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Protector and friend: Turning points and discursive constructions of the stepparent role

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Abstract

Objective: To understand turning points (TPs) in the development of positive step-
parent-stepchild communication and relationships.

Background: Scholars stress the importance of communication in co-constructing
healthy stepparent-stepchild relationships. The researchers focused on posi-
tive stepparenting via understanding transformational turning point (TP) events
across time. Research questions explored how stepparents with an overall posi-
tive relationship with a stepchild characterize TPs and the discursive construc-
tions of the stepparent role.

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Method: The team analyzed 877 pages of data from 37 in-depth interviews with stepparents who described self-identified TP events, reflected in visual graphs of 279 TPs.

Results: Data were coded into 11 TP types, focused on structural and role changes for stepparents, co-constructed over time. The top three TP types were changes in household composition, communicating support through offering protection and being present/available, and role change, most frequently by functioning as a parent versus friend. All the TPs highlight discursive work to forge positive stepparenting roles.

Conclusions: The findings extend earlier studies of stepchildren's experiences and communication practices that ground resilience to manage relational resources through investments of quality time and enactment of social support. Implications: Applications suggest support for stepparents to have quality interactions with stepchildren and training to develop healthy communication practices and facilitate resilience.

Keywords: family communication and interaction, parent-child relationships, qualitative: discourse/narrative analysis, remarriage and stepfamily, resilience

Scholars, clinicians, and lay authors have focused on understanding stepfamily relationships over the past 20 years, addressing challenges these families encounter (e.g., Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Papernow, 2013). Understanding stepfamily challenges is important, as they have become a prevalent family form in the 21st century. The Pew Research Center (2015) reported that less than half (46%) of children in the United States are living in first marriage, two-parent households and 16% live in a stepfamily at a given time.

Researchers have documented numerous internal stepfamily challenges, including conflicting expectations, loyalty divides, and role ambiguity, especially for stepparents who may lack the awareness, knowledge, or skills to effectively navigate the turbulent waters of stepparent-stepchild communication (e.g., Afifi, 2003; Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Many stepparents find it particularly difficult to manage inherent contradictions of the stepparent-child relationship, such as closeness and distance. Stepparents may face expectations to form relationships with their stepchildren and may desire this themselves, while their stepchildren or partner may prefer them to have more reserved or detached relationships (Baxter et al., 2004). Struggles over the stepparent role are also located externally, as stepparents are nested within, and often caught between, larger family networks of partners, nonresidential parents, biological siblings, stepsiblings,

and external family members, all of whom may influence expectations and roles (DiVerniero, 2013; Ganong & Coleman, 2017).

Researchers' proclivity to focus on stepfamily deficits sometimes results in them missing opportunities to focus on stepfamilies that successfully address their challenges and thrive. Although stepfamilies differ across structures and experiences, Papernow (2013) argued, "strong stepfamilies face the same challenges as struggling ones do. It is *how* stepfamilies meet challenges that determines their success" (p. 24, emphasis in original). Thus, some contemporary researchers have stressed the importance of stepfamily adaptation and positive relational development. For example, Schrodt (2006) found that stepchildren from bonded and functional stepfamilies (with higher levels of involvement, flexibility, and expressiveness) experienced fewer mental health symptoms and perceived higher levels of competence regarding their parent and stepparent. Baxter et al. (2004) argued the importance for all members of the stepfamily to "put forth efforts toward affinity seeking and maintenance, both at the beginning of stepfamily life and especially over time as the family develops" (p. 462). Although stepfamilies have different needs across time, Baxter et al. (1999) cautioned against simple answers that call for stepfamilies to enact specific behaviors at particular stages in stepfamily development.

Scholars have stressed the important role of stepparent communication in the success of the entire stepfamily and especially in the stepparent-stepchild dyad (Braithwaite et al., 2022). Stepparents who adopt a warm and authoritative parenting style experience better outcomes. For example, Ganong et al. (2019) provided evidence that stepparent affinity-seeking behavior improves relational quality. In contrast, Papernow (2018) noted that stepparents are disadvantaged when they take on disciplinary roles and advised "connection not correction" (p. 37). Schrodt et al. (2008) identified relational consequences of stepparents and stepchildren engaging in everyday talk, and Waldron et al. (2018) saw the positive role of communicating forgiveness in resilient stepparent-stepchild relationships. We contend that scholars should continue to explore how positive stepfamilies interact and co-construct adaptive, successful family identity, focusing specifically on the key role of the stepparent. Thus, our central purpose was to understand the development of positive stepparent-stepchild interaction and relationships.

Discursive Co-Construction of Stepfamily Developmental Processes

We centered our study in a perspective that calls focus to how communication contributes to how families are created, enacted, resisted, and changed in social interaction (Baxter, 2014). Galvin (2014) explained that families located outside traditional structures and norms are “discourse-dependent” (p. 29), meaning they lack cultural models from which to develop and enact roles and expectations and require additional communicative labor to create and validate the family, internally and externally. As such, our study extends existing research on “discursive constructions” of familial roles, meaning researchers focus on how discourse and communication create social meanings. The current study focused on the ways in which familial roles, specifically that of a stepparent, are constituted, established, and co-constructed or negotiated in and through discourse between a stepchild and stepparent.

Researchers most often gain a snapshot of family life at one particular point in time as data are collected, leaving an incomplete picture of family development and enactment over the years (Braithwaite et al., 2022). Papernow (2013) recommended a process view of stepfamilies, especially as most take at least 2 years to experience equilibrium and 4 years to achieve a state of stability, if this does occur. In addition, stepfamily researchers have devoted more efforts to understanding the formative stages and less focus on understanding stepfamilies once they have stabilized and how they unfolded over time (e.g., Baxter et al., 1999; Golish, 2003). Although longitudinal studies of families are rare, some scholars gravitate toward methodologies that can capture family development over time—for example, identifying relational stages of stepfamily life, such as acceptance and changing trajectories (e.g., Ganong et al., 2011; Papernow, 2013). Other scholars have turned to less linear approaches, such as understanding relational turning points (TPs). A TP is a “transformative event that alters a relationship in some important way, either positively or negatively” (Baxter et al., 1999, p. 294).

A small number of stepfamily scholars have found merit in gathering participant-generated accounts of TPs that shape and reflect how

families navigate change. For example, Graham (1997) studied TPs in postdivorce relationships with implications for coparental functioning. Baxter et al. (1999) interviewed parents, stepparents, and stepchildren about the first 4 years of the stepfamily, categorizing 15 primary TP types and identifying five developmental trajectories. Nuru and Wang (2017) studied TP types in the experiences of children in cohabiting stepfamilies. Braithwaite et al. (2018) focused on the development of resilience in overall positive stepfamilies, from the perspective of adult (over age 25) stepchildren's sense-making of how their stepfamily relationships developed over time. They labeled "pro-social acts" (see also Baxter et al., 1999; Braithwaite et al., 2018) as those TPs in which a parent performed acts of kindness or gift offering. TPs of this kind, as well as the TP of spending "quality time," accounted for a third of all TPs. This result suggested that stepchildren value generosity, including the gift of time. Although focusing on the perspective of stepchildren is certainly important, our first goal in the present study was to understand interactive and relational development of positive stepfamilies from the perspective of stepparents, posing Research Question (RQ)1: How do stepparents who have an overall positive relationship with a stepchild characterize TPs in the development of that relationship?

One of the more vexing remaining questions concerns the structure and expectation of the stepparent role in stepchildren's lives; whether they should take on a more traditional parenting role and share in parenting responsibilities (a quasi-kin role) or take on a role more akin to friendship with their stepchildren (e.g., Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Stepchildren report mixed findings, and favor a friendship role. However, stepparent perspectives have not been explored as extensively or in longitudinal sense, leaving us to wonder how they negotiate this tension between friend and parent over time (Braithwaite et al., 2018; Ganong et al., 2011). Our second goal was to understand how stepparents and stepchildren interact and co-construct positive relationships, focusing on the enactment of these roles, posing RQ2: What are the discursive constructions of the stepparent role in overall positive stepparent-stepchild relationships?

Methods

We centered the present study in the interpretive paradigm, seeking to understand meaning-making from participants' points of view and embracing the subjectivities of social life (Braithwaite et al., 2014; Miles et al., 2014). The research team completed in-depth interviews with 37 stepparents, self-identifying overall positive relationships with one or more stepchildren, describing interaction at pivotal relational TP events.

Participant recruitment

The research team recruited stepparents through research calls and purposive sampling, sending out study information via emailed listservs and social media posts that invited a particular group of people to participate (Miles et al., 2014). First, we required stepparents to be at least 19 years of age and perceive an overall positive relationship with at least one stepchild. This first criterion ensured all participants in the data set were reflecting on a currently positive relationship with their stepchild, to investigate how TPs contributed over time to a currently positively perceived relationship. All participants also provided a current (at the time of the interview) perceived positivity score of 1% to 100% positive, and all participants in the data set rated their relationship as 65% positive or more (range 65%–100%, $M = 90.57\%$) at the time of interview. Second, we required participants to be a part of a stepfamily that formed no less than 4 years earlier; past the often turbulent early years and the 4-year “make or break” point for most stepfamilies (Mills, 1984). Third, we required participants to be living with or married to the parent of the stepchild. Fourth, we required that the stepparent lived with the stepchild at least 50% of the time and for a minimum of a year before the stepchild was 18 years old, reflecting the importance of co-residence (Kalmijn, 2013) and opportunities for interaction.

Twenty-two stepmothers (59%) and 15 (41%) stepfathers, ranging in age from 28 to 75 years ($M = 48.11$) took part in the study. Ages of stepchildren ranged from 8 to 50 years ($M = 24.05$). Length of stepfamilies ranged from just under 4 years to more than 42 years ($M = 16$ years and 1 month; $SD = 11$ years and 2 months). The team had

interviewees from the Southwest, Midwest, and Southeast regions of the United States, made efforts to recruit participants representing different ethnic identities, and had diversity represented on the original research team. In the end, most participants identified as Caucasian ($n = 35$, 94.5%) with two (5.4%) self-identifying as Hispanic. Most stepparents identified as the same race as their stepchild ($n = 31$, 83.7%), and six (16.2%) reported their stepchild being of a different race or more than one race (four were identified as Hispanic (10.8%); three (8.1%) as more than one race, and one (2.7%) as African American). Just over half of participants reflected on cross-sex parent-child dyads ($n = 19$, 51.3%), with 13 (35.1%) stepmothers discussing their relationship with a stepdaughter, and five (13.5%) stepfathers discussing a relationship with a stepson.

Data collection and analysis

TP interviews, held virtually using Zoom or Skype video conferencing software, ranged from 45 to 90 minutes in length. Participants were instructed to hold their interview in a private room or location with no interaction or interruption from others. To ensure participant confidentiality, only audio-recordings were downloaded, and all video files were deleted after the interview. Once the interviews were transcribed, the research team deleted the audio files and ensured that only pseudonyms were present within the transcripts.

We defined TPs as “significant or pivotal events or experiences at a particular moment or time in your life that were important in bringing your relationship with your stepchild to where it is today.” We briefed participants on the meaning of TPs in the scheduling email and at the start of interviews, stressing we were interested in both positive and negative TPs.

We adopted the retrospective interview technique (e.g., Baxter et al., 1999; Huston et al., 1981) and adapted and pretested our interview guide to reflect the experiences and interactions of stepparents. Interviews consisted of four parts. First, after completing informed consent, interviewers gathered demographic information via a family tree worksheet (Baxter et al., 1999). Second, we asked participants to tell the story of how their stepfamily came to be, making sure to not assume cohabitation or marriage as the starting point

because many stepfamilies identify as a family before marriage occurs (Baxter et al., 1999; Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Third, consistent with previous TP studies, we asked participants to identify and name relational TPs with their stepchild, provide the date of TP occurrence, and rate how positive they perceived the relationship to be, from 0% to 100% at the time of each TP. As the interview progressed, the interviewer created a visual graph of all the TPs, resulting in 279 TPs, with a mean of eight TPs per participant (range = 4–22). Fourth, interviewers asked participants to describe what occurred during each TP, asking a series of open-ended questions focused on interactions during the TP.

We collected 844 pages of data; 753 single-spaced pages of interview transcripts and 91 pages of TP graphs. We analyzed data in six stages, with four research team members functioning as a coding team that met between each stage to discuss and refine the analysis. First, the coding team read all transcripts and graphs holistically to gain familiarity with the data. Second, an initial codebook of TPs was created from Braithwaite et al.'s (2018) positive TP study with stepchildren, continually amended to reflect emerging themes in the present analysis.

Third, coders worked independently to code each TP across the same 10 randomly identified interviews (27% of the data) using the initial codebook and identifying any TP that was not reflected in these current data. Coders were instructed to only assign one code to each TP, with the most salient meaning superseding any other codes. Each TP was also identified as positive, negative, or neutrally valenced based on the perceived change in positivity from the previous TP. Any new TPs were discussed at the following meeting and the codebook was amended accordingly. In addition to the TPs types identified for stepchildren (Braithwaite et al., 2018), coders identified two unique TP types in these stepparent interviews: “Communicating Support” and “Role Change.” Coders assessed interrater agreement twice during data analysis (Scott's $\pi = .76$ for initial coding then $.79$ after adjusting for the two new coding categories).

Fourth, coders analyzed an additional 12 interviews (33% of the data), working independently and then in pairs to reach consensus on any coding differences. The coding team again came together to discuss amendments to the codebook. Interrater reliability was again

Table 1 Stepparent turning point (TP) types

TP types	Freq.	% of total TPs	% of total with positive change	% of total with negative change	% of total with neutral change
TP 1 Changes in household composition	49	18	40	17	44
TP 2 Communicating support (RQ2)	36	13	59	19	22
Through offering protection	22	8	65	9	26
Through being present/ available	14	5	50	36	14
TP 3 Role change (RQ2)	34	12	65	21	15
To parent	29	10	63	22	15
To friend/peer	5	2	57	14	29
TP 4 Quality time	32	11	50	9	41
TP 5 Reconciliation/problem-solving	23	8	64	5	32
TP 6 Prosocial actions	20	7	60	5	35
TP 7 Rituals	20	7	65	20	15
TP 8 Relocation or geographic move for household	20	7	40	45	15
TP 9 Conflict or disagreement	19	7	16	84	0
TP 10 Unmet expectations/disappointment	16	6	13	75	13
TP 11 Family crisis	10	4	50	30	20
Overall	279	100	48	26	26

Note. The bolded numbers indicate numbers for each turning point category overall. Freq. = frequency; RQ = research question.

assessed with Scott's Pi at .81, with .82 and .79 for the pairs. Fifth, the remaining 15 interviews (40% of the data) were divided among the four coders who each made independent coding decisions. A last meeting of the coding team was held to finalize the TP types (see **Table 1**), discuss findings and implications, and suggest exemplars for each code. Sixth, the whole research team came together in an interactive data conference (Braithwaite et al., 2017) to discuss and test the results and findings related to the two research questions.

Results

In response to RQ1 concerning how stepparents characterize relational TPs, we discuss the 11 TP types identified in order of frequency (see Table 1), focusing on discursive constructions of the role of the stepparent in response to RQ2.

Changes in household composition (TP Type 1)

Changes in household or family composition included subevents (marriages, births, or family members moving into or out of the family residence) that altered the structure of a stepfamily system. This category represented 18% ($n = 49$) of all TPs, and participants viewed this category as having no or neutral change in their relationship with a stepchild in 44% of instances, positive change in 40% of instances, and negative change 17% of the time. Many TPs in this category involved the birth of a half-sibling (with the stepchild's biological parent). Some stepparents identified TPs reflecting on the birth of a half-sibling as negative to their relationship with their stepchild. For example, one stepmother's recalled that her 6-year-old stepdaughter expressed that "she kind of felt like all of our attention was going towards her [new half-sibling]. ... She was kind of on the outside looking in, in terms of the likenesses and similarities between [her half-sibling] and me" (#12; *note*: data are cited by interview number).

However, many stepparents perceived births of half-siblings as positively contributing to the stepparent-child relationship, perceiving that this new biological connection helped the entire family feel more unified. A stepfather explained: "It made our relationship more positive just that we had that genetic link ... a kind of physical representation that the family had become a unit" (#30). A stepmother recounted her 11-year-old stepson was "over the moon about having a baby [half]-sister," arguing that the birth "definitely had an impact on him [which] grew and clustered into our relationship" (#23). Another stepmother echoed this theme, stressing that the birth of a half-sibling (when her stepchild was age 7) "strengthened [their] relationship" (#35).

Another common change in the household referenced the union of the participant and the parent of the stepchild, most often through marriage:

Not only am I marrying [my husband], but I am marrying and committing to a child also. Just verbalizing that out loud to him and all our friends and family, I felt so connected to him at that time ... you could just tell [my stepson, age 6 at the time] had this really emotional experience too and he really felt like we were a family. (#1)

Other stepparents reflected on the adults' cohabitation or marriage: "We had waited so long to have this complete family structure where [my stepson, age 5 at the time] wasn't constantly far away in an environment we didn't like. ... It was a really big honeymoon period" (#16). Overall, the birth of a child in the stepfamily or union of the stepparent and the parent appeared essential to the solidification of the new family structure and stepparent-stepchild relationship.

Communicating support (TP Type 2)

Stepparents recalled pivotal moments in their relationships with their stepchildren when communicating support for or toward them. This new TP type made up 13% of all TPs ($n = 36$), with most perceived as positively contributing to the relationship (59%; 19% negative; 22% neutral). Stepparents recalled showing support for their stepchildren in two unique ways. First, stepparents noted how showing support by *protecting* (8% of all TPs, $n = 22$) their stepchild was significant in relational development. One stepfather vividly recalled a time when he protected his stepson from witnessing conflict between his mother and new stepmother: "Lots of screaming going on ... negative for him. ... I just removed him from that situation, took [him] to the truck, and [we] just sat and talked ... he really found comfort that I was just there to make sure he was okay" (#2, age 6 at the time). A stepmother noted the importance of her stepson seeking her protection when scared in a crowd at Disney World:

He [age 12 at the time] grabbed my hand and held it until we were in a much smaller crowd, for an hour at least. I remember thinking at the time, this speaks volumes 'cause he didn't reach for his father's [hand]. He reached for my hand.... Once that happened, I thought, "All right, he knows he can trust me, knows that he'll be safe with me." (#22)

Second, stepparents articulated the significance of communicating support through simply *being present or available* (5% of all TPs, $n = 14$) for their stepchildren. Stepparents often depicted these events as necessary to get a stepchild through a difficult time or novel circumstance. A stepmother explained how she showed support for her stepdaughter:

There have been episodes of emotional conversations that have often been about her managing the idea that she doesn't have a true biological mom. ... me sitting with her—sometimes crying with her. I would say things like, “I'm really sorry that your mom's not in the picture. I wish it were better. I wish it was different for you, but I'm here and I do the best I can.” We reaffirm our commitment to one another through these episodes. (#4, stepchild roughly age 10–12 at the time)

Similarly, a stepfather mentioned being available for his stepdaughter, age 12 at the time, grieving the death of her grandparent: “It was me sitting there letting her talk about how she felt... [Being] there to just, sort of, be a receptacle for her grief was useful” (#18). A stepmother noted the long-standing effects of being available to support her stepson when he experienced issues at school: “I remember talking to him [age 11 at the time] ... how do I help, what do you need from me, what would make it better? ... I feel like that was a turning point for us because it's solidified being able to kind of talk to me about things” (#37).

The significance of communicating support answers our second research question in part, as we inquired about the discursive construction of the stepparent role. Forming a positive stepfamily identity by interacting and co-constructing a positive stepparent–stepchild relationship appears to be influenced by the presence of a stepparent's supportive behaviors. To create this positive stepfamily identity, stepparents must interact and navigate supportive roles of being an ally (being present when needed) and a protector. When enacting their role within the family, stepparents must rely on communication to discern how, when, and in what ways to demonstrate support. These stepparents noted times when they knew their stepchild simply needed an ally, or someone to be there for them, such as a stepfather who offered support in times of grieving (#18). Other times, participants saw the need to step beyond availability and actively defend or protect their stepchildren instead. The urge to protect a stepchild appeared to contribute to and reflect a greater understanding of the stepparent role. For example, one stepmother described how protection led her to a new realization about her role:

I became fiercely protective of her. ... [My stepdaughter, 5 at the time] had supervised visitations with her mother, and these were supervised by her biological grandmother. ... They came and my stepdaughter was hysterical, crying, incredibly upset. Through this, we find out that, her mother, [who] hated the fact that her ears were pierced, tried to rip one of her earrings out. ... The mother bear came out from me and I was just very fiercely protective of her towards the grandmother, who is supposed to be supervising, keeping this child safe ... that blindness of “I’m going to protect my child no matter what ...” that came out for my stepchild. ... I think that is a turning point. (#4)

The participants illustrated that stepparent expectations for supportive behaviors are negotiated and constructed through interactions with stepchildren, internal, and external family members.

Role change (TP Type 3)

Role change referred to events that indicated to a stepparent that their role had altered within the stepfamily and represented 12% of all TPs ($n = 34$). These events included stepparents perceiving a role change or another stepfamily member communicating their perception of role change to them. Stepparents perceived role changes to have a mostly positive influence (65%; 21% negative; 15% neutral), and we identified two subcategories.

First, participants recalled vividly when their role in their stepchild’s life changed to a role that felt more like that of a *parent*. As one stepmom described:

A turning point would have been the first time she recognized me as “somebody.” She was just sitting there, and she just knew *exactly* who I was. She was probably about 7 months old at that time ... that was really important to me just ‘cause I wasn’t just a stranger anymore. I was someone, and someone important!” (#35)

This role evolution often led stepparents to engage in more behaviors typical or expected of parents, mostly of caring and nurturing

behaviors, including serving as a mothering figure: (“[It] was much more consistency, much more motherly presence,” #35, stepchild age 7 at the time; “I truly became a—a mother to him,” #14, stepchild age 1 at the time).

Some stepparents sometimes found they were expected to be a financial provider:

I had to get over this hurdle within myself and said, well yeah, she’s your daughter. She is, so I should treat her as my own because it’s the only one I have. Of course I would get her [age 12 at the time] braces. She needs my assistance, she’s my daughter. (#20)

Other stepparents felt that they were expected to be disciplinarians. One participant said of their stepson, “When I first met him, I was just playing with, getting to know him, making him happy. I wasn’t concerned with raising him yet because I hadn’t developed into that role yet ... after [we] got married, I took that strong disciplinary role” (#1, stepchild age 7 at the time). Although this “parenting role” ranged at times from that of a nurturer, financial provider, or disciplinarian, participants overall detailed a clear “shift” in their identity in the eyes of the stepchild.

Second, stepparents also noted a change in their role from a dating partner of their stepchild’s residential parent to that of a *friend or peer*. One stepmother noted her relationship with her stepson, age 14 at the time, was “more of a friendship ... because of [his] maturity and [him] being more reliable on certain aspects on the family” (#14). A stepfather echoed that a friend role was significant, but at the early stages of stepfamily development:

I met [my stepdaughter at age 5] while I was dating [her mom]. I mean I wasn’t trying to avoid her. I was, you know, we would [all] go swimming at least once a week ... ride bikes together. Watch movies. ... It was kind of like, I don’t know, it transitioned into more of like a big brother kind of relationship. Just engaging with her at the start.” (#32)

Another stepmother exemplified this role by explaining that she watched movies, discussed boys, and bonded over issues with her

stepdaughter, noting that “it’s the stepparent’s role to be the friend and to know your place in that situation” (#19, stepchild age 13 at the time).

Examining these role changes for stepparents helped us further illuminate how the stepparent role is co-constructed through family interaction (RQ2). Indeed, many of our participants brought with them their own preexisting expectations for their role as stepparent, noting that they came into the role expecting that being a disciplinarian was off limits. However, we note in our findings that enacting more traditionally “parental” behavior—mostly the warm, caring, and nurturing role expected of caregivers—had an ultimate positive impact on the stepparent–stepchild relationship in the families represented in our data.

Importantly, participants identified how communicative TP events served as clues, alerting them to a change in their role and thus allowing them to enact behaviors that they perceived were unacceptable or inappropriate before the event. A stepfather recounted:

I remember [my stepdaughter, age 7 at the time] had said something like, “I wish you were my dad” [and] I was kind of taken aback. I was like, okay, that makes sense, she doesn’t really see her biological dad and I’m the one who’s spending time with her.... That’s kind of a pivotal moment, right? You kind of have to ask yourself, like, if this isn’t going to work with her mom, we need to figure this out sooner than later. (#32)

Although participants described their “parental role” differently (nurturer, financial provider, protector, disciplinarian, etc.), participants overall could clearly recall events that alerted them to a change in their identity from simply a “partner” to a “parent.” Recalling a time when they saw expectations to enact a more traditional parent or a friend role appeared to lower uncertainty for stepparents. Moreover, role-change TPs call attention to a continuing role challenge for stepparents: to be both a parent and a friend across the development of their stepfamily (see Baxter et al., 2004). It was clear that stepparents must attend carefully to interactive clues to understand their various roles within the stepfamily and how these roles change over time.

Quality time (TP Type 4)

The fourth most prevalent TP category (11% of all TPs; $n = 32$) depicted quality time spent between a stepparent and their stepchild. Participants identified the significance of spending either one-on-one time with a stepchild or jointly alongside the stepchild and another stepfamily member. Quality time was significant to stepparents as these events allowed them to truly “get to know” their stepchild. A stepmother recalled the following:

During her high school years, I drove her every morning to school. ... We talked about her friends, teachers, what happened that day at school. ... And it was during that time that I really felt like I knew all the stuff that [she] was doing. ... I got to know her as a person more and saw more—more complexity in how she approaches the world. (#10)

Quality time also allowed stepparents and stepchildren to interact and enact shared hobbies. A stepfather explained, “She was a soccer kid and we would go to games together or she was a player. So that was key to me as a parent, my own identity, watching my kids play soccer” (#13). As a result, quality time episodically bonded this dyad through locating commonalities. A stepmother also explained, “[My stepson, from ages 4 to 6] attached even more to me [because] we had more time together. Play Pokémon, ABCs, taught him how to say, write some words, things like that. Go on walks. ... I think he was starting to feel more secure” (#14).

Stepparents also found great value in being able to provide social support in the form of advice or guidance to their stepchildren while spending quality time together. A stepmother noted:

We would talk a lot during the school year. She would ask me questions and I would help her with papers. [I] helped her write essays when she was graduating [when she was 18], and those essays got her scholarships. I remember being really proud that she and I worked together on writing and seeing the success those papers had and the money that came through for her scholarships. That was a really positive

experience—that she let me help her as much as she did. ... It just made me feel like a really big part of her life. (#7)

Participants reveled in the ability to get closer with and learn more about their stepchild through quality interaction, with 50% of these TPs perceived as positively contributing to the relationship (41% neutral, and 9% negative), helping to develop and clarify the stepparent role.

Reconciliation and problem-solving (TP Type 5)

Reconciliation and problem-solving (8% of all TPs; $n = 23$) referred to events that emphasized the ability of a stepfamily to reach positive resolutions—in many cases, after conflict or disagreement. Although conflict and disagreement was also an identified category, coders focused on the emphasis participants placed on their experiences (emphasis placed on the relational impact of *problem-solving* a conflict or on the *presence of conflict or disagreement* relationally impacted their parent–child relationship) and coded accordingly. Importantly, in this TP type, stepparents emphasized the importance of “making it through” difficult times and conflict. They noted the ability to work together as a family in problem-solving and managing issues had a long-standing positive impact on their relationship. Indeed, participants described 64% of these TPs as positively contributing to the stepparent–child relationship (32% neutral, 5% negative). One stepmother provided the following account:

I just needed to have a frank discussion with her [at age 18] that if she wants to be viewed as an adult, she needs to act like an adult and adults do the dishes once a week to help out. And you know, it went really well. Her and I have since been able to talk ... been able to work through problems. [So that] discussion went very, very good. (#19)

In this example, we see an explicit negotiation of communication rules, where, without blaming, shaming, or threatening, a stepparent discussed guidelines to problem-solve in anticipation of a future conflict. Another participant noted how problem-solving in her relationship

with her stepdaughter was positive and had a systematic effect on the family, including how the stepchild communicated with her residential father: “[My stepdaughter, age 28 at the time] promised me too, that she would be there for their father and that they would put their own differences aside and that had never been done or certainly expressed [before]” (#34). The positive implications of reconciliation and problem-solving within the entire stepfamily system confirms similar findings in stepfamily research (Braithwaite et al., 2018; Coleman et al., 2013).

Prosocial actions (TP Type 6)

Prosocial actions made up 7% of all TPs ($n = 20$) and illustrated the relational significance of generous acts, many of which were unexpected. These TPs included small kindnesses, gift-giving, or grand gestures on the part of the stepparent. A stepmother explained:

For [my stepdaughter’s] birthday, there’s this one musician that comes into town right around then and she just adores this guy. So every year I’ve gotten her the special [where] she can go in with a small group of people, meet him separately, get pictures taken. ... I don’t even go, this is just something that I give as a present for [her and her dad] to both go to this concert. ... I sent her all the information [for her 30th birthday] and she sent me back a text that said, “You’re the best.” That’s huge. I’m not saying that [she] is stingy, but that might be the only time in my entire life I will get that, but I will take it! (#10)

In this case, the gift may have included the opportunity to spend time alone with her father, a kind step-parenting action that gains its power from reinforcing the special relationship with the biological parent (Papernow, 2018). Prosocial actions often included tangible items from the stepparent, such as money or gifts: “My stepdaughter [age 27 at the time] got \$20,000 budget maybe from us for her wedding” (#13). Stepparents also recalled how unexpected gestures on the part of the stepchild had an enduring positive effect on their relationship:

[My stepson] graduated from high school and I was surprised because his grandmother's still alive and she is very, very close with him. And there's kind of a thing where you bring flowers to your parents. I was just under the impression that the flowers would go to his grandmother. Um, just because I, that's where I thought we were in the relationship. ... And the flowers came to me ... I don't know, I just felt closer to him. ... I just kind of felt like he has the connection. He just can't voice it. And I was okay if I get this little piece here, that's good enough. (#36)

Not surprisingly, these TPs were mostly positively valenced (60%, 35%, neutral, 5% negative).

Rituals (TP type 7)

Rituals referred to special events in the family, such as creating and spending holidays and birthdays together, or enacting family-specific traditions. Rituals represented 7% of all TPs ($n = 20$), and participants identified them as mostly positive (65%, 20% negative, 15% neutral).

Many of these TPs reflected rituals common across many families, such as graduations. One participant said, "There was something about the process of reflecting when you get to the end of something significant like a graduation ... she wrote me a note on her graduation stole, that kind of thing. So that's definitely a moment that you can pinpoint" (#15). Other stepfamilies described holidays: "We decided to really start traditions in terms of holidays. We [when the stepchild was 6] decided we would dedicate to doing cinnamon rolls every Christmas" (#37).

The ritual of becoming engaged to the stepchild's parent held a special place for several stepparents. They often strategically included the stepchild in the enactment of this ritual, noting positive outcomes that followed. One stepfather remembered:

[My stepson] was involved in the proposal and engagement process. [My husband] proposed and [his son] knew all about it beforehand and was in on the surprise and everything! So that was a really special time for us. ... [When he] proposed,

[my stepson, age 5 at the time] just kinda stood right by him. So it was very much a joining of like, “will you marry my dad?” and also kind of everything that goes with that. (#1)

Several stepparents reported the significance of asking a child for approval before proposing marriage. A stepmother recounted that her husband had asked the children (with the stepchild of focus age 14 at the time) if they wanted him to marry her: “You know, how they felt about that, if they were going to be okay with it. ... Then we went out to dinner and celebrated with the kids” (#8). As Baxter et al. (2009) discovered, stepchildren value being involved in the enactment of their parent’s remarriage and our findings support the work of scholars who identified the importance of stepfamilies co-creating rituals together (Braithwaite et al., 1998).

Relocation or geographic move for household (TP Type 8)

Geographic relocation for all or part of the stepfamily was tied with the previous two categories in frequency (7% of all TPs, $n = 20$). Understandably, geographic moves, whether local or across the country, led to increased uncertainty for the family, including stepchildren. One stepparent explained, “We moved to the farm [when my stepdaughter was 11] ... and she was very upset. ... Her best friend lived two houses away. They’d gone to the same school with all these kids for so many years. She did not understand why we would move to a farm” (#31).

Additionally, moving made interacting with geographically distant family members more difficult. One stepmother noted, “I decided to move away to help my family out [and that was] much harder on all of us just simply because I was no longer there and [the stepchild, age 3 at the time] was not consistently seeing her dad and I together” (#35). As a result, 45% of these TPs were identified as having a negative relational effect on the stepparent–stepchild relationship.

Not all relocation TPs were perceived negatively; in fact, 40% were perceived as having a positive impact on the stepparent–stepchild relationship (remaining 15% neutral). For example, one participant discussed the conscious decision across all parental figures (step and co-parent) to move closer to one another for the benefit of their stepchild:

[My husband and I] had a conversation and, and we were like, okay, this is not gonna work anymore! We've got to do something different! So we made the decision that, we would just basically pack up everything, pick up our lives, and [move back]. ... Around that time, [our son's] stepdad [said], "Wait, don't live here yet. Let me see where my next job site is." So he [looked for a job near us and found] a permanent position [here], which is where we all are now! All four of us currently live about two and a half miles from each other! [laughter]. (#1, stepchild age 8 at the time)

Stepparents noted that geographic decisions with the child's interests in mind positively impacted the stepparent role and the stepparent-stepchild relationship.

Conflict or disagreement (TP Type 9)

Not surprisingly, conflict and disagreement had a place in stepparent accounts (7% of all TPs, $n = 20$). Previous scholars placed considerable focus on conflict within stepfamilies (appearing as TP type #2 in Baxter et al., 1999, and TP type #3 in Braithwaite et al.'s 2018 study). Compared to the stepchildren's perspective, conflict was negatively valenced 84% of the time (vs. 66% for stepchildren, Braithwaite et al., 2018).

In the present data, stepparents often depicted conflict as occurring early in stepfamily development. For example, one stepparent described, "[My stepson, age 4 at the time] was not accepting of me at first. He showed that he didn't want anybody else to have his [dad's attention] and he would physically say, "No," and hit me [laughs] to stay away from his dad. So it took [my stepson] probably 6 months before he accepted me" (#14). Conflict also surfaced surrounding disciplinary actions, for example, a stepparent recalled: "I spanked [my stepdaughter, age 4 at the time] once. ... That was not positive" (#13). As noted by Papernow (2018), the perceptions of stepparents stepping into disciplinary roles tend to be negative. Overall, conflict and disagreement identified as TPs surfaced early in the developmental process in the stepfamily, as stepparents were interacting and working out their role and place in the family system.

Unmet expectations or disappointment (TP Type 10)

Stepparents also noted the impact of unmet expectations or disappointment as a TP in the stepparent–stepchild relationship (6% of all TPs, $n = 16$). These events were not predicated in conflict, but rather manifested in actions or inactions of a stepfamily member(s) that led to dissatisfaction, and 75% of these reflected negative change in positivity. One stepparent recalled feeling disappointed in the stepchild’s reaction to his prosocial action of buying a bicycle: “I thought I was making this grand gesture. ... It’s an early, fun opportunity for them, giving them a lot of freedom, which it actually didn’t accomplish. They were clearly not impressed by the bikes that I bought them.” (#23, stepchild was age 6 at the time).

Many of the TPs coded in this category reflected a stepparent’s disappointment in relation to what they perceived *should be* their place in the stepfamily. For example, one participant reported a very close relationship with his stepson but received a disappointing response when he offered to adopt his adult stepson as a gesture of his connection and affection:

We were walking on the beach, I screwed up my nerve and said, “How about if I adopt you?” And he said, “No thanks.” I’d been thinking about it for a while, thinking about asking him, and this seemed like a good opportunity. We were all having a really good time. I was, um, startled and disappointed that he turned me down. (#11)

This stepparent was deeply hurt by this reaction, given his positive role in the family and strong relationship with his stepson. Another participant talked about his expectation that his stepdaughter would be open and desire support from him, and he felt immense disappointment when she came out as gay to others and did not disclose to him (#17, stepchild age 18 at the time). A common theme of the TPs in this category was stepparents’ disappointment when their expectations concerning the role they had co-constructed disregarded or violated.

Family crisis (TP Type 11)

Family crisis involved family events centered around health emergencies, family member deaths, or other emergencies that resulted in a relational change in the stepparent–stepchild relationship (4% of all TPs, $n = 10$). Half of these TPs had a positive impact on the stepparent–stepchild relationship (50%), where the stepparent and stepchild bonded following the emergency. A stepfather recalled his stepson’s diagnosis of meningitis at age 21: “[The illness] changed everything about our life. It was the turning point, in terms of my love for him or my character. [The relationship] probably went all the way up to about 70, 80% positive” (#23). Another 30% of family crisis TPs had a negative impact, as this stepfather recalled the death of an important grandparent figure in the household: “That was the first real hint of mortality for him. He didn’t know what to feel or when to say certain things. He just illustrated a lot of bratty behavior. I was really unhappy with him for a while” (#6, stepchild age 7 at the time).

The final 20% of the family crisis TPs were perceived as a neutral change, typically when there were both positive and negative outcomes of a family crisis. One stepmother recalled when her stepson’s mother had a paralyzing stroke. The son experienced intense sadness, but this crisis had a positive effect on their stepparent–stepchild interaction:

It’s horrible to say, but after the horror of the first few weeks sort of wore off, we realized him living [with us] was for forever ... he’s never going to move away or back in with his mom ... so I think in some ways it actually made [our relationship] better. (#16, stepchild age 4 at the time) Although a devastating experience, the crisis strengthened the stepparent–stepchild bond.

Discussion

To follow, we highlight three sets of conclusions. First, we discuss how our findings affirm and extend those of earlier investigations grounded in the experiences of stepchildren. Second, we discuss the

theoretical implications of our study and inform future theorizing about stepfamily development. Third, we discuss practical implications for stepfamilies and practitioners in fostering more positive stepfamily relationships.

First, our findings contribute to existing research and applications on the unique contributions of stepparents who have co-constructed positive relationships with stepchildren. As we compared TP types reported by stepparents with those of stepchildren in a recent study (see Braithwaite et al., 2018), we found some common and important TP types, for example, spending quality time together and prosocial actions ranked as TP Types 1 and 2 for stepchildren (and 34% of all stepchild TPs) and ranked as TP Types 4 and 6 for stepparents. Most stepchildren and stepparents rated these TPs as positive. For both stepchildren and stepparents, prosocial actions were seen as relational investments by stepparents. For example, Braithwaite et al. (2018) reported a stepchild's perspective: "He's the only parent that's ever been like, 'I just want to make you happy.'... He's extremely thoughtful and he's never judged me." (p. 98). For stepparents, affinity-seeking behaviors figured prominently into stepfamily success, communicating their commitment and desire to bond, a finding supported by other scholars (Ganong et al., 2019; Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010).

Second, there were important divergences in the TP types of stepparents and stepchildren that are worth highlighting. We discovered that stepparents' top three TP types focused on structural and role changes in the stepfamily and communicating in ways that contributed to and altered the stepparent role. Changes in household composition was the top TP type for stepparents (18% of all TPs), including cohabitation, marriage, and the birth of children with the residential parent. Oliver (2019) also found that the entrance of a new half-sibling marks a significant change in family communication. Although conflict was a prominent TP for stepchildren (ranking as TP Type 3 in Braithwaite et al., 2018), it was less prominent for stepparents in our study (ranking as TP Type 9). Although conflict is commonly associated with stepfamily life (Afifi, 2003; Ganong & Coleman, 2017), it may be a less potent relational experience for stepparents, who may have enough life experience to expect and manage conflict.

It is important to note that the second and third most frequent TP types for stepparents were unique to the present study: (a)

communicating support by offering protection and being present or available and (b) role change enacted by either functioning more as a parent versus as a friend or peer. Both of these TP types involved the stepparent picking up on subtle communication cues from their stepchild, another family member, or from the situation at hand, which signaled to them a change in role was expected or needed. From our findings, we do not argue that there is a given or set time to “become more parental” or “be more of a friend” for stepparents but that stepparents’ attention to communicative clues on when to enact a particular role when necessary was significant in forging a positive stepparenting role in the midst of complicated and changing family conditions. In addition to facilitating congenial relationships within the stepfamily, many stepparents recognized their stepchild’s need for protection from those external to the household. In many cases, stepparents functioned as a buffer against destructive conflicts involving their stepchild’s residential or nonresidential parent or extended family members. Indeed, we observed that stepparents in positive relationships offer constructive and compassionate communication, especially when they recognize cues that signal a stepchild’s need for protective intervention.

The unique TPs described by stepparents also highlight their efforts to navigate the often blurry boundary between functioning as a friend and as a parent. Stepparents described positive TPs such as moving into warm, nurturing, protective parenting roles, and, not always disciplinary roles. Most scholars and clinicians have suggested that stepparents fare best when playing the role of a friend, especially early on, as children may not be ready to accept stepparents in a disciplinary role (Bray, 1999; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hetherington et al., 1998). In addition, a friend role can also minimize competition with coparents, while providing valuable support to stepchildren (e.g., Ganong et al., 1999). Thus, we add nuance to that recommendation in several ways. Most of the stepparents in these overall positive relationships perceived that their stepchildren welcomed their parenting efforts. This was even true in the few times discipline was mentioned, although stepparents explained that appreciation was reflected by the stepchild only after time had passed since the discipline TP event. Stepparents in these positive stepfamilies perceived that they were either entrusted by their partner to step forward and parent or

they believed they needed to step forward out of necessity (e.g., substance abuse by the partner or nonresidential parent) or when a child was at emotional or physical risk.

Through these findings, we highlight how the stepparent role was developed and discursively co-constructed over time as stepparents started taking on a parenting role more fully, either in explicit negotiation with their partner or implicitly through trial and error. When enacting a parenting role, stepparents often find it challenging to navigate this role in ways that will be accepted both by the partner and the stepchild, as well as, at times, by nonresidential parents and extended family members (Ganong et al., 2011). Thus, while stepparents in the present study often enacted behaviors of friendship, such as seeking affinity or lending a sympathetic ear, more of them perceived themselves to function as parents.

Lastly, it is important to note that although TPs are often discussed as particular “events,” “episodes,” or “experiences,” they also characterize ongoing or changing processes that can unfold over a series of events or across time. For example, spending quality time with a stepchild consistently or communicating support across a difficult time in a child’s life appears just as memorable and significant to cultivating positive stepparent–stepchild bonds as do singular prosocial actions or scheduled rituals. Our study, and the TPs mentioned by our participants, suggest stepparenting requires more than communicating positively or strategically at or during a few singular events in a stepchild’s lifetime but instead is a collection of pivotal communication choices and remaining attentive to the ongoing needs of a stepchild across the relationship’s development. Stepparents, therefore, must be mindful of how their communication affects their stepchildren and their parent–child relationship across the life course.

In sum, stepparents must balance the roles of both parent and friend throughout the trajectory of their relationship with a stepchild, highlighting the need for flexibility in enacting stepfamily roles and expectations, especially when encountering resistance from inside or outside the family unit (Ganong & Coleman, 2019). Taken together, our findings encourage a refinement of previous thinking about the stepparent role generally. More specifically, they highlight the nuanced communication practices that stepparents report engaging in to form and maintain positive relationships with their

stepchildren. Our findings are important not just in identifying the relational episodes that matter most in the development of positive stepfamilies, but also in highlighting the discursive constructions and meanings associated with relational events for stepparents and stepchildren. It may be that these relationships became more positive as a parenting role developed for these stepparents or, perhaps, that having more positive relationships with a stepchild encouraged the parenting role. Nevertheless, we conclude that stepparents can forge a positive relationship with a stepchild, in part, by simply being attentive to subtle communication cues and displaying a willingness to adopt new roles when needed. This developmental sequencing certainly warrants more research attention, as do the multiple perspectives that different internal and external members bring to the family system.

Theoretical implications

The TP interviews allowed stepparents to plot changes over the life course of the relationship, a reflective task that helps scholars understand positive relational development across time. As such, these present findings may be particularly helpful to theorists interested in communication and relationship development (e.g., Mongeau et al., 2022). For example, theorizing on stages of stepfamily development (Papernow, 1993) has been supplemented by the recognition that acceptance of the stepfamily arrangement can progress through a variety of trajectories (e.g., Baxter et al., 1999; Ganong et al., 2011; Papernow, 2013). The current findings highlight how different kinds of relational episodes may accelerate trajectories of acceptance, including those in which stepparents communicate the kind of support needed by the child at a particular developmental moment, given the age of children or other circumstances. Developmental theorists will prove helpful in conceptualizing the calibration of these and other communicative responses to the evolving needs of stepfamilies.

Although our interviews surfaced an extensive list of TPs, parsimony can be found in aligning them with a smaller set of dimensions identified by strength-based theories of stepfamily life (Golish, 2003; Oliver, 2019; Waldron et al., 2018). Particularly, participants reported experiences anticipated by the theory of resilience and relational load

(TRRL), an approach that grounds resilience in efforts to manage relational resources in ways that help relationships overcome adversity (Afifi et al., 2016; Afifi & Harrison, 2018). Prominent TP types identified by our stepparents appeared to add resources to the *relational resource bank*, through investments of quality time and enactment of social support. For example, stepparents perceived episodes of quality time left stepchildren feeling cared for and appreciated, strengthening their relational bonds. Bolstered by these experiences, both stepchild and stepparent may have been better prepared to weather inevitable moments of conflict or stepfamily stress. If quality time had this preparatory effect, offers of social support were often, in the language of TRRL (Afifi & Harrison, 2018), calibrated to moments of crisis, as when a stepchild was struggling at school or experiencing conflict with a residential parent. A distinguishing characteristic of positive stepfamilies may be stepparents' capacity to bring communicative and emotional resources to the family.

Our findings also illustrate the importance of *communal orientation*, as TRRL (Afifi & Harrison, 2018) suggests that families that feel unified are better prepared to navigate adversity as fewer relational assets are expended on internal conflict. We also witnessed the communication events and practices that enact communal orientation, at least in the eyes of stepparents. For example, some stepparents framed changes in family composition (e.g., the birth of half-siblings) as unifying events rather than sources of discord. Only 17% saw this potentially disruptive event as negative. In TP studies focused on the perspectives of stepchildren, managing conflict well and forgiving stepparents were prominent positive TPs (Braithwaite et al., 2018; Waldron et al., 2018). Our data suggest that stepparents were less likely to view conflict and forgiveness as TPs; for example, conflict was well down the list at 7%. TPs that involved helping the family navigate change, communicate support, and offer parental guidance were more prominent than conflicts in the reports of our stepparents. Consistent with TRRL, stepparents in these positive families have contributed, even modeled, communication behaviors that reduced the intensity and frequency of resource-depleting conflict.

Practical implications

Understanding the discursive constructions and enactments of positive stepparent roles and relationships leads to several applications for stepfamilies and those who support them. First, stepparents should be encouraged by residential parents, practitioners, and family educators to carve out time for quality interactions with their stepchild (see Papernow, 2013; Braithwaite et al., 2018). In addition, stepparent prosocial actions, often rather modest gestures of generosity and care, can help stepchildren feel understood and valued, especially early in the relationship.

Second, support from the residential parent is crucial to help stepparents develop their role in the family, often expanding from simply being present or friendly to protector to parent. Family professionals can help residential parents and stepparents understand how to cultivate healthy stepparent roles and help residential parents best communicate their support to the stepparent and children and may also include negotiations with the nonresidential parent.

Third, we highlight the importance of stepparent understanding and maturity in developing positive relationships. Waldron et al. (2018) described the importance of stepchildren forgiving stepparents and even themselves, for negative or harmful acts committed during the early years of stepfamily life. In the present study, stepparents had little to say about needing forgiveness, suggesting they likely expected conflicts under the often-stressful conditions of early stepfamily development. Stepparents may be encouraged to consider explicitly raising forgiveness with stepchildren if the situation warrants it. Finally, we highlight the benefits of developing communication practices that help stepfamilies navigate conflict and stepparent roles. Training programs for stepfamilies, such as the successful “Smart Steps” program from the National Stepfamily Resource Center (<https://www.stepfamilies.info/programs-services/smart-steps/>) can encourage positive stepfamilies via healthy communication practices, developing emotional hardiness, perspective-taking, and facilitating the capacity for resilience.

In the end, we see both limitations and strengths of this research endeavor. Despite efforts to recruit a broad sample of stepfamilies, the respondents were primarily Caucasian. Nonetheless, the

participants of color contributed centrally, not peripherally, to the findings. For example, a Latinx mother was a prototype exemplar of a residential parent supporting her partner's efforts to be a protector and negotiating his role with the nonresidential father. We are very aware that multiethnic and multiracial stepfamilies face unique threats and challenges in stepfamily creation, management, and development (e.g., Limb et al., 2020). We and other scholars need to find better ways to diversify our studies, including expanding the research agenda to include stepfamilies from the queer community who face unique challenges, such as managing disclosure of sexual identity (e.g., Bergeson et al., 2019).

A strength of our study is the rich depictions of positive stepparent relationships, analogous to a gallery of intricate portraits rather than a single painting. The considerable variety in the nature and timing of TPs affirm that positive stepfamilies are diverse and that positivity can be achieved via multiple paths, which we continue to study. Despite this diversity, all relationships were punctuated by moments of significant change and opportunities for interaction that helped families grow in resilient ways. Stepparents navigated these waters via nuanced communicative choices, an affirmation of the uniquely discourse-dependent nature of stepfamily life and transcending traditional family roles and expectations.

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