

DeFacto Stepfamilies: Cohabiting Multiple-partner Fertility Couples

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Family composition becomes complex as adults form and dissolve multiple relationships. Parents and children face unique concerns and barriers when parents enter into a new relationship. For cohabiting families with children from multiple partners, navigating relationships can be particularly stressful. However, some remarried and cohabiting stepfamilies have developed strategies that enable them to overcome barriers and have healthy functioning families.

Key Terms and Statistics

DeFacto stepfamilies - made up of a parent, his/her biological child, and a cohabiting partner (not related to the child).

Multiple partner fertility - the pattern of having biological children with more than one partner.

- About 40% of all children can expect to spend some time living with their biological parent and his or her cohabiting partner before age 16.⁹
- In 59% of unmarried couples

in the Fragile Families study, one or both parents already had at least one child by another partner.²

- About 73% of multiple partner fertility men have three or more children.¹³
- About 40% of cohabiting households dissolve within 5 years of union formation.⁹
- When men or women have children in more than one household, or live with a child that is not biologically theirs, there is more competition for scarce resources (time, money and attention).

Parents with children from former relationships face additional stress associated with coordinating the parenting of their children across more than one household and integrating their partner into a pre-existing family system.

- Unmarried fathers typically live with the mother and her other children, while unmarried mothers almost never live with the children from their partner's past

relationships (these children usually live with their own biological mother).⁶

- There are few pre-scriptive guidelines for cohabiting partners in regard to their responsibility in raising children and providing financial support. There are also few legal and social expectations for this role.^{11, 12}
- The lack of clear norms, authority, legal relationships, and routines in cohabiting stepfamilies with children can lead members to have competing or conflicting interests. Family boundaries, privacy, and autonomy are compromised when the nonresidential parent and his/her kin exercise their perceived rights to remain connected to the child.⁶
- Mothers often want partners to be involved in raising their children, yet because of their lack of trust and their desire to “protect” their child, they give men ambiguous or conflicting messages regarding the type of involvement they want and the role they want

their partner to take in raising the child(ren).^{4, 5, 10}

- Children from previous relationships also seem to affect parent involvement. Mothers report that when their current partner has children from previous relationships, he is uncooperative in parenting (e.g., he does not respect her rules for child), is unsupportive (e.g., will not look after children for mother) and does not share responsibility in childrearing.³

Children's resources (both time and money) are likely to be reduced in the context of multi-partnered fertility.

- Cohabiting or visiting partners are less likely to contribute to the basic needs of the household compared to adults who are married.¹
- The children from other partners may not receive the same benefits as the child(ren) the couple share in common.⁶
- Sometimes parents provide resources to children from more than one household or to children of the same household that may or may not be related to them. In this case, it is likely that parental interests and resources are spread across his, hers, and their children, which may compromise the quantity or quality of parenting that children receive.^{3, 6}
- Cohabiting partners spend less time involved with children,

engage in fewer activities (reading to child, playing with child), and extend less warmth (hugging, expressing love, or joking) than married stepparents or biological parents.¹²

Parental obligations to children outside of the couple relationship often affect the couple's relationship quality.

- After a new baby is born, children from other relationships are often a source of tension in the couple relationship.^{3, 6}
- Incidents of infidelity are high (more than one-third of low-income couples experience at least one incident of infidelity) and often occur with a former partner.⁶ As a result, both partners often distrust the other gender, and the father visiting a child in the home of an ex-girlfriend increases the anxiety of the current partner.³
- Mothers complain about the time fathers spend with their other children. They feel this detracts from the time spent with the new baby, and there is tension because the father is spending time with the children in the home of their mother (an ex-girlfriend).⁶
- When both parents have a previous child, the frequency of arguing is higher than in couples where only one partner has a child from a prior relationship.³

Cohabiting and married stepfamilies have similar experiences and challenges with respect to parenting.⁷

- In nuclear families, parents adjust their parenting as a child grows. In a stepfamily, stepparents often become an instant parent in a family that has established rules and routines for children.¹¹
 - In cohabiting stepfamilies, the cohabiting partner may be stepping into a situation where there are established routines and rituals with children. In addition, there may be conflict about rules for children and parenting practices.
- In dual-earner stepfamilies, the new couple must decide how money is spent. Both partners may be accustomed to making those decisions.⁵
 - In cohabiting families, the partner may feel that they have no financial obligation to children.

Cohabiting families can take some tips from what research has learned about successful stepfamilies and how they negotiate roles and rules to form a healthy family.

- Successful stepfamilies reach agreement over family roles.⁵
 - Parents, stepparents, and children agree about the involvement of the stepparent, the responsibilities of all family



members, and the family's rules for the children.⁵

In successful stepfamilies, the stepparent and stepchild have formed a relationship. Stepparents develop a relationship with the child(ren) by:

- Seeking affinity (attempting to get the child to like them).⁸
 - The stepparent attempts to be a friend to the child and often does things that the child likes (e.g., playing catch with a baseball).
 - Having fun together doing things that they both like to do (e.g., playing a board game, going to the movies).
- Being a friend, not a disciplinarian.⁸

Biological parents help facilitate a relationship between partner and child by:

- Promoting a relationship between the partner and the child(ren).
 - Encouraging the partner and child to do fun things together.⁸
 - Leaving the child and the partner alone (either physically or emotionally) so that they can figure out the relationship for themselves.⁸
 - Letting the partner and child work out disagreements on their own.⁸
- Helping the partner and child understand each other.

- Explaining and interpreting behavior – this could be educating a partner who is unfamiliar with normal child development (what is typical for a child her age), children's preferences (Susie likes getting ice cream after a movie), or explaining behavior (he is angry sometimes when he comes home from seeing his Dad).⁸
- Spending one-on-one time with biological child(ren).
 - This helps keep the parent-child bond strong and allows the child to feel like they will retain the parents love and will not be replaced by the new partner.⁴

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