

Stepchildren who view former stepparents as family maintain relationships after divorce

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Remarriages often combine two families into one stepfamily unit. When that stepfamily unit dissolves after a divorce, little is known about the relationships between former stepparents and stepchildren. Now, researchers in the University of Missouri College of Human Environmental Sciences found stepchildren's views of former stepparents depended on emotional reactions to the divorce, patterns of support or resource exchanges, and parental encouragement or discouragement to continue step-relationships. Whether stepchildren maintained relationships with their former stepparents largely depended on whether stepchildren viewed their former stepparents as family.

"For a substantial portion of these children's lives, they've been living with a stepparent, who, in many cases, became a parent to them," said Marilyn Coleman, a Curators' professor emerita in the Department of Human Development and Family Science. "Then, the couple breaks up, the [family](#) breaks up, and what happens to these kids? Stepparents may have invested a lot of time, a lot of emotion in raising a child and then end the [relationship](#) completely. Sometimes, there's an assumption that when the relationship ends, there's no need to continue ties. But for children who have grown up viewing someone as a parent, it may not be so easy for them to lose that relationship."

The researchers interviewed 41 young adults who had experienced stepfamily dissolutions. Half of the participants had considered or "claimed" their stepparents as family at one time or another. Of those, half of the adults still maintained relationships with their former

stepparents, but the other half had since ended their relationships with their former stepparents.

"In post-divorce families - stepfamilies and former stepfamilies in particular - kinship is an important notion," said Larry Ganong, a professor in the MU Sinclair School of Nursing and co-chair in the Department of Human Development and Family Science. "People make judgments about whether or not people are 'family,' and if you are, then there's some sort of expectation about interactions, feelings, expectations. If you aren't 'family,' then there's ambiguity. It's stressful, and people are less sure about how to act and feel."

Ambiguity exists about what step-relationships mean even when couples are together; these ties become even more ambiguous when the relationships dissolve, Ganong said.

"Stepparent-stepchild relationships in particular have neither legal nor genetic ties, which are the two markers that legally and culturally we use to decide who is obligated to whom," Ganong said. "When there's a second divorce, there are neither blood nor legal ties binding stepparents and [stepchildren](#), so that creates an added level of complexity about who's in families and why."

Divorcing couples should consider how their breakup will affect their biological children and stepchildren. Although a 10-year relationship might be a small portion of parents' lives, it could be a significant portion of children's lives, Coleman said.

"Don't put your kids in the middle," Coleman said. "When stepfamilies dissolve, the biological parent can completely cut ties with the stepparent - the children could never see him or her again. Until children are old enough to drive, they have no way to maintain contact with former stepparents unless the parents facilitate visits."

The researchers said they noticed diversity among the relationships between stepparents and stepchildren. These family dynamics continue to evolve over time, Coleman said.

"We have a study of a point in time with these young adult children," Coleman said. "Some are talking retrospectively. We don't really know how all of these relationships are going to play out, and there's so much diversity - some families break ties completely, others keep living together, give financial support or spend holidays together. Some stepchildren re-establish contact with former stepparents years after the stepfamilies dissolve."

The study, "Stepchildren's Views about Former Step-Relationships Following Stepfamily Dissolution," was published in June in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*.

More information: *Journal of Marriage and Family*, [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10 ... /jomf.12182/abstract](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jomf.12182/abstract)

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