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THE SOUND OF MUSIC: CORRELATES OF HARMONIOUS RELATIONSHIPS IN STEPFAMILIES

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THE SOUND OF MUSIC: CORRELATES OF HARMONIOUS RELATIONSHIPS IN
STEPFAMILIES

by

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Abstract

Family structure has always been an integral part of the nurturing of children and adolescents. In the past fifty years, the number of stepfamilies formed after remarriage superseded the number of stepfamilies following the death of a parent. These new stepfamilies contribute to a more challenging adjustment for children and adolescents as they figure out the role the new stepparent plays in their life, in addition to the non-residential biological parent. This study surveyed undergraduate students at a private university in the United States using a positive and negative interaction questionnaire and family harmony measure. The researcher attempted to find factors that would relate to harmonious family functioning. Results found that a supportive stepparent relationship and intentionally discussing changes with the children prior to the remarriage were especially helpful, as well as mitigating negative interactions with parents and new stepfamily members.

KEY WORDS: Stepfamily, blended family, harmony, STEP, positive events

Table of Contents

Chapter I: Introduction.....	1
Hypothesis.....	2
Chapter II: Review of Literature.....	3
Families.....	4
Challenges in Stepfamilies.....	7
Parent-Child Relationships and Communication.....	9
Effects Continuing into College.....	10
Helping Stepfamilies.....	11
The Stepfamily Events Profile.....	13
Family Harmony.....	14
Summary.....	14
Chapter III: Methodology.....	16
Chapter IV: Data Analysis.....	19
Chapter V: Discussion.....	22
References.....	26
Appendices	
Appendix A: Demographic Questions.....	29
Appendix B: STEP Questionnaire.....	30

Appendix C: Harmony Questions.....	34
Appendix D: Researcher Created Questions.....	36
Appendix E: Informed Consent Form.....	37
Table 1: Demographic Composition of Full Sample.....	39
Table 2: Demographic Composition of Subsample.....	40
Table 3: Correlations between GPA and Age at Blending in Full Sample.....	41
Table 4: Correlations between Measures of Good Adjustment in Full Sample.....	42
Table 5: Correlations between STEP and Adjustment in Subsample.....	43

The Sound of Music: Correlates of Harmonious Relationships in Stepfamilies

Chapter I: Introduction

Family structure is extremely important for how children grow up and view the world. Family structure can influence their socioeconomic status, role models, worldview, education, identity, and love life later on. One family structure that can especially impact children and adolescents mentally and emotionally is a stepfamily. Stepfamilies imply at least two family structure transitions, one in which the nuclear family is separated, and another when the stepfamily blends together; those structure changes can bring inherent instability.

Adjusting to parental divorce or the death of a parent is hard enough, but having a parent remarry can make adjustment more difficult. When I was thirteen, my mom remarried, and the initial blending of the family was very difficult. My siblings and I had to move to a new state and start at new schools at the same time that we had to learn how to live with a stepdad and new brothers. This drastic change in our lives led to confusion in roles, uncertainty about discipline, and unavoidable conflict that comes with learning how to live with new people. I know I am not the only child who has struggled with stepfamily adjustment, and while my family eventually bonded, I wanted to research anything that has a chance to make the adjustment easier for future families.

Previous studies looked at what stepfamily structures tend to make adjustment the most difficult (Fine, Voydanoff, & Donnelly, 1993; Zimiles & Lee, 1991), the importance of relationships with parents and stepparents during time of adjustment (Jensen & Lippold, 2018; Slattery, Bruce, Halford, & Nicholson, 2011), and how events surrounding the time of remarriage can impact how the child handles all the changes (Doyle, Wolchik, & Dawson-McClure, 2002).

However, this study aims to identify factors associated with positive or harmonious functioning into a new blended family structure.

Hypothesis

I predict that participants who were older at the time of remarriage, whose parents prepared them for the remarriage by discussion or with resources, and who reported more frequent positive interactions and less frequent negative interactions with parents and stepparent(s) will have a harmonious, or well-functioning family unit.

Chapter II: Literature Review

This literature review will first look at families and family structure and how that can affect children and adolescents. There will then be a focus on the unique challenges faced by stepfamilies and how the relationships in the family can combat those issues. In order to find out how to help children and adolescents, there is a section on how these challenges continue into college and how counselors can maybe help new stepfamilies. There will also be a review of two of the measures later used in the survey.

Family structure has always been an integral part of the nurturing of children and adolescents. However, in the past fifty years, the “normal” family structure has changed quite a bit. With high divorce rates and the number of stepfamilies formed after remarriage superseding stepfamilies following the death of a parent, there came a need for research regarding these families. Stepfamilies are formed when at least one adult in the relationship has a child (or children) from a previous relationship (Ganong & Coleman 2004, p. 2). Because there are some stepfamilies where only the wife brings children, some with only the dad bringing in children, and sometimes both parents bringing in children, stepfamilies have variations and no two are exactly alike. With these differences in stepfamily structure and the responses of both the family members and others to the blending of the family, adjustment can be difficult for many families. Roles tend to get confusing, titles for stepparents lead to awkward conversations, and non-residential parents can complicate the lives of children and adolescents who are placed in these new stepfamilies. The purpose of this research is to focus on the children in stepfamilies and to

discover if there are predictors for children and adolescents' better adjustment into stepfamilies.

Some research questions that are pertinent to this topic are:

- How does family structure effect children's adjustment?
- Does the age of the child at time of remarriage change how well the adjustment is handled?
- Does family structure continue to affect young adults in college?
- Does discussing the remarriage and blending of families help adolescents understand and adjust better?
- How do relationships with parents and stepparents affect adjustment?
- Does it make a difference if the parent and stepparent marry, or do cohabiting stepfamilies have the same adjustment issues?
- How can psychologists, friends, parents, and teachers help adolescents adjust more easily?

All these questions show that there are many factors that need to be looked at in order to understand stepfamilies and find better ways to support adjustment. This research is important for people who want to better understand friends or students in stepfamilies, for counselors to understand all the complications in order to extend educated empathy, and for adolescents in stepfamilies to feel understood and not alone.

Families

Families are structured in so many different ways. Intact families and single-parent families are generally first thought of, but there are also grandparent families, adoption families, and stepfamilies as well. Under those overall family labels are many varieties. Variety in that the single parent may be the mother or the father, the grandparents may be young or very old, the

adopted family may be connected to the birth family or not at all, and in stepfamilies there are even more variations. Stepfamilies can mean the mother remarried or the father remarried, each parent may have brought in children or only one, or perhaps that both biological parents remarried and the child splits time between two different stepfamilies. For this research the focus will be on stepfamilies regardless of which type.

There is a wealth of research about family structure and its effect on children and adolescents. In general, children who grow up in a family other than the nuclear, intact family have more behavioral and emotional problems, academic problems or less engagement in school activities, lower self-esteem, and are at greater risk of victimization from siblings, peers, and new family members if in a step-family (Brown, 2004; Ganong & Coleman, 2003; Turner et al., 2007). Studies show that children in stepfamilies are comparable to single-parent families in some areas (Ganong & Coleman, 2003), and actually fare worse in other areas. Multiple family structure transitions may be a reason for the children to fare worse, as single-parent families have either no transition if the second parent was never a part of the family, or one transition when that parent left the family. For children in stepfamilies, they have the transition out of their biological nuclear family and a second transition into a blended family, which definitely seems to make a difference (Dunn et al., 1998). With the seemingly increasing negative effects for children in a family structure that is becoming more normal, it is important to do research now to help the future families struggling to unite their stepfamilies.

Researchers did not start focusing on stepfamilies until fairly recently. The research boom for stepfamilies and children only started in the 1970s and 80s. A need for research in this area really became apparent when stepfamilies were being formed more after remarriage than after widowhood. Cherlin (1978) brought up the need for research because he noticed that these

remarriages had higher rates of divorce than first marriages, and he wanted to know why. Ganong & Coleman (2018) referenced Cherlin (1978) and they hypothesized that the roles in stepfamilies are so confusing that it leads to stepfamily dissolution. Stepparents may be unsure about disciplining the children, the children are not sure who to ask permission from or who to listen to, and chores can be disproportionate when both parents bring in children. Cherlin's (1978) article and Ganong & Coleman's (2018) both explain how in the past, stepfamilies were created when a widow remarried. Usually that meant a stepfather for the family and he would step in to fill the role of the father. Now, post-divorce stepfamilies are more complicated because most of the time if a divorced parent remarries, the other biological parent is still alive and, in many cases, has partial custody of the child (or children). These roles are confusing and at the time of Cherlin's article in 1978, these families had no one to look to for advice. Role confusion is especially prominent in stepfather families. A father's instinct is to lead and protect, but that may look different for a stepfather if the biological father is still present in the child's or children's lives. A stepfather would maybe want to teach a young child how to learn to ride their bicycle, but the biological father also wants that experience. Stepfathers of teenagers may want to be a voice in the curfew discussion or meet a child's date, but that may make the child feel as though they are trying to replace their biological father. For any stepfamily, roles are confusing with who can discipline the children and who the children go to for permission. Even chores may need to be reassigned so that they are even across all the children. There can be conflict if children from one family do many chores and the children in the other family never do chores, or if chores were paid for some children and not for the others. Stepfamily parents need to work together so that the children view them as the new unit they are, rather than as parent and step-parent.

There is research, as noted in Ganong & Coleman's (2018) stage two of stepfamily research, that is more focused on the differences of the stepfamily types. Research homed in on specific stepfamily types based on gender of the stepparent, time spent together, or simple versus complex (children from only the biological parent versus children from both parent and stepparent, respectively). Research in this stage, the "Growing Recognition Era," as defined by Ganong and Coleman, (2018), also found researchers using longitudinal research and looking at how adolescents adjust to these families over time. Research in this era was aided by the work of Borrine, Handal, Brown, and Searight (1991). Their study was one of the first to add stepfamilies to the family structures previously studied (single-parent, intact, and divorced) to see if stepfamilies always lead to maladjustment. One thing Borrine looked at was if adolescents in stepfamilies perceive more conflict than those in intact families and higher perceived conflict did make more issues. Borrine et al. (1991)'s research is important because it shows that the perceived family conflict is more of a determining factor for adjustment issues than the family structure. This means that deviating from a nuclear family does not automatically lead to adjustment issues; family conflict ultimately predicts adjustment issues more strongly, and family conflict can happen in any family structure.

Research did not focus on the effects on the children in stepfamilies until much later. Ganong and Coleman (2018), identified the third era of stepfamily research was in the last ten years of the 20th century and "In this era, more than 200 studies focused on the effects of children living with a stepparent" (p. 15). With all this research, different opinions were being brought to attention, a lot having to do with the negative outcomes for children living with a stepfamily. Researchers in this era began to have access to longitudinal studies, family studies, and more.

Challenges in Stepfamilies

There are many changes that occur when two families blend into a stepfamily which all may contribute to the difficulty of the transition. Many challenges have been listed already, but some big ones could be: A new home, a new parent, sometimes a new city or school. All of these challenges can all cause distress in a child and lasting effects.

As briefly mentioned before, the number of transitions may be a reason for more problems seen in adolescents in stepfamilies than other family structures. Children in a single-parent or divorced family have gone through the separation transition while children of stepfamilies have the separation transition as well as the transition to the new family. This extra transition seems to be a factor in adolescent adjustment, relating to behavioral problems and emotional difficulties, as well as possible peer problems, and a predictor of maladjustment and depression (Dunn et al., 1998; Shafer et al., 2017) . Children and adolescents in remarried families who have already seen one parent leave, and another come in which can lead them to believe that their new family will not stay together either (Bray, 1992). With a higher divorce rate for remarried families (Bray, 1992), it is even more important to help adolescents adjust more easily so that the parents can work on their relationship without so much stress over the children.

It is imperative that the parents in remarried families do not neglect their relationship because there are additional negative effects on children in remarried or step-families related to the relationship between the parent and stepparent. Problems in the marriage correlate to negative parenting, and negative parenting correlates with marital conflicts about the child, which circles back (Ulbricht et al., 2013). Parents' stress in the marriage can leak out and cause parenting outbursts, or more intense reactions to their child's usual tendencies. These parental outbursts can be a stressor for children which can lead to them acting out which contributes right back to parental stress and negative parenting. There was a study done to see if the type of

stepfamily has to do with warmth or control that the parents use with the children. Fine, Voydanoff, and Donnelly (1993) looked at how different stepfamily structures (eg. stepmother family versus stepfather family) changed how parents dealt with kids, either warmly or sternly. While this study was prior to the Stepfamily Events Profile or STEP model, the questions were similar. This research was more inclusive than the later results of the STEP since the researchers included stepmother and complex stepfamilies (Fine et al., 1993). The results, while inclusive to more families, did not find that the step-family type mattered. These articles found that events surrounding remarriages and transitions can make a difference in adjustment. The results from these articles show that while it is impossible to save a child from the extra transitions that come with remarriage and a stepfamily, parents can make extra effort in their relationship so that the children do not feel the as many of the negative effects.

Parent-Child Relationships and Communication

In continuation with the discussion of how adolescent adjustment can be predicted, it is important to look at how the gender of the child or parent matters, what good relationships and bad relationships are, and the effects of these on the adolescents. Over time, it appears that the relationship between parent and child has a big impact on whether the child adjusts well or not. Just like positive events surrounding transitions, positive interactions between stepparent and non-biological child(-ren) are needed to allow families to grow and make memories as one instead of two separate families (Banker & Gaertner, 1998). In fact, parental disconnect, which was measured with adolescent response to five items about their relationship with parents, is related to depression, dropping out of school, and behavioral problems (Jensen & Lippold, 2018; Slattery et al., 2011; Zimiles & Lee, 1991). For the likelihood of staying in school and doing well in it, the quality of parental relationship is not the big predictor, the gender of the child in

relationship to the gender of the parent/stepparent is what seems to determine it (Zimiles & Lee, 1991). Students dropped out more if their custodial parent was like-gender. So while females in stepfamilies dropped out more than males in stepfamilies, the dropout rate was even higher if the female student was in a stepfather family structure, and higher for males with stepmothers (Zimiles & Lee, 1991).

Parental communication even without a good relationship is linked to better adjustment. Dunn, Davies, O'Connor, & Sturgess (2001) found that children felt they were not told what was happening when they were put in their blended families, which left them confused, feeling unloved, and no longer wanting to talk to or confide in their stepparents. On the contrary, adolescents who had good relationships with their residential biological parent had the best buffer to counteract symptoms of depression. Additionally, a good relationship with the nonresidential biological parent also helped (Shafer et al., 2017).

Children going into a stepfamily need to be told what is going on and given ample time with parents and stepparents in order to grow and nurture relationships with them so as to adjust better to stepfamily life.

With lots of research on adolescents who are in the midst of their time with the stepfamily, there needs to be research later on to see some of the effects.

Effects Continuing into College

Looking at the short-term effects of adjusting in stepfamilies is essential, but it is also important to try to see if there are long-term effects that can be monitored. With lots of research on adolescents who are in the midst of their time with the stepfamily, there needs to be research later on to see some of the effects. College-age students are ideal because many are away from

home for the first time which may be telling on how relationships within families last outside the home

How does this continue as adolescents grow up and leave the home? Psychological well-being in college in relation to attachment to parents was compared between intact and stepfamilies. Love & Murdock (2004), studied young adult college students to see if their parental attachment and psychological well-being could be related. After surveying nearly two hundred students, their hypothesis was correct, that students from intact families would have more secure attachments and that secure attachment was a significant predictor of well-being

Chapman (1977) was interested in looking at how cognitive performance may be affected by family structure adjustment by college age. Looking at male and female student's SAT scores and focusing on father-absent and stepfather families, Chapman found that stepfathers actually related to females being more field independent than even intact family females.

Effects measured cognitively are interesting, but also understanding young adults' perception of their relationship and adjustment are also important. A study done with Canadian undergraduate students asked teens in intact and stepfather families questions about their father figure and his attitude towards them. Questions such as if their father figure hugs or compliments them which are very similar to questions in the STEP questionnaire. This study found that "biological fathers were found to be warmer, more controlling, and more successful than stepfathers" (Claxton-Oldfield et al., 2006, p. 58). Children of parents who scored higher on warmth showed better psychological outcomes, so it is important for the stepparents to act warmly toward their new stepchildren.

Helping Stepfamilies

Research about stepfamilies can give practitioners insight for how to best help children and families beginning the family blending process. A helpful reminder for people entering a stepfamily is that while there is now an *additional* parent, the stepparent is not a *replacement* parent (Skeen et al., 1985, p. 124). Parents who begin the stepparent journey need to remember to make their relationship a priority, so they are not simply parenting together. Other comments from Skeen and like researchers are to communicate roles, especially disciplining roles for each parent. It is important for each parent to back the other up when disciplining so that the children do not receive all the discipline from one parent and none from the other. School counselors who have more interactions with students are able to make a greater impact on students in stepfamilies, especially since many may not get to individual or family counseling unless the family situation is struggling. Prosen and Farmer (1982) make recommendations for group counseling. "One effective strategy was getting students together who suffered parental divorce, loss of a loved one or other separation and doing group counseling" (p. 396). Allowing students to grieve the loss of their original family and the change into a new stepfamily may be helpful for adjustment. In fact, this seems to be the best first step for stepfamilies, because after they grieve the loss of the original family they can focus better on the new family (Ransom, Schlesinger, and Derdeyn, 1979). Giving students time to hear how other students feel and relate it back to how they are feeling themselves may also be helpful (Prosen & Farmer, 1982). Group counseling for the family or parents may be helpful as well. One study chose psychodynamic and behavioral theories for a group counseling class of several sessions. One session was focused on understanding and empathizing with the children to better understand their behavioral problems and the class had an 85 percent increase in understanding of their stepchildren (Nadler, 1983, p. 109). Prosen and Farmer (1982) and Skeen et al. (1985) both highlighted the need for time to

bond as a couple, but Prosen and Farmer added a warning to parents to keep the efforts of working on their new marriage separate from visiting children and the nonresidential parents. An additional tip for those working with new stepfamilies is to encourage them to spend the time early on to restructure the roles within the family and with the nonresidential biological parent so that they can make the new family feel like one (Ransom et al., 1979).

Overall, getting counseling to aid in the adjustment process of a new stepfamily can be helpful to guide and gain understanding between members of the new family. For children in schools, school counseling may be beneficial as group counseling can connect other students in stepfamilies together so they can grieve and learn how to cope together. Reminders for counselors in this area were to encourage the couples to learn their new roles together and then help establish new family roles.

The Stepfamily Events Profile

After realizing there was very little research understanding how positive events could help understand adolescent adjustment in stepfamilies, Doyle, Wolchik, and Dawson-McClure decided to make their own. Doyle et al.'s (2002) literature review revealed that smaller events may be more indicative of adjustment than big events and the idea for their study was to identify small, positive events that could not only help them understand, but also potentially help adolescents to adjust better in many ways. Doyle and the other researchers did not only interview adolescents, they asked parents and professionals questions as well. To develop the original events profile, Doyle and the other researchers interviewed 14 minor children, 17 college students, 8 parents, and 16 professionals. By asking participants to identify simple questions

about what events would be upsetting and which would be helpful, the STEP profile was created. The researchers placed events under domains based on relationship and then sent it to adolescents to fill out. The scores were later compared to their parents' report of internalizing problems and their parents' report of externalizing behavior problems. Because the researchers asked people in stepfamilies and those familiar with them to create the questions, they were able to find more relationships between the events and internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Overall, the study found that positive events were reported more than negative, and they were significantly negatively related to adolescent and mother report of internalizing problems. As for externalizing problems, "positive events between the adolescent and stepfather were negatively correlated with adolescent report of externalizing problems" (Doyle et al., 2002, p. 140). Doyle continued this research with others and used the STEP in 2003 to assess if positive events could act as a buffer for children and adolescents going through the transition to a stepfamily. The researchers found evidence consistent with the original STEP research. In their first study, the researchers found that if the children did not have many positive events, the negative events were significantly related to internalizing and externalizing problems, whereas the problems were found to be insignificant for the adolescents who reported many positive events (Doyle et al., 2003). The results kept consistent in their second study, as Doyle and the other researchers found that fewer positive events were related to both externalizing and internalizing behavior problems, and those problems became less significant with more positive events reported.

Family Harmony

Since the development of appropriate event questions, the researcher for this study has the ability to discover if these positive events within specific relationships in the family are related to family harmony. Banker and Gaertner (1998) developed questions to assess stepfamily

harmony and came to the conclusion that it was important both that the members of the two families viewed themselves as one new family, and that the relationships within the family were good. The focus on individual relationships within the family and the adolescent's perspective of the family make these questions appropriate to look at for correlation with the STEP.

Summary

The study of stepfamilies has increased as stepfamilies have become more common. The research is important especially for adolescents so that every predictor can be implemented to give each child the best shot at a healthy, harmonized blended family. Conclusions drawn from several studies show that events surrounding family transitions seem to either help or hinder adjustment over time. Events that were rated positive by adolescents had to do with good and fair relationships between stepparent and child, while events that were rated negative were parents fighting or stepfather calling stepchild names and giving unequal discipline. Child's age at time of transition matters and so does the marital status of the parent and stepparent, either married or cohabitating. Perhaps the biggest predictor found for better adjustment is in the relationships between parent and child, non-resident parent and child, and stepparent and child. Communication is important prior to transition to help children prepare for the changes and important between new family members to create a sense of unity in the one family.

Relationships between stepfathers and children should portray warmth, as the ones who reported high levels of warmth from their stepfathers showed better psychological adjustment in college.

The evidence presented in this literature review supports the hypotheses mentioned earlier. Age does appear to matter in regard to transitioning to a stepfamily, with older children and adolescents doing better than young children and toddlers. Discussing the changes that will

occur can help the child or adolescent adjust better and open up conversation for questions.

Relationships between parent and child need to be strengthened even after remarriage for a better chance at good adjustment. People who know adolescents or anyone adjusting to a stepfamily can encourage the child and parent to grow their relationship and be sure the child has plenty of distracting positive events surrounding the transitions. Counselors who work with stepfamilies can highlight the importance of understanding parent roles and help the children recognize that the new parent is additional and not a replacement for the other biological parent. Counselors should also help the children grieve the changes in their family structure. Counselors who work with stepparents can remind them to take the time to work on their own relationship outside of parenting, and when parenting, to back each other up.

Chapter III: Methodology

Participants

Participants for the current study were a convenience sample recruited through an online system called Sona at a Christian liberal arts university. Undergraduate students enrolled in psychology courses were incentivized to participate in research surveys and experiments in lieu of a three-page research article summary. To gain more participants, resident directors and the honors leadership team sent email requests to students to complete the survey if they are part of a stepfamily. Voluntary participants at the university were to continue to the survey if they were 18 years of age or older and part of a stepfamily.

At the end of data collection, the survey received 40 responses, 10 from the Sona website, and 30 from at later-developed Google Form. The participants were 7 males and 33 females between the ages of 18 and 29. The range of age for how old they were when their family was blended was from birth to 22, with the mean being 11 years old. The demographic questions allowed students to rate themselves on multiple categories of race and ethnicity. This sample consisted of 29 white students, 6 black or African American, 6 Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin, 1 Asian, and 2 “other”. There were 33 students whose primary family consists of a stepfather, and 5 whose primary family is with a stepmother.

Measures

To better understand factors associated with family harmony and positive adjustment in blended families, a survey questionnaire was created with a mix of questions. The beginning of the survey included demographic questions asking about participants’ age, sex, ethnicity, and religion (Appendix A). The researcher asked selected questions from the Stepfamily Events

Profile (STEP) and family harmony measures to assess the individual relationships within the student's stepfamilies, and the families as a unit.

The STEP questionnaire (Doyle et al., 2002) asks specific scenario questions to assess parent-child and step-parent child relationship. There are 129 events in 14 domains in the STEP that are asked. The researcher asked 50 over 4 domains with added stepmother options as the STEP only studied stepfather families. The format in the original STEP profile asked participants if the event was positive or negative and if they had experienced the event more than three times in the past month (Doyle et al., 2002, p. 132). For the present study, the researcher asked 52 questions over 3 domains and added options for stepmothers that mirrored the stepfather questions for a total of 66 questions (See Appendix B). For the purpose of this project, the researchers were only interested in if the participants had experienced the event more than three times in the past month. The researcher added stepmother options to avoid having to narrow participants to only stepfather families. Students were asked to check N/A for the STEP questions that did not match their stepfamily structure. The STEP questionnaire was used after development in 2003 and the test-retest reliability was found to be good, especially for positive events at .83, and negative events not too far behind at .74 (Doyle et al., 2003, p. 538).

In order to assess how the family unit functioned from the perspective of the students, the researcher used already developed stepfamily harmony measures (Banker & Gaertner, 1998). The harmony measures in Banker and Gaertner's study ask the extent to which there is contentment and harmony in the home rather than disagreement and conflict, and questions stepsibling relationships. The present study used selected measures from Banker and Gaertner's study (see Appendix C). Banker and Gaertner were thorough with their analyses and included

Cronbach's alpha for each set of questions. All measures used in this study have alphas over .80 except for one.

Added to these measures are researcher-created questions asking Grade Point Average (GPA), age at time of parent's remarriage, and open-ended questions asking personal opinions about what could have been done to make adjustment easier for the participant.

For the qualitative analyses, of the open-ended questions, the researcher tallied up responses based on overall theme, then analyzed the themes again for specific responses.

Procedures

Students who registered for the study in the original Sona system were presented with the informed consent and proceeded to the survey on the website. The later survey given out the next semester allowed students to register on Sona or take the survey directly on the link to an online Google Form. The participants for the Google Form reviewed the informed consent, which let them know that participation was voluntary, and they could opt out at any time (See Appendix E). Students who chose to continue the survey on both platforms were first asked demographic questions, followed by the STEP questionnaire and family harmony models, and ended with open-ended questions developed by the researcher. After the survey was complete, the researcher granted the students research credit.

Chapter IV: Analysis of Data

Full-Sample Quantitative Analyses

Several analyses were conducted using the full sample of participants who completed the relevant measures. The researcher chose the full sample to see if there were any relationships between Grade Point Average (GPA) and good family adjustment.

First, correlations between college and high-school GPA and two measures of family relationships were tested (See Table 3). It was predicted that GPA would be negatively correlated with feeling like one's family is divided into two separate families, but that GPA would be positively correlated with family harmony. The correlational analysis did not find any statistically significant associations between college or high school GPA and better adjustment (Table 3). Additional analyses were done to see if GPA was related to whether or not one's parents had discussed the remarriage prior to its occurrence, as well as to supportive stepparent relationships, but there were no significant associations there, either. While there were studies in the literature review that commented on younger children having a tougher adjustment, in this study there were no statistically significant associations between the age at blending and the family relationship measures. Family harmony had a significant positive correlation with report of a supportive stepparent ($r(23) = .55, p = .004$).

Three variables correlated negatively with participants reporting their home feels like two separate groups (See Table 4). The three variables that had statistically significant negative correlations with these student reports were premarital discussion, or reports from participants who felt they got to discuss the changes before the remarriage ($r(29) = -.41, p = .02$), participants who felt they had a supportive stepparent ($r(33) = -.52, p = .001$), and those who

perceived their family as harmonious ($r(24) = -.45, p = .02$). Family harmony and having a supportive stepparent were positively correlated ($r(23) = .55, p = .004$).

Subsample Quantitative Analyses

The subsample consisted of 25 participants who had stepfamilies in both their primary and secondary family structures, which allowed them to answer for both stepmother and stepfather interactions. The researcher chose to analyze the subsample for the correlations with the STEP questionnaire because there the STEP identifies specific interactions within stepfamily relationships. Since the researchers could not be sure those who did not have a stepmother were answering “N/A” because the participant did not have a stepmother, and not because the interaction did not occur, the researcher chose to analyze only those with two stepfamilies. Since the participants with stepfamilies on both sides had the possibility of experiencing every interaction, it allowed for consistency in the measurement. The correlations of positive and negative interactions with family harmony and other variables were tested (See Table 5). Family harmony correlated negatively with negative STEP interactions ($r(19) = -.55, p = .01$), and, as in the large sample, harmony correlated positively with premarital discussion ($r(13) = .56, p = .03$) and the supportiveness of the stepparent ($r(16) = .51, p = .03$). Stepparent supportiveness correlated negatively with negative STEP interactions ($r(18) = -.47, p = .04$) and positively with positive STEP interactions ($r(18) = .53, p = .02$). Premarital discussion had a similar result, being negatively related to negative STEP events ($r(17) = -.52, p = .02$). However, there was no significant relationship between premarital discussion and positive STEP events.

Independent t-tests were conducted to test the associations between dichotomous variables and the STEP scales. Those without premarital discussion reported significantly more negative events ($M = 4.63, SD = 4.41$) than those who did discuss the changes prior to the

remarriage ($M = 0.00$, $SD = 0.00$), $t(12) = 3.78$, $n = 6$, $p = .003$, two-tailed. The mean difference was large (4.62) and the 95% confidence interval around the mean difference was fairly precise [1.95, 7.28]. Since the sample size for this comparison is so small, the results should be interpreted with caution. The results indicated that none of the students who reported having premarital discussion experienced any of the negative interactions found on the STEP questionnaire. Those who denied that their family felt like two groups did not score significantly higher on STEP positive interactions ($M = 9.12$, $SD = 5.43$) than those who agreed that their family felt like two groups ($M = 6.67$, $SD = 3.67$), $t(21) = 2.45$, $p = .32$, two-tailed. Likewise, there was no significant difference in terms of negative STEP interactions between whose family felt like one groups ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 3.42$) and those whose family felt like two groups ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 5.13$), $t(21) = -2.04$, $p = .28$, two-tailed.

Qualitative analysis across the sample regarding the open-ended questions showed obvious similarities. When asked if there was one thing about their adjustment they wish they could change, 7.5% of the participants said they would not change anything, and 22.5% said they just needed to keep an open mind for their parents' sake. 7.5% said having more time to transition and get to know their new family would have been helpful. Communication was a common answer both to the question about their families, and when asked what tips they would give to new stepfamilies. For themselves, 10% said knowing what was going on would be helpful. When asked to give tips to other families, 7.5% of the participants said to have more communication on both sides of the family. Topics included in the tips were discussing holidays and getting to know stepsiblings. Being accepting was the top tip, with 20% of participants saying that new stepfamilies need to be accepting of the other side and prepared for change. Those who

gave the tip of being accepting reported that in their experience, all the change was worth it for the family they have now.

The majority of this sample did not have any resources to aid their adjustment, although two participants mentioned going to counseling.

Chapter V: Discussion

The original hypotheses were that participants who were older at the time of remarriage, whose parents prepared them for the remarriage by discussion or with resources, and who reported more frequent positive interactions and less frequent negative interactions with parents and stepparent(s) will have a harmonious, or well-functioning family unit. While this study did not have any significant results based on the age of the student at the time their parents remarried, the findings generally supported the rest of the hypotheses.

The first goal of this research was to discover possible predictors of harmonious functioning in stepfamilies. Results from the survey, although a small sample of the population, did find two possible predictors of harmony in stepfamily relationships. Premarital discussion or taking time to talk with the children prior to the remarriage about the changes they can expect in a blended family, was related to a harmonious stepfamily, and may predict fewer negative interactions between the children and parents. Having open communication before the remarriage may be a predictor since intentionality before the remarriage can lead to better adjustment overall. Parents who choose to talk through the expected challenges may also make more effort throughout the adjustment. In the literature review, studies were found that said having no prior communication led to the children not wanting to confide in the stepparents. Making the effort to have a good discussion prior to the remarriage may also make having the

good relationship with the stepparent possible, which then helps the child or adolescent in more ways than one.

The second suggested predictor is a quality relationship with the stepparent, one that makes the child feel supported and able to talk to about anything. Having a quality relationship with a stepparent is important across all stepfamily structures and functioning outcomes our study, as it was correlated negatively with feeling like two families under one roof, and positively with perceived family harmony. In the subgroup of students with two stepfamilies, that stepparent relationship was even more important. The students who rated their stepparent as supportive and cooperative tended to report more positive interactions with their parents and fewer negative interactions. The subgroup also showed that the stepparent relationship is positively related with family harmony.

The findings related to the relationship with the stepparent align with the findings in the literature review. Studies in the literature review found that adolescents who had good relationships with parents seemed to have a buffer against depression, and college-age students who had dad's (stepdad's or biological dad's) act warmly towards them had more positive psychological outcomes, so it makes sense that those students would report better family functioning and more positive events. In the original studies using the STEP questionnaire, the researchers looked more at behavioral problems and found more with children who had more negative interactions within their families. With fewer behavioral problems from the children, that also makes sense as to why fewer negative interactions related to harmonious family functioning.

There were several limitations to this study. With only 40 participants, the results are not generalizable. There were even fewer when broken up into the subscale group. While these

correlations are statistically significant in this study, they may not replicate in the general population. The second limitation to the study was the age group. For the university age of the sample, many of the students were living in dorms and away from their parents. The researcher did not ask students if they live at home or on campus, so there is no way to know how big an effect it had on the answers. The reason this could have changed the data is that all of the questions in the STEP asked if the students had experienced the interaction more than three times in the past month. If the students had not been home around the time they took the survey, they may have answered no to interactions that they normally would experience. The responses are also limited based on the fact that they are retrospective. Furthermore, STEP questionnaire used was originally created for solely stepfather families. The researcher adapted the questionnaire in order to include stepmother families by mirroring the stepfather questions, however the biological parent questions were more negative for the father than the mother, because they assumed the children were living with the mother. Even though they were able to be answered by all the students with two stepfamilies, the questions may have been less accurate for those whose primary family structure with a stepmother.

There are practical applications that can be implemented regardless of the generalizability of this study. A surprising finding in the data may be good insight for how to help future stepfamilies. In the study, harmony was significantly related to having supportive stepparent and fewer negative interactions; however, there was no significant correlation between harmony and positive interactions. This finding suggests that having fewer negative interactions may be more impactful than having more positive interactions. In this study, the most experienced negative events were “mom seems unhappy” (45% experienced this more than three times in the month prior to taking the survey), “dad seems unhappy” (15%), and “mom said mean things about dad”

(22.5%). New stepparents should keep these in mind and try to limit the number of negative events so that children have a greater chance for good adjustment. Loyalty conflicts between the divorced biological parents were the source of many negative events found in the STEP.

Beyond limiting negative events, the research findings in this study suggest that both sides of the future stepfamilies should sit down together and discuss the changes they can expect. Children may have questions about moving and how the house will be run. Parents should be sure to communicate how discipline will be handled so that the children know that their parents will be on the same team. This discussion allows for the family members to get to know one another better and can help jumpstart a good stepchild/stepparent relationship. Stepparents need to take time and cultivate a good relationship with their stepchild or stepchildren. One example of how a stepparent can do this is to find ways where they can show their support for their stepchildren. Making a point to be present and supportive at athletic games and school events is a great start, and the supportive relationship can grow from there.

Future research in the area of stepfamilies should focus on high school–age students and implement a longitudinal design. By high school age, many students will have had time to make the adjustment but will not have left home yet, so their relationships with parents and stepparents will not be as retrospective as when they leave home for college. A new questionnaire needs to be created that can more accurately determine how well these children and young adults have adjusted in all types of stepfamilies. With a larger sample, more generalizations can be made in relation to how age at the time of blending may be a factor in adjustment and help parents to make more informed decisions that can help their family in the adjustment process. Longitudinal studies are extremely helpful. One that could give good insight would be a study that follows children and young adults from the first year of blending and every year until middle adulthood.

Following the same families over many years can help researchers see both how their family structure and adjustment affect them in the long term, and how their rating of adjustment may change as time passes. Asking each year what they think worked and did not work for their families can give new stepfamilies and people who work with stepfamilies a wealth of ideas to try out.

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Appendix A

Demographic Questions

Gender Identity: Female Male I prefer not to answer Comment: _____

Age (in years): _____ I prefer not to answer

Are you currently enrolled in a psychology course? No Yes

What was your high school GPA? _____

What is/was your college GPA? _____

Which categories describe you? Please select all that apply to you:

American Indian or Alaska Native	Middle Eastern or North African
Asian	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
Black or African American	White
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin	Some other race, ethnicity, or origin
I prefer not to answer	Please specify: _____

How do you describe your religion, spiritual practice, or existential worldview?

None	Hindu, Specify: _____
Christian, Specify: _____	Buddhist, Specify: _____
Jewish, Specify: _____	Other, Specify: _____
Islamic, Specify: _____	Spiritual, not religious
I prefer not to answer	

Appendix B

STEP Questionnaire

(Doyle et al., 2002)

These next questions are going to be about the various relationships in your family. Indicate whether the event is positive or negative (P/N) and if you have experienced it at least 3 times in the past month.

For these questions, we are focusing on the Resident Mother-Adolescent Relationship:

Mom asked about your day/told you she liked something you did	>3x in the past month
Mom told you she loved you, hugged or kissed you	>3x in the past month
Mom was unhappy	>3x in the past month
Mom helped you solve a problem	>3x in the past month
Mom spent time alone with you	>3x in the past month
Mom talked to you about your family's future	>3x in the past month
Mom shared her secrets and thoughts with you	>3x in the past month
N/A	

Father-Adolescent Relationship (Non-resident father)

You received a phone call, letter in the mail or email from dad	>3x in the past month
Dad told you he loves you or thinks about you often	>3x in the past month
Dad asked about your life	>3x in the past month
Dad helped you solve a problem	>3x in the past month
Dad was unhappy	>3x in the past month
Dad spent time alone with you	>3x in the past month
Dad missed scheduled visits	>3x in the past month
You were made to go to your father's when you did not want to go	>3x in the past month
Dad ignored attempts to contact him	>3x in the past month
Dad dated someone new	>3x in the past month
Dad moved further away from you	>3x in the past month
N/A	

For the following questions, choose the one that fits your family situation.

Stepfather-Adolescent Relationship

Stepdad helped out when you needed it	>3x in the past month
Stepdad asked about your day	>3x in the past month
Stepdad told you he liked something you did or things about you	>3x in the past month
Stepdad shared his interests, opinions, or experiences with you	>3x in the past month
Stepdad hugged you	>3x in the past month
Stepdad spent time alone with you	>3x in the past month
Stepdad got mad at you for something you didn't do	>3x in the past month
Stepdad ignored you	>3x in the past month
You couldn't do something because your mom wanted the family to do something your stepdad wanted to do	>3x in the past month
Stepdad told mom something mean about you	>3x in the past month
Stepdad asked questions about your life that were uncomfortable	>3x in the past month
Stepdad commented on changes in your body	>3x in the past month

OR

Stepmother-Adolescent Relationship

Stepmom helped out when you needed it	>3x in the past month
Stepmom asked about your day	>3x in the past month
Stepmom told you she liked something you did or things about you	>3x in the past month
Stepmom shared her interests, opinions, or experiences with you	>3x in the past month
Stepmom hugged you	>3x in the past month
Stepmom spent time alone with you	>3x in the past month
Stepmom got mad at you for something you didn't do	>3x in the past month
Stepmom ignored you	>3x in the past month

You couldn't do something because your dad wanted the family to do something your stepmom wanted to do	>3x in the past month
Stepmom told dad something mean about you	>3x in the past month
Stepmom asked questions about your life that were uncomfortable	>3x in the past month
Stepmom commented on changes in your body	>3x in the past month

Loyalty Conflicts

Mom said mean things about dad	>3x in the past month
Dad said something nice about stepdad	>3x in the past month
Mom said something nice about stepmom	>3x in the past month
Dad said mean things about mom	>3x in the past month
Parents used you to communicate between them about issues	>3x in the past month
Mom and dad argued or fought	>3x in the past month
Stepdad said something nice about your father	>3x in the past month
Stepmom said something nice about your mom	>3x in the past month
Mom, dad, stepdad/stepmom attended an event you were in	>3x in the past month
Stepdad/mom told you s/he does not want to replace your parent	>3x in the past month
Dad asked questions about mom and stepdad's relationship	>3x in the past month
Mom asked about dad and stepmom's relationship	>3x in the past month
Had to choose between a stepfamily event and visiting parent	>3x in the past month
Told to behave or go live at other parent's home	>3x in the past month
Prevented by mom/dad or stepparent from contacting parent	>3x in the past month

Dad said mean things about stepdad	>3x in the past month
Mom said mean things about stepmom	>3x in the past month
Dad and stepdad or Mom and stepmom argued or fought	>3x in the past month
Relatives talked bad about nonresident parent	>3x in the past month
Stepdad was able to talk to dad about things your mother would not bring up	>3x in the past month
Asked to call stepdad “dad” or stepmom “mom”	>3x in the past month
Dad got angry when you mentioned stepdad	>3x in the past month
Mom got angry when you mentioned stepmom	>3x in the past month

Appendix C

Banker and Gaertner’s Harmony Questionnaire

Stepfamily Harmony (Cronbach's alpha = .88, Banker & Gaertner, 1998)

Generally, there is a feeling of contentment in my house.

Agree Disagree N/A

There are rarely any disagreements in my house.

Agree Disagree N/A

I would characterize the environment at my house as "harmonious."

Agree Disagree N/A

Overall, there is more harmony in my house than discontent.

Agree Disagree N/A

Two Groups (Cronbach's alpha = .90, Banker & Gaertner, 1998)

Living in my house, it feels like there are two separate families.

Agree Disagree N/A

Rate the extent to which it feels like two separate families (5 being all the time, 1 being rarely)

1 2 3 4 5

Stepparent-Stepchild Relationship (Cronbach's alpha = .83, Banker & Gaertner, 1998)

I can count on my stepparent to be supportive.

Agree Disagree N/A

I can count on my stepparent to be cooperative.

Agree Disagree N/A

My stepparent and I have serious, personal talks.

Agree Disagree N/A

My stepparent generally does not support me if I have a disagreement with my parent.

Agree Disagree N/A

My stepparent makes me feel like a stranger in my own home.

Agree Disagree N/A

Opportunities for Personalization Index (Cronbach's alpha = .67, Banker & Gaertner, 1998)

Holiday outings or vacations are usually planned so that everyone in the household is included.

Agree Disagree N/A

I tend to spend more time with my siblings than my stepsiblings.

Agree Disagree N/A

My stepparent spends less time with my siblings and/or me than with my stepsiblings.

Agree Disagree N/A

My parent spends more time with my siblings and/or me than with my stepsiblings.

Agree Disagree N/A

Appendix D

Researcher Created Questions

1. If there was one thing you feel could have aided in a better adjustment for you when you entered your stepfamily, what would it be?
2. What tips would you tell other people who are about to transition into a blended family?
3. Did your parents discuss and help you understand how things would change before the re/marriage took place? Yes No Unsure
4. Was your family given any resources from anyone? Resources could mean pamphlets or websites with information to help before blending your families.
Yes No Unsure
If so, what was it? _____

Appendix E

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY

Title: Predictors for Adolescents' Healthy Adjustment into Stepfamilies

Investigator(s): Principal Investigator Jeremy Cummings, Co-Investigator Emily Monnik

Purpose: The purpose of the research study is to discover if there are predictors for adolescents to adjust better to a stepfamily. You must be 18 years or older to participate and be part of a stepfamily.

What to Expect: This research study is administered online. Participation in this research will involve completion of one questionnaire. The questionnaire will ask questions about your demographic and stepfamily and biological family relationships. Students have the right to skip any question they do not feel comfortable answering.

Risks: The risk associated with this study is possible experience of mild, temporary emotional distress. Campus counseling is available at 863-667-5205.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits to you. However, you may gain some insight about your family relationships.

Compensation: You will receive one SONA credit for your participation.

Your Rights and Confidentiality: Your participation in this research is voluntary. There is no penalty for refusing to participate, and you are free to withdraw your consent and participation in this project at any time.

Confidentiality: The participants identity will be protected on password protected programs on a password protected computer in a locked office. The results will not be connected with a name

and only the principal investigators and the research team are allowed to access the stored data. All data will be destroyed five years after the study has been completed.

Contacts: You may contact the researcher at the following email address should you desire to discuss your participation in the study and/or request information about the results of the study.

Jeremy Cummings: jpcummings@seu.edu

If you have questions about your rights as a research volunteer, you may contact the IRB office at IRB@seu.edu

If you choose to participate: Please, click NEXT if you choose to participate. By clicking NEXT, you are indicating that you freely and voluntarily and agree to participate in this study and you also acknowledge that you are at least 18 years of age. It is recommended that you print a copy of this consent page for your records before you begin the study by clicking below.

SONA Study Description:

Adolescent Adjustment in Stepfamilies: The purpose of this study is to identify possible predictors for a more positive or healthy adjustment into a stepfamily as an adolescent.

Participants will be asked to complete an online questionnaire about their stepfamily through Google Forms. This questionnaire is expected to take no more than 20 minutes to complete.

Table 1
Demographic Composition of the Full Sample ($N=40$)¹

Mean Age (<i>SD</i>)	19.93 (2.01)
Range of Age	18-29
Mean Age at Family Blending (<i>SD</i>)	11.19 (5.73)
Age Range at Family Blending	Birth – 22 years
Gender	
Male	7 (17.5%)
Female	33 (82.5%)
Race ²	
White	29 (65.9%)
Black or African American	6 (13.6%)
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin	6 (13.6%)
Asian	1 (2.3%)
Other	2 (4.5%)
Stepfamily Formation	
Remarriage	29 (72.5%)
Cohabitation	3 (7.5%)
Parents not married when child was born, later parent married stepparent	8 (20%)

¹Figures represent numbers of participants in each category, followed by percentages in parentheses, except where stated otherwise.

²Cumulative percentage may exceed 100 percent as some subjects selected multiple categories.

Table 2
Demographic Composition of the Subsample ($N=25$)¹

Mean Age (<i>SD</i>)	20.16 (2.32)
Range of Age	18-29
Mean Age at Family Blending (<i>SD</i>)	9.9 (5.22)
Age Range at Family Blending	6 months - 22
Gender	
Male	6 (24%)
Female	19 (76%)
Race ²	
White	19 (76%)
Black or African American	4 (16%)
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin	4 (16%)
Asian	0 (0%)
Other	2 (4.5%)
Stepfamily Formation	
Remarriage	19 (76%)
Cohabitation	0 (0%)
Parents not married when child was born, later parent married stepparent	6 (24%)

¹Figures represent numbers of participants in each category, followed by percentages in parentheses, except where stated otherwise.

²Cumulative percentage may exceed 100 percent as some subjects selected multiple categories.

Table 3
 Correlations between GPA and Age at Blending in Full Sample (N = 40)

	Feeling Like Two Groups	Premarital Discussion	Harmony	Supportive Stepparent Relationship
H.S. GPA	.10	-.29	.01	.04
College GPA	.13	-.15	-.05	.29
Age at Blending	.13	.15	-.14	-.18

Note: No correlations were significant at $p < .05$

Table 4
Correlations between Measures of Family Relationships in Full Sample

	Feeling Like Two Groups	Premarital Discussion	Harmony
Premarital Discussion	-.41* (31)		
Harmony	-.52** (35)	.29 (28)	
Supportive Stepparent Relationship	-.45* (26)	.26 (21)	.55** (25)

Note: Sample sizes are in parentheses.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Table 5
Correlations between STEP and Adjustment in Subsample

	Harmony	STEP Positive Events	STEP Negative Events	Premarital Discussion	Supportive Stepparent
STEP Positive Events	.28 (21)				
STEP Negative Events	-.55** (21)	-.09 (25)			
Premarital Discussion	.56* (15)	.11 (19)	-.52* (19)		
Supportive Stepparent	.51* (18)	.53* (20)	-.47* (20)	.41 (14)	
Feeling Like Two Groups	-.44 (20)	-.22 (23)	.23 (23)	-.44 (18)	-.27 (19)

Note: Sample sizes are in parentheses.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$