

Parental roles matter in fostering relationships between children and stepgrandparents

May 4 2016

Popular television shows such as "Modern Family" and the "Brady Bunch" brought the dynamics of stepfamilies into mainstream pop culture. However, as families become increasingly diverse and complex, defining family membership remains ambiguous. Now, researchers from the University of Missouri's College of Human Environmental Sciences and Sinclair School of Nursing are shedding new light on what happens within a family when the stepgrandparent had no active role in raising the parent of the stepgrandchild. Their findings indicate that how a parent behaves toward the stepgrandparent determines the relationship between their child and the stepgrandparent.

"In our research on families, we had theorized that there were three distinct types of stepgrandparents: long-term, later life and inherited," said Marilyn Coleman, Curators' Professor of Human Development and Family Science. "However, we now have found that a fourth pathway to becoming a stepgrandparent exists. In cases where stepgrandparents did not help raise their stepgrandchildren's [parents](#), but have been in the lives of stepgrandchildren from birth or early childhood, the grandparent role, in essence, skips a generation."

Coleman, along with Larry Ganong, co-chair of the Department of Human Development and Family Science and Ashton Chapman, a doctoral student at MU, examined 35 relationships involving skip-generation stepgrandparents to understand what determined strong

relationships within the [family](#) unit. They conducted interviews with stepgrandchildren to determine relational history, the benefits and challenges related to being a stepgrandchild and general feelings and attitudes about the stepgrandparent.

They found that the relationship between stepgrandchild and stepgrandparent was influenced by cultural stereotypes, the parent's relationship with the stepgrandparents and the parent's role as "gatekeeper" either facilitating or inhibiting the relationship. They also found that in every instance, the stepgrandchild mirrored their parent's relationship and perception of the stepgrandparent. In cases where the parent modeled a close [relationship](#) with the stepgrandparent and facilitated bonding between the stepgrandparent and child, kinship in the family was stronger. In cases where the parent felt torn between biological parents and stepparents, those feelings could transfer to their children impacting relationships with stepgrandparents.

"When it comes to family, norms and obligations matter," Chapman said. "Understanding who is supposed to do what and how family members are identified affects the family dynamic. If the step-grandchild knows from day one that a stepgrandfather is simply grandpa, his role will be more important in the child's life."

"Relational ties in stepfamilies can be convoluted and difficult to navigate," Ganong said. "Yet, established boundaries and understanding can strengthen family bonds, even when the [family tree](#) looks more like a family bush."

More information: Ashton Chapman et al, "Like My Grandparent, But Not": A Qualitative Investigation of Skip-Generation Stepgrandchild-Stepgrandparent Relationships, *Journal of Marriage and Family* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/jomf.12303](https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12303)

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

Citation: Parental roles matter in fostering relationships between children and stepgrandparents (2016, May 4) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-05-parental-roles-fostering-relationships-children.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.