

New research shines light on stepparent fairy-tale stereotype

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Although the fairy tale of the wicked stepmother is a tale as old as time, the effects of blending children with their new stepfamilies may not be as grim as once thought.

In fact, new research shows that stepparents are not at a disadvantage compared to their peers from single-parent households and actually experience better outcomes than their halfsiblings—good news for the more than 113 million Americans that are part of a steprelationship.

Led by East Carolina University anthropologist Ryan Schacht and researchers from the University of Utah, the study, "Was Cinderella just a fairy tale? Survival differences between [stepchildren](#) and their half-siblings," is available in the May edition of the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*.

The study challenges the "Cinderella effect" theory. The effect contends that conflict within stepfamilies over physical, financial and emotional resources leads to higher mortality risks for stepchildren, and is a main factor in higher rates of abuse and neglect. The phenomenon suggests that stepparents play a major role in this abuse, hoarding resources for their [biological children](#) and leading to negative outcomes for stepchildren.

Schacht proposes that previous studies have placed blame for the negative outcomes associated with parental loss on stepparents yet have done so through an "apples-to-oranges comparison." Specifically, they compare the long-term outcomes of children who have suffered trauma like parental loss versus children from stable households. When the team compared stepchild outcomes more appropriately among those children who too have experienced the economic and emotional hardships associated with parental loss, they found no difference. Specifically, the introduction of stepparents did not increase stepchild mortality.

"The idea of a stepparent, especially the stepmother, as being an agent of evil seems to be a story as old as time," Schacht said. "It's easy to sell the Cinderella effect's result because we've been told these stories about the

problems that stepfamilies experience for hundreds of years.

"We're not denying that some stepchildren suffer," he said. "However, if we truly believe it is the stepparent that is the source of negative outcomes for a stepchild, then we need to compare similar environments and experiences. A child that hasn't lost a parent through death or divorce hasn't experienced the same trauma that a stepchild has; comparing those two experiences and blaming the stepparent for diverging outcomes isn't a fair comparison."

The study compared the mortality of stepchildren whose parents remarried after the death of a spouse to children whose parents did not remarry and found three key findings:

- Parental mortality has a negative effect on children under 18 years old, especially for infants losing a mother;
- Children whose parents remarried after the loss of a spouse did not suffer a mortality rate any greater than children whose parents did not remarry; and
- Stepchildren received a protective effect when a halfsibling was introduced to their new family.

"The metrics of what makes a family successful—household stability, relationship stability and [economic stability](#)—are achieved by stepparents investing in their stepchildren to make that a reality. Coming in with an antagonistic approach doesn't make sense if stepparents want their relationship to succeed."

The research team analyzed a data set of more than 400,000 children from Utah from 1847-1940. Schacht said the [time period](#) provided an opportunity to analyze stepchild mortality rates in families during a natural fertility period where families were larger in size and most stepfamilies were formed due to the death of a parent.

The study adds that [children](#) who have suffered parental loss have more in common with their peers from [single-parent households](#), facing many of the same educational, economic and health care disparities.

Schacht hopes the study will shed a light on public policy funding for interventions for families that have suffered parental loss.

More information: Ryan Schacht et al, Was Cinderella just a fairy tale? Survival differences between stepchildren and their half-siblings, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* (2021). [DOI: 10.1098/rstb.2020.0032](https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2020.0032)

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