


1992

The relationship between the content and quality of ex-spousal interactions and the adjustment of stepchildren: An exploratory study

Bradley Lawrence Elison
College of William & Mary - School of Education

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Clinical Psychology Commons](#), [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#), [Social Psychology Commons](#), and the [Student Counseling and Personnel Services Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Elison, Bradley Lawrence, "The relationship between the content and quality of ex-spousal interactions and the adjustment of stepchildren: An exploratory study" (1992). *Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects*. Paper 1539618840.

<https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.25774/w4-581p-4g19>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.

INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

U·M·I

University Microfilms International
A Bell & Howell Information Company
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
313/761-4700 800/521-0600



Order Number 9224072

The relationship between the content and quality of ex-spousal interactions and the adjustment of stepchildren: An exploratory study

Elison, Bradley Lawrence, Ed.D.

The College of William and Mary, 1992

U·M·I

300 N. Zeeb Rd.
Ann Arbor, MI 48106



THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CONTENT AND QUALITY
OF EX-SPOUSAL INTERACTIONS AND THE ADJUSTMENT
OF STEPCHILDREN: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Education
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

by

Bradley Lawrence Elison

Frebruary, 1992

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CONTENT AND QUALITY
OF EX-SPOUSAL INTERACTIONS AND THE ADJUSTMENT
OF STEPCHILDREN: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

by

Bradley L. Ellison

Approved on March 1992 by

Fred L. Adair

Fred L. Adair, Ph.D.
Chairman of Doctoral Committee

Kevin E. Geoffrey

Kevin E. Geoffrey, Ed.D.

Charles O. Matthews

Charles O. Matthews, Ph.D.

Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges the following individuals, all of whom have contributed significantly to the completion of this work.

My wife, Jennifer - who provided the love, patience, and support necessary for this project to take form, and who believed in me when self-doubt made completing the project seem impossible.

My children, Emily and Greg - who daily remind of the joy in life and the wonderful rewards of sharing oneself with others.

My parents, Gladys Hardin and Larry Elison - who nurtured me challenged me, and set me free.

My grandparents, Wilford and LaRue Elison - who have quietly modeled for me the things that are important in life: love, honesty, commitment, and family.

My dissertation committee, Fred Adair, Kevin Geoffroy, and Chas Matthews - For their support and guidance through my graduate education and the completion of this dissertation.

The staff of the PACES Family Counseling Center - who provided the friendship, support, and intellectual challenge that helped to make this project a reality.

And lastly, to the sixty-two individuals who gave their time and shared their experiences so that others could learn the path to satisfying stepfamily relationships.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
LIST OF TABLES.....	vi
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	2
Statement of the Problem.....	2
Justification for the Study.....	2
Theoretical Rational.....	6
Definition of Terms.....	13
General Hypotheses.....	15
Sample and Data Gathering Procedures.....	15
Limitations of the Study.....	16
II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	18
Summary of Rationale and Relationship to the Problem.....	18
Review of Research on the Stepfamily and its Impact on Children.....	20
Critique of Stepfamily Research.....	33
Methodological Concerns.....	33
Current Limitations.....	35
Review of Research on Ex-spousal Interactions.....	37
Ex-spousal Interactions and Stepfamily Functioning.....	42
Ex-spousal Interactions and Stepchildren's Adjustment.....	45
Summary.....	54
III. METHODOLOGY.....	57
Population and Selection of the Sample.....	57
Data Gathering Procedures.....	58
Instrumentation.....	59
Research Design.....	63
Specific Research Hypotheses.....	64
Statistical Analysis.....	66
Ethical Considerations.....	66
Summary of Methodology.....	67

IV.	RESULTS.....	69
	Demographic Description and Analysis.....	69
	Analysis of Primary Research Variables.....	74
	Analysis of Specific Hypotheses.....	82
	Additional Findings.....	87
	Summary of Results.....	91
V.	SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH.....	95
	Summary.....	95
	Statement of the problem.....	95
	Theory Base and Relevant Research.....	96
	Methodology.....	97
	Results.....	100
	Limitations of the Study.....	102
	Conclusions.....	106
	Implications for Future research.....	114
APPENDICES		
	A. Consent Forms.....	118
	B. Instruments	
	Demographic Questionnaire.....	121
	Quality of Coparental Communication Scale...	122
	Content of Coparental Interactions Scale....	124
	O'Leary Porter Scale.....	126
	Children's Perceptions Questionnaire.....	128
	C. Correspondence With Stepfamilies	
	Cover Letter.....	131
	Instructions for Questionnaire.....	132
	REFERENCES.....	134
	VITA.....	142
	ABSTRACT.....	143

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE

4.1 Comparison of Demographic Variables for Clinic and Nonclinic Subsamples.....72

4.2 T-Tests for Differences Between Clinic and Nonclinic Subsamples for Demographic Variables.....73

4.3 Correlation Coefficients for Ex-spousal Interaction Variables and Children's Adjustment Measures.....75

4.4 T-Tests for Differences in Stepchildren's Adjustment According to Stepfamily Type.....77

4.5 T-Tests for Differences in Stepchildren's Adjustment According to Stepchild Gender.....78

4.6 Correlation Coefficients for Selected Demographic Variables and Measures of Stepchildren's Adjustment.....79

4.7 Correlations Between Ex-Spousal Interactions and Stepchildren's Adjustment Controlling for Family Type, Stepchild gender, and Length of Parental Remarriage.....81

4.8 T-Tests for Differences in Stepchildren's adjustment According to Subsample: Clinical or Nonclinical.....89

4.9 T-Tests for Differences in Ex-spousal Interactions According to Subsample: Clinical or Nonclinical.....90

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CONTENT AND QUALITY
OF EX-SPOUSAL INTERACTIONS AND THE ADJUSTMENT
OF STEPCHILDREN: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

Chapter I

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

The problem investigated in this study concerned the effects of ex-spousal interactions on children's behavioral and emotional adjustment following parental divorce and remarriage.

Justification for the Study

Changes in the patterns of marriage, divorce, and remarriage in the past twenty years have resulted in an increasingly complex array of family systems. The simple, two-parent, intact family system has been supplemented by a variety of alternative family types that are neither intact nor simple. Although future divorce and remarriage behaviors are difficult to predict, Glick and Lin (1986) predict that if present trends continue, approximately one in four children will spend some portion of their childhood in a remarried family. As life in remarried families becomes a reality for increasing numbers of children, the need for a solid research base on the effects of parental remarriage is apparent. While efforts have been made to establish such a base, our understanding of remarriage and remarried families remains minimal (Furstenberg, 1988).

Of particular importance in the study of the remarried family is the ability of the family to rear children who are capable of

functioning adequately in their social, vocational, and personal endeavors. Furstenburg (1987) argues that the most critical question for research on the stepfamily involves how relations within stepfamilies affect the stepchild's performance outside the family. Similar "critical" questions concerning the viability of the remarried family have been posed by other researchers, however, answers have been slow to emerge.

Recent studies (Pasley & Healow, 1988; Amato & Ochiltree, 1989) suggest that in some areas stepchildren may be disadvantaged when compared to children from other family types. Unfortunately, these studies ignored many variables relevant to stepfamily functioning and did not control for the possible influence of those variables on children's adjustment. Even if it is accepted that stepchildren are disadvantaged in some way the question remains: What are the characteristics of remarried families that negatively and/or positively impact upon the lives of stepchildren? The vast majority of our information on stepfamilies is the result of comparison based research which does not even attempt to identify the qualities of the stepfamily that may explain differential outcomes for stepchildren (Ganong & Coleman, 1987).

In response to the dearth of information on variables related to stepfamily functioning, some researchers have attempted to move beyond simple comparison designs in their investigations of the stepfamily. One area that has received increased research attention recently is the nature and consequences of the various relationships among the members of remarried families (Brand &

Clingempeel, 1987; Clingempeel & Segal, 1986; Crosbie Burnett, 1984). These studies suggest that certain relationships within the stepfamily are significantly related to stepfamily adjustment. The information generated by these studies is limited, however, as the research has been primarily descriptive (Clingempeel, Brand, & Ievoli, 1984) and/or has focused on measures of marital and family satisfaction rather than stepchild adjustment (Crosbie-Burnett, 1984). Another shortcoming of the above research efforts is their tendency to focus on a single household when examining stepfamily relationships. Investigations of significant stepfamily relationships are an important step toward a better understanding of the stepfamily. Unfortunately, knowledge relevant to a wide variety of factors that influence the adjustment of remarried families and stepchildren remains inadequate.

Amid the efforts to expand our understanding of the stepfamily efforts have been made to address the unique structural elements of the stepfamily, most notably the involvement of more than the traditional two parents in child rearing (Ahrons, 1979). In a series of articles stemming from her research with divorced couples, Ahrons has generated a wealth of descriptive information on the interactions between former spouses following marital separation (Ahrons, 1979, 1981, 1983). Despite these efforts to explore the nature of ex-spousal relations, virtually no research has been conducted to assess the possible impact of ex-spousal relations on child outcomes in the stepfamily. The extant research

addresses only marital and family satisfaction measures (Clingempeel, 1981) or has been designed to be purely descriptive (Ahrons, 1982). Attempts have not been made to correlate outcome measures focusing on the behavioral and emotional adjustment of stepchildren to measures of the relations between former spouses.

While a wide variety of factors may eventually help to explain the impact of stepfamily life on children, the relationship between former spouses shows special promise as an explanatory factor. An abundance of evidence suggests that parental relations, especially discord and hostility, strongly influence emotional and behavioral responses in children (Emery, 1982). The evidence that parental interactions have a profound influence on children coupled with Ahrons' observation that neither of a child's biological parents ceases to be a parent following remarriage, regardless of custody and residential arrangements, suggests that ex-spousal relations may be significant in the adjustment of stepchildren. The importance of ex-spousal interactions in the lives of stepchildren is further evidenced in research that shows such interactions to be significant even after parental separation and divorce (Kline, Johnston, & Tschann, 1991).

Despite the potential explanatory power of ex-spousal relations following remarriage as a factor in stepchild adjustment, ex-spousal relations have been ignored in stepchild adjustment research. As the legal, emotional and practical responsibilities for child rearing are increasingly shared by a child's biological parents despite remarriages and parental antagonisms, the need for

research on ex-spousal relations and childhood adjustment in the stepfamily has become urgent. The purpose of the current research is to examine the relationship, if any, between ex-spousal relations following remarriage and the behavioral and emotional adjustment of stepchildren.

Theoretical Rationale

While the family has historically been acknowledged as a significant element of human civilization, comprehensive theories of the internal dynamics of the family have been developed only in the last fifty years. The specifics of family functioning as a mechanism in the maintenance of a vital and psychologically healthy society remained unquestioned through the early part of the twentieth century. During this period our cultural emphasis on individual responsibility and accountability led psychology to focus upon intrapsychic processes. As the authors of individualistic theories of human behavior endeavored to provide a more comprehensive view of their subject, it became apparent that behavior could not be adequately explained using intrapsychic processes alone. In response to the shortcomings of previous efforts, a growing number of theorists began to explore the environment in which human behavior occurs. Emphasis on environmental factors in the explanation of behavior coupled with the belief that childhood is a crucial period for the development of subsequent behavior patterns naturally led practitioners and researchers to the study of the family.

Though the family permeates every aspect of a child's environment, a coherent theory describing and explaining the relationships between family functioning and the development of human behavior was slow to materialize. Studies involving the families of schizophrenics in the early 1950s opened the door for comprehensive theories linking family relationships with specific forms of human psychopathology. When these family centered theories of psychopathology were coupled with the introduction of the biologically inspired general systems theory (Bertalanffy, 1968) a wave of theorizing about families and the variety of family systems ensued.

Among the attempts to explain family functioning in the past forty years, the structural family therapy theory of Salvador Minuchin is one of the most widely used and accepted. Minuchin developed an unparalleled image of the family as a true system in which each member's behavior can only be understood in relation to the larger system of which it is a part. Minuchin's theoretical approach to families was first described in Families of the Slums (Minuchin, Montalvo, Guerny, Rosman, & Schumer, 1967) and has been clarified and extended in subsequent works (Minuchin, 1974; Minuchin, & Fishman, 1981). Structural family theory is grounded in the clinical observations and descriptions Minuchin and his colleagues made of families they worked with at The Philadelphia Child Guidance Center. The nontraditional configurations of these families helped to produce a theory with ample explanatory power to

address the extended, divorced, remarried, and otherwise unconventional family systems of the 1990s.

The major premise which underpins Minuchin's theory is the belief that families are best understood as systems rather than as groups of individuals. The goals and objectives of the system are defined by sets of transactions between family members (Walsh, 1981). These transactions, as the name structural implies, result in alignments, boundaries, and rules for interactions among various family members. Alignments within the family result in subsystems with specific family roles and expectations. The major subsystems referred to by Minuchin are the parental, marital and sibling subsystems (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). The boundaries between these subsystems and the hierarchy established between them defines the family and its ability to function effectively.

Minuchin argues that within the confines of each subsystem, or holon as he refers to them (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981), an individual family member is required to behave in specific ways which emphasize only a portion of that individual's total being. In the parental holon the child is expected to defer to the authority of the parent while the parent is expected to use his or her authority to protect, provide for, and nurture the child. The behaviors appropriate to this holon are vastly different from those which are appropriate for the spousal or sibling holons respectively. In order that each holon may perform its role in the family system, boundaries between subsystems must be both firm

enough to guide behavior and yet flexible enough to permit the system as a whole to grow and change.

The concept of boundaries among the subsystems of the family unit clearly reveals the structural component of Minuchin's theory of the family. As was suggested above Minuchin holds that at any given time people are functioning with only a portion of their possibilities. Whether or not a particular possibility is elicited or constrained is dependent upon the contextual structure of the situation (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). Simply stated, boundaries provide the contextual structure in the family system that dictates how family members participate in each subsystem and who is included in any given set of interactions.

While contextual limitations (boundaries) allow for organized and effective behavioral responses, breaking or expanding contexts is often necessary for new possibilities to emerge. Walsh (1981) provides a succinct treatment of Minuchin's concept of boundaries and describes three common manifestations of family boundaries; clear, rigid, and diffuse. Clear boundaries provide protection for subsystem members so that they can fulfill subsystem functions free from the interference of others. Although clear boundaries do limit access to the subsystem they simultaneously define the rules that allow for important interactions with other subsystems or individuals to take place. Rigid boundaries severely limit the interactions between subsystems and thus inhibit family communication. Without communication and cooperation between subsystems, the subsystems become disengaged from each other and

frequently function at odds with each other and the goals of the family as a whole. At the opposite end of the spectrum from rigid boundaries are diffuse boundaries which result in overinvolved, overdependent interactions. Where boundaries are diffuse, individuals and subsystems become confused and family members cannot differentiate who does what, when, or how it is to be accomplished.

Family structure, family subsystems, and family boundaries predict how a family will respond to the internal and external stresses placed upon the family system. A functional family will have established a workable hierarchy of authority coupled with mutually understood expectations for the various subsystems. Additionally, subsystem boundaries will be clear and yet flexible. Dysfunction in the family and in individual family members can be expected when important family roles are vested in inappropriate subsystems and/or boundaries between subsystems are either too rigid or too diffuse.

Minuchin's theory of the family is straight forward and concise when applied to an intact family growing along normal developmental lines. The theory's predictive and explanatory power, however, become more complicated issues when the family is not organized in a traditional manner. Fortunately, Minuchin's clinical work included large numbers of families that did not lend themselves to the typical two parent family model. Minuchin presents some of his ideas about these, nontraditional families in his book Families of the Slums (Minuchin, et al, 1967). Of particular interest for the

present work are Minuchin's ideas concerning the parental and spousal subsystems of the divorced and remarried family system.

Minuchin makes it clear in his earliest work that the family's capacity to prepare the young for society is a function of family interactions and the internal workings of the family (Minuchin, et al, 1967). In observing and recording the apparent causes of dysfunctional behavior in children, Minuchin points to impermanence and unpredictability in the family system. According to Minuchin self-esteem develops in children as a result of mastering and affecting the world of things and people. Along the same lines, a child's ability to establish effective interpersonal communication is dependent upon the clarity, order, and degree of differentiation in parental communications. The tasks of the parental subsystem in a healthy family system must include the establishment of a consistent, rule ordered environment that permits the child to effectively interact with the environment and other people.

Based on the above criteria for parenting, the dysfunctional family can be characterized by random parental responses, a lack of internalized rules and an emphasis on control rather than guidance. According to Minuchin, the development of dysfunction in the family is often the result of marital dissension. The lack of role differentiation between husband and wife typically results in an attempt to define a basic self-identity through the role of parent. Minuchin et al (1967) suggest that

the usefulness of children as sources of feedback and as extensions and reflections of self overrides any parental ability to perceive them as potential persons. In sum, it is the children who organize intense

interpersonal contact and offer some justification for parental existence, as well as some basis for discovery of a fundamental role (p. 221).

The potential for the above scenario to develop and significantly influence child development prior to parental divorce is apparent. What is less apparent is how adult attempts to define individual and spousal roles in the context of parent-child interactions may continue to influence children and ex-spouses even as they establish new spousal and parental relationships.

If, as Minuchin suggests, adults lacking in self-esteem and basic identity attempt to fulfill these needs through the parental subsystem it is reasonable to predict that to some extent they are successful in that attempt. In other words, the individual establishes some self-definition through his or her parental role. To the degree that one relies on parent child interactions for interpersonal orientation, that person becomes dependent upon the child to maintain a sense of self and continues to confuse the boundaries between the parental and marital subsystems.

Following divorce it has been the norm for men to attach themselves to or create a new family system while women have remained with the biological children of the first marriage. This pattern, regardless of its origins, often results in a period of disruption and bitter inter-spousal conflict as each parent attempts to redefine their roles. As new relationships develop, typically the father becomes increasingly detached from the original family system and, following remarriage tends to shift attention to a newly established family system for his sense of

identity. If new relationships are allowed to develop both parents and children have the opportunity to shake off old roles and patterns of interaction in favor of more differentiated and healthy modes of relating. Where ex-spousal interactions remain enmeshed and conflictual the legal dissolution of the spousal subsystem reinforces the already dysfunctional reliance upon parental roles for the resolution of spousal conflict and may prevent the development of effective new roles in remarried families. In situations such as these, where parental conflict and/or enmeshment continues through divorce and into remarried families, a significant negative effect for the biological children might be predicted.

It is the purpose of the current work to investigate the dynamics of the original spousal subsystem as it manifests itself following divorce and remarriage. Specifically, the ongoing dynamics of the ex-spousal subsystem will be examined to determine its impact upon the emotional and behavioral adjustment of stepchildren.

Definition of Terms

Blended Family: Used synonymously with the term stepfamily.

Ex-spouses: Refers to a couple who were at one time married and who have subsequently terminated the marital bond through divorce.

Ex-spousal Subsystem: The portion of an extended family system following death or divorce which includes a previously married couple and the ongoing interactions between them.

Family System: A system of two or more individuals related by blood, through marriage (past or present), or through another significant bond who interact to meet the various needs of the system's members and the system as a whole.

Parental Cooperation: Interactions between members of the parental subsystem that are characterized by open communication and effective problem resolution.

Parental Discord: interactions between members of the parental subsystem which are characterized by conflict and a lack of problem resolution.

Parental Hostility: Interactions between members of the parental subsystem which are characterized by interpersonal and/or other forms of violence.

Parental Subsystem: The portion of a family system consisting of those family members whose roles involve the provision of primary care and nurturing of children. Members of this subsystem are usually the biological parents of the children they care for but the subsystem may also include older children, stepparents, adoptive parents, and or extended family members.

Quasi Kin: Relatives and/or relationships established as the result of a marriage that has subsequently ended in divorce or death. Includes former spouses, former in-laws, stepchildren from a previous marriage etc..

Remarried Couple: Any married couple in which at least one member has been previously married to another partner.

Remarried Family: Used Synonymously with the term Stepfamily.

Spousal Subsystem: The portion of a family system that is composed of a married couple and the roles and transactional patterns established by that couple.

Stepchild: A person who has had at least one biological parent remarry following a separation due to divorce or death.

Stepfamily: Any family unit consisting of a married couple and at least one child who is biologically related to only one of the members of the couple.

Stepparent: A person whose spouse has had children from a previous marriage or relationship.

General Research Hypotheses

1) A significant relationship will be found between the content and quality of the interactions in the ex-spousal subsystem of the remarried family and the emotional and behavioral adjustment of stepchildren.

2) The relationships found between ex-spousal interactions and the emotional and behavioral adjustment of stepchildren will be influenced by the stepchild's gender, the gender of the stepchild's residential parent and other demographic variables associated with the marital history of the stepchild's parents.

Sample Description and Data Gathering Procedures

Subjects for this research included 31 stepchildren and their residential biological parents. 18 stepchild/ biological parent

pairs were obtained from a clinical population and 13 pairs were obtained from a non-clinical population. Clinical stepchild/parent pairs were solicited through the PACES Family Counseling Center at The College of William and Mary. Nonclinical pairs were identified using a network sampling technique.

All adult subjects in the proposed research were asked to complete a self-report inventory addressing the frequency of interaction and level of discord present in their ex-spousal relationships. Adult subjects were also asked to complete a behavioral assessment instrument pertaining to the child participating in the study with them. Children were asked to complete self-report inventories addressing self-esteem and perceptions of parental interactions. Each Parent child pair was asked to complete a brief questionnaire requesting family demographic information.

Limitations of the Study

The findings of this study are limited by its use of a nonrandom sampling procedure that relied solely on volunteer subjects. Generalizations from this study to all stepfamilies cannot be made without careful matching on demographic and other relevant variables and then only with great caution. The selection of subjects from the PACES program and through networking with local professionals limits the generalizability of the study to stepfamilies from the same or similar geographical locations. The selection of stepfamilies with children between the ages of 8 and

16 limits the study's generalizability to stepfamilies with children of the same ages. The use of self-report measures in the study limits the validity and reliability of any conclusions to the levels of reliability and validity of those measurement tools. Claims to higher levels of accuracy than is found in those measurement tools is erroneous. Finally, despite a rigorous research design aimed at assuring the confidentiality and anonymity of the individual subjects, the sensitive nature of the information being requested may have infringed upon the validity of individual responses and consequently the validity of the study.

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

Summary of Rationale and Relationship to the Problem

There is little doubt that the family plays an integral role in the structure and functioning of our society and culture. Despite the important socializing role of the family, however, our understanding of family systems remains limited. Even in those areas of family life that have received ample research attention our knowledge is frequently limited to data gathered from intact family systems. While intact, two-parent families represent a majority of all family types, recent trends in divorce and remarriage suggest that an increasing number of Americans are living in a variety of alternative family types. (Glick & Lin, 1986). The prevalence of single parent families, stepfamilies, and extended family systems adds significantly to the complexity of the already poorly understood American family.

The most complex, and perhaps least understood, of the variety of alternative family types is the stepfamily. Moreover, the stepfamily represents a large and growing percentage of all family types. Recent statistical evidence on divorce and remarriage (Furstenberg, 1987) suggests that by the age of 16 one in four American children will have lived with a stepparent. If nonresident stepparents are included in the estimate the figures increase to as many as one in three children who will have had first hand

experience with stepfamily life. If remarriage patterns continue at their present rates Glick (1989), predicts that nearly fifty percent of all children will become stepsons or stepdaughters by the year 2000.

Research on the family, especially research examining the stepfamily as an alternative family type, is only beginning to address the multitude of questions relevant to an understanding of important family types. Only in the last decade has the stepfamily received significant attention as an element of American society. The increased attention now focused on stepfamilies is evidenced in a review by Ganong & Coleman (1987) who found over 400 references related to the stepfamily. With the recent publication of other works compiling and reporting on the status of stepfamily research (Giles-Sims & Crosbie-Burnett 1989; Clingempeel, Brand, & Segal, 1987; Coleman & Ganong, 1990), an elementary understanding of stepfamily dynamics has begun to emerge. Despite a decade of efforts to establish a more thorough understanding of stepfamily functioning, however, many of the roles and expectations of stepfamily members remain unclear and without social proscription (Coleman & Ganong, 1990).

Of the efforts to better understand the stepfamily, the viability of the stepfamily as an option for the nurturance and training of future generations has received the most attention (Coleman & Ganong, 1990). Studies related to the viability of the stepfamily have examined a variety of child outcome measures using a variety of methodological approaches (Ganong & Coleman, 1987).

What follows is a review of the research related to the stepfamily's impact on children and an analysis of some important areas of concern that have yet to be adequately addressed.

Review of Research on the Stepfamily

As was suggested above, one of the major roles of the family is the nurturance and training of future generations. An important thrust of the research on stepfamilies has thus been directed toward an understanding of the influence living in a stepfamily has on childhood development. The research on the impact of stepfamilies on children, however, has been hampered by the notion that stepfamilies are somehow deficient in comparison to intact families. The result of the deficit centered view of the stepfamily has been a series of studies emphasizing comparisons between stepchildren and children from intact families. These studies typically predict that stepchildren will be relatively disadvantaged when compared to children from intact families. This deficit model of the stepfamily exemplifies much of the preliminary research on children in stepfamilies.

In 1984 Ganong and Coleman conducted a limited review of the research on the effects of remarriage on children that included thirty-eight empirical investigations. After locating over 350 references on remarriage and stepfamily relations, the authors used three criteria to select studies to be included in their review: 1) the main focus was on the effects on children of parental remarriage, having a stepparent, or living in a stepfamily; 2) the

studies were empirically based; and 3) the studies were published in a book, journal, or monograph. After narrowing their review to 38 studies, the authors analyzed the studies using a four step procedure. The procedure used required an initial survey of common variables, a tabulation of these common variables, a summary and review of results organized around the dependent variables, and a critical assessment of the sample of studies.

Though some evidence was found that a variety of outcome measures are influenced by the type of family a child grows up in, the Ganong and Coleman review found substantial deficits not in stepfamilies, but in stepfamily research. On the basis of their review, Ganong and Coleman (1984) reported that;

Few conclusions can be drawn from the studies of the effect of remarriage on children. A restricted number of variables has been investigated, few variables have been included in more than one study, and sample composition has been quite diverse (p. 401).

Even when methodological concerns were overlooked, Ganong and Coleman found that in general remarriage of parents did not significantly relate to problem behavior or negative attitudes toward self and others in stepchildren.

In concluding their review of the effects of stepfamily life on children Ganong and Coleman (1984) pointed out a variety of specific shortcomings they believed had hindered empirical investigations. Among those shortcomings were; the lack of controls for crucial variables such as custody arrangements, length of time in a stepfamily, and number of siblings; the lack of studies from theoretical perspectives other than the implicit or explicit

deficit comparison to nuclear families; the lack of adequate controls for the various types of stepfamilies; and the lack of descriptive studies of well-functioning stepfamilies.

The critique that stepfamily research lacked adequate controls and relied too heavily on comparisons with intact families generated a number of alternative research designs. While some researchers simply abandoned comparison based studies, others attempted to better address the methodological flaws of previous comparison studies. Interestingly, the findings of these refined comparison studies tended to contradict the conclusion that remarriage does not significantly relate to problem behavior and negative attitudes in stepchildren.

In an effort to address some of the criticisms of earlier stepfamily research, Amato and Ochiltree (1987) designed a study comparing child and adolescent functioning in intact, one-parent, and step-families. Among other attempts to conduct methodologically sound research, the authors selected a random probability sample, included parent socio-economic status and length of time since parental loss as control variables, and used measures of child competence rather than child maladjustment. One element of the author's study, its use of Australian subjects, impairs its comparability to existing studies of North American subjects.

Amato and Ochiltree found a variety of important relationships between measures of child competence and family type. The authors report a significant effect for family type, with children in stepfamilies scoring lower on a measure of reading ability than

children in intact two parent families. A significant effect for family type was also reported on a measure of general skills, this time with the stepchildren showing higher scores than their counterparts from other family types. Although no other statistically significant results were noted, the authors suggest that children in stepfamilies scored marginally lower on a measure of self-concept than did the children from other family types. No differences were found between family types on a measure of social competence.

Amato and Ochiltree concluded that it appeared to be children from stepfamilies, as opposed to single parent families as was hypothesized, that were at a disadvantage. They went on to argue that it appeared to be the gaining of a new parent rather than the loss of an old one that produced debilitating effects. While the authors noted that their results differed from those of Ganong and Coleman (1984) they acknowledged that; although they observed significant differences between children from different family types, the family type variable explained only a small portion of the total variance in their study.

While the Amato and Ochiltree study is perhaps the best attempt to address the critiques leveled at comparison based research, other recent studies have also concluded that stepchildren are disadvantaged when compared to children of intact families. Studies have shown that the academic achievement of stepchildren compares unfavorably with that of children from intact families (Boyd & Parish, 1985; Zimiles & Lee, 1991), that stepchildren demonstrate

lower self-concept scores than children from intact families (Parish, 1987), and that stepchildren exhibit more behavioral problems than do children from intact families (Brady, Bray & Zeeb, 1986; Zill, 1988). These and other studies strengthen the argument that there are qualities inherent in the stepfamily that are problematic for stepchildren.

The recent evidence that stepchildren compare unfavorably with their counterparts from intact families has not been accepted among all stepfamily researchers. Instead, a series of new critiques for comparison-based research has been generated. A follow-up review of the stepfamily literature conducted by Ganong and Coleman (1987) concluded that a variety of family structure characteristics were relatively ignored by researchers in their attempts to compare family types. A study reported by Pasley and Healow (1988) supported the conclusions of Ganong and Coleman in concluding that family type when considered alone does not effectively explain differences in children's personal adjustment. Studies that have included family type as one of several predictors of stepchild adjustment have also concluded that family type alone is insufficient as an explanation of observed differences in adjustment (Grossman, Shea & Adams, 1980; Jacobson, 1987).

While some researchers continue to simplistically compare children living in stepfamilies to children living in other types of families, many others are beginning to recognize and address the full range of variables that may influence stepchildren's adjustment. In the last half of the 1980s, research on stepchildren

began to stress the specific characteristics of stepfamilies that promote healthy and/or maladaptive adjustment (Hetherington, 1989). Variables such as the gender of stepchildren and stepparents, number of children in the family, relationships between family members, and circumstances of the divorce and remarriage, have all received recent attention (Coleman & Ganong, 1990).

One important article that specifically addresses the healthy functioning of the stepfamily was authored by Giles-Sims and Crosbie-Burnett (1989). These authors organized a selection of empirical and clinical reports on the stepfamily outlining the essential ingredients of "an integrated stepfamily model". In their review, Giles-Sims and Crosbie-Burnett claim that an integrated model of the stepfamily must incorporate at least five important aspects of stepfamily functioning: 1) That stepfamilies exist in a larger social context and that social context directly influences stepfamily structure and process; 2) that stepfamilies vary across demographic groups and that different types of stepfamilies are identifiable according to family structure; 3) That factors contributing to healthy functioning must be addressed to counterbalance the research that addresses factors contributing to pathology; 4) That the formation of a stepfamily must be seen as a developmental process that takes place within the context of multiple interrelated persons and households over time; and 5) That models of what successful stepfamily development means and how that development can be evaluated must be established.

Giles-Sims and Crosbie-Burnett argued that the existing literature provides a significant base of information for the development of an integrated stepfamily model. However, they also stressed that more research and interdisciplinary effort is needed. Among the areas suggested for further investigation were: family structure and roles in the stepfamily, clarification of what it means to be a successful stepfamily, and the identification of factors that will contribute to healthy stepfamily functioning.

Of the elements of Crosbie-Burnett's model for developing an understanding of the stepfamily, the need for research on family structure and relationships within stepfamilies has received the bulk of the attention. This emphasis appears to be justified. Ganong and Coleman (1987), for example, list thirty-four questions related to stepfamily dynamics that have yet to be systematically studied. Without a better understanding of stepfamily dynamics stepfamilies are often expected to model themselves after an idealized two parent nuclear family (Vischer & Vischer, 1988), an expectation that is unrealistic at best and potentially destructive at worst. The mere existence of more than two parents involved in the lives of stepchildren precludes the modeling of the stepfamily after an intact family. Extended families of stepgrandparents, ex spouses, stepsiblings, and half siblings complicate the structure of the stepfamily even further.

An especially active area of research associated with the internal dynamics of the stepfamily is the nature of the stepparent-stepchild relationship and its connection to overall

stepfamily functioning. In a study by White and Booth (1985), the quality and stability of remarriages was directly related to the presence of stepchildren in the family. Using a nationwide probability sample of over 1500 married individuals White and Booth found that the incidence of divorce among remarriages was higher than for first marriages only in those families where both spouses had been previously married and there were stepchildren in the household. White and Booth also reported that married individuals with stepchildren reported significantly less satisfaction with their family life than respondents with biological children. White and Booth concluded that "the presence of stepchildren is a destabilizing influence in remarriages and a major contributor to the somewhat greater rate of divorce" (p. 689).

The study by White and Booth, and similar evidence of the adverse effects of stepchildren on the marital stability of remarried couples (Albrecht, 1979), emphasizes the importance of stepchildren in remarried families. These studies, however, provided no discussion of specific stepfamily characteristics that might explain the apparently adverse impact of stepchildren on remarriages. While White and Booth did report that parents with stepchildren are dissatisfied with their spouse's relationship to their children the dynamics of this relationship was not examined in their work. Despite their shortcomings, the White and Booth (1985) and Albrecht (1979) studies helped to emphasize the importance of unique stepfamily relationships as explanatory factors in a family's ability to function.

A study by Crosbie-Burnett (1984) addressed some of the unique internal workings of the stepfamily by specifically examining the relationship between stepchildren and stepparents. Working with the hypothesis that overall happiness in the family is more closely related to aspects of the stepfather-stepchild relationship than to the marital relationship, Crosbie-Burnett gathered data from 87 mother-stepfather households. Measures of family happiness, marital happiness, step-relationship, nurturance, and discipline were constructed which allowed for both individual and family scores on each of the variables. The variables were then examined using a multiple regression procedure to determine which variables were the best predictors of overall family happiness.

Crosbie-Burnett found that her hypothesis that the step relationship would be the best predictor of family happiness was supported. While Statistical analysis indicated that the step-relationship was the best predictor of family happiness, marital happiness was also found to be a significant predictor of overall family happiness. Measures of nurturance and discipline did not explain a significant amount of the variance in family happiness.

On the basis of her study Crosbie-Burnett concluded that, unlike previous work emphasizing the importance of marital satisfaction as the key to a well functioning stepfamily (Duberman, 1975), the important variable in well functioning stepfamilies is the stepparent-stepchild relationship. She went on to suggest that the significance of the step relationship may be linked to the fact that it is the step relationship which typically lacks any natural

reason to exist. The lack of purpose in the step relationship is especially evident in modern stepfamilies where the noncustodial biological parent is frequently an active participant in the child's life.

A number of attempts to explore the specifics of the stepparent-stepchild relationship have been reported that support the findings of Crosbie-Burnett. In 1984, Clingempeel, Brand, and Ievoli conducted a study to assess the quality of stepparent-stepchild relations in stepmother and stepfather families. Their research was unique in two respects: 1) it attempted to differentiate between two structural types of stepfamilies, and 2) it examined the specifics of the step-relationship using behavioral measures. Variables investigated in the study included ratings of love and detachment in the stepparent-stepchild interactions, and measures of verbal and problem-solving behaviors between stepparents and stepchildren.

The Clingempeel, Brand, and Ievoli study found that stepparent-stepdaughter relationships were typified by lower scores on love and higher scores on detachment than were stepparent-stepson relationships. Additionally, stepdaughters were found to show more negative problem-solving and less positive verbal behaviors toward their stepparents. Stepparents in the study were not found to differ in their responses to boys and girls on the behavioral measures.

In a separate study by Clingempeel, Ievoli, and Brand (1984) stepfather-stepchild relationships were investigated to determine

if the structural complexity of the stepfamily influenced the step-relationship. While no significant effects were associated with the complexity of the family structure (one parent with children from a previous marriage verses both parents with children from previous marriages) some gender differences were noted. As with the previous study on step-relationships, the Clingempeel, Ievoli, and Brand study found that girls developed fewer positive problem-solving behaviors toward their stepfathers than did boys.

In the discussion of their findings Clingempeel, Brand and Ievoli (1984) suggested that "since the mother-son relationship is often more problematic than the mother-daughter, boys may welcome the same sex parent figure while girls may fear a stepfather will disrupt the mother-daughter bond" (p. 471). It was also suggested that children's relationships with nonresidential parents may differentially impact upon girls and boys in stepfamilies. Though their research added a piece to the stepfamily puzzle, the Clingempeel, et al studies did not discuss what impact the observed differences in the step-relationships studied might have for stepchildren. The question remained; how do the unique relationships found in stepfamilies influence the adjustment of stepchildren?

In 1986, Clingempeel and Segal addressed the above question by correlating the quality of stepparent-stepchild relationships to the psychological adjustment of children. The results of their study were mixed. In stepmother families more positive stepparent-stepchild relationships were associated with lower inhibition and

aggression ratings for stepchildren. However, no significant findings were reported for stepfather families. Based on the initial findings of Clingempeel and Segal, it appeared to be stepmother-stepchild relationships that were especially important in stepchild adjustment.

In an attempt to clarify and solidify our understanding of the stepparent-stepchild relationship, Brand and Clingempeel (1987) conducted an investigation of both marital and stepparent-stepchild relationships and the relationship of these variables to children's psychological adjustment. In this study evidence was reported in support of the claim that stepparent-stepchild relationships are significant in stepmother but not stepfather families. Additionally, the study found that higher marital quality was associated with more positive stepmother-stepson relationships and better stepson adjustment. Somewhat surprisingly, the study found that higher marital quality was associated with less positive stepmother-stepdaughter relationships and poorer stepdaughter adjustment.

The series of studies by Clingempeel and his associates appear to support the claim that step-relationships can be significant for stepchild adjustment. As reported in the studies, marital quality may also be significant for stepchildren's adjustment. While these studies added significantly to our understanding of intrastepfamily dynamics, they addressed only two (marital and stepparent-stepchild) of the significant relationships associated with the complex structure of the stepfamily.

The only other relationship variable that has received significant attention as a potential explanation of the variability in stepchildren's adjustment is the relationship between children and their biological parents. While a variety of interactional patterns between children and their divorced parents have been discussed (Hetherington, 1987; Vuchinich, Hetherington, Vuchinich & Clingempeel, 1991), the correlation between these patterns and children's adjustment has not been established empirically. Some evidence (Peterson & Zill, 1986) does suggest that a positive relationship with one or both parents following marital disruption may mitigate the negative effects of the disruption for children.

Studies focusing on the relationship between a child and his or her noncustodial parent are also inconclusive. Some studies have shown that continued interactions between a child and his or her nonresidential/noncustodial parent help to mediate the adverse impact of parental divorce (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982). Other studies have found little association between time spent with the noncustodial parent and children's behavioral adjustment (Jacobson, 1987). Still other studies suggest that the effects of visitation by the noncustodial parent may depend upon whether that parent is the mother or father and if the child is a boy or girl (Furstenberg, 1988; Brand, Clingempeel & Bowen-Woodward, 1988).

Recent research that specifically addresses stepfamilies (Bray & Berger, 1990) supports the conclusion that the quantity and quality of interactions between a stepchild and his or her noncustodial parent may be significant only when the child's gender

is considered. More specifically, the Bray and Berger study found that more contact and better relationships between stepsons and their noncustodial fathers was associated with more externalizing behavior and lower self-esteem. For girls more contact and better relationships with their noncustodial fathers was associated with fewer total behavior problems.

While the studies discussed thus far in this review are important and help to exemplify the complexity of post-divorce family relations, their underlying message seems to be that our understanding of complex stepfamily systems is severely limited.

Critique of Stepfamily Research

Research pertaining to the stepfamily and its ability to function adequately in the rearing of children has produced an understanding of stepfamily issues that is well advanced from the relative ignorance of the previous decade. Despite improvements in research methodologies and efforts to expand the field of inquiry, however, in many ways our understanding of stepfamilies remains inadequate. While a host of recommendations for further research and stronger experimental controls can be found in the literature, concerns about research methodologies and the lack of specific research on stepfamily dynamics remain largely unaddressed.

Methodological Problems in Stepfamily Research. The majority of the criticism leveled at the research on stepfamilies emphasizes the methodological and design problems that plague many studies. As

late as 1987, Ganong and Coleman claimed that in both clinical and empirical reports the deficit comparison approach to the stepfamily remained prevalent. Despite the shortcomings of this type of research, attempts to identify increased signs of pathology among stepchildren as compared to children from other family types continue to typify many research efforts. While the importance of identifying differences between and among various family types is apparent, comparison efforts provide little if any insight into the reasons for observed differences and do not add to our understanding of healthy stepfamily functioning.

In addition to the strong emphasis on deficit comparison studies in the research on stepfamilies, a major deficit in the research can be found in the lack of control for certain important variables. The complexity of the stepfamily and the large number of potentially significant variables can explain the omission of many variables from the design of even the best studies. The consistent lack of consideration given to variables which have been experimentally associated with stepfamily outcome measures, however, is without excuse. The length of time since parental remarriage, custody arrangements, type of stepfamily (stepfather verses stepmother), gender and age of the stepchild, and other relevant variables have been ignored in the designs of most stepfamily research.

Another important deficit in the research on stepfamilies can be found in the sampling procedures employed for many studies. Random samples drawn from large populations have frequently produced such

low response rates that their randomness is severely compromised. Studies employing smaller samples often rely on clinical populations which may not be representative of stepfamilies as a whole. While well designed longitudinal studies are underway, divorce and remarriage are often accompanied by frequent moves resulting in a subject pool that is difficult to track. In addition to the sampling problems encountered by researchers working with stepfamilies, sample composition and sampling procedures are frequently poorly described, making replication and generalizability of findings difficult.

Current Limitations. While methodology and design problems continue to plague stepfamily research, perhaps the most significant criticisms of the research to date are the limited number of variables studied and the lack of theoretical foundations for continued research efforts. In the area of theoretical foundations, the literature is characterized by piecemeal explanations for observed phenomena rather than by attempts to integrate stepfamily dynamics into a larger theoretical framework. Observed relationships are cautiously explained in the narrowest contexts as in Crosbie-Burnett's (1984) suggestion that stepparent-stepchild relationships are negatively related to stepfamily functioning because these relationships have no natural reason to exist. While this type of explanation provides some food for thought it avoids any attempt to explain how this phenomenon may be

connected to the vast array of stepfamily information that has previously been accumulated.

Although research findings have consistently found significant relationships between intrafamily dynamics and the functioning of the stepfamily, they have failed to produce models of stepfamily dynamics which are capable of explaining more than a fraction of the variance in the adjustment of stepchildren. The integrated stepfamily model proposed by Giles-Sims and Crosbie-Burnett (1989) that was discussed earlier in this review has yet to be thoroughly explored. There is a pressing need for theoretical discussions and reports that attempt to synthesize the extant research into a coherent whole. The value of an undefined and disjointed collection of research findings for family therapists, stepfamilies, and society is questionable.

Due to both the lack of theoretical foundations guiding stepfamily research, and the sheer number of variables which may eventually prove to be relevant for an understanding of stepfamilies, many relevant and unique aspects of the stepfamily have been overlooked. Different custody arrangements, extended family communications, the role of stepsiblings, family identity, and a host of other unique stepfamily characteristics remain virtually untouched. While it is unrealistic to assume that research efforts can effectively address all of the factors associated with stepfamilies, many factors that are worthy of investigation have yet to receive any substantial research attention.

Among the most pressing and unique of the unexplored aspects of the stepfamily are the multiple roles and relationships that must be carried on across two or more households. The stepfamily has too often been treated as an intact unit without regard for the vast array of contacts that may be maintained with the family of the nonresidential biological parent. Although frequently noted in clinical discussions of the structural complexity of the stepfamily (Vischer & Vischer, 1988; Sager et al, 1984), the influence of two households and three or more parental figures on children's adjustment has been neglected as a topic for empirical investigation. What follows is a review of the limited research examining the roles of the ex-spouse and coparent in the stepfamily.

Review of the Research on Ex-Spousal Interactions

In an important treatment of the dynamics of the remarried family, Cherlin (1979) argued that the incomplete institutionalization of the remarried family is responsible for the instability and confusion found in this family type. Cherlin suggested that the remarried family lacked the institutional guidelines for solving many of its most common problems. Among the most complex problems discussed by Cherlin are the expanded number of roles and relationships that must be maintained by the members of a remarried household. He succinctly pointed out that the customary custody and visitation arrangements for children promote communication among the divorced parents, and their new spouses.

This communication creates roles and expectations that have yet to be defined in any practical and workable manner. Cherlin concluded that our study of the family must broaden its scope to include the many influences on family functioning which originate outside the nuclear family and include extended family and social institutions.

Perhaps the most comprehensive effort to expand the narrow focus of most stepfamily research on the single household stepfamily has been led by Constance Ahrons. Ahrons has been conducting research on, and theorizing about, the influence of the ex-spouse/noncustodial parent on post-divorce family dynamics for the past decade. Her concept of the binuclear family (Ahrons, 1979) and the research generated by the Binuclear Family Research Project (Ahrons, 1981, 1983; Ahrons & Perlmutter, 1982; Ahrons & Wallisch, 1987) has provided an empirically based understanding of post-divorce families that is both practical and theoretically appealing. While much of the research addressing the functioning of the "binuclear family" has focused on children and parents following divorce, the longitudinal design of Ahrons' research project has resulted in an extension of her inquiry to include those parents who have remarried and established stepfamilies.

An assessment of Ahrons' work suggests that the significance of many of the variables studied in relation to stepfamily adjustment may be best explained by the type of relationship maintained between the two nuclei of the binuclear family. Ahrons and Perlmutter (1982) argued that the continuance of meaningful attachments between parents and children is dependent on the kind

of relationship that develops between the parents and between stepparents and parents in the binuclear family system. The significance of stepparent-stepchild, and other intra-stepfamily relations in stepfamily adjustment may be best understood as a reflection of the stepchild's attempts to understand and relate to his or her biological parents.

While Ahrons has not addressed the relationship between specific binuclear family interactions and stepchildren's adjustment, her research has greatly added to our understanding of the complexity and variety of binuclear family relations. As was suggested above (Ahrons & Perlmutter, 1982), Ahrons believes that one of the most crucial tasks facing divorced spouses is the redefinition of their interpersonal and coparental relationship. At this point in time, however, the interpersonal and coparental interactions between ex-spouses are poorly understood. Not only are there few descriptive studies of ex-spousal relations following divorce and remarriage, there are virtually no studies examining the effects of various types of ex-spousal interaction on the adjustment of stepchildren (Clingempeel, Brand & Segal, 1987).

What we do know about ex-spousal interactions from Ahrons (1981) work is that relationships between former spouses may range from best friends to bitter enemies. More specifically, the Ahrons (1981) study found that in some cases the former spouses' interactions were exclusively related to their roles as parents while in others interactions were viewed as important in and of themselves. Ex-spouses reported that the frequency of their

interactions ranged from almost none to daily with the vast majority of the sample reporting interacting with their former spouse at least once a month.

Other descriptive data on the interactions maintained between former spouses following divorce are scarce and are subject to a variety of interpretations. In a study reported by Furstenberg (1988) that relied on a sample of couples that had been divorced four years or less, the frequencies of interactions between ex-spouses were found to be similar to those reported by Ahrons. The Furstenberg study also found that the frequency of ex-spousal interactions declined over the two year interval of the study with a marked decrease in interactions when noncustodial fathers remarried and their spouses did not. While the Furstenberg study provides evidence that parental interactions change in frequency following divorce and remarriage, changes in specific patterns and types of ex-spousal interactions were not addressed.

In another study examined by this author that dealt directly with parental roles following divorce and remarriage the issue of role ambiguity was the center of investigation (Pasley, 1987). In Pasley's study on boundary ambiguity among remarried couples, ambiguity in parental roles are reported to be related to the presence of children. While this finding does not specifically speak to ex-spousal roles, the ambiguity in family roles created by remarriage when children are present would suggest the role of ex-spouse is also unclear. The effects of boundary ambiguity on children's adjustment resulting from continued interactions between

both biological parents following remarriage will be addressed in another section of this review.

In assessing the quality of ex-spousal relations, the role of conflict and support among divorced couples has been studied most extensively. One recent study conducted by Fishel and Scanzoni (1990) specifically addressed how the degree of support and/or conflict in ex-spousal interactions is influenced by a variety of context variables (length of separation, mother's and children's ages, type of custody, and number of children). Supportive relationships were found to be associated with mother's educational level and fewer children. Conflicted relationships were found to be associated with more children.

In another study of the relationship between ex-spouses by Masheter (1991), the postdivorce interactions of ex-spouses following two to two and a half years of divorce were examined. In this sample, as in earlier studies, more than half of the respondents reported at least monthly contact with their ex-spouses following the divorce. As was the case in the Fishel and Scanzoni (1990) study, contact was friendlier and quarreling was less frequent for those divorcees without children.

While it would appear that the presence of children, a given when discussing stepfamilies, adversely affects ex-spousal interactions, other variables may also be significant. In a study by Maccoby, Depner and Mnookin (1990) the amount of conflict in ex-spousal interactions was shown to be a factor of the intensity of conflict present at an earlier time in the relationship. Support

for the argument that conflict is continuous through family transitions is reported by Forehand and Brody (1989) who found that the conflict between married and divorced couples was very similar. Perhaps an adequate explanation of ex-spousal interactions needs to include both the level of conflict and/or support prior to divorce and the presence of children. It appears that the ex-spousal relationship may remain strained and conflictual in cases where the presence of children require frequent and ongoing contact.

In summary, our knowledge of ex-spousal interactions suggests that contact remains frequent for many ex-spouses, that contact may diminish over time, that the role of ex-spouses in stepfamilies is poorly defined, that interactions are more likely to be conflictual when children are present, and that interactions are related to the prior history of the couple.

Ex-spousal Interactions and Stepfamily Functioning. The majority of what is known about ex-spousal relationships is derived from research on divorced rather than remarried ex-spouses. It does appear that, regardless of family type, the presence of children is associated with poorer ex-spousal relations. As was previously discussed, children have also been shown to adversely affect the marital quality of remarried couples (White & Booth, 1985; Albrecht, 1979). One possible explanation for both of the above findings is that when children are present, ongoing ex-spousal interactions are necessitated. This interaction serves to perpetuate ex-spousal tensions and negatively affect the remarried

couple's relationship. Several studies have provided support for the above hypothesis by correlating marital quality in stepfamilies with the frequency and quality of interactions between ex-spouses and their families (Clingempeel, 1981; Clingempeel & Brand, 1985; Roberts & Price, 1989).

Clingempeel (1981) studied twenty-seven couples from stepfamilies where both members had children from a previous marriage and thirteen couples where only the wife had children from a previous marriage. The couples were divided into groups according to their levels of contact with the families of former spouses and their marital quality was assessed. Findings showed that those couples who maintained moderate levels of communication with their former spouses exhibited higher levels of marital quality than did the couples who maintained either low or high levels of contact. These findings suggest that, at least in terms of the remarried couple, there may be an optimal level of communication with former spouses and their kin.

While the Clingempeel (1981) study appeared to have established the beginnings of an understanding of the relationship between ex-spousal relations and the functioning of the stepfamily, the study has not been replicated. In an attempt to replicate the study with a different sample, Clingempeel & Brand (1985) found no correlation between frequency of contact with quasi-kin and marital quality. Correlations were found between the structural complexity of the stepfamily and measures of marital quality with more complex structure associated with lower marital quality.

In a more recent study, Roberts and Price (1989) explored a variety of factors hypothesized to influence marital adjustment among the remarried. The variables explored were: Attachment to former spouse; relationship with friends and relatives; the former spouse parental role; marital communication; family cohesion; marital roles; and parental roles. Among the significant findings of the study was a negative association between attachment to former spouse and marital adjustment. This finding seems to support the notion that interactions between ex-spouses may have a negative impact on marital quality.

Despite the evidence that ex-spousal interactions and marital adjustment may be associated, anomalies in the research persist. In a study by Pasley and Ihinger-Tallman (1982), findings indicated that relationships with ex-spouses were rarely sources of disagreements in remarriages. Additionally, research has shown that while stepchildren may negatively influence the marital quality of the remarried, the marital adjustment of remarried couples is no lower than that of first married couples (Hobart, 1990). The presence of stepchildren and the ex-spousal interactions they necessitate seem to be an important element of remarried family dynamics. The specific impact of ex-spousal interactions on stepchildren will be the focus of the next section in this review.

Ex-spousal Interactions and Children's Adjustment. In an interesting foray into the effects of marital discord in the stepfamily Anderson and White (1986) found that marital adjustment

was not as highly associated with family dysfunction in stepfamilies as it was in intact families. Anderson and White suggested that this apparently paradoxical finding was evidence that stepfamilies may develop family dysfunction even if they have good marital adjustment. An extension of this reasoning implies that stepfamily functioning and child adjustment may be more closely tied to relationships that reach beyond the confines of immediate stepfamily interactions. At the very least, the Anderson and white study supports the notion that marital adjustment is insufficient as a measure of the viability of the stepfamily as a nurturing environment for children.

The implications of the Anderson and white study coupled with reports that stepfamily relationships are extremely delicate when a noncustodial parent is still involved in the child's life (Vischer & Vischer, 1988), seem to point to the interactions between former spouses as an important variable in children's adjustment in stepfamilies. Despite the potential explanatory power of ex-spousal interactions in an assessment of children's adjustment to parental remarriage, few studies have addressed this variable. Much of the research that does pertain to spousal and ex-spousal relations examines roles prior to and following divorce but ignores changes that may result when one or both ex-spouses remarry. Other research related to the frequency of contact between households after a parental separation addresses only the amount of interaction between noncustodial parents and their children.

The increasing acceptance of joint custody as a legal solution to divorce proceedings that involve children (Ferreiro, 1990) has helped to bring the effect of ex-spousal relationships on children into focus. Concerns that the influence of formalized and significant interactions between ex-spouses on children remains unknown seem to be emerging. In a study by Susan Steinman (1981), the impact of joint custody was found to be highly related to the relations between parents. She concludes that "the most crucial and beneficial components of joint custody for the children lie in the attitudes, values, and behavior of their parents" (p. 414). These findings stress the importance of ex-spousal relationships for children as well as the need for a better understanding of those relationships.

Only one study was identified by this author that has specifically addressed the quantity of parental interactions as they relate to child outcome measures. In the study by McCombs, Forehand, and Brody (1987), the effects of the quantity of interaction between former spouses was investigated through questionnaires completed by divorced mothers, one of their children, and the child's social studies teacher. Variables measured in the study included marital conflict, quantity of interaction between parents on both parenting and nonparenting issues, and a series of child adjustment measures. Results indicated that the best predictor of adolescent functioning was the quantity of parental interaction on nonparenting issues. As the level of parental interactions increased in the nonparenting realm

the adolescent's functioning worsened. The authors note that although they find their results to be important they did not control for the quality of the nonparental interactions that took place.

Although the amount of interaction between a child's biological parents seems to have some bearing on the child's adjustment to divorce and parental remarriage, the quality of the parental relationship has received the bulk of the research attention. Researchers have investigated several aspects of the relationship between quality of parental interaction and children's adjustment including measures of both cooperation and conflict (Camara & Resnick, 1988; Hetherington, 1987; Hetherington, Stanley-Hagen & Anderson, 1989). Parental relationships marked by conflict and hostility, however, have shown the most promise as predictors of dysfunctional childhood behaviors (Porter & O'Leary, 1980; Emery & O'Leary, 1982; Christianson, Phillips, Glasgow & Johnson, 1983). For this reason the bulk of the research on the quality of parental and ex-spousal relations has emphasized parental discord rather than parental cooperation.

Despite methodological criticisms and inconsistent findings in the research, there has been a growing belief among mental health professionals that parental conflict and hostility are associated with emotional and behavioral problems in children (Pietrointo, 1985). The negative effects of parental discord have even been reported to be more detrimental for children than the loss experienced through separation and or divorce of the parents

(Hetherington, 1979; Bishop & Ingersoll, 1989; Long, 1988). While the research base on marital conflict and childhood adjustment has grown significantly since his report, the effects of marital conflict on children is succinctly summarized by Robert Emery (1982).

On the basis of an extensive review of the literature, Emery (1982) suggested that despite a variety of methodological flaws in the empirical research, the evidence was sufficient to justify confidence in the conclusion that marital discord and behavior problems in children are associated. He claims that research indicates that separation from a parent is less traumatic and disabling than exposure to parental hostility. His conclusion is worth restating:

In sum, in studies of clinic and nonclinic groups that have used both independent and nonindependent raters, interparental conflict has been associated with behavior problems in children whether that conflict occurred in intact marriages, before a divorce or after a divorce (Emery, 1982, p. 313).

Having clearly reported the significance of marital discord in child behavior problems, Emery addressed the parameters of the relationship as they had been established to that date. Emery found the following conclusions to be supported: 1) Marital conflict is a better predictor of problems in children than is marital satisfaction, 2) Open hostility is more highly associated with behavioral disturbances than is encapsulated conflict, 3) Continuing conflict produces increasingly detrimental effects for children, and 4) Post-divorce conflict between parents is associated with more problems and an increased likelihood that

children will come to the attention of professionals. Despite the knowledge base that had been established in the area of parental discord and children's behavior problems, Emery argued that both the amount and type of conflict merited more detailed investigation.

The last two of Emery's above conclusions deserve special attention in light of the current research. Although virtually no research has been reported on the significance for children of parental discord between former spouses following remarriage, much can be implied from Emery's conclusions. If continuing parental conflict produces increasingly detrimental effects for children, and if parental conflict has the potential to affect children even after parental separation, then it can be assumed that ex-spousal conflict that extends through divorce and into remarriage will have an adverse effect on the involved children. While the above conclusion has not been empirically tested, there is a growing body of research that suggests it may be true.

One of the reasons ex-spousal relations as a factor in child adjustment have been neglected after parental remarriage lies in the assumption that parental conflict and its negative effects subside with time, allowing for more positive adjustment in single parent and stepfamily homes. Earlier reports (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980) indicating that for most children the effects of parental divorce are temporary with relatively normal adjustment to new family conditions observed roughly two years after the divorce have been contradicted (Kline, Johnston & Tschann, 1991). In a ten

year follow up study by Wallerstein, Corbin, & Lewis (1988) a much graver picture of the post-divorce child is reported. Among other things, the authors suggest that the disruption in parenting coupled with the parental conflicts that can remain and become chronic in the post-divorce family represent serious hazards to the psychological health of children.

The Wallerstein Corbin & Lewis (1988) study is indicative of a trend in the research toward studies aimed at the identification and clarification of factors that influence post divorce adjustment for children. This trend in the research has emphasized many of the same variables which were implicated in the research on intact or divorcing families. Most significant of these variables are parenting skills, quality of parental relations, and involvement with the child's noncustodial parent.

An important improvement in recent research efforts focusing on ex-spousal interactions and children's adjustment is the inclusion of a larger number of variables related to the parental relationship that go beyond the traditional focus on discord (Camara & Resnick, 1988; Johnston, 1990). Another important improvement can be found in the care that has been taken to include family type (intact, single parent, or stepfamily) as either an independent or a control variable to help further establish the significance of the parental relations under a variety of conditions (Forehand, Long & Brody, 1988; Camara & Resnick, 1988).

The current status of the research on parental factors that influence children's responses to post-divorce living is well

represented in a series of studies conducted by Arnold Stolberg and his associates at Virginia Commonwealth University. Stolberg and Bush (1985) interviewed a sample of eighty-two mother-child pairs from divorced homes to assess the relationship between life change events, marital hostility, parenting skills, parent adjustment, child behavior adjustment, and child self-esteem. Path analysis was used to analyze the data and three paths emerged which explained the majority of the variance in the two child adjustment outcome variables. The first path showed an apparent connection between number of children, parental adjustment and parenting techniques. The second path showed that younger children reported more life change events which were associated with greater externalized psychopathology and fewer social skills. The third path involved only one predictor variable, that of marital hostility, which was related to more externalized and internalized psychopathology and fewer social skills.

In a 1987 study by Stolberg, Camplair, Currier, and Wells, an additional forty-seven mother-child pairs from intact homes were added to the eighty-two pairs included in the previous study. The goals of the study were described in terms of an assessment of both positive and negative outcomes for children of divorce and an assessment of the relative influence of the variables related to those outcomes. Results of the study suggest that children's responses to divorce include both maladaptation and enhanced, prosocial skills. Marital hostility, parenting skills, and parent

adjustment were found to be more important than individual influences on children's divorce adjustment.

In a third Stolberg study (Walsh & Stolberg, 1989) a sample of twenty-three boys and sixteen girls were included in an attempt to further address the adjustment of children to divorce. Independent variables for this study included; interspousal hostility, single parenting skills, child-reported good and bad environmental events, and time since separation. All four independent variables were reported to be significantly related to children's adjustment to divorce with the significance of the hostility and bad events variables declining over time and the parenting skills variable remaining consistent over time. The authors suggest that while a number of relevant predictor variables have been identified, the relevance of these variables to long-term adjustment is still open for discussion and investigation.

In a separate report on the effects of the ex-spousal relationship on children's adjustment (social competence) Buehler and Trotter (1990) attempted to further flesh out the salient aspects of the ex-spousal relationship. In their study, coparental conflict, coparental cooperation, and coparental competition were examined as distinct dimensions of the ex-spousal relationship. The findings of the Buehler and Trotter study revealed that it is competition between ex-spouses rather than conflict or cooperation that is the best predictor of children's social competence.

The consistent and significant finding that variations of ex-spousal interactions are related to children's adjustment to

divorce represents an important addition to the understanding of post divorce families and their children. In spite of the evidence that ex-spousal relationships continue to be significant well after the initial divorce, the relationship between ex-spousal interactions and children's behavioral problems following parental remarriage has remained relatively unexplored. Are there unique aspects of remarriage that add to or mitigate the influence of the ex-spousal relationship on children? Are the important relationships between stepparents and stepchildren adversely affected by the ex-spousal relationship? These and other questions are only beginning to receive attention.

In a recent and comprehensive treatment of the effects of "Marital Transitions" Hetherington, Stanley-Hagen, and Anderson (1989) attempt to outline current research outcomes related to the effects of marital divorce and remarriage on children. Their treatment is noteworthy in its inclusion of the remarried family and the effects of parental remarriage on children. One prominent effect of parental remarriage is reported to be the reappearance or intensification of children's emotional and behavior problems. These problems are typically hypothesized to be related to the changes in the dynamics of the child's relationship with the custodial parent. Are these problems also associated with the changes remarriage precipitates in the relationship between ex-spouses (the child's biological parents)?

Hetherington, Stanley-Hagen and Anderson did report that high rates of discord between divorced parents is associated with the

gradual loss of the noncustodial parent especially after the noncustodial parent remarries. They also stressed that the balance between conflict and cooperation for divorced parents seems to play an especially important role in the adjustment of stepchildren. While it was noted that continued non conflictual involvement of "a competent, supportive, reasonably well adjusted noncustodial father can have positive effects on the adjustment of children" (p.309), no indication of the likelihood these qualifications will be present was included. The author's statement that:

"More research is needed before firm conclusions can be drawn about the effects of sustained contact with the noncustodial parent. It is important to note that these effects are likely to be modified by the quality of the relations between the divorced parents and the attributes and behavior of the noncustodial parent" (p. 309)

speaks to the importance of, and need for more, research on the effects of ex-spousal interactions on stepchildren's adjustment.

Summary

Research seems to support the conclusion that there are significant correlations between parental relations and the post divorce adjustment of children. These correlations have been shown to transcend family type and other possibly confounding variables. Discord, hostility and competition in ex-spousal interactions have been associated with poor behavioral adjustment, lower self-esteem, and reduced social competence among children. Cooperation and other elements of the ex-spousal relationship have thus far been shown to have little association with children's adjustment.

The above conclusions represent important advances in the understanding of ex-spousal relationships and their consequences for children of divorce. Unfortunately, these conclusions are not the result of studies which have focused on the relationship between a child's biological parents after one or both of a child's parents remarry. Instead, beliefs about the continuing effects of ex-spousal interactions following remarriage are based on extrapolations of research with divorced couples and single parent families. As was suggested earlier by Ahrons (1981), an essential factor in the remarried family is the interaction between adults from more than one family system, a factor that has yet to be adequately addressed.

It has been suggested that conflict between ex-spouses may increase or show signs of resurgence following a remarriage (Ahrons & Wallisch, 1987). This evidence, coupled with the knowledge that remarriage is frequently accompanied by a resurgence of problems for children, seems to suggest that relations between biological parents may influence a child's ability to thrive in the stepfamily. The lack of significant relationships between poor marital adjustment in the stepfamily and problems for stepchildren (Anderson & White, 1986; Albrecht, 1979) and the evidence that positive marital relations in the stepfamily may even be related to negative outcomes for some children (Hetherington, 1987), suggests that the influence of the stepfamily on children's behavior may be subordinate to other, possibly extra-familial, influences.

The research conducted on the factors which mediate a child's adjustment to the stepfamily is growing and the need for further investigation has been stated (Hetherington, 1989). Despite the circumstantial evidence pointing toward the need for a better understanding of the dynamics of the relationship between a child's biological parents the research findings remain meager in this area. As conflict between biological parents has repeatedly been shown to produce adverse effects on children it stands out as the variable most likely to explain the adjustment of children in the stepfamily. Unfortunately it has neither been directly investigated as an independent variable nor controlled for in the research on children in stepfamilies. Until the influence of the ongoing relations between biological parents on children's adjustment is better understood, research addressing the myriad of potentially mediating factors in adjustment to a stepfamily seems destined to be confused and inconclusive.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Population and Selection of the Sample

The population for this study included stepfamilies residing in the catchment area of the Peninsula Area Cooperative Education Services (PACES) program. The target population was restricted to those stepfamilies with children between the ages of 8 and 16 residing in the home and to families with a living non-residential biological parent. The PACES catchment area includes the residents of York County, Gloucester County, Williamsburg-James City County, and the cities of Newport News, Hampton and Poquoson. The area is located in the southeast portion of the State of Virginia and includes rural, suburban, and urban areas of development.

One half of sample for the current study was obtained by soliciting volunteers from among the qualifying families who sought services from the PACES Family Counseling Center. The remaining subjects were obtained using a snowball or network sampling technique initiated through contacts with area school counselors and College of William and Mary employees. A total of 52 families, 31 through the family counseling center, and 21 through independent sampling, were identified that met the qualifications of the study.

Attempts were made to contact all identified families by phone to determine if they met the criteria for participation and if they were willing to volunteer. Of the 52 identified families 13 could

not be contacted due to insufficient or outdated identifying information (wrong phone numbers, disconnected phone numbers, and families no longer at the contacted residence). The remaining 39 families were all contacted by phone and asked to participate in the study.

All families contacted initially agreed to participate and were sent questionnaires. In spite of a follow-up letter and a follow-up phone call, 8 of the initially agreeable families did not return questionnaires. Reasons for not responding included: no reason, 3 families; concerns about children's responses to questions about the parental divorce, 3 families; and lack of time, 2 families. The final sample included 31 families, 16 from the PACES population and 15 from the general population.

Data Gathering Procedures

Those qualifying families expressing a willingness to participate in the proposed study during the initial phone contact were sent the following: a cover letter explaining the nature and purpose of the study, a written consent to participate which both family participants were asked to sign and return, and a packet containing the research questionnaires and instructions for their completion. A stamped, preaddressed envelope was included in each packet. Only those families who signed the consent to participate forms and who returned completed questionnaires were included in the final sample.

The residential parent who agreed to participate was asked to complete a brief (5 minute) questionnaire requesting demographic information relevant to the study, The Revised Behavior Problem Checklist (RBPC), The O'Leary Porter Scale (OPS), The Content of Parental Interaction Scale, and The Quality of Coparental Communications Scale. Children included in the study (only the oldest qualifying child in each family was included) were asked to complete The Children's Perception Questionnaire (CPQ), and The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale. Specific instructions were provided with the CPQ and the OPS directing the subjects to answer in terms of the ex-spousal relationship.

All volunteer subjects were thanked for their cooperation and were given the opportunity to ask the researcher about the study and/or any concerns that were generated by the research questions. Appropriate referral information for counseling was available for subjects who expressed concerns that were beyond the scope of the research(no subjects requested this information). Subjects were also provided with the name and address of the researcher and his Faculty sponsor and were encouraged to make contact if questions or concerns arose at a later date.

Instrumentation

Demographic information was necessary to define the study sample and to control for relevant extraneous variables. Demographic data were collected using a questionnaire specifically designed for the proposed study (see appendix B). Information was collected relevant

to the following variables: ages of subjects, gender of subjects, time since parental divorce, time since residential parent's remarriage, stepfamily characteristics, and previous counseling experience.

The ex-spousal relationship was evaluated using two self-report measures completed by the parent; the Quality of Coparental Communication Scale and the O'Leary-Porter Scale (OPS). The OPS is a measure of open spousal conflict consisting of 20 items of which 9 are scored. The author reports that Cronbach's Alpha for this scale was measured at .86 and that two week test-retest reliability was found to be .96 (Porter & O'Leary, 1980). Validity data for the O'Leary-Porter scale is scant, however, it does have clear face validity and has shown moderate concurrent validity (.63 correlation with the Locke-Wallace marital adjustment scale). An additional asset of the O'Leary Porter scale is its ongoing use as a measure of spousal discord in studies of children's adjustment to divorce (Forehand, Long, & Brody, 1988; Stolberg, et al, 1987). The Quality of Coparental Communication Scale is a brief measure designed to assess two important elements of parental communication, conflict and support. The conflict subscale is composed of four items each rated on a five point likert type scale. The support subscale is composed of 6 items rated on the same scale as the conflict subscale. Reliability data are reported for internal consistency only with Cronbach's Alpha ranging from .71 to .95 for the subscales. While little validity data are available, Ahrons (1983) does report significant correlations

between the scales and interviewer assessments of parental conflict and support.

The degree of interaction between ex-spouses was measured with The Content of Coparental Interaction Scale (Ahrons, 1981). The Content of Coparental Interaction Scale was specifically devised to assess the relationship and interactions between divorced couples on both parenting and non-parenting issues. The Scale is composed of two subscales; a 13 item nonparental dimension and a 10 item parental dimension. The scale is a self-report measure with likert-type response categories. Correlational data measuring the internal consistency of the instrument is reported to be in the .90 to .95 range and the face validity of the instrument is good. While the psychometric quality of the Coparental Interaction Scale has not been well established, the instrument is unique in its assessment of ex-spousal relations and was thus the most appropriate measure for the purposes of the current research.

Children's behavioral adjustment was measured with the Revised Behavior Problem Checklist (RBPC). The RBPC is an updated version of the Behavior Problem Checklist (BPC) (Quay and Peterson, 1979). The RBPC consists of 89 items rated on a 3 point scale and is designed to measure six dimensions of social emotional functioning. The checklist is designed to be completed by anyone well acquainted with the child being assessed and is ideally suited for parent or teacher ratings. The checklist includes two minor and four major subscales. The four major subscales were used in the current study and include: 1) conduct disorders, 2) socialized aggression,

3) attention problems-immaturity, and 4) anxiety-withdrawal. The RBPC has demonstrated good reliability and validity although interrater reliability has been questioned. Despite the limitations imposed by only moderate interrater reliability, the measure has been deemed one of the more psychometrically sound checklists available (Cancelli, 1985).

Children's self-concept was measured using the Piers-Harris Children's Self-concept Scale (Piers-Harris). The Piers-Harris is a self-report inventory consisting of 80 declarative statements each requiring a yes/no response. Scores can be interpreted either as an overall self-concept measure or can be broken down into 6 cluster scores (behavior, intellectual and School status, Physical appearance and Attributes, Anxiety, Popularity, and Happiness and Satisfaction). For the purposes of the current study only the overall scores on the Piers-Harris were used. Reliability measures for the Piers-Harris are reported to average .73 on test-retest with a range from .43 to .96. Measures of internal consistency for overall scores are reported to be in the .88 to .93 range. Validity studies examining the relationship between the Piers-Harris and other measures of self-concept are reported in the manual and are acceptable for a test of this nature. The measure has been independently reviewed and determined to be a "psychometrically adequate instrument whose usefulness in research has been documented" (Epstein, 1985, p. 1169).

Children's perceptions of the relationship between their biological parents were assessed using The Children's Perception

Questionnaire (CPQ) (Emery & O'Leary, 1982). The CPQ is a 38 item inventory containing statements about the child's home and school life. Imbedded in the questionnaire are 10 items which pertain to the child's perception of parental discord. Items on the inventory are rated by the child as either true, somewhat true, or not true. Coefficient alpha is reported to be .90 for the parental perception scale indicating the instrument has a high degree of internal consistency. No validity data are available for the CPQ. The preliminary nature of investigations into children's perceptions of parental interactions, however, has produced no well researched measures to date thus the use of an essentially unvalidated instrument was necessary.

Research Design

The current study collected demographic data from both a clinical and a non clinical sample of stepfamilies. By comparing the characteristics of these two subsamples on a variety of demographic variables the generalizability of the study's findings can be improved. For this reason, between group comparisons of the clinical and nonclinical subsamples were conducted using Chi Square and T-Tests where appropriate.

A correlational research design was employed for the purpose of establishing the degree of relationship that exists between measures of the quality and content of ex-spousal interactions and measures of the behavioral and emotional adjustment of stepchildren. Correlational research designs require the researcher

to obtain scores on two or more variable measures, one score for each variable of interest, for all members of a selected sample. Once scores have been obtained for all subjects on all variables, paired scores are statistically correlated and tested for statistical significance.

According to Borg and Gall (1989) correlational designs are best employed in studies directed toward the exploration of possible relationships and are not suitable for experimental investigation of cause and effect relationships. The structural complexity of the stepfamily coupled with the abundance of possibly confounding variables precluded the use of more powerful research designs in this study. Because the purpose of this research was to explore potential factors influencing stepfamily functioning and establish the ground work for future experimental research, a correlational design was appropriate.

Specific Research Hypotheses

1) There will be a statistically significant correlation between ex-spousal scores on The O'Leary Porter Scale of Overt Parental Hostility and stepchildren's adjustment as measured using The Revised Behavior Problem Checklist and The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept scale.

2) There will be a statistically significant correlation between children's ratings of ex-spousal discord on the Children's Perceptions Questionnaire and stepchildren's adjustment as measured

using The Revised Behavior Problem Checklist and The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale.

3) There will be a statistically significant correlation between parental scores on The Parental Subscale of The Content of Coparental Interactions Scale and stepchildren's adjustment as measured using The Revised Behavior Problem Checklist and The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale.

4) There will be a statistically significant correlation between parental scores on The Nonparental Interactions Subscale of The Content of Coparental interactions Scale and stepchildren's adjustment as measured using The Revised Behavior Problem Checklist and The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale.

5) There will be a statistically significant correlation between parental scores on The Conflict Subscale of The Quality of Coparental Communication Scale and stepchildren's adjustment as measured using The Revised Behavior Problem Checklist and The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale.

6) There will be a statistically significant correlation between parental scores on The Support Subscale of The Quality of Coparental Communication Scale and stepchildren's adjustment as measured using The Revised Behavior Problem Checklist and The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale.

Statistical Analysis

The data obtained for this study were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical procedures. Descriptive statistics, including frequency tables, means, ranges, and standard deviations as appropriate, are reported for all demographic and experimental variables. Demographic comparisons between subsamples from the clinical and nonclinical subsamples were made using the Chi Square procedure and independent sample T-Tests as appropriate.

Correlations between experimental variables were determined using Pearson's product moment correlations and partial correlation procedures. For the purposes of hypothesis testing, the child outcome measures (scores on The Revised Behavior Problem Checklist and The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale) were treated as dependent variables and the ex-spousal interaction variables (scores on The O'Leary Porter Scale, The Children's Perceptions Questionnaire, The Quality of Coparental Communications Scale, and The Content of Coparental Interactions Scale) were treated as independent variables. All tests for statistical significance were based on a (.05) level of probability.

Ethical Considerations

All subjects participating in the current research were volunteers and were fully informed of the purpose of the research prior to participation. All subjects signed a consent to participate form (see appendix A) which included a written description of the research coupled with a request for their

participation. Only those persons who indicated their willingness to participate by signing the consent for participation form were included in the study. As all children included in the study were age 16 and under, in addition to their own consent, official consent to participate was also obtained from the custodial parent. All subjects who agreed to participate were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time they so desired. Results of the study were made available to the subjects upon request.

All data collected was recorded anonymously to insure the confidentiality of individual subjects. Subject response forms were numerically coded and reported as group data to make certain that no individual's responses were recognizable.

While the psychological risk to study participants was minimized through the use of standardized measurement tools and anonymous recording of data, the requested data was sensitive in nature for some subjects. To guard against the risk of psychological distress related to the study's questions, all subjects were informed of the availability of referral information for counseling and stepfamily services in their area. In addition, all subjects were provided with the names and addresses of the researcher and his sponsor for future reference should problems related to the research arise at a later time.

Summary of Methodology

A volunteer sample of stepchildren and their residential parents was obtained from both a clinical and a nonclinical population of

stepfamilies in the Peninsula area of the state of Virginia. A series of self-report instruments designed to measure the content and quality of ex-spousal interactions and the emotional and behavioral adjustment of children was administered to the research sample. Scores on the various scales employed were tabulated and recorded in an anonymous fashion. Data were analyzed using standard descriptive and correlational procedures to determine the degree of relationship that exists between experimental variables. Results of the study were compiled and reported in compliance with the ethical and professional standards for doctoral research in the School of Education at the College of William and Mary.

Chapter IV

Results

The results of the statistical analyses of the data collected for this study are reported in this chapter. The primary purpose of this study was to examine the effects of ex-spousal interactions following divorce and remarriage on the behavioral adjustment and self-concept of stepchildren. In order to effectively address the primary concern of this study, it was necessary to first address two secondary concerns; sample composition and sample representativeness. As a prelude to the analysis of the study's major hypotheses, a thorough description of the demographic characteristics of the study's sample is presented.

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

For the purposes of accurate sample description and to establish the representativeness of the sample relative to all stepfamilies, families were asked to provide specific demographic information. The following demographic variables were included in the study: Age and gender of responding parent, age and gender of responding child, ethnic background(s) of the stepfamily, number of residential children in the stepfamily, number of children from the responding parent's previous marriage, marital history of the responding parent (length of first marriage, length of time between marriages, length of current marriage), marital status of the

noncustodial biological parent, history of residential stepparent's prior marriages (if any), number of children from residential stepparent's prior marriages, and a listing of counseling support services pursued by the family. Descriptive statistics for each of the above variables are provided below.

A total of 31 stepchild/resident-biological-parent pairs participated in the study. Parent ages for subjects ranged from 27 to 48 years with a mean of 37.7 years. The responding stepchildren's ages ranged from 8 to 16 years with a mean of 11.6 years. Twenty-three of the families were composed of a biological mother and a stepfather, and 8 of the families were composed of a biological father and a stepmother. Twenty-one of the participating children were male and 10 were female. Thirty-one of the families were caucasian and one family was black.

The number of children from the first marriage of the responding parent ranged from 1 to 3 with a mean of 1.7. Twenty-three of the responding parents' current spouses had been married previously and 20 of the current spouses had had at least one child from a previous marriage. Six of the remarried couples in the study reported at least one child from their current marriage. The total number of children (includes full, half, and step siblings) making their primary residence in the stepfamily household ranged from 1 to 5 with a mean of 2.2.

The length of the responding parents' first marriage ranged from 12 to 280 months with a mean of 113.8 months (approximately 10 years). The length of time between marriages for the responding

parent ranged from 0 to 108 months with a mean of 42.7 months (roughly three and a half years). The length of the residential parents' current marriage ranged from 5 to 95 months with a mean of 50.8 months (slightly more than 4 years). Twenty-one of the residential parents' ex-spouses had remarried and 10 remained single at the time of this study.

In addition to the descriptive role of the demographic variables in this study, demographics were also used to help establish the representativeness of the study's sample. In order to avoid the limitations of studies relying entirely on clinical populations of stepfamilies, the sample for the current study enlisted stepfamilies from both a clinical population and a nonclinical population. Demographic comparisons between these two subsamples of the total study population were conducted to determine if there were significant differences between subsamples that might limit the generalizability of the study's findings. Comparisons were made using T-Tests and Chi Square statistical procedures as appropriate for the type of demographic data being analyzed. The results of these tests for significant differences between subsamples are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

As can be seen in Table 1, there were no statistically significant differences between subjects drawn from the clinical and nonclinical populations for the variables: Ethnic background, parent gender, child gender, previous marital status of stepparent, presence of children from the stepparents' previous marriage, and marital status of nonresidential parent. A similar lack of

Table 4.1

Comparison of Demographic Variables for Clinic
and Nonclinic Subsamples

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Total Frequency</u>	<u>Clinic Frequency</u>	<u>Nonclinic Frequency</u>	<u>Chi Square</u>	<u>Sig. Level</u>
Parent Gender					
Male	8	4	4		
Female	23	12	11	0.011	.916
Child Gender					
Male	21	11	10		
Female	10	5	5	0.015	.901
Family Ethnic Identification					
Caucasion	30	15	15		
Black	1	1	0	0.969	.325
Children from First Marriage					
One	11	5	6		
Two	17	8	9		
Three	3	3	0	3.120	.210
Current spouse Previously Married					
Yes	23	11	12		
No	8	5	3	0.512	.474
Current Spouse has Children					
Yes	20	11	9		
No	11	5	6	0.258	.611
Children from Current Marriage					
None	25	12	13		
One	5	3	2		
Two	1	1	0	1.209	.546
Former Spouse Remarried					
Yes	21	12	9		
No	10	4	6	0.797	.372

Table 4.2

T-Tests for Differences Between Clinic
and Nonclinic Subsamples for
Demographic Variables

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Mean for entire Sample</u>	<u>Mean for Clinic Sample</u>	<u>Mean for Nonclinic Sample</u>	<u>Df</u>	<u>T Value</u>	<u>Sig. Level</u>
Parent age In Years	37.71	36.38	39.13	29	1.56	.129
Child age In Years	11.61	11.43	11.80	29	0.44	.665
Length of Original Marriage In Months	113.87	112.25	115.60	29	0.16	.876
Time as Single Parent In Months	42.64	44.56	40.60	29	-0.34	.735
Length of Current Marriage In Months	50.81	53.56	47.87	29	-0.52	.606

statistically significant differences between subsamples can be found in Table 2 for the variables: Parent age, child age, length of first marriage, length of time between marriages, and length of current marriage. The similarity of the demographic characteristics of the two subsamples is important in that it allows for the two groups to be combined for the purposes of further statistical analysis. Additional implications of the demographic similarity of the clinic and nonclinic samples will be addressed in chapter 5 of this research.

Statistical Analysis of Research Variables

The current research was specifically designed to examine the relationships among a variety of measures of ex-spousal interactions and the behavioral adjustment and self-concept of stepchildren. Each of the measures of ex-spousal interaction was predicted to be significantly related to the behavioral adjustment and the self-concept of stepchildren. As an initial assessment of the relationships relevant to this study, Pearson's product moment correlations were calculated for the relationships between each measure of ex-spousal interaction and each of the five measures of stepchildren's adjustment. The results of this analysis are presented in matrix form in Table 3.

As can be seen in Table 3, correlations between Coparental Conflict and stepchildren's adjustment as well as correlations between Children's Perceptions of conflict and stepchildren's adjustment were found to be statistically significant. Coparental

Table 4.3
Correlation Coefficients for Ex-Spousal
 Interaction Variables and Measures
 of Children's Adjustment

Ex-Spousal Interaction Measures	Measures of Stepchild Adjustment				
	Piers-Harris Children's Self-concept	RBPC Conduct Disorder	RBPC Socialized Aggression	RBPC Attention Problems	RBPC Withdrawn Anxiety
Coparental Interaction	.1682	-.2044	.0693	-.2128	-.1724
Nonparental Interaction	-.0628	-.2333	-.0301	-.1960	-.2217
Coparental Conflict	-.4386**	.2487	.0730	.2502	.3719*
Coparental Support	-.0769	-.1689	-.0076	-.1382	-.1924
Overt Hostility	-.2481	.1363	.1406	.0027	.0618
Child's Perception	-.4254**	.5335**	.5052**	.3849*	.2339

* (p < .05); ** (p < .01)

Conflict was significantly correlated with Self-concept ($r = -.4386$, $p < .01$), and the Anxiety-Withdrawal Scale of The RBPC ($r = .3719$, $p < .05$). Children's Perceptions of marital discord were correlated with The Piers-Harris ($r = -.425$, $p < .01$), The Conduct Disorder scale of The RBPC ($r = .5335$, $p < .005$), The Socialized Aggression Scale of the RBPC ($r = .5052$, $p < .005$), and the Attention Problems-immaturity Scale of The RBPC ($r = .3849$, $p < .05$). These zero order correlations are important, however, they do not control for any of the demographic variables that have been associated with stepchildren's adjustment.

Previous research has demonstrated that family type (stepmother verses stepfather), the gender of the stepchild, the length of the original marriage, the length of time spent in a single parent household, and the length of time in the stepfamily may all be associated with stepchildren's adjustment. In order to determine the possible influence of these demographic variables for stepchildren's adjustment in the current study, two sets of T-Tests (one for each of the nominal level variables; family type and stepchild gender) and one correlation matrix (including the length of the original marriage, length of time in a single parent home and length of time in a stepfamily variables) were generated. Table 4 contains the results of the T-Tests for differences in stepchildren's adjustment according to family type. Table 5 contains the results of the T-Tests for differences in stepchildren's adjustment according to stepchildren's gender. Table 6 contains the results of the product moment correlations between

Table 4.4

T-Tests for Differences in Stepchildren's
Adjustment According to Stepfamily Type

Stepchild Adjustment Measures	Stepfather Families		Stepmother Families		Df	t Value	Sig. Level
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Piers-Harris Self-Concept	55.88	11.3	60.13	13.2	29	-0.81	.423
Conduct Disorder	9.38	7.0	11.91	9.9	28	-0.66	.512
Socialized Aggression	3.88	5.1	2.64	3.1	28	0.82	.412
Attentional Problems	6.50	3.9	8.50	8.0	28	-0.67	.507
Withdrawal- Anxiety	4.50	3.6	5.45	4.4	28	-0.55	.590

Table 4.5

T-Tests for Differences in Stepchildren's Adjustment According to Stepchild Gender

Stepchild Adjustment Measures	Male Stepchildren		Female Stepchildren		DF	t Value	Sig. Level
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Piers-Harris Self-Concept	57.05	12.8	63.20	12.1	29	-1.27	.212
Conduct Disorder	13.45	10.2	6.80	4.1	28	1.97	.059
Socialized Aggression	2.90	3.0	3.10	4.9	28	-0.14	.890
Attentional Problems	9.60	7.9	4.70	4.1	28	1.84	.076
Withdrawal-Anxiety	6.05	4.6	3.50	2.8	28	1.61	.118

Table 4.6

Pearson Correlation Coefficients for Selected
Demographic Variables and Measures
of Stepchildren's Adjustment

Demographic Variables	Measures of Stepchild Adjustment				
	Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept	RBPC Conduct Disorder	RBPC Socialized Aggression	RBPC Attention Problems	RBPC Withdrawn Anxiety
Length of 1st Marriage	.1358	-.1762	-.1121	-.0684	.0534
Time Between Marriages	.0919	.1412	.1724	.2525	.0810
Time as a Stepfamily	-.1423	-.0789	.3063*	.1035	.1670

* (p < .05)

the family history variables and the measures of stepchildren's adjustment.

The analyses contained in Tables 4, 5, and 6 indicate that except in the case of the Socialized Aggression Scale of The RBPC, no significant relationships were found between the demographic variables examined and the measures of stepchildren's adjustment used in this study. Stepchildren's scores on The Socialized Aggression Scale of The RBPC were significantly associated with the stepfamily type variable ($r=.3063$, $p < .05$). Despite the lack of significant correlations found in the above analysis of selected demographic variables, it was decided that they be controlled for when assessing relationships relevant to this study. Statistical analysis using partial correlation procedures was conducted to assess the degree of relatedness between ex-spousal interaction measures and stepchildren's adjustment measures while controlling for the influence of selected demographic variables. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 7.

An assessment of the partial correlations presented in table 7 shows that even after controlling for the effects of family type, stepchild gender, and length of time in a stepfamily, the relationships that were initially found to be significant remained significant. Of interest, however, is the effect of the partial correlation procedure on the degree and significance of the correlations between Overt Parental Hostility and The Piers-Harris ($r= -.3326$, $p < .05$) and between Nonparental Interactions and The Anxiety-Withdrawal Scale of The RBPC ($r= -.3172$, $p < .05$). In each

Table 4.7

Correlations Between Ex-Spousal Interaction
and Adolescent Adjustment Controlling
for Family Type, Child Gender, and
Length of Remarriage (N=31)

Ex-Spousal Interaction Measures	Measures of Stepchild Adjustment				
	Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept	RBPC Conduct Disorder	RBPC Socialized Aggression	RBPC Attention Problems	RBPC Withdrawn Anxiety
Coparental Interaction	.2427	-.2291	.0564	-.2231	-.1809
Nonparental Interaction	.0577	-.2590	-.1457	-.2511	-.3172 †
Coparental Conflict	-.4182**	.1868	.0727	.2201	.3978*
Coparental Support	-.0289	-.1904	-.1035	-.1806	-.2646
Overt Hostility	-.3326*	.0453	.2792	-.0418	.0600
Child's Perception ^b	-.3834*	.5515**	.5084**	.3640*	.1882

^aFor RBPC scales (n=30); ^bfor Children's Perception scale (n=29).
* p < .05; ** p < .01

of these cases, controlling for the effects of demographic variables increased the degree of relatedness sufficient to make it statistically significant.

Specific Research Hypotheses

The first research hypothesis for the current study predicted that there would be a statistically significant correlation between parent scores on the O'Leary-Porter Scale of Overt Parental Hostility and stepchildren's adjustment as measured using the Revised Behavior Problem Checklist and The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale. After controlling for the influence of selected demographic variables, The O'Leary Porter Scale was found to be significantly correlated only with stepchildren's scores on the Piers-Harris. The final correlation coefficient was $-.3326$ with a probability of less than $.05$. The negative value of the coefficient indicates that the relationship is inverse (that as scores on the parental hostility scale go up self-concept scores go down).

The hypothesis that there would be a significant correlation between parental scores on The O'Leary Porter Scale of Overt Parental Hostility and stepchildren's adjustment was partially supported. A significant correlation was found between overt parental hostility and stepchildren's self-concept scores. No significant correlations were found, however, between overt parental hostility and the measures of stepchildren's behavioral adjustment.

Hypothesis 2 stated that there would be a statistically significant correlation between stepchildren's ratings of discord in the ex-spousal relationship as measured using the Child Perception Questionnaire (CPQ) and stepchildren's adjustment as measured using the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale and The Revised Behavior Problem Checklist. After controlling for the influence of selected demographic variables, stepchildren's scores on the Child Perception Questionnaire were found to be significantly correlated with all of the measures of stepchildren's adjustment except the Anxiety-Withdrawal Scale of the RBPC. Partial correlations were as follows: CPQ with self-concept, $r = -.3844$ ($p < .05$), CPQ with The Conduct Disorder Scale of The RBPC, $r = .5515$ ($p < .01$), CPQ with The Socialized Aggression Scale of The RBPC $r = .5084$ ($p < .01$), CPQ with The Attention Problems-Immaturity Scale of The RBPC $r = .3640$ ($p < .05$).

The hypothesis that stepchildren's ratings of discord in the ex-spousal relationship as reported on The Children's Perception Questionnaire would be correlated to each of the five measures of stepchild adjustment was supported except in the case of The Anxiety-Withdrawal Scale of the RBPC. A significant correlation was found between stepchildren's perceptions of ex-spousal discord and each of the remaining four measures of stepchild adjustment. In the case of stepchildren's self-concept, the correlation was negative indicating that as stepchildren's perceptions of ex-spousal discord increase their self-concept decreases. In the correlations involving RBPC scales, the correlations were found to be positive

indicating that as stepchildren's perceptions of ex-spousal discord increase their behavior problems increase.

Hypothesis 3 stated that there would be a statistically significant correlation between parental scores on the Coparental Interactions Scale of the Content of Coparental Interactions Scale and stepchildren's adjustment as measured using the Revised Behavior Problem Checklist and The Piers-Harris Children's Self-concept Scale. After controlling for the influence of selected demographic variables Coparental Interaction scores were not found to be significantly correlated with any of the measures of stepchildren's adjustment. Weak positive correlations were found between coparental interactions and stepchildren's self-concept and weak negative correlations were found between coparental interactions and stepchildren's scores on the Conduct Disorder, Socialized Aggression, and Withdrawal-anxiety Scales of THE RBPC. These correlations were not strong enough to reach statistical significance even at the .10 level.

The hypothesis that there would be a statistically significant correlation between the Coparental Interactions Subscale of the Content of Coparental Interactions Scale and the five separate measures of stepchild adjustment was not supported. After controlling for the influence of demographic variables, Coparental Interaction scores were not significantly correlated with any measures of child adjustment.

Hypothesis 4 stated that there would be a statistically significant correlation between the Nonparental Interactions

Subscale of the Content of Coparental Interactions Scale and stepchildren's adjustment as measured using the Revised behavior Problem Checklist and The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale. After controlling for selected demographic variables, parent scores on The Nonparental Interactions scale were not significantly correlated with any of the measures of stepchildren's adjustment. Three trends (correlations significant at the .10 level) were observed in the correlational analysis. Weak, negative correlations between nonparental interactions and stepchildren's scores on The Conduct Disorder, Attention Problems-Immaturity, and Withdrawal-Anxiety Scales of The RBPC were found. These relationships must be viewed with extreme caution as there is a relatively high possibility that they are the result of chance factors.

The hypothesis that parental scores on The Nonparental Interaction Scale of the Content of Coparental Interaction Scale would be correlated with each of the five measures of stepchild adjustment was not supported. The implications of the statistical trends noted above will be addressed in chapter 5 of this research.

Hypothesis 5 stated that there would be a statistically significant correlation between parental scores on the Conflict Subscale of The Quality of Coparental Interactions Scale and stepchildren's adjustment as measured using the Revised behavior Problem Checklist and The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale. After controlling for the influence of selected demographic variables, parental scores on The Conflict Scale were found to be

significantly correlated with stepchildren's scores on The Piers-Harris ($r = -.4182$, $p < .05$), and with stepchildren's scores on the Withdrawal-Anxiety Scale of the RBPC ($r = .3978$, $p < .05$). The negative correlation between parental conflict and stepchildren's self-concept indicates that as conflict increases self-concept decreases. The positive correlation between parental conflict and stepchildren's withdrawal-anxiety scores indicates that as conflict increases scores on The Withdrawal-Anxiety Scale also increase.

The hypothesis that parental scores on The Conflict Scale of the Quality of Coparental Interactions Scale would be significantly correlated with stepchildren's behavioral adjustment and self-concept was partially supported. Parental conflict was found to be significantly associated with stepchildren's self-concept scores and with stepchildren's scores for withdrawal-anxiety. No significant correlations were found between parental conflict and stepchildren's scores for The Conduct Disorder, Socialized Aggression, and Attention problems-Immaturity scales of The RBPC.

Hypothesis 6 stated that there would be a statistically significant correlation between parental scores on The Support Scale of The Quality of Coparental Communications Scale and stepchildren's adjustment as measured using The Revised Behavior Problem Checklist and The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale. After controlling for the influence of selected demographic variables, parental scores on The Support Scale were not found to be correlated at the .05 level of significance with any of the five measures of stepchildren's adjustment. A statistical trend was

noted in the correlation between Coparental Support and stepchildren's scores for socialized aggression ($r = -.2646$, $p < .10$).

The hypothesis that parental scores on the Support Scale of The Quality of Coparental Communications Scale would be correlated with stepchildren's adjustment as measured using The Revised Behavior Problem Checklist and The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale was not supported. The statistical analysis indicated that there may be a weak negative correlation between coparental support and stepchildren's level of socialized aggression, however, the sample size for this study was insufficient to verify this possibility with the usually accepted level of confidence.

Additional Findings

Although the primary thrust of this study was the examination of relationships between ex-spousal interactions and stepchildren's adjustment, the study's design also permitted comparisons between the clinical and nonclinical subsamples of stepfamilies. While it was not stated as a hypothesis, a general goal of this study was to establish an understanding of stepfamilies that would facilitate the provision of quality mental health services to stepfamilies. In keeping with this goal, comparisons were made to determine if there were differences between the clinical and nonclinical stepfamilies that might help to explain the different therapeutic needs of these two groups.

In order to assess the differences between the clinical and nonclinical subsamples relevant to the primary research variables of this study, a series of independent T-Tests were performed. A total of eleven tests were performed; one for each of the six ex-spousal interaction variables, and one for each of the five stepchild adjustment variables. Table 8 contains a summary of the statistical comparisons between the clinical and nonclinical subgroups on the stepchildren's adjustment variables.

As can be seen in Table 8, significant differences between children from clinically referred and nonclinically referred stepfamilies were obtained on four of the stepchild adjustment measures. Piers-Harris Self-concept scores for stepchildren from clinically referred families were significantly lower than for children from non referred families. Stepchildren from the clinically referred subsample were also defined by higher scores on The Conduct Disorder, Attention problems-Immaturity and Withdrawal-Anxiety Scales of the RBPC. The implications of these differences will be addressed in chapter 5.

Table 9 contains a summary of the comparisons between the clinical and nonclinical subsamples on the ex-spousal interaction variables. As can be seen, significant differences between stepfamilies who had been referred for family therapy and those who had not been referred were evident only with regard to scores on The Children's Perception Scale. Children's perceptions of ex-spousal discord were higher in the clinical than the nonclinical

Table 4.8

T-Tests for Differences in Stepchildren's
Adjustment According to Subsample:
Clinical or Nonclinical

Stepchild Adjustment Measures	Clinical Families		Nonclinical Families		Df	t Value	Sig. Level
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Piers-Harris Self-Concept	52.88	12.0	65.60	10.0	29	3.19	.003
Conduct Disorder	14.88	8.8	7.07	7.8	28	-2.54	.016
Socialized Aggression	3.56	3.5	2.29	3.9	28	-0.95	.348
Attentional Problems	10.38	6.8	5.21	6.7	28	-2.08	.046
Withdrawal- Anxiety	6.81	3.5	3.36	4.2	28	-2.44	.021

Table 4.9

T-Tests for Differences in Ex-spousal
Interactions According to Subsample:
Clinical or Nonclinical

Ex-Spousal Interaction Measures	Clinical Families		Nonclinical Families		Df	t Value	Sig. Level
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Coparental Interactions	17.88	8.3	23.80	10.3	29	1.77	.088
Nonparental Interactions	16.68	2.4	18.40	4.9	29	1.24	.224
Conflict	13.19	5.3	10.67	4.8	29	-1.37	.180
Support	11.88	5.0	14.80	5.1	29	1.62	.117
Overt Hostility	13.56	3.9	13.53	5.6	29	-0.02	.987
Children's Perceptions	5.40	3.4	2.00	1.9	27	-3.30	.003

group ($t = -3.30$, $p < .01$). No other significant differences in ex-spousal interactions were found between the two subsamples.

Summary

A number of significant results have been reported in this chapter. Analysis of the demographic characteristics of the study's sample revealed no significant differences between the clinical and nonclinical subsamples thus the two groups were combined for all further analyses. Although no statistically significant differences between the demographic characteristics of the clinic and nonclinic families were observed, the demographic characteristics of the total sample revealed an under representation of stepfamilies from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Correlational analysis revealed that after controlling for selected demographic variables, there were several statistically significant relationships between the ex-spousal interaction variables and the stepchildren's adjustment variables. In addition to those correlations that reached statistical significance at the .05 level, several relationships were found to be significant at the .10 level and were reported as trends. The results of the correlation analyses are summarized by hypothesis below.

The first hypothesis, that there would be a significant correlation between parental scores on The O'Leary Porter scale of Overt Parental Hostility and stepchildren's adjustment was partially supported. A significant negative correlation was found between overt parental hostility and stepchildren's self-concept

scores. No significant correlations were found, however, between overt parental hostility and the measures of stepchildren's behavioral adjustment.

The second hypothesis, that stepchildren's ratings of discord in the ex-spousal relationship reported on The Children's Perception Questionnaire would be correlated to each of the five measures of stepchild adjustment was largely supported. A significant correlation was found between stepchildren's perceptions of ex-spousal discord and stepchildren's scores on The Piers-Harris Self-concept Scale, The Conduct Disorder Scale, Socialized Aggression Scale, and The Attention Problem-Immaturity Scale. In the case of stepchildren's self-concept scores, the correlation was negative indicating that as stepchildren's perceptions of ex-spousal discord increase their self-concept decreases. In the correlations involving The RBPC scales the correlations were found to be positive indicating that as stepchildren's perceptions of ex-spousal discord increase their behavior problems increase.

The third hypothesis, that there would be a statistically significant correlation between The Coparental Interactions Subscale of the Content of Coparental Interactions Scale and the five separate measures of stepchild adjustment was not supported. After controlling for the influence of demographic variables, Coparental Interaction scores were not significantly correlated with any measures of child adjustment.

The fourth hypothesis, that parental scores on The Nonparental Interaction Scale of the Content of Coparental Interaction Scale would be correlated with each of the five measures of stepchild adjustment was not supported. After controlling for the influence of demographic variables, Nonparental Interaction scores were not significantly correlated with any measures of child adjustment. Several correlations approached significance and were reported as statistical trends.

The fifth hypothesis, that parental scores on The Conflict Scale of the Quality of Coparental Interactions Scale would be significantly correlated with stepchildren's behavioral adjustment and self-concept was partially supported. Parental conflict was found to be significantly associated with stepchildren's self-concept scores and with stepchildren's scores for withdrawal-anxiety. No significant correlations were found between parental conflict and the remaining scales of The RBPC.

The sixth hypothesis, that parental scores on the Support Scale of The Quality of Coparental communications scale would be correlated with stepchildren's adjustment as measured using The Revised Behavior Problem Checklist and The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale was not supported. The analysis suggested that a weak negative correlation between coparental support and stepchildren's level of socialized aggression may be present. This correlation was reported as a statistical trend.

Comparisons of clinically referred and nonclinically referred stepfamilies revealed a number of significant differences relevant

to the stepchildren's adjustment variables. Stepchildren from the clinical subsample obtained significantly lower self-concept scores and scored significantly higher on three of the behavior problem scales than did stepchildren from the nonclinical subsample. In the area of ex-spousal interactions, stepchildren's ratings of ex-spousal discord on the Children's Perceptions Questionnaire were significantly higher for the clinical than for the nonclinical subsample.

Chapter V

Summary, Conclusions, and Implications for Further Research

This chapter addresses the meaning and significance of the results reported in chapter 4. The first section of the chapter provides a summary of the study and its findings. The second section of the chapter discusses the limitations of the study's findings. The third section of the chapter addresses the conclusions that can be drawn from the results of this study in light of current theory and research. The final section of the chapter assesses the implications of the study's findings for future research.

Summary

Statement of the Problem. In the past decade there has been an increasing interest in the viability of the stepfamily as a nurturing and effective form of the American family. Significant increases in the number of children who currently reside in stepfamilies coupled with preliminary research which indicates that these children may be disadvantaged when compared to peers from other family types, justifies the increased attention. Despite the renewed interest in the stepfamily among researchers and clinicians, however, there continue to be significant gaps in the research base on stepfamilies.

One neglected area of concern in the study of the stepfamily is the nature and effects of the relationship between ex-spouses following remarriage. The purpose of this study was to examine ex-spousal interactions following divorce and remarriage and the effects of those interactions on the adjustment of stepchildren. It was predicted that there would be a relationship between both the content and quality of ex-spousal interactions and stepchildren's adjustment.

Theory Base and Relevant Research. The study was grounded in the family systems theory associated with structural family therapy. The importance of family structure in stepfamily functioning, especially issues related to the spousal and parental subsystems of the family, was discussed. Several crucial issues for stepfamily adjustment were addressed from a structural family therapy theory perspective. These issues included the lack of ex-spousal role expectations and the absence of clear boundaries between spousal and parental roles in a multi-parent system. It was predicted that in stepfamilies where conflicted and/or enmeshed ex-spousal relationships were evident, the family system and its members would be less functional. This study represented an attempt to explore and potentially verify the above prediction.

In addition to its foundation in structural family therapy theory, this study was an outgrowth of the increasing number of research reports that have linked family type (intact, single parent, and stepfamily) with children's adjustment. The trend in this research suggests that stepchildren may be disadvantaged when

compared with children from other family types. The conclusion that stepchildren may be disadvantaged in some way, however, has been attacked as both unfounded and simplistic. While the methodology and design of comparison based studies has been questioned, the most significant criticism has been the lack of meaningful information supplied by these studies.

Recent research efforts have stressed the importance of specific relationships in stepfamilies in an attempt to more adequately explain stepfamily functioning. While these efforts provided evidence that stepfamily functioning is influenced by the nature of the relationships between stepfamily members, relationships that extended beyond the confines of the stepfamily home were neglected. Despite a wealth of research linking spousal and ex-spousal interactions to children's behavioral and emotional adjustment, the significance of ex-spousal interactions following remarriage remained an unknown.

This study was designed to address the importance of the role of ex-spousal interactions in stepfamily functioning and the effect of those interactions on the behavioral and emotional adjustment of stepchildren. The design of the study was correlational as opposed to comparison based and care was taken to avoid some of the sampling problems that have plagued stepfamily research in the past.

Methodology. The study relied on self-report data gathered from 31 stepchild/biological-parent pairs residing in the catchment area

of The Peninsula Area Cooperative Education Services (PACES) Family Counseling Center. Half of the subjects belonged to stepfamilies that had been referred to The Family Counseling Center and half of the stepfamilies were obtained independently of the Family Counseling Center using a snowball or network sampling method. All stepchildren were between the ages of 8 and 16 and all subjects were volunteers.

In order to specifically address the gap in the stepfamily research in the area of ex-spousal interactions and their effects on stepchildren, a series of questionnaires were administered to each stepchild/ biological-parent pair. Parents were asked to provide demographic information about the history and characteristics of the family. Information relevant to the content and quality of ex-spousal interactions was obtained using parental ratings from The Content of Coparental Interactions Scale, The Quality of Coparental Communications scale, and The O'Leary Porter Scale of Overt Parental Hostility. Additional information about the ex-spousal relationship was obtained using stepchildren's ratings of ex-spousal discord from The Child Perception Questionnaire. Stepchildren's behavioral adjustment was measured using the four major subscales of The Revised Behavior Problem Checklist (RBPC). Stepchildren's self-concept was measured using the stepchildren's responses on The Piers-Harris Children's Self-concept Scale.

Demographic variables previously shown to be related to stepchildren's adjustment were statistically analyzed to determine if they were related to stepchildren's adjustment in this sample.

After controlling for the effects of selected demographic variables, measures of ex-spousal interactions were statistically analyzed to determine which, if any, were significantly related to stepchildren's adjustment. The following six hypotheses were specifically addressed:

1) There will be a statistically significant correlation between parental scores on The O'Leary porter Scale of Overt Parental Hostility and stepchildren's adjustment as measured using the Revised Behavior Problem Checklist and The Piers-Harris Children's Self-concept Scale

2) There will be a statistically significant correlation between stepchildren's ratings of the ex-spousal relationship on the Children's Perception Questionnaire and stepchildren's adjustment as measured using The Revised Behavior Problem Checklist and The Piers-Harris Children's Self-concept Scale.

3) There will be a statistically significant correlation between parental scores on The Coparental Interaction Subscale of The Content of Coparental Interactions Scale and stepchildren's adjustment as measured using The Revised Behavior Problem Checklist and The Pier-Harris children's Self-concept Scale.

4) There will be a statistically significant correlation between parental scores on The Nonparental Interaction Subscale of The Content of Coparental Interactions Scale and Stepchildren's adjustment as measured using The Revised Behavior Problem Checklist and The Pier-Harris Children's Self-concept Scale.

5) There will be a statistically significant correlation between parental scores on the Conflict Subscale of The Quality of Coparental Communications Scale and stepchildren's adjustment as measured using The Revised Behavior Problem Checklist and The Piers-Harris Children's Self-concept Scale.

6) There will be a statistically significant correlation between parental scores on The Support Subscale of The Quality of Coparental Communications Scale and stepchildren's adjustment as measured using The Revised Behavior Problem Checklist and The Piers-Harris Children's Self-concept Scale.

Results. Statistical analysis of the data collected for this study yielded several statistically significant findings. In the initial description of the demographic characteristics of the study sample it was observed that there was an under-representation of families from minority ethnic backgrounds. Statistical analysis of the demographic data from the two subsamples (clinical and nonclinical) of the total sample found no statistically significant differences between the two groups. The demographic similarity of the two subsamples was cited as justification for their treatment as a single sample in the correlational analysis of the primary research variables.

Correlational analysis revealed that, after controlling for the effects of three selected demographic variables (family type, stepchild gender, and length of time as a stepfamily), certain ex-spousal interaction variables were significantly associated with

stepchildren's adjustment. Correlations that reached the .05 level of statistical significance were reported as evidence in support of the hypotheses. Correlations that reached the .10 level were reported as correlational trends but were not accepted as evidence relevant to the specific hypotheses. The statistically significant correlations and correlational trends are reported below.

A significant correlation was found between parental scores on The O'Leary Porter Scale of Overt Parental Hostility and stepchildren's scores on The Piers-Harris children's Self-concept Scale. Significant correlations were also found between stepchildren's ratings of ex-spousal discord on The Children's Perception Questionnaire and stepchildren's self-concept scores, conduct disorder problems, socialized aggression problems, and attention-immaturity problems. Additional significant correlations were found between parental scores on The Conflict Scale of The Quality of Coparental Communications Scale and stepchildren's self-concept scores and withdrawal-anxiety problems.

Correlational trends were reported between parental scores on The Nonparental Interaction Scale of The Content of Coparental Interactions Scale and The Conduct disorder and Withdrawal-Anxiety Scales of The RBPC. An additional trend was reported for the correlation between parental scores on The Parental Support Scale of The Quality of Coparental Communications Scale and stepchildren's scores on The Withdrawal-Anxiety Scale of The RBPC. A final correlational trend was reported between parental scores on The O'Leary Porter Scale of Overt Parental Hostility and

stepchildren's scores on The Socialized Aggression Scale of The RBPC.

Limitations of the Study

A number of important methodological and practical concerns have direct bearing upon the conclusions and generalizability of this study. It is necessary to examine these concerns in order to facilitate the accurate interpretation of the findings of this study. Two separate but related sets of issues must be kept in mind relative to the study's limitations; those issues that reflect upon the reliability and validity of the study's results and those that reflect upon the generalizability of the study's results to other samples of stepfamilies. In some cases such as sample size the same concern affects both the specific results of the study and the generalizability of those results. A discussion of each of the major limiting factors of this study follows.

The size and composition of the sample used in this study must be seriously considered when interpreting the study's results. While every effort was made to obtain a large, representative sample of stepfamilies for this research, several obstacles were encountered. Identification of stepfamilies proved to be difficult due to the somewhat transient nature of this family type and the reluctance for some families to identify themselves as stepfamilies. This reluctance may have been due to families concerns with being socially stigmatized (Vischer & Vischer, 1988). The requirement that the stepfamilies include a stepchild between

the ages of 8 and 16 and that both biological parents of the child be alive, further limited the number of families identified as appropriate for the study.

In addition to problems identifying stepfamilies sample size was affected by the reluctance of some families to participate in the study. While all stepfamilies contacted about the study initially agreed to participate, nearly 21 percent of those families who were originally contacted failed to complete and return the study questionnaires. Between the problems with identification of stepfamilies and reluctance of some families to participate, the final sample included just 31 stepchildren and 31 parents. While this sample was sufficient to meet the assumptions of the statistical procedures used to analyze the data it was subject to a potentially significant level of sampling error.

Sample composition was affected by the response rate for the study. Even though the lack of response was briefly explained for each of the nonresponding families no statistical assessment was possible to determine if there were important differences between those who did and those who did not respond. Sample composition was further affected by the use of clinically referred families and by the sampling procedure used to identify additional stepfamilies. While snowball or network sampling is commonly employed in cases where the population is especially difficult to identify, it is susceptible to a number of potentially biasing influences. The lack of ethnic minority involvement in the study, for example, is partially explained by the sampling technique used for the study.

While the demographic similarity of the clinic and nonclinic stepfamilies strengthens the claim that the study is representative of a wider population of stepfamilies, the representativeness of the sample remains limited.

The above concerns with sample size and composition dictate that the results of this study be generalized only with extreme caution. As was mentioned above, while the assumptions of the statistical analyses used in the study were met, the relatively small sample size and the snowball sampling technique used introduce a substantial degree of sampling error and result in conclusions that are less reliable than those obtained with larger samples. In other words, the likelihood that this study's findings would be replicated using another sample is compromised by the sampling technique and the sample size.

Though sampling procedures and the composition of the study's sample are the primary limiting factors relevant to this study, several other issues are worthy of attention. All data for the study were obtained using self-report instruments. While the use of self-report measures simplifies data gathering it may reduce the reliability and validity of the data obtained. Self-report instruments such as the ones employed in his study are subject to the influence of what the subject feels is socially appropriate (Borg & Gall, 1989) and may not be a true representation of the variable being measured. Some effort was made in this study to control for the possibility that respondents may be biased in their reporting of their activities by including data from more than one

family member. This procedure, however, did not entirely eliminate the problems associated with the subjective nature of self-report data.

An additional limitation of this study is associated with the specific design of the study. Several stepfamilies noted that the child who participated in the study (the oldest child under age 17) was not the child who had been most significantly influenced by the parental divorce and remarriage. While concerns about which child participated in the study are unfounded (it is equally likely that the most as opposed to the least affected child was included in the study), the study design may have neglected some relevant characteristics of the participating child. The study did not control for birth order, child age at time of divorce or child age at time of remarriage. Each of these variables may be an important element of stepchildren's adjustment.

The last major limitation associated with the study's findings is connected to the use of The Children's Perception Questionnaire as a measure of ex-spousal discord. The questionnaire was originally designed for children whose parents were married and, consequently, some confusion was created when stepchildren were instructed to think of their currently divorced biological parents as they completed the questionnaire. In addition, some parents were concerned that the questionnaire would be disturbing for their children and acted accordingly (three did not participate at all in the study and two simply did not have their children complete the questionnaire). The above concerns with the Children's Perception

Questionnaire suggest that extreme caution should be used when interpreting findings based on this instrument.

In summary, a number of methodological and procedural problems were encountered in conducting this study. These problems all serve to limit the results and conclusions of the study in some way. Of special concern are issues related to sample size and composition. While these problems are significant, they do not necessarily undermine the importance of the study. They do demand careful consideration from researchers and clinicians attempting to generalize the conclusions drawn in this study.

Conclusions

The findings of this study have implications for both the theoretical and the practical understanding of the stepfamily. The following section of this research will discuss these implications and the conclusions that can be drawn from this study. The reader is reminded that each of the following conclusions and implications are directly linked to the results of this study. As a consequence, generalizations based on these conclusions should be approached with the extreme caution suggested in the discussion of the limitations of this study.

The results of this study provide evidence which supports a variety of specific conclusions about stepfamily functioning. Of primary importance, however, is the evidence that certain ex-spousal interactions are related to the self-concept and behavioral adjustment of stepchildren. Based on the analysis of the data

collected for this study, it can be generally concluded that ex-spousal interactions following divorce and remarriage have a significant impact on the adjustment of stepchildren. Each of the specific conclusions relevant to this general conclusion are addressed below.

In accordance with recent research that has implicated ex-spousal interactions as a negative factor in children's adjustment, this study found that conflictual relationships between ex-spouses are related to measures of stepchild adjustment. This finding is unique as it specifically applies to ex-spousal relationships following remarriage and the formation of a stepfamily. Previous findings have been limited to the study of marital and ex-spousal conflict in intact and divorced couples only. The findings of this study suggest that ex-spousal conflict has the potential to adversely influence the adjustment of children even after the initial marital bond has been supplanted by a new marriage.

The specific relationships examined in this study produced evidence that several different aspects of ex-spousal interaction are related to stepchildren's self-concept and behavioral adjustment. As could be predicted from earlier studies of ex-spousal conflict with divorced couples, overt ex-spousal hostility was shown to have an adverse effect on the self-concept of stepchildren. More unexpected, however, was the finding that more subtle elements of ex-spousal conflict were shown to be a significant factor for both stepchildren's self-concept and stepchildren's levels of withdrawal-anxiety. Despite its emphasis

on underlying tension as opposed to overt hostility, the Conflict Scale of The Quality of Ex-spousal Communications Scale was still significantly correlated with two separate measures of stepchildren's adjustment.

That the more subtle aspects of the ex-spousal relationship may be significant in the lives of stepchildren is further evidenced in the finding that stepchild adjustment is significantly correlated with stepchildren's perceptions of ex-spousal discord. Not only were stepchildren's perceptions of discord related to stepchildren's adjustment, the degree of correlation was higher than for any other measures of ex-spousal conflict. The strength of the correlations involving stepchildren's perceptions of ex-spousal discord suggests that the actual presence of conflict may be less significant than the stepchild's perceptions of conflict. This conclusion cannot be wholly supported by the results of this study, however, as no independent verification of the accuracy of stepchildren's perceptions was obtained.

This study did find that increases in stepchild perceptions of discord are associated with lower stepchild self-concept and with increases in stepchildren's problem behaviors in the areas of conduct disorders, socialized aggression, and attention problems-immaturity. These findings indicate that, regardless of the actual presence or absence of ex-spousal conflict, if stepchildren perceive conflict in the ex-spousal relationship they are more likely to exhibit lower levels of adjustment.

There are several possible explanations for the significant associations found in this study between negative ex-spousal interactions and stepchildren's adjustment. Instability and or hostility in the relationship between a child's biological parents may directly impact on the child's sense of self-control and self-esteem. Alternatively, the negative quality of the ex-spousal relationship may limit the stepchild's ability to develop workable relationships within the new stepfamily system. The lack of functioning step-relationships would, in turn, limit the child's ability to get important needs met in the stepfamily.

There are some research findings which support each of the above possibilities. Recent research on marital and ex-spousal discord suggests that it is the long-term exposure to parental conflict and the accompanying disruption in parenting that produces serious negative outcomes for children (Wallerstein, Corbin, & Lewis, 1988). This evidence suggests that children's and stepchildren's adjustment is directly affected by parental discord regardless of the type of family the children reside in. On the other hand, the research of Clingempeel and Segal (1986), Brand and Clingempeel (1987), and Crosbie-Burnett (1984), has consistently pointed to the importance of stepparent-stepchild relationships in stepfamily functioning. If these researchers are correct, the impact of ex-spousal interactions on step-relationships within the stepfamily would appear to be the most efficacious explanation for the association between ex-spousal conflict and stepchild adjustment.

A third possible explanation for the relationships found between ex-spousal conflict and stepchildren's adjustment must also be considered. As our understanding of stepfamilies is very limited it is possible that the relationships found in this study are artifacts of other, as yet unexplored elements of stepfamily dynamics. An examination of the significant correlations that were found between stepchildren's perceptions of ex-spousal discord and stepchildren's adjustment may help to clarify this possibility. It has been established in previous research that children's self-concept and behavior problems influence their perceptions of their parents (Hazzard, Christianson, & Margolin, 1983). If an unidentified variable proves to be the major cause of low self-concept and behavioral problems in stepchildren, and children with low self-concepts and behavioral problems are more likely to perceive their worlds in a negative fashion, then perceptions of ex-spousal discord would be best explained as artifacts of the as yet unidentified variable. While each of the above arguments is plausible, the results of this study do not permit a conclusive statement concerning the causal nature of the relationship between negative ex-spousal interactions and stepchildren's adjustment.

The results of this study support only very tentative conclusions regarding the more positive aspects of the ex-spousal relationship. Unlike previous research that found a positive correlation between nonparental ex-spousal interactions and children's adjustment (McCombs, Forhand, & Brody, 1987), this study found evidence that the opposite may be true. Correlations of $-.25$

or higher were observed between the level of nonparental ex-spousal interaction and stepchildren behaviors associated with conduct disorders, attention problems and withdrawal. The negative value of these correlations indicates that as nonparental interaction increased, behavior problems decreased. The statistical significance associated with the above correlations in the present study reached only the .10 level due to the small size of the study's sample. Consequently, the apparently contradictory findings of this study must be viewed with some skepticism.

Some additional findings, relevant to the demographic variables assessed in this study are significant in light of earlier research. Several previous research reports have argued that family type (stepmother or stepfather) and length of time in a stepfamily are significant variables influencing stepchildren's adjustment. This study found no evidence in support of those claims. Stepchildren's adjustment was not significantly different in stepmother as opposed to stepfather families for any of the measures employed in this study. Study results also showed a lack of significant relationships between measures of stepchildren's adjustment and the length of time the child had been in a stepfamily.

Some significant differences were found in the behavioral adjustment of male and female stepchildren in this study. Male stepchildren in this study were found to exhibit more behavioral problems associated with conduct disorders and attentional problems-immaturity than did females. This finding is dissimilar to

previous studies that have suggested girls are more severely affected by parental divorce and remarriage than are boys. Moreover, no evidence was found that stepchildren's adjustment was affected by an interaction between gender and family type as was reported by Brand and Clingempeel (1987).

It was hoped that, by statistically analyzing the differences in ex-spousal interaction and stepchildren's adjustment according to the stepfamilies' status as clinically referred versus nonclinically referred, additional information about the therapeutic needs of stepfamilies would be found. This hope was not realized. As could be expected the stepchildren from the clinical sample reported significantly lower self-concepts and significantly more behavior problems than their counterparts from the nonclinical sample. Differences in ex-spousal interaction patterns between the clinic and nonclinic families, however, were not found. Only in the case of stepchildren's perceptions of ex-spousal discord was there a significant difference between clinic and nonclinic families. This finding, as was mentioned earlier is difficult to interpret as it is equally plausible that the stepchild's adjustment produced the perceptions of discord as it is that the discord produced the reduced levels of adjustment.

The most important theoretical implication of this study was that members of the stepfamily are significantly affected by the ex-spousal relationship. This relationship extends beyond the traditional boundaries of the one household stepfamily system. The evidence that negative ex-spousal interactions are a factor in poor

stepchild adjustment suggests that a workable model of stepfamily structure must include roles for ex-spouses and the ex-spousal subsystem. If such a model was explored for theoretical implications a plausible explanation for the findings of this study might include the following: when ex-spousal conflict is present, the definition of clear parental and ex-spousal roles and the establishment of meaningful boundaries in the stepfamily system is compromised. The lack of such roles and boundaries would then undermine the functioning of the stepfamily and produce adjustment problems for stepchildren.

The lack of a significant correlation between Coparental interactions and stepchildren's adjustment suggests that the specific content of ex-spousal roles is not as important as the communication and cooperation necessary to clearly define those roles. Significant correlations between various measures of ex-spousal conflict and certain measures of stepchildren's adjustment provide evidence that it is the manner in which ex-spouses relate to each other, rather than the subject matter communicated, that is most important to stepchildren. As was mentioned in the theoretical rationale for this work, without cooperation and communication, family subsystems become disengaged and function at odds with one another and the goals of the family. This disengagement may be descriptive of stepfamilies where ex-spousal interactions remain conflicted.

The theoretical implications discussed above represent a limited assessment of one possible interpretation of this study's

findings from the perspective of structural family theory. They are not conclusive arguments and should not be viewed as such. What is more certain, based on this study's findings, is that attempts to assess the functioning of the stepfamily will require a more complex structural framework that broadens the stepfamily boundaries to include ex-spousal and coparental subsystems. This framework should address the appropriate roles and boundaries of each of these subsystems as they relate to the goals and objectives of the entire stepfamily system.

Implications for Future Research

The results of this study have established the importance of the ex-spousal and coparental relationships as important elements of the stepfamily system. The findings of this study also provide some specific indications of what types of ex-spousal interactions are most significant in the lives of stepchildren. In spite of the meaningful additions to the stepfamily literature made by this study, however, a plethora of questions remain unanswered. The following section of this work will briefly address those questions and provide suggestions for future research.

As was alluded to in the discussion of the findings of this study, the design of this study precluded the identification of specific causal mechanisms that explain healthy and/or unhealthy adjustment in stepchildren. The correlations between ex-spousal interactions and stepchildren's adjustment may be the result of a direct, causal relationship or they may be the result of an as yet

unexplored web of interrelated variables. The present study does not provide evidence relevant to the exact nature of the relationship.

The significant correlations between ex-spousal interactions and stepchildren's adjustment reported in this exploratory study establishes the need for more specific and controlled experimental research in the area of ex-spousal interactions. Causal-comparative and experimental designs isolating the effects of ex-spousal interactions on stepchild adjustment are needed. Only with these, more controlled, research efforts can the parameters of the relationships found in this study be determined.

One of the major shortcomings of the present study was its cross-sectional design. Because it relied on data gathered at a single point in time, this study was unable to assess variables associated with children's developmental stages. In the same vein, the study was not able to address the impact of parental and ex-spousal interactions on stepchildren's long-term adjustment. There is a need for longitudinal studies that include ongoing assessments of the role and consequences of ex-spousal interactions throughout the process of divorce and remarriage. Only with this type of investigation can the complex relationships between parents, ex-spouses, stepparents, children, and stepchildren be understood.

As has been the case in the majority of the research conducted on stepfamilies, this study was limited by its sample size. A variety of issues need to be confronted if stepfamily research is to escape the limitations of small, nonrandom, convenience samples.

The first issue is the negative social stigma often felt by stepfamilies. Unless research and education can help to normalize the experiences of stepfamilies, sampling will continue to be plagued by a reluctant population of subjects. A second issue is the lack of any consistent and reliable means for the identification of stepfamilies in the population. Currently, court records are the only publicly available source of information on remarriages and the formation of stepfamilies. Unfortunately, the transient nature of the stepfamily population often demands that extensive funding and time commitments be made to track families who may not be willing to be studied. Identification of an accessible population of stepfamilies, willing to be studied, is an ongoing concern for future research in this area.

In addition to the sampling problems that have hindered stepfamily research, a variety of methodological and procedural problems are in need of more attention from future researchers. One of the most pressing problems is the lack of valid and reliable measurement devices designed specifically for the stepfamily population. Many of the measurement tools currently in use were designed for use with intact families or divorced couples and have been adapted for use with stepfamilies without adequate validation or reliability data. More significantly, many of the most interesting aspects of the stepfamily are unique to this family type and have never been assessed in any objective manner. The need for psychometrically sound research instruments for the measurement of relevant stepfamily characteristics is urgent.

One final area of concern for future research on stepfamily functioning is the lack of independent ratings for important variables. Most research has relied on self-report data collected from only one member of the stepfamily. This study attempted to address the problem of purely subjective responses by collecting data from more than one stepfamily member. In spite of this precaution, the results were still compromised by the subjective nature of self-report data. Future research efforts need to develop new and creative means for obtaining independent and objective data on the stepfamily. The current research base has relied too heavily on questionnaires addressing how stepfamilies perceive themselves and has neglected efforts to verify those perceptions.

**APPENDIX A
CONSENT FORMS**

AN INVESTIGATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
THE QUALITY AND QUANTITY OF EX-SPOUSAL INTERACTION
AND THE BEHAVIORAL AND EMOTIONAL ADJUSTMENT OF STEPCHILDREN

CONSENT FORM

This form describes the research project you are being asked to participate in. Please read the form carefully to insure that you understand the purpose of the research and the demands that will be made of all volunteer subjects. When you have read the entire form please sign the section marked "Informed and Voluntary Consent to Participate" if you are willing to participate in the research. While a separate form will be provided for your child's signature, your signature on this form will include parental consent for your child's participation. Only children with both personal and parental consent will be included in the study.

Purpose of the Research

The research you are being asked to participate in is designed to explore the relationships between a child's adjustment in a stepfamily system and the interactions between the child's biological parents. The research is important for stepfamilies and their children as it may help both families and mental health professionals understand some of the factors which influence children's ability to adapt to stepfamily life.

Amount of Time Involved for Subjects

The research you have been asked to participate in will require approximately one hour of time from you and approximately one half hour of time from your participating child. All Questionnaires will be hand delivered and collected by the researcher at a date and time that is agreeable to you.

Risk Involved in Participation

The research you are being asked to participate in will not involve any physical risk for subjects. While every effort has been made to minimize possible psychological distress that may result from this study the sensitive nature of some of the research questions may be stressful for research subjects. If distress does occur debriefing and, if necessary, referral sources may be obtained from the researcher or his sponsor whose names and addresses are provided elsewhere on this form.

Assurance of Confidentiality

All information collected from you as a participant in the proposed research will be identified using only a numeric code to insure the confidentiality of your responses. Only the researcher will have access to individual information collected and no individual responses will be identified in the final report of this study.

Assurance of Voluntary Participation

Only those persons who provide written consent to participate by signing this consent form will be included in the study. As a volunteer you may withdraw in part or whole at any time and/or refuse to answer some or all questions. Refusal to participate in part or in whole will not result in any penalty, bias, or loss of benefits.

Availability of Research Results

If you would like to receive a copy of the results of this research when it is completed, they will be available upon request from either:

Bradley L. Elison, Researcher
5005 King William Road
Richmond, Virginia 23225
(804) 232-0310

or,
Fred L. Adair, Ph.D., Sponsor
Professor of Education
School of Education
College of William and Mary
Williamsburg, Virginia 23185
(804) 221-2321

Informed Voluntary Consent to Participate

I have been fully informed of the purpose of the study described above and the demands that will be made of me as a participant. I have also been informed of my right to withdraw in whole or in part at any time without penalty or bias. My signature below indicates both my willingness to participate in the study and my permission for the child listed to be included in the study.

Child's Name

Subject's Signature

Researcher's Signature

Date

Date

Children's Consent Form

You and your parent have been asked to take part in a study about children and parents who live in stepfamilies. The study will try to find out some of the things that make having divorced parents and living in stepfamilies hard for some children. If you agree to be in the study you will be asked questions about yourself and your family. The questions will be written down and will take about thirty minutes for you to answer. The answers you give will not be shared with anyone other than the researcher. Your answer sheets will have numbers on them instead of names so that no one will know which answers are yours. You will only be asked to answer questions if you agree to be in the study and you may change your mind and decide not to be in the study at any time. You may also decide not to answer some or all of the questions you are asked. There will be no penalty for you or your parent should you decide not to participate or not to answer some questions. If you understand what you are being asked to do and agree to be in the study please sign your name below. Remember, even if you sign your name you can decide not to be in the study at any time.

Subject's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

APPENDIX B
QUESTIONNAIRES

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Please answer the following questions pertaining to you and your family as accurately as possible. Feel free to collaborate with other family members if necessary on this portion of the questionnaire.

1. Your age _____
 2. Your gender (Male/Female)
 3. Your ethnic background (Caucasian, Black, Hispanic, Asian, other)
 4. Age of child participating in the study with you _____
 5. Gender of child participating in the study with you (Male/Female)
 6. Date of your first marriage (mo/yr) _____
 7. Number of children from your first marriage _____
 8. Date of the divorce ending your first marriage (mo/yr) _____
 9. Date of marriage to your current spouse (mo/yr) _____
 10. Has your current spouse been previously married (yes/no)
 11. Does your current spouse have children from a previous marriage (Yes/no)
 12. Number of children from your current marriage _____
 13. Number of children who maintain their primary residence in your home at the present time _____
 14. Has your former spouse remarried (yes/No/Don't know)
 15. Please list any counseling and/or support services you, your family, or your child have received to help in your adjustment to the stepfamily _____
-

PLEASE NOTE

Copyrighted materials in this document have not been filmed at the request of the author. They are available for consultation, however, in the author's university library.

122-130

University Microfilms International

**APPENDIX C
CORRESPONDENCE**

Dear Mr/Ms _____,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the stepfamily research described below and in the inclosed consent forms. The time and energy you and your child volunteer for this study will be greatly appreciated. The following packet contains a number of forms and questionnaires, each of which is vital to the research being conducted.

The first two forms describe the study and request the participation of you and your child in the study. Please read these forms carefully and sign them in the appropriate spaces if you and your child are willing to be involved in the study. The child who participates with you should be your oldest biological child between the ages of 8 and 16.

The next form is a demographic questionnaire that asks you for some background information about your family. Simply answer these questions as accurately as possible. You may seek help from other family members on this portion of the research.

The last two portions of the packet are research questionnaires for you and your son. These sections include brief directions for completion. The second children's questionnaire has been confusing for some children as it refers to parental behavior and often the child sees only one parent regularly. If your child has questions of this nature please advise them to think about the parent they live with when responding. If the confusion persists simply leave this questionnaire blank as it is a secondary part of the study.

When you have completed the forms and questionnaires please return them to the pre-addressed stamped envelope and drop them in the mail at your convenience. Again, thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Bradley L. Elison
5005 King William Rd.
Richmond, Va. 23225
(804) 232-0310

PARENT QUESTIONNAIRES

Instructions

Each of the following questionnaires are to be filled out by the biological parent of the child participating in the study without the help or input of any other person.

The questionnaires should be completed in the order in which they are presented.

Please read and follow the instructions for each questionnaire carefully.

Please review your answers after completing the questions to make sure you have not missed any.

Consider all types of communication between you and your ex-spouse including phone conversations, letters, face-to face discussions etc. when answering the questions.

Even if you have not communicated with your ex-spouse at all during the past few years please attempt to answer all questions using the "never" response as appropriate.

CHILD QUESTIONNAIRES

Instructions

Each of the following questionnaires is to be filled out by the the child participating in the study without the help or input of any other person.

The questionnaires should be done in the order in which they are given to you.

Please read and follow the instructions carefully for each questionnaire.

Please check your answers after you are done to make sure you have not missed any questions.

Even if you have not seen or heard from your mom or dad at all during the past few years please try to answer all questions as well as you can.

Thank you for your help in this project.

References

- Ahrons, C. R. (1979). The binuclear family: Two households, one family. Alternative Lifestyles 2 (4), 499-515.
- Ahrons, C. R. (1981). The continuing coparental relationship between divorced spouses. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry 51 (3), 415-428.
- Ahrons, C. R. (1983). Predictors of paternal involvement postdivorce: Mother's and father's perceptions. Journal of Divorce, 6(3), 55-69.
- Ahrons, C. R. & Perlmutter, M. S. (1982). The relationship between former spouses: A fundamental subsystem in the remarriage family. In J. Hansen and L. Messinger (Eds.) Therapy With Remarriage Families (pp. 32-46). Rockville Md.: Aspen Systems.
- Ahrons, C. R. & Wallisch, L. (1987). Parenting in the binuclear family: Relationships between biological and stepparents. In K. Pasley and M. Ihinger-Tallman (Eds.) Remarriage and Stepparenting: Current Research and Theory (pp. 225-256). New York: Guilford Press.
- Albrecht, S. L. (1979). Correlates of marital happiness among the remarried. Journal of Marriage and the Family 41, 857-867.
- Amato, P. R., & Ochiltree, G. (1987). Child and adolescent competence in intact, one parent, and step-families: An australian study. Journal of Divorce, 10 (3/4), 75-96.
- Anderson, J. Z., & White, G. D. (1986). An empirical investigation of interaction and relationship patterns in functional and dysfunctional nuclear families and stepfamilies. Family Process 25 407-422.
- Bertalanffy, L. V. von. (1968) General system Theory. New York: Braziller.
- Bishop, S. M., & Ingersoll, G. M. (1989). Effects of marital conflict and family structure on the self-concepts of pre- and early adolescents. Journal of youth and adolescence, 18(1), 25-38.
- Borg, W. R. & Gall, M. D. (1989). Educational Research: An Introduction 5th Ed. New York: Longman.

- Boyd, D. A., & Parish, T. S. (1985). An examination of academic achievement in light of familial configuration. Education, 106(2), 228-230.
- Brady, C., Bray, J. H., & Zeeb, L. (1986). Behavior problems of clinic children: Relation to parental marital status, age, and sex of child. American journal of Orthopsychiatry, 56, (3), (339-412).
- Brand, E., & Clingempeel, W. G. (1987). Interdependencies of marital and stepparent-stepchild relationships and children's psychological adjustment: research findings and clinical implications. Family Relations 36, 140-145.
- Brand, E., Clingempeel, W. G., & Bowen-Woodward, K. (1988). Family relationships and children's psychological adjustment in stepmother and stepfather families. In E. M. Hetherington and J. D. Arasteh (Eds.) Impact of divorce, single parenting, and stepparenting on children (pp. 299-344). Hillsdale, NJ.: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Bray, J. H., & Berger, S. H. (1990). Noncustodial father and paternal grandparent relationships in stepfamilies. Family Relations, 39(4), 414-419.
- Buehler, C., & Trotter, B. B. (1990). Nonresidential and residential parents' perceptions of the former spouse relationship and children's social competence following marital separation: Theory and programmed intervention. Family relations, 39(4), 395-404.
- Camara, K. A., & Resnick, G. (1988). Interparental conflict and cooperation: factors moderating children's post-divorce adjustment. In E. M. Hetherington and J. D. Arasteh (Eds.) Impact of divorce, single parenting, and stepparenting on children (pp. 169-195). Hillsdale, NJ.: Lawrence Erlbaum
- Cancelli, A. A. (1985) Review of the Revised behavior Checklist. In O. K. Buros (Ed.) Ninth Mental Measurements Yearbook, Highland Park, NJ.: Grypon.
- Cherlin, A. (1978). Remarriage as an incomplete institution. American Journal of Sociology 84 (3), 634-650.
- Christensen, A., Phillips, S., Glasgow, R. E., & Johnson, S. M. (1983). Parental characteristics and interactional dysfunction in families with child behavior problems: A preliminary investigation. Journal of abnormal child psychology, 11(1), 153-166.

- Clingempeel, W. G. (1981). Quasi-Kin relationships and marital quality in stepfather families. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 41 (5), 890-901.
- Clingempeel, W. G., & Brand, E. (1985). Quasi-Kin relationships, structural complexity and marital quality in stepfamilies: A replication, extension, and clinical implications. Family Relations, 34, 401-409.
- Clingempeel, W. G., Brand, E., & Ievoli, R. (1984). Stepparent-stepchild relationships in stepmother and stepfather families: a multimethod study. Family Relations 33, 465-473.
- Clingempeel, W. G., Brand, E., & Segal, S. (1987) A multilevel-multivariable-developmental perspective for future research on stepfamilies. In K. Pasley and M. Ihinger-Tallman (Eds.). Remarriage and Stepparenting: Current Research and Theory (pp. 65-93). New York: Guilford Press.
- Clingempeel, W. G., Ievoli, R., & Brand, E. (1984). Structural complexity and the quality of stepfather-stepchild relationships. Family process, 23, 547-560.
- Clingempeel, W. G., & Segal, S. (1986). Stepparent-stepchild relationships and the psychological adjustment of children in stepmother and stepfather families. Child Development 57 474-484.
- Coleman, M., & Ganong, L. H. (1990). Remarriage and stepfamily research in the 1980s: Increased interest in an old family form. Journal of marriage and the family, 52(4), 925-940.
- Crosbie-Burnett, M. (1984). The centrality of the step relationship: A challenge to family theory and practice. Family Relations 33, 459-463.
- Duberman, L. (1975). The Reconstituted Family: A Study of Remarried Couples and Their Children. Chicago: Nelson Hall.
- Emery, R. E. (1982). Interparental conflict and the children of discord and divorce. Psychological Bulletin 92 (2), 310-330.
- Emery, R. E., & O'Leary, K.D. (1982). Children's perceptions of marital discord and behavior problems of boys and girls. Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 10(1) 11-24.
- Epstein, J. H. (1985). Review of Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale. In O.K. Buros (Ed.), Ninth mental measurements Yearbook. Highland Park, NJ.: Gryphon.

- Ferreiro, B. W. (1990). Presumption of joint custody: A family policy dilemma. Family relations, 39(4), 420-426.
- Fishel, A. H., & Scanzoni, J. (1990). An exploratory study of the post-divorce coparental relationship. Journal of divorce, 13(2), 95-119.
- Forehand, Long, & Brody (1988). Divorce and marital conflict: relationship to adolescent competence and adjustment in early adolescence. In E. M. Hetherington and J. D. Arasteh (Eds.). Impact of divorce, single parenting, and stepparenting on children (pp. 155-167). Hillsdale NJ.: Lawrence Erlbaum
- Forehand, R., & McCombs, A. (1989). The nature of interparental conflict of married and divorced parents: Implications for young adolescents. Journal of abnormal child psychology, 17(2), 235-249.
- Furstenberg, F. F. (1987). The new extended family: The experience of parents and children after remarriage. In K. Pasley and M. Ihinger-Tallman (Eds.) Remarriage and Stepparenting: Current Research and Theory (pp. 42-61). New York: Guilford Press.
- Furstenberg, F. F. (1988). Child care after divorce and remarriage. In E. M. Hetherington and J. D. Arasteh (Eds.) Impact of divorce single parenting, and stepparenting on children (pp. 245-261). Hillsdale NJ.: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Ganong, L. H., & Coleman, M. (1984). The effects of remarriage on children: A review of the literature. Family Relations 33, 389-406.
- Ganong, L. H., & Coleman, M. (1987). Effects of parental remarriage on children: an updated comparison of theories, methods, and findings from clinical and empirical research. In K. Pasley and M. Ihinger-Tallman (Eds.) Remarriage and the Stepfamily: Current Research and Theory (pp. 94-140). New York: Guilford press.
- Giles-Sims, J., & Crosbie-Burnett, M. (1989). Stepfamily research: Implications for policy, clinical interventions, and further research. Family Relations 38, 19-33.
- Glick, P. C. (1989). Remarried families, stepfamilies, and stepchildren: A brief demographic profile. Family relations, 38(1), 24-27.
- Glick, P. S., & Lin, S. Recent changes in divorce and remarriage. Journal of Marriage and the Family 48, 737-747.

- Grossman, S. M., Shea, J. A., & Adams, G. R. (1980). Effects of parental divorce during early childhood on ego development and identity formation of college students. Journal of divorce, 3(3), 263-272.
- Hazzard, A., Christianson, A., & Margolin, G. (1983). Children's perceptions of parental behavior. Journal of abnormal child psychology 11(1), 49-60.
- Hetherington, E. M. (1979). Divorce: A child's perspective. American Psychologist 34 (10), 851-858.
- Hetherington, E. M. (1987). Family relations six years after divorce. In K. Pasley and M. Ihinger-Tallman (Eds.) Remarriage and the Stepfamily: Current Research and Theory (pp. 185-205). New York: Guilford press.
- Hetherington, E. M. (1989). Coping with family transitions: winners losers, and survivors. Child development, 60(1), 1-14.
- Hetherington, E. M., Cox, M., & Cox, R. (1982). Effects of divorce on parents and children. In M. Lamb (Ed.) Nontraditional families (pp. 233-288) Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Hetherington, E. M., Stanley-Hagen, M., & Anderson, E. R. (1989). Marital Transitions: A child's perspective. American Psychologist 44 (2), 302-312.
- Hobart, C. (1989) Experiences of remarried families. Journal of divorce, 13(2), 121-141.
- Jacobson, D. S. (1987) Family type, visiting patterns, and children's behavior in the stepfamily: a linked family system. In K. Pasley & M. Ihinger-Tallman (Eds.), Remarriage and the stepfamily: current research and theory (pp.257-272). New York: Guilford Press.
- Johnston, J. R. (1990). Role diffusion and role reversal: structural variations in divorced families and children's functioning. Family relations, 39(4), 405-413.
- Kline, M., Johnston, J. R., & Tschann, J. M. (1991). The long shadow of marital conflict: A model of children's post-divorce adjustment. Journal of marriage and the family, 53(2), 297-309.
- Long, B. H. (1986). Parental discord vs family structure: Effects of divorce on the self-esteem of daughters. Journal of youth and adolescence, 15(1), 19-27.

- Maccoby, E. E., Depner, C. E., & Mnookin, R. H. (1990). Coparenting in the second year after divorce. Journal of marriage and the family, 52(1), 141-155.
- Masheter, C. (1991). Postdivorce relationships between ex-spouses: The roles of attachment and interpersonal conflict. Journal of marriage and the family, 53(1), 103-110.
- McCombs, A., Forehand, R., & Brody, G. H. (1987). Early adolescent functioning following divorce: the relationship to parenting and non-parenting ex-spousal interactions. Child study journal 17 (4), 301-310.
- Minuchin, S. (1974). Families and family therapy. Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press.
- Minuchin, S. & Fishman, H. C. (1981). Family therapy techniques. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.
- Minuchin, S., Montalvo, B., Guerney, B. G., Rosman, B. L., & Schumer, F. (1967). Families of the slums. New York: Basic Books.
- Parish, T. S. (1987). Children's self concepts: are they affected by parental divorce and remarriage. Journal of social behavior and personality, 2(4), 559-562.
- Pasley, K. (1987). Family boundary ambiguity: Perceptions of adult stepfamily members. In K. Pasley and M. Ihinger-Tallman (Eds.). Remarriage and stepparenting: Current research and theory (pp. 206-224). New York: Guilford Press.
- Pasley, K., & Healow, C. L. (1988). Adolescent self-esteem: a focus on children in stepfamilies. In E. M. Hetherington and J. D. Arasteh (Eds.) Impact of divorce, single parenting, and stepparenting on children (pp. 263-278). Hillsdale, NJ.: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Pasley, K., & Ihinger-Tallman, M. (1982). Stress in second families Family perspective, 16, 181-196.
- Peterson, J. L., & Zill, N. (1986). marital disruption, parent-child relationships, and behavior problems in children. Journal of marriage and the family, 48(2), 295-307.
- Pietrointo, A. (1985). Effect of unhappy marriages on children. Medical aspects of sexuality 19 (2), 173-181.
- Porter, B., & O'Leary, K. D. (1980). Marital discord and childhood behavior problems. Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 8(3), 287-295.

- Quay, H. C., & Peterson, D. R. (1979). Manual for the Behavior Problem Checklist. (Available from D. R. Peterson, 39 North Fifth, Highland Park, New Jersey 08904.
- Roberts, T. W., & Price, S. J. (1989). Adjustment to remarriage: Communication, cohesion, marital and parental roles. Journal of divorce, 13(1), 17-43.
- Sager, C., Brown, H., Crohn, H., Engel, T., Rodstein, E., & Walker, L. (1983). Treating the remarried family. New York: Bruner/mazel.
- Steinman, S. (1981). The experience of children in a joint-custody arrangement: A report of a study. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry 51 (3), 403-414.
- Stolberg, A. L., & Bush, J. B. (1985). A path analysis of factors predicting children's divorce adjustment. Journal of Clinical Child Psychology 14(1), 49-54.
- Stolberg, A. L., Camplair, C., Currier, K., & Wells, M. J. (1987). Individual, familial and environmental determinants of children's post-divorce adjustment and maladjustment. Journal of Divorce, 11(1), 51-70.
- Vischer, E. B., & Vischer, J. S. (1988). Old loyalties new ties: Therapeutic strategies with stepfamilies. New York: Bruner/Mazel.
- Wallerstein, J. S., Corbin, S. B., & Lewis, J. M. (1988) Children of divorce a 10-year study. In E. M. Hetherington and J. D. Arasteh (Eds.). Impact of divorce, single parenting, and Stepparenting on children (pp. 197-214). Hillsdale, NJ.: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Wallerstein, J. S., & Kelly, J. B. (1980). Surviving the breakup: how children and parents cope with divorce. New York: Basic Books.
- Walsh, P. E., & Stolberg, A. L. (1989). Parental and environmental determinants of children's behavioral, affective and cognitive adjustment to divorce. Journal of Divorce, 12(2/3), 265-282.
- Walsh, W. M. (1981). A primer in family therapy. Springfield, Il.: Charles C. Thomas.
- White, L. K., & Booth, A. (1985). The quality and stability of remarriages: the role of stepchildren. American Sociological Review, 50, 689-698.

- Vuchinich, S., Hetherington, E. M., Vuchinich, R. A., & Clingempeel, W. G. (1991). parent-child interaction and gender differences in early adolescents' adaptation to stepfamilies. Developmental psychology, 27(4), 618-626.
- Zill, N. (1988). Behavior, achievement, and health problems among children in stepfamilies. In E. M. Hetherington and J. D. Arasteh (Eds.). Impact of divorce, single parenting, and stepparenting on children (pp. 325-367). Hillsdale, NJ.: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Zimiles, H., & Lee, V. E. (1991). Adolescent family structure and educational progress. Developmental psychology, 27(2), 314-320.

Vita

Bradley Lawrence Ellison

Date of Birth: December 1, 1960

Birthplace: Saline, Michigan

Education

- 1986-1992 College of William and Mary, Williamsburg,
Virginia.
Master of Education
Education Specialist
Doctor of Education
- 1979-1983 Whitman College, Walla Walla, Washington.
Bachelor of Arts (Psychology)

Professional Experience

- 1992-Present J Sargeant Reynolds Community College,
Western Campus
Richmond, Va. 23261
Adjunct Faculty
- 1988-1991 PACES Family Counseling Center
College of William and Mary
Williamsburg, Va. 23185
Director/Family Counselor
- 1988-Summer Center For Gifted Education Phoenix
Program
College of William and Mary
Williamsburg, Va. 23185
Residential Director
- 1987-1989 College of William and Mary School of
Education
Williamsburg, Va. 23185
Graduate Assistant
- 1984-1986 Shodair Adolescent Hospital Chemical
Dependency Unit
Helena, Montana 59601
Counselor, Charge Counselor
- 1983-1984 Petaluma Family Life Center
Petaluma, California
Counselor

Abstract

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CONTENT AND QUALITY OF EX-SPOUSAL INTERACTIONS AND THE ADJUSTMENT OF STEPCHILDREN: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

Bradley L. Elison, Ed.D.

The College of William and Mary in Virginia, March 1992

Chairman: Fred L. Adair, Ph.D.

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between ex-spousal interactions following remarriage and the behavioral and emotional adjustment of stepchildren. The subjects for the study were volunteers and were recruited for the study either through The PACES Family Counseling Center at The College of William and Mary or through a networking sampling procedure. The study participants included stepchildren between the ages of 8 and 16, and their residential biological parents.

Thirty-one stepchild/biological-parent pairs participated in the study by completing a series of questionnaires relevant to ex-spousal interactions and children's adjustment. Ex-spousal interactions were assessed using The Content of Coparental Interactions scale, The Quality of Coparental Communications Scale, and The O'Leary-Porter Overt Hostility Scale. Stepchildren's adjustment was measured using The Revised Behavior Problem Checklist and The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale. Stepchildren's perceptions of the ex-spousal relationship were assessed using The Children's Perception Questionnaire.

Measures of the content and quality of ex-spousal interactions were statistically analyzed to determine if, and to what extent, they were associated with measures of stepchildren's adjustment. Partial correlation procedures were employed to control for the influence of selected demographic variables in the relationships under investigation. Statistically significant correlations were found between ex-spousal conflict and/or hostility and the self-concept and behavioral adjustment of stepchildren. The highest correlations obtained were between stepchildren's perceptions of ex-spousal discord and stepchildren's adjustment measures.

The results of the study suggest that ex-spousal interactions are a significant factor in children's adjustment even after parental remarriage and the establishment of a stepfamily system. Findings also suggest that stepchildren's perception of ex-spousal discord may be the key determinant in the effect ex-spousal interactions have on stepchildren's self-concept and behavior. The implications of the significant findings of this study are discussed within the context of Structural Family Therapy Theory.