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## **Chapter One: Literature Review**

### **Brief overview of study**

This study investigates young adult stepchildren's experiences of relationships with stepmothers. The stepparent-stepchild relationship has a significant impact on stepfamily functioning and on outcomes for stepchildren (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). It is important, therefore, to understand the impact of stepfamily functioning, including stepfamily relationships from the perspective of children so that adverse experiences can be avoided or managed effectively, and positive experiences incorporated into the new stepfamily (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Freisthler, Svare, & Harrison-Jay, 2003).

Coleman, Ganong and Fine (2000) state in their review of the research and theory on remarriages and stepfamilies published in the 1990s, that historically research on stepmother families has been limited, due to custody being awarded to women in most cases, which has led to only a small number of residential stepmothers. Although many of the issues highlighted by stepfather family research applies to stepmother families, it is becoming increasingly important to understand the unique challenges of stepmother families given the increasing number of men who are seeking full or part-time custody and the conclusion of most existing stepfamily research that the stepmother role is more problematic and stressful than that of a stepfather (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Johnson et al., 2008).

The first chapter will give an overview of the literature that provides the background to this study and Chapter Two will review the methodology used in this research. The

results from qualitative analysis of the interviews with young adult stepchildren about the positive experiences of stepmother relationships are presented in Chapter Three and Chapter Four presents the results from the analysis of difficult experiences of stepmother-stepchild relationships. Chapter Five reviews stepchildren's perceptions of how relationships with stepmothers change over time and the different developmental trajectories identified across participants. Chapter Six provides a review of the overall findings, their contribution to stepfamily research and theory, clinical findings and implications for future clinical practice and research.

### **Definition of terms**

In this study, a stepfamily is defined as two adults living together with at least one child from a previous union. Families consisting of two parents and their biological children will be referred to as first-marriage families (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995). The term parent/s refers to the biological parent/s of stepchildren and non-residential parent refers to the biological parent not residing with the child. A first-marriage couple refers to the stepchildren's parents and stepfamily couple to the stepfamily couple. Single-parent household refers to a household where only one biological parent is present. Mutual child refers to the biological child of the stepfamily couple.

The following literature review provides the background to this study. It examines the importance of studying stepparent-stepchild relationships given the increased number of stepfamilies and the identification by research of the increased risk of negative outcomes for children in stepfamilies compared to children in first-marriage families. Research on stepfamily functioning will also be examined including the unique issues that confront stepfamilies during their formation. Following this the stepparent role

will be examined along with issues particular to the stepmother role. In the later part of the chapter the empirical literature that is informative on stepchildren's experience of living in a stepfamily will be reviewed along with the stepparent-stepchild relationship. Finally, children's experiences of the stepmother relationship will be reviewed. This research will contribute to the understanding of stepmother-stepchild relationships within stepfamilies and hence it will contribute to the understanding of functioning within stepmother families.

## **Why study stepfamilies?**

### **The number of stepfamily households**

Stepfamily households increased in number over the last 30 years because of changes in family structures within Western society including an increase in divorce, non-marital childbearing, cohabitation and remarriage (Coleman et al., 2000; Wise, 2003). It is difficult to obtain accurate statistics on the number of stepfamilies due to several methodological problems including the lack of a standardised definition of a stepfamily, the increasing number of couples who cohabit rather than remarry, stepchildren who live across two households, and in some countries stepfamily statistics are not collected (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). Due to these difficulties, statistical data on stepfamilies needs to be considered with caution and considered as an estimate only.

In the United States (U.S.), the U.S. Bureau of the Census (2006) reported that, approximately 9% of married-couple households and 11.5% of cohabiting couples have stepchildren. Life time prevalence data from the U.S. suggests approximately 40% of mothers and 17% of children under 18 years of age will spend at least part of their

lifetime in a stepfamily (Bumpass et al., 1995; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2006). The third wave of The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey in 2003, concluded that 11% of all couple-families with children under 18 years were residential stepfamilies indicating a 50% increase over ten years from 7% in 1996 (Qu & Weston, 2005).

In New Zealand (N.Z.), stepfamily statistics are not collected in the census. However, analysis of N.Z. 'Marriages, Civil Unions and Divorce' statistics can give us an estimate of the number of children entering into stepfamilies per year (Statistics NZ, 2006). Divorce and remarriage statistics have remained relatively stable between 2001 and 2006 (Statistics NZ, 2006). Just under half of all dissolved marriages involved people with children under 17 years old (Statistics NZ, 2006). Of these divorces, there was an average of 1.8 children per divorced couple and less than half (approximately 45%) of these children were under 10 years of age. Over one third of legal marriages (7,462 marriages) involved at least one person for whom this was a remarriage (Statistics NZ, 2006). Children living with divorced parents who are cohabiting in a relationship other than marriage or civil union are not accounted for in the above statistics.

Estimates of the number of N.Z. children living in stepfamily households can also be derived from the 1995 N.Z. Women, Family Education and Employment Survey (NZWFEE), which interviewed 3,017 women aged from 20 to 59 years (Dharmalingam, Pool, Sceats, & Mackay, 2004). Dharmalingam et al. (2004) found that one quarter of women had spent some time living in a stepfamily with children from a previous union of one or both partners. The Christchurch Health and Development Study (Nicholson, Fergusson, & Horwood, 1999), a longitudinal study of children in N.Z., estimated that

approximately 18% of the 1265 cohort lived in a stepfamily for some period of between the ages of six and 16 years.

Statistics on stepmother families are hampered by the same limitations as stepfamily statistics (Coleman, Troilo, & Jamison, 2008). For example, in a study of over one thousand families in the U.S., Maccoby, Mnookin, Depner and Peters (1992) found that 20% of stepchildren change residency before they turn 18. In the U.S. women are awarded custody of children in 85 to 95% of divorces, which results in a significantly larger number of residential stepfather than stepmother families, although the incidence is increasing (Johnson et al., 2008; Schmeekle, 2007). In Australia for example, estimates suggest that 12% of stepfamilies are stepmother households and another four percent are “blended” or complex family households (families where both adults have children from a previous union living with them) (Qu & Weston, 2005). In N.Z., statistics on sole-parent families indicate that only a minority of children in sole-parent families live with their father (16.6 % in 2006, 16.5% in 2001 and 15.2% in 1996) (Ministry of Social Development, 2007). In conclusion, empirical research suggests that the number of stepfamilies has increased in the last 30 years and the incidence of stepmother families is also increasing.

### **Outcomes for children in stepfamilies**

The adjustment of children living in stepfamilies has been well-researched, outcomes vary and some children show resiliency across these transitions, whereas others experience adjustment difficulties (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). However, most research reports that children in stepfamilies when compared to children from first-marriage families score lower on several psychosocial outcome measures (Brown, 2006; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hetherington, 2005). Hetherington and associates have conducted



two longitudinal studies investigating children's adjustment to divorce and remarriage - the Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage (Hetherington, 1993, 2003a), and the Hetherington and Clingempeel Study of Divorce (Hetherington, 2003b). They found that preadolescent boys and girls in divorced and stepfamilies displayed less social and academic competence compared to children in first-marriage families in the first one to three years. Bray and Berger (1993) in the Developmental Issues in Stepfamilies Research Project, Lee et al. (1994) in the American National Education Longitudinal Study also found that children in stepfamilies had more behaviour problems and lower social competency compared to children in first-marriage families. Researchers in the U.K. and the U.S. have concluded that children in stepfamilies show an increased risk of academic and behavioural problems (Amato & Keith, 1991; Ganong & Coleman, 1993), psychological problems including depression and low self-esteem (Amato & Keith, 1991), delinquency and substance abuse (Ganong & Coleman, 1993; Hetherington, 2005), compared with children in first-marriage families. Children in stepfamilies, on average, adopt adult roles and leave home earlier (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001), drop out of school and experience increased unemployment levels (Hetherington, 2003b), and have children and form intimate relationships earlier than children in first-marriage families (Hetherington, 2003b; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Research from the U.S. has also shown stepfamilies have a higher utilisation of mental health services (Zill, 1994). In N.Z., data from the Christchurch Health and Development Study identified problems with delinquency, nicotine dependence, substance abuse, poor academic achievement and suicidality in stepchildren (Nicholson et al., 1999). However, risks reduced substantially when psychosocial

outcomes were adjusted for a number of confounding variables (Nicholson et al., 1999).

Outcome studies also suggest that children in single-father and father-stepmother families are at increased risk of negative outcomes compared to children in first-marriage families and stepfather families (Hoffmann & Johnson, 1998; Lee et al., 1994). Bernstein (1994) and Lee (1994) found that the circumstances that surround fathers being given custody of children often indicates more disruption for children.

It is important to acknowledge that the increased risk of negative outcomes is statistically significant, although the effect sizes are relatively small (Amato, 1994; Coleman et al., 2000) and most children fare adequately or well in stepfamilies (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hetherington, 2005). It is also important to note that most of the adjustment difficulties in stepfamilies occurs within the first three years and if stepfamilies stay together difficulties are usually resolved after five to seven years (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Papernow, 2008). It is also unclear how much of the differences in outcomes for stepchildren are actually due to experiences and processes that existed prior to the stepfamily formation and are a result of factors present in the first-marriage family and subsequent separation and time spent in a one-parent family (Amato, 2000; Anderson, Greene, Hetherington, & Clingempeel, 1999; Sweeney, 2010). Furthermore, well-functioning stepfamilies can serve to reduce the risks of poor child outcomes associated with divorce (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Hetherington, 2005; Pryor, 2005).

## **Stepfamily characteristics and functioning**

When dealing with stepfamilies, one of the most important issues to consider is that they function differently, in some areas, compared to first-marriage families. In light of this, several reviewers of stepfamily research have been guided by a family systems perspective that places an emphasis on structural differences in stepfamilies compared to first-marriage families (Bray, 1995; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Golish, 2003; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Pasley & Lee, 2010). A family systems perspective also puts emphasis on the relationships between the different subsystems within the family and the impact of this on family functioning (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Researchers conclude that many of the stresses inherent in stepfamily living are due to structural differences including the functioning of the stepfamily couple and parent-child subsystems (Ganong & Coleman, 2004), the misapplication of first-marriage norms and expectations (Coleman et al., 2000; Whiteside, 2006), and the lack of an adequate framework to guide remarried couples (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). These differences in stepfamily structure and functioning are examined below.

Stepfamily members have already gone through several transitions before entering the stepfamily including divorce and time spent in a single-parent household. These transitions often involve significant loss including separation, change in residence and reduced contact among some family members. Often a strong bond forms between a parent and child during the single-parent phase, with some children taking on the adult roles of confidante and caretaking of younger children (Papernow, 2008).

### **Stepfamily couple subsystem**

Stepfamily members often have unrealistic expectations about their new family based on first-marriage family values and experiences (Coleman et al., 2000; Whiteside,

2006). Bray and Berger (1993) concluded that a common expectation is that the new stepfamily will function like a first-marriage family, that stepfamily relations will be good with little effort, and that stepparents and stepchildren will feel instantly connected to each other. Visher, Visher and Pasley (2003) also suggest that many stepparents enter stepfamily life with unrealistic expectations and trying to attain these expectations may lead to stress, disappointment and hurt if they are not met.

Research suggests that prior to entering into a stepfamily situation, few couples discuss potential difficulties and issues such as parenting and stepparenting roles (Cartwright, 2010; Ganong & Coleman, 1994b; Robertson, 2008). Stepparents find themselves with instant families, and couples must develop a cohesive couple unit while maintaining parent-child relationships, developing stepparent-stepchild ties, and co-parenting with the ex-spouse (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Kelly & Halford, 1993; Pasley & Lee, 2010). In stepfamilies, the parent-child bond is formed prior to the marital or adult couple bond and when a strong bond has formed between a parent and child during the single-parent phase it can be more difficult for the “outsider” stepparent to be included and they can feel jealous and isolated (Howden, 2007; Papernow, 2006).

Forming a parenting alliance that is adaptive and that stepchildren will adjust to and accept can be a difficult task for stepfamily couples. Unlike first-marriage families where both members of the couple are parents, in stepfamilies one person in the stepfamily couple is not a parent. Research on adolescent adjustment in first-marriage families suggests that authoritative parenting (high warmth and high, but flexible control) is positively related to adolescent well-being (Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1999).

However, in stepfamilies this is not necessarily so for the stepparent. The role of the stepparent in disciplining children and the amount of support and warmth they display is often an area of contention between couples resulting in difficulties in forming an adaptive parenting alliance (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). (The issue of the most adaptive parenting style for stepparents to adopt according to research is discussed further under stepparent role).

### **Parent-child subsystem**

Parent-child relationships come under considerable stress following repartnering or remarriage, especially in the early stages and during adolescence (Cartwright, 2008; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). The transition into remarriage often leaves the parent with less time and energy and they can feel caught between the needs of their children and their new partner (Ahrons & Tanner, 2003; Cartwright, 2003). Parents may fail to communicate effectively about upcoming changes with children and fail to take in to consideration children's developmental stage and individual needs (Cartwright, 2003).

Children within stepfamilies have experienced major losses from negotiating several family transitions, including separation, divorce, single-parenthood, cohabitation and remarriage (Bielenberg, 1991; Brady & Ambler, 1982). Remarriage may involve moving to a new residence with further loss including losing friends and local support (Coleman et al., 2000). Adults usually perceive the remarriage as a gain and something they have chosen, which provides them with companionship and support (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Children, on the other hand, may have mixed feelings and may perceive remarriage as precipitating further loss, loss of the special parent-child bond

and their role beside the single parent, and the end of their parents relationship (Coleman & Ganong, 1997; Freisthler et al., 2003; Visher & Visher, 1988).

### **Stepfamily stages**

Examination of clinical and research literature suggests that stepfamily development may occur in stages (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Papernow, 1993; Whiteside, 2006). The first stage (lasting at least two years) is often characterised by the stepfamily couple trying to create a new family with the expectation that the stepfamily will quickly become a close and loving family unit (Bray, 2001; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). The second stage is characterised by a growing acknowledgement by stepfamily members that their expectations are not being met and individuals and relationships within the stepfamily are not functioning as previously expected (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Papernow, 1993). If stepfamilies successfully work through these second-stage issues, they begin to consolidate their relationships and develop a stable sense of family in the third stage (Papernow, 1993; Whiteside, 2006). Researchers suggests that in general it may take between two to seven years for stepfamilies to adjust depending on the conditions under which they were formed (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Papernow, 2008), however many stepfamilies do not reach the final stage and end in separation (Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1997).

Within stepfamilies the development stage of the stepfamily unit and the life-cycle stage of individual member's may also be incongruent. For example, an adolescent striving for independence and some distance from the stepfamily may conflict with the new stepfamilies desire to create cohesion (Bray, 2001; Crosbie-Burnett, 1989; Whiteside, 2006).

In conclusion, stepfamily functioning differs in some important ways from first-marriage families. Stepfamily members have gone through many changes and transitions before entering the stepfamily some of which can be stressful and involve significant loss and disruption. The stepfamily couple faces the challenge of developing their own relationship while embedded in the multiple relationships of a stepfamily. Parents may have less time with children and be torn between their partner's needs and those of their children. Research suggests that many stepfamily couples and stepfamilies fail to discuss the implications of moving into stepfamily living, and may go into the stepfamily with unrealistic expectations about how quickly the stepfamily will become a cohesive unit.

### **Stepparent role**

This section examines the literature in regard to the stepparent role. Research related specifically to the stepmother role will be discussed in a later section. Many of the difficulties and issues facing members of stepfamilies revolve around the role of the stepparent (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989). Cherlin (1978) proposed that the absence of societal norms for stepfamilies regarding roles, along with the lack of institutionalised social support, contributes to greater stress for stepfamilies. Subsequently researchers have confirmed that role expectations for stepparents are less clear than expectations for parents (Booth & Edwards, 1992; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994). Fine, Coleman, and Ganong (1999) used surveys, interviews and behavioural observations of 40 stepfamily members to investigate the content, clarity, and perception of the stepparent role and found that stepfamily members often have differing perceptions of the stepparent role. This lack of clarity of the stepparent role was also found in the British U.K. New Stepfamilies Study in which 111 stepfamilies, the stepfather, mother and stepchildren

were interviewed about the quality of stepfamily relationships and stepfamily functioning (Robertson, 2008). Robertson found that there was little discussion about the stepfather's role in parenting prior to cohabitation and there was discrepancy between stepfamily members about the most appropriate role. The lack of discussion by stepfamily couples of the stepparent role and approach to parenting prior to cohabitation was also found by Marsiglio (2004) and Whiteside (2006).

In general, adults in a stepfamily are more likely to define their roles on those of first-marriage norms rather than adapt to the specifics of the stepfamily situation (Fine et al., 1999). Parents tend to expect stepparents to support them in a shared parenting role, which may involve supporting them in disciplining stepchildren (Fine et al., 1999). Stepparents often expect and want to take on an active parental role including disciplining stepchildren and having input in establishing limits and routines in the stepfamily (Fine et al., 1999; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Howden, 2007). Most stepchildren, on the other hand, expect stepparents to take on a role similar to that of a friend or babysitter, being supportive and warm but leaving the disciplining to the parent (Fine et al., 1999). In general, stepparents want to have a more active role in parenting including disciplining stepchildren and monitoring behaviour, while stepchildren expect them to leave control in the hands of the parent (Fine et al., 1999).

### **Parenting style – control and support**

The ambiguity of the stepparent role can lead many stepparents to feel uncertain about their interactions with stepchildren, how to form a functional parenting alliance including the approach to disciplining children, and the appropriate level of warmth and support (Hetherington, Arnett, & Hollier, 1988; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Research on adolescent adjustment in first-marriage families suggests that



authoritative parenting (high warmth and high, but flexible control) is positively related to adolescent well-being (Fine & Kurdek, 1992; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). However, Hetherington and Jodl (1994) found that a stepfather's adoption of an authoritative parenting style during the initial stages of stepfamily formation often triggers resistance from children and leads to stepfamily adjustment difficulties. Stepparents may then become discouraged when their attempts to parent are rejected and may withdraw from the relationship with the stepchild (Anderson et al., 1999; Papernow, 2006). Further, stepparents who try to take too much control in the stepfamily may be viewed as rigid, strict and domineering (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Nielsen, 1999; Schmeeckle, 2007)

Although stepchildren in general do not approve of stepparent control, they appear to benefit and appreciate stepparent warmth and support (Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004; Crosbie-Burnett & Giles-Sims, 1994). Crosbie-Burnett and Giles-Sims (1994) study on stepparent styles and adolescent adjustment concluded that a supportive style (high support and low control) was associated with the highest levels of adolescent adjustment. They also found that stepparent support as opposed to stepparent control was the more important determinant of adolescent adjustment. Similarly, Ganong, Coleman, Fine and Martin (1999), in a study of 17 stepfamilies utilising interview data, concluded that relationship quality and satisfaction with stepchildren was high when stepparents attempted to engage in affinity seeking early in the relationship with stepchildren and maintained this throughout. However, research on stepfathers' actual behaviour towards stepchildren shows that they more readily engage in control-related behaviours, and show less warmth than parents (Fine et al., 1999; Robertson, 2008).

In conclusion, empirical findings suggest that it works best if discipline remains in the hands of the parent with the stepparent supporting the parent in an authoritative role (Cartwright, 2005; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Research suggests stepparents are better if they focus more on developing a warm, supportive and involved relationship with stepchildren (Crosbie-Burnett & Giles-Sims, 1994; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Visher & Visher, 1988). Over time, and once a close relationship has developed, stepchildren may accept an authoritative parenting style from stepparents (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Schrodt, 2006).

### **Stepmother role**

The following section examines the empirical research on the stepmother role. First, research that compares the stepmother role with that of stepfather's will be reviewed. The qualitative studies that investigated the types of roles stepmother's report taking in stepfamilies will be discussed. Finally, research that examines the possible causes of increased stepmother stress including role ambiguity and gender issues are discussed.

#### **Stepmother role compared to stepfather role**

There appear to be more difficulties with the stepmother role than the stepfather role. Evidence suggests that on the whole stepfather-stepchild relationships are more positive and less stressful than stepmother-stepchild relationships (Ahrons & Tanner, 2003; Fine & Kurdek, 1992; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002) and stepmothers experience less satisfaction in their relationships with stepchildren and see the relationship as more dysfunctional and conflictual (Hart, 2009; Pruett, Calsyn, & Jensen, 1993; Sauer & Fine, 1988). Coleman and Ganong (1997) reported that some stepmothers were so unhappy with their family situation that they would strongly advise women against marrying men with children and report the stepmother role is their hardest task ever.

**Key roles adopted by stepmothers**

Several key roles adopted by stepmothers have been identified by researchers using qualitative interviews e.g., Bradley (2006), Church (1999), Erera-Weatherley (1996), Levin (1997), Weaver and Coleman (2005) and Orchard & Solberg, (1999). Church (1999) interviewed 104 stepmothers, 70% of whom were residential stepmothers, about the role they chose to take in the stepfamily and who they considered as part of the stepfamily. In Church's (1999) study, some stepmothers talked about taking on the primary care of stepchildren and doing the majority of household tasks. These stepmothers appeared to be trying to recreate a family based on the nuclear family model, adopting the role of a replacement mother (Church, 1999). Levin (1997) interviewed 63 stepfamily members about the role stepmothers and stepfathers took in the stepfamily and who they considered part of the stepfamily. Some of the stepfamilies members she interviewed also referred to stepmothers who were considered to play the role of replacement mother.

Another role identified by Erera-Weatherley (1996) who interviewed 32 stepfamily couples about the role they adopted within the stepfamily, was that of the detached or uncertain stepparent. These stepmothers may be unsure how to develop their relationship with stepchildren; when to step in and when to stand back (Erera-Weatherley, 1996) or perhaps they have withdrawn from the stepmother-stepchild relationship after early experiences of rejection (Coleman & Ganong, 1997). Other stepmothers interviewed by Church (1999) and Bradley (2006) focussed on the couple relationship and only over time did they begin to develop relationships with stepchildren; fathers in these stepfamilies remained the primary caregivers.

Church (1999) also identified some stepmothers who focussed on creating a new family with their stepchildren and spouse, and adopted the role of another supportive adult or friend with stepchildren. All of the non-residential stepmothers in Weaver and Coleman's (2005) study defined their role as a "mothering role, but not mother". They provided practical and emotional support but were careful not to take over the role of the mother. Coleman et al. (2008), Weaver and Coleman (2005) and Schmeckle (2007) also discuss the role stepmothers play in maintaining relationships within and across stepfamilies, facilitating relationships between fathers and their children, between their partner and his ex-spouse, and also keeping mothers informed about issues pertaining to their children.

Levin (1997) also described stepfamilies in which stepparents try out different types of behaviour and roles in order to find the best suited to them. Coleman et al. (2008) concludes that the role of many stepmothers changes over time and suggested that flexibility in role development in response to individual stepfamily characteristics can be beneficial to stepfamily functioning and stepmother-stepchild relationships. Levin (1997) found that the mental health of stepmothers is better if they do not try to adopt a traditional parental role.

Several researchers have investigated the possible causes of increased stepmother stress and dissatisfaction compared to that of stepfathers (Bradley, 2006; Coleman & Ganong, 1997; Johnson et al., 2008). Issues identified include increased lack of role clarity, impact of gender, stepmother personality and the impact of mothers.

**Lack of role clarity**

Several researchers identified a lack of role clarity as a significant cause of stepmother stress (Bradley, 2006; Coleman & Ganong, 1997; Johnson et al., 2008; Morrison & Thompson-Guppy, 1985). It is suggested that the smaller number of residential stepmother families exacerbates role ambiguity for stepmothers meaning stepmothers may lack clear role guidelines and receive less social support for their position in the family compared to stepfathers (Clingempeel, Brand, & Levoli, 1984; Nadler, 1983; Orchard & Solberg, 1999). Also, in many cases, children remain in contact with their mother, which can contribute to the stepmother role being less clear than that of stepfathers, given the primacy of the mother role (Bradley, 2006; Coleman & Ganong, 1997; Johnson et al., 2008).

Issues related to gender may also impact this role clarity (Weaver & Coleman, 2005). Several issues related to gender have been identified by stepfamily researchers including pressure on the stepmother to conform to the culturally dominant view of the mother as the primary caregiver; mothering being considered central to the identity of women; the attention women place on relationships; the stereotype of the cruel and wicked stepmother; and children's fathers who are working full-time may spend more time in the stepmother's care. Researchers suggest that although both parents and stepparents generally agree that stepparents should be less involved with parenting, women still feel under pressure to be involved and often adopt the role of parent and mother because of these influences and also fathers' expectations (Johnson et al., 2008; Levin, 1997; Salwen, 1990; Schmeekle, 2007).

Several researchers suggest that society still views women as having the primary responsibility in families for meeting the physical and emotional needs of children, and

for maintaining the emotional well-being of the family (Jones, 2004; Levin, 1997; Morrison & Thompson-Guppy, 1985). Some suggest that these expectations create increased stress for stepmothers compared to stepfathers because there is a conflict for women between the gender role and the role of stepparent (Coleman et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 2008; Jones, 2004; Levin, 1997). On the one hand, the stepmother role prescribes maintaining distance, while on the other the gender role of women is to be a mother and play a pivotal role in family life (Coleman et al., 2008; Levin, 1997; Orchard & Solberg, 1999).

Levin (1997) concluded that for stepfathers, the distant stepparent role is more congruent with the traditional role of men and fathers within a family. Traditionally men's primary role is that of the breadwinner, and they tend to have less involvement in the day to day running of the house and monitoring of children's behaviour, and therefore there may be less role discrepancy for stepfathers. Sauer and Fine (1988) compared the perception of 47 young adult stepchildren (31 from stepfather families, 16 from stepmother families) with the perception of 130 young adults from first-marriage families of parent-child relationships. They found that both residential and non-residential stepmothers played a central role in the care of children – especially when fathers were working full-time. Stepfathers, on the other hand, were more likely to contribute financially and give practical support (Sauer & Fine, 1988).

Researchers also suggest that the view of the mother or the “myth of motherhood” within our society increases stress on stepmothers (Coleman et al., 2008; Crohn, 2010). The “myth of motherhood” encompasses the view that the mothering role is central to the identity and fulfilment of women; the expectation that women will sacrifice their

own needs to care for their children; and that the love between mother and child is the most perfect and intense love there is (Crohn, 2010; Ganong & Coleman, 1995b; Nielsen, 1999). Researchers suggest that the view of mother as the “ultimate nurturer” places high expectations on stepmothers, and they are caught between these expectations and the reality that they will never be their stepchildren’s mother (Bradley, 2006; Nielsen, 1999). Nielsen (1999) reviewed the psychological and sociological literature examining the factors that contributed to stepmother stress and concluded that the view of mother as the ultimate nurturer promotes the unrealistic expectation that stepmothers will instantly feel motherly towards stepchildren and a bond between them and their stepchild will naturally develop. Bradley interviewed 12 stepmothers about their roles and found that most expressed a desire to be close to stepchildren, and had some feelings of empathy and love towards them (Bradley, 2006). She also found however, that, stepchildren often take time to accept stepmothers, and stepmothers often do not feel instant love for stepchildren (Bradley, 2006). Orchard and Solberg (1999) surveyed 265 stepmothers’ perceptions and expectations of their role as a stepmother and found that when stepmothers initial expectations of being close with stepchildren are unfulfilled, stepmothers may become stressed and frustrated, begin to withdraw from stepchildren and feel disappointed with the reality of stepfamily life. Many stepmothers also experience apprehension, ambivalence, anxiety and feelings of self-doubt about this relationship (Ambert, 1986; Bradley, 2006; Morrison & Thompson-Guppy, 1985). In reality this myth of “instant love” is an unrealistic expectation and can lead to feelings of guilt, disappointment and blame (Visher & Visher, 1988; Whiting, Smith, Barnett, & Grafsky, 2007).

Finally, the common societal stereotype of the cruel and wicked stepmother can also impact negatively on stepmother-stepchild relationships (Claxton-Oldfield & Butler, 1998; Levin, 1997; Nielsen, 1999). In a remarriage situation stepfamily members, particularly children, may be filled with fears and anxieties based on these common myths (Bray, 1995; Nielsen, 1999; Strawn & Strawn Knox, 2007). Levin (1997) suggests that stereotypes influence how individuals behave and how people respond to them.

Stepmother personality, their own family history and their goals and desires can also interact with gender and influence adjustment to the role and their experience as a stepmother (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Crosbie-Burnett, 1984; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Coleman and Ganong (1997) found that stepmothers with high control needs suffered the most, having more unrealistic expectations of stepchildren and stepfamily life. Stepmothers without children may want to be more involved with stepchildren and therefore suffer greater disappointment when reality does not mirror these “first-marriage” family expectations (Brand, Clingempeel, & Bowen-Woodward, 1988; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Furthermore, stepmothers without children may lack the child-rearing skills and knowledge of behavioural and developmental needs of children, which may impact on their ability to develop a good relationship with stepchildren (Perez & Torrens, 2009). Fine (1995a) suggests that when stepmothers do have children from a previous marriage this may increase their role ambiguity as they must play the role of both mother and stepparent. Johnson et al. (2008), in a study of 177 stepmothers who completed an online questionnaire about stress and marital satisfaction found that stepmothers with children of their own take on a higher level of responsibility for running the household, including monitoring chores than stepmothers without children. Hence gender norms may influence the



role of stepmothers within the stepfamily, increasing role ambiguity which can lead to increased stress and difficulties forming stepmother-stepchild relationships.

### **The impact of mothers on stepmother-stepchild relationships**

Stepmothers must build the relationship with stepchildren in the context of the primacy of the mother. Non-resident mothers are more likely to spend more time with children, maintain more interest and support, and are more likely to engage in a monitoring role with children than fathers (Hetherington & Henderson, 1997; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001; Stewart, 1999). Furthermore, in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (U.S.) (using data from 294 adolescents who live in stepmother families), King (2007) found that stepchildren's closeness to the mother was more influential on childhood outcomes than the relationship of children to the stepmother and mothers have a stronger influence on child outcomes than fathers (King, 2007). Some studies suggest that stepmother families with frequent visits to the mother are more stressful, and mother interference may be a precipitating factor in stepmothers seeking help (King, 2007; Morrison & Thompson-Guppy, 1985). Clinicians, Visher and Visher (1988), concluded that the stepparent role may be more ambiguous when the parent is highly involved with the child, particularly the mother. Non-residential stepmothers in Weaver and Coleman's (2005) study reported that stepchildren's mothers had a significant effect on the role they played in the stepfamily. On the other hand, in terms of developing a relationship with both the mother and stepmother, King (2007) found that stepchildren's contact with their mother does not interfere with them establishing close ties to the stepmother, however if the mother is absent then stepchildren tend to be closer to the stepmother.

In conclusion, role ambiguity in stepmother families is even more pronounced than in stepfather families due to the relatively small number of stepmother families, the possible increased discrepancy (relative to stepfathers) between the gender role of women and the stepparent role, and the increased involvement of mothers in stepfamilies, relative to fathers.

### **Stepchildren's experiences of stepfamilies**

Previous research has tended to investigate the perspectives and experiences of adults in stepfamilies (Braithwaite, Toller, Daas, Durham, & Jones, 2008; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). However, it is important to understand the impact of stepfamily processes and relationships within the stepfamily from the perspective of children so that adverse experiences can be avoided or managed effectively, and positive experiences incorporated into the new stepfamily (Coleman et al., 2000; Freisthler et al., 2003; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). The following section will review the research on stepchildren's experience of living in a stepfamily including relationships with parents and stepparents.

#### **Relationship with parents**

A number of studies have focussed on gaining the perspectives of young adult stepchildren and their relationship with parents (Ahrons & Tanner, 2003; Braithwaite et al., 2008; Cartwright & Seymour, 2002). After separation, the family spends time as a single parent-household. During this phase family boundaries often become more flexible with children taking on adult roles that were previously the responsibility of the other parent, including acting as a confidante to the parent, disciplining younger children, and taking on household chores (Brand & Clingempeel, 1987). Hetherington

(2003b) notes that adopting this parenting role can be particularly distressing for children if the parent is not coping well with the separation.

Cartwright and Seymour (2002), conducted group interviews with 28 (21 female and 7 male) young adults about the effect of stepfamily living on their relationship with parents including some of the helpful and unhelpful responses made by parents. Children said that some parents did not prepare them for the changes that followed repartnering (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002). On the other hand, some stepchildren expressed being uncomfortable when adults included them in conversations that were inappropriate for their level of maturity. This included asking them to choose where to live, talking negatively about the other parent, discussing parental conflicts and finances, and adult dating or marital problems (Braithwaite et al., 2008; Cartwright & Seymour, 2002; Golish, 2003). Braithwaite et al. (2008) ran focus groups (eight groups with a total of 28 participants - 18 female and 10 male) to examine adult stepchildren's experience of being "caught in the middle" when living between two households. In this study stepchildren expressed the importance of parents communicating effectively and not using children as go-betweens, putting down the other parent or pressuring them to choose sides. This was also talked about by young adults in a study by Ahrons and Tanner (2003) who interviewed 173 (84 female and 89 male) young adults about the impact of divorce on their relationship with their father 20 years on, including discussion on the effects of the fathers' remarriage. Stepchildren also said it was important that parents took the time to talk with them about significant events or changes that may affect them, including a significant new relationship or plans to move (Braithwaite et al., 2008; Cartwright & Seymour, 2002).

Stepchildren identified the experience of loss as a significant part of growing up in a stepfamily; losses included: the loss of childhood; their home, school and friends; loss of family members and a sense of belonging; and, for some, the loss of a sense of belonging to any family (Freisthler et al., 2003). Some stepchildren also reported experiencing a loss of attention or loyalty from their parent as they focussed on the new couple relationship (Baxter et al., 2004; Cartwright, 2008).

### **Stepchildren's experiences of stepparent-stepchild relationships**

Most researchers conclude that it is difficult establishing the stepparent-stepchild relationship, especially in the early stages of stepfamily formation, but that the quality of this relationship is central to the well-being of the stepfamily and stepchildren (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Crosbie-Burnett, 1984; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). It is common, especially in the early stages, for children to be cautious, respond in ways that create distance and at times be openly hostile towards the stepparent (Coleman et al., 2000; Nielsen, 1999). However, some studies have also found that children may express openness to the remarriage, and when they see the stepparent wanting to spend time with them and build a relationship with them they may respond in kind (Ganong et al., 1999; Hogan, Halpenny, & Greene, 2003). Many of the disagreements within stepfamilies centre on issues related to stepchildren, such as discipline, rules, and the distribution of resources (Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1994), problematic relationships between stepchildren and stepparents (Wilkes & Fromme, 2002), and disputes between the adult partners, which can result from arguments between stepparents and stepchildren (Coleman et al., 2000). Researchers conclude that stepparent-stepchild relationships are likely to be more conflicted, distant and negative than those in first-marriage families (Bray, 1995; Hetherington &

Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Research also suggests the stepparent-stepchild relationship impacts on marital quality to a greater degree than parent-child relationships (Brown & Booth, 1996; Fine, 1995) and stepparent-stepchild relationships have a greater impact on overall stepfamily functioning than quality of the marital relationship (Crosbie-Burnett, 1984; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

The following section will discuss experiences identified by research that impact significantly on the stepparent-stepchild relationship including, loyalty binds, parenting style adopted by stepparents, stepparents personality and influences of stepchildren.

### **Loyalty binds**

Golish (2003) used a systems perspective to study the communication strengths of stepfamilies, by comparing the communication strategies of "strong" stepfamilies with those of stepfamilies having difficulty adjusting. She concluded that "feeling caught in the middle" between two adults is a common and stressful experience for children in stepfamilies. Stepparent-stepchild relationships can be complicated by children experiencing divided loyalties or loyalty binds. Children may experience conflicting loyalties between separated parents, the stepparent and the non-residential parent, the stepparent and the residential parent and between the stepparent and mutual children (Bielenberg, 1991; Coleman et al., 2000). Loyalty issues in these relationships are discussed below.

### ***Separated parents***

Children can experience divided loyalties between separated parents (Golish, 2003; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Researchers and clinicians suggest that witnessing parental conflict post-separation can have a significant negative impact on child-wellbeing (Ahrons & Tanner, 2003; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Papernow, 2006). Interparental

conflict may also come to involve the stepparent, and conflict between households and adults can have a negative impact on relationships within stepfamilies (Ahrns & Tanner, 2003; Cartwright & Seymour, 2002; Schrodt, 2006). Children expressed the importance of adults supporting them to continue to have a relationship with both parents (Braithwaite et al., 2008). Loss of contact with a parent post-divorce can affect child wellbeing (Ahrns & Tanner, 2003).

### ***Stepparent and residential parent***

Children may view the stepparent as coming between the resident parent-child relationship (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002). When a stepparent enters the family unit several changes occur that affect children. The stepparent may claim roles that children had taken on during the single-parent phase (Ganong & Coleman, 2004); the amount of time children may be able to spend with the parent may be threatened; and moreover, the stepparent's daily presence may thwart children's hopes for reconciliation between parents (Ganong & Coleman, 2004).

Hetherington (2003b) found that children, upon entering the stepfamily, experienced diminished availability of parents, and less parental boundary setting, support and protection. Cartwright and Seymour (2002) note that parents might not always be aware of how stepfamily processes affect their children. Stepchildren report experiencing parents as disloyal if they take the stepparent's side during a conflict, fail to intervene to protect them from irrational stepparent behaviour and/or put stepparents wishes ahead of theirs (Braithwaite et al., 2008; Cartwright & Seymour, 2002). Sauer and Fine (1988) in their study, found that although parents may think it is important to adopt a strong parenting alliance with the new partner, children can see this as disloyal and interpret this as meaning the father cares more about his new

partner than them. Moore and Cartwright (2005) in a questionnaire study of 65 young adults in N.Z., found that they expected the residential mother to intervene and assist children if they were having difficulties in relation to the stepfather. Stepchildren also express the importance of parents continuing to spend quality one-on-one time with them, reassuring them that they still care, and taking the time to listen (Braithwaite et al., 2008; Cartwright & Seymour, 2002). Cartwright and Seymour (2002) in the previously mentioned qualitative study utilising a group interview format, found that stepchildren think it is important that stepparents are supportive and understand the need for parent-child time, thus avoiding loyalty conflicts.

#### ***Stepparent and non-residential parent***

Children may also view the stepparent as coming between the non-resident parent-child relationship (Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, & Pauk, 2001). Baxter et al. (2004) interviewed 50 (33 female, 17 male) young adult stepchildren about the relationship with the stepparent. Some stepchildren in their study (2004) talked about keeping their distance from the stepparent due to feelings of loyalty towards the non-residential parent, while others wanted closeness. Stepchildren may also experience anxiety and guilt if they find themselves liking the stepparent (Coleman & Ganong, 1997).

Divided loyalties can be exacerbated by parents and stepparents criticising each other causing children to feel they must “ally” themselves with either their stepparent or non-residential parent (Coleman et al., 2001). Kinniburgh-White, Cartwright and Seymour (2006) in a N.Z. study interviewed 25 (16 female, 9 male) young adults about the positive and negative aspects of growing up with stepfathers and how the relationship developed over time. They found that some stepchildren think

stepparents contributed to loyalty conflicts by excluding the non-residential parent or by excluding them from the couple relationship. This was confirmed by Baxter et al. (2004). However, some research also suggests, that it is possible for stepchildren to maintain a relationship with both the stepparent and the non-residential parent (Coleman & Ganong, 1997; King, 2007). Some children have good relationships with both fathers and stepfathers, and this is associated with better child outcomes (White & Gilbreth, 2001).

### ***Mutual children***

Some stepchildren think that stepparents contribute to loyalty conflicts by focussing more on the mutual children or their own children (Baxter et al., 2004; Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001; Crohn, 2006). Braithwaite et al. (2001) in their 5-year longitudinal study of 175 adolescents from stepfather families, also found that when adolescents perceived differential treatment by a parent of siblings in the stepfamily, this had a negative impact on their relationships with their siblings. They also found that positive adolescent relationships with half-siblings were associated with adolescents engaging in more positive behaviours in general. Some children also think that their fathers give more attention and time to his residential stepchildren (Sauer & Fine, 1988).

Hence, loyalty conflicts have a significant impact on stepparent-stepchild relationships. Research suggests it is important for stepfamily members to maintain good relationships within the stepfamily and to also promote good quality relationships across the extended stepfamily network.



## **The Stepparent role**

### ***Control and discipline***

As discussed previously stepfamilies function differently from first-marriage families in some areas, one of these areas is the most appropriate role for stepparents to adopt towards disciplining stepchildren.

Schrodt (2006) took responses from 522 (309 women, 213 male) young adults who completed an inventory assessing the primary dimensions of the stepparent-stepchild relationship (as identified by stepchildren). He found that many stepchildren express resentment and anger in response to stepparents adopting an authoritative role especially in the early stages of stepfamily formation (Schrodt, 2006). This was confirmed by Freisthler et al. (2003) and Kinniburgh-White et al. (2006) in their studies of young adult stepchildren's perception of the stepparent relationship. In general, stepchildren appreciate when stepparents stand back and allow parents to maintain the primary disciplinary role, although they appreciate when stepparents support their parent on discipline issues (Baxter et al., 2004; Crohn, 2006).

In interview studies stepchildren have emphasised the importance of the parent being the main disciplinarian (especially during early stepfamily formation and adolescence) and the need for them to intervene when stepparents inappropriately discipline stepchildren (Braithwaite et al., 2008; Cartwright & Seymour, 2002). However, some research also suggests that, over time, and once a supportive relationship has been built, some stepchildren respond well to authoritative parenting from the stepparent (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Schrodt, 2006; Whiteside, 2006). Stepparents and stepchildren need to take the time to develop a relationship by spending time getting to know each other and having fun together and it is only when this relationship has

developed that children may be more accepting of an authoritative stepparent (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Schrodt, 2006; Whiteside, 2006). Kelley (1995) suggests that it may take at least two years for a step-relationship to develop to the point where they may become a disciplinarian and research on stepfamily adjustment suggests it could take up to four to seven years (Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1997). Hetherington and Kelly (2002), based on their longitudinal studies, also note that some stepchildren may never accept a stepparent disciplining them.

Negotiating new rules and boundaries with stepparents is experienced as difficult for some stepchildren (Baxter et al., 2004). Stepchildren related that a lack of consistency across households causes further stress and in some cases it enables them to “get away with things” (Braithwaite et al., 2008). However, in the long term they felt that the absence of agreement across households leads to ineffective parenting and the lack of clear boundaries and guidance increases the difficulty of adapting to stepfamily living (Baxter et al., 2004; Braithwaite et al., 2008; Crohn, 2006).

### ***Warmth and support***

Although stepchildren are against stepparent’s involvement in discipline, they do welcome aspects of stepparent warmth and support. Stepchildren identify an increase in emotional resources as a positive aspect of having a stepparent (Baxter et al., 2004; Crohn, 2006; Freisthler et al., 2003; Schrodt, 2006). This includes having a father, another supportive adult, or another person to be close to and learn from (Baxter et al., 2004; Freisthler et al., 2003; Schrodt, 2006). Stepparents advice giving and sharing information is also highlighted as a positive aspect of stepchild-stepparent relationships (Crohn, 2006; Freisthler et al., 2003). Stepchildren express an appreciation of the stepparents’ extended family network and of the stepparent

sharing in family activities (Freisthler et al., 2003). Stepchildren believe the stepparent contributes to their personal growth, as they felt they had become more adaptive because of learning new ways of relating, being introduced to new experiences, and having to cope with different rules and routines (Coleman & Ganong, 1997; Freisthler et al., 2003; Schrodts, 2006). Some stepchildren think they have a more realistic view of life due to the various changes and experiences inherent in stepfamily living (Freisthler et al., 2003). Some stepchildren also appreciate the respect stepfathers show towards their mothers and how they help them resolve conflicts with her (Crohn, 2006).

Stepchildren also appreciate the increase in financial resources and stability from two household incomes (Freisthler et al., 2003). They enjoy getting more presents and some said their stepfathers had helped them find employment and provided cheap rental accommodation (Freisthler et al., 2003; Sauer & Fine, 1988). Some stepchildren in a study examining communication with stepparents (Baxter et al., 2004), stated that stepfamilies should get past the distinctions between “real” and “step” parents as this hindered stepfamily cohesion, although some stepchildren in the study said they still considered the stepparent an outsider in the family.

### **Stepparent personality**

Stepparent personality was highlighted by some young adult stepchildren as a significant factor affecting the stepparent-stepchild relationship (Crohn, 2006). This is consistent with the findings of Schrodts (2006) on the importance of positive regard and respect from stepparents towards stepchildren. Stepchildren think it is important that the stepparent has a “good” personality and in such cases they feel affection and admiration towards them (Crohn, 2006; Schrodts, 2006). Participants in Kinniburgh-White et al.’s (2006) study stated relating to a stepfather with a difficult personality

was one of the negative aspects of growing up in a stepfamily, especially if some of his behaviour was physically or emotionally abusive.

### **Influences of stepchildren**

The quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship may also be influenced by the characteristics and responses of stepchildren including their age, gender, personality, psychological health and life histories including previous family experiences (Cavanagh & Huston, 2008; Dunn, Davies, O'Connor, & Sturgess, 2000).

Stepchildren in stepfamilies appear to have more influence on family functioning than children in first-marriage families (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Van Eeden-Moorefield and Pasley (2008) using data from Wave 1-3 of the National Survey of Families and Households found that there is increased marital conflict, reduced marital quality and increased marital instability in remarriages if stepchildren are present than if they are not. The behaviour of stepchildren can have a significant impact on the responses of stepparents, the quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship and the quality of the remarriage (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Weaver & Coleman, 2005). Some stepchildren may be resistant towards stepparents due to perceiving that, the stepparent is taking up the parents time, the stepparent is a threat to the special bond formed with the parent during the single-parent stage, and the stepparent is trying to replace the non-residential parent (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Stepchildren with adjustment problems prior to remarriage may experience even greater difficulties (Hetherington, 2003b).

**Age**

The age of the stepchild entering into a stepfamily situation can affect the adjustment of the child to stepfamily living and the quality of the stepparent-stepchild bond (Amato, 2000; Marsiglio, 1992). In general, research suggests that younger children are more open to a relationship with a stepparent and are more likely to accept the stepparent playing a parental role (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Marsiglio, 1992). Adolescents and older children often have more difficulty adjusting and accepting the stepparent and in general stepparent-stepchild relationships are more conflicted when the stepchild is an adolescent (Amato, 2000). Behavioural difficulties or conflict that occurred early in stepfamily formation may reoccur when children reach adolescence, which may be a result of the general difficulties faced by adolescents and/or the conflict between an adolescent's developmental need for separation from the family and a new stepfamilies desire to establish closeness (Berg, 2003; Bray, 2001; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Children who have previously accepted a parental role from the stepparent may rebel against this in adolescence (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

**Gender**

Gender differences may also impact child adjustment to the stepfamily (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). It appears that young girls tend to be better adjusted relative to boys in single-parent families, however, preadolescent girls in stepfather families experience greater difficulties relative to boys (Hetherington, 2003b). Hetherington and Kelly (2002) concluded that boys tend to experience significant adjustment difficulties in the first few months of remarriage but over time tend to adjust and settle, whereas

adolescent girls do not show a similar level of adjustment over time and continue to show an increased level of behavioural and social problems.

Research into the impact of gender differences in adjustment tends to show variable results by late childhood and adolescence in terms of the effect of gender on outcome (Hetherington, 2005; Nicholson et al., 1999; Schmeekle, 2007). Ganong and Coleman's (2004) review of stepfamily research also concludes that the impact of the gender on stepchildren's adjustment remains unclear.

In terms of the types of adjustment problems displayed by gender, research suggests that boys tend to show more signs of externalising problematic behaviour for example a greater risk of early delinquency and substance use, while girls display more internalising types of problematic behaviours for example leaving home early and early pregnancy (Aquilino, 1997; Hetherington, 2005).

Hence, stepparent-stepchild relationships are influenced by several factors. Research from the perspective of young adult stepchildren suggests that reducing loyalty conflicts between stepfamily members, and parents maintaining the main disciplinary role, while stepparents focus on building a warm and supportive relationship with stepchildren will result in stepchildren being more open to a relationship with stepparents. Research also suggests that stepchildren age and gender also influence the quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship.

### **Changes in relationship over time**

It is also important to look at the changes that happen over time in the stepparent-stepchild relationship. Hetherington and Kelly (2002) in the Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage concluded that the relationship between stepparent and

stepchild can be challenging and tends to develop gradually over time. Research suggests that the long-term outcome for stepparent-stepchild relationships varies, with some relationships becoming close, some growing more distant and some changing little over time (Coleman & Ganong, 1995; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Similarly, in a N.Z. study, Kinniburgh-White et al. (2006) investigated the development of the stepfather-stepchild relationship over time and identified five developmental trajectories - relationships that began positively and continued to be positive over time, relationships that were conflictive from the beginning and failed to improve, relationships that were characterised by distance with little change in the relationship over time, relationships that deteriorated during adolescence but then recovered, and relationships of slow but gradual improvement. Longitudinal studies suggest that many stepfathers perceived they had distant relationships with their stepchildren in the early stages of remarriage but relationships tended to improve over time (Bray & Berger, 1993; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Schmeekle et al.'s (2006) study of adult stepchildren's perceptions of current and former stepparents (including stepmothers) found that some of the adult stepchildren still consider the stepparent a family member even if they have separated from the parent. However, research findings also suggest that some children may never form a loving relationship with their stepparent (Rodwell, 2002; Schmeekle et al., 2006).

### **Stepchildren's experiences of relationships with stepmothers**

The research into children's perceptions of relationships with stepmothers is relatively sparse. The existing research on stepmother-stepchild relationships is reviewed below starting with stepchildren's experience of loyalty binds.



**Loyalty binds**

Stepchildren's torn loyalties between stepmothers and mothers can lead to distress and confusion for stepchildren (King, 2007). The relationship between the mother and the stepmother is often difficult and this is in part due to the primacy of the mother's role with her children (Hart, 2009). Mothers may feel resentful and threatened by the stepmother's presence and make it difficult for the stepmother to form a relationship with the stepchild (Bernstein, 1994; Coleman & Ganong, 1997). A mother's jealousy and possessiveness can exacerbate stepchildren's loyalty conflict and some stepchildren may purposely resist forming a relationship with the stepmother out of loyalty to the mother (Nielsen, 1999). Also some children idealise the absent parent and blame the father or stepmother for the parents' divorce, which adds further stress to the stepmother relationship (Nielsen, 1999). On the other hand, Coleman and Ganong (1997) note that some stepchildren are able to assimilate two mothers into their sense of family. King's (2007) study of stepmother-stepchild relationships also found that stepchildren's contact with their mother does not appear to interfere with them establishing close ties to the stepmother.

Also if stepmothers have their own children the stepmother may treat her children preferentially to prevent them feeling displaced in the stepfamily (Weaver & Coleman, 2005). Hart (2009) also suggests that loyalty binds may be exacerbated by the stepmother's children putting pressure on her to prioritise them and hold stepchildren at a distance.

**Discipline and warmth**

As discussed previously there may be more pressure on stepmothers to be involved in parenting stepchildren, especially if fathers are working full-time, which can lead to



stepmothers adopting a disciplinary role (Coleman et al., 2008; Dierks-Spencer, 1997). However, this can result in stepchildren feeling suspicious, resentful and at times openly hostile and rejecting towards stepmothers (Bradley, 2006; Jones, 2004; Morrison & Thompson-Guppy, 1985; Vinick & Lanspery, 2000). Dierks-Spencer (1997), in a questionnaire study of 62 residential stepmother family members (stepmother, father and stepchild) found that stepchildren, who perceived stepmothers as more controlling in discipline, had a more negative relationship with the stepmother. Dierks-Spencer's (1997) study also showed that in general pre-adolescent children were more willing to accept stepmother involvement in discipline than adolescents. A study of stepdaughters in Crohn's (2006) interview study of positive stepmother-stepchild relationships, perceived that no stepmother attempted to take over the role of mother and participants said this was the most significant factor contributing to their positive relationships.

Stepdaughters in Crohn's (2006) study, appreciated when stepmothers were supportive, and stepmothers giving advice and sharing information was highlighted as a positive aspect of the stepparent relationship. Stepdaughters said stepmothers were often very supportive of their goals and career plans and often more so than mothers whose support was tempered by concerns (Crohn, 2010). Stepdaughters talked about sharing common interests such as music and fashion, and enjoying shopping and doing fun activities with their stepmother (Crohn, 2010). Stepdaughters also appreciated the financial support stepmothers provided including giving gifts to them (Crohn, 2010). Crohn (2010) found that the content of stepchildren's disclosure to the mother and stepmother differed, and although stepchildren disclosed more to the mother, some stepdaughters confided in stepmothers about their sexual experiences, rule violations

and secrets; none of the stepdaughters discussed these topics with the mother. Crohn, (2010) concluded that stepchildren felt the stepmother was less likely to be judgemental and worry if they made such disclosures, and the stepmother was able to provide guidance and become an additional support and resource.

### **Age of stepchildren**

Some studies have found that younger children are more accepting of stepmothers and of stepmothers adopting a parent role (Bradley, 2006; Dierks-Spencer, 1997). Non-residential stepmothers in Weaver and Coleman's (2005) study reported that younger children were more likely to accept them playing a parental role, while adolescents tended to respond negatively to their attempts to parent. Dierks-Spencer (1997) concluded that stepmothers often withdraw from the parenting role with adolescents when relationships become conflictive. Adolescents and young adults in the process of separating from relationships are often not interested in developing a relationship with the stepmother (Hart, 2009).

### **Gender**

Several researchers have investigated if the gender of the stepchild affects the stepmother-stepchild relationship (Bradley, 2006; Dierks-Spencer, 1997; King, 2007; Levin, 1997; Pasley & Moorefield, 2004). Results, however, have been variable (Ganong & Coleman, 2004).

Some researchers have found that girls have greater difficulty in relationships with stepmothers than boys (Dierks-Spencer, 1997; Pasley & Moorefield, 2004), while others have found the reverse (King, 2007; Levin, 1997). Some researchers suggest it may be easier for stepmothers to get along with and become closer to stepdaughters (Ganong & Coleman, 1994a; King, 2007; Quick, Newman, & McKenry, 1995). Some of

the reasons cited for this include: boys' externalising behaviours that may be more difficult for a stepmother to manage; boys being more likely to be involved in the marital conflict; and research that suggests that boys are more negatively affected by living with a single mother before the repartnering (Nielsen, 1999). Conversely, studies that found more problems for girls living with stepmothers suggest this may be due to daughters' "wife-like" relationship with fathers (as confidante and household manager) during the single-parent stage and her reluctance to relinquish this role to the stepmother (Clingempeel & Segal, 1986; Dorius, Heaton, & Steffen, 1993; Pasley & Moorefield, 2004).

### **Changes in relationships over time**

Some research on stepmother-stepchild relationships suggest that these relationships improve and stabilise over time (Brand et al., 1988; King, 2007; Orchard & Solberg, 1999). Some researchers suggest that, in the long-term, a stepmothers investment in time, nurturing, love and support can result in positive and enduring relationships with stepchildren, as stepchildren begin to see the stepmother as additional support, rather than a threat to the relationships with parents (Ganong & Coleman, 1994b; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Schmeekle, 2007). However, other studies fail to find that time significantly influences stepmother-stepchild relationships (Quick et al., 1995). A study by Vinick and Lanspery (2000), in which they interviewed 25 women retrospectively about their relationships with their now adult stepchildren, found that the developmental trajectory of two-thirds of stepmother-stepchild relationships were characterised by stable positive movement, and one-third were characterised by stable negative or negative movement over time.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, stepparent-stepchild relationships can be difficult to establish and have a significant impact on stepfamily functioning and outcomes for children. Stepfamilies function differently from first-marriage families. One area where this is particularly important is the type of parenting role that stepparents adopt. Research suggests that stepparents who adopt a parenting style low on control and high on warmth and support are more likely to develop good relationships with stepchildren. If stepparents attempt to discipline stepchildren this often results in resistance and resentment from stepchildren, negatively affecting the quality of stepparent-stepchild relationships. However, stepchildren do appreciate stepparent warmth and support, a stepparent's affinity seeking helps build positive stepparent-stepchild relationships in the long term. Research also highlights the importance of open and direct communication between stepfamily members about changes and issues related to stepfamily functioning, and also the importance of reducing loyalty conflicts between stepfamily members. Research also highlights that stepparents personalities can affect relationships with stepchildren, as can the age and gender of stepchildren.

Stepmother-stepchild relationships are particularly difficult to establish and research suggests this is in part due to the increased ambiguity of the stepmother role as compared to stepfathers. Over time the quality of stepmother-stepchild relationships varies with some becoming close and showing ongoing improvement and others remaining poor.

This study addresses the importance of gaining the unique perspective of children in stepfamilies, as experiences within stepfamilies may be viewed differently by different stepfamily members. Given the increasing number of stepmother families and the

potential risks and benefits for children, it is important to continue to investigate and develop an understanding of stepfamily experiences that can facilitate the formation of positive stepchild-stepmother bonds and what experiences impact adversely on this relationship. This study investigates stepchildren's experiences of relationships with stepmothers from the perspective of 25 young adults who grew up with stepmothers. This included 16 participants whose fathers still lived with stepmothers, and nine whose fathers and stepmothers had separated. It was considered important to include stepfamily couples who had separated, given the high separation rate among stepfamily couples, the impact that separation can have on children and to enable consideration of the stepmother-stepchild relationship post-separation. Narrative interviews allow for an analysis of the common core themes that emerge across the stories in regard to positive and difficult experiences, as well as allowing for an investigation of the development of the relationship over time.

## **Chapter Two: Qualitative Research Methodology**

This chapter outlines the methodology used in this research. It gives a brief overview of aims of the study, discusses the strengths of qualitative research, and the methods used in the study. The methods of data collection and data analyses are presented.

This study has three aims: to gain insight into the stepmother-stepchild relationship from the perspective of stepchildren; to identify experiences that contribute to a positive stepmother-stepchild relationship and those experiences that are experienced as difficult and adversely affect the stepmother-stepchild relationship; and to examine the relationship in terms of its development over time. In order to meet these aims, narrative interviews were conducted with 25 young adults who had grown up with a stepmother. This study fits within the existing body of literature on stepfamily relationships and in particular relationships within stepmother families. It has implications for clinical work with stepfamilies and for future research.

### **Qualitative methodology of this study**

Qualitative research is often focused on gaining an understanding of individuals experiences in contrast to the emphasis on generalizable findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Merriam, 2002). This study draws on interpretative (Smith & Osborn, 2008), phenomenological (Crossley, 2000) and narrative (McAdams, 1993; Murray, 2003) approaches within qualitative psychology. Phenomenological approaches aim to understand the subjective, lived experiences of participants and their perceptions and reflections on these experiences (Crossley, 2000). Within interpretative approaches the researcher is interested in an individual's capacity for meaning-making, that is, an individual's process of self-reflection on their experiences and the meaning they give

to these experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Narrative approaches also focus on gaining an understanding of individuals subjective experiences (McAdams, 1993; Murray, 2003). Narrative approaches examine the stories that individuals tell to understand the meaning and interpretation that individuals have given to their experiences (McAdams, 1993).

Qualitative studies generally adopt an idiographic mode of inquiry. Idiographic models focus on conducting in-depth understanding and analysis of a small number of individual cases (Patton & Patton, 2002; Smith & Osborn, 2008). This allows the qualitative researcher to gain a rich account of individuals experiences and the meaning given to these experiences (Ashworth, 2008; Bryman, 2004). The focus of qualitative research on obtaining rich descriptive accounts of individuals subjective experiences often leads to the employment of smaller samples of participants, as opposed to a more cursory exploration (using for example questionnaires or surveys) with larger samples (Bryman, 2004; Smith & Osborn, 2008). As such, it does not aim to generalise the findings to the wider population (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003), although qualitative research often contributes to the development of theory.

### **Narrative interviews**

Narrative approaches fit within this paradigm in that researchers gather the participants' stories about the phenomenon of interest to understand their subjective experiences, and how these experiences change and develop over time (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Murray, 2003). Narrative research explores the context and time in which events occur, their significance, importance and impact on the individual and, how individuals make sense of what has happened (Lieblich et al., 1998; Merriam, 2002; Murray, 2003).

Within narrative research, semi-structured and in-depth narrative interviews are often used in order to gain participants stories (Lieblich et al., 1998; McAdams, 1993; Murray, 2003). Narrative interviews encourage participants to tell their stories and describe their experiences relative to the focus of the study (Wengraf, 2001). This process allows participants to take a strong role in determining the direction the interview takes and gives them maximum opportunity to tell their own story in their own way, which allows the researcher to gain insight into the experience of the interviewee with as little influence as possible arising from their own preconceptions (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Clinchy (2003) suggests that it can also be useful to prepare prompt questions that may be used during the interview to encourage a participant to talk more if they are having difficulty, or are giving short or superficial replies. Smith and Osborne (2008) caution that it is important, however, that the interview is not taken up with material entirely derived from these very specific follow-up questions as this may suggest that the participant is not fully engaged and the information being collected is perhaps more reflective of the researchers own experiences than that of the participant.

In order to give structure and coherence to the interview process, and to aid narrative analysis of the interviews, participants can be asked to divide their story into chapters, a method used by Lieblich et al. (1998) and McAdams (1993) and also used in this study (this is presented in greater depth under data collection). Participants divide their story into chapters according to natural transitions or turning points in the narrative or according to the literary tradition of the beginning, middle and end (Gergen & Gergen, 1986; McAdams, 1993). Having participants divide their story into



chapters enables the researcher to use “plot analysis” or “analysis of form,” a technique utilised in narrative research to assess the form or structure of participants’ narratives as they develop across time (Gergen & Gergen, 1986; Lieblich et al., 1998). Plot analysis looks at the underlying theme or plot that characterises a story and also the developmental trajectory of the story (Gilgun, 2005; Lieblich et al., 1998). Narrative researchers also use plot analysis to identify turning points in the story (Lieblich et al., 1998), to find commonalities including common themes among individuals whose story has a similar structure (Gergen & Gergen, 1986; Lieblich et al., 1998), and to identify experiences or comments and themes within the narrative interview that explain the changes in form (Lieblich et al., 1998).

Gergen and Gergen (1986) theorised that there are three basic patterns of progression that occur the “progressive,” “regressive” and “stable” narrative. These have been further explored by Lieblich et al. (1998) and Murray (2003). In the progressive narrative, the story advances or rises steadily and can be associated with a movement towards a goal or a series of life challenges that are overcome (Gergen & Gergen, 1986; Lieblich et al., 1998; Murray, 2003). In the regressive narrative there is a course of deterioration or decline, and a movement away from a goal (Gergen & Gergen, 1986; Lieblich et al., 1998; Murray, 2003). In a stable narrative, the plot is steady and the graph does not change or there is little change (Gergen & Gergen, 1986; Lieblich et al., 1998; Murray, 2003). Lieblich et al. (1998) notes that an individual story may contain a combination of the three forms. Plot analysis was used by Kinniburgh-White et al. (2006) in their N.Z. study discussed previously to investigate the change over time in adult stepchildren’s relationships with stepfathers.

McAdams (1993) and Murray (2003) note that research participants often express positive feelings about research interviews, which give them the opportunity to tell their story. Participants comment that it might stimulate them to think more about their experience, give them a new understanding, and, it can be satisfying knowing that they are able to contribute to research and knowledge in an area that is familiar to their own experience and may benefit others (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002; McAdams, 1993).

### **Thematic analysis**

Qualitative research adopts an inductive process as opposed to the deductive process utilised in quantitative research (Merriam, 2002). Rather than seeking to test a priori hypotheses or theoretical models as in quantitative research, qualitative research is exploratory. It attempts to study in detail individual participant's experiences in relation to the phenomena of study for its own sake, or such information can be used to begin to formulate hypotheses or theories about the phenomena to add to existing research. (Bryman, 2004; Smith & Osborn, 2008). The data that emerges from a qualitative study is in the form of themes, categories, concepts and, perhaps tentative hypotheses that may be linked to the existing literature in the subject area (Merriam, 2002).

Thematic analysis is a method that can help researchers identify and report the repeated patterns (or themes) that occur across the whole data set (all interviews) and within each participant's data (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is not tied to any epistemological position and therefore can be utilised within different theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this current study,

thematic analysis is used to investigate positive and problematic experiences in relationships with stepmothers that participants discuss in their narrative interviews.

Braun and Clarke (2006) have defined a structured step-by-step process in conducting thematic analysis including familiarisation with data, generating initial codes to organise and identify the data into meaningful groups, searching for themes and organising all the data under these themes, reviewing themes and ensuring they are discrete from each other and internally consistent and, finally defining and naming the themes.

The methodology of this study is particularly suited to gaining more understanding of stepchildren's experiences of relationships with stepmothers and the meanings that they have given to these experiences as they change and develop across time. It allows for a greater degree of flexibility in the process of data collection as the researcher is able to be responsive to the data presented by individual participants, probing particular questions or new areas of interest that arise, and clarifying and checking understanding with participants as they proceed (Bryman, 2004; Merriam, 2002).

## **Method**

The following section outlines the methods used in this research. Ethical approval for this research was granted by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (Reference number 2008/277).

### **Participant recruitment**

Certain criteria were met by all participants including: age range (18-25) and country of residence (N.Z.). Participants were also selected on the basis that they considered the relationship with the stepmother had been significant in their lives, they had been part

of a stepmother family for at least two years, and they visited regularly at least once per week for two days over at least a two year period.

Participant recruitment involved placing advertisements (see Appendix A) on the notice boards at the University of Auckland and Auckland University of Technology, in the Auckland University student newspaper, in two local newspapers, and in an electronic newsletter for young adults. Information about the study was also presented to several undergraduate psychology classes. Some individuals also passed on information about the study to their friends or family whom they thought may be interested in participating. Given ethical boundaries the researcher took care not to interview friends, close acquaintances or their children. To reimburse participants for their travel costs and time taken for the interview, they were given a \$20 gift voucher following participation.

Through the advertising, participants were provided with the researcher's university extension number and email address. When potential participants emailed or phoned to indicate their interest in participating they were given a brief overview of the study, and given an opportunity to ask any questions about the study. At this stage, I also checked they fulfilled the study criteria. They were then sent a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) (see Appendix B) and asked to contact me again if they had further questions and would like to participate in the research. No one was contacted directly by me unless they had previously demonstrated permission for me to contact them by providing an email address or phone number, and expressing their interest in participating in the study.

In my first contact with the participants, I checked if they were currently experiencing any distress related to the stepmother relationship. No participant indicated that they experienced distress about the relationship and no one was concerned that participating in the interview would be distressing.

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of 25 young adults, aged between 18 and 25 years (mean = 21). Four were male and 21 were female. Their contact with stepmothers varied from part-time contact including weekends and school holidays over several years, to living full-time with the stepmother and father for a few years during their childhood, to living full-time with the stepmother and father until late adolescence or until the stepfamily couple separated.

All participants had spent a significant amount of time in the stepmother family (mean = 10 years) and all of the young adults experienced the stepmother relationship as having had a significant impact on their lives. The average age at parental separation was 6.5 (between 2 and 15 years) and average age at which participants met their stepmother was 7.5 (between 2 and 16 years). Of the 25 participants 16 indicated that their stepmother still lived with their father, and nine of the stepfamily couples had separated. The average age of stepchildren when the father and stepmother separated was 16.5 (between 12 and 19 years). Of all the participants, 16 still spent some time with the stepmother. Households included stepfamily adults that were legally married or cohabitating. A table of participant information is provided on the following page for ease of reference (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

P. No.	Gender	Age at parental separation	Age at meeting stepmother	Years known stepmother	Age at stepcouple separation	Age now	Stepcouple still in relationship
P1	F	3	4	16	--	20	Yes
P2	M	14	15	10	--	25	Yes
P3	F	2	4	15**	19	25	No
P4	M	3	4	21	--	25	Yes
P5	F	4	6	13	--	19	Yes
P6	M	13	13	10	--	23	Yes
P7	F	15	16	5	--	21	Yes
P8	F	3	9	10*	17	19	No
P9	F	4	5	17	--	22	Yes
P10	M	4	6	18*	14	24	No
P11	F	9	9	11	--	20	Yes
P12	F	10	15	3**	18	20	No
P13	F	13	13	11	--	24	Yes
P14	F	7	9	9	--	18	Yes
P15	F	2	2	16**	18	22	No
P16	F	8	8	13	--	21	Yes
P17	F	2	7	5**	12	18	No
P18	F	3	5	16	--	21	Yes
P19	F	5	8	15*	18	23	No
P20	F	8	8	11	--	19	Yes
P21	F	4	4	15**	19	25	No
P22	F	10	10	8	--	18	Yes
P23	F	3	3	19	--	22	Yes
P24	F	1	4	14	--	18	Yes
P25	F	6	6	14*	16	20	No
Mean	--	6.4	7.7	12.9	16.7	21.3	--

*Note.* \* Stepchild has continued contact with stepmother after stepfamily couple separation, \*\* stepchild had no contact with stepmother after stepfamily couple separation

### **Data collection**

Data collection was achieved through a semi-structured narrative interview (see Appendix D). The interviews collected participants' retrospective accounts of stories of relationships with stepmothers.

Interviews lasted between 1 and 1½ hours and were conducted at an office space at the University of Auckland. At the beginning of the interview the study aims were explained again, together with an explanation of the interview process. If participants were happy to proceed they were asked to sign a consent form indicating: their agreement to participate, their agreement to the interview being taped, their right to withdraw from the study within seven days following completion of the interview, and their confidentiality and anonymity were assured (see Appendix C). On this form participants were also given the opportunity to request a summary of the findings following completion of the study.

In the interview process, participants were initially asked a series of structured questions concerning demographic details (see Appendix E). This aimed to establish the context in which participants' relationships with stepmothers developed. Participants were then asked to divide the stories into chapters and to give each chapter a name. When they had done this, they were asked to give a brief summary of each chapter, and state what marked the transition from one chapter to the next. Questions to elicit such a sequencing of experience included – "I would like you to divide your story into three chapters. You may choose to do this by dividing the story into a beginning, middle and now chapters or you can identify specific turning points or experiences in the relationship that signified a new chapter for you?" In response to this some participants marked the shift from one chapter to the next according to

significant experiences or turning points in the relationship with the stepmother while others divided the story into chapters based on the beginning; middle and now (present state of the relationship with the stepmother).

Participants were then asked to begin to tell me the story of the relationship with the stepmother from the first meeting. Several open-ended questions had been prepared to help encourage participants to describe their experiences and to help draw out the information that was required to meet the aims of the study. For example, participants were asked “Can you tell me about the first meeting with your stepmother and your memories of that experience?” Participants were encouraged to provide the context for this meeting, which could involve briefly describing their parent’s separation and the time up until meeting the stepmother. For example, individual participants were asked “Do you remember what was happening around this time?” Participants were then prompted to talk about the next stage of the story by asking “What happened next?” or “When was the next time you saw your stepmother”? The participants were also encouraged to talk about the quality of the relationship at different points and to give examples of difficult and positive experiences as the stories progressed. For example, participants were asked “What were some of the positive experiences during this time or experiences that helped you build a good relationship with your stepmother”? Or “What were some of the difficult experiences during this time with your stepmother”? Or participants were asked “How did you feel or what did you think about this experience and how did this experience affect the relationship with your stepmother”?



At the end of each chapter participants were asked to think back and comment on the positive experiences in the relationship with the stepmother that helped them build a relationship with her during this period and the experiences that were difficult and hindered the development of the relationship with the stepmother. Participants were then asked to talk about the next stage in the relationship with the stepmother until they reached the present time.

Towards the end of the interview participants were once again asked to comment on the experiences across the relationship with the stepmother that were positive and helped them build a good quality relationship with her and those experiences that were difficult and hindered the development of the relationship with the stepmother. At the conclusion of the interview, participants were asked what advice they would give to children and stepmothers about how they could build a positive relationship. It was hoped that by ending the interview with this questions it would give participants a positive focus and a sense of efficacy on which to end the interview.

The use of narrative interviews helped develop rapport with the participants and enabled me to express empathy in response to difficult experiences. It allowed me to be responsive to each individual's experience and to enter into a dialogue whereby particular areas of interest could be pursued, novel responses explored, and my understanding of the participants experience checked with them during the interview. By listening respectfully and with interest, and expressing thanks to participants at the end of the interview it was hoped that I provided a validating and worthwhile experience for them.

For some participants, speaking about the relationship with their stepmother was an emotional experience. Several participants became tearful when discussing difficult experiences with the stepmother and in some cases they were surprised that these experiences still upset them. To manage difficult experiences, participants were offered the opportunity of a break if they required it. The interview was also structured so that participants were given the opportunity to talk about positive experiences of the stepmother relationship, thus not just focussing on the difficult and potentially upsetting experiences. I also checked with participants at the end of the interview to see if they still felt upset by discussing these experiences and reminded them of the available counselling services.

### **Graphs**

In the present study, plot analysis was facilitated by asking the participants to plot the development of the quality of the stepmother relationship over time on a graph. This was done at the end of the interview. They were given a template of a graph (see Appendix F) with the quality of the stepmother-stepchild relationship represented on Axis Y, against time, on Axis X. The graphs were divided into three chapters. The study participants were then asked to draw a line that depicted the basic trend of the relationship development over time, highlighting any significant changes in the quality of the relationship. As individuals completed the graph, they were asked to describe the influences on the changes in the quality of the relationship. For example, naming specific experiences, which they thought had contributed to any change in quality. After this, participants were asked what ages they were during each of the chapters.

## Data analysis

### Transcription

The interviews were digitally taped and then transcribed in full, including repetitions, incomplete sentences, pauses, and affective expressions (Lieblich et al., 1998). The young adults who participated were encouraged not to use names during the interview, but if names were used they were changed during the transcription process to ensure confidentiality. The transcriptions were reviewed while listening to the digital recording and any errors corrected. Each of the interviews was entered into a qualitative software package QSR NVivo8 (Richards & Richards, 1998) to assist with management of the data and carrying out thematic analysis. The narrative accounts were then re-read so that I could familiarise myself with their content and structure, and note any initial themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Two methods of data analysis were used. First, a thematic analysis of the narratives was conducted using methods described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Second, a narrative analysis following the structure outlined by Murray (2003) was conducted including a plot analysis of the progression of the stepmother-stepchild relationship against time (Lieblich et al., 1998).

### Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted to investigate the positive and difficult experiences in forming the stepmother-stepchild relationship and the common core themes arising from the interview data. The interview data was divided into two data sets. The first was titled Positive Experiences and included all the positive experiences identified by young adult stepchildren regarding the stepmother-stepchild relationship. The second was titled Difficult Experiences and included all those experiences talked about by

participants that were difficult in relation to the stepmother-stepchild relationship. Thematic analyses were then conducted on both sets of data.

The two data sets were printed out and initial thematic coding applied to organise and identify the data into meaningful groups. The data and initial codes were then re-examined and any codes found to be similar or encompassed by other codes were collapsed to create distinct and unique categories. The codes were then categorised into potential themes and all the relevant data organised under these themes. The themes were then reviewed to ensure that they were internally consistent and discrete from each other. The analyses were then given to another researcher in the field of stepfamily relationships to review by checking that the portions of text coded under each of the various themes were a good fit. On completing the review of the coding, I discussed with the researcher any disagreement about the coding. Both the other researcher and I explained our rationale for the difference in coding and this was discussed until an agreement was reached about the correct coding for the text in question. From this process, some changes were made to the themes and also the text coded under the different themes. My supervisor also provided on going checks throughout the thematic and narrative analysis and interpretation of results.

### **Narrative analysis of graphs**

Participant's graphs depicting the development of the stepmother-stepchild relationship over time were analysed using plot analysis as previously described. Analysis of the narrative progressions were done up until the time of the separation, however participants' discussion of the relationship post-separation is included in the narrative analysis. The graphs were grouped into similar developmental narratives or trajectories based on patterns of ascent (increasing quality of the stepmother-

stepchild relationship), stability, or decline (decreasing quality of the relationship) (Lieblich et al., 1998). Thematic analysis was conducted to extract the core themes associated with each of the trajectory groupings, and to examine the experiences that influenced the development of the quality of relationship over time. These were then examined more closely so the similarities and differences of the different developmental forms could be identified. The interview data was reviewed with the graphs to take note of experiences or triggers for significant changes in the quality of the relationship

### **Validity of the research**

The concept of reflexivity is an important consideration for researchers and acknowledges that the researcher *cannot directly capture* the participants' lived experience, as the researcher's own assumptions and preconceptions are involved and reflected in the questions they ask and the interpretations they make (Murray & Chamberlain, 1999). Bryman (2004) notes that in trying to understand an individual's understanding of their world, the detail that researchers choose to attend to is inextricably linked to their own presuppositions and values and this means that study findings are susceptible to the influence of what each researcher identifies as significant and important. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) and Parker (2004) suggest that this is not unique to qualitative methods and as in all research, the selection, interpretation and presentation of research data is inextricably tied to the subjective position of the researcher. However, because of this perceived limitation, qualitative research tends to put more emphasis on researchers identifying, recording and

monitoring their own subjectivities during the data collection and interpretation process (Bryman, 2004; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

Therefore, it is important to note that I have been a non-residential stepmother for five years. My experience in this role allowed me to relate to some of the experiences described in the literature and also more specifically stepmother relationships. This knowledge, and my experience as a clinical psychology student, also helped me relate to and feel empathy for the young adult stepchildren's experiences. On the other hand, I worked consistently to put aside my own assumptions and to ensure that the data analysis was systematic. I aimed to ensure that the results of the analyses validly reflected the participants' experiences rather than my own expectations or values. This was aided by the use of regular review of my analysis by a peer researcher and my primary supervisor.

The validity of qualitative research is enhanced by the researcher also being transparent in relating the aims of the study to the methods, including recruitment of participants, methods of analysis, and the process of arriving at conclusions (Bryman, 2004; Rogers, 2003). Transparency allows assessment of whether the researcher adequately observes and analyses those features of participants' experience that they intended to study and whether there is a good match between the researcher's observations and the theoretical ideas they develop (Bryman, 2004; Mason, 1996).

As the researcher I have attempted to gain accounts of stepmother-stepchild relationships that covered the broad spectrum of experiences from those that started off negatively and continued on this trajectory, to those that started well and continued positively. Descriptive detail has been provided of the participants and the

methods used so that other researchers can replicate this study and/or consider the relevance of its findings to a comparable group. I have attempted to make transparent the process of understanding individual participant's experience by using quotes and phrases from the interviews in reporting the study's findings. To increase the transparency and validity of this study, a peer review of at least thirty percent of the thematic analysis was conducted once the coding was complete.

The validity of qualitative research can also be assessed by the relevance, importance and contribution the research makes to the broader area of study in which it is situated (Hammersley, 1992). It can also be assessed by looking at the relevance to practitioners and researchers, whether it helps increase understanding in the subject area and has clinical relevance (Hammersley, 1992). Guba and Lincoln (1994) suggest validity can be assessed by whether it increases the understanding of participants or of other individuals in society that have had similar experiences.

As the researcher, I am interested in discovering what helps stepchildren develop a positive relationship with the stepmother. I am interested in identifying specific behaviours and relationship approaches on the part of the stepmother and the stepchild that help the successful development of this relationship. I am also interested in identifying those behaviours or experiences that hinder the development of the relationship. As discussed more fully at the start of this section, by using narrative interviews I was able to gain the perspective of young adult stepchildren of the stepmother-stepchild relationship. In doing this, it is hoped that this research will be relevant to stepfamily members and clinicians and add to the existing literature on stepfamily functioning.

## **Chapter Three: Thematic Analysis**

This chapter presents the thematic analysis of the positive experiences of relationships with stepmothers. As discussed previously, the interview data were classified into two sets: positive experiences of the stepmother-stepchild relationship and difficult experiences of the stepmother-stepchild relationship. Eight themes emerged from the two sets of data. Participants' positive experiences were represented according to four themes: 1) ways in which participants felt supported by their stepmother; 2) participants' experiences of positive qualities of their stepmother, 3) ways in which participants felt that their stepmother contributed to a sense of family; and 4) ways in which participants felt that their stepmother showed appropriate respect for the existing family. In some cases, the overall theme contained a few sub-themes, which are also discussed. The difficult experiences are discussed in Chapter Four.

In the following section, the main themes are discussed along with the number of participants who talked about each theme and quotes illustrating examples of the theme. Table 2 contains an overview of the themes and sub-themes.



Table 2  
*Overview of the Positive and Difficult Experiences*

Positive experiences	Difficult experiences
<u>Felt supported</u>	<u>Discipline and rules</u>
Emotional support	Adjusting to different routines and expectations
Practical support	
<u>Stepmother qualities</u>	<u>Personality</u>
<u>Contributed to a sense of family</u>	<u>Disrupted relationship with the father</u>
Dad is happy	Loss of time
Sense of supportive family unit	Poor communication
Mutual child brings connection	
<u>Respected existing family members</u>	<u>Torn loyalties</u>
Relationship with father	Mother and stepmother
Family members got along	Dad and stepmother
	Mutual children
	Parents (and stepmother)

## **Positive themes**

This section presents an analysis of the positive data. The positive experiences were grouped according to the following four themes:

- (1) Felt supported
- (2) Stepmother qualities
- (3) Contributed to a sense of family
- (4) Respected existing family members

All twenty-five participants made at least one positive statement about the stepmother. Overall, three participants experienced a mostly positive relationship with the stepmother, 18 participants experienced a mixture of both positive and difficult periods in the relationship, and four participants had a mainly negative relationship with the stepmother with few positive experiences.

### **Felt supported**

Nearly all participants (n = 24) talked about receiving at least some support from the stepmother. Five participants talked about receiving a lot of support, four participants thought they received some and fifteen participants said they received little support. Of the latter, three talked, during the interview, about only one instance of receiving support from the stepmother.

### **Emotional support**

Emotionally supportive experiences identified by participants consisted of feeling cared about, being able to discuss problems and get advice, and being able to talk openly with the stepmother. Thirteen participants referred to some memories of

feeling cared about or loved by the stepmother. They talked about how important it had been to them to receive physical affection, to be given attention, to be comforted when upset and to be treated by the stepmother as if they were one of her own children. Displays of physical affection included such things as spontaneous soothing and hugs, or a kiss when saying hello or goodbye. One participant remembered being surprised by her stepmother's display of affection, which resulted in her being more open to developing a closer relationship with her,

I remember one time I got up in the middle of the night and I fainted in the bathroom, and apparently I had a seizure. And she was the one that got me up and got me back to bed and looked after me for that day. That was nice. I think I was a little bit surprised. After that I felt warmer towards her ... After that I thought she actually does care (P19).

One participant who lived full-time with his father talked about being appreciative of what he saw as his stepmother's "motherly" warmth and support; his own mother had been hospitalised when he was a pre-schooler so support from her was limited,

I do remember hugs and plenty of warmth ... She always wanted the best for me ... Yeah she really did care when it was hard for me ... She visited me when I was in hospital—she was always there with Dad ... She was always a good person towards me, a good parent (P10).

Another participant who met her stepmother when she was a pre-schooler recounted her experience of feeling loved by her stepmother and her appreciation of the stepmother's attention,

I really appreciated the attention my stepmum gave to me, because my mum was working full-time so couldn't pay all of her attention to me (P23).

Another participant who described a mostly negative relationship with his stepmother was able to acknowledge a few times when he thought his stepmother was supportive,

She was really good—had compassion for me when I was having trouble at school, just being really kind and settled me down and she actually boosted me in a way (P2).

Participants also recalled positive experiences related to their sense that communication between themselves and their stepmothers was becoming more open and honest over time. A few participants said that as time went by the stepmother became more open about herself and her history and that this led to a deepening of understanding and increased closeness in the relationship. It also led them to be more trusting of her and to open up more themselves. One participant discussed how in recent years her stepmother has been more open with her, and how this had helped her make sense of some of the early difficult experiences in the relationship,

My stepmum was very open to me—she didn't seem closed off and she was happy to talk about things—family questions that I wanted to ask. I felt comfortable telling her things ... And she opened up a lot to me as well and she talked about having post natal depression and being on IVF. So I realised that they were huge factors in our relationship early on ... and we definitely opened up more on an emotional level (P18).

Another participant appreciated what she perceived as her stepmother's approachability and openness when it came to discussing difficulties in their relationship,

Yeah, that's definitely one of the awesome aspects of our relationship is that we are able to, you know, say I understand where you're coming from, I'm sorry, and kind of work things out ... Because we both have personalities where we're willing to look at all sides of a situation and accept that what we think is maybe not what the other person thinks but that there can be multiple right sides to a story (P16).

Participants also said they valued being able to talk through problems or get advice from the stepmother. Several participants found it valuable to have an independent

adult they could talk to about issues they would not discuss with a parent. One told a story about her stepmother's reaction to a drunken party,

I guess it's slightly embarrassing stuff like one of my friends had way too much to drink. We were all a little bit drunk and she threw up and my stepmother heard her throwing up and she was kind of annoyed but she was really good about it. Whereas, I don't think Dad would have been ... Like she's not my mother ... You don't have to project a false image ... Yeah she's not sort of responsible—well, she is, but not in the same way (P1).

The above participant's experience suggests she thought she could be more honest with her stepmother about some of her teenage experiences than with her parents.

Another participant also appreciated how she was able to look to her stepmother for emotional support in matters that she couldn't take to her own mother,

Well it was great that I had another person to talk to ... Just having someone else for support—someone that is going to help me think through things. Sometimes there are things that you can't talk to your mum about, so you want to talk to somebody else (P25).

Several of the female participants appreciated having the stepmother around to help with 'girl' issues. This included helping them with things like clothes and make-up but also helping when they menstruated. Two participants recalled the input from the stepmother,

If we were going out she would always do my hair and my makeup and make me look pretty. Yeah, that was nice too (P14).

I mean because living with Dad—obviously, he's male, and I was the eldest—and I'm like, a girl, so he didn't really know what to do with me. And I was quite early developed for my age. I mean I wasn't going to go and ask Dad and say Dad I think I need to buy my first bra. Whereas, it was good to have my stepmum there to be able to talk to. And you know when I first got my period it was my stepmum that was there (P20).

Some participants came to see their stepmother as a friend and, for three participants their stepmother came, over time, to fill the role of their absent mothers. The

following participant talked about her stepmother becoming more like a friend in recent years,

I think as I've gotten older, we've got closer. I would say it's quite a close supportive relationship now. I wouldn't say that I am a daughter figure to her but it's becoming more like a friendship ... I would say I'm closer to her than I am with my real mother. I feel supported by her and she doesn't get judgmental. Yeah and we have alone times as well, just her and me. Like our relationship has developed more just the two of us (P9).

Another participant discussed how she sees the stepmother's role as equal to that of a parent,

I mean I call her Mum. And when I'm talking about my parents, I'm talking about her as well. I mean technically she's not my parent, but she's married to my dad—she supports me in the way that Dad does—like so technically she is my parent. I mean like I've got my mum and my dad and she's my stepmum. They are all my parents (P20).

Two participants, who lived with their father and stepmother full-time because of the mother being unwell, recounted their experience of having a stepmother that fulfilled the mother role,

I guess part of it, in a sense, was to fill the role of a mother to me because my mother couldn't fulfil it anymore, unfortunately, with her illness ... I'm really thankful for that. Two parents keeping up the upbringing ... A real stepmother that does actually love you and care for you—what more can you ask for in a parent, really (P10)?

I always saw her as my mum. And she came with me on my first day of school—my stepmum did—so she kind of took the mother's role. So like she was just mum to me ... She kind of just did everything 'cause we lived with her and she treated us like we were her own. So it was good ... I used to call them 'Mummy Debra' and 'Mummy Katherine' (P24).

The following participant's mother died when she was a teenager, and initially the relationship with the stepmother was experienced as rather awkward and at times conflictive. However, on reflection the participant was appreciative of her stepmother's perseverance in building a relationship with her after the loss of her

mother. From her late teens until the present the participant has continued to build a very strong, positive and supportive relationship with her stepmother,

I remember sitting in the front row at the funeral. I was sitting next to my dad and my sister and she was on the other side. And I was crying and she was like rubbing my back from behind my dad ... And she bought us roses ... At first we had an awkward relationship and then we had a very angry one and didn't get on at all. And now I would probably say that her and I are a lot closer than even my brother and myself or my dad and me—because she's just like my mum now pretty much (P8).

Hence the participant's stepmother helped her cope with the loss of her mother and also gave her the support of a mother figure.

The experiences and perceptions of the above four participants demonstrates that over time some stepchildren were willing to accept the stepmother playing a significant role in their lives. Receiving emotional support from the stepmother was a significant experience for some participants that led them to develop a positive relationship with her.

### **Practical support**

Practical support was provided by stepmothers in various ways: by engaging in activities with stepchildren, helping with household tasks, getting them to appointments, helping them with their studies and by providing supplemental financial resources.

Participants recalled that they appreciated engaging in enjoyable activities with their stepmother. The following participant lived with her mother and visited her father for weekends and holidays for the first three years after her parents separated. She then lived with her father and stepmother full-time. This is how she remembered early visits with her stepmother,

We would sometimes go out for brunch. Those were fun times. Plus, we were quite close to the beach so we could go swimming and my stepmother always wanted to do stuff—you know, not hang around home ... Then, eventually they got a wee boat and we used to go out boating, go out to a beach ... There were lots of cool things like that. We went to the museum a couple of times, which was pretty cool. It was like lots of little adventures (P19).

Another participant recalled that her stepmother had helped her to do volunteer work,

I wanted to do volunteer work for the SPCA and she did all this research for me about it and rang them up and I was too young to go on my own so she said that we could go together and ... I think it was good to find an activity that we could bond over and stuff (P8).

Shopping was an activity eight of the 21 female participants appreciated. They saw it as a fun way to spend time with their stepmother and they believed it showed that she cared about them and was interested in having a relationship with them. They also appreciated shopping with their stepmother because it was something fathers often did not do with them, and their mother sometimes did not have the financial resources to do so. One participant below recalls the significance of shopping,

Yeah, she used to take us out to malls and we would go and have lunch sometimes. And she would occasionally buy us, like, little things—she'd buy me stuff and spoil me. And, yeah, like go clothes shopping and look for clothes and sometimes she would buy me something. I mean to begin with she was nice like that—she did take us out and she would do things with us. Yeah, it was nice (P14).

Participants appreciated their stepmothers' support with household tasks, and getting them to school and to sports activities and other appointments. This was particularly appreciated if the father was busy or away. One participant had been living with her father full-time when her stepmother moved in. She appreciated her stepmother taking over some of the tasks she had previously done,

She'd do the dishes and help out with the cleaning and cooking. So yeah she actually just made life a lot easier. So how could you not like her for that? And



she was really helpful during exams—she'd pick up the slack around the house (P7).

Another participant said she appreciated lifts to school and to sports activities, as she thought that she could rely on her stepmother more than her father,

Dad's always working—work, work, work—so she became more like the main person—she would drop us off from school and take us to after school care and drop me off at netball on Saturdays or come and watch my game ... I could always count on her to do more of like the driving me to places, taking me to games, the doctor's or whatever. She's the more responsible one of the two (P20).

Participants also appreciated the stepmother's role in helping them with school, and when older, university study. One participant recounted,

Yeah, she was quite supportive with schoolwork and stuff and she always said it was really important for me to do well and she'd try and help me with school work and stuff. She was quite supportive in that aspect, which was good, and real proud of me when I did well—she'd say that's really good and blah-blah ... And now she's supportive with uni. and asks how it's going ... it's nice to have someone that is enthusiastic about my university (P11).

Often the stepmother had skills or experience that differed from that of the mother or father, which meant she could help in a unique way. The following participant found her stepmother supportive and resourceful in talking about career choices, and her stepmother's specific experience was valuable,

I was deciding what I wanted to do after school and we'd have chats about the kinds of things I might want to do and the realities of actually getting into health ... And she worked in that area and had helpful contacts, which was good. She really helped me out with that (P19).

Four participants recalled how helpful the extra financial resources had been that their stepmother brought into the family. Extra income made it possible to engage in more and different kinds of activities, and also, in some cases, to move to a nicer house. The following participant acknowledged that when the stepmother became part of the

family they could afford to go out more and as a result they had a lot of fun. Having fun with the stepmother increased her willingness to develop a relationship with her,

My stepmum makes a lot more money than my mum and so we are able to do a lot more things with her and my dad as far as travelling and going to concerts and doing all these fun leisurely activities. And so my stepmum was able to provide all this fun for us (P16).

Hence, receiving support from the stepmother was appreciated by some participants and led them to value the relationship with the stepmother and the positive role she could play in their lives. Participants appreciated receiving emotional support from the stepmother, feeling cared about, receiving physical affection, and being able to talk openly with her about problems and get advice. Some of the young adult stepchildren in this study talked about appreciating when the stepmother did activities with them, when she helped with household tasks and getting them to and from appointments, and when she supported them with study and career choices. Some participants also appreciated the increased financial resources that came with having a stepmother. Other participants received limited support from their stepmother, and these participants had overall poor relationships with stepmothers.

### **Stepmother qualities**

Seventeen participants mentioned positive qualities they associated with the stepmother. Some participants referred to specific aspects of the stepmother's personality that they liked: she was fun, easy to get along with, open, calm, compassionate or reliable. Others referred to specific attributes such as being young, having money and being someone new and exciting in their lives. Participant 16 appreciated the stepmother's personality and saw her as a positive role model. This is how she summed up her stepmother's qualities,

She's kind, she's compassionate, she's hard working and she's a good example for me. She wants me to follow my dreams and she wants to do everything possible to make my dreams come true. She was one of the big factors in my coming to university. If there was anything she could possibly do for me, she would. Yeah, she's always there for me (P16).

Hence, the above participant appreciated qualities of her stepmother's personality that she found supportive. Participant 23 was able to appreciate both the stepmother and the mother, and the unique qualities that each of them brought to the relationship with her. She thought her stepmother's personality was a good complement to her mother's personality,

Yeah, they're opposite people. My stepmum was incredibly emotional ... She's really open about the way she feels. She's like a self-help kind of person. Like she has so many self-help books on every topic that she's ever been through in her life. And she's really into the whole "I" statements and my mum is the opposite, she's a very medical and scientific person, so like she's not emotional ... And I think that's probably why my stepmum came into my life is to make up for the emotional stuff my mum lacks. Like, my mum has a lot of things my stepmum doesn't and they really balance each other out (P23).

Another participant appreciated her stepmother's quiet and calming presence in the family, and her compassion,

She was very quiet; she fitted in a lot easier ... She's just like a quiet and calming presence the whole time. She didn't push herself upon us ... And she's really empathetic, so she doesn't try and interpret things, she just listens to what you have to say. She doesn't judge, she just accepts. And she's good to talk to, you feel comfortable around her and because of that I'd trust her with anything. She understands and she's really good to get on with (P8).

This stepmother's gradual integration into the stepfamily and her ability to listen to the stepchild appears to have been important in the stepchild developing trust in her.

Other participants focussed on particular attributes of their stepmothers. A few participants commented that stepmothers were quite a bit younger than fathers. Participants appreciated stepmothers introducing fathers to up-to-date things, such as

music and fashion. The following participant appreciates not only the influence her younger stepmother had on her father, but also hearing about her stepmother's different experiences,

Because she was much younger than my dad—something like 12 or 13 years younger—she kind of introduced him to like new things. I don't know like, newer things, music and skiing, and you know, we used to travel quite a lot ... And she'd travelled quite a lot all around the world so I enjoyed understanding her way of living, you know, her experiences ... So I did find that interesting as a kid (P22).

In the initial stages of getting to know stepmothers, many saw them as bringing something new and exciting into their lives. Participants often referred to the stepmother's appearance and that she came from somewhere more exciting. This participant described how she perceived her stepmother initially,

Yeah she seemed really cool. She was like pretty and she's got quite a bit of money. She had nice clothes and I'd get to try on her shoes—just like fun stuff like that, which was really appealing to me (P11).

Four participants thought that their stepmothers were good cooks, and in two cases the cooking was one of a few positive things they could recall.

Two participants thought the stepmother brought "feminine energy" into the home. The following participant compares her house before and after the stepmother moved in, and her appreciation of the more homely atmosphere created by the stepmother,

So a lot of Dad's old furniture was sold and her stuff came in and so there were, like, areas of the house, which were more hers than ours ... It was quite nice 'cause she'd brought in quite a lot of womanly, I mean sort of feminine energy ... I mean it had been quite stark because Dad's a farmer and Mum took all the nice stuff out, so it was just like more homely things and more comfortable ... Yeah, she made it a lot more homely (P7).

In summary, some of the participants in this study appreciated the positive personality characteristics of the stepmother such as being fun, friendly, kind and compassionate

that helped them build a relationship with her. Some participants also appreciated that the stepmother was someone new and exciting, that she was young and brought new experiences to the family.

### **Contributed to sense of family**

Twenty-one participants talked about at least some ways in which the stepmother had a positive effect on their sense of belonging to the stepfamily unit. This was the result of several experiences such as the stepmother's positive influence on fathers, inclusion of the stepmother's extended family in their lives, and the birth of a mutual child.

### **Dad is happy**

Eleven participants felt that relationships with their stepmothers were strengthened by seeing how happy she made their fathers. The following participant talked about valuing her stepmother because she could see her father's happiness and her stepmother's support for her father,

I also saw the effect that she had on Dad, which was really good ... And I was like comparing her to Mum's partners. So in many ways I liked her a lot more ... And they were like calling and texting each other a million times a day—really cute actually. It was cute to see his face light up when she texted him ... And it's nice how she gets quite caught up in the ideas that my dad has... So she's been really good for my dad (P7).

Some participants also thought that the father's happiness meant they had a better relationship with him, which improved the time they spent with the father. Spending time with their fathers was important for most participants. The following participant appreciated the extra effort her father made when her stepmother was there,

I didn't really mind having her around because Dad seemed to be happy. Like I saw more of Dad and he seemed happy rather than like not wanting to see us ... He would take us out to dinner with her, so it was like, yay, when this lady's around we get to go out and do stuff. And he'd buy stuff to do around the home so we could occupy ourselves while he hung out with her ... So yeah, we

probably got more attention rather than less, for the beginning part anyway (P20).

Participants appreciated the support their father got from their stepmother. They felt that it would make it less likely that they would have to worry about or feel responsible for their father in the future. Participant 19 appreciated that her father appeared happy and more stable since meeting her stepmother,

I was happy that Dad had found someone, most definitely. I sort of felt like he was a little bit afloat, didn't know what to do ... I saw that she was trying to help him out, giving him a place to live while he found a job—she was very supportive with that ... He didn't really have a steady job until he moved in with her; and he seemed happy, so that was the main thing really for me (P19).

Seven participants, who had mostly difficult relationships with their stepmothers, perceived that their father's happiness was one of the few positives of the stepmother relationship. The following participant, who met her stepmother when she was at primary school, described a mostly difficult relationship with her stepmother until recent years. In the following quote she acknowledges that her stepmother has been good for her father, and how in recent years this has helped her to put her own difficulties with her stepmother aside so she could spend more time with him,

I do think she is good for my dad. I think she is probably better suited to my dad than my mum was and I think that's good—but it doesn't make any impression on me. It's good for my dad. When I say it's not good for me I don't mean it's bad; I just mean it has no effect on me whether she is with my dad or not ... But then again, I don't think he would be the person he is today after his accident if she wasn't there. So I think she is good for him. And that's positive for me because it is making him happy, and if he wasn't happy I couldn't handle it (P5).

Another participant appreciated her stepmother's role in bringing out the more sensitive side of her father, as well as the 'motherly' aspect she brought to the family as a whole,

It was different having that element around Dad because when I was with him we were always outside doing stuff and building stuff and making things. And with my stepmother around it just brought a completely different element—Dad was a bit more sensitive than I'd ever seen him (P18).

Several participants talked about being able to get support from the stepmother when they were not getting on with the father, or when the father had personal problems that affected them. Participants thought that the stepmother helped them negotiate the relationship with the father. One participant appreciated that the stepmother was able to confront the father when he was being unreasonable, something she felt unable to do as his daughter,

It's more like when Dad was being grumpy—he's really rude, he's quite short-tempered—and my stepmother would be like, what are you doing? Calm down. Whereas, I can't really say that to Dad ... So it was nice to have her there in a way to diffuse things (P1).

Some participants also thought the stepmother had a positive impact on the relationship with the father by facilitating communication with him. The following participant had experienced trauma in relation to the stepfather, and needed to talk to her father about it. The father and stepmother were aware that this had taken place and the participant appreciated her stepmother's help in coaching her father to be able to talk and comfort her around this issue,

I remember going to Dad's one night because I just wanted to talk ... and Dad was like: why did you come over here, what's going on? And I just told him I wasn't having a good day. And then my stepmother said: take her downstairs she needs to talk... because Dad didn't know how to cope with the situation, with the abuse (P9).

Another participant also valued her stepmother's role in facilitating communication with her father,

She teaches him how to talk to us and how to be emotional and how to feel things—and so yeah, that’s a benefit ... I mean, he’s learning and she’s teaching him a lot too (P23).

Hence some stepmothers were seen as making the father happy or assisting with the father’s difficulties, which in turn led to a better relationship with the father for the stepchildren.

### **Sense of supportive family unit**

Ten participants talked about the positive effect the stepmother had on the sense of family and extended family. This came in large part from doing activities together as a family unit, and with the stepmother’s family. The following participant appreciated her stepmother taking a place beside the father as the other adult in the family,

We used to go for walks along the beach and that would be quite nice and it’s quite nice walking with two adults. Because I remember there’d be lots of jelly fish along the beach, and so, you could hold onto the adult’s hand and then run along, and then, they could like lift you over the jelly fish. Yeah, so it was nice having a kind of parent—even though I was very clear that she wasn’t a parent. In some ways it’s quite nice doing things with sort of two parent-like adults (P1).

Some participants appreciated getting to know the stepmother’s family. As they spent more time with them, they began to value them as part of their extended family. This next participant explained the importance of the stepmother and her family to her,

I mean, one day I’m going to be married. I’m going to have kids and there’s going to be another huge element put into the family. And I would love for all of my family to be a part of it ... She’s not just my dad’s wife—she’s part of the family, which is very important to me. My grandma, my aunts and uncles and stuff—it’s important to me to keep building our relationship (P18).

Another participant talked about having gained grandparents and accepting the stepmother’s family as her own,

Actually the only grandparents I had were her parents, and we used to spend a bit of time with them. That was cool ... We used to go and camp at their place



and spend weekends there—probably when they wanted time out ... And they were like our grandparents—we just called them Granddad (P1).

Two participants referred to feeling particularly appreciative when they felt that the stepmother was treating them as if they were her own children. They said that this contributed positively to their acceptance of the stepmother and to their sense of belonging to a new family unit,

And you have this person who, in theory, has no reason to love you as much as she does, but you know you're her family ... Yeah she treated us like we were her own, so yeah, it was good ... And she just really always thought of us as her kids—she really wanted us to think of her as our stepmum, not just our dad's wife ... and that was good for me. Like, in a situation like divorce it can be so ugly. And if you get this extra person you are so lucky to get this whole new person to have in your life—this extra love (P23).

Often if Dad was away for the weekend on business we still did our week about, and we went to her instead. So she took on quite a motherly role, like we were her children. She definitely emphasised that (P25).

As mentioned previously, nine fathers had separated from the stepmothers at the time of the interview. However, four of the nine participants continue to have some contact with the stepmother, and three of these continue to have a close relationship with the stepmother and her family. The following example demonstrates the capacity for stepfamily members to accept and integrate different members of each family into their sense of family. The quote below is from a participant who went to live with her stepmother and father when her mother passed away in her early teens. She developed a close relationship with her stepmother. When the father and stepmother separated, four years ago, the participant continued to have contact with the stepmother, her half-sibling and the stepmother's children,

I probably still see her once a week still, so I see her all the time ... And I still go out and stay at her place. I went to her house a couple of weeks ago because it was my little brother's birthday. Yeah, she's got two little boys with another

person now... She's like my mum now—she always calls me her oldest girl and when we go out like, I always say her little boys to me are my brothers and I don't treat them any differently. And she's the same, like, she doesn't treat me differently from my sister or the boys ... And like, Dad and her have become friends again and he actually takes her other boys with him when he takes my sister for the weekend. So it's pretty good (P8).

Hence, some participants valued extended family relationships and some continue to be involved with the stepmother and her family even though the stepfamily couple are separated.

### **Mutual child brings connection**

Nine participants talked about how important the birth of a half-sibling had been in improving their relationship with their stepmother. For three participants, the birth of the mutual child was the most significant factor in initiating the development of a good relationship with the stepmother. One participant, who was particularly resentful towards her stepmother because the relationship was the result of an affair, said that the birth of her half-brother and half-sister led to a thawing of the relationship,

So there was a point where I started to hang out with my sister because I realised in the end that it wasn't her fault. So yeah, pretty much when the little girl was born I started to be like a big sister—it was all good fun there. I think maybe with the kids being around and being born made me have to have a relationship with her ... And like now I can go over there and we'll sit down and have a conversation. But our conversations are about the kids and she usually rings me when there's a problem with my sister. I would say the one good thing about having a stepmother is having my baby brother and sister (P13).

The following participant met her stepmother when she was a pre-schooler. Her half-brother was born a few years later, and it was only after this that she became close to her stepmother. Despite the time it took this participant to accept her stepmother, she accepted her half-siblings straight away and they became a common link that helped

to build the relationship with her stepmother. She recounted her excitement when her brother and sister were born,

I think my relationship with my stepmother really started to develop when my brother was born ... And I was so excited to see him and then my sister was born and I remember getting letters and photos from my dad and stepmum and they would tell me about my brother's first word ... And me and my brother and sister are extremely close ... I just wanted to take care of them, be the older sister (P9).

Another participant, who had a mostly superficial and rather neutral relationship with her stepmother, readily embraced her half-brother. She related to her stepmother as the mother of her half-brother, but otherwise felt that their bond was limited,

I mean she is like the mother of my brother ... I mean, I suppose the way I see her is that she's my dad's partner. She's a mum to my brother. That's kind of the way I see her. I mean I get on with her from time to time, but it's not like we extremely get on ... Yeah, I suppose I care more about my little brother and my dad than I do her (P20).

Hence some participants were excited and open about the arrival of the mutual child. The mutual child provided an ongoing connection with the stepmother, which led them to want to build and continue to have a relationship with her. For others however, although the mutual child provided an ongoing connection with the stepmother, the relationship with her still remained superficial.

### **Respected existing family members**

Fifteen participants discussed how their stepmother's respect for existing family relationships and family rules and routines positively influenced their perception of her and their relationship with her. They thought that such respect was important in making the transition into stepfamily living easier.

### **Relationships with fathers**

Seven participants appreciated that they were still able to spend time alone with their father. They reported that this helped them feel more secure in their relationship with their father and less likely to feel competitive with the stepmother. In some cases, participants said that this was consciously orchestrated by the father and/or stepmother. In other cases stepchildren thought it happened less consciously and more organically—participants might get time with their father when driving to and from their mother’s house, or when engaging in shared interests. Participant 19 recalled valuing her time alone with her father and being aware that the stepmother consciously encouraged this,

I think to start with he would come down by himself so we could actually spend some time—just me and my sister and my dad ... And sometimes she would have stuff on in the weekends and we would go off with Dad. It balanced out, I think ... So she was aware that we did need time with Dad, which was good ... I think my dad was aware of it, but I think most of the time it was my stepmum saying: why don’t you do something with the girls (P19)?

Participant seven remembered that the father continued to support her with horse riding. She saw this as her main opportunity to have one-on-one time with him, which she appreciated,

On weekends, if we had an important event on for horse riding, he was there. He was up at seven o’clock in the morning and he would drive us there, spend the whole day with us and come home. He was very supportive of that ... The horse aspect was a huge part of our relationship, and my stepmother didn’t come to our events. It was Dad and I or Dad and my sister and I, which was important (P7).

### **Family members got along**

A few participants referred to being appreciative that different family members were able to get along. They felt that this made the coordinating of events easier. For example, “pickups” and “drop-offs” were less stressful, and it meant that all family

members could attend functions without the stepchild feeling awkward. Participant 16 had a largely positive relationship with her stepmother, and appreciated the fact that there were no loyalty issues between family members. She appreciated what she perceived as the prioritising of their needs as children. She is also conscious that this is perhaps not always the case in stepfamilies,

I think everyone's very settled into the situation now. You know, my dad and my stepmum get on really well with my stepdad and my mum ... It's kind of like everyone accepts the other people and realises that they're all in it for the long haul—and they're in it for making the situation the best that it can be for my sister ... So my mum and stepmum run my sister's netball snack stand together ... It's definitely a very rare situation, I think, for divorced families to have stepparents and parents and everyone be on such good terms (P16).

Only one other participant said that her mother and stepmother were friendly towards each other,

So over time everyone settled into the situation. They just all got along—it was just the way things were ... They both came along to school plays. So, you know, it wasn't like they couldn't be in the same room as each other ... And if mum came to pick us up she would sit down and have a coffee with the other mum. It was pleasant and everyone chatted and we always knew what was happening (P18).

Five participants said that they appreciated the periods when they thought their parents got along. They felt safe in the knowledge that their parents were able to prioritise the well-being of their children over personal disagreements. Participant 24 talks about spending time with both her parents,

During that period mum and dad got along quite well, so it was all good. You know, we loved going to mum's because she had all the junk food and because we didn't see her as much. So going to her house was so good. But we enjoyed going back home as well ... I was lucky to be able to spend time with both parents—'cause divorced parents aren't meant to get along. But we had it pretty good for a while (P24).

Another participant recounted what she saw as her parents' intervention to ensure that she maintained a good relationship with both parents. Perhaps this also demonstrates the parents' awareness of the importance of not encouraging criticism of the other parent.

I was always in trouble at my mum's if I said something bad about Dad. And I was always in trouble if I said something bad about my mum at Dad's ... And if I was mad at Dad about something she would always ask me to talk to him about it. She was really good at wanting us to communicate with him and have a good relationship with him ... And I don't have any memory of them fighting (P23).

In conclusion, participants appreciated when they were still able to spend one-on-one time alone with the father and when all family members were perceived as getting along. Participants said that this helped them build a positive relationship with the stepmother. Some participants were also conscious that the mother and stepmother's criticism and competitiveness with each other could exacerbate their loyalty issues and make it more difficult for them to form a relationship with the stepmother. Some participants also talked about appreciating when their parents got along, which made going between households and family events less stressful.

## Chapter Four: Thematic Analysis

### Difficult experiences

This section presents an analysis of the experiences that stepchildren identified as difficult and adversely affected relationships with stepmothers. The difficult experiences were grouped according to the following four themes:

- (1) Discipline and rules
- (2) Personality
- (3) Disrupted relationship with the father
- (4) Torn loyalties

All 25 participants made at least one negative statement about the stepmother. Four participants had a mainly difficult relationship with the stepmother, 18 participants experienced a mixture of both positive and difficult periods in the relationship, and three experienced a positive relationship with the stepmother with few difficult experiences.

#### Discipline and rules

Nearly all participants ( $n = 24$ ) perceived some difficulties in relation to the stepmother's approach to discipline and household rules, and in adjusting to different expectations.

Some participants said that when the stepmother moved in she took charge of the household, including responsibility for disciplining them, telling them what chores they had to do, and organising the general day-to-day running of the house. These

participants did not feel this was an appropriate role for the stepmother. They thought the primary authority should stay with the father.

For example, the following participant had a mostly negative relationship with her stepmother. In part, this was due to her perception that the stepmother became too involved in monitoring her behaviour and tried to exert too much control over her life. She thought that her father should have retained more of the authority in the house,

Yeah, she pretty much ran the house from an early stage—was like the leader of the household—and so she really started to have control over, like, my life and what I could and couldn't do and if I could go out and if I couldn't and I hated that ... she controlled, like, heaps of things, helping around the house, who did what, who hasn't done what, you have to do this, being home at certain times, like being able to go and do things with my friends, asking my dad and then she'd butt in about what I should and shouldn't do ... I think Dad definitely needed to have more authority and for him to tell us what to do and not her (P11).

Seven participants talked about their stepmothers disciplining them. They thought this was inappropriate and they remembered feeling shocked, angry or annoyed when she did so. Some participants thought that disciplining should only be done by the father. The following participant had a very positive relationship with her stepmother overall. However, there was some conflict when the stepmother initially moved in, and also during adolescence when she tried to exert some authority. The participant said that she saw the stepmother's role as more like an aunt, and so she felt shocked when the stepmother disciplined her—the same shock she would have felt if an aunt had,

I see her as a sort of aunt, kind of. That's how I kind of feel the stepmother role is. So if she told me off I felt a bit shocked, like if an aunt told me off ... I felt it was out of line for her to say that ... Yeah, I don't think it's her role to keep tabs on me or tell me what to do and it irritates me when she does ... And if I was there at night and I didn't want to go to bed she would say "just go to bed" or something like that and I would get really upset because I think even then (when you're young) you have a perception that you have your parents and that's their role. I guess I personally feel that that's really not a stepparent role



... It's not her place to play the parent—that's your dad's role. It wasn't her place ... It was definitely her attempts to parent that definitely produced conflict (P1).

Another participant discussed how her father and stepmother appeared to favour their own children. That is, both the father and stepmother brought children into the stepfamily; however, they would not discipline their own children, only each other's children. The participant said she would have liked it to have been different. She didn't want her stepmother to discipline her,

In the beginning, Dad would favour us kids over her kids because they are his kids and she would do the same thing. So, like, if we were in trouble she would be the one to tell us off because she wouldn't tell off her own kids. And my dad wouldn't tell us kids off because we were his kids. And then if her kids got into trouble he would be the one that tells them off ... I don't think I liked that. I would rather be told off by my mum or dad because it doesn't make sense for a stranger to be telling me off when it's not her role. She's not my mum (P5).

Six participants talked about their perception that stepmothers took too much control in the house, but did not support them or show warmth towards them. Participants referred to missing their mother's support and nurturing when they stayed at their father's. The following participant had a mostly negative relationship with his stepmother. He commented that she appeared to have no qualms about telling him what to do, but he thought that she made no effort to be friendly or understanding towards him,

She didn't really make that much of an effort with me, I don't think. But she didn't hold back from, you know, telling us what to do. But at the same time she didn't make an effort to come across like friendly, like she didn't really have any empathy for our feelings or whatever (P6).

Another participant who had a mostly negative relationship with her stepmother said that while she appeared to take on the control aspect of the mothering role and parenting for her, she did not feel supported by her,

I think she tried too hard to be a mother. She wasn't my mother but she took the control of a mother. She didn't take any of the responsibilities of a mother, but she took control. And I don't think that was right. I think she could have tried to be a friend first—to gain the trust and make me feel more comfortable ... With her it was more just telling me what to do (P5).

Another participant talked about how her stepmother failed to comfort her. She compared what she saw as her mother's nurturing when she was sick with the lack of it from her stepmother in the same situation. This participant often felt lonely at her stepmother's due to her perception of the lack of warmth in the relationship from the stepmother and also the father.

No one would ever comfort me when I was there and I felt real lonely there ... and like when I was sick from school my mum would always kind of like help, get me Sprite or something and some crackers and you know just stuff that mums do. And I'd never get that there and like I'd be at home by myself (P11).

Several participants felt angry and frustrated by their stepmother's approach to chores. Participants said that it was not the stepmother's place to set and monitor the chores, that the chores were often excessive, and that stepmothers had unrealistic standards. Participants also complained that doing chores took up time they wanted to spend with their father. One participant, who had a mostly negative relationship with his stepmother, thought that the stepmother took excessive control of running the house when she moved in. One of the ways he thought she did this was in her approach towards chores. He compared her to a sergeant in the army,

Yeah, like, if something wasn't up to standard she would let us know. She asked us to clean the bathrooms and around the place. We had to do them a lot more often than we were used to, she expected so much of us ... And everything had to be so structured and organised so everything can run smoothly. She tried to run us really; I mean, honestly, she was like a sergeant at one stage (P2).

The following participant stayed with her father every second weekend and half of the holidays. Over time she became resentful because it seemed to her that when she stayed with her father she spent most of her time cleaning rather than being with him,

I slowly started not liking going to my dad's house, because she kind of, like, we'd go over and end up just cleaning their house and doing the chores there. And it was just, like, I don't want to go ... it was, like, we didn't go to see Dad and our brothers. It was, like, we went over to clean her house. That was really annoying (P14).

In summary, participants thought it was inappropriate for the stepmother to monitor their behaviour, set rules and discipline them. Stepmothers' attempts to do so often resulted in resistance from stepchildren. Participants whose stepmother tried to discipline thought that the authority should stay with the father. Some participants also thought that the stepmother exerted too much controlling authority over them while failing to provide a balance of caring support. A few participants also mentioned being unsure of what the stepmother's role was in regards to them and thought it was difficult for the stepmother to move between the role of supportive friend and that of authority figure and disciplinarian.

### **Adjusting to different routines and expectations**

Fifteen participants talked about difficulties adjusting to some of the changes they experienced when the stepmother entered their lives. There were sudden alterations of routines and expectations, and changes in neighbourhood, houses and schools to cope with. Some participants thought stepmothers were insensitive to the difficulties children faced trying to adjust to the changes they had gone through. Participants said stepmothers should have had more respect for existing routines and structures. The following participant felt very resentful towards his stepmother, in part because he

perceived that when she moved in she took charge and began to change things without respect for how things had run previously in the family,

She's not very nice. It's like she treats it like her space. I don't feel like she respected the dynamics that we had before. And she changed things, but not in a discreet way; it was, like, really aggressive, like, "oh, I'm taking charge" and changing things in a lot of ways our family just wasn't used to (P2).

The following participant felt that it would have been good to have had more time to get used to her parents' separation before her stepmother moved in and started to alter the routines of family life,

I mean, I think there should have been more time to get used to everything, without someone coming in and trying to change everything ... Yeah, she set every rule. There was not a rule that she hadn't put down. Like, she definitely wore the pants in the house at that time (P8).

Another participant (who lived with her stepmother and father full-time until they separated) illustrated the difficulty in adjusting to change by talking about the unfamiliar meals that the stepmother prepared,

She could have tried to fit in with the lifestyle that we had before so it wasn't so much of a change; even like little things, like the food we ate. She started cooking for us and it was, like, that we didn't necessarily like what she cooked. And she would, like, force feed it to us, like, so that we physically had to eat it. We weren't allowed to leave the table unless we finished our plate—that kind of thing ... It's really confusing and hard when there's so many changes all the time. I think you've got to try and fit in with the kids as they are and then make small changes (P17).

Two participants suggested that perhaps the reason their stepmother had unrealistic expectations of them was that she did not have children of her own. As one of them put it,

I think the main difficulty in my case was that my stepmum hadn't had any children. So her, kind of, way with dealing with children is kind of different from what I would expect. She wasn't like a natural mother ... and we had arguments about, like, very small things—like leaving a cup on the floor ... I just think a normal mother would expect it, like, from a 12-year-old (P22).

In summary, some participants experienced difficulty adjusting to some of the changes stepmothers made and stepmothers' expectations. A commonly expressed opinion was that the stepmother should make an effort initially to be seen to be fitting in with existing routines and structures, and only later to make changes, gradually and with sensitivity.

### **Personality**

Twenty-one participants commented on aspects of their stepmother's personality that they found difficult and adversely affected their ability to develop a positive relationship with her. Several participants struggled because they thought that, unlike their mother, whom they described as relaxed and easy-going; their stepmother was more "uptight". Examples of words used to describe stepmothers included "harried," "stressed," "not flexible" and "not relaxed." One said that "everything was non-negotiable" with her. When stepmothers were perceived in this way, participants felt uneasy, anxious or uncomfortable around their stepmothers. A small number of participants also used words like "crazy," "insane," "mental" and "psycho" to describe their stepmother's personality. They referred to the stepmother's irrational and aggressive behaviour, and some recalled being yelled and screamed at. One participant was physically abused by his stepmother.

The following participant went to live with her father and stepmother full-time when she was seven, and recalled finding it very difficult adjusting to her stepmother, whom she thought was much more uptight than her mother. She had a consistently negative relationship with her stepmother and ended up becoming very unsure of herself and unhappy,

I remember she was often quite harried, sort of bustling and not necessarily very patient. It would be “no, we’re not going to do that”—very curt and abrupt. My mum is more a sort of song and dance person—she’s, like, “I’m busy, I’m very very busy, terribly busy,” but then quite merrily sit down and watch telly for an hour ... My stepmother was intimidating and abrupt. Oh, that’s something quite different from how Mum was. It was more like a school teacher (P3).

Several participants said they did not like their stepmother’s personality and they thought this was one of the biggest problems in trying to build a relationship with her.

Nine participants experienced their stepmother as critical and intimidating at some time in the relationship.

Participant 2 had a very negative relationship with his stepmother. He became very angry about what he perceived as her criticism and lack of acceptance of his choices and this resulted in him becoming increasingly withdrawn and unsure of himself,

I mean, if I got something wrong—I mean, things go wrong in life—she’d make a big song and dance about it: “step up, John, get it right.” You’d feel really little. She really belittles me ... I mean it didn’t have to be so abrupt. She hardly made any good comments. Like there were some good things but never good enough—you’ve done this wrong, you’ve done everything wrong. We always do things wrong. We just never satisfy her ... It would always make me feel bad about myself (P2).

Another participant recalled how her stepmother often compared her and her siblings unfavourably with her own children,

Like, if there was something I wanted to do I felt like I was being criticised for it. Like, when I was deciding what to do for uni. and it just seemed like she would come out, like, “why are you doing that?” ... And it’s just like the tone of her voice—it sounds very criticising ... (P5).

Two participants described their stepmother as emotionally cruel. They recalled such things as their toys being taken away permanently, and being told they were bad children, or that their mother did not want them back. The following participant described how, when she went to live with her father and stepmother, her Barbie dolls

were taken away from her, and how this increased her difficulty in adjusting to living in the new environment. She cried in the interview when talking about this,

I remember being a bit lost in a way. One of the reasons that I felt quite low was because I had a whole lot of Barbie's—really, dozens of them. So I packed up all my Barbie dolls to take to my dad and stepmum's house. But I remember my stepmum saying we don't think children should have plastic toys and taking all of my Barbie dolls and putting them into a box on top of the cupboard. But every now and then, I remember I wasn't allowed them. I remember a few times having baby sitters and I'd persuade the baby sitter I was allowed to play with them, then the baby sitter would get into trouble [crying] (P3).

The above participant had such a difficult time getting on with her stepmother that she began to think of herself as the bad child,

What I remember is being or becoming identified as a bad child. I don't remember actually being a bad child [crying]. I sort of remember it becoming increasingly pervasive, that perspective, and I became increasingly uncertain and kind of discombobulated (P3).

Three participants talked about their perceptions that their stepmother lacked respect for others. This lack of respect manifested in the stepmother being “insensitive to others' feelings,” or having “no empathy,” or being “socially inept and rude.” One participant who lived with his father and stepmother full-time had a mostly negative and superficial relationship with her. He said he thought that his stepmother had a poor understanding of relationships and social reciprocity,

She's just so disrespectful—just to guests and stuff as well. I think she's got something wrong with her brain. Like, she doesn't know where, like, socially acceptable boundaries are for, like, saying stuff—she just says it ... Like, I would say she has no empathy or something for our feelings or our situation ... Like, I just don't like her personality. I think one of the main problems is she can't put herself in other people's shoes. Like she will say something to someone and she has no idea how that might affect them (P6).

Five participants experienced their stepmother as moody, grumpy and quick to anger.

This made the participants feel uncomfortable around the stepmother and some

initially interpreted this behaviour as meaning they had done something wrong to upset her. As one participant said,

My stepmum would just kind of ignore us. Like, we would come out in the morning and be, like, “morning” and she would kind of, well, almost just grunt at us ... and I felt like I’d done something wrong ... And, like, if we had done something wrong or hadn’t done something she would get all moody ... And then, like, we would get on for a good period of weeks and then all of sudden we’ll have a week where we just don’t and I’ll just stay out of her way (P20)

Four participants described their stepmother as being emotionally unbalanced or dysfunctional. Two of these stepmothers were described as alcoholics, one was physically abusive, and the other was described as irrational. The following participant recalled that her stepmother would send her and her sister downstairs to a self-contained flat when they stayed. The participant was in her mid-teens at the time, and her sister in her early teens. She said that they would prepare and eat all their meals downstairs over the weekend, except for Friday night, when they would eat with the father and stepmother. She said that they were not allowed upstairs and if the father wanted to spend time with them he would have to come and visit them in the downstairs apartment. She described her stepmother as insane,

So my sister and I were living downstairs and she would lock the door and we would just kind of fend for ourselves down there and she would, like, send Dad down to see if we needed anything ... And the main problem was just her—her personality. She was insane (P12).

Another participant who had a negative relationship with the stepmother did not like her personality, especially when she had been drinking,

Yeah, she was just psycho. She just had, like, too many issues in her head and she used to go mental all the time, like yelling and screaming. She was one angry lady, especially when she would drink alcohol (P15).



One participant talked about his stepmother being physically as well as emotionally abusive. The abusive behaviour consisted of lying about or exaggerating bad behaviour to his father and to other authorities, threatening him with physical violence, and on occasions actually being physically abusive. This participant described how the abuse led him to believe that he was a bad child,

She would make things up that I'd done to get me in trouble with Dad, or she'd, like, exaggerate it, and if I did anything wrong she'd beat the shit out of me. Like, really, she gave me my first concussion when I was probably about eight ... When I was growing up I thought I was the worst child. Like, the way she acted made me feel like I'm such a bad child, but now when I look back it wasn't normal, what she was doing. I was absolutely terrified of being around her (P4).

Three other participants (not the four mentioned above) referred to their stepmother as "the evil stepmother." Because of the stepmother's difficult personality, stepchildren found it hard to develop a relationship with her. One said,

I didn't actually think I'd be like one of those stepchildren. I didn't think she'd actually be like the evil stepmother from then until now (P2).

Another recalled,

I saw her as, like, a stepmother, but sort of, the kind of Disney kind of stepmother, where it's an evil stepmother (P21).

In summary, most participants initially found it difficult adjusting to their stepmother's personality because they thought it was different from their mother's. Some participants perceived that there were aspects of stepmother's personalities that made it difficult to get along with her and for a small group of participants they reported experiencing very extreme personality traits that prevented them from being able to develop a relationship with her.

### **Disrupted relationship with the father**

Twenty-two participants spoke about how their stepmother had a disruptive effect, at times, on their relationship with their father. Disruption of the relationship resulted primarily from loss of time with the father and also as a result of not being prepared for the changes of stepfamily living, due to poor communication.

#### **Loss of time**

Eighteen participants talked about experiencing a loss of time with the father after the stepmother moved in. In some cases participants thought this loss of time was a result of their stepmother taking up their father's time, and in some cases the stepchild stopped wanting to visit the father because they did not get on with the stepmother. One participant who gained a stepmother when she was sixteen talked about how the dynamics with her father changed when the stepmother moved in,

It's interesting how my relationship with my dad changed as well, because Dad and I got very close during the year that he wasn't seeing anyone. Like, before she arrived, Dad and I used to make pancakes on a Saturday at midday after he'd been out ... So I think obviously I did resent her a little bit for taking that relationship away ... Like, with Dad we had always come first—we'd come first from the separation and slowly she was becoming more important (P7).

This participant also talked about her perception that the stepmother was "taking her place," and this was symbolically illustrated the day her stepmother took her car space in the garage,

Yeah, the day that my car wasn't allowed in the garage any more and her car took its place was quite a big day. Her car just turned up there one day. And I think I went in and I had a bit of a cry and said something like "you're replacing me." Yeah, it was just like a stand-out moment for me ... It just seemed that she was becoming more important in Dad's eyes and because, after that initial rejection from Mum—because it felt like Mum rejected us— yeah, it made it a little bit harder [crying] (P7).

Another participant talked about the difficulty of suddenly finding her father's attention divided between her and her stepmother, and not being able to share the things they had previously done together,

I'd got kind of used to having quality time with Dad. But quite often if I was there during the weekend then my stepmum would be there as well, so it sort of changed the dynamic that you have ... We'd sort of do different things if she's there, and I guess just not being the focus of Dad's attention—so it's sort of divided ... I would occasionally feel a little bit left out (P1).

Another participant talked about missing the one-on-one time she used to have with her father and how this interrupted talking with her dad about the divorce and about her mother,

We just wanted to see Dad. We didn't hate her or anything—we just didn't really like having to see her as well. She was always there, and we couldn't talk to our father or anything—like we couldn't talk about Mum and the divorce ... And we didn't have much time with Dad—just us. It was only by chance if my stepmum went out with a friend or something (P22).

Nine participants talked about not wanting to stay with the father because of the difficult relationship they had with the stepmother. Some participants did stop living with or spending time with the father because of this,

I tried to discuss it with him—that I didn't want to stay there if she was going to be there—and that didn't go down well because he felt that it meant I didn't want to see him ... And so as I got older, instead of kind of sticking with the routine, I just kind of decided to get out when I could. So from about 16 I stopped staying there (P5).

Another participant, who regularly stayed with her father every second weekend and during the holidays for about nine years, stopped when she was in her mid-teens because she did not like her stepmother,

I remember I just avoided going there by saying "oh, I have study to do. I can't come." And that turned into, "I'm not coming. I'm not 18 yet, but I don't want to stay anymore. I've had enough." And I just sort of gave up going there (P14).

Hence, some participants felt that the stepmother disrupted the relationship with the father because she took up the father's time, which meant he spent less time with them. In some cases, stepchildren perceived the stepmother took their place beside their father, and some stepchildren stopped visiting their father because of the negative relationship with the stepmother.

### **Poor communication**

Eight participants talked about their father's (and sometimes their stepmother's and mother's) poor communication about such changes as the stepmother moving in, or being pregnant, or the father and stepmother separating.

Participants thought fathers could have talked to them more about how they were feeling about the stepmother. One participant recalled how his father ...

never really spoke to us about how we thought or how we felt. So he could have dealt with the situation better or communicated more to us, because he just thinks it will eventually just go away if you ignore it. So yeah, he could have communicated better (P15).

The following participant had a mostly positive relationship with her stepmother until, when she was in her late teens, the couple separated. She remained very upset that neither her father nor her stepmother told her they were separating. Her stepmother moved overseas shortly afterwards. Despite a very positive relationship with her stepmother she now feels angry and resentful towards her for not talking with her at the time about the separation and moving, or discussing it subsequently,

Like I can imagine if they'd just sat us down and told us what was going on and explained things to us—how she was moving overseas—we probably would have continued to have a good relationship with her, definitely, rather than trying to figure it out for ourselves (P25).

In summary, two-thirds of participants thought they had less time with the father after the stepmother moved in. Some participants stopped living with the father or visited him less because of the negative relationship with the stepmother. Some participants also thought fathers, stepmothers and mothers failed to communicate effectively with them about upcoming changes, which made changes seem sudden and adjusting more difficult.

### **Torn loyalties**

Twenty-four participants talked about experiencing divided loyalties that complicated the relationship with the stepmother. Participants experienced conflicting loyalties between the stepmother and the non-residential mother, between the father and stepmother, and between the father and non-residential mother (which often involved the stepmother). Participants also referred to loyalty issues related to the mutual child or their stepmother's own children.

### **Mother and stepmother**

Sixteen participants talked about experiencing some ongoing loyalty conflicts between their stepmother and their mother, especially in the initial stages. This was exacerbated by several issues including: stepmothers and mothers being critical and jealous of each other, children blaming stepmothers for their parents' separation, their mother's unhappiness after the separation, and children feeling guilty and disloyal if they befriended the stepmother.

Several participants recalled feeling resentful towards their stepmother and feeling ambivalent about forming a relationship with her because they blamed her, fully or in part, for their parents' separation. The following participant said that her stepmother's arrival signified for her that her parents' separation was final. Because she blamed the

stepmother for her parents' separation she did not want to have a relationship with her, although in later years they became quite close.

It was because, like, Mum and Dad had separated but they were still together, but just, like, a mutual agreement to have some time apart. But that's when my dad met my stepmother ... And I didn't want to meet her because when I was that young I was, like, oh, I want my parents to get back together. So I always saw her as the person who took my dad away from my family (P8).

Other participants feared that their stepmother was trying to replace their mother. The following participant's parents shared joint custody. Initially she had a very difficult relationship with the stepmother because she felt very loyal to her mother. She remembered seeing her stepmother as a threat, thinking that her stepmother was trying to replace her mother. As a young child she was very resistant to having a relationship with her,

When I first met her it was really tough for me. I was upset my parents were getting divorced and I didn't want them to separate. But once I realised Dad was seeing someone else, that was that. I think in my eight-year-old mentality I had the thoughts that she was trying to replace my mum and I didn't want to have anything to do with her (P16).

Some participants also found it difficult to see their mother's unhappiness after the separation, and this increased their sense of loyalty towards her. The following participant had a mostly negative relationship with her stepmother, which was in part because the relationship had started as an affair.

Well, I knew the reason why my parents split was because of her. Because I think they were having an affair, and so I hated her right from the beginning. And whether or not she was nice I didn't care. All my loyalties were with my mum because Mum was really upset about the whole thing (P13).

Another participant walked in on her mother crying after she had just found out her ex-husband had a girlfriend. Because of this the daughter felt very loyal to her mother and did not want to have a relationship with the stepmother.

I remember I woke up because I saw a light on, and I went out into the kitchen and my mum was sitting there crying, and I was, like, “Oh, what’s wrong?” and she was, like, “Oh, your dad’s got a new girlfriend now.” And seeing my mum so upset, you know, I just didn’t want a part of it. I didn’t want to meet her (P8).

It was only in her teens, after her mother passed away, that she developed a close and supportive relationship with her stepmother.

Some participants also found it difficult when the mother was critical of the stepmother, which increased their cautiousness about developing a relationship with her. One participant explained that her mother’s criticism of her stepmother in the first few years led her to keep her distance from the stepmother. It was only in her late teens that she developed a positive and supportive relationship with her stepmother, although sometimes she still feels conflicted about the relationship,

Mum used to always say bad stuff about her so that kind of made me go on Mum’s side in a way and not like her ... Mum had negative comments about her all the time and I think that’s had a long-term effect. Even now there’s still a bit of me wanting to keep my distance from her—you know, questioning is what Mum said correct or not (P9)?

The following participant had a similar experience. She described how her initial resistance to building a relationship with her stepmother was in part due to her mother’s criticism of her,

My mum made it difficult as well, because she wasn’t too fond of my dad having a new girlfriend and so she was the one that was, like, you don’t call her “Mum.” And she definitely made critical comments and said things, as a parent, you probably shouldn’t say in front of a kid ... I definitely sided with my mum (P1).

Some participants talked about feeling guilty when they started to befriend or like their stepmother because of loyalty to their mother. The following participant’s mother and stepmother were initially friendly to each other and did not criticise each other. However, she still felt uncomfortable when she began to develop a relationship

with her stepmother. She still felt the possibility that forming a bond with the stepmother would hurt her mother's feelings,

Yeah I think I did feel guilty about it at first, and probably for a while. Like I think a lot of people feel guilty when their parents separate and they start getting a relationship with the other stepparent. I probably still will feel guilty actually, like when I start having kids or whatever. I think I still feel like my mum should come first—I should always ask her to baby-sit first (P23).

Some participants also found it difficult when their stepmother appeared jealous or critical of their mother. Two participants talked about stepmothers asking them inappropriate questions about their mothers. One participant was too young when her stepmother moved in to realise that the questions she was asking about her mother were inappropriate. But as she got older the questioning led to resentment and rejection of the stepmother,

She would ask really inappropriate questions. Like, how much she earns, how much she spends a week on groceries, and stuff like that. And how can she afford to do certain things. Like, I think she wanted to feel superior to my mum, and, like, knowing that she can afford to do things that my mum can't (P6).

Another participant felt caught between her mother and stepmother's criticism of each other,

I mean, it was really frustrating. She would say stuff about my mum—just real inappropriate things. But as much as I didn't agree with what my stepmum was doing, it wasn't right for my mum to say things about her either, especially to me ... It upset me a lot because I couldn't say anything and I felt like I was being put in the middle. It just didn't seem fair (P11).

Hence loyalty issues between their stepmother and their mother were difficult. Most participants felt a loyalty to the mother and a sense that she should come first, which meant that initially some participants consciously kept their distance from their stepmothers. This conflict of loyalties was exacerbated by mothers' and stepmothers' criticism of each other, by stepchildren blaming the stepmother for the separation,



and by the witnessing of the mother's unhappiness because of the separation. This issue often resulted in children feeling confused about how they should be with the stepmother and feeling guilty if they did befriend the stepmother.

### **Dad and stepmother**

Eleven participants perceived experiencing their father's loyalties as problematically divided between their stepmothers and themselves. Participants perceived that problems with split loyalties arose from: their stepmothers' jealousy of themselves and their siblings, feeling that their father did not support them when conflicts arose with their stepmother, and feeling left out and jealous of their father's relationship with their stepmother. Some participants also thought their fathers did not support them to develop good relationships with their stepmother and made excuses for their stepmother's irrational behaviour.

Four participants thought that their stepmother deliberately got between themselves and their father because she was jealous of their relationship. Some participants thought their stepmother competed with them for their father's attention. The following participant recalls how her stepmother came between her and her father,

She used to be super jealous of my relationship with Dad, which I always found a bit weird. She used to say that Dad put us first all the time, and I think she found that quite hard to deal with. I didn't really think he was putting us first, but she did. She used to get angry—like she didn't like me sitting next to him on the couch. And if I asked him for help with my homework she would get in a really angry mood or she'd turn up the TV really loud or storm off to her room (P15).

Several participants also recalled feeling a sense of betrayal when their father supported their stepmother in a disagreement or conflict. One participant, who had a

mostly negative relationship with her stepmother, said that her dad should have been more supportive,

When it comes to my stepmum, like, sometimes she makes like catty little comments and sometimes Dad would be there and hear. And if she had a problem with something to do with, like, my sister and I, Dad would kind of, like, back her up immediately. I was kind of, like, come on Dad, I'm your child not hers. Yeah, he would just seem to care more about her ... Yeah, he did seem to care more about what her opinions were and what her interests were like over how I felt (P20).

Hence, this participant thought that by her father supporting the stepmother he was being disloyal to her and she thought this meant that the father cared more about the stepmother than about her.

Another participant felt that her father made excuses for her stepmother's behaviour,

He wouldn't stand up for us or himself. And it would be like she's stressed because she's got exams, or she's stressed because she's pregnant, or we're building a house—like, there was always something and it was always Dad making excuses for her (P11).

Hence participants thought that the father was disloyal when he did not support them in a conflict with the stepmother.

The participant who suffered on-going physical abuse talked about his deep sense of betrayal at his father's failure to intervene to protect him,

He'd take her side over anyone else. I don't think he ever stuck up for me ... I was about seven or eight when the beatings started happening (P4).

A few participants also reported being jealous of their stepmother's relationship with their father, they thought the stepmother took up too much of their father's time, preventing them from having enough time together. One participant recalled,

Yeah, I was annoyed because me and my dad, we were really close ... I used to get to a point where I used to get jealous of their relationship. And because I was the only kid left with Dad, so I always felt left out (P13).

Another recalled,

My brother said that when I was little, apparently I used to try and separate their hands. My dad would hold her hand all the time (P15).

And another remembered meeting her stepmother for the first time:

To be honest, I was a little bit jealous. I wanted Dad to myself ... And I never used to want to go and see him after that because I think I was jealous of not having Dad to myself (P9).

Several participants thought the father could have done much more to help them overcome conflict in their relationship with their stepmother and to build a good relationship with her.

When I asked another participant whether her father had supported her in nurturing her relationship with her stepmother, she told me that:

He was useless. I don't think it was because he didn't want to. It's he just didn't know how. And because he was never at home to deal with any of that—so he just left us to our own devices and hoped that no one would come back dead (P13).

Hence, just under half of the participants experienced loyalty conflicts between the father and the stepmother. Some participants thought the stepmother was jealous of their relationship with the father and deliberately came between them. Other participants thought the father was disloyal to them when he supported the stepmother in a disagreement or made excuses for her behaviour. Other stepchildren said they felt jealous of the stepmother and the father's relationship and this left them feeling left out.

#### **Mutual child and stepmother's children**

Fourteen participants perceived inconsistencies in their stepmother's treatment of them compared to her treatment of her own children (mutual children and

stepsiblings). Some participants thought the stepmother treated her own children better or differently from them, and some thought that this interfered with their attempts to develop a good relationship with their stepsiblings or half-siblings. Two participants felt that the father also favoured the mutual child over themselves.

One participant talked about noticing that her stepmother treated her half-brother differently and that this made her feel less a part of the family than she'd felt before he was born,

He was the favourite amongst us three and that became hard with just little things. Like, she made his lunch every day and she had specific things that she gave him for lunch that we weren't allowed (P18).

Another participant recounted tearfully what she saw as a very clear and stark example of her half-sister receiving preferential treatment,

I remember losing out a lot to my younger sister ... They had a big walk-in pantry and it would be pretty full, with lots of clear jars and things like sweets and crisps and crackers and things that as a child you're, like, fantastic! And I remember being told really explicitly that they were my little sister's and I didn't get them ever ... It felt quite deliberate, like putting me in my place—this is where you are in the family (P3).

The following participant had a good relationship with his stepmother initially, and recalled that she treated him as if he were her own child. However, once his half-brother was born he thought that the stepmother withdrew her attention and care from him. He described later in the interview how he thought she became deliberately discriminating towards him,

So he was born and then it started getting a bit different. Like, obviously there was no concentration on me anymore and, like, she wasn't nice to me anymore. Like, she used to give me things and tried to treat me like I was her own, but then afterwards, not at all (P4).

He goes on to describe one incident that was particularly poignant to recall,

Like, I remember this one time when Power Rangers were real popular. She came home from shopping and she said, "I just brought your brother a few pairs of Power Ranger undies, and you don't get any" (P4).

Another participant, who had a mostly positive relationship with the stepmother, also talked about her stepmother favouring her own child (her step-brother). When her son was around the stepmother ignored not only her stepchild, but the father as well. The participant thought this interfered significantly in their relationship,

It's a problem when her son is there. She gives him a lot of attention and tends to ignore Dad and us. So I always felt like our relationship had to develop, like outside of when her son's been around ... She just ignores everything else to look after her son (P7).

In summary, for several participants, relationships with their stepmothers were adversely affected by the perceived preferential treatment by stepmothers of their own children. When the mutual child was born, some stepchildren thought the stepmother's behaviour changed such that she withdrew her attention, preferred the mutual child, and sometimes deliberately discriminated against them. This was often experienced as a difficult transition for the stepchildren, leading them to feel they had lost their place in the family.

### **Parents (and stepmother)**

Thirteen participants recalled feeling torn between their separated parents, a conflict that often involved the stepmother. Participants perceived that divided loyalties towards their parents were exacerbated by the parents' continual conflict and criticism of each other. Participants perceived that they were used as a go-between in communication with parents, and some participants recalled being asked to choose where to live or who they supported in an argument. Participants talked about sometimes feeling caught in the middle of the parental conflict, that attendance at

family events was made difficult, and that drop-offs and pick-ups were sometimes fraught with difficulty. Continual conflict between parents made adjusting to the stepfamily situation difficult and the stepmother often became involved in the conflict, compounding the difficulties in building a relationship with her.

One participant recalled an awkward situation in which the stepmother believed that the participant's father was putting off marriage to her by stalling over the finalisation of his divorce. The mother then involved the stepchild in the dispute by asking her to pass on signed divorce papers to the stepmother,

I think she wanted to get married, but my dad wouldn't divorce my mother. And then my mum actually gave me a signed copy of the divorce papers to give to her so that she could see that it wasn't my mum refusing not to get divorced, it was my father (P17).

Another participant talked about a conflict that arose on one occasion when her mother came to pick her up from her father's. The participant recalled that her parents were having a conflict and as a result the father had said she couldn't go and stay at her mother's. The stepmother was left to enforce this decision, and refused to let the stepchild go with her mother,

Mum was coming to pick us up and my stepmum said no, because apparently Dad had said I couldn't ... And my stepmum invited the neighbour over in case my mum would come over. And they got in this huge argument and my mum tried to pick us up and I think my stepmum threatened to call the police. And my mum was saying you have to come with me and she was saying no. We were, like, what do we do? And it was some dispute between Mum and Dad (P18).

A few participants perceived that they were asked to choose sides in parents' arguments. This placed children in a very difficult position and left them feeling torn between parents. One participant described being caught in the middle and feeling this was an unfair thing for parents to do to a child,

I felt like I was being put in the middle, and I didn't think that I should have to choose between my parents—it just didn't seem fair. I definitely felt put in the middle at some points (P18).

A few participants talked about being used as a go-between for parents communicating with each other. This was often because parents were fighting or refused to talk to each other. The following participant said that she often had to relay information between her parents because of continuing conflict (in which the stepmother has become involved),

There are still things they don't speak to each other about. Like, I still tell my dad things from my mum and he still tells me things for her to know. It's really annoying. And as we've gotten older my stepmum has got involved too, which has made it worse (P23).

For a few participants, school events were made awkward by their parents' and stepmothers' continuing conflict with each other. Children felt that they had to invite family members to different nights of the concert, or try to pay equal amounts of attention to each family group if they attended on the same night. The following participant recalled her solution to the awkwardness of school events,

At that time Mum and Dad could hardly be in the room together, and it was even worse when you had my mum's parents there as well. So it was always putting them on separate nights for the school concerts and that sort of thing (P25).

Another participant talked about using the conflicts between her parents and stepmother to her advantage,

If I was arguing with Dad I'd ring up Mum and tell her. And then sometimes, if I was arguing with Mum, I'd ring the other mum—and then it was just one big argument and all three of them got involved (P24).

In summary, for many participants, continuing conflict between stepfamily members was a source of stress. Loyalty issues appeared to further hinder participants' abilities to develop positive relationships with their stepmothers.



## Chapter Five: Plot Analysis of Graphs

### Change in relationship over time

This section will examine participants' perspectives of the development of the quality of their relationships with stepmothers over time. At the conclusion of the interviews participants drew a line depicting the development of the quality of the relationship with the stepmother (on Axis Y), against time (on Axis X) (as discussed in the methods section p. 55). As participants completed the graph, they highlighted any experiences that led to significant changes or turning points in the quality of the relationship.

The graphs were then examined and put into groups according to the general type of narrative progression depicted (Lieblich et al., 1998). These were also reviewed with my supervisor. Five general developmental progressions were identified. These were titled Positive, Progressive, Decline and recovery, Regressive and Consistently poor.

In the following section, the different types of narrative progressions are presented along with a general description of each narrative type. Two participant graphs that represent the basic trajectory of each narrative group are presented. In addition, brief descriptions of the demographic properties of each group are reported with a comment on any patterns or trends. (It is not possible, however, to draw any conclusions from this information, given the small number of participants). The experiences and themes that led to changes in relationship quality within each narrative type are then discussed, along with the degree of change in the quality of the relationship, from Chapter One to Chapter Three.

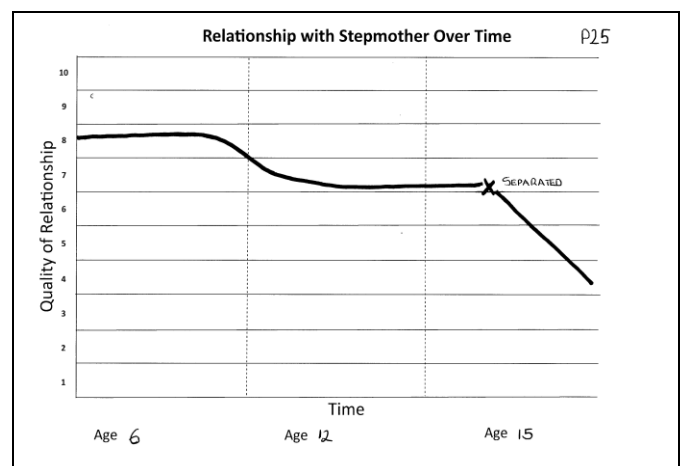
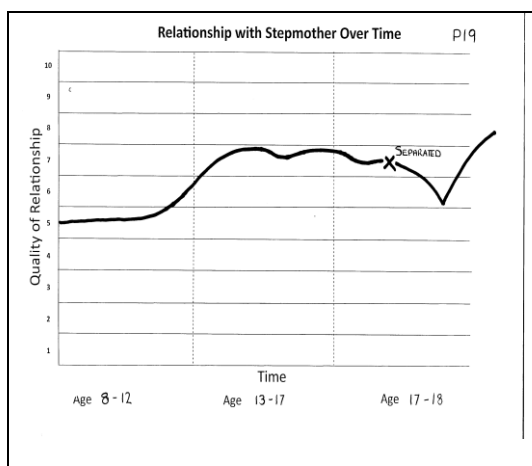
Following this, the common experiences in relationships with stepmothers associated with positive or negative inclines/declines or turning points in the quality of the relationship across all narrative types are examined.

This study interviewed young adult stepchildren who thought the stepmother played a significant role in their lives. For nine participants the stepfamily couple had separated some time before the interview, often in their late teens. Analysis of the narrative progressions were done up until the time of the separation, however participants' discussion of the relationship post-separation is included in the narrative analysis.

### Relationship development over time

#### Positive narratives

Three participants' relationships with stepmothers were characterised by a positive trend over time relative to other participants' relationships. Relationships started quite positively and, in general, continued to improve and be experienced positively throughout, though with some fluctuations in quality over time.



Figures 1 and 2. Positive narratives

Table 3  
*Participant Demographics, Positive Narratives*

P. No.	Gender	Age at parental separation	Age at meeting stepmother	Years in stepfamily	Step-couple still in relationship	Age at stepcouple separation	Stepmother children	Mutual children
P10	M	4	6	8	No	14	No	Yes
P19	F	5	8	10	No	18	No	No
P25	F	6	6	10	No	16	Yes	No
Mean	--	5	7.3	9.3	--	17	--	--

Participants were aged 6 to 8 years when they met their stepmothers; two were female and one male (see Table 3). Participants spent an average of nine years in the stepfamily (between 8 and 10). One participant's mother was largely absent due to having a mental illness. The three stepfamily couples in this narrative group had separated at the time of the interview.

Participants were initially very accepting of the stepmother in the first chapter, which they attributed to the stepmother being someone new and exciting and "nice" to them. Two participants said that being young (the stepchild) made it easier for them to accept the stepmother. For one participant, the stepmother replaced his absent mother and when his brother (mutual child) was born, he saw this as a further opportunity to have a sense of family.

Over time, during Chapter Two and Chapter Three, participants perceived that increased contact with the stepmother resulted in them getting to know her better and forming a more positive relationship with her. All participants in this narrative group recalled appreciating the practical and emotional support from the stepmother, and thought the stepmother contributed to a sense of family, which included their father's sense of happiness. Participants mentioned that attributes such as the stepmother being a good parent, being young and fun, having a "cool" house, and

doing activities with them contributed to the positive relationship. Participants mentioned aspects of the stepmother's personality such as being warm, friendly, nice, affectionate, and like a big sister or aunt, which helped them to build a positive relationship with her. Participants perceived that over time the stepfamily settled into a more familiar routine. Participants in this narrative group recalled less conflict due to the stepmother disciplining them or monitoring their behaviour than participants in the other four narrative groups. It appeared that stepmothers in this group tended not to discipline stepchildren directly and left disciplining to the father.

Participants did report some experiences that made it difficult, at times, to have a positive relationship with the stepmother, including difficulties adjusting to stepfamily living, difficult aspects of the stepmother's personality, loyalty issues between the mother and stepmother, and parental conflict.

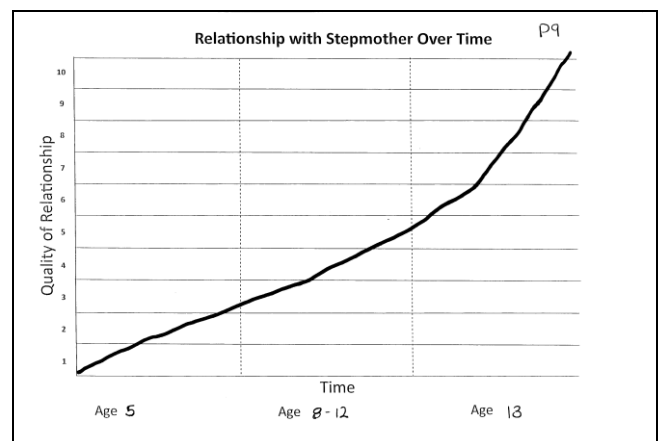
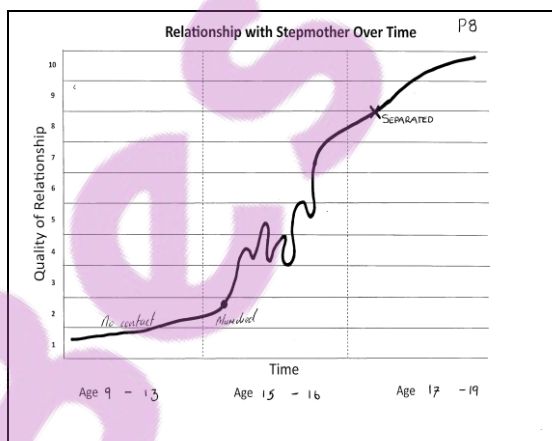
Three stepfamily couples in this narrative group had separated, however two participants continued to have a positive relationship with the stepmother. One participant (P19) continues to have regular contact, describing the relationship now as very positive, close and supportive. She considers the stepmother someone she can refer to for advice and talk with about personal issues. One other participant (P10) still visits the stepmother overseas, and considers it a close relationship despite the limited contact. The final participant (P25) said that because of poor communication after the separation and her stepmother moving overseas, they now have a very poor relationship with minimal contact. This appeared to be the only case among the separated stepfamily couples in the study where the decline in the quality of the relationship was directly attributed, by the participant, to the stepfamily couples

separation. That is, prior to the separation, the stepmother-stepchild relationship was positive, but because of the lack of communication from the stepmother and father about the separation, and also because of the stepmother moving overseas, the stepchild now considers the relationship poor.

In terms of the change in the quality of relationship over time from Chapter One to Chapter Three (before the stepfamily couples' separation), all participants rated the quality of the relationship between six and seven on the Y axis. For one participant the quality of the relationship improved by three points from Chapter One to Chapter Three, for one participant by two points and for the other participant the quality of the relationship decreased by approximately one and a half points by the time of the separation of the stepfamily couple.

### Progressive narratives

Seven participants' relationships with stepmothers were characterised by a positive trend over time. Although relationships started negatively or were of poor quality initially, over time they developed positively and by Chapter Three all relationships were positive. One participant's relationship only improved in the last chapter when she was a young adult.



Figures 3 and 4. Progressive narratives

Table 4  
*Participant Demographics, Progressive Narratives*

P. No.	Gender	Age at parental separation	Age at meeting stepmother	Years in Stepfamily	Stepcouple still in relationship	Age at stepcouple separation	Stepmother children	Mutual children
P5	F	4	6	13	Yes		Yes	No
P7	F	15	16	5	Yes		Yes	No
P8	F	3	9	8	No	17	Yes	No
P9	F	4	5	17	Yes		Yes	Yes
P13	F	13	13	11	Yes		No	Yes
P16	F	8	8	13	Yes		No	No
P22	F	10	10	8	Yes		No	No
Mean	--	8.1	9.6	10.7	--	--	--	--

Participants were aged 5 to 16 years when they met their stepmothers and all participants in this narrative group were female. In general, participants in this group tended to be older, but three were under 10 years old when they met the stepmother. Participants spent an average of 11 years in the stepfamily (between 5 and 17). One of the stepfamily couples in this group had separated at the time of the interview. Three of the participants' mothers in this group were largely absent due to mental illness, death and the stepchild choosing not to spend much time with the mother because of a conflicted relationship with her stepfather.

Participants in this narrative group expressed reluctance to develop a relationship with the stepmother in the first chapter, which was due in part to the stepmother signifying for them that the separation between their parents was final. In two cases, participants blamed the stepmother for the parents' separation due to a pre-existing affair. Four participants also said that loyalty to mothers stopped them wanting to have a relationship with stepmothers.

Over time, participants perceived that increased contact with the stepmother resulted in them getting to know the stepmother and appreciating her positive qualities.

Participants described stepmothers who were emotionally and practically supportive and contributed to a sense of family for them. Positive attributes of the stepmother, which participants identified included being young and interesting, not disciplining them, being able to discuss differences of opinion and not making big changes in the household. These all helped them build a positive relationship with the stepmother. Participants also mentioned positive personality traits such as being easy-going, flexible, calm, trustworthy, and compassionate and having a positive outlook, which helped them build a positive relationship with her. Participants also thought that as they got older and more mature in attitude this enabled them to have a better relationship with their stepmothers.

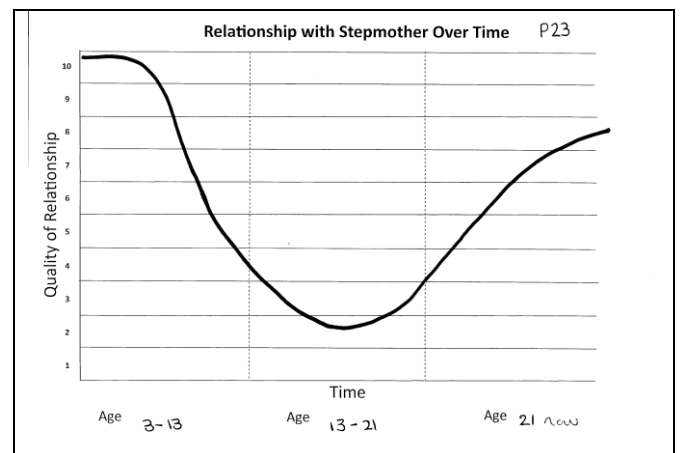
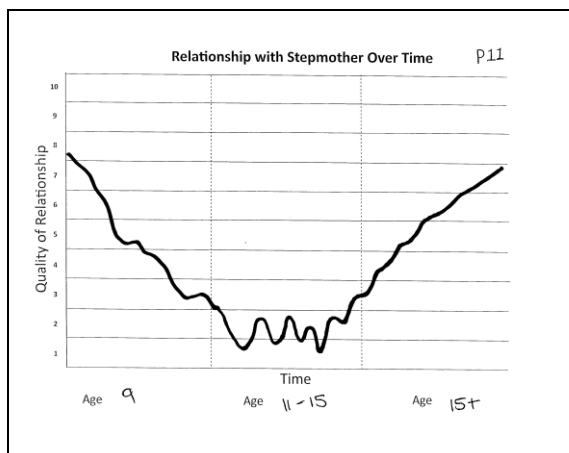
Participants said that while they did develop a positive relationship with the stepmother, there were things that made this difficult, including difficulties adjusting to stepfamily living, aspects of the stepmother's personality, the stepmother favouring the mutual child, and mother-stepmother and parental conflict.

Five participants (including P8 whose father and stepmother had separated) continued to have regular contact with the stepmother at the time of the interview. Four of these participants described the relationship now as very positive, close and supportive. They considered the stepmother someone they referred to for advice, whom they can talk to about personal issues, and who is supportive or a best friend. The other participant described the relationship as improving because of her putting more effort into the relationship with her stepmother after her father became unwell. One participant has limited contact with the stepmother because she has moved to a different city, but she still considers the relationship positive. The other participant's

relationship has improved significantly, but still remains relatively formal and conversation is centred on the grandchildren and mutual children. By the end of Chapter Three, four participants rated the quality of the relationship above eight, two rated the quality above six and one participant rated the quality at five on the Y axis. On average, the quality of the relationships increased approximately six points from Chapter One to Chapter Three.

### **Narratives of decline and recovery**

Six participants experienced a decline in the quality of the relationship with the stepmother around the second chapter. In general, the relationships started well, declined in the second chapter, and then recovered to a good level by the end of Chapter Three.



*Figures 5 and 6. Narratives of Decline and recovery*



Table 5  
*Participant Demographics, Decline and Recovery Narratives*

P. No.	Gender	Age at parental separation	Age at meeting stepmother	Years in stepfamily	Stepcouple still in relationship	Stepmother children	Mutual children
P1	F	3	4	16	Yes	No	No
P11	F	9	9	11	Yes	No	Yes
P18	F	3	5	16	Yes	No	Yes
P20	F	8	8	11	Yes	No	Yes
P23	F	3	3	19	Yes	No	No
P24	F	1	4	14	Yes	No	Yes
Mean	--	4.5	5.5	14.5	--	--	--

Participants in this narrative group tended to meet the stepmother at a younger age, between ages 3 and 9 years, and all were female. The stepfamily tended to be together for a longer time relative to the other groups — on average 14.5 years (between 11 and 19). None of the stepfamily couples had separated.

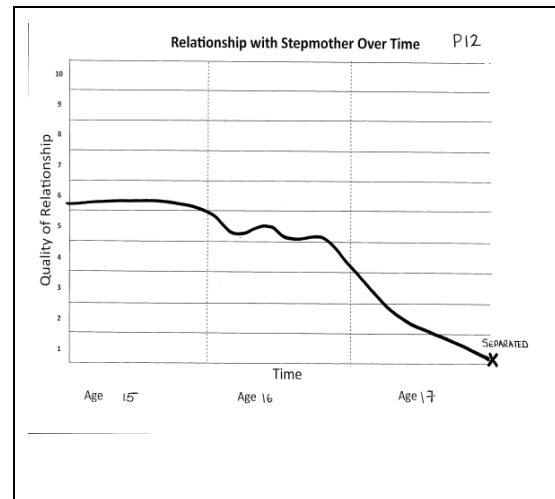
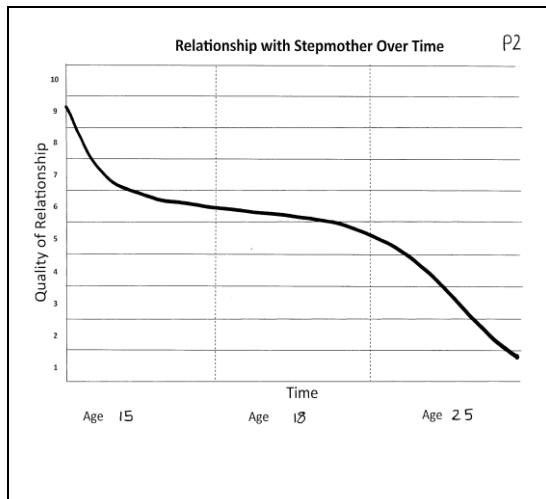
In general, participants were accepting of the stepmother initially because of the stepchild being young, seeing the stepmother as someone new and exciting, and the stepmother being nice. During the middle chapter, participants experienced a decline in relationship quality due to them entering adolescence and stepmothers becoming more involved in disciplining them. Participants said that being an adolescent they had more conflict with adults in general and they were more resentful of the stepmother's attempts to discipline them. The birth of a mutual child, and the stepmother favouring them over the stepchildren, also impacted adversely on relationships. Participants also talked about aspects of the stepmothers' personality, such as lack of warmth, being uptight, lack of empathy, moodiness, and being controlling and critical, that made building a positive relationship with her difficult. This was mainly an issue during the period of decline.

In the final chapter, participants said that the relationship had recovered due to several experiences in the relationship with the stepmother. Participants perceived that because they were older and more mature they became more appreciative of the stepmother and they valued the support that she offered. Participants also said that they had a more adult relationship with the stepmother. They were able to have more fun with her because of the stepmother no longer having a role of authority with them. Participants also said that being older meant they could come and go as they pleased and visit or stay with the father and stepmother when they wanted to, which took some of the tension out of the relationship.

Five of the participants continued to have regular contact with the stepmother and father and have a positive or mostly positive relationship with her. One participant has a relatively superficial relationship with the stepmother. At the end of Chapter Three, participants rated the quality of the relationship between six and 10 on the Y axis. On average, the quality of the relationship dropped approximately four points in the middle chapter before recovering.

### **Regressive narratives**

Five participants' relationships with stepmothers were characterised as regressive over time. In general, relationships started well, but gradually declined and most participants had very little or no contact with the stepmother by the time of the interview.



Figures 7 and 8. Regressive narratives

Table 6

Participant Demographics, Regressive Narratives

P. No.	Gender	Age at parental separation	Age at meeting stepmother	Years in Stepfamily	Stepcouple still in relationship	Age at stepcouple separation	Stepmother children	Mutual children
P2	M	14	15	10	Yes		Yes	No
P3	F	2	4	4	No	19	No	Yes
P12	F	10	15	3	No	18	Yes	No
P14	F	7	9	9	Yes		Yes	Yes
P17	F	2	7	5	No	12	Yes	No
Mean		7	10	6.2		16.3		

Note. P3 had no contact with father and stepmother after age 8

Participants in this narrative group were aged 7 to 15 years when they met their stepmother; one was male and five female. Two were adolescents when they met the stepmother. Stepfamilies tended to be together for less time than in the other groups, for an average of six years (between 3 and 10 years). Three of the five stepfamily couples in this group were separated.

In the first chapter participants related that the stepmother initially seemed nice, was someone new and exciting and they found her helpful. As they got to know the stepmother better in the second chapter, the quality of the relationship started to

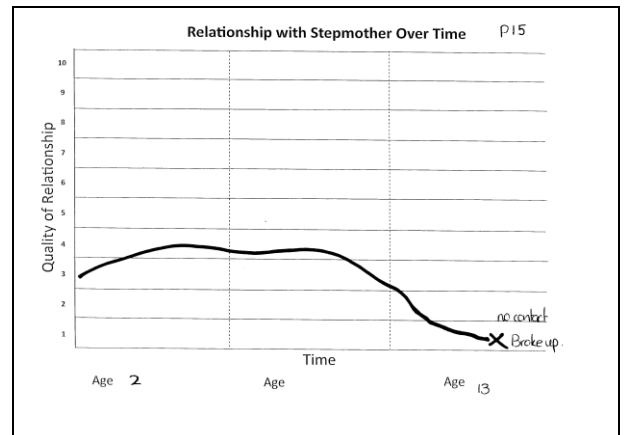
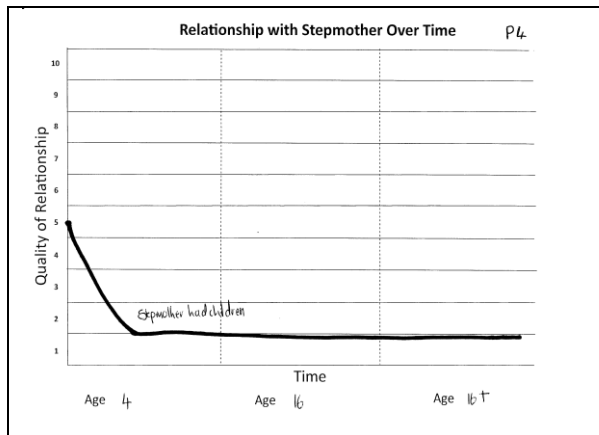
decline because of the stepmother taking more of an active role in disciplining stepchildren and setting chores. Two participants also described how, after the birth of the mutual children, the stepmother favoured the mutual child and was less attentive to them. Participants perceived that they received little emotional support from the stepmother, although they reported receiving a similar amount of practical support as participants in the other narrative groups. Participants perceived aspects of the stepmothers' personality, such as being cruel, irrational, cold, aggressive, controlling, insensitive and critical affected their ability to develop a relationship with her. All participants said that they stopped visiting the stepmother before the end of Chapter Three (and prior to the separation) because they did not like her and had a poor relationship with her.

All participants have very limited or no contact with the stepmother now and described the relationship as poor or non-existent. Participants in this group whose stepmother and father had separated said that relationships with the stepmother had declined prior to the separation and as a result they had stopped visiting the stepmother. Participants did not comment about conflictive relationships between the stepmother and father impacting on their relationship with the stepmother before the separation. All participants rated the quality of the relationship now at equal to or less than one on the Y axis and, on average, the quality of the relationship fell approximately six points from Chapter One to Chapter Three.

### **Consistently poor narratives**

Four participants had consistently poor quality relationships with their stepmothers. The relationships started badly and continued to be experienced negatively throughout. Participants had very little contact or no contact with the stepmother at

the time of the interview due to the deterioration in the quality of the relationship by the end of Chapter Three.



Figures 9 and 10. Consistently poor narratives

Table 7

Participant Demographics, Consistently Poor Narratives

P. No.	Gender	Age at parental separation	Age at meeting stepmother	Years in Stepfamily	Stepcouple still in relationship	Age at stepcouple separation	Stepmother children	Mutual children
P4	M	3	4	12	Yes		No	Yes
P6	M	13	13	10	Yes		No	Yes
P15	F	2	2	16	No	18	No	No
P21	F	4	4	15	No	19	No	Yes
Mean	--	5.5	5.8	13.3	--	18.5	--	--

Note. P4 had no contact with stepmother after age 16 years

Participants were aged between 2 and 13 years when they met their stepmother; two were male and two were female. One participant was an adolescent when they met the stepmother. Stepfamilies were together for an average of 13 years (between 10 and 16). Two mothers were largely absent due in one case to the father having full custody, while in the other the mother had had an accident causing severe physical injuries and she also suffered from depression. Two of the four stepfamily couples in this group were separated.

Participants in this narrative group perceived that aspects of the stepmother's personality most significantly impacted on their ability to develop a relationship with her. Participants described the stepmothers as dysfunctional. One participant said the stepmother was an alcoholic, one was physically and emotionally abusive, one was described as "irrational and volatile" — regularly threatening to leave with the mutual child, and the other participant described her stepmother as a cruel and "evil stepmother." Participants recalled other aspects of the stepmother's personality, such as lack of warmth, moodiness, aggressiveness, being critical, controlling, insensitive, uptight and rude, which affected their ability to develop a relationship with her. Participants talked about finding it difficult to form a positive relationship with the stepmother and, although the stepmother was supportive in some practical ways, no participant in this group recalled receiving emotional support from the stepmother. Stepchildren thought the stepmother should not discipline them and should leave authority in the hands of the father. The stepmothers' attempts to discipline and monitor their behaviour resulted in anger and resentment, adversely affecting the relationship. Three participants perceived that the stepmother favoured the mutual child and was less attentive to them, which adversely affected the relationship.

All participants have very limited or no contact with the stepmother now and they described the relationship as poor or non-existent. Three participants said that they stopped visiting the stepmother before the end of Chapter Three because they did not like her and had a poor relationship with her. One participant continued to see the stepmother infrequently when he visited his father. Participants whose stepmother and father had separated reported that the relationship had declined to such a level prior to the separation that they had stopped visiting her, in some cases years before

the separation. Participants did not comment whether prior to the separation conflict between the stepfamily couples affected their relationship with the stepmother. All participants rated the quality of the relationship now between zero and three on the Y axis and, on average, the quality of the relationship fell approximately two points from Chapter One to Chapter Three.

### **Positive inclines, declines and turning points**

The following section will review those experiences that were perceived by participants as leading to a significant change or turning point in the quality of relationships with stepmothers.

#### **Stepmother's role in discipline**

Eleven participants commented that early in the relationship contact with the stepmother was infrequent or the stepmother took more of a back seat and did not try to parent or discipline them, which had a positive impact on the relationship. Participants perceived that this meant the stepmother's arrival had less impact on them and it was easier to accept her.

Participants commented that as they spent more time in the stepfamily some stepmothers began to take a more active parental role including discipline, which participants resented and this led to a decline in the quality of the relationship. Most participants perceived that the stepmother disciplining them was inappropriate and the main disciplinary role should stay with the father. In response to the stepmother's attempts to discipline them, stepchildren felt angry and resentful and this adversely affected the quality of the stepmother-stepchild relationship.

**Resentment due to parental separation**

Overall, six participants said that realising the parents separation was final was a significant factor in their negative attitude towards the stepmother in the first chapter. Four of these participants' stepmothers and fathers had a pre-existing relationship. Three of these participants also said that loyalty to the mother was a significant factor that impacted negatively on the stepmother-stepchild relationship.

**Mutual child**

The birth of a mutual child was also significant for some participants in leading to a decline or incline in the quality of the relationship with the stepmother. For eight participants, the birth of the mutual child led to a decline in the quality of the relationship. This was associated with their perception that the stepmother favoured the mutual child and withdrew attention from them. For some participants, they also perceived that the father favoured the mutual child or failed to intervene when he saw the stepmother doing so. However, for five participants, the birth of the mutual child led to the beginning of a positive change in the relationship because they were excited about having a younger sibling and taking the role of big sister or brother and they saw the mutual child as providing a link with the stepmother. One participant (included in above group had two mutual siblings) found the birth of the first mutual child difficult but over time she began to accept him and she then experienced the birth of the second mutual child positively Participants also said that because the stepmother did not excessively favour the mutual child or withdraw attention from them it made it easier for them to accept the child.



**Age of stepchild**

The age of the stepchild appeared to have an influence on changes in the quality of the relationship with the stepmother. In general, the first chapter was associated with some participants reporting that they were younger and, therefore, accepted the stepmother more easily. This was confirmed by eight participants across the narrative groups. In Chapter Three, growing up (becoming young adults or being in their late adolescence) was identified by thirteen participants as resulting in a positive change in the relationship with the stepmother. Participants perceived that the improved relationship resulted from the stepmother no longer having a role in disciplining them. Their growing maturity also led to an increasing appreciation of the stepmother and the development of a more adult relationship

Nine participants identified the period of adolescence as one of the most significant experiences leading to a decline in the quality of the stepmother-stepchild relationship in Chapter Two. Participants attributed this decreased quality of the relationship to the stepmother becoming more involved in disciplining them while they wanted more independence. They also recalled generally more conflictive relationships with all adults during this time. For all nine participants, the relationship with the stepmother recovered in late or post-adolescence due to the stepmother and stepchild working through the difficulties and the stepmother's decreased involvement in disciplining them as they got older.

**Length of time stepfamily together**

Fifteen participants recalled that at first the stepmother was someone new and exciting, who would take them places or introduce them to new activities, and that this contributed positively to the relationship. These participants also reported that she

seemed nice initially, was helpful and appeared to make an effort in the relationship with them. On the other hand, fifteen participants talked about having difficulty initially adjusting to the changes that came with having a stepmother, including feeling awkward around her because they did not know her.

By Chapter Three, some participants reported that they had got to know the stepmother better and had begun to appreciate her ongoing support and involvement in their lives, which led to an incline in the quality of the relationship. Participants commented that the stepmother had become very important to them and had become another independent adult whom they could confide in and seek support from, and whom they considered part of the family.

Some participant's relationships declined over time. By the end of Chapter Three, nine participants had poor relationships with their stepmother because of conflict in the relationship and in some cases stepchildren had stopped having contact with the stepmother. Stepfamilies in the Regressive group were together a shorter amount of time relative to other groups. Therefore, some relationships improved over the years, given time, others decreased in quality over time.

### **Other significant experiences**

Finally, six participants referred to other significant experiences that resulted in a positive change in the relationship with the stepmother. Two participants recalled that a particular argument with the stepmother was the turning point that led to an improvement in the relationship with the stepmother. In the process of working through the conflict, participants perceived that they began to talk more openly with the stepmother about disagreements and ultimately reach a resolution and this led to

a more open and honest relationship. One participant related that her stepmother's care for her when she was ill made her realise that her stepmother cared, and led to an improvement in the relationship. Another participant recalled that her stepmother's support for her around a mental health issue led her to develop an increased appreciation of her.

Hence several experiences led to an incline or decline in the quality of the relationship with the stepmother, including the stepmother's role in disciplining stepchildren, loyalty to the mother, the birth of the mutual child, the age of the stepchild and the length of time in the stepfamily. The stepchildren's and stepmother's response to these stepfamily processes and experiences also had a significant impact on the relationship.

### **Summary**

Five general developmental progressions were identified and titled Positive, Progressive, Decline and recovery, Regressive and Consistently poor. Participants with Positive, Progressive, and Decline and recovery narratives tended to have more positive relationships with stepmothers by the time of the interview. Experiences identified as contributing to the positive relationship included the stepmother not disciplining stepchildren, and giving both practical and emotional support. Aspects of the stepmother's personality, such as being warm, friendly, sensitive and easy-going, also supported participants in forming a positive relationship with stepmothers. Participants in the Decline and recovery group recalled that adolescence and the stepmother's increased role in disciplining them led to a decline in the quality of the relationship during the middle chapter. However, over time the relationship recovered because of them being older and more appreciative of the stepmother, the

stepmother having less authority over them, and being able to come and go as they pleased.

Participants in two narrative groups, Regressive and Consistently poor, had mostly negative relationships with the stepmother. Participants described experiences such as the stepmother taking an active role in disciplining stepchildren and setting chores and her lack of emotional support making it difficult for them to build a positive relationship with her. Participants also perceived that there were aspects of the stepmother's personality that made it difficult to build a good relationship with her.

Several experiences of the stepmother relationship were associated with improvements or positive turning points in the quality of the relationship. They included stepmothers being someone new and exciting, coming to appreciate the stepmother's positive qualities, stepmothers not being involved in discipline, becoming an older sibling to a mutual child, the stepmother treating stepchildren and mutual children equally, and stepchildren developing a more adult relationship with the stepmother.

Similarly, several experiences were associated with declines or negative turning points in the quality of the relationship with the stepmother. These included realising the parents' separation was final, loyalty to the mother, the stepmother's increased involvement with children including disciplining them, birth of a mutual child, stepmothers favouring mutual children and withdrawing attention from the stepchild, and difficulty adjusting to stepmothers and stepfamily living and adolescence.

## **Chapter Six: Discussion**

This chapter examines the results of this study with reference to previous research regarding stepparent-stepchild relationships, and especially the stepmother-stepchild relationship within the stepfamily system. Implications for clinical practice with stepfamilies are discussed, along with limitations of this research, and implications for future research directions.

### **Development of stepmother-stepchild relationships over time**

As found previously (Hetherington, 2003a), there was considerable variation in the quality and developmental trajectory of stepmother-stepchild relationships in this study. Some stepchildren experienced positive or progressive relationships, some experienced negative or regressive relationships, and some experienced relationships that began positively, declined and recovered. Ganong and Coleman (1995), and Kinniburgh-White et al. (2006) also found that some stepparent-stepchild relationships became closer, some grew more distant, and some changed little over time.

Some young adult stepchildren looked back on the relationship with the stepmother favourably and believed that the stepmother provided, and continues to provide, considerable emotional and practical support in their lives. They described the relationship with the stepmother as positive, warm and supportive. They considered the stepmother someone they could refer to for advice or talk to about personal issues. It supports previous research that suggests, over time, some stepchildren allow the stepmother to play a significant role in their lives, come to consider them part of their family, and regard them as close to mother figures, as friends and mentor's (Crohn, 2010; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). Participants who had good quality

relationships with stepmothers described stepmothers who were friendly and spent time with them.

At the other end of the spectrum are participants who looked back on the relationship with stepmothers with frustration, sadness and sometimes anger. They viewed the history of the relationship in a negative light with little or no improvement over time. The experience of these participants is consistent with previous research findings suggesting that it is not only the length of time together that determines the outcomes in stepmother-stepchild relationships (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Quick et al., 1995; Schmeekle, 2007; Vinick & Lanspery, 2000). Participants who experienced poor quality relationships with stepmothers described aspects of her personality and behaviour that they thought made it difficult to build a relationship with her including being cold, irrational, uptight and controlling. These participants talked about receiving very little emotional support from the stepmother and they reacted strongly to the stepmother's attempts to discipline them and take control of running the house.

### **Narrative trajectories**

Narrative analysis enabled examination of the different forms of relationship development across participants. Given the small sample size it is not possible to draw any conclusions from this information, however trends across participants and how these may relate to previous research findings are discussed.

Three narrative types – Positive, Progressive, and Decline and recovery – showed an overall increase in the quality of the stepmother-child relationship over time. Two-thirds of the participants experienced a more positive relationship with their stepmothers by Chapter Three. This is similar to the findings of both the Kinniburgh-

White et al.'s (2006) study of stepfather-stepchild relationships and Vinick and Lanspery's (2000) study, which found two-thirds of stepmother-stepchildren relationships were stable positive or showed improvement over time, and one-third were stable negative or deteriorated over time. Two narrative types – Consistently poor and Regressive – showed an overall decrease in the quality of participants' experiences of the stepmother-stepchild relationship. One-third of participants experienced a largely negative relationship with stepmothers by Chapter Three. These findings support previous research from longitudinal studies on stepfather-stepchild relationships (Bray & Berger, 1993; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992) and on stepmother-stepchild relationships (Brand et al., 1988; Orchard & Solberg, 1999) with respect to the proportion of relationships that improved and stabilised over time.

### **Experiences affecting relationships with stepmothers**

Thematic and narrative analyses helped identify the common experiences in relationships with stepmothers associated with positive or negative inclines or turning points in the quality of the relationship. The following section reviews participants' perceptions of the experiences that contributed positively to the stepmother-stepchild relationships and those experiences that were difficult and adversely affected the relationship.

The findings will be reviewed in relation to previous research, which has identified the dimensions of support and warmth (including having a supportive personality, open communication and contributing to a sense of family), and control and discipline (including difficulty adjusting to different routines and having a controlling personality), as significant influences on the stepmother-stepchild relationship as

perceived by stepchildren. The impact of experiences of relationships within the stepfamily will also be examined, and finally the influence of stepchildren on the quality of the stepmother-stepchild relationship will be discussed.

### **Relationships with stepmothers and stepmothers role**

#### **Stepmother roles**

The results support previous conclusions by clinicians (Papernow, 2008; Visher et al., 2003) and stepfamily researchers (Bradley, 2006; Coleman et al., 2000; Robertson, 2008) that there is a variety of roles that stepmothers may adopt and that there may be some confusion about the stepparent role. From a stepfamily systems perspective, it highlights that the roles of adults in a stepfamily differ from those in first-marriage families (Coleman et al., 2000; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Participants' perception of the role their stepmothers played varied from seeing her as a somewhat detached person in the background to viewing her as another parent, or as an aunt or a friend, or, in the cases of three of the participants, as a replacement mother. Some stepmothers tried to take on a parenting role and this was problematic for some children. In some cases, this adoption of the parenting role was due to the father working full-time. Other stepmothers' left the disciplining and parenting of the children largely up to the father. Participants reported that they thought it was difficult for the stepmother to move between the role of supportive friend and that of authority figure and disciplinarian. Participants talked about aspects of the parental role, especially in the areas of control and support, which affected the quality of the relationship. This is discussed below.



### **Stepmother support**

One of the strongest themes associated with positive experiences was the importance of practical and emotional support. In general, stepmothers' who were affectionate, friendly, provided comfort when participants were upset, showed an interest in them and gave them attention, formed the strongest bonds. This supports findings that stepparent warmth and emotional support is associated with positive stepparent-stepchild relationships (Baxter et al., 2004; Crosbie-Burnett & Giles-Sims, 1994; Freisthler et al., 2003; Schrodtt, 2006).

Some studies have found that emotional support and warmth of the stepmother may be even more important than practical support in building a good relationship (Baxter et al., 2004; Crosbie-Burnett & Giles-Sims, 1994). This is further supported by the finding that participants with negative relationships with stepmothers in this study, the Consistently poor and Regressive narratives, reported receiving very little or no emotional support from stepmothers, and yet sometimes received a similar amount of practical support as other narrative groups. These results also support findings that stepparents who engage in affinity seeking with stepchildren and do so consistently over time are more likely to have more positive relationships with stepchildren (Ganong et al., 1999). In conclusion, stepchildren report that stepmothers who engage in warm and supportive behaviours that foster a friendship, and who adopt a parenting style high on support and low on controlling behaviours, are more likely to have positive relationships with stepchildren (Coleman et al., 2001; Crosbie-Burnett & Giles-Sims, 1994).

Practical support was identified by several participants as contributing positively to the relationship with the stepmother, which is consistent with previous findings by Crohn

(2006) and Freisthler et al. (2003). Participants reported that the stepmother's engagement in various activities, the help provided with household tasks, study and career choices, and the increased financial resources she brought into the family had a positive impact on the relationship.

Another area that emerged from the analysis was the significant impact of the stepmother's personality, as perceived by stepchildren, on the quality of the relationship. Important qualities that helped build positive relationships with stepmothers included being fun, easy to get along with, open, calm, compassionate and reliable. Others referred to specific attributes such as being young, having money, being someone new and exciting in their lives and being a positive role model.

Some of the findings of this study support previous research by Golish (2003) that found good listening, addressing conflicts directly, and sharing and spending time together as a family assists with healthy stepfamily functioning. Some stepchildren in this study reported that as time went on their stepmothers became more open about themselves, and that this led to a deepening of understanding and an increased closeness in their relationship with their stepmother. Participants also formed better bonds with stepmothers who were open to discussing differences of opinion, and who were willing to negotiate solutions and apologise for mistakes made. Good communication skills resulted in greater trust of the stepmother, and more openness in discussing problems. An important and unique aspect of the stepmother relationship for some children was that they felt they could confide in their stepmothers about certain intimate topics, which they would not discuss with their parents. This is consistent with Chron's (2006) findings, who found that some of the

participants in the study felt the stepmother was able to discuss these topics from a more objective position, while their parents may be more conservative and protective. In conclusion, some of the young adult stepchildren in this study suggest that stepmothers can fulfil an important support role for stepchildren, and that a stepmother's gradual integration into the stepfamily and her friendly approach and ability to listen to stepchildren is important in developing a trusting relationship with stepmothers (Golish, 2003; Schrodtt, 2006).

On the other hand, several participants commented that poor communication by parents and stepmothers adversely impacted on their adjustment to stepfamily living. This reinforces previous research findings that stepchildren think it is important that parents take the time to talk with them about significant events or changes that may affect them (Braithwaite et al., 2008; Cartwright & Seymour, 2002). Some participants also felt the father could be more helpful by talking with them about the relationship with the stepmother. In some cases, where stepchildren had a positive relationship with the stepmother, they expressed the importance of continued communication and contact with her if she separated from their father. This is in accord with the observations of Schmeekle et al. (2006) that some children maintain a relationship with a stepparent even after separation.

Some stepmothers were perceived to have a positive effect on stepchildren's sense of belonging to the stepfamily unit, also consistent with the findings of Freisthler et al. (2003). The increased sense of family resulted from the stepmother's positive influence on the father, from the inclusion of the stepmother's extended family in their lives, and from the birth of a mutual child. Some participants found that the

stepmother provided a “motherly” or feminine aspect to the family by being warm and supportive and bringing some of her own furniture and more feminine objects into the house. Some participants experienced a strengthened sense of family from doing activities together with the stepmother and with her family. The importance of participating in shared activities has also been highlighted by Freisthler et al. (2003) and King (2007). For some participants, the stepmother’s family (sometimes step-grandparents) became part of their extended family network and in some cases, even if their father separated from her, stepchildren still had contact with the stepmother and her family. This highlights some stepchildren’s ability to accept and integrate different members of each family into their sense of family.

#### **Stepmother discipline and control**

As discussed previously, in a first-marriage family an authoritative parenting role for the parent is positively associated with child and adolescent well-being (Fine & Kurdek, 1992; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). However, stepfamily research suggests a parenting role for the stepparent, especially in regard to discipline, is problematic and can result in resistance from children and lead to difficulties in forming a stepparent-stepchild relationship (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Schrodt, 2006). The participants’ stories in this study support this conclusion as discussed below.

The stepmother’s involvement in discipline, setting rules and routines and monitoring children’s behaviour was almost always experienced by participants as inappropriate. The majority of participants felt angry and resentful when the stepmother attempted to discipline them and they thought this hindered the development of the relationship.

Participants thought authority should stay with the father and saw the appropriate stepmother role as more like a friend or mentor.

Some participants also discussed the adverse impact of stepmothers taking too much control and authority over them, while failing to provide a balance of caring support. Stepmothers who appeared to take charge in the household too zealously when they moved in, or who were seen as too controlling, received a negative reaction from stepchildren. This is in agreement with other research showing that stepparents who try to take control in the stepfamily risk being viewed as rigid, over-strict and domineering (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Nielsen, 1999; Schmeeckle, 2007).

On the other hand, it is important to note that the stepmother's role is considered more stressful because of the impact gender issues have on the expectation of stepmothers in stepfamilies. Therefore, it is difficult to know how much pressure the stepmothers were under to provide support, and if they did not, if participants judged them more harshly than they might have stepfathers.

Alternatively participants reported positive feelings when stepmothers tried to fit in with existing rules and routines and were sensitive about staying in the background when it came to authority allowing the father to have this role. Over half of the participants talked about difficulties adjusting to some of the changes they experienced when the stepmother entered their lives, the alterations of rules and routines, changes in neighbourhood, houses and schools. A commonly expressed opinion was that the stepmother should make an effort initially to be seen to be fitting in with existing routines and structures, and only later to make changes, gradually and with sensitivity, as is recommended by clinicians (Papernow, 2006; Visher et al., 2003).

Several participants were in agreement with the findings of Kinniburgh-White et al. (2006), that stepchildren thought that aspects of the stepmother's personality provided an obstacle to building a relationship with her. Personal qualities that the young adult stepchildren in this study identified as adversely affecting their ability to develop a relationship with stepmothers included being uptight, controlling, insensitive to others and aggressive. Participants who experienced stepmothers this way generally felt uneasy, anxious and uncomfortable around stepmothers, and often began to see themselves as bad children. In some cases, participants reported that their stepmother was emotionally or physically abusive, and in some cases mentally unstable. A small number believed that this resulted in ongoing adjustment problems, including anxiety, low self-esteem and relationship difficulties. As found previously, a father's failure to intervene when the stepmother was seen to be irrational, was perceived by the stepchildren as disloyal and as an indication that he did not care about them, which replicates previous research findings (Ahrons & Tanner, 2003; Braithwaite et al., 2008; Moore & Cartwright, 2005). However, while some of the accounts suggest that a small number of stepmothers were struggling with personal difficulties (such as alcoholism and lack of anger control) as mentioned previously, it is difficult to know the pressures that "uptight" stepmothers were under, such as feeling expected look to after the stepchildren and experiencing stepchild rebellion. Certainly stepmothers talk about the difficulty of the stepmother role (Coleman & Ganong, 1997).

### **Relationships in the stepfamily**

The following section will review the impact of relationships between the sub-systems within the stepmother-family system and how these can impact on stepmother-

stepchild relationships. Consistent with previous research (Coleman & Ganong, 1997; Golish, 2003; Nielsen, 1999), almost all participants experienced divided loyalties, or loyalty binds that affected the quality of the relationship with the stepmother. Participants experienced conflicting loyalties between the stepmother and the mother, between the father and stepmother, and between the father and mother (which often involved the stepmother).

In some cases the behaviour of adults in the stepfamily was thought by participants to have exacerbated loyalty conflicts, such behaviour included: the mother and father criticising each other and involving children in their conflicts by, for example, asking them to take sides; using children as go-betweens in communicating between households; stepmothers asking personal information about mothers; stepmothers stopping children from spending time with fathers; and fathers making excuses for stepmothers irrational behaviour and failing to intervene if the stepmother was being cruel and abusive. Loyalty situations were experienced as stressful and resulted in stepchildren feeling awkward, guilty, anxious, betrayed and confused. Stepchildren tried to manage some loyalty conflicts by taking special care when organising family events.

A few participants reported positive memories of extended family members getting along. They recalled that co-operation made the coordinating of events easier, pick-ups and drop-offs less stressful, and meant that all family members could attend functions without the stepchild feeling awkward. They perceived this to mean that the parents were prioritising them, which was important for their security.

**Father-child relationship**

The stepmother's arrival into the stepfamily was perceived by most participants as disrupting their relationship with their father and some experienced jealousy. They felt that the stepmother took up too much of their father's time. Some felt their father did not help them to develop a relationship with their stepmother, and some felt the father's behaviour demonstrated that he cared more about the stepmother and other stepfamily members than his own children. This supports prior research findings that one of the difficult experiences for stepchildren is the impact that the stepmother has on their experience of the relationship with the father (Ahrons & Tanner, 2003; Braithwaite et al., 2008; Cartwright & Seymour, 2002; Hetherington, 2003b). This situation was eased in those cases where the father still spent one-on-one time with his children, and the stepmother was seen to be supporting this.

Participants had a positive experience of their stepmother's relationship with their father insofar as she supported him, was seen to make him happy, and in some cases brought out his more sensitive side. Children perceived that this improved their relationship with their father and the quality of the time they spent with him. Participants also thought the stepmother provided some protection and support when they were not getting on with their father, or when he had personal problems that affected them. As found previously, some participants appreciated their stepmother's role in facilitating their relationship with their fathers (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Schmeckle, 2007).

**Mother-child relationships**

Most participants found that their natural loyalty toward their mothers resulted in them being somewhat ambivalent about developing a relationship with the



stepmother. This supports previous research conclusions that some stepchildren experience anxiety and guilt if they find themselves liking the stepparent. (Coleman & Ganong, 1997; King, 2007; Nielsen, 1999). When relationships between stepmothers and mothers were difficult, this exacerbated the stepchildren's loyalty conflict. Some participants felt guilty if they started to be friendly with the stepmother because they worried they would hurt their mother's feelings, especially if the mother was struggling to cope after the separation.

If participants blamed their stepmother for the parental separation, this further exacerbated their reluctance to form a relationship with her. When mothers and stepmothers were critical or jealous of each other, this made it particularly difficult for stepchildren to build a good quality relationship with the stepmother. These results support the conclusion that stepmothers face particular difficulties forming relationships with stepchildren because of mothers' responses to sharing their children (Nielsen, 1999). However, as found by King (2007) and Ganong and Coleman (1997), some stepchildren were able to maintain a positive relationship with both their mother and their stepmother and they valued the different qualities and aspects of support that each brought to the relationship with them.

### **Mutual children and stepsiblings**

Mutual children were experienced as having a significant impact on the quality of the stepmother-stepchild relationship for all participants. For some stepchildren the birth of the mutual child was seen as a positive event and they willingly took on the role of a big sister or brother, similar to some stepchildren in the study by Braithwaite et al. (2001). When stepmothers were seen to treat stepchildren and mutual children equally, the birth of the mutual child was experienced positively and added to the

stepchild's sense of family. For some participants, the birth of the mutual child led to a negative change in the relationship. This was usually the result of their perception that the stepmother favoured the mutual child and withdrew attention from them. This is consistent with the findings of Baxter (2004), Kinniburgh-White et al. (2006) and Braithwaite et al. (2001). As reported by some stepchildren in the study by Cartwright and Seymour (2002) two participants thought that their parent, in this case the father, favoured their half- siblings over themselves.

According to participants, their perceptions about how their stepmother treated them in comparison to how she treated her own children also had an impact on the quality of the relationship, which is consistent with previous research on stepparent-stepchild relationships (Baxter et al., 2004; Braithwaite et al., 2001; Crohn, 2006). Some participants thought the stepmother treated her own children better or differently from them, and some thought that this interfered with their attempts to develop a good relationship with the stepmother and their sense of being a family.

### **Influences of the stepchild**

#### **Age of the stepchild**

The age of the stepchild appeared to have an influence on the quality of the relationship with the stepmother. In general, the first chapter of the participants' narratives was associated with participants reporting that they were young and, therefore, accepted the stepmother more easily. This is consistent with previous findings that younger children more easily accept stepfathers (Marsiglio, 2004; Weaver & Coleman, 2005) and stepmothers (Weaver & Coleman, 2005). Growing up was also identified by some participants as resulting in a positive change in the relationship with the stepmother. Participants reported that the improved relationship resulted from

the stepmother no longer having a role in disciplining and monitoring their behaviour. Their growing maturity was associated with an increasing appreciation of the stepmother and the development of a more adult relationship.

As consistently identified in previous research (Amato, 2000; Berg, 2003), adolescence is often associated with a negative change in the relationship with the stepparent. Participants attributed this decreased quality of the relationship to the stepmother becoming more involved in monitoring their behaviour at a time when they were seeking increased independence and finding their relationships with all adults in general increasingly conflictual. As discussed previously, stepchildren's concerns about mothers and their jealousy of stepmothers, also contributed to a negative reaction to stepmothers. It was not possible to assess the impact of stepchildren's gender on the stepmother relationship, given the small number of male participants.

Some participants' perceptions of stepmothers may, in part, be influenced by the impact of gender on the stepmother role. Previous research suggests that we expect women, especially mothers, to be warm and supportive, which may put undue pressure on stepmothers. Participants in this study reported appreciating stepmother warmth and support, and some participants were critical of stepmothers who appeared not to take an interest in building a relationship with them or who were perceived as cold or distant. Although some participants appreciated warmth and support from the stepmother, they were resistant to her exerting any control or having a role in discipline or rule setting. It is also possible that the stereotype of stepmothers, as wicked, cruel and controlling, influenced the participants' perceptions and

recollections of experiences with stepmothers, perhaps with a tendency to focus more on the more difficult aspects of the relationship.

### **Clinical implications**

Clinicians report that remarried parents, stepfamilies, and stepmothers represent a growing part of their clinical practice (Hart, 2009). Given this, and the findings that suggest an increased risk of negative outcomes in stepfamilies, it is important that clinicians understand the challenges that stepmother families face.

The results from this study support the importance of clinicians understanding that stepfamilies function in ways that differ from first-marriage families. Research suggests that working clinically with stepfamilies, as if they are first-marriage families, can exacerbate stepfamily problems (Visher, Visher, & Pasley, 1997). It is important that stepfamilies and clinicians approach stepfamily difficulties with this in mind, and take into account the unique characteristics and needs of each family.

Psychoeducation is an important aspect of working with stepfamilies and helps to normalise their experience (Browning & Artelt, 2012). This research reinforces the importance of fathers and stepmothers understanding that relationships with stepchildren develop gradually over time. It gives hope that, even if a relationship is initially difficult, or goes through difficult and conflicted periods, with time and continued respect and perseverance relationships can become satisfying.

This study also emphasises the importance of stepmothers slowly developing supportive and friendly relationships with stepchildren, prior to attempting to take on a parenting role. Stepmothers can be encouraged to develop a friendship with

children, provide practical and emotional support, and spend time with and engage in activities that stepchildren enjoy.

Papernow (2008) and Browning and Artelt (2012) also note the importance of educating stepparents about the difficulties associated with parenting stepchildren, including stepmother, discipline and control. It is almost a universal experience that stepmothers engaging in disciplining stepchildren is met with anger and hostility. Stepchildren are very clear that their parents should retain the primary disciplinary role. This may be particularly difficult for stepmothers to accept, especially those with strong needs for control, as opposed to “laid back” stepparents (Fine et al., 1999).

This study reinforces previous research that adolescence increases difficulties in the stepparent-stepchild relationship. Young adult stepchildren in this study reported that this resulted from the conflict between their wish for more freedom and their stepmother’s attempts to discipline them and take control in the household. The participants in this study also acknowledged that the period of adolescence was characterised by increased conflict with adults in general. Fathers and stepmothers may need particular support during this period to assist them to work well together.

This study emphasises the potential importance of stepmothers in the ongoing lives of children and young adults, even when she has separated from the father. It is important that stepmothers recognise the possibility that a stepchild will want to maintain a relationship after separation, and that this can be importantly beneficial.

Participants in this study reported that parents or stepmothers did not discuss with them the changes that they had been through, or those that might occur in the future, and how these changes might affect them. Cartwright (2010) in her N.Z. study found

that parents often did not talk to children about stepparents moving into a stepfamily. This study supports previous research that recommends that stepfamily members, especially adult members, communicate with stepchildren about changes and openly engage in problem solving as difficulties arise (Schrodt, 2006; Whiting et al., 2007). It is also important for therapists to support parents to take the transition slowly, allowing children time to adjust and get to know the stepmother.

This study also emphasises the importance of fathers maintaining close relationships with children. Cartwright (2008) concludes that children may be more accepting of a stepmother or stepfather if they feel secure in the relationship with the parent. Clinicians can encourage fathers to spend time with children giving them attention and support.

Finally, as in previous research (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002), participants in this study felt that conflicts of loyalty were a particularly difficult aspect of stepfamily living, and had an adverse effect on stepmother-stepchild relationships. Clinicians can help parents minimise stepchildren's feelings of being caught in the middle by conveying to them the importance of reducing conflict between parents, of talking positively and encouraging the relationship with both parents and of conducting arguments away from children (Papernow, 2006). It is also important to point out to adults the behaviours that participants identified as contributing to loyalty conflicts.

### **Limitations**

This study has a number of limitations. First, it used a small sample of self-selected participants. The participants were university students and the majority were New Zealand European, and as a result the sample is not representative of stepchildren in

New Zealand. Because of the relatively small sample size, it also cannot be assumed that these stepchildren's views represent those of all university-educated stepchildren.

Second, this study investigated stepchildren's experiences of the stepmother-stepchild relationship. Given that stepfamily members often have differing perceptions of the same experiences, gaining the perspectives of other family members would have added more depth and understanding of the complexity of stepmother-stepchild relationships. This was particularly so in regard to stepmothers, because of the gender issues, which add stress to the stepmother role. It was not possible to understand these issues from the accounts of the participants.

Third, interviews were conducted at one point in time when stepchildren were aged between 18 and 25 years. Given that an individual's narrative of life experiences can change over time, it is possible that interviewing participants at a different stage may have resulted in different narratives. For example, if adolescents had been interviewed, the types of experiences they described and their responses are likely to have been different. Participants' narratives may also have been influenced by the quality of the stepmother relationship at the time of the interview. That is, if a participant's relationship with the stepmother was currently positive, it may be likely that the participant would focus more on the positive experiences, as opposed to participants whose relationships with stepmothers were currently difficult. It is possible that the current quality of the stepmother-stepchild relationship influenced the participant's recollection of the relationship and therefore the narrative.

Fourth, this study did not distinguish between simple stepfamilies (only one partner has children from a previous relationship) and complex stepfamilies (both adults bring

children to the relationship). Given that previous research findings suggest the structural complexity of the stepfamily can affect stepfamily functioning, this may have impacted on stepmother-stepchild relationships (Afifi, 2008). Participants also varied in the amount of time they spent with stepmothers, although most relationships were of many years duration and were significant to the participants. Also some of the stepcouples have separated, while information of relationships with stepmothers after separation is important, it added to the greater variability in this sample.

### **Directions for future research**

Qualitative research has an important role in helping clinicians and researchers understand stepfamily functioning and stepfamily relationships. Further qualitative studies are needed to build on the findings of existing research and to broaden the focus to the experience of all stepfamily members. Gathering information from all stepfamily members would deepen our understanding of the stepmother-stepchild relationship. Gaining the perspective of adult stepfamily members would help to broaden the understanding of what may help or hinder them in engaging in experiences that enhance the stepchild relationship and what may help to reduce adverse experiences.

It is important in New Zealand that future research investigates Maori and Pacific Island stepfamilies as their perspectives may differ to those of European stepfamilies. Qualitative studies using longitudinal designs would allow for the investigation of stepchildren's experiences across the age groups, assessing how age affects stepchildren's perception of stepfamily experiences. Future research in the New



Zealand context is also needed to develop and investigate the efficacy of stepfamily psycho-education programmes utilising the information gained from research.

Finally, stepfamily research has mainly concluded that it is problematic for stepparents, including stepmothers, to adopt a disciplinary role in the early stages. Despite this, many stepmothers in this study appeared to do this. It is important to understand if a lack of information about stepfamily roles underlies this and to understand other obstacles to stepmothers accepting fathers in this role, at least in the early stages of stepfamily living.

## **Conclusion**

Results from this study, along with previous studies, underscore the difficulties in forming the stepmother-stepchild relationship. Participants' relationships with stepmothers in this study varied in quality and developmental trajectory. Over time many stepchildren experienced a close and supportive relationship with the stepmother, however some stepchild-stepmother relationships remained difficult and others rejected stepmothers.

Stepchildren identified several experiences that affected the quality of the stepmother relationship. Stepchildren appreciated stepmothers who were warm and supportive, and who fostered a friendship with them. On the whole, they did not think it appropriate for stepmothers to discipline them and preferred the authority to remain with the father. Loyalty conflicts, especially between mothers and stepmothers, can affect relationships with stepmothers, other family members and stepmother family functioning.

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## Appendix B: Participant information sheet



Dept. of Psychology  
The University of Auckland  
Tamaki Campus  
PH 3737599 x 86269  
Private Bag 92019,  
Auckland

### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

#### Developing a Relationship with a Stepmother

**Principal Researcher:**

Penelope Mansell  
Doctorate in Clinical Psychology  
Dept of Psychology  
University of Auckland

To: Potential Participants

I am conducting research into the development of relationships between stepmothers and stepchildren. I am looking for participants between the ages of 18 and 25 who have resided with their father and stepmother during some of their childhood. If you fit these criteria I would like to invite you to take part in this study although you are under no pressure to do so.

**About the Research:**

Stepfamily living can be challenging and also rewarding for children and the family. Previous research suggests that, within the stepfamily, the relationship between the stepchild and their stepparent is crucial to the wellbeing of children and parents and the family as a whole. Given the increasing number of children that live in stepfamilies, I believe it is important to continue to investigate and develop an understanding of how stepfamily relationships develop and the impact on stepchildren. Most research to date has been focussed on stepfather families. However, with the increasing number of children that live full or part-time with their father and stepmother it is important to talk to adults who have spent a significant amount of time living in a stepmother family. In my research, I will be asking you to talk about your experience of developing a relationship with your stepmother and the experiences that you found difficult and those things that were helpful and positive in your relationship.

**Your involvement:**

Participating in this research would involve an interview of one to two hours long. These interviews would take place at the University or in your home, whichever suits you best. To reimburse you for your travel costs and time taken for the interview, I will give you a \$20 gift voucher following your participation.

**Confidentiality:**

The interviews will be audio-taped. In order to protect your privacy, your name will not be used during the interview. The interview will then be transcribed by the researcher, and your identity will be protected. Each tape will be assigned a number and the identity of the numbers will be attached to your Consent Form which will be stored in a separate location at the University of Auckland. The audio-tapes and transcripts will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's office. The Consent Form will outline the procedures followed in the study, the measures to ensure the information you share remains confidential and the storage of your information. The Consent Form, tapes and transcripts will be kept for a period of six years after which the tapes will be wiped clear and the Consent Forms and transcripts shredded. The results from this study will be published in the researchers Doctoral Thesis; however, no individuals will be identifiable.

**Results of this Study:**

If you take part in this study, you can request a report on the results of the study and this will be sent to the contact address that you provide on the Consent Form.

**Your rights:**

If you decide to take part in an interview, and you experience any distress during the interview, or become tired, we can stop for a rest. If you decide you wish to withdraw from the interview, you can do that. You can withdraw your interview information up to 2 weeks following your interview. This data will be shredded and interview tapes destroyed if you request it. If you were to experience any distress as a result of taking part in the study the researcher would be able to support you to find a qualified counsellor to talk to, if this was something that you would like.

<b>Principal Researcher</b>	<b>My Supervisor</b>	<b>Head of Department</b>
Penelope Mansell Doctorate in Clinical Psychology Dept of Psychology Uni of Auckland Private Bag 92019 Auckland Ph:480 0404 Email: <a href="mailto:pennymansell@hotmail.com">pennymansell@hotmail.com</a>	Dr Claire Cartwright Department of Psychology Uni of Auckland Private Bag 92019 Auckland Phone: 373 7599 Extn 82629	Assoc Prof Fred Seymour Dept of Psychology Uni of Auckland Private Bag 92019 Auckland Phone: 3737599 Extn 88414

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

**APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE 13 August, 2008 for 3 years till 13 August, 2011. REFERENCE NUMBER 2008/277**

## Appendix C: Consent form



Dept. of Psychology  
The University of Auckland  
Tamaki Campus  
PH 3737599 x 86269  
Private Bag 92019,  
Auckland

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

Project title: Developing Relationships with Stepmothers

Researcher name: Penelope Mansell

- I have read the Participant Information Sheet, understood it and I agree to take part in the research.
- I understand that I am volunteering to take part in one interview, up to one-and-a-half hours long.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time.
- I understand that I can withdraw any data traceable to me up until two weeks following the following interview session.
- I understand that the interview will be audio taped.
- I understand that I can have the audio tape turned off at any time.
- I understand that my name will not be used during the interview session.
- I understand that the interview will be transcribed by the researcher and I will not be identified by name on the transcript.
- I understand that the data will be stored for ten years in the Department of Psychology, after which time it will be destroyed
- I understand that that results from the study will be published in the researchers Doctoral Thesis but that I will not be identifiable in any publications
- I understand I will be reimbursed for my travel expenses and time participating in the study with a \$20 gift voucher.

Name (Please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Would you like a copy of a report at the completion of the study? Yes/ No

Postal address if yes: \_\_\_\_\_

---

**APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE for years from August 2008 to August 2011. REFERENCE NUMBER 2008/277**



## **Appendix D: Interview guide**

### Background

- How did you hear about the research?
- Confidentiality

### Introduction

- I am interested in understanding how stepchildren develop their relationship with stepmothers, the positive experiences that helped you develop a relationship with the stepmother and also the difficult experiences that hindered relationship development.
- It is up to you to choose what you tell me about this relationship as it is important for me to hear about your experience.
- The general aim of this study is to investigate young adult stepchildren's experiences of relationship with stepmothers and to identify those experiences that help build a positive stepmother-stepchild relationship and those experiences that stepchildren find difficult and hinder the development of the relationship.
- The aim is to understand what works and what doesn't work for children and this will help clinicians, researchers and families.

### Demographics

- First I would like to gather some background information such as your age now, at the time of your parents' separation and your age when you met the stepmother.
- I would also like to get some information about your mother, father and stepmother.

### Chapters

- I would like you to divide your story into three chapters. This can either be beginning, middle and now or you can identify definite turning points or changes in the relationship which signify a new chapter for you.
- Name the three chapters for me and years they cover (put on graph)

### Main Interview

#### Chapter 1 - Beginning

- Can you tell me about the first meeting and your memories of that experience?
- Can you tell me about the relationship with your stepmother during this early period including some of the difficult experiences of trying to build a

relationship with her and also about some of the positive experiences and things that worked well?

- Take as much time as you like and I will listen to your story
- How did you feel about having a mother and stepmother?
- How did your Dad respond?

#### Chapter 2 – Middle

- How did you feel about your father and stepmother moving in together?
- How did you feel about having a mother and stepmother?
- How did your Dad respond?

#### Chapter 3 – Now

- How do you feel about having a mother and stepmother?
- How does your Dad respond now?

#### Concluding questions

1. What do you think have been the main difficulties for you in developing your relationship with your stepmother?
2. What have been the best times/positive aspects of your relationship?
3. What were the most important ups and downs
4. What has worked?
5. What has not? (Can delete these if answered previously)
6. How have the two of you looked after your relationship/spent time together?
7. Drawing on your experience what advice would you give to children about how to work well with a stepmother?
8. What advice would you give to stepmothers

#### Prompt Questions

- Do you remember how you felt around this time?
- Do you remember what was happening at this time?
- What did you think about what was happening?
- Who was responsible for disciplining you? Who was the main authority in the house?
- What kinds of things did you talk about with the stepmother and did you discuss difficulties or conflicts in your relationship?
- Was your stepmother affectionate and supportive to you? If so in what ways?
- Did your stepmother provide practical support? If so in what ways?

## Appendix E: Demographic information

Your initials ..... Where advertised .....

Age .....

Student      †

Working      †

### Biological parents

How long were your parents married? (Number of years)

.....

How long had they been together when you were born?

.....

When did your parents separate? (Year and your age)

.....

Do you have brothers and sisters?

M/F      AGE:

M/F      AGE:

M/F      AGE:

M/F      AGE:

### Information about your mother

Did your mother remarry or get a new partner?

.....

How long after your parents separation did they start going out together?

.....

When did your mother's new partner move in or get married?

.....

When did you meet your mother's new partner? (Your age)

.....

Did you live with your stepfather?

.....

When and how often did you stay with your mother and stepfather?

.....

Did her new partner have children?

M/F            AGE:

M/F            AGE:

M/F            AGE:

M/F            AGE:

Did you mother and her new partner have children?

M/F            AGE:

M/F            AGE:

M/F            AGE:

M/F            AGE:

Are you mother and stepfather still married?

.....

Information about your father

Did your father have another relationship?

.....

How long after your parents separated did he met his new partner?

.....

When did your father move in or get married to his partner? (Year and your age)

.....

When did you meet your stepmother? (Year and your age)

.....

How often did you spend time living with your father and stepmother?

.....

.....

Did your stepmother have children before she met your father?

M/F            AGE:

M/F            AGE:

M/F            AGE:

M/F            AGE:

Did your father and stepmother have children?

M/F            AGE:

M/F            AGE:

M/F            AGE:

M/F            AGE:

How long have your father and stepmother been together?

.....  
.....

Three Chapters

Chapter 1 – Name (age, years, and experiences)

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

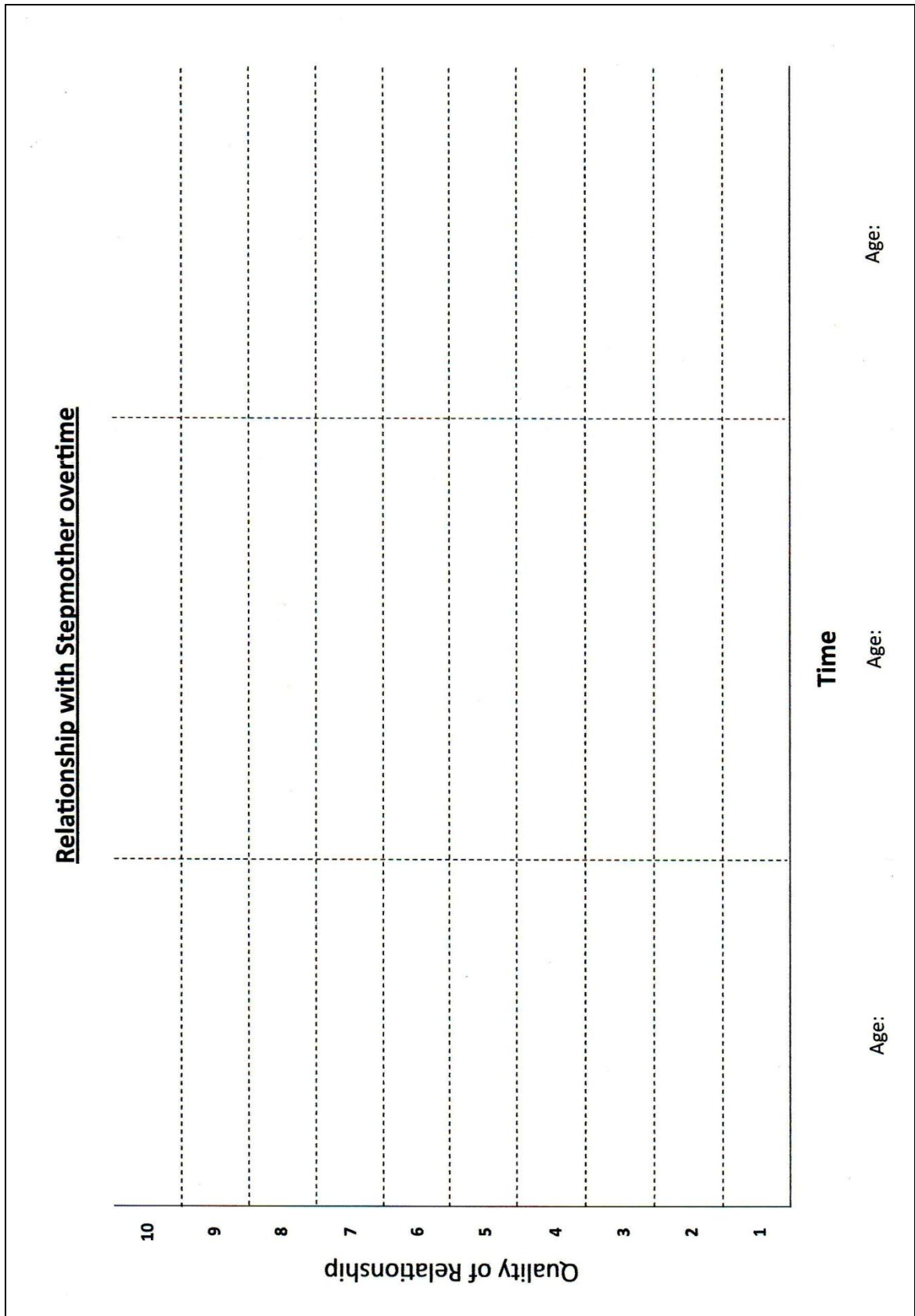
Chapter 2 – Name (age, years, and experiences)

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Chapter 3 – Name (age, years, experiences)

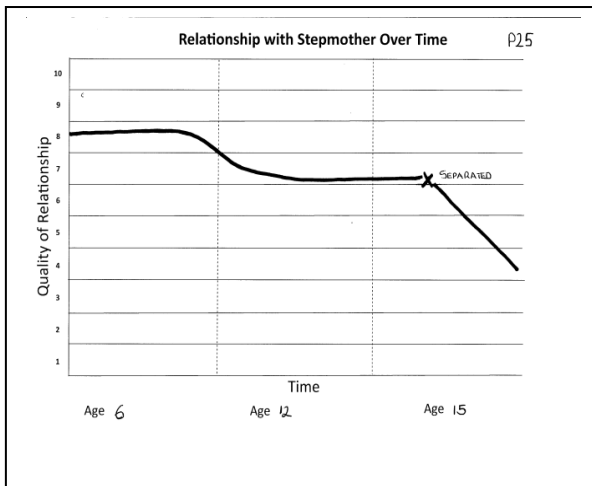
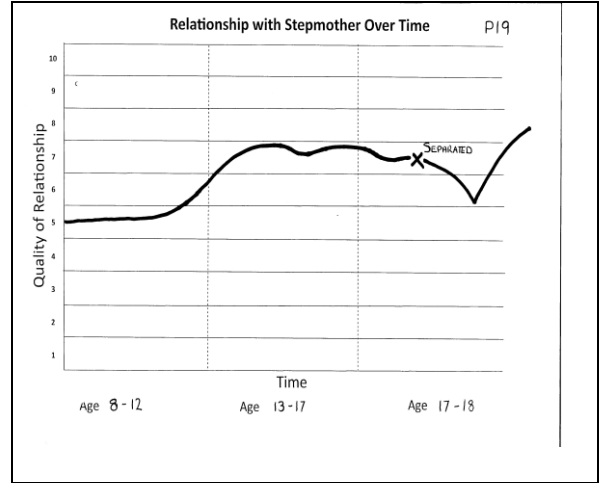
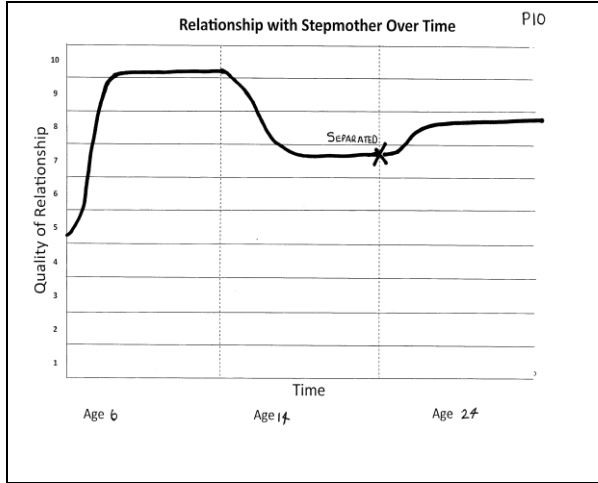
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### Appendix F: Graph - Relationship with stepmother over time

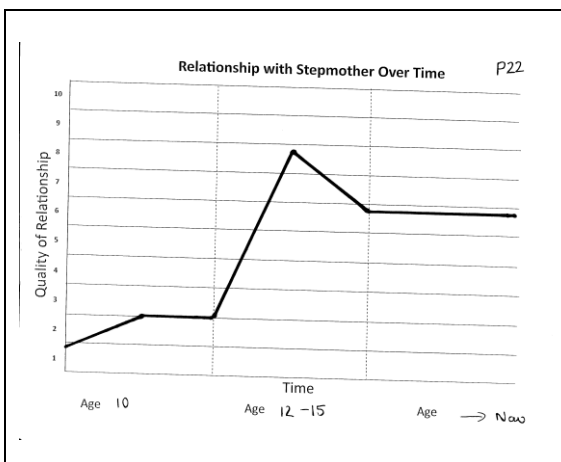
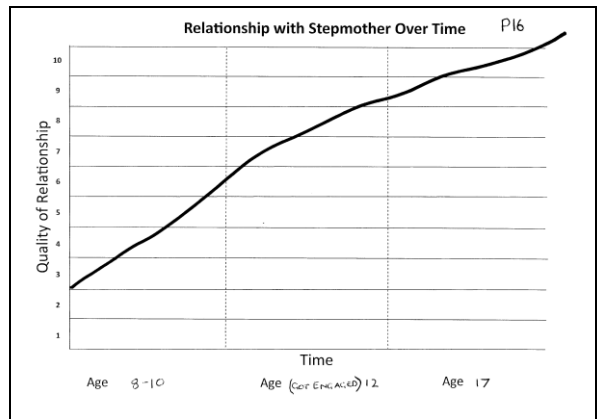
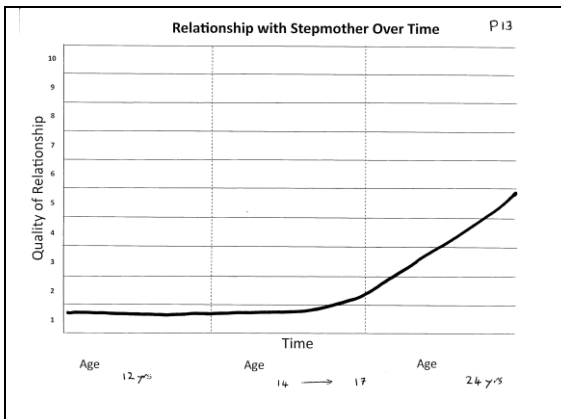
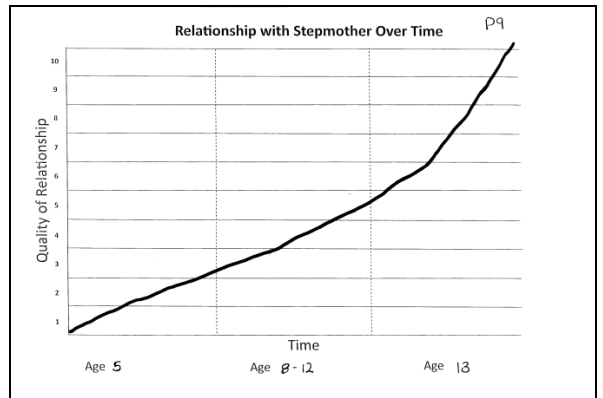
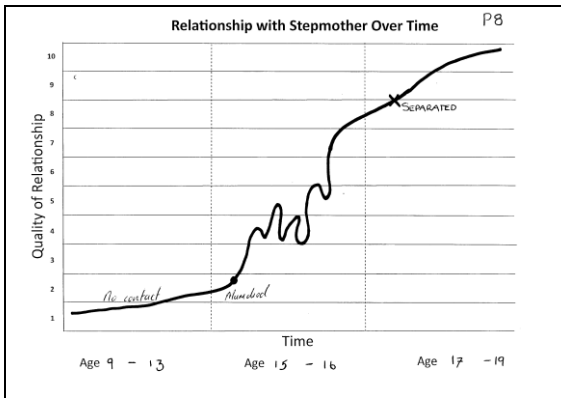
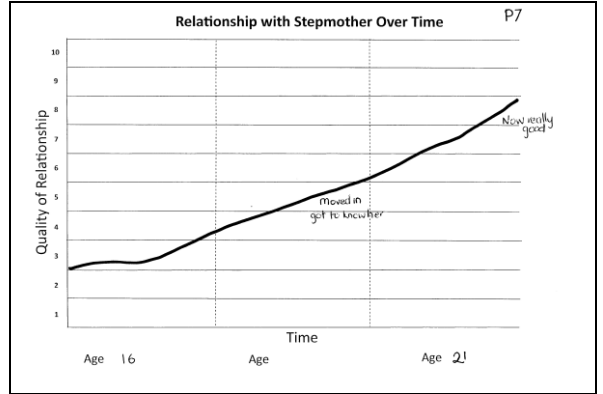
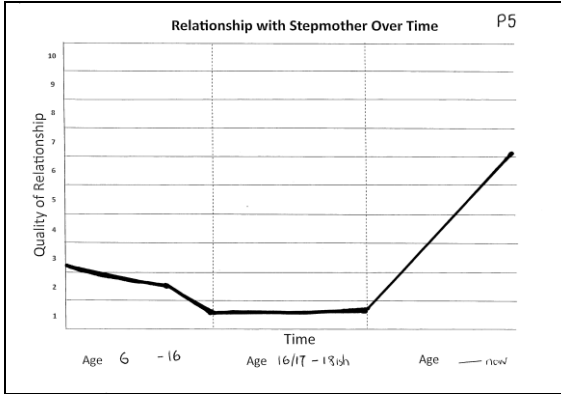


## Appendix G: Participant graphs

### Positive narratives

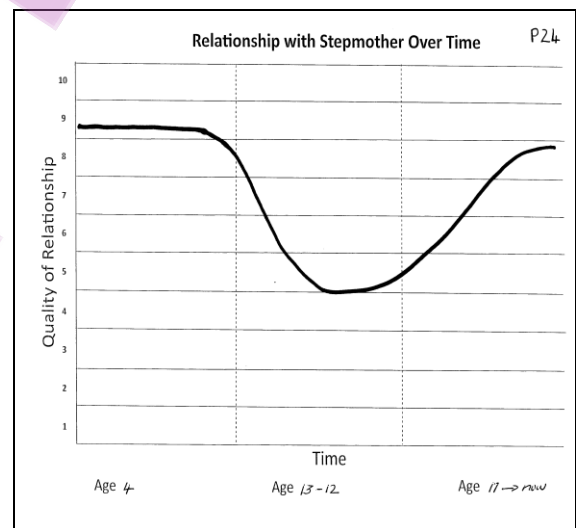
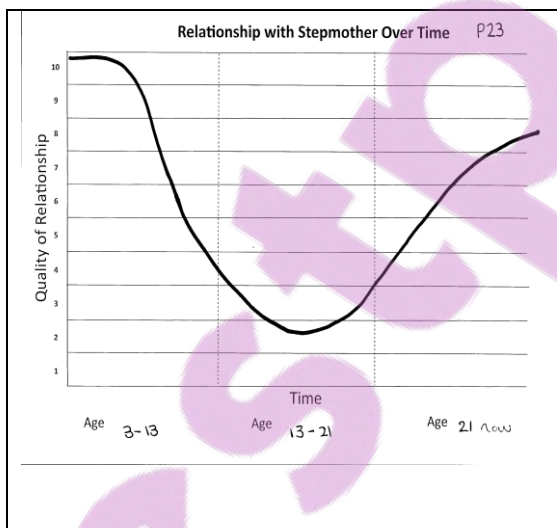
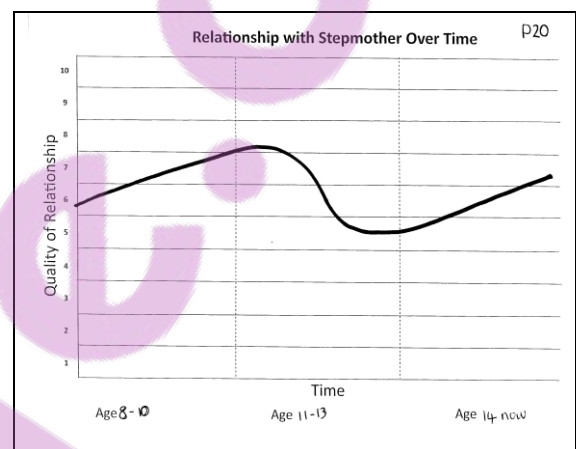
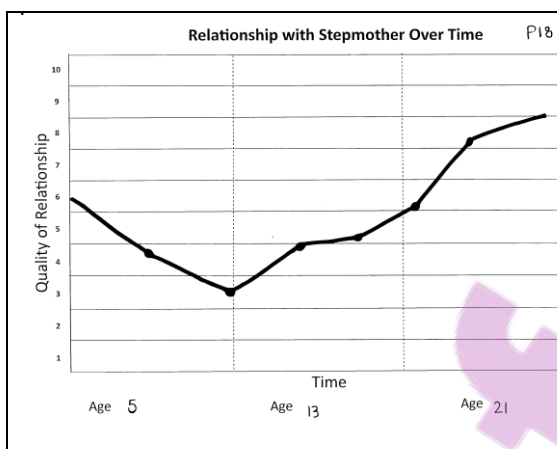
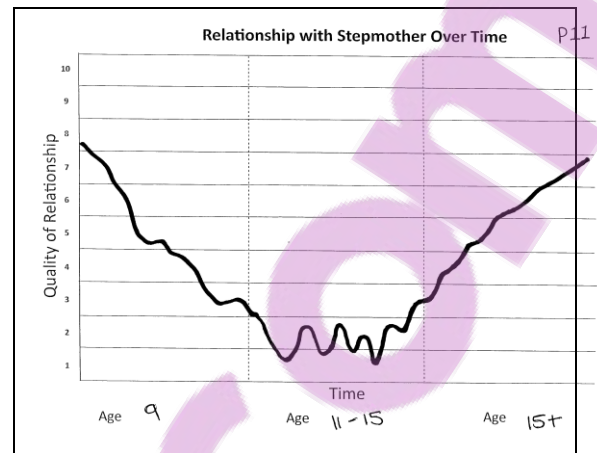
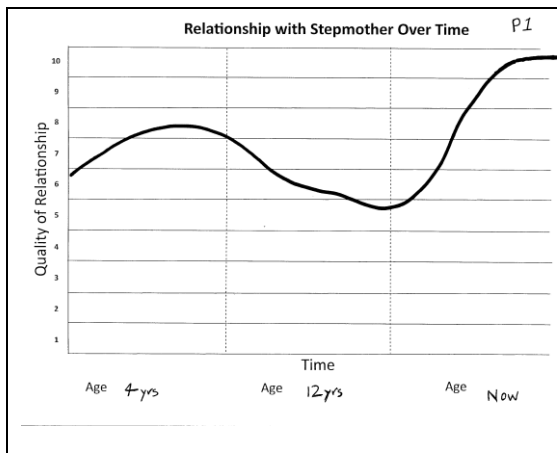


Progressive narratives

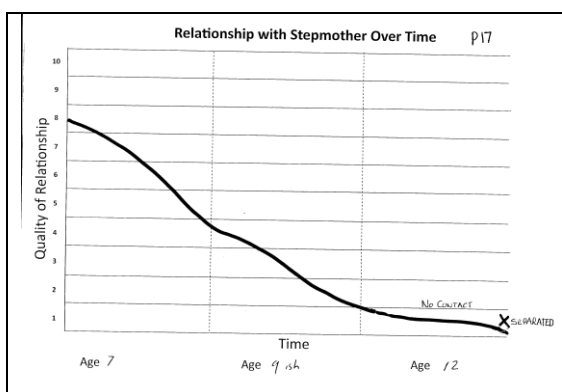
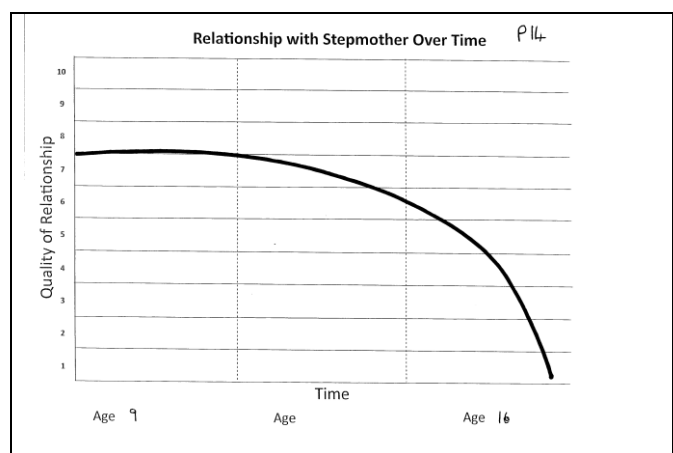
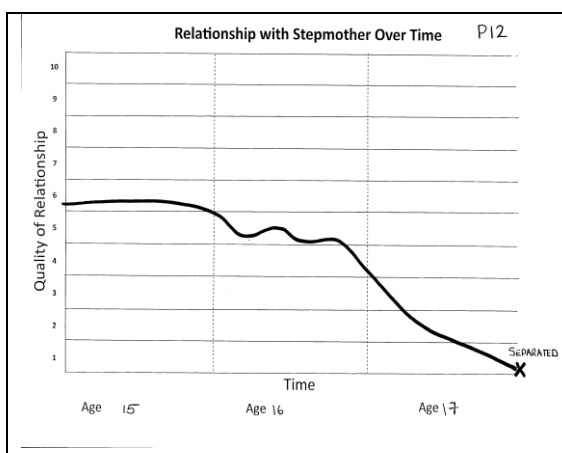
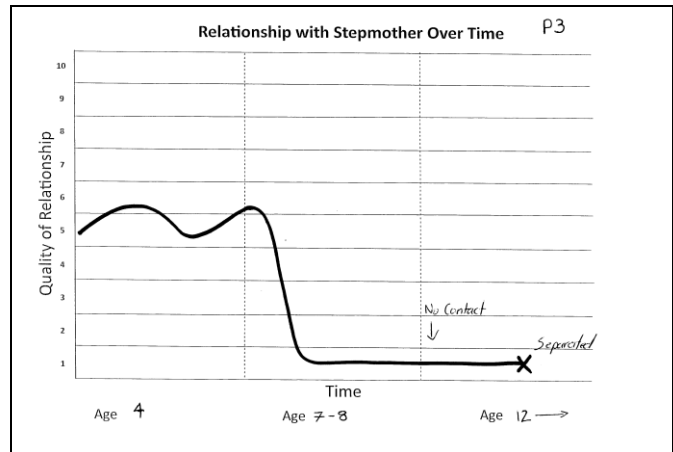
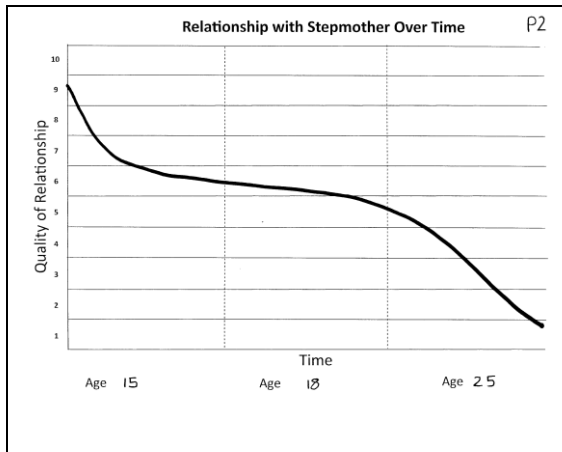




Narratives of decline and recovery



Regressive narratives



Consistently poor narratives

