

Stepchildren relate to stepparents based on perceived benefits, researchers find

March 29 2011

More than 40 percent of Americans have at least one step relative, according to a recent Pew Center study. Relationships between stepchildren and stepparents can be complicated, especially for children. University of Missouri experts have found that stepchildren relate with stepparents based on the stepparents' treatment of them and their evaluations, or judgments, of the stepparents' behaviors.

"It takes both parties – children and adults – to build positive relationships in stepfamilies," said Larry Ganong, professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies. "Children and stepparents should think of it as building a friendship. There's no perfect formula for doing this, and even if stepchildren initially reject their stepparents, it shouldn't be viewed as permanent. Relationships among stepchildren and stepparents can grow in acceptance, friendship and bonding, regardless of how they begin. Negative relationships don't have to last forever."

Ganong and Marilyn Coleman, Curators Professor in the College of Human Environmental Sciences, identified factors that are related to positive and negative stepchild-stepparent relationships. They found that stepchildren build positive or negative relationships based on their evaluations, or [judgments](#), of stepparents' behaviors toward them and their family. Children also are affected by the opinions and actions of their biological parents and other family members as they develop relationships with stepparents.

The MU researchers evaluated stepchildren's participation and contributions in building relationships with stepparents. They identified six patterns of step-relationship development from stepchildren's perspectives: accepting as a parent, liking from the start, accepting with ambivalence, changing trajectory, rejecting and coexisting.

"Whether or not stepparents are accepted by stepchildren depends on the overall family situation and if they are recognized as being beneficial to their family, either financially or emotionally," Ganong said. "However, step-relationships aren't determined solely by individual actions, but by the collective interactions of both persons in the [relationship](#)."

Another complication is the presence of interested third parties, such as biological parents and siblings, and their reactions to stepparents. Through a process called triangulation, many nonresidential birth parents work to get their children to "side" with them and therefore, reject stepparents.

"Rather than engage children against stepparents, parents should seek counsel from persons outside the [family](#), such as a minister, a therapist or best friend, and avoid getting kids involved," Ganong suggests.

"Parents should remember that they won't be replaced by stepparents if they maintain strong bonds and that their kids will still love them, even if they also love their stepparents. Relationships are not a zero sum game; there isn't a limit on how much and who people can love."

More information: The study, "Patterns of Stepchild-Stepparent Relationship Development," will be published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

Citation: Stepchildren relate to stepparents based on perceived benefits, researchers find (2011, March 29) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-03-stepchildren-stepparents-based-benefits.html>

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