not safe. In the case of something very serious, it would be my responsibility to talk to you or an appropriate person about it.

Queries

Thank you for considering taking part in this research project. If you have any queries or wish to know more please phone me on (09) 3737 599 Extn. 88515 or email me at vmob001@auckland.ac.nz

Alternatively, my supervisor is Doctor Claire Cartwright who may be contacted by phone on (09) 3737 599 Extn. 86269 or by email at c.cartwright@auckland.ac.nz

The Head of Department is Associate Professor Fred Seymour who may be contacted by phone on (09) 3737 599 Extn. 88414 or by email at f.seymour@auckland.ac.nz

For any queries regarding ethical concerns please contact:

The Chair, the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, The University of Auckland, Room 005, Alfred Nathan House, Private Bag 92019, Auckland. Phone (09) 3737 999 Extn. 87830

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 13th September 2006 for 3 years, from September 2006 to September 2009. Reference number: 2006/274.

Participant Information Sheet – Child version

THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND
NEW ZEALAND
Te Whare Wānanga o Tāmaki Makaurau

Building 734, Tamaki Campus
261 Morrin Road, Glen Innes
Auckland, New Zealand
Telephone 64 9 373 7599
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The University of Auckland
Private Bag 92019
Auckland, New Zealand

Participant Information

We invite you to take part in a study exploring
Parenting and Stepparenting Roles in New Zealand Stepfamilies.

My name is Vicki Mobley and I am a Doctoral student in the Clinical Psychology programme at the University of Auckland. This study is part of my Doctoral research and will be supervised by Doctor Claire Cartwright and Associate Professor Fred Seymour.

Purpose of the research

In this research, I will be asking parents, stepparents, children and adolescents who are living in stepfamilies to fill in questionnaires which will ask them about the kinds of things they think children living in stepfamilies like and don't like, and the kinds of things that parents and stepparents do and don't do that they find helpful and difficult. I will be asking you about what parents and stepparents should be responsible for in stepfamilies.

I am interested in learning about ways that parents and stepparents can help their children when they are having difficulties in their stepfamily as well as ways of helping the family to get on well with each other. I will be interested in hearing your ideas about this.

Your involvement

You, your parent, and stepparent are invited to take part in this study. If you do take part, this will involve all of you filling in questionnaires. The questionnaires will take about 15 – 20 minutes to answer. Each person will have their own forms to fill in and their own envelope so you can keep your information confidential by placing it in your envelope before posting it back to the university.

There is a second phase to this research project. This will involve a face-to-face interview with some of the stepfamilies who have already taken part in the study. You, your parent and stepparent are invited to take part in this second phase of the study. Once again, this next part of the study is voluntary and you do not have to take part unless you and your family agree to. If you do take part, this will involve you and I meeting and talking together for about ½ to ¾ of an hour. I will ask you questions about your thoughts, feelings, and opinions about how parents, stepparents and children get along and what children like and don't like in stepfamilies. I will not try to influence your opinion,

however, because it is your opinion and ideas that I am interested in. I will also spend 1 to 1 ½ talking with your parent and your stepparent about their opinions and experiences. The interviews will take place at your home, if your parent chooses, or in my office at the University. When we all meet together we will check out that we are all still feeling OK about doing the interviews and talking about private things in your stepfamily. The interviews will be audio-taped, although the tape could be turned off or the interview stopped at anytime, if this was requested by you.

Your parent will be contacted by the researcher to make a time to do the interview with you and/or post out the questionnaires at a later date.

Confidentiality

I would like you to take part in this research but you do not have to. It is up to you. If you do take part you can withdraw the information you have given to me up to one month after returning your questionnaires and 7 days following the interview should you take part in the second phase of the study (as outlined above). I will treat all information you provide as confidential and the information will be kept under in a secure, locked facility at the University of Auckland for 3 years. The written questionnaires will then be destroyed (shredded) and the audio-tapes will be wiped. Only the researchers will have access to the information that you have given in the study. I will not tell your parent or stepparent what you have said to me, unless we agree to do so. The only exception to this would be if I learnt something from you, which meant that you were not safe. In the case of something very serious, it would be my responsibility to talk to your parent or an appropriate person about it.

Queries

If you have any questions, I can discuss these with you on the phone. You can phone me on (09) 3737 599 Extn. 88515 or email me at vmob001@auckland.ac.nz

Thank you for considering taking part in my research!

My supervisor is Doctor Claire Cartwright

(09) 3737 599 Extn. 86269
c.cartwright@auckland.ac.nz

The Head of Department is Associate Professor Fred Seymour

(09) 3737 599 Extn. 88414
f.seymour@auckland.ac.nz

For any queries regarding ethical concerns please contact:

Appendix B: Consent and Assent Forms

Adult Consent Form

THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND
NEW ZEALAND
Te Whare Wānanga o Tāmaki Makaurau

Building 734, Tamaki Campus
261 Morrin Road, Glen Innes
Auckland, New Zealand
Telephone 64 9 373 7599
Facsimile 64 9 373 7043

The University of Auckland
Private Bag 92019
Auckland, New Zealand

Consent to take part in the study

I _____ , agree to taking part in the study
An Exploratory Investigation of Parenting and Stepparenting Roles in New Zealand
being conducted by the University of Auckland by Vicki Mobley.

I have been given and have understood an explanation of this research project which involves my participation in an interview which will be audio taped.

I understand that my participation is voluntary, and that I can withdraw myself from the interview at any stage if I want to without having to give a reason.

I understand that I have the right to withdraw any information that I have provided up to 7 days following the interview.

I understand that no information that names or identifies me will be used in any discussions or reports written about the study.

Consent

Signature …………………………

Date   ……………………………..

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 13th September 2006 for 3 years, from September 2006 to September 2009. Reference number: 2006/274.

This consent form will be held until 31 December 2012 when it will be destroyed (shredded).

Child Assent Form

THE UNIVERSITY
OF AUCKLAND
NEW ZEALAND
Te Whare Wānanga o Tāmaki Makaurau

Building 734, Tamaki Campus
261 Morrin Road, Glen Innes
Auckland, New Zealand
Telephone 64 9 373 7599
Facsimile 64 9 373 7043

The University of Auckland
Private Bag 92019
Auckland, New Zealand

Assent to take part in the study

I _____ , agree to taking part in the study
An Exploratory Investigation of Parenting and Stepparenting Roles in New Zealand
being conducted by the University of Auckland by Vicki Mobley.

I have been given and have understood an explanation of this research project which
involves my participation in an interview which will be audio taped.

I understand that my participation is voluntary, and that I can withdraw myself from the
interview at any stage if I want to without having to give a reason.

I understand that I have the right to withdraw any information that I have provided up to
7 days following the interview.

I understand that no information that names or identifies me will be used in any
discussions or reports written about the study.

Assent of the young person	Consent of Parent/Guardian (if under 16 years old)
Signature …………………………….. Date ……………………………..	Name …………………….. Signature ……………………… Date ……………………………..

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS
ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 13th September 2006 for 3 years, from September 2006 to
September 2009. Reference number: 2006/274.

This consent form will be held until 31 December 2012 when it will be destroyed (shredded).

Appendix C: Recruitment and Advertisements

PARTICIPANT FAMILIES REQUIRED FOR STEPFAMILY RESEARCH

Step/blended families consisting of a parent, stepparent, and at least one child (aged 10 – 16 years) are needed to participate in a study of roles and relationships between family members living in stepfamily households.

The researcher is Vicki Mobley and she is conducting this research as part of her studies as a Doctoral Clinical Psychology student under the supervision of Doctor Claire Cartwright and Associate Professor Fred Seymour at the University of Auckland.

Participants in the research (both the parent, stepparent, and at least one child in each stepfamily) will each be asked to complete a written questionnaire requiring 10-15 minutes which will be posted and returned by mail.

The research will contribute to an understanding of parenting and stepparenting in this alternative type of family household and the guidance offered to adults and children during this family transition. You will also be invited to an educational evening which will provide the latest New Zealand and international research into what appears to work for stepfamilies.

This study is also part of a larger national project entitled 'Families in Transition Study' which will incorporate the findings of multiple studies about the experiences of New Zealand families at differing stages from separation and divorce through to repartnering/remarriage over the next 5 years. The results from this project may be published in New Zealand and International Research Journals and add further to our knowledge of what is helpful and what works.

If you are interested in participating in the research, or would like to be given more information, please contact Vicki Mobley on 3737599 Extn. 84479 or email at vmob001@ec.auckland.ac.nz

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 13 September, 2006 for 3 years. Reference number: 2006/274.

Principals' Consent Form

This consent form will be held until 31 December 2012 when it will be destroyed (shredded).

Title of Project: An Exploratory Investigation of Parenting and Stepparenting Roles in New Zealand Stepfamilies.

Researcher: Vicki Mobley

Supervisors: Dr Claire Cartwright

Associate Professor Fred Seymour

I have read the Participant Information Sheets for parents, stepparents, and children and understand the purpose of this study. I have approved the advertisement being placed in a newsletter which goes out to parents. I understand that the confidentiality and privacy of the parents and children who participate will be protected. I understand that participants can withdraw from the research at any time.

I give permission for the advertisement to be placed in our school newsletter and for the researcher to recruit participant families through our school.

Signed:

Name:

School:

Position:

Date:

Appendix D: Self-Report Questionnaire Schedule

Self-Report Questionnaire Schedule – Parent version

Personal information to be completed by the parent

Please fill in the following family details

Adult One

First name: Age:

Ethnicity:

Occupation:

Highest qualification or level of education:

Adult Two

First name: Age:

Ethnicity:

Occupation:

Highest qualification or level of education:

The Child/ren participating in this study

Participating children of adult one

First name: Age:

First name: Age:

First name: Age:

Number of years since parents' separation:

Number of years/months living in current stepfamily household:

Participating children of adult two

First name: Age:

First name: Age:

First name: Age:

Number of years since parents' separation:

Number of years/months living in current stepfamily household:

Please note:

We would like to acknowledge that many people in New Zealand do not use or do not like the stepfamily terms such as 'stepfather', 'stepmother', 'stepchild', or 'stepfamily'. Some adults who have been with their partner's biological children for a significant time may feel like and act like a parent, and some people feel more comfortable with alternative terms such as a 'blended' or 'reconstituted' family.

However, to conduct this research we need to differentiate between a biological parent and a parent's partner. Because the stepfamily terms are the only clear terms we have, we would appreciate if you would use these terms for the purposes of this study. Please see the definitions below.

Parent – refers to the biological parent of the child

Stepparent, stepfather, stepmother – refers to the parent's partner

Child – refers to the biological child of the parent

Stepchild – refers to the child of the stepparent's partner

Your time and cooperation in completing the following questionnaire is much appreciated.

STEPPARENT ROLE QUESTIONNAIRE

Which relationship best describes the *ideal* way in which you would like your current spouse/partner to relate to your child?

Please answer by placing a circle at the option below which *most* closely applies. Please choose only *one* option.

    (a) distant relative
    (b) teacher
    (c) friend
    (d) stepparent
    (e) acquaintance
    (f) advisor
    (g) boss
    (h) parent
    (i) aunt or uncle
    (j) enemy
    (k) other (please write your answer)

STEP/PARENTING BEHAVIOUR INVENTORY

The following are behaviours that parents and stepparents engage in. Please rate how often you personally believe each adult should *ideally* behave in these ways within a stepfamily. Please use the following scale:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
rarely or never			sometimes			extremely often or always

For each item below please put a number from the scale above in the column on the left for the parent and in the column on the right for the stepparent.

	Ideally how often do you think a parent or stepparent should	PARENT	STEPPARENT
1.	ask your child how his or her day went		
2.	hug your child		
3.	do a fun activity with your child (play games, go to a movie etc.)		
4.	complement your child		
5.	try to spend time with your child		
6.	help your child with homework		
7.	give advice to your child		
8.	when your child has conflicts with other children, help him or her figure out how to solve them		
9.	comfort your child when he or she is upset		
10.	make sure that your child does his or her homework		
11.	ask your child how he or she is doing in school		
12.	set rules that your child has to follow		
13.	enforce rules that you as the parent set for your child to follow		
14.	discipline your child when rules are not followed		
15.	try to make sure that your child does not make the wrong kinds of friends		
16.	try to teach your child right from wrong		
17.	know where your child is and whom he or she is with		
18.	when your child does something wrong, explain to him or her why it was wrong		

STEPFAMILY RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION SCALE

Please answer the questions below that apply to you. For each question, circle the number on the scale that is most accurate.

Nb., please answer the questions below in terms of the relationships with the child/ren that live in your household at least 50% of the time.

1. How satisfied are you with your stepfamily situation?

Not at all				Very much
1	2	3	4	5

2. How satisfied are you with your relationship with your stepchild/ren?

Not at all				Very much
1	2	3	4	5

3. How satisfied are you with your relationship with your biological child/ren?

Not at all				Very much
1	2	3	4	5

4. How satisfied are you with your partner as a stepparent?

Not at all				Very much
1	2	3	4	5

5. How satisfied are you with your partner as a parent?

Not at all				Very much
1	2	3	4	5

Thank you for completing the above questionnaires. Please complete the section below and place all the forms in your individual envelope provided.

☐ Please tick if you would like a summary copy of the research findings.

Please provide a postal address

_____
_____
_____

☐ Please tick if you would like an invitation to attend the educational evening at a later date. Please also provide telephone or postal address (if not already provided above) so you can be informed of time and place

_____
_____
_____
_____

Self-Report Questionnaire Schedule – Stepparent version

STEPPARENT ROLE QUESTIONNAIRE

Which relationship best describes your *ideal* way to relate to your stepchild?

Please answer by placing a circle at the option below which *most* closely applies. Please choose only *one* option.

    (a) distant relative
    (b) teacher
    (c) friend
    (d) stepparent
    (e) acquaintance
    (f) advisor
    (g) boss
    (h) parent
    (i) aunt or uncle
    (j) enemy
    (k) other (please write your answer)

STEP/PARENTING BEHAVIOUR INVENTORY

The following are behaviours that parents and stepparents engage in. Please rate how often you personally believe each adult should *ideally* behave in these ways within a stepfamily. Please use the following scale:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
rarely or never			sometimes			extremely often or always

For each item below please put a number from the scale above in the column on the left for the parent and in the column on the right for the stepparent.

	Ideally how often do you think a parent or stepparent should	PARENT	STEPPARENT
1.	ask your stepchild how his or her day went		
2.	hug your stepchild		
3.	do a fun activity with your stepchild (play games, go to a movie etc.)		
4.	complement your stepchild		
5.	try to spend time with your stepchild		
6.	help your stepchild with homework		
7.	give advice to your stepchild		
8.	when your stepchild has conflicts with other children, help him or her figure out how to solve them		
9.	comfort your stepchild when he or she is upset		
10.	make sure that your stepchild does his or her homework		
11.	ask your stepchild how he or she is doing in school		
12.	set rules that your stepchild has to follow		
13.	enforce rules that the parent sets for his or her child to follow		
14.	discipline your stepchild when rules are not followed		
15.	try to make sure that your stepchild does not make the wrong kinds of friends		
16.	try to teach your stepchild right from wrong		
17.	know where your stepchild is and whom he or she is with		
18.	when your stepchild does something wrong, explain to him or her why it was wrong		

STEPFAMILY RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION SCALE

Please answer the questions below that apply to you. For each question, circle the number on the scale that is most accurate.

Nb., please answer the questions below in terms of the relationships with the child/ren that live in your household at least 50% of the time.

1. How satisfied are you with your stepfamily situation?

Not at all   Very much
   1   2   3   4   5

2. How satisfied are you with your relationship with your stepchild/ren?

Not at all   Very much
   1   2   3   4   5

3. How satisfied are you with your relationship with your biological child/ren?

Not at all   Very much
   1   2   3   4   5

4. How satisfied are you with your partner as a stepparent?

Not at all   Very much
   1   2   3   4   5

5. How satisfied are you with your partner as a parent?

Not at all   Very much
   1   2   3   4   5

Thank you for completing the above questionnaires. Please complete the section below and place all the forms in your individual envelope provided.

☐ Please tick if you would like a summary copy of the research findings.

Please provide a postal address

_____
_____
_____
_____

☐ Please tick if you would like an invitation to attend the educational evening at a later date. Please also provide telephone or postal address (if not already provided above) so you can be informed of time and place

_____
_____
_____
_____

Self-Report Questionnaire Schedule – Child version

STEPPARENT ROLE QUESTIONNAIRE

Which relationship best describes the *ideal* way in which you would like your stepparent to relate to you?

Please answer by placing a circle at the option below which *most* closely describes how you would like the relationship to be. Please choose only *one* option.

   (a) distant relative
   (b) teacher
   (c) friend
   (d) stepparent
   (e) acquaintance
   (f) advisor
   (g) boss
   (h) parent
   (i) aunt or uncle
   (j) enemy
   (k) other (please write your answer)

STEP/PARENTING BEHAVIOUR INVENTORY

The following are things that parents and stepparents sometimes do. How often do you think a parent and stepparent should *ideally* behave in these ways within a stepfamily? Please use the following scale:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
rarely or never			sometimes			extremely often or always

For each item below please put a number from the scale above in the column on the left for the parent and in the column on the right for the stepparent.

	Ideally how often do you think a parent or stepparent should	PARENT	STEPPARENT
1.	ask the child how his or her day went		
2.	give the child a hug		
3.	do a fun activity with the child (play games, go to a movie etc.)		
4.	complement the child (praise the child when they have done well)		
5.	try to spend time with the child		
6.	help with homework		
7.	give the child advice		
8.	help the child figure out what to do when the child has fights or problems with other children		
9.	comfort the child when he or she is upset		
10.	make sure that the child does his or her homework		
11.	ask how he or she is doing in school		
12.	set rules (make up the rules)		
13.	make sure that rules made by the parent are followed		
14.	discipline or give consequences when rules are not followed		
15.	try to make sure that the child does not make the wrong kinds of friends		
16.	try to teach the child right from wrong		
17.	know where the child is and who they are with		
18.	When the child does something wrong, explain to him or her why it was wrong		

STEPFAMILY RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION SCALE

For each question, please circle the number which seems to be most close to how things are for you.

1. How satisfied are you with your stepfamily situation?

Not at all   Very much
1   2   3   4   5

2. How satisfied are you with your relationship with your parent?

Not at all   Very much
1   2   3   4   5

3. How satisfied are you with your relationship with your stepparent?

Not at all   Very much
1   2   3   4   5

Thank you for completing the above questionnaires. Please place all the forms in your individual envelope provided.

Appendix E: Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule – Adult version

(name) once again thanks for giving your time and views to this study on parenting and stepparenting roles. And of course with your own personal experience of stepfamily life we *really do* value your opinion and views. So the interview now will probably take us about an hour, and I will have a tape running and take brief notes just to make sure I don't lose anything important that you've said. But the tape will be wiped at the end of the study and what you have said will remain confidential. Is that OK?

Administer vignette (see versions below; 10 – 13 year old child or 14 -18 year old adolescent)

Administer open ended semi-structured questions below;

Open ended semi-structured questions

1. So, now thinking generally about stepfamilies, can you tell me what you think could be the positive things about stepfamily life and being part of a stepfamily?

(Probes –Are there positive things about being in a stepfamily that other forms of families might not as easily provide?
–Are there things about being in a stepfamily that are easier or better or provide different opportunities than being in another type of family?)

Now I would like to ask about your views on what a parent's role and what a stepparent's role is in a stepfamily, and how these may perhaps differ or be the same. And it would really help me in understanding your views if you're able to give me the reasoning for your ideas as we go and when you're able to do this. Is that OK? So if we think about the parent first

2. What do you think the parent's role is in a stepfamily? (that is, what sorts of jobs, activities, responsibilities do they take care of?)
(Probes - discipline, rules, nurturing, support and care activities
- What kind of activities do you think a parent should do with their children after they repartner?)

And now thinking about the stepparent

3. What do you think is the stepparent's role in a stepfamily? Where do they fit in, what do they do?
(Probes- discipline, rules, nurturing, support and care activities
- What are the things you think a stepparent should contribute to and do in the stepfamily? what about discipline, finances, support?
- Are there things that you think a stepparent should do or does work well?
- Are there things you think a stepparent shouldn't do or don't work?)

4. (a) (if same) **So do the roles differ in any way?**
or (if different) **So what are the ways the roles differ?**
(Probe- Are there/what are the roles or things that ideally a stepparent shouldn't do?
- Are there/what are the roles that only the parent should do?)

(b) And how are their roles the same?
(Probe – What are the things that are ok for both the parent and stepparent to do?
-So once a couple repartner who do you think should discipline the children in terms of the parent, stepparent, either, both?)

5. Do you think that the length of time together as a family influences these roles?
(Probes – how might it/does it change?
- who would that be better/easier for? Children/adults)

6. How much agreement do you think there is across the roles in your household?
(Probes - So how much do you think you and your partner would agree on these roles we've talked about?
And what about the kids, do you think the children in your house might see it this way? Does this cause problems?)

We've talked mostly about the parent and the stepparent, now I'd like us to think about the children in stepfamilies.

7. What do you think children like or find positive about being in a stepfamily?

8. What do you think they don't like or sometimes find difficult?

9. (name) thanks for your views so far. Finally, if you were talking to a person who was new to a stepfamily what advice would you want to give, and what do you think it would be important for them to be aware of? (what would you want to tell them to do or not do and what would you want them to know about).

Vignette (10-13 year old child)

To start with, I'm going to tell you a made up scenario about a stepfamily and ask you what you think about what's happening, and there's no right or wrong answers to this.

So, John/Jenny is 11 years old. He/she lives with his/her mum/dad and stepfather Peter/stepmother Paula. They have been living together as a stepfamily for about 8 months.

A) John moved school this year. Although he thinks the new school is OK he is finding it hard to make new friends. He is also finding the new maths programme hard to understand and is worried that he is not keeping up with the class.
In your opinion who should talk to John about this, the parent or the stepparent, and can you tell me why?
What do you think it would be like if the stepparent tried?

B) John's teacher sends a note home to say that he is not doing his homework. His bedroom is messy and he can't use his desk as it is piled up with clothes and rubbish. There are going to be some rules about homework and chores made in the house for John so that he gets these things done.
Who should decide on the rules?
Who should tell John about the rules and consequences once they have been decided on?
How would it be for John if Peter (stepfather) made up the rules?
If not ok, why? Why wouldn't it work?

C) A rule is made that John must spend half an hour a night at his desk doing his homework before he can watch TV. John comes into the lounge to watch TV with the family one evening.
Who should check if he has done his homework?
Who should send him back to his room if he hasn't done his homework?
How would it be for John if Peter (stepfather) did this?
If not ok, why?

Vignette (14-18 year old adolescent)

To start with I'm going to give you a made up scenario about a stepfamily and ask you what you think about what's happening, and there's no right or wrong answers to this.

So, John/Jenny is 15 years old. He/she lives with his/her mum/dad and stepfather Paul/stepmother Paula. They have been living together as a stepfamily for about 8 months.

A) John moved school this year. Although he thinks the new school is OK he is finding it hard to make new friends. He is also finding the new maths programme hard to understand and is worried that he is not keeping up with the class.
In your opinion who should talk to John about this the parent or the stepparent and can you tell me why?
What do you think it would be like if the stepparent tried?

B) John has begun to get to know a couple of boys at school and has started hanging out with their group of friends at lunchtime. The boys sometimes meet up on the weekends to go to a movie or hang out together in town. They have asked John if he wants to come along.
Who should John ask/check this out with at home?
Who should decide on the rules about where John can go, who he can go with, what time he needs to be home etc?
Who should tell John the rules when they have been decided?
How would it be for John if Peter (stepfather) made up the rules?
If not ok, why? Why wouldn't it work?

C) On the weekend John goes to town to meet his friends. One of the rules about being able to go is that he must be home by 10.30pm. John is having a good time and decides to catch a later bus. The family are very worried about him when he arrives home late at 11.30pm.
Who should decide on the consequence for breaking the rule?
Who should talk to John about the consequence and enforce it?
How would it be for John if Peter (stepfather) decided on the consequence…
If not ok, why?

Interview Schedule – Child version

(name) once again thanks for spending this time talking with me about what you think about stepfamilies. And of course because you have experience living in a stepfamily yourself it's really great to have your opinions and hear what you have to say about it. So we'll be talking now for about half an hour, and I will have a tape running and take brief notes just to make sure I don't lose anything important that you've said. But the tape will be wiped at the end of the study and what you say will be confidential. So is that OK for us to start?

Administer vignette (see versions below; 10 – 13 year old child or 14 -18 year old adolescent)
Administer open ended semi-structured questions below;

Open ended semi-structured questions

1. So now thinking generally about stepfamilies then, can you tell me what you think could be some of the good stuff and positive things about stepfamily life and being part of a stepfamily?
(Probes - Are there good things you get or have that you might not if you were in another type of family?)

Now I would like to ask about what you think is the parent's job/role and what's the stepparent's job/role in a stepfamily, and how the things they do might be the same and how they might be different. And it would really help me in understanding your views if you're able to tell me why you think this way as we're going along - if you can. Is that OK? So if we think about the parent first

2. What do you think the parent's job is in a stepfamily? What types of things should they be doing and looking after in the family?
(Probes - discipline, rules, nurturing, support, help and care activities
Are they responsible for…Is it up to them to…Should they be…
        - What kind of things do you think a parent should be doing with their children after they repartner?)

And now thinking about the stepparent like …(name)..is a stepfather/mother to you

3. What do you think the stepparent's job is in a stepfamily? What should they be doing and looking after?
(Probes- discipline, rules, nurturing, support, help and care activities
Are they responsible for…Should they be…Is it ok for them to…
        - What are the things you think a stepparent should contribute to and do in the stepfamily? What about disciplining, making up the rules, money, care and support?
        - Are there things that you think a stepparent should do or do work well?)

4. (a) So (if same) are their jobs and responsibilities different in any way?
        Or (if different) **in what ways are their jobs different?**
Are there/what are the things that ideally a stepparent shouldn't do?
Are there/what are the things that only the parent should do?
What are the things that are ok for both the parent and stepparent to do?

(probe - So in a stepfamily who do you think should discipline the children and make up the rules - the parent, stepparent, either, both?)

5. Do you think how long a stepfamily has been together changes these jobs and the things they do and don't do?
(Probes – how might it change?
   - who would that be better/easier for? Children/adults)

We've talked mostly about the parent and the stepparent, now I'd like us to think about the kids in stepfamilies.

6. What are the kind of things that make it easier for children or are the kinds of things that children like in a stepfamily?
What do you think children want from stepparents in stepfamilies? What do they like?
What do you think children want from parents in stepfamilies? What do they like?

7. What kind of things do you think children find difficult or don't like in a stepfamily?
(Probe - What do you think children like stepparents to do when it comes to the rules of the house?)
What are the kinds of things that children don't want from stepparents in stepfamilies?
What kinds of things dot children want parents to do more or do less of in stepfamilies?

8. (name) thanks for talking to me and telling me what you think so far. Finally, if you were talking to a person who was new to a stepfamily what would you want to tell them about stepfamily life, what things do you think it would be helpful for them to do or know?

Vignette (10-13 year old child)

To start with I'm going to give you a made up scenario about a stepfamily and ask you what you think about what's happening, and there's no right or wrong answers to this.

So, John/Jenny is 11 years old. He/she lives with his/her mum/dad and stepfather Paul/stepmother Paula. They have been living together as a stepfamily for about 8 months.

A) John moved school this year. Although he thinks the new school is OK he is finding it hard to make new friends. He is also finding the new maths programme hard to understand and is worried that he is not keeping up with the class.
Who at home could John talk about this with?
Who do you think John would like help from with this?
Why?
Do you think he would want to talk to Paula (his stepdad) about this?
Why not?
What do you think it would be like if his stepparent tried?

B) John's teacher sends a note home to say that he is not doing his homework. His bedroom is messy and he can't use his desk as it is piled up with clothes and rubbish. There are going to be some rules about homework and chores made in the house for John so that he gets these things done.
Who should decide on the rules? What would work best?
Who should tell John about the rules and consequences once they have been decided on?
How would it be for John if Peter (stepfather) made up the rules?
If not ok, why? Why don't you think it would work?

C) A rule is made that John must spend half an hour a night at his desk doing his homework before he can watch TV. John comes into the lounge to watch TV with the family one evening.
Who should check if he has done his homework?
Who should send him back to his room if he hasn't done his homework?
How would it be for John if Peter (stepfather) did this?
Why?

Vignette (14-18 year old adolescent)

To start with I'm going to give you a made up scenario about a stepfamily and ask you what you think about what's happening, and there's no right or wrong answers to this.

So, John/Jenny is 15 years old. He/she lives with his/her mum/dad and stepfather Paul/stepmother Paula. They have been living together as a stepfamily for about 8 months.

A) John moved school this year. Although he thinks the new school is OK he is finding it hard to make new friends. He is also finding the new maths programme hard to understand and is worried that he is not keeping up with the class.
Who at home could John talk about this with?
Who do you think John would like help from with this?
Why?
Do you think he would want to talk to Paula (his stepdad) about this?
Why not?
What do you think it would be like if his stepparent tried?

B) John has begun to get to know a couple of boys at school and has started hanging out with their group of friends at lunchtime. The boys sometimes meet up on the weekends to go to a movie or hang out together in town. They have asked John if he wants to come along.
Who should John ask/check this out with at home?
Who should decide on the rules like where John can go, who he goes with, what time he needs to be home etc?
(If argues for the parent)
How would it be for John if Paul (stepfather) made up the rules?
If not ok, why? Why wouldn't it work?

C) On the weekend John goes to town to meet his friends. One of the rules about being able to go is that he must be home by 10.30pm. John is having a good time and decides to catch a later bus. The family are very worried about him when he arrives home late at 11.30pm.
Who should decide on the consequence for breaking the rule?
Who should talk to John about the consequence and enforce it?
How would it be for John if Peter (stepfather) decided on the consequence…
If not ok, why?

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