Many children spend part of their childhood living in a step-family household. Recent Australian statistics suggest that around one in ten couple families contain resident step-children (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2007). In Wave 3 of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, 13% of households had either residential or non-residential step-children, or both (Qu & Weston, 2005). In the United States, approximately 9% of married couple households, and 11.5% of cohabiting households contain resident step-children (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). Step-family data is not collected in the New Zealand census; however, results from the longitudinal Christchurch Health and Development Study indicate that 18.6% (or around 1 in 6) of the 1,265 survey participants had lived in a step-family between the ages of 6 and 16 years (Nicholson, Fergusson, & Horwood, 1999).

In recent years, researchers have concluded that, compared to children and adolescents in non-divorced families, those in step-families are at increased risk of developing emotional and behavioural problems (Bray, 1999; Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002) and, compared to sole-parent families, have increased risk of developing problems in the areas of educational achievement, leaving home early and beginning sexual activity earlier (Rodgers & Pryor, 1998). Hetherington and Kelly (2002) and Bray (1999) concluded from their longitudinal studies that the risk of children and adolescents developing clinically significant emotional and behavioural problems is increased by around 25% by divorce and remarriage. On the other hand, many children in step-families fare adequately or well (Amato, 2000; Coleman et al., 2000), and established step-families can provide good environments for child development (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; Hetherington, Henderson, & Reiss, 1999).

The transition from a sole-parent family to a step-family involves a reorganisation of family roles and rules, and the development of step-relationships (Hetherington, 1999; Papernow, 2006). Children’s negative responses to the changed family situation and conflict around management and care of step-children pose the greatest challenge for parents and step-family couples (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hobart, 1991; O’Connor & Insabella, 1999; Saint-Jacques, 1995). This current study focused on the relationship that is often viewed as most central to adjustment in step-families—the relationship between the step-parent and step-child (Coleman et al., 2000; Crosbie-Burnett, 1984). The quality of this relationship impacts child and family wellbeing and marital quality (Bray & Berger, 1993; Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1997; Fine & Kurdek, 1994; Nadler, 1988). In a recent New Zealand study of 90 step-families, a positive association was found between the quality of children’s relationships with step-parents and children’s self-concepts (Pryor, 2005). Children’s feelings of closeness to step-parents, and security in this relationship, were major predictors of children’s perceptions of their own strengths.
On the other hand, although the step-parent-child relationship is important to child wellbeing and family adjustment, it can be highly problematic in the early stages of step-family living, and many step-parents and children experience difficulties in establishing positive or even workable relationships (Bray, 1999; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). Many children have difficulty accepting and adjusting to the step-parent’s presence and are rebellious towards or reject the step-parent. This appears to be exacerbated again during adolescence (Bray, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). In the twenty-year follow-up to the Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage (VLSDR), Hetherington & Kelly concluded that adolescents in step-families experienced more troubled relationships with parents and step-parents and greater emotional and behavioural difficulties compared to their peers in non-divorced families.

Step-family therapists and researchers have observed that some step-parents attempt to adopt a parenting role in the early stages of step-family living (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Visher & Visher, 1988). Some parents also encourage new partners to take on a disciplinary role, perhaps because they want support for parenting of their children (Cartwright, 2003; Cartwright & Seymour, 2002). On the other hand, a step-parent’s adoption of a disciplinary role in the early stages of step-family living can be associated with negative outcomes for children and adolescents (Bray, 1999; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Papernow, 2006; Visher & Visher, 1996). Although there is some evidence that adolescents may accept or benefit from an authoritative step-parenting style (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Nicholson, Phillips, Peterson, & Battistutta, 2000), a step-parent style high on support and low on control has been found to be associated with the highest levels of adolescent adjustment, followed by an authoritative style, and with disengaged step-parenting associated with the lowest levels (Crosbie-Burnett & Giles-Sims, 1994). Crosbie-Burnett and Giles-Sims argued that a step-parent style characterised by support but low control is similar to a permissive style of parenting. Similarly, “laid-back” step-parents appear to be more successful in building relationships with children than “take-charge” step-parents who are concerned with exerting control (Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & Martin, 1999, p. 299). Adolescents in step-family father families are also more likely to believe that it is appropriate for step-fathers to have the role of a friend, in contrast to parents and step-parents, who are more likely to believe that a parenting role is appropriate (Fine et al., 1999).

Given the centrality of the step-parent-child relationship, it is important to investigate the types of step-parent practices that are acceptable to children and adolescents and facilitate their adjustment to new step-family situations. As discussed previously, their negative responses to step-family living create the greatest challenges for parents and their new partners. Clearly there are aspects of gaining a new step-parent that are very difficult. Hence, it is important for researchers to investigate the experiences of step-children. A small number of informative studies (e.g., Cartwright & Seymour, 2002; Duran-Aydintug, 1997; Gorrell Barnes, Thompson, Daniel, & Bruchardt, 1998) have interviewed young adults about their experiences of relating to step-parents as children and adolescents. The Life Stories and Family Transitions (LSFT) Study (see Cartwright, 2006) investigated the ways in which young adults of divorce made sense of the family transition of divorce within the context of their current lives. In this current study, we examined the participants’ accounts of relationships with step-parents in order to further understand their experiences of relating to step-parents as children and adolescents, and the step-parent practices that were experienced positively or were considered problematic. We also examined the meanings of these experiences for participants in order to further understand their responses to their step-parents.

Recruitment and interviews

The 40 participants of the original LSFT Study (Cartwright, 2006) were recruited through advertisements and word-of-mouth. The majority were tertiary students. Seven young men and 33 young women participated. Attempts to recruit more young men were unsuccessful. Twenty-seven of the participants were of European descent, 11 were of Māori or Pacific Island descent, and 2 were Asian.

Eighteen of these participants had lived in a residential step-family household (for at least half the week) before the age of 16 years. The 18 participants ranged in age between 18 and 24 years. This included 3 young men and 15 young women. (The cultural background of the participants is not given in order to protect their identity.) The average age of the participants at the time of parental separation was 6 years. Ten of the participants lived in a house with a resident biological mother and step-father. Eight lived with a resident father and step-mother, and 1 participant lived at different times, in both a step-mother and step-father household. Twelve of the step-families had formed before the participants were 12 years of age. Six step-families were formed when participants were adolescent. Two of these participants lived in a step-family household for less than a year.

The interview method for the LSFT Study (Cartwright, 2006) was adapted from McAdams’ life story interviewing method (see Crosley, 2000; McAdams, 1993). Participants were asked to divide their life stories into three to five chapters and to describe each of these chapters. This method was adopted as it assists participants to structure their life stories and to talk systematically about their experiences. They were encouraged to talk about their family life, relationships, school and other significant experiences in each of the chapters. Following this, participants were also asked to talk about their futures; the four most significant life relationships; their current resources and stressors; and their views of the effects of their parents’ divorce, if any, upon themselves and their lives. The interviews were not particularly directed at step-family issues and the information regarding step-family experiences was given by participants as part of the life stories, although participants were prompted throughout the interviews to expand on descriptions of life experiences, including their experiences of living in a step-family household.

Analysis of the step-family data

Two independent thematic analyses of the data were conducted. These followed the methods of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The 18 transcribed
interviews were examined and all data pertaining to step-family experiences were extracted. This data was divided into two data sets: all positive comments (denoted by both words and tone) that were made about step-parents and step-family living; and all negative comments. This process of thematic analysis involved multiple readings of the data, followed by a systematic process of examining each segment and coding them. The codes were then examined and grouped into categories of related data or emergent themes. The themes that emerged from the two independent analyses were then examined. Issues around step-parent support, and discipline and control were the dominant themes in both analyses. Both analyses also pointed to the participants’ perceptions of the importance of the step-parent’s personality style. Before presenting the results of the thematic analysis, however, it is important to give an overview of the stories of relationships with step-parents that were told by participants.

The stories of step-parents within the life stories

As might be expected, there was considerable variation in how participants told their life stories. Some participants spoke succinctly, some talked in-depth, and others were hesitant and needed encouragement and prompting. Sometimes the stories were told in a linear fashion, and at other times, the participants shifted across time periods. On the whole, however, the style of interview encouraged participants to work systematically through their life stories, from the earliest period to current times. Participants also varied in how much they talked about their parents, their parents’ divorce, and also step-parents. Participants focused their stories more on parents than step-parents and, as the participants grew up, much of the story also focused on relationships with friends, romantic partners, school and university.

When asked, 5 of the 18 participants listed a step-parent as one of the “four most significant” people in their lives. Another participant listed a step-parent as being significant because he perceived that the step-parent had a significantly negative effect on his life. This is in contrast to 13 mothers and 6 fathers who were named as being significant. The stories of step-parents ranged from warm and supportive to harsh and rejecting. Step-parents who had been part of the participants’ lives from an early age were sometimes fully integrated into the participants’ life stories, almost as much as a parent might be. Overall, 5 participants gave very positive accounts of their relationship with their step-parents; 4 gave negative accounts, characterised by difficulty and distress; and 10 participants told stories of step-parents that included both positive memories and difficulties. For some participants, the difficulties emerged mainly in adolescence.

It is also important to note that experiences that occurred prior to repartnering seemed to impact some participants’ responses to step-parents. Some parents repartnered quickly and participants did not have the opportunity to get to know the step-parent beforehand. Three participants believed that parents had affairs that contributed to the end of their parents’ marriages. Two fathers had custody of daughters who wanted to be with their mothers. Such experiences appeared to negatively impact participants’ acceptance of step-parents. On the other hand, some non-custodial parents were seen as less interested or less capable and this, in turn, appeared to lead to a greater valuing of what the step-parent had to offer.

It is also important to note that sometimes participants were negatively affected by experiences that were not directly related to the step-parent. For example, one young woman who liked her step-father and felt supported by him, was sexually abused for a brief period of time by a member of her step-father’s family. This appeared to contribute to problems in her relationship with both her mother and step-father. Two participants had difficulties with step-siblings. One young woman, for example, felt jealous of her step-mother’s daughter, as she perceived that her step-sister was given primary importance in the family and she felt left out. Another young woman rejected her step-father and “hated” him when her mother remarried at age 15 years, because she thought it would take her mother’s time away.

Finally, it was surprising to discover that almost half of the step-parents in the sample were step-mothers. This was unexpected, as most residential step-families are step-father families. A possible explanation is that participants were mainly university students, and may have come from educated family backgrounds in which parents are more likely to share custody (Smyth, Qu, & Weston, 2004).

The following section presents the results from the thematic analysis of data related to young adults’ recollections of experiences with step-parents that were difficult or supportive. The thematic analysis provides insight into the experiences that were common among the group of participants, and allows for an examination of the step-parent practices that were experienced positively and those experienced negatively. Three broad themes emerged in the analyses of the step-family data: step-parent support, step-parent’s personality, and step-parent discipline and control.

Step-parent support

Around two-thirds of the participants talked about receiving some form of support from step-parents. Some participants recalled step-parents assisting them with practical problems or doing nice things for them, as this young woman says:

I mean, I suppose [my childhood] was really easy and it was really nice. Like you’ll ask him [step-father] to do something and he’ll go and do it.

Other step-parents provided financial support, which resulted in a range of perceived improvements, including attending a private school, having a larger house or having one’s own bedroom. One young woman went to live with her father and step-mother when she was 15 years old:

[My step-mother] was quite wealthy and she ended up buying a house that my Dad renovated, and they had it. It was a big house, and this big room had an ensuite and I ended up with that room.
Another young woman named her step-father as being one of her four significant people, even though her mother and step-father had recently separated. She reflected back on the support he had given:

My dad didn’t pay child support … so my step-dad looked after us and we weren’t even his children. And he was really good to us and stuff. And, I mean, even though they just recently separated. He’s still really good to us and he’ll kind of spoil us when he sees us, and I just think that he’s quite a good person.

A young man said his step-father, who had three older children from a previous marriage, accepted him and his siblings as his own:

He treated us as his own children. I mean, he hasn’t had more children with my mother … We never felt that we would not be like his own children.

Some participants also appeared to be given emotional support by step-parents. They described feeling accepted or cared for, and some enjoyed or appreciated being able to talk to step-parents. Perhaps the strongest example of this was a young woman who grew up with a resident step-mother from her preschool years. She said that her step-mother was not responsible for discipline, but gave her helpful support. In looking back on her life, she described the two most significant people—her father and her step-mother:

I guess my dad, because he’s always been my mentor and he’s always pushed me beyond what my teachers ever did. I wouldn’t have got to where I am by just following my teachers. And he’s quite strict in my schooling … I think I got my drive and my nature from him … [My step-mother], because she’s always been really supportive. She’s been like the balance of dad, and she’s always had deep and meaningfuls with me, and given me advice about life and that kind of thing.

It is also important to note that some participants commented on and appeared to value the positive effects that the step-parents’ support had on the wellbeing of their parents. As one young woman said:

I could always see how he treats her, you know. Like he was always really nice, he was really wonderful to her. He makes my mum really happy.

On the other hand, while step-parent support was valued, around a quarter of the participants perceived a consistent lack of support from step-parents. Some participants also recalled feeling unwanted or unwelcome by the step-parent. Once again this varied between participants who felt this sometimes or perhaps in the initial period of step-family living, and others who felt it more consistently. One young woman came to enjoy living at her father’s, but felt uncomfortable in the first year or two:

I felt unwelcome there. I was like, “This is half my house too, so I should be allowed here!” But she acted like it was all hers. [Later], I hated it because we were in competition [over father]. She would want dad to spend his money on her.

Other participants recalled not feeling like it was their home:

I felt so uncomfortable, like, going into the living room and watching TV and stuff, because even though it wasn’t their house, it was like, you know, her and dad had moved in together at the same time, it was, like, I don’t know, like everything belonged to [step-mother].

One young man also told the story of the difficulties he had in his relationship with his step-mother. He lived initially half the time with his father, but felt pushed out by his step-mother:

I mean, in this house as well there was none of Dad’s things, some of the things that I had grown up with, and things that I could identify with. It was all her stuff. I couldn’t see anything of Dad’s history. So it was very uncomfortable the entire time that I was living there. [Later], she didn’t want me there at all, and I still didn’t feel welcome and it was still her house. It had all gone off a bit nasty. I was quite sort of depressed around that age.

Finally, some participants were concerned that their parents supported the step-parents more than themselves, or that the new couples’ relationships took away from their sense of importance to their parents. One father, for example, upset his daughter by telling her that he loved his new partner more than he loved his children. She believed, in retrospect, that this had a negative effect on her:

I felt jealous that my dad loved her [step-mother] more than us and I think that made me feel insecure possibly … and then it came out with other stuff like school work.
Hence, step-parent support, either practical or emotional, was valued by participants. It is not clear if they demonstrated appreciation of this at the time; however, they did so as they told their life stories. Those who were close to their step-parents saw them as being supportive in practical and emotional ways. They felt accepted and cared for by their step-parents. Participants also appreciated the impact of step-parent support on the wellbeing of their parents. On the other hand, the absence of step-parent support or feeling unwanted was difficult, and resulted in participants feeling uncomfortable in the home. Some also felt a loss of parental support due to the presence of the step-parent.

Step-parents who demonstrated acceptance of step-children, who gave them support, and allowed the biological parent to maintain responsibility for their care and discipline, appeared to facilitate the development of positive relationships.

The step-parent’s personality

A second theme that emerged was the participants’ perceptions of the importance of the step-parent’s personality. Participants partly attributed the problems or the positive aspects of the relationship to the step-parent’s personality. Positive descriptions of step-parents’ characteristics were “supportive”, “great with kids”, “kind”, “caring”, “awesome”, “a fun guy”, “good person”, “cool”, “nice”, “light-hearted” and “easygoing about things”. As one young woman said:

Yeah, I remember that he was really funny, like, he’s a really fun guy. Yeah, I think we kind of got along really well. He got on with my brothers too.

Another young woman talked about how she shifted from living with her father and step-mother, with whom she had struggled, to living with her mother and step-father when she was a teenager. She saw this as the beginning of a better time for herself, and valued her step-father’s approach:

Mum clicked straight away that I had depression and I had to adapt with my new step-father as well, but he was awesome. I have so much respect for him. He has such a good sense of humour, and he was so light-hearted about things, and he had patience to give me the time as well, because I’d obviously been through a lot, and he just dealt with me being a little smart-arsed teenager. He didn’t get too angry and he was really good about it.

On the other hand, some participants attributed what they perceived as step-parent personality problems to difficulties in the relationship. A young man whose step-father hit him said:

I think he’s got a small man’s syndrome or something. He’s a little smaller than me, but I don’t know, he’s not very big.

Two step-mothers were described initially as “a bitch”, suggesting that the participants saw this as part of the step-mothers’ personalities early on in the relationship. One young woman, whose father had an affair, saw her step-mother as “selfish”:

The only thing we ever talked about between me and my brothers was [step-mother] and what a bitch she was … We hated her.

Despite this, she did come to like her step-mother in time. One young woman thought that difficulties with the step-father were due to him being “pretty old-fashioned”, “irrational”, “moody” and “strict”. Another young woman believed that her step-mother had to have “complete control of everything” and had “this really weird thing about food”, and always “got stressed out”. Hence, participants appeared to approve of step-parents who did not attempt to discipline them, and were experienced as easygoing and supportive. Some were regarded as good or admirable people. Participants who made critical comments about step-parents emphasised step-parents exerting unwanted control and linked this to step-parents’ personalities.

Step-parent discipline or control

Over a third of the participants recalled experiencing significant distress or anger in response to step-parents taking on disciplinary roles or attempting to exert control. They reported resentment of step-parents who attempted to create new rules or imposed their own ways of doing things. One young woman was close to her step-father and spent a lot of time with him until she reached early adolescence. Even though she expressed appreciation during the interview for his support during her life, she recalled that they began to have conflict over his attempts to set rules and discipline her as she reached her teenage years:

That’s probably when I started doing the teenager thing, especially with my step-dad, because I started turning into a teenager. So I didn’t really get on with him at all. [Later], talking on the phone too much was one of the main ones … So I think it was a big drama, like he would make a big drama at that one. He’d make a really big deal.

When asked how she would respond to her step-father, she said:

Oh, I don’t know, scream back and slam my door, and you know. Play some really loud music or something.

Another young woman recalled that she was angry with her mother for not “sticking up for” her and for allowing her step-father to discipline her by disconnecting the phone she had in her room. This culminated in the participant shifting out of her mother’s home:

I was making a real conscious effort to be good. Then my mum comes home and I’m like: “Mum, my phone’s been disconnected, do you know why this is?” And mum’s like: “Oh, you should talk to [step-father] about that”; and so completely avoiding that. And so I’m like: “[Step-father], did you disconnect my phone?” “Yep.” “Why?” “Because you were on it after 10 o’clock.” That wasn’t the rule, and I got really annoyed and I was like, I called up my dad: “Come and pick me up!” He came and picked me up and I moved into his house.

The most extreme story of control, however, was told by a young man whose step-father used physical punishment. This began on their first outing together when he was pre-adolescent. He was told to leave home at an early age. He described becoming depressed, and was upset that his mother continued to see him as the problem:

He just tells mum and he makes it so he’s not the bad guy, which really gets to me. He’s half the problem. He thinks he has to enforce something and then he’ll really have a go at you.
Three of the participants who disliked their step-parents’ discipline or control (two were living half-time with their fathers, and one full-time) expressed significant difficulty with step-mothers whom they described as dominating or controlling the household. Two of these participants liked their step-mothers initially, but relationships became conflicted as they began living together. One young woman was close to her father and spent half of the week with him. However, she stopped living with her father because of her difficulty accepting her step-mother’s control of the household:

Of course, when she first came she was lovely and we loved her, and she baked us cakes and did really nice things … [later], she became a lot more—things always had to be done her way, and a lot of the problems arose from that. Like, I never wanted to be at dad’s—we dreaded going there. We’d just stay in my room, me and my sister … It wasn’t that she was bad or anything, like she wasn’t really mean to us, but she just had her way of doing things and she couldn’t accept any other way. Dad never stood up for us until it was too late, pretty much.

Another young woman also felt let down that her father gave control to his wife, and encouraged her to accept her step-mother in a parenting role:

The hardest thing going to a new family is dealing with their values and their way of life and their upbringing, which is different from how you had it, and having to take that on. When you have a father who’s too busy to know what’s going on and basically says: “This is your new mother. This is her, and I agree with everything she says”. The third participant, a young man, also felt let down by his father. He perceived that his father allowed his step-mother to criticise him, and accepted the step-mother’s decision to cut down the time he spent with his father:

I think the worst thing now is what happened to our relationship with dad. This was the fact that he didn’t stand up for me. He never sort of said: “Well, he’s never done the washing before. He’s not used to doing this thing”. He just kind of took it, when [step-mother] said that I could only stay two days a week. Dad didn’t say: “No, I want to see him three days a week”.

On the other hand, five participants had step-parents who did not attempt to take on a disciplinary role, and they appreciated this:

She never tried to take over my mum’s role. She was always quite clear in the boundaries, that she was going to be a friend. Dad was the disciplining person and she was there as a support for him, but they never contradicted each other’s decision.

He never tried to be our dad or anything. He knew he wasn’t our dad and wouldn’t try to be!

The remainder of the participants mentioned conflict or disagreement with step-parents at some stage in the life story, but did not appear to feel as strongly about it. Hence, step-parent discipline and control impacted negatively on some of the participants and also on their relationships with parents. In this study, five participants were “kicked out” or went to live with their other parent as a result of conflict with a step-parent. These problems tended to be exacerbated during adolescence and the young people themselves sometimes talked about their contribution to the conflict with step-parents and parents. As one young woman said:

I had gotten over my complex-type thing … my difficulties living with [step-mother], and it was better.

One young woman also expressed regret about never having acknowledged this to her step-mother:

I really did treat them quite badly. I was only 15, 16, and I had angst and youth shit going on, you name it. I was quite bad to them, but I did a lot of personal growth and stuff in that time. Never really sat down and said I’m really sorry, especially to [step-mother].

Conclusions

This study examined young adults’ accounts of relationships with step-parents during childhood and adolescence. Its main limitations are the small sample size and its reliance on the perspectives of young adult step-children. The step-parents’ stories are absent. Previous studies have found that step-parents often try hard to establish relationships with reluctant, rejecting and sometimes hostile step-children (Coleman et al., 2000). However, this study does provide insight into step-children’s perspectives and the impact on them of different step-parent practices.

The results demonstrate the diversity that exists in step-parent–child relationships. The descriptions of step-parents varied from warm and supportive to controlling or rejecting. This study supports step-family therapists and researchers who have concluded that step-parent warmth and support is associated with the emotional wellbeing and adjustment for children (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Crosbie-Burnett & Giles-Sims, 1994; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Papernow, 2006; Visher & Visher, 1988). In these stories, step-parents who demonstrated acceptance of step-children, who gave them support, and allowed the biological parent to maintain responsibility for their care and discipline, appeared to facilitate the development of positive relationships.

This study also supports previous findings that attempts by step-parents to discipline step-children are met with anger
and resistance and can be associated with emotional and behavioural problems for children and adolescents (Bray, 1999; Bray & Berger 1993; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). The participants who felt most negatively about their step-parents were those who perceived that the step-parents dominated the running of the household or attempted to set rules and discipline them. Five participants changed residence during their adolescence, at least in part because of the conflict with step-parents over issues of discipline and control.

Hetherington and Kelly (2002) concluded from the 20-year follow-up of the VLSDR that one of the major determinants of the success of the step-family was the parent’s choice of a supportive partner. The young adults in this study appeared to agree with this. They praised step-parents who were perceived as “easygoing”, “supportive” and who did not attempt to discipline or control them; and struggled with step-parents who behaved in a “take-charge” manner (Ganong et al., 1999). However, it is also important to note that some “strict” step-parents were also seen to accept and support the step-child in practical or financial ways, and these step-parents were also appreciated, and sometimes cared for. The control issues, however, did appear to create ambivalence in the relationship. As some young adults mature, these control issues may become less relevant.

Another trend that emerged was the impact on participants' perceptions of parental loyalty and support of a conflicted relationship between participants and step-parents. This theme emerged in other qualitative studies that examined parent-child relationships in step-families (Cartwright, 2003, 2005; Cartwright & Seymour, 2002). In these studies, some young adults who grew up in step-families, and therapists who worked with step-families observed that children feel a loss of parental loyalty when parents are seen to “take sides” with step-parents or allow step-parents to take over control of the household. Some participants in this study felt let down by parents who supported step-parents' control. This was felt keenly by some participants, including two young men who described themselves as becoming depressed as a result of conflict with step-parents and a lack of parental support. One young woman was also very upset that her father told her he loved the step-mother more than his own children. The five participants who changed residence believed that their parents had not supported them.

Researchers and therapists often talk about the losses that children sustain through the family transitions of divorce and remarriage (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). It is important to consider that some of the participants in this study felt that the step-parent’s presence and approach meant that they were losing the security of their relationship with their parent and the comfort of the home. Some also felt that they were losing family traditions and ways of doing things. As previously argued (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002), these results suggest that parents who attempt to follow the guidelines normally given to first-marriage families (e.g., backing up the step-parent when the step-parent is in conflict with the child or allowing the step-parent to take on a disciplinary role) may unwittingly jeopardise their relationships with their children as children can interpret this as a loss of parental support or loyalty.

It is also important to note that almost half of the participants who lived with step-mothers described their fathers’ acceptance of the step-mothers’ control and management of the household. Previous studies have demonstrated that step-mothers experience greater difficulty with step-children than step-fathers do (for a review, see Nielsen, 1999). Gorrell-Barnes et al. (1998) interviewed 50 adults from the British National Child Development Study who had grown up in step-families, and concluded that adult step-children were much more judgemental of step-mothers. This may be due to the special importance given to the role of mothers and to motherhood (Nielsen, 1999). However, it can also be exacerbated when residential fathers and their spouses

Step-parents would be more successful if they took time to get to know their step-children, demonstrate acceptance of them, give them support and support the parents’ authority.
maintain traditional gender roles, with step-mothers taking over responsibility for the management of the household and the step-children (Nielsen, 1999).

In conclusion, this study supports the importance of step-parents developing positive relationships with step-children before attempting to take on any type of parenting role (e.g., Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Papernow, 2006; Visher & Visher, 1996). Papernow talked about the lack of a “middle ground” in the step-parent–child relationship in the early years of step-family living. It seems likely that step-parents would be more successful if they took time to get to know their step-children, demonstrate acceptance of them, give them support and support the parents’ authority. This study also suggests the challenges that “take-control” step-parents have ahead of them. It may be desirable to focus particular clinical and research attention on assisting step-parents with an authoritarian style to adapt and cope with the demands of step-parenting.

References


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