

Stepchildren Adopted by their Stepparents:
Where do they fit?

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ABSTRACT

According to the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse (NAIC, 2006), stepchild adoption (i.e., stepchildren who are legally adopted by their stepparents), is the most common form of adoption in the United States. Very little is known about the circumstances under which stepchildren are adopted by their stepparents and how they fare relative to other children. This study draws upon the 2002 National Survey of America's Families and investigates the sociodemographic characteristics and well-being of adopted stepchildren, defined as children residing in married couple households with one biological parent and one adopted parent. Adopted stepchildren are compared to children with two married biological parents, two married adoptive parents, and children with one married biological parent and one (non-adoptive) stepparent. Preliminary descriptive results indicate that about 1% of children in married, two-parent households has an adoptive stepparent. About 5% of children in stepfamilies has been adopted by a stepparent. Adopted stepchildren have an increased risk of negative outcomes in the area of behavior and emotional problems. Results indicating that adopted stepchildren are most similar to children with two adoptive parents as opposed to one biological parent and one stepparent suggest that researchers need to be cautious about treating adopted stepchildren as stepchildren in their research. Future analysis will examine the well-being of adopted stepchildren relative to other children in a multivariate context.

INTRODUCTION

Although exact figures are not available, the adoption of stepchildren by their stepparents is thought to be the most common form of adoption in the United States (NAIC, 2006). Stepchild adoptions also comprise the highest percentage of legal adoptions in European countries such as Great Britain and Ireland (Ball, 2002; Loftus, 2003). Adopted stepchildren challenge both traditional and not-so-traditional notions of parenthood because they reside within the overlapping contexts of biological parenthood, adoptive parenthood, and stepparenthood (Figure 1). It is not clear where adopted stepchildren “fit” on the parent-child relatedness continuum; do they have more in common with biological children, adopted children, or stepchildren? There is a great deal of inconsistency among researchers. Some studies put children adopted by their stepparents in the same category as “biological or adopted” children (i.e., not stepchildren) with the justification that after adoption stepparents become financially and legally responsible for the child (e.g., Bray & Berger, 1993; Stewart, 2001). Other researchers treat adopted stepchildren just as they would stepchildren (e.g., Moorman & Hernandez, 1989; Norton & Miller, 1992). Others treat stepchild adoption as “special case” within the stepfamily literature (e.g., Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & McDaniel, 1998) and adoption literature (e.g., Appell, 2000). One study that compared biological, adoptive, and stepparents parents was vague as to how these children were handled (Cebello, Lansford, Abbey, & Stewart, 2004).

One of the main reasons for the lack of consistency with respect to adopted stepchildren is that there is very little specific information on this practice. Surprisingly, there are not any published estimates of the number of stepparents in the United States

who legally adopt their stepchildren, or the number of children who are adopted by stepparents. Data from the Court Statistics Project (which gathered information from public and private adoption agencies and vital records) estimated that there are roughly 125,000 children adopted annually in the U.S., a figure which has remained relatively stable since the mid-1980s (NAIC, 2004). The adoption of stepchildren by stepparents is considered “adoption by relatives” or “kinship adoption.” Based on the latest year available, relative adoptions were estimated to represent 42% of all adoptions in 1992 which amounts to roughly 50,000 children (Flango & Flango, 1994 cited in Adoption Statistics, 2006).

Similarly, reports based on the U.S. Census and National Surveys of Family Growth do not distinguish children adopted by stepparents from other types of adopted children (Kreider, 2003). One previous estimate of stepparents who have adopted their stepchildren based on data from the 1987-1988 National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) suggests that roughly one in ten married stepparents with resident stepchildren had legally adopted at least one of them, but this amounted to only 33 cases which was too small for detailed analysis of these families (Stewart, in press). Thus, for quite some time we have not had a good understanding of the prevalence of stepchild adoption and the socioeconomic and family characteristics of adopted stepchildren, nor do we know how these children fare in terms of their socioemotional outcomes relative to other children.

The present study investigates the prevalence, family characteristics, and well-being of adopted stepchildren from the 2002 National Survey of America’s Families (NSAF). One of the strengths of the NSAF is that it contains a large number of children

from nontraditional family structures (e.g., stepfamilies, adopted families) in addition to children from two biological parent families. The number of adopted stepchildren in this sample (approximately 130) is sizable enough for detailed analysis and is the largest sample of adopted stepchildren available to my knowledge. This study therefore provides the only nationally generalizable portrait of U.S. stepchildren who have been adopted by their stepparents. Adopted stepchildren occupy three worlds based on biology, adoption, and stepfamily membership. Comparing adopted stepchildren to children with two biological parent, two adoptive parents, and one biological parent and one stepparent will provide insight into the meaning of parenthood in American Society and will help policymakers and practitioners anticipate the needs of these children and their families.

BACKGROUND

Legalities of Stepchild Adoption

The conditions under which U.S. stepparents adopt their stepchildren are less clear than in some other countries. In Ireland, only stepchildren who are born outside of marriage (as opposed to children born to married parents who later divorce) are eligible (Loftus, 2003). In Great Britain, stepchild adoption comprised half of all adoption orders in 1998 which dropped to 35% of all adoptions in 2000 following a 2002 amendment to the *Children Act 1989* which allows children to have a legal relationship with a stepparent in addition to two biological parents (Ball, 2002). In that country, stepparents who have been married to their stepchild's resident parent and who have lived with the stepchild for at least two years can petition to establish legal relationship referred to as a *residence order*, which allows the stepparent rights similar to those of a biological parent (Fine, 1994). In contrast, in the United States children cannot legally have two legal

parents of the same sex although some states sometimes allow a “stepparent exception” (Slater, 2001-2001). U.S. law requires the consent of both the child’s biological parents for a stepchild to be adopted unless it can be determined that one of the parents has not fulfilled his parental duties for two consecutive years or is otherwise incapable of consenting to the adoption (Torline, 1995-1996). In essence, the child’s nonresident parent must agree to relinquish his parental rights and responsibilities and is no longer responsible for child support (NAIC, 2006).

Stepchild adoption is probably more common among stepfamilies resulting from a nonmarital birth than stepfamilies resulting from divorce. In the case of a child born to unmarried parents, the child’s nonresident parent tends to be less involved and would therefore be more likely to consent to the adoption. Women who were not married to their child’s biological father are less likely to have a child support order and are less likely to receive child support (Bartfeld & Meyer, 2001; Grall, 2003). Nonresident fathers whose children were born outside of marriage also visit them significantly less (King et al., 2004). Previous researchers have indicated that adoption of stepchildren by their stepfathers generally occurs in cases where the biological father has died, has deserted the family, or has stopped visiting and paying child support (Reitz & Watson, 1992).

Compared to standard two-parent adoption, the court process of adoption by a stepparent is streamlined. For instance, a judge may dispense with the “home study” that is typically required with other kinds of adoptions (NAIC, 2006). However, adoption is regulated by the states and state laws governing adoption vary from state to state (NAIC, 2006). It is the case that it would be unlikely for a stepfather who was not legally married

to his stepchild's mother to be granted custody of stepchildren (Mason, Fine, Carnochan 2001).

Reasons for Adopting Stepchildren

Unlike families who adopt unrelated children, very little is known about families with adopted stepchildren (Chambers, 1990). Historically, the husband of a child's mother is assumed to be the father of that child (Mason et al., 2001) and families with adopted stepchildren may consider the adoption a "private matter" (Wolf & Mast, 1987). One in-depth study of 27 U.S. stepfamilies asked stepparents if they had thought about adopting their stepchild (Mason, Harrison-Jay, Svare, & Wolfinger, 2002). The majority of stepparents reported that they had "considered the idea" but decided against it because of the nonresident biological parent. Others felt that grandparents and extended family members would disapprove of the children taking their stepfather's name. Others felt that the children would not want to be adopted while for another group it, "did not feel like the right decision."

In Wolf and Mast's (1987) study of 55 stepparent adoptions in Pennsylvania, they found that most stepparent adoptions involve male adopters and children between the ages of 5 and 7 (about the time that children start school) and about half had other children living in the household; the sex of the child does not appear to be a factor in the decision to adopt a stepchild. Only one of the stepparent adoptions involved a black family, and the authors argue that African American families may be more likely to engage in informal adoption than legal adoptions. However, according to data from the National Survey of Family Growth, black women are more likely than Hispanic or white women to adopt a child who is a blood relative when they adopt (Chandra, Abma, Maza,

& Bachrach, 1999). The Wolf and Mast (1987) study indicates that the most important reasons for adopting a stepchild are: a name-change for the child, to increase family unity, because of the good relationship between the stepparent and child, to transfer legal rights to the stepparent, to sever the relationship with the other biological parent, the child requested it, and to rid themselves of a poor relationship with the child's other birth parent. Stepparents may also want to legally adopt stepchildren to provide them with health insurance and social security benefits or to prevent stigmatization of the child by their community, or simply make their lives less complicated (Chambers, 1990; Masson, 1984; Wolf & Mast, 1987).

A small study of 16 stepfamilies by Ganong et al. (1998) reveals that stepchild adoption is a salient issue in that in almost all the families interviewed, at least one family member had thought about the stepparent adopting the stepchild. In half of families, the parents had talked to the children about it. In that study, similar to Mason et al. (2002) cited above, the extent that the family considered the adoption hinged on the level of involvement of the child's nonresident parent with serious consideration seen only in families with limited involvement. Motivations to adopt were similar to the Wolf and Mast (1987) study cited above: the desire to become more like a "regular" nuclear family, reduce hassle of being a stepfamily, legally sanctioning and legitimizing the stepparent role, worries over the nonresident parent having a legal right to the child should the resident, biological parent die. Financial considerations included the loss of child support from nonresident parent and uncertainty as to whether the stepparent wanted to continue financial obligations to the children should the marriage dissolve.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Parenthood, family structure, and child well-being have been approached in terms of biosocial and evolutionary theories (i.e., perpetuation of one's own genetic line), sociological theories (family roles, family stress, incomplete institutionalization, etc.) and adults' and children's differential rates of selection into different family types based on previous sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., low education and income). For example, lack of genetic relatedness has been used to explain stepfathers' lower levels of involvement with stepchildren relative to biological children (Hofferth & Anderson, 2003; Stewart, 2005), worse child outcomes among stepchildren (Popenoe, 1994), and greater incidences of child abuse among stepchildren than biological children (Daly & Wilson, 1988; Flinn, 1988). However, a sociological argument for lower levels of parental involvement and well-being among stepchildren relative to biological children is that stepfathers and stepchildren are not given an opportunity to bond early in the child's life (Glenn, 1994) combined with a lack of clear social roles for stepparent and stepchildren in stepfamilies (Cherlin, 1978). Children who have been adopted by two parents have a unique set of characteristics that impinge upon their well-being. Children who are adopted have a higher incidence of physical and cognitive disabilities yet are adopted into higher income families and families in which the parents are more likely to have completed a college degree (Krieder, 2003). Adopted children may be foreign born and may have been adopted by older couples who have undergone years of infertility treatments. It is unclear how, on balance, these different factors would affect child outcomes. The well-being of adopted stepchildren relative to other children will be

considered based on these frameworks. Additional theoretical frameworks will also be explored.

DATA AND METHODS

Data

This study is based on data from the 2002 National Survey of America's Families (NSAF), a nationally representative sample of children and their families which provides a range of information on the economic, health, and social characteristics of children and non-elderly adults (Abi-Habib, Safir, & Triplett, 2002). The NSAF is ideally suited for this project for several reasons. The NSAF is probably the largest family survey conducted in recent years and the 2002 round contains information on roughly 34,000 children over 40,000 families. These data also contain a rich set of family environment and child outcome measures that have been shown to have a high degree of validity and reliability (Ehrle & Moore, 1999).

Analytic Sample

The main analytic sample is comprised of 22,680 minor children between the ages of 6-17 in married couple households that contain either the child's two biological parents (N = 19,615), two adoptive parents (N = 412), one biological parent and one stepparent (N = 2,513), or one biological parent and one adoptive parent which are referred to as "adopted stepchildren" (N = 140). The sample is limited to married couples because in general only married stepparents are granted custody of stepchildren (Mason et al., 2001). For the analysis of child well-being, the sample is further limited to 11,291 children age 6 to 17, younger children (< age 5) because key measures do not pertain to young children. Cases missing on child outcomes were also removed from the sample

(less than 2%). Information is provided by the *most knowledgeable adult* (MKA), defined as the adult considered most knowledgeable about the focal child's health and education. Typically this person is the child's biological or adoptive parent (usually the child's mother), but the MKA may also be a stepparent, sibling, grandparent, other relative, or unrelated adult.

Variables

Children's Well-being. I use two pre-constructed measures of child well-being, the Child School Engagement Scale and the Child Behavioral and Emotional Problem Scale. These scales represent important domains of children's psychosocial adjustment (Bornstein, Davidson, Keyes, & Moore, 2003). The School Engagement Scale is based on the MKA's report of how much of the time the child cares about doing well in school, only works on schoolwork when forced to, does just enough schoolwork to get by, and always does homework, from none of the time, to some of the time, most of the time, and all of the time. This scale ranges from 4 to 16, with scores less than or equal to 10 indicating "low" school engagement (Ehrle & Moore, 1999). The Child Behavioral and Emotional Problem Scale is the MKA's report of the extent to which the child doesn't get along with other kids, can't concentrate or pay attention for long, has been unhappy, sad, or depressed, feels worthless or inferior (age 6-11), has been nervous, high-strung, or tense (age 6-11), acts too young for his/her age (age 6-11), has trouble sleeping (age 12-17), lies or cheats (age 12-17), does poorly at school (age 12-17) in the past month. Responses are never true, sometimes true, and often true. This scale ranges from 6-18 with scores greater than or equal to 12 indicating a "high" level of problems (Ehrle & Moore, 1999). Additional outcomes, e.g., positive activities with the child, will be explored.

Family Structure of Child. Children are divided into the following family types based on household roster and relationship data provided by the MKA: two biological parents, two adoptive parents, biological parent-stepparent, biological parent-adoptive stepparent. Adopted stepchildren (children in the biological parent-adoptive stepparent category) are compared to children in each category in descriptive and multivariate analyses.

Other independent variables. Of the sociodemographic variables known to be associated with family structure and children's well-being, I use the variables available in NSAF as controls, including the characteristics of the child (sex, age, race, born within/outside of marriage), characteristics of the MKA (sex, age, education, employment, mental health, and physical health), and characteristics of the child's household (family income, number of children in household). Additional covariates will be explored.

Analysis Plan

The sociodemographic characteristics and well-being of children in various family structures (two biological parents, two adoptive parents, biological parent-stepparent, biological parent-adoptive stepparent) are compared and significance tests between groups (t-tests) will be conducted. Next, the family structures of children are compared in a multivariate context (i.e., controlling for various sociodemographic variables) using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. Each family structure category will be rotated out (i.e., serve as reference group) to test significant differences between all groups. Despite some degree of skewness in the distribution of behavior and emotional problems and school engagement (in the direction of low behavior problems and high engagement), OLS is a robust analytic technique when sample sizes are large (Lumley, Diehr, Emerson, & Chen, 2002). I conduct separate analysis depending on the children's age (6-11 and

12-17), as adolescence has emerged as a discrete lifestage from childhood, with unique behaviors, concerns, and peer and family relationships (Furstenberg, 2000). Because the NSAF employs a complex cluster sampling design, special weighting procedures have to be employed so that the standard errors are not underestimated (Flores-Cervantes, Brick, & DiGaetano, 1997).

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Table 1 shows the composition of children in married, two-parent households by their adoption and stepfamily status. About 87% of children live with both of their biological parents. About 2% (1.6%) reside with two adoptive parents. Eleven percent of children in married, two-parent homes live with one biological parent and one stepparent. Less than 1% (.6%) of children has an adoptive stepparent. That is, they reside with one biological parent and one adoptive parent. Of interest to stepfamily researchers is the percentage of stepchildren who are adopted by their stepparents. Among children living in married, two-parent households with one biological parent and one stepparent/adoptive parent, less than 5% (4.8%) are adopted (i.e., are adopted stepchildren). This amounts to roughly 275,000 adopted stepchildren in the U.S. in 2002.

Table 2 compares the well-being of children with two married parents in the household. Of particular interest is the well-being of the adopted stepchildren (i.e., one biological parent-one adopted stepparent) in column 4 relative to children with two biological parents, two adoptive parents, and one biological parent and one stepparent. First, none of the groups of children scored in the clinic range of low school engagement and high behavior and emotional problems. With respect to school engagement, younger adopted stepchildren (age 6-11) scored lower than children with two biological parents,

similar to children with two adopted parents, and higher than children with one biological parent and one stepparent. Among older children (age 12-17), adopted stepchildren again scored most similarly to children with two adoptive parents, lower than children with two biological parents, and higher than children with one biological parent and one stepparent. However, no significant differences were observed between groups with respect to school engagement.

Both younger (age 6-11) and older (age 12-17) adopted stepchildren scored significantly higher on behavior and emotional problems than children with two biological parents in the home. Adopted stepchildren were not significantly different from children with two adoptive parents and one biological parent and one stepparent (although their scores were higher). Children in these groups also scored significantly higher than children with two biological parents on this measure.

These preliminary findings suggest that among children with two married parents, adopted stepchildren are potentially at risk for experiencing lower well-being in the area of behavioral and emotional problems. Furthermore, these initial findings indicate that adopted stepchildren exhibit well-being most similar to children with two adoptive parents as opposed to children with one biological parent and one stepparent (i.e., children in stepfamilies). This suggests that researchers need to be cautious about treating adopted stepchildren as stepchildren in their research. Future analyses are planned that compare these children's sociodemographic characteristics and examine the effect of family structure on child outcomes in a multivariate context.

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Figure 1. Concept of Adopted Stepchildren

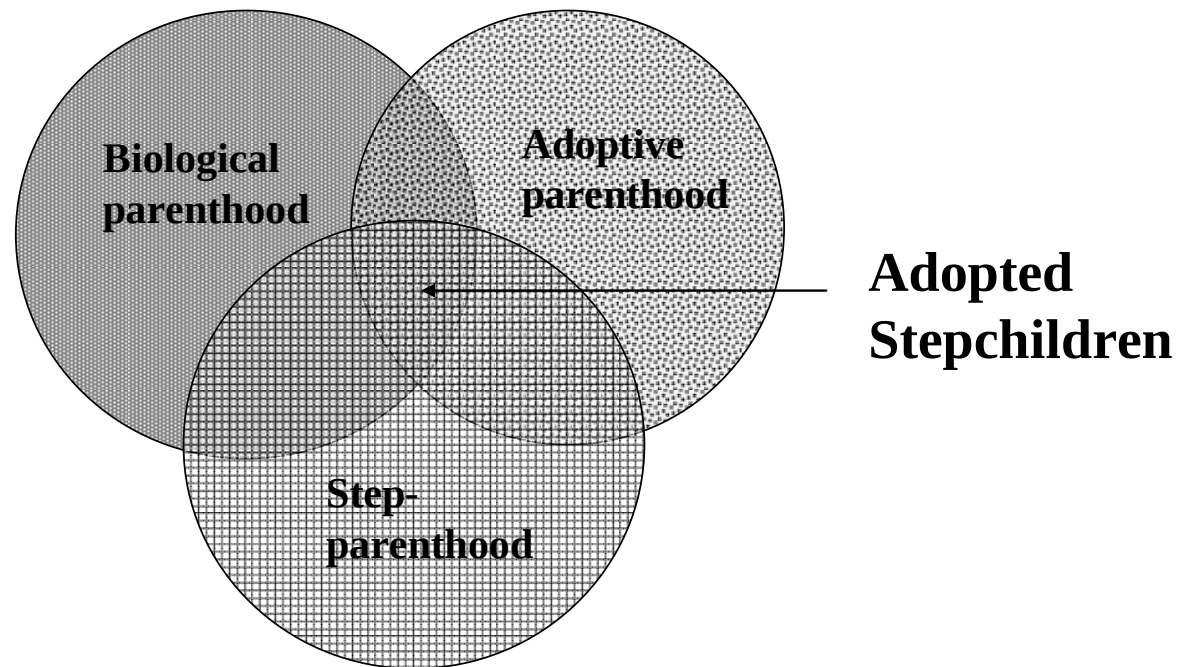


Table 1. Children Age 0 to 17 in Married, Two-Parent Households by Adoption/Stepfamily Status

	N	Percent
Two Biological Parents	19,615	86.6
Two Adoptive Parents	412	1.6
One Biological-One Stepparent	2,513	11.2
One Biological-One Adopted Stepparent	140	0.6
Total	22,680	100.0

Source: 2002 National Survey of America's Families

Table 2. Well-Being of Children with Two Married Parents

	Two Biological	Two Adoptive	Biological Parent- Stepparent	Biological Parent- Adopted Stepparent
School Engagement				
Child age 6-11	13.3	13.2	12.8	13.2
Child age 12-17	12.9	12.2	11.7	12.4
Behavior/Emotional Problems				
Child age 6-11	7.7*	8.6	8.2	9.0
Child age 12-17	7.7*	8.6	8.5	9.0
N	11,291	275	2,205	126

Source: 2002 National Survey of America's Families

Note: The school engagement scale ranges from 4 to 16, with scores less than or equal to 10 indicating "low" engagement; The behavior and emotional problems scale ranges from 6-18 with scores greater than or equal to 12 indicating a "high" level of problems (Ehrle & Moore, 1999).

*Denotes significantly different from biological parent-adopted stepparent at $p < .05$.