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A Phenomenological Exploration of the Experience of Parenting Half-Siblings Within a Blended Family

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A Phenomenological Exploration of the Experience of Parenting Half-Siblings

Within a Blended Family

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Nicole Josephsen

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A Phenomenological Exploration of the Experience of Parenting Half-Siblings Within a

Blended Family

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been approved by the committee members signed below
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DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

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Abstract

A Phenomenological Exploration of the Experience of Parenting Half-Siblings Within a

Blended Family

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Blended families are a growing population and encompass a diversity of characteristics

and family types. Among the different types of blended families are those with both

stepchildren and mutual children. Research on the complex experience of parenting a

mutual genetic child and a stepchild within a blended family is minimal. To better

understand the unknown experience of such parents, this phenomenological study was

conducted to provide an in depth description of the experience of simultaneously

parenting mutual children and stepchildren within a blended family. In this

phenomenological study the researcher conducted interviews with six participants who

varied by gender, socioeconomic status, and age. The researcher followed Giorgi's

(2009) phenomenological method of data analysis. The findings of this study fit into six

themes about these parents' experiences of parenting half-siblings, including: I can

parent, My children get along, We miss you, Let's talk, It's challenging and rewarding,

and Different experiences. Among the conclusions of this research was the high value

parents placed on the half-sibling relationship. Parents shared observations about their

stepchildren taking time to adjust to the birth of the mutual child, half-siblings missing

each other during visitations, and helping their mutual children navigate their experience

and understanding of the stepchild's visitations. Thus this research provided a rich

description of the experience of parenting stepchildren and mutual children within a

blended family. Such information might help inform custody arrangements as they affect

the half-sibling relationship, evidence-based interventions, and family education in

support of parents in blended families. The electronic version of this dissertation is at

OhioLink ETD Center, www.ohiolink.edu/etd

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Introduction

Blended families are a growing population in America (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Stewart, 2005b). Based on the most recent statistics on divorce and remarriage, about 16% of all marriages created blended families, and increasing numbers of blended families are comprised of cohabitating couples (Coleman et al., 2000; Hetherington, 1999; Stewart, 2005a). The term *blended family* has been used to encompass a variety of family structures (Portrie & Hill, 2005). Such blended family structures include couples, cohabitating or married, in which one partner has a child from a previous relationship, as well as complex family structures of couples where both partners have children from previous relationships as well as mutual children from the current relationship (Dunn, 2002; Stewart, 2005a; Weaver, Umañ-Taylor, Hans, & Malia, 2001).

While there has been a large amount of research produced in the past few decades on step-parenting and blended families, very little is known about the experience of parenting in the specific complex family type in which both stepchildren and mutual children are present (Coleman et al., 2000; MacDonald & DeMaris, 1996). Inherent in this form of blended family is a unique parenting experience, encompassing both the role of biological parent of a mutual child from the current relationship and stepparent concurrently (Stewart, 2005b). The experience of parenting with these simultaneous roles has not yet been covered in the research literature (Cartwright, 2010; Wilkes & Fromme, 2002). In order to inform practices for providing parenting support to blended family parents in this specific family type, further research is needed on the experience of parenting in which both step and mutual children are present (Coleman et al., 2000). In

response to this gap, the research question for this study is: "What is the experience of simultaneously parenting a mutual-genetic child/children and stepchild/children within a blended family?" As research is sparse, little is known about parents' experience of parenting in such a context (Portrie & Hill, 2005).

Qualitative research is a useful method for exploring a specific experience that has not yet been described (Creswell, 2007). In a qualitative exploration of the meaning of an experience for the individuals in a specific situation, like simultaneously parenting both step and mutual children within a blended family, the essential aspects of that lived experience will be uncovered (Creswell, 2007). As such, this research will shed light on the essential constituents of the phenomenon of parenting both step and mutual children within a blended family, providing an in-depth description of that experience (Portrie & Hill, 2005). This research will contribute to developing more focused quantitative research agenda on this form of blended family by addressing some of the "mechanisms underlying the trends, patterns, and relations" (Coleman et al., 2000, p. 1302). This research will also provide information that can inform interventions and policies for parenting within the context of a blended family in which both step and mutual children are present (Coleman et al., 2000; Portrie & Hill, 2005).

The specific qualitative research method that best lends itself to answer the research question of this study is the phenomenological method. Psychological phenomenology is focused on person's experience of a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). In phenomenological research the goal is to gather information from people who have experienced a specific phenomenon, in order to provide a rich description of the key

constituents of those individuals' perceptions of that specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

As there are no studies on parents' experience of raising half-siblings within a blended family, a phenomenological research design will address this gap in the academic literature. This project provides insight into parents' experience of simultaneously rearing both mutual children and stepchildren within a blended family. Such information could guide practices and policies regarding parenting in this type of blended family, a growing family population in the U.S. (Stewart, 2005b). This study will also provide more specific information for future researchers on parenting in this form of blended family.

Literature Review

The nuclear family is not the only form of family in America today (Portrie & Hill, 2005). Given that 50% of marriages in the U.S. end in divorce, and as many as 65% of divorcees remarry, a portion of nuclear families has been reorganized into blended families (Coleman et al., 2000; Portrie & Hill, 2005). Of those who were divorced and remarried, some have children from their previous marriage/s and therefore form blended families in the remarriage (Stewart, 2005a, 2005b). Moreover, many couples have chosen to cohabitate instead of marrying (Coleman et al., 2000; Weaver et al., 2001). According to the research, about 25% of cohabitating couples in the U.S. form blended families (Coleman et al., 2000). Cohabitating couples are more likely than remarried couples to have at least one partner bring a child from a previous relationship, therefore forming a blended family (Coleman et al., 2000). Given the prevalence of divorce, remarriage, and cohabitation, blended families are a sizable population of families in the U.S.

The exact prevalence of blended families is unclear because due to their not being specifically accounted for by the U.S. Census Bureau. The most recent census only included blended families where the children resided the majority of the time (Kreider & Lofquist, 2014). Therefore the census did not account for all of the blended families, married or cohabitating, in which the parents had less than 50% custody of their children (Kreider & Lofquist, 2014). It is therefore likely that the number of blended families is much higher than the census reported. The information gathered about the living arrangements of children was that 20% of children currently live with stepparents (Portrie & Hill, 2005). About one third of children lived within a remarried or cohabitating blended family by the time the child was 18 years of age (Coleman et al., 2000).

Additionally, within four years of parental separation, 50% of children lived with stepfathers (Hetherington, 1999). Therefore, based on the rates of divorce, remarriage, cohabitation, and children's living arrangements, the U.S. Census Bureau (Kreider & Lofquist, 2014) projected that blended families may be the majority family structure in America today (Stepfamily Foundation Inc., 2014).

As a result of the shift in family makeup in the U.S., research on blended families tripled in the 1990s and has continued to increase in breadth and depth (Coleman et al., 2000). As such, researchers have uncovered a wide range of data on blended families and their experiences. A general review of the research on blended families is followed by a targeted discussion of the current research on the specific blended family type which is the focus of this study, blended families with half-siblings.

Blended Families

While there are still many holes in the research on blended families (Cartwright, 2010; De'Ath, 1996), the following is a general discussion of what is known to date about blended families. This discussion addresses the current research about the blended family as a whole, the couple, the parents, and the children. It also includes a targeted discussion of the research literature that specifically addresses blended families with half-siblings, both stepchildren and mutual children.

The family. The definition of a blended family is a family in which one partner brings a child from a previous relationship so that there is a biological parent, a stepparent, and a child who is biologically related to only one of the parents (Dunn, 2002; Howell, Weers, & Kleist, 1998; Weaver et al., 2001). However, in some cases both partners bring children from previous unions, making both partners stepparents and

biological parents (Dunn, 2002). Moreover, in other cases the blended family couple adds a mutual child to the current relationship, forming half-siblings between the mutual child and the stepchild who is only biologically related to one of the partners of the blended family couple (Stewart, 2005b). Finally, the most complex form of blended family is that in which there are children from each partner's previous relationships and children from the current relationship, creating siblings, half-siblings, and stepsiblings (Portrie & Hill, 2005).

Terminology. Blended families have been widely referred to in the research literature as stepfamilies (Bray, 1999; Dunn, 2002; Michaels, 2000; Morin, Milito, & Costlow, 2001; Stewart, 2005a, 2005b). While researchers have begun to use the term *stepfamily* more broadly to include cohabitating couples, the term stepfamily has typically referred to remarried families (Coleman et al., 2000; Dupuis, 2007; Portrie & Hill, 2005; Stewart, 2005a, 2005b). In contrast, the term *blended family* is indicative of both remarried and cohabitating families. As the research of this study is inclusive of both remarried and cohabiting families, the blended family term is used in reference to both types of families.

Custody. Blended families vary in the level of custody they have of each child (Kreider & Lofquist, 2014). The U.S. Census Bureau only counted blended families in which the child lived the majority of the time. However, children often split their time between two households, sharing membership in two distinct families (Dunn, 2002; Weaver et al., 2001). In some cases the children are a part of one blended family and one single parent family, whereas in other cases both families are blended (Dunn, 2002; Weaver et al., 2001). Within the two blended family households the children may

experience different variations on the type of blended family they are a part of, making them step- or half-siblings, or simply an only child. Also, the parents experience differing levels of involvement with their children based on their biological or stepparent status and amount of custody or time with their children.

Beginnings and endings. According to the research, potential blended families began for a diversity of reasons: death, divorce, breakup, and single parenthood (Weaver et al., 2001). In some cases a blended family is the result of a remarriage, because it was preceded by a divorce or widowhood (Coleman et al., 2000; Dunn, 2002; Weaver et al., 2001). However, in other cases a blended family is a first marriage, preceded by single parenthood or previous cohabitating relationships (Coleman et al., 2000; Weaver et al., 2001). As such, the partners in a blended family may have different relational histories, including single without children, widowed, divorced, single parent, and serial cohabitating relationships (Weaver et al., 2001).

Blended families also begin and end in a variety of ways. A blended family may begin at different points, whether in the dating process, cohabitation, or marriage (Weaver et al., 2001). As such, blended families are created through marriage or cohabitation, and increasingly research is aimed at addressing both types of blended families (Portrie & Hill, 2005). Blended families also end in a diversity of ways, such as divorce, death, or ending of a relationship (Weaver et al., 2001). According to the research, remarried couples are more likely to divorce within the first two years of remarriage (Coleman et al., 2000; Hetherington, 1999; Portrie & Hill, 2005). Given that 65% or more of divorcees remarry (Portrie & Hill, 2005) and 30% of divorcees remarry

within a year (Coleman et al., 2000; Hetherington, 1999), blended families can begin and end and become another blended family within a few short years.

    Blended family process. When a family comes together to form a blended family, they go through a process to develop their new blended family identity (Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001; Bray, 1999; Greef & Du Toit, 2009; Hetherington, 1999). According to the research, it can take two to five years for families to create and solidify a new blended family identity (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Bray, 1999; Golish, 2003; Hetherington, 1999). Families who made it through those first two to five formative years were more likely to stay together (Coleman et al., 2000; Hetherington, 1999; Portrie & Hill, 2005).

    During those formative years, blended families deal with a wide range of complex issues (Baxter, Braithwaite, Nicholson, & Demo, 1999; Braithwaite et al., 2001; Golish, 2003; Stewart, 2005a, 2005b). Some of the complex issues discussed in the research literature have included the following: boundary ambiguity (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Stewart, 2005a), role ambiguity (Baxter et al., 1999; Braithwaite et al., 2001; Portrie & Hill, 2005), communication (Beaudry, Boisvert, Simard, Parent, & Blais, 2004; Braithwaite et al., 2001; Golish, 2003; Portrie & Hill, 2005), conflict resolution (Baxter et al., 1999; Portrie & Hill, 2005), adjusting to change or adaptability (Baxter et al., 1999; Braithwaite et al., 2001), loyalty (Baxter et al., 1999), and solidarity (Baxter et al., 1999; Braithwaite et al., 2001; Golish, 2003; Stewart, 2005a). How the family deals with these issues significantly impacts their family identity (Baxter et al., 1999).

    Not only do blended families face a variety of issues in forming their family identity, researcher have also provided information regarding which circumstances

produced opportunities for the family to gain solidarity or move farther apart (Baxter et al., 1999). Some of those opportune circumstances included changes in household configuration, conflict, holidays/special events, quality time, and family crisis (Baxter et al., 1999). For example, during regular holidays a family may have developed traditions over the years, but with the development of a new family system the family may create new traditions, which then help to develop more solidarity within the new family system (Baxter et al., 1999).

While all blended families experience this formative process, they engage in this process in a variety of ways, leading to success, stagnation, or dissolution (Baxter et al., 1999). Among those elements that lead to the success of blended families, effective communication has been found to help families navigate the many issues they face in forming their new family identity (Golish, 2003; Portrie & Hill, 2005). It was also indicated in the research that role ambiguity decreased when the family came to an agreement regarding the roles, parental or not, of the adults (Coleman et al., 2000). Such an agreement would only have come about with the use of effective communication. Investing in their commitment to the marriage and to the family helped to create a sense of success as a blended family among family members (Michaels, 2000). Investing in strengthening their sense of family among immediate family members and extended family members also enhanced blended families' sense of success as a family (Michaels, 2000).

The couple. The complex issues and processes that take place in blended families affect all of the relationships within the family, including the couple's relationship (Hetherington, 1999). According to the research, divorce in remarriage happens more

frequently and quickly than within first marriages (Coleman et al., 2000; Hetherington, 1999). As many as 60% of remarriages end in divorce, and, in addition, 25% of remarriages end within the first five years (Coleman et al., 2000; Hetherington, 1999). Researchers have therefore focused their attention on some of the factors that might contribute to remarried couples' propensity toward divorce (Coleman et al., 2000). For couples whose remarriage formed a blended family, there is evidence to suggest that the presence of stepchildren increased those couples' chance of divorce by 50% (Hetherington, 1999; Portrie & Hill, 2005; Stewart, 2005b).

Researchers investigating couples in blended families have found that conflict within the couple dyad and children's behavior greatly affected each other (Jenkins, Simpson, Dunn, Rasbash, & O'Connor, 2005). It has been indicated that there is a stronger association between marital quality and parent-child relationship quality in stepfamilies than in nuclear families (Coleman et al., 2000). Additionally, couples in which both partners had children from previous unions had more conflict, and most disagreements centered on parenting the stepchildren (Coleman et al., 2000).

Cohabitation. Despite the prevalence of cohabitating couples, these couples were often not included in the research on blended families (Coleman et al., 2000; Weaver et al., 2001). Cohabitating couples were more likely than remarried couples to have a child from a previous relationship, yet they were less likely to have additional children in the new union (Coleman et al., 2000). According to the research, 25% of blended families cohabitated instead of marrying, and most couples cohabitated before forming a legal union (Coleman et al., 2000; Weaver et al., 2001). In short, a more thorough treatment of research on blended families should include both married and cohabitating couples.

The parents. As the couple in a blended family is significantly impacted by the parent-child relationship, the role of parenting is another important element of the blended family (Jenkins et al., 2005). One of the unique aspects of parenting within a blended family is the kaleidoscope of roles the parents may play (Cartwright, 2010; Svare, Jay, & Mason, 2004). Unlike in the nuclear family in which the role of parents is more clearly delineated by society, parents in blended families may play less stereotypical roles within their families based upon their relation to the different children within their homes (Cartwright, 2010; Svare et al., 2004).

The biological parent. A biological parent in a blended family is one who brings children from a previous relationship into a blended family and/or has a mutual child within their blended family. Researchers have found that biological parents in blended families struggle with loyalty between their biological children from a previous union and their new partner (Howell et al., 1998; Schrodt & Braithwaite, 2011). Biological parents in blended families may act as the ambassador between their biological children and their new partner, which either helps the two parties to develop a closer relationship or keeps the two parties at a distance (Howell et al., 1998; Schrodt & Braithwaite, 2011). The biological parent and child may have a different perception than the stepparent of the level of closeness or distance that is best between the stepchild and stepparent (Howell et al., 1998; Schrodt & Braithwaite, 2011).

Biological mothers are most often the residential parent in blended families (Coleman et al., 2000). Therefore, biological mothers are also more likely to deal with loyalty issues between their biological children and their new partner (Schrodt & Braithwaite, 2011). Biological mothers in blended families are also most often the

disciplinarian for their biological children, rather than the stepfather (Morin et al., 2001). On the other hand, biological fathers are most often the non-residential parent and are therefore more distant with their biological children (Laursen, 2005). As such, biological fathers are more likely to show levels of involvement with their biological children similar to that of stepfathers (Adamsons, O'Brien, & Pasley, 2007; MacDonald & DeMaris, 2002).

Another type of biological parent in blended families is parents who have a mutual biological child from the current relationship. This type of parent is the parent of focus in this study. There is very little research on such parents in blended families. A more thorough discussion of what little research exists on this type of parent will follow in a later section of the literature review.

The stepparent. Many aspects of the experience of step-parenting in blended families have been studied. However, the stepparent of interest in this study is a type of stepparent who has received less attention in the research literature. This is the stepparent who is both a stepparent to their partner's biological child, as well as a biological parent to their mutual biological child from the current relationship. Research is sparse on the experience of this stepparent who is also a biological parent.

One of the important issues that stepparents navigate within a blended family is developing their parental role with their stepchildren (Svare et al., 2004). Specifically, researchers have found that stepparents have to address the level of authority they have for parenting and role ambiguity in parenting (Schrodt & Braithwaite, 2011). There are many possibilities of the types of roles and how much authority stepparents can successfully maintain in parenting their stepchildren (Svare et al., 2004). The parental

roles stepparents have engaged in have ranged from almost the same as a biological parent and high authority to more of a distant relation with very little authority (Svare et al., 2004).

According to the research, stepparents parent their stepchildren with lower levels of monitoring, or supervising their stepchildren's activities, than biological parents (Portrie & Hill, 2005; Rodgers & Rose, 2002). Stepparents are also more likely to provide lower levels of support or emotional connectedness, compared to biological parents (Portrie & Hill, 2005; Rodgers & Rose, 2002). Some researchers theorized that the lower level of involvement from stepparents may have made room for more involvement from biological parents, which may be a welcomed experience for biological children who wish to be with their biological parents (Svare et al., 2004). Traditional family roles often do not apply to blended families (Speer & Trees, 2009; Svare et al., 2004). Researchers found that stepparent support was more important than monitoring for stepchildren and that parental monitoring might be less of a protective factor among blended families (Coleman et al., 2000). Therefore, stepparents who sought affectionate relationships with their stepchildren initially and consistently had more affectionate relationships with their stepchildren over time as compared to stepparents who engaged in lower levels of support (Coleman et al., 2000).

Much of the research on stepparents is regarding stepfathers, because they are the most likely residential step-parent. Residential stepfathers play a supplemental role for the non-residential biological father, which is based upon the level of involvement of the biological father with the children (MacDonald & DeMaris, 2002). Stepfathers' level of involvement with stepchildren is often dependent upon their level of marital satisfaction

(Adamsons, et al., 2007) and the stepfathers' perception of the psychological adjustment of the children (Flouri, 2004). The stepfathers' authority in parenting is related to the amount of time spent with the children (Coleman et al., 2000). Also, stepfathers demonstrate lower parental monitoring than biological parents and stepmothers (Coleman et al., 2000). It is still unclear what aspects of step-fathering contribute to closer or more distant relationships between the stepfather-stepchild dyad (Coleman et al., 2000). Researchers did find that stepfathers who engaged in higher levels of monitoring and support of their stepchildren increased stepchild satisfaction within the blended family (Coleman et al., 2000).

The research on stepmothers is limited and has often painted a negative picture of stepmothers (Whiting, Smith, Barnett, & Grafsky, 2007). What researchers have found thus far is that stepmothers have a heightened awareness of blended family issues or more sensitivity to the experiences of their new blended family (Portrie & Hill, 2005). Also, stepmothers who have residential stepchildren have more security in their couple relationship than stepmothers who have non-residential care of stepchildren (Portrie & Hill, 2005). Some research has indicated that stepmothers have a harder time than stepfathers parenting their stepchildren (MacDonald & DeMaris, 1996).

The children. The children in blended families encounter a wide range of experiences, depending upon the custody arrangements and their relationship to their variety of parents (Portrie & Hill, 2005; Stewart, 2005a, 2005b). Children experience their blended family differently depending upon both their age at their entrance into the blended family and their age at the time that the research was conducted (Coleman et al.,

2000; Golish, 2003). The following is a discussion of some of the research on children in blended families.

Adolescents. Researchers have found that one of the more challenging times for blended families is when the stepchildren enter adolescence (Stewart, 2005b). Moreover, adolescent stepchildren have a harder time entering a blended family and more difficulties with the stepchild/stepparent dyad (Coleman et al., 2000; Golish, 2003). In general, both biological and step- adolescent children are strongly affected by family transitions, such as the ones that take place in the blended family process like death, divorce, and remarriage (Isaacs, 2002; Portrie & Hill, 2005). Among the blended family transitions adolescents struggle to deal with are the transitions related to parental involvement by biological parents and stepparents (Portrie & Hill, 2005). It has been well established in the research that adolescence is a time of conflict and that adolescents have regular conflict with their parents, regardless of biological or stepparents, nuclear or blended family (Laursen, 2005).

Young children. With adolescence presenting so many new dynamics to any type of family, the researcher of this study chose to focus on families with young children who had not yet entered into adolescence. Much of the research on young children in blended families addressed the effects on children of being in a blended family system (Coleman et al., 2000; Portrie & Hill, 2005). Researchers have looked at the academic achievement and internalizing and externalizing behaviors of young children in diverse family types (Portrie & Hill, 2005). Researchers have found that young children in blended families show externalizing behaviors, such as acting out, and academic deficiencies, although these behaviors were also found to be statistically insignificant in comparison to children

in non-blended families (Gennetian, 2005; Ginther & Pollak, 2004). Young children also

experience internalizing behaviors, such as depression and low self-esteem, in

conjunction with the blended family process (Portrie & Hill, 2005).

Many researchers have suggested that blended families provide a poorer

environment for children than the nuclear family (Bray, 1999; Ginther & Pollak, 2004;

Portrie & Hill, 2005). However, researchers have since found that blended families are

less impaired than was previously assumed, and instead, they are able to develop into just

as functional a family unit equally as well as a nuclear family over time (Bray, 1999;

Portrie & Hill, 2005). While researchers have found that children in stepfamilies are more

likely to have academic difficulties, internalizing behaviors, and/or externalizing

behaviors, only 25% or less of those affected children have difficulties that are clinically

significant (Coleman et al., 2000; Hetherington et al., 1999; Portrie & Hill, 2005).

Therefore, the majority of stepchildren do not have clinically significant difficulties as a

result of being in a blended family.

Some researchers explored protective factors in blended families for young

children, or what elements came together to help protect young children as they entered

into or grew up in a blended family. According to the research, a protective factor for

young children in blended families is time with their biological parents (Hofferth, 2006).

Specifically, quality time with the biological father positively affected children's

self-esteem (Flouri, 2004; Portrie & Hill, 2005). In general, parental monitoring and

parental support were indicated in the research as the two most important protective

factors for children in blended families (Portrie & Hill, 2005; Rodgers & Rose, 2002).

This research study addresses parents in blended families specifically parenting young children, both step and mutual.

  Half-siblings. The focus of this study is parents' experience of parenting half-siblings in a blended family. Half-siblings, children who have one biological parent in common, are created in blended families with stepchildren and mutual children. The research on half-siblings in the academic literature is limited (De'Ath, 1996). One of the main elements found in the research on half-siblings is that the nature of the half-sibling relationship is similar to that of full siblings, full of closeness and rivalry, compared to that of stepsiblings, associated with less closeness and rivalry (Deater-Deckard, Dunn, & Lussier, 2002). As such, half-siblings do not necessarily identify as half, rather than full siblings (Ganong & Coleman, 1988). Researchers have also found that the presence of a positive relationship with an older half-sibling was sometimes a protective factor for younger half-siblings and possibly a protective factor for the older half-sibling as well (Anderson, 1999).

Blended Families With Half-Siblings

  There are numerous variations of blended family forms and therefore many different parenting roles within the diverse types of blended families (De'Ath, 1996). As such, there are still many holes in the research regarding parenting in specific blended family types including the type that is the focus of this study, parenting half-siblings within a blended family. In this type of blended family, one or both partners are stepparents and the couple has a mutual child within the current relationship, making both partners biological parents as well (Cartwright, 2010; De'Ath, 1996).

Relevant research. Only a few studies specifically addressed the blended family

form in which there are both stepchildren and mutual or shared children. Researchers

looked at why blended families chose to have a mutual child. They found that a couple's

desire to have mutual children was impacted by whether or not each partner already had

biological children (Stewart, 2002). Couples were more likely to continue to intend to

have children until both partners had a biological child (Stewart, 2002). Thus, the

presence of both stepchildren and biological children from a previous relationship was an

important factor in the couple's decision to have a mutual child (Stewart, 2002).

Moreover, blended families in which the stepfather was young and did not have children

from a previous relationship were more likely to have a mutual child, than blended

families in which the stepfather was older and/or had already had children from a

previous union (Ganong & Coleman, 1988). In general, men were less deterred from

having a mutual child by the presence of biological children from their previous

relationship than were women (Stewart, 2002).

Another question researchers posed was whether or not having a mutual child

brought the blended family closer together. The findings were that the presence of a

mutual child did not have a solidifying effect on the blended family (Ganong & Coleman,

1988; Stewart, 2005b). Specifically, blended families with mutual children did not have

higher levels of commitment than other family forms, and had lower levels of family

support than other family forms (Downs, 2003). However, blended families with mutual

children did have a high desire to be in their families, shedding light on one positive

effect of the addition of a mutual child (Downs, 2003).

Researchers also found that the addition of a mutual child did not affect stepparents' experience of the difficulty of raising stepchildren (MacDonald & DeMaris, 1996). On the other hand, researchers did find that stepparents had an increased difficulty finding satisfaction with their stepchildren when their first biological child was a mutual child from the current relationship (MacDonald & DeMaris, 1996). MacDonald and DeMaris posited that stepparents in blended families who became biological parents for the first time experienced role conflict that affected their experience of parenting their stepchildren. In contrast, stepparents who had biological children from a previous relationship, and then went on to have mutual children in the current relationship did not experience as significant an impact on their satisfaction in the parenting of their stepchildren (MacDonald & DeMaris, 1996). Additionally, a limited descriptive finding in the research was that parents found the birth of their mutual child to be initially challenging to their relationship with their biological children, but later their children adjusted and were generally happy to have their half-sibling (Ganong & Coleman, 1988).

Finally, one researcher also explored a variety of types of families and their experience of boundary ambiguity, or the concept of family membership according to each individual family member. Boundary ambiguity was found to be higher in blended families than nuclear families and was the highest among the most complex blended families, in which both partners had children from previous relationships as well as mutual children from the current relationship (Stewart, 2005a). Blended families with just one set of stepchildren and a set of mutual children had less boundary ambiguity than those with two sets of stepchildren and no mutual children (Stewart, 2005a). In short, the blended families with the most nonresidential stepchildren had higher rates of boundary

ambiguity, regardless of the presence of a mutual child. Stewart (2005a) attributed this effect to the presence of more complex parental roles with nonresidential children. Stewart (2005a) also cited research indicating that stepchildren fared better when a half-sibling was present.

A gap in the research. There are still numerous gaps in the research about blended families with half-siblings. Specifically, we know very little about the unique experience of parenting half-siblings. Such a parent would be performing both the parental roles of a residential biological parent and a stepparent who varies in the level of custody of their stepchildren. None of the published studies were qualitative in nature, therefore lacking in rich descriptions of the lived experience of parents in such families. With so little information on parenting in this form of blended family, further research is needed to better understand parenting in this blended family type. In answer to this gap in the research, this qualitative study is aimed at providing such descriptive information on parenting simultaneously mutual children and stepchildren within a blended family.

Phenomenological Methodological Approach

The method for gathering rich descriptions of the experience of parenting simultaneously stepchildren and mutual children within a blended family is through qualitative research. Specifically, the qualitative method of phenomenology is best suited to gathering experiential information. In order to effectively conduct phenomenological research on the experience of parenting half-siblings within a blended family, it is necessary to understand the origins of phenomenological research and the basic structure of this form of research. The following is a discussion of the philosophical underpinnings of this research method and the application of this method to psychological research. Also included is a brief discussion of some methods for strengthening the qualitative research design.

Philosophy of Phenomenology

One of the pioneers of phenomenology was Edmund Husserl (Giorgi, 2009; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). In agreement with Kant and Descartes, Moustakas (1994) asserted that "knowledge based on intuition and essence precedes empirical knowledge" (p. 26). One vein of philosophical research is the phenomenological method (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). A core presupposition of phenomenology is that understanding human experience in relation to the world is the beginning of knowledge, and measuring physical things to gain knowledge should spring out of that primary source of knowledge, which is human experience (Creswell, 2007; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

Intentionality. The focus of phenomenology is human consciousness. Husserl applied the concept of intentionality to his theory of consciousness to help describe an

important aspect of the nature of consciousness (Creswell, 2007; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). According to Husserl, the concept of intentionality indicates that consciousness is always focused on something in particular (Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989). Therefore, an important part of consciousness is the act of intentionally focusing on an object (Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). The object of consciousness is the experience of the world (Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989). One can experience objects such as a physical thing, a relational interaction, or an imagined scenario about the world (Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). In fact, one can only experience subjects that have to do with the world (Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

Noema and noesis. Husserl shifted away from the traditional philosophy of the subject-object distinction, in which the focus of study was the cognitions and physical chemistry/biology of a person (the subject) and the characteristics and/or physical properties of a thing (object) (Creswell, 2007; Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Instead, Husserl engaged in a more nuanced examination of the subjective (Moustakas, 1994). He subdivided the subjective experience into noema, what a person perceives, and noesis, the way they perceive it (Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989).

Noema refers to what one perceives: the thing/person/concept that one directs their consciousness toward (Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989). In Moustakas' (1994) example of a tree, the noema is the tree perceived in one's consciousness, rather than the physical tree itself. Therefore, the person's perception of the tree is the phenomena, rather than the physical tree (Moustakas, 1994). The concept

of noesis refers to how one perceives the phenomena: the way in which one directs and focuses their consciousness on the noema (Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989). Noesis is therefore the way in which one emotionally, cognitively, and sensually experiences the phenomena (Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). In the example of the tree, the perception of the tree is the noema, and how one experiences that perception of the tree is the noesis. One might experience a tree as a pleasant place to sit for shade; then, after a romantic kiss under that same tree, one has an affectionate experience of a tree.

The nature of the noesis is ever changing (Moustakas, 1994). The initial noesis (way of experiencing) of a noema (the thing experienced) informs, and is informed by, the subsequent interactions with that noema (Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). As the noesis changes through experience, it also affects one's perception of the noema. This ever changing process also informs what noemas one might focus their attention on in the future (Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). In the example of the tree, if one experiences a joyful kiss under a tree in autumn, then they might be more joyful about and more likely to seek out autumn trees in the future.

Husserl posed that the correlational relationship between noema and noesis is bidirectional (Creswell, 2007; Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). How one experiences a phenomenon (noesis) is informed by what they have experienced in the past (noema and noesis), and the way one experiences that phenomenon (noesis) informs their understanding of what they experienced (noema) (Moustakas, 1994). Noema and noesis are also considered inseparable, in that every human experience is comprised of a way of experiencing that which is experienced (Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

Epoche. Husserl proposed a specific stance for researchers to take in order to effectively explore phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). The epoche, another core presupposition of this philosophy, is a stance in which the researcher is to suspend their judgments and assumptions regarding the phenomenon (Langdrigde, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Husserl suggested that the epoche enables the researcher to explore the phenomenon with a fresh view, as if for the first time (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). In the words of Moustakas (1994), "In the epoche, the everyday understandings, judgments, and knowings are set aside, and phenomena are revisited, freshly, naively, in a wide open sense, from the vantage point of a pure or transcendental ego" (p. 33).

Husserl's goal in using the epoche was not to achieve pure objectivity, as the original empiricists sought out (Moustakas, 1994). Rather, the process of epoche provides the researcher with more receptiveness and openness toward the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). In this way, the researcher can become aware of, and critique, their biases, therefore resulting in a more open stance toward the subject of study (Moustakas, 1994). Approaching the phenomenon with such openness allows the researcher to consider all aspects presented about the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Some of the aspects presented might be expected by the researcher, whereas other aspects might not be expected (Langdridge 2007; Moustakas, 1994). However, all of the aspects presented about the phenomenon are equally important because they all come together to paint the complete picture of the noema and the noesis of that phenomenon (Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenological reduction. Once data has been gathered on the phenomenon of study, the phenomenological researcher then enters into the phenomenological

reduction or the data analysis process. Polkinghorne (1989) described the phenomenological reduction as "the 'reduction' or 'reducing' of specific descriptions to their fundamental structures" (p. 51). Therefore the goal in the phenomenological reduction is to consider all aspects of the phenomenon shared and to reduce it down into its most core constituents (Moustakas, 1994). There are a few different methods of phenomenological reduction, but they all share a few common components (Langdridge, 2007).

One element is the concept of horizontalizing, or making sure that all parts of the experience have equal value (Langdridge, 2007). This approach ensures that nothing is left out or overlooked because of the presuppositions of the researcher (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Langdridge, 2007). Most phenomenological data analysis methods include a first step of looking at all of the data together to gain an overall picture of the phenomenon. The next step is usually some method of dividing the data into smaller parts that are easier for the researcher to digest and consider (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Polkinghorne, 1989). Finally, the researcher moves from the smaller parts to finding the key constituents of the phenomenon and then creates a general description of the essence of the phenomenon (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

One of Husserl's tools for the phenomenological reduction is imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994). In this process the researcher considers an element of the phenomenon from a variety of possibilities and views (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Langdridge, 2007). In the example of the tree, an imaginative variation would be the consideration of what makes a tree a tree rather than a bush or a rock (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). This process of consideration has been adapted from philosophy to numerous

disciplines applying phenomenological research as a method for getting to the core, or the essence, of a phenomenon (Giorgi, 2009). Finding the essential constituents of a phenomenon is the goal of phenomenological research (Creswell, 2007; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Langdridge, 2007). The essence is that which makes the experience uniquely about that particular phenomenon (Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Through the phenomenological reduction, therefore, the researcher finds the essence of a phenomenon.

Phenomenological Research Design

There are a variety of methods for doing psychological phenomenological research (Creswell, 2007; Langdridge, 2007, Polkinghorne, 1989). Descriptive phenomenology is the approach closest to the original philosophical approach of Husserl (Langdridge, 2007). It follows the general protocol of philosophical phenomenology, with slight alterations making it scientific and psychologically focused, rather than solely philosophical (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). The descriptive method of phenomenology was chosen for this research because the purpose of this research is to describe the essence of the experience of simultaneously parenting both a mutual child from the current relationship and the partner's stepchild, within a blended family. There are a variety of descriptive phenomenological research methods that specifically include a protocol for analyzing the data, such as that of Colaizzi (1978), Van Manen (1990), Moustakas (1994), and Giorgi (2009).

While there are no definitive methods for descriptive phenomenological research, there are general guidelines that most phenomenological research studies follow (Creswell, 2007; Langdridge, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1989). First, the research question

addresses a phenomenon that is yet to be described (Creswell, 2007; Giorgi, 2009; Polkinghorne, 1989). As the goal of phenomenological research is to gain an understanding of a person's perceptions of their experience of a particular phenomenon, the researcher then recruits participants who meet the criteria of having experienced the phenomenon in question (Creswell, 2007; Giorgi, 2009; Langdridge, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1989).

Sampling procedures. A criterion sample is a sample in which all of the participants meet a certain set of criteria (Creswell, 2007; Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan, 2008). This is a common method of sampling in phenomenological research because it assures that all participants meet the general criteria of having experienced the phenomenon in question (Heppner et al., 2008). Therefore, the inclusionary criteria may include a variety of aspects that indicate the participant has experienced the phenomenon of study (Creswell, 2007; Heppner et al., 2008; Langdridge, 2007).

In phenomenological research, another recommended method of sampling is maximum variation, in which the participants are people who have all experienced the same phenomenon but vary in individual characteristics (Langdridge, 2007). In this way each individual participant has a slightly different perception of the phenomenon, but the invariant features of the phenomenon should be common across the perceptions of the varied group of participants (Langdridge, 2007).

The sample size of phenomenological research varies from study to study. Given that in-depth interviews or questionnaires provide a vast amount of data about the phenomenon of study, only a limited number of interviews or questionnaires are necessary in this form of research (Hycner, 1985). As Langdridge (2007) noted in his

review of phenomenological research in psychology, "sample sizes are usually very small (around five or six, and sometimes fewer, participants for most research conducted individually) due to the time-consuming nature of the analytic process" (p. 87). As such, as few as five participants can be a sufficient enough number of accounts to saturate the topic of study given redundancies in the interviews or questionnaires (Hycner, 1985).

      Bracketing methods. Before the phenomenological researcher begins the data collection and analysis, they enter into the epoche and bracket their presuppositions about the phenomenon in question, so as to approach the research with freshness (Giorgi, 2009; Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological researchers are tasked with the responsibility of bracketing their assumptions about the phenomenon in question throughout the research process (Giorgi, 2009; Langdridge, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1989). While it may not be possible to approach the research with a blank slate, the researcher can assess their preconceived notions about the topic at hand and then set aside those presuppositions while conducting the research (Langdridge, 2007). Once the research is completed, the researcher can then compare their original assessment with the research findings to ensure that they have made their best effort at bracketing throughout the phenomenological research process (Langdridge, 2007).

      In an effort to provide readers with sufficient explanation of the researcher's preconceived notions, the researcher can provide both a thorough literature review on the constructs and theories from which the researcher draws prior academic understanding about the phenomenon of study and a summary of the researcher's field notes (Langdridge, 2007). Field notes, a commonly used tool in qualitative research, provide

the researcher with a place to keep track of their thoughts and biases throughout the research process (Creswell, 2007; Langdridge, 2007).

Data collection methods. The phenomenological data is most often gathered through semi-structured interviews, and written questionnaires are the second most common form of data collection (Creswell, 2007; Giorgi, 2009; Heppner et al., 2008; Langdridge, 2007; Mastain, 2007). Phenomenological interviews are generally semi-structured because the interview often starts with a structured question about the person's experience of a phenomenon and then continues with less structured follow-up questions to further explore the participant's experience of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2009; Langdridge, 2007). The interview questions are posed in such a way as to elicit from the participants their experience of the phenomenon rather than their theories, or the researcher's theories, about their experience of the phenomenon, so as to get as close to the participants' experience as possible (Giorgi, 2009; Polkinghorne, 1989). Phenomenological interviews are generally audio recorded and transcribed in preparation for a formal data analysis (Creswell, 2007; Giorgi, 2009; Langdridge, 2007).

Data analysis methods. The goal of the data analysis is to find the essential constituents of the phenomenon as experienced by the participants (Creswell, 2007; Giorgi, 2009; Langdridge, 2007). The researcher conducts a data analysis of the raw data using a particular phenomenological data analysis method. Most phenomenological data analysis methods have a few components (Giorgi, 2009; Langdridge, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1989). The researcher begins the analysis by approaching each interview or questionnaire separately (Giorgi, 2009; Langdridge, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1989). With

each individual interview or questionnaire, the researcher will follow some variety of the following steps:

1. The researcher reads the transcript or questionnaire to get a sense of the whole experience described (Giorgi, 2009; Langdridge, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1989).

2. The researcher uses some kind of method for dividing the transcript/questionnaire into smaller meaning units (Giorgi, 2009; Langdridge, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1989).

3. The researcher then assesses the psychological and topical (the specific phenomenon) meaning of each unit narrowing down the essential constituents of the experience described (Giorgi, 2009; Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989).

4. With the above information, the researcher will create a description of the essential constituents of the experience for each individual transcript/questionnaire (Giorgi, 2009; Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989).

5. Finally, the researcher will create one or more comprehensive descriptions integrating all of the transcripts or questionnaires as they are similar or different (Giorgi, 2009; Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989).

Some phenomenological researchers will return to the participants with the transcript and the individual data analysis for their feedback in order to validate the findings before they integrate the individual data analyses into a general description

(Creswell, 2007; Langdridge, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1989). Use of a computer program, like ATLAS.ti may enable the analysis process (Langdridge, 2007).

Giorgi's descriptive phenomenology methodology. As one of the main pioneers of the descriptive phenomenological approach and the most widely accepted descriptive method, the research method that was chosen for this study was that of Amedeos Giorgi (2009). Giorgi's (2009) method was based on phenomenological philosophy and then altered to meet the needs of psychological scientific research. The method of Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) includes all of the main elements of the phenomenological approach. By operationalizing the phenomenological reduction and focusing it to address psychological issues, Giorgi's (2009) method provides a bridge for the researcher to cross from philosophy to the psychological research arena.

Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) outlined specific steps for the data analysis with psychological and topical constructs in mind. The psychological construct can be defined as the behaviors, emotions, thoughts, and relationships that occur in the data (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). The topical construct refers to the topic, or phenomenon, of the study, which in this study is simultaneously parenting stepchildren and mutual children within a blended family (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Giorgi (2009) also designed specific steps for the data analysis process, which are outlined in the Project Method section. In following Giorgi's method of data analysis, the researcher accesses the essence of a phenomenon of study with a method that allows others to check or replicate the researcher's data analysis process.

Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research

Validity and reliability are important aspects of the research process in all forms

of research (Creswell, 2007; Langdridge, 2007). In qualitative research, the term

trustworthiness is often used in place of validity and reliability as a method of increasing

the rigor of such research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lovi & Barr, 2009; Scannell-Desch &

Doherty, 2010; Taniguchi & Magnussen, 2009). Lincoln and Guba recommended that

qualitative researchers takes steps to establish credibility (a form of internal validity),

transferability (a form of external validity), dependability (a form of reliability), and

confirmability (a form of objectivity). Current researchers still refer to these concepts for

strengthening the rigor of their qualitative research (Lovi & Barr, 2009; Scannell-Desch

& Doherty, 2010; Taniguchi & Magnussen, 2009).

Credibility. Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasized the importance of using

techniques for establishing credibility in place of internal validity. Such techniques

include the use of multiple raters of the data analysis and returning to the participants

with the transcripts and the individual data analysis summaries to get the participants'

feedback (Creswell, 2007; Langdridge, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba

suggested that going back to the participants for their feedback is a step that strengthens

the internal validity of qualitative research.

Inherent in taking this step are some risks. One risk is the possibility that the

participants may not feel comfortable providing honest feedback to the researcher

because of the power differential (Langdridge, 2007). There is also the possibility that the

transformation of the interview into the data analysis findings may be difficult for the

participant to understand, having not been trained in phenomenological data analysis

(Giorgi, 2009). Moreover, as a client in a therapy session may not see the general picture of their struggle, so in research, the participant "may not be able to adopt a meta-perspective on their own experience (step outside the natural attitude)" (Langdridge, 2007, p. 82). This step creates authenticity in the research because it provides the participants with the opportunity to ensure that they were understood and that the researcher has accurately conveyed their perspective; it is often considered a reasonable risk (Creswell, 2007; Langdridge, 2007). In order to minimize the potential risks, the researcher can provide clear, concise, simplified information to the participants and gain informed consent about the participants' responsibility to provide feedback at the outset of the research process.

Transferability. In place of external validity, Lincoln and Guba (1985) introduced the concept of transferability. They suggested that it is the responsibility of the reader to determine the transferability of the research or to what extent they can apply the research elsewhere, considering the context and limitations of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As such, it is the responsibility of the researcher to provide sufficient information about the context and limitations of their research so that the reader has enough information to consider its transferability to other applications (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thus, the researcher should take efforts to clearly describe the context, regarding the relevant current research literature and the specific methodology of their research. The researcher should also discuss the limitations of their study.

Dependability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed dependability in place of the quantitative concept of reliability. Reliability refers to the ability of other researchers to replicate a study and find the same outcome (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As

such, the qualitative researcher should include a specific outline of the steps taken to make their research replicable. However, inherent in qualitative research is a less precise replicable nature.

For example, in phenomenological research the goal is to find the essential constituents of the phenomenon from the kaleidoscope of individual experiences with that phenomenon (Langdridge, 2007). When a phenomenological study is replicated, similar essentials will likely be found; however, there may be differences as well, given the change in the participant kaleidoscope. While the participants might change in a replicated study, the phenomenon of study should not, and a well-constructed research design can ensure that the particular phenomenon of study is maintained as the focus of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By creating very specific inclusionary criteria, outlining the necessary characteristics that define whether or not a person has encountered that phenomenon, the research design can be made dependable enough to ensure that the participants found for a future replication of the study would in fact have experienced the particular phenomenon of study.

Confirmability. Finally, Lincoln and Guba (1985) described the concept of confirmability, which is in regards to developing objectivity within the research process. Objectivity in quantitative research is defined as finding facts that are confirmable, while subjectivity refers to personal bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba suggested that in qualitative research, objectivity be redefined as that which has been experienced by numerous individuals, and subjectivity is that which a single individual describes as their experience. Therefore, in order to demonstrate confirmability, the researcher can

interview a sample of multiple participants and combine the results of their interviews to find an objective result.

Project Method

Research Question

What is a person's experience of simultaneously parenting a mutual genetic child and a stepchild within a blended family?

Research Design

A general overview of the research procedure follows. In this study, participant recruitment (purposeful sampling of a criterion sample) was followed by a phone screening of participants based on the inclusionary criteria, which are outlined in the Participants section (Giorgi, 2009; Langdridge, 2007). The screened participants who qualified were provided with information about the study both verbally and by surface mail and email, and an appointment was scheduled for their interview. Informed consent was obtained from the participants at the outset of their involvement in the study in person at their scheduled interview (Creswell, 2007; Langdridge, 2009). Immediately before each interview, the researcher wrote a journal entry about her presuppositions about the phenomenon in an effort to bracket her perspective and approach the interview with freshness and an awareness of her biases (Giorgi, 2009; Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

At the appointed times, the researcher conducted an individual semi-structured interview with each participant at the predetermined location; such location criteria is discussed in the Data Collection section. The semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed for data analysis. The researcher followed Giorgi's (2009) method for data analysis. Throughout the data analysis process, the researcher continued to bracket her presuppositions about the phenomenon by journaling and comparing it to

the data analysis (Giorgi, 2009; Langdridge, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1989). Each individual interview was first analyzed separately using Giorgi's (2009) data analysis method. Once each individual interview was analyzed, the researcher mailed or emailed to each participant their individual transcript and data analysis summary for their verification or clarification of the findings on their individual interview.

The researcher was able to attain feedback on the data analysis from 100% of the participants. After the researcher received verification and/or clarification from the participants who were willing to provide feedback (in this case, all of the participants), the researcher mailed the participants the promised incentive, a gas gift card of $25 dollars. The researcher then finalized the data analysis. In this step, the researcher combined the findings of each of the individual interviews into one summary, in adherence with Giorgi's (2009) data analysis method. Upon completion of the project, the researcher mailed each participant a copy of the findings.

Participants

This study included six participants who were parents within blended families. Maximum variation of the participants was achieved among the following three demographic variables: gender, age of parent, and socioeconomic status. See Table 1 for a breakdown of the variation of these demographic variables among the six participants.

Table 1

Sample Variation

Participant	Gender	Age	SES
A	Male	30	90-100k
B	Male	40	30-40k
C	Male	28	15k
D	Female	25	60k
E	Female	35	110k
F	Female	31	50k
Totals			
6 Participants	Male: 3 Participants	20s = 2	90k+ = 2
	Female: 3 Participants	30-34 = 2	50k+ = 2
		35-40 = 2	15k + = 2

The sample of participants included three males and three females. Two of the participants were in their 20s, two in their early 30s, and two were between 35 and 40 years old. Two of the participants had a family income around 100k, two other participants were in the 50k–60k range, and the other two participants had family incomes below 40k. Five of the participants were married and one cohabitating. Three of the participants were married for about three years, one participant had been cohabitating for two years, and two of the participants were married for five years. Four of the participants had one stepchild, and two of the participants had two or more stepchildren. Four of the participants had one mutual child, and two of the participants had two mutual children. Two of the participants had the majority or sole custody of their stepchildren, two other participants had 50% custody, and the other two participants had 30% custody of their stepchildren. See Table 2 for a listing of the demographics by participant.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Demographic Data by Participant						
Participant	A	B	C	D	E	F
Age	**30yrs**	40yrs	28yrs	25yrs	34.5yrs	31yrs
Gender	Male	Male	Male	Female	Female	Female
SES	90-100k	30-40k	15k	60k	110k	50k
Relationship Status	Married	Married	Married	Engaged	Married	Married
Length of Cohabitation/ Relationship	3.5yrs	3yrs	2-3yrs	Cohab 2yrs /Relationship 4yrs	5.5yrs	5yrs
Mutual Genetic Children/Ages	Son / 2yrs	Daughter / 22mo	Sons / 3yrs, 1yr, & pregnant	Son / 8mo	Son / 2yrs	Sons / 3.5yrs & 1.5yrs
Stepchildren/Ages	Stepdaughter / 10yrs	Stepdaughters / 15, 11, 7, & 6yrs	Stepdaughters / 10yrs & 6yrs	Stepdaughter / 7yrs	Stepdaughter / 8.5yrs	Stepson / 11yrs
Custody of Stepchildren	Majority	Sole	50%	50%	30%	30%
Biological children /Ages	NA	Daughters 13 & 12yrs	NA	NA	NA	NA
Custody of Biological children	NA	Sole custody	NA	NA	NA	NA
Education	Some college	AA	Some college	Some college	BA	Some college
Religion	Christian	Roman Catholic	Christian	None	None	Christian

The researcher used a criterion sample. The specific inclusionary criteria for the participants included the following: It was required that in the household there was at least one child from the current cohabiting or married relationship and at least one stepchild who is genetically related to the other parent from a previous relationship. This would make the participating parent a stepparent and a genetic parent. In some families there are mutual genetic children, children who are genetically related to one parent, and children who are genetically related to the other parent. In those cases, both parents are stepparents and genetic parents. However, in other families only one parent is both a stepparent and a genetic parent. In order to achieve maximum variation, only one parent from each qualifying family was included in the study, even if both parents qualified. In this way participants from numerous different families were included, creating more variation of experiences across participants. In the cases where both parents qualified for the study, the researcher chose the parent who varied the most from the other research participants in gender, age, and socioeconomic status to achieve maximum variation in the sample.

Other inclusionary criteria for participants were as follows. If cohabiting, participants needed to have a history of cohabiting with their partner in their blended family for a minimum of two years. The length of the romantic relationships of the participants was also limited as a result of the following criteria about the age of the children. The eligible age ranges of the children within these blended families were twofold, concerning the mutual genetic child and the stepchild. It was initially required that the age range for the mutual genetic child was between 1 and 10 years old; however,

it was extended down to 6 months old to allow for more potential participants to qualify for the study. The required age range for the stepchild initially was between 2 and 10 years old, and it was extended to 11 years old as well, to allow for more potential participants to qualify for the study. It was also initially required that the parents have a minimum of 50% custody of their stepchild. However, during the recruitment process the researcher shifted that requirement to a minimum of 30% custody to allow more potential participants to qualify for the study.

All of the changes made to the inclusionary criteria were cleared with the dissertation committee chair's approval first, and then the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), before making any adjustments to the recruitment process. Moreover, these changes did not violate the original theoretical reasoning for the original criteria of including families with young children. Broadening the age range of the young children made it possible for more participants to qualify for the study, but it did not change the focus of study from looking at people's experience of parenting young children rather than adolescents.

Data Collection

Approval. After receiving approval from the Antioch University Seattle Institutional Review Board, the researcher began the following sampling procedures.

Recruitment. The researcher began recruitment for the criterion sample in August 2011. A general advertisement about the purpose and method of the study was created. It included information providing an incentive for participation in the study, a gas gift card for $25 dollars (see Appendix D, Recruitment Advertisement). This

advertisement was used across all sampling venues. Respondents to the ads called or emailed.

Methods of recruitment included online advertising via a mass email to one thousand recipients, Facebook advertising targeted at around two thousand parents in blended families in Washington state, emails sent to blended-family-themed Meet Up Groups in Washington state, and other social media. The researcher also posted flyers throughout the Pacific Northwest of Washington state at 20 grocery stores, 20 coffee shops, four libraries, and two large churches. The researcher also networked with others to find qualifying participants, including school contacts, by meeting with local schools to discuss opportunities for finding research participants (Creswell, 2007).

The researcher actively recruited participants for two months, August and September 2011. Once the researcher had obtained the minimum number of participants required for this study, which was six participants, and had achieved maximum variation in age, gender, and socioeconomic status among those participants, the researcher stopped the Facebook advertising to save on costs. The researcher continued to advertise in the other sampling venues during the data analysis by reposting and replenishing flyers in the different locations during the course of a year. Recruitment was officially ended when saturation of the topic was achieved.

Screening participants. The researcher started screening participants in August 2011. The researcher screened 14 people for this study. While seven of the 14 people qualified for the study, only six people agreed to participate in the study.

When a potential participant contacted the researcher in response to the sampling methods listed above with interest in participating in the study, the researcher conducted

a phone screening. In the phone screening, the researcher outlined the inclusionary and exclusionary criteria to assess whether the person was qualified to be a part of the study (see Appendix A, Screening Protocol). Also during the phone screening, the researcher tried to attain maximum variation among the participants by choosing participants with the most variation in their age, gender, and socioeconomic status. Once a person was found to be eligible for the study during the phone screening, the researcher verbally provided them with more information about what the study entailed. If the person was interested in participating, then the researcher gathered contact information from the participant to surface mail and email a consent form (see Appendix C, Consent Form). The researcher then scheduled the date and location for their interview.

The interviews. The researcher began conducting interviews in August 2011 and continued to schedule and conduct interviews through September 2011. The interviews were conducted at either the participant's home or a local community resource such as a library. The criterion for the location was that it be a quiet space where there would be no interruptions, so as to make expedient the audio recording of the interview. Therefore, the local library with private study rooms for reservation, or an apartment building with a recreation room for reservation were the best options. At the beginning of the interview, the researcher reviewed the consent form with the participant and answered any questions they had. The researcher then obtained written informed consent from the participant (see Appendix C, Consent Form). Once the participant had provided written consent, the researcher conducted a semi-structured interview and audio recorded the interview for later transcription. The interviews started with a brief discussion of demographic information. Then the researcher provided the participants with the following prompt:

"Please describe for me the experience of parenting simultaneously your mutual genetic child and stepchild." Other probing questions were also asked to clarify the above information, including the following: "What was the experience like for you? How did you feel? What did you think? What did you do? What else can you add about the experience?" During the interview, the interviewer took minimal notes on the Interview Protocol (see Appendix B, Interview Protocol) in order to stay on track with the interviewee or as a reminder to ask a follow-up question about an aspect of the experience that the participant shared.

At the end of the interview, the researcher thanked the individual for participating and answered any questions the participant had. The researcher also reminded the participant of the researcher's intent to mail or email the interview transcript and a summary of the data analysis so that the participant could edit any sections of the transcript they did not want included in the study. The participant also agreed to confirm or clarify whether the summary of data analysis on their individual interview was an accurate description of their experience of the phenomenon. If any of the participants needed to further process their thoughts brought up by the interview, the researcher was prepared to provide the participant with a referral to a counselor who works with blended families; however, no referral was necessary. In one case a participant did ask for a brief follow-up interview in order to provide more information about their experience that had surfaced as a result of the first interview. This brief interview was also recorded, transcribed, and included in the data analysis.

Materials

A digital audio recorder and computer audio recorder software was used to record the interviews. The computer audio files of the audio recording were obtained and submitted to the transcriptionist. The interviews were transcribed by the appointed transcriptionist service, a service that is unrelated to the research participants. The computer software program, ATLAS.ti, was used to store and organize the data and the researcher's field notes.

Data Management and Analysis

Privacy and confidentiality. To protect the anonymity of the participants, each participant was given a code number and their consent forms and contact information were stored in a locked file cabinet at a separate location from the audio files, interview protocols, and transcriptions. The audio files, protocols, and transcriptions were labeled with the corresponding code number and any identifying information was masked. Computer files were double locked with a password-protected log-in to get into the computer, and the particular files were also password protected. The transcriptions, the audio tapes, and the interview protocol were kept in a locked file cabinet at the researcher's home. The consent forms with the participants' identifying information were kept at a separate location in a locked file cabinet. Audio recordings were destroyed at the completion of the study.

Phenomenological data analysis. The researcher began to analyze the first individual transcript during the recruitment and interview process in September of 2011. Once the researcher had completed the data analysis of the first interview, the researcher then conducted the analysis of the subsequent individual interviews over the course of a

year. Once all of the six interviews had been analyzed, the researcher reviewed them for

recurrent themes. In consultation with the dissertation committee chair, it was agreed that

there were enough recurrent themes in the transcripts to warrant saturation of the topic of

study. At that point recruitment was ended and the researcher conducted the analysis of

all of the interview transcripts together.

The researcher used ATLAS.ti to organize the data during the data analysis. The

researcher followed the data analysis steps of Giorgi and Giorgi (2003). For an example

of step 3 of the data analysis, see Table 3.

> Step 1: Within the attitude of the scientific phenomenological reduction, R [researcher] reads the transcription or description to grasp the basic sense of the whole situated descriptions. Nothing more is done at this stage.
> Step 2: R [researcher], remaining within the scientific phenomenological reduction, then creates parts by delineating psychological meaning units. A meaning unit is determined whenever R [researcher], in a psychological perspective and mindful of the phenomenon being researched, experiences a transition in meaning when he or she rereads the description from the beginning. Slashes are placed in the description at appropriate places.
> Step 3: R [researcher], still within the scientific phenomenological reduction, then transforms Ps [participants] everyday expressions into expressions that highlight the psychological meanings lived by P [participant]. This requires the use of free imaginative variation as well as rendering implicit factors explicit.
> Step 4: Based on the transformed meaning units and still within the scientific phenomenological reduction, R [researcher] uses the transformed meaning unit expressions as the basis for describing the psychological structure of the experience.
> (Adapted from Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003)

Table 3

Example of Step 3 of Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) Data Analysis

Meaning Units	First Transformation of the Meaning Units	Second Transformation of the Meaning Units	Transformed Meaning Units combined into Key Constituents
"…I feel that I am being a good parent. That [mutual genetic son] does love me. That's obvious now, and I feel that I treat him and [stepdaughter] pretty much the same. Maybe the age difference, is a little different there, but I feel like I'm doing the right thing even though [stepdaughter] doesn't necessarily show me the affection that I feel like I deserve. [laughter]… I don't second guess my thoughts or my actions. I'm just being myself and I know that it's good. And [mutual genetic son] is helping me with that," (E, line 741).	Feels she is being a good parent because her mutual genetic son loves her and she treats her stepdaughter the same as she treats her mutual genetic son. Even though her stepdaughter does not respond to her the same as her mutual genetic son she feels more confident in her parenting style and doesn't second guess herself now because her mutual genetic son responds to her with love. She is aware that she does parent her children differently based on their developmental needs.	Feels she is a good parent. Her mutual genetic child has helped her feel more secure in her parenting style. Parents her mutual genetic child and her stepchild the same. Parents her children based on their developmental needs.	I can Parent

Credibility and incentives. Once the individual transcripts had been analyzed, the researcher followed the credibility step and went back to the participants with their individual findings. The researcher contacted the participants via phone, email, and mail. All participants willingly shared their feedback in agreement of the findings and/or in clarification or extrapolation of the findings. Upon completion of this step, the researcher mailed to the participants the agreed-upon incentive of a $25 gas card. Incorporating the participants' feedback, the researcher then integrated the findings of each individual transcript to create a comprehensive structure describing the essence of all of the participants' experience of simultaneously parenting stepchildren and mutual children within a blended family.

Bracketing

In order for the researcher to maintain the bracketing of her presuppositions throughout the research process, the researcher made entries in a field journal immediately preceding and immediately after each interview, as well as immediately before and immediately after each session of the data analysis (Creswell, 2007; Giorgi, 2009; Langdridge, 2007). After the completion of the data analysis and after obtaining all of the participant feedback, the researcher reviewed the field journal to check and evaluate if and how the researcher's natural attitude was or was not reflected in the data analysis and the participant feedback (Langdridge, 2007). A summary of the researcher's biases as reflected in the field journal is as follows.

The researcher chose the topic of parenting mutual children and stepchildren within a blended family because of personal experience working with this form of blended family in a clinical setting. Having encountered many parents in this type of

blended family who were seeking therapy for various reasons, the researcher developed an interest in, and desire to find ways to better support such parents. In order to understand how to support such parents and their families, the researcher decided to focus on better understanding parenting both mutual children and stepchild within blended families. The researcher chose to interview a nonclinical sample in an effort to learn about the experience of parenting in this form of blended family in the general population.

Regarding the researcher's biases, one bias was a positive view of blended families being successful families and a hope of understanding more about how blended families can function well. As the purpose of this research was to better understand parents' experience of parenting both mutual children and stepchildren within a blended family, the researcher's biased hopes in doing this research were to find that these blended family parents from a nonclinical sample would be able to provide information that could show how they had found success in their families. Such information would then be beneficial to struggling blended family parents. Aware of and fully disclosing this bias, the researcher set that bias aside as much as possible throughout the research process, so as to be open to hearing all aspects of the participants' experience, whether successful or unsuccessful.

The researcher, also aware of the academic research about the difficulties in stepfamily and divorced family life, held the presupposition that the blended family parents in this sample would have experienced significant challenges in their family. Moreover, the researcher had experience working in a clinical setting with some blended families who were struggling in various aspects of their blended family life. Therefore,

throughout the research process the researcher also purposed to set aside the bias that the participants would definitely have significant challenges to share about. The researcher endeavored to be open to whatever the participants might share regarding challenges or the lack thereof.

Some other specific biases the researcher initially held included some gender biases, assuming that the mothers would have more investment in the topic of parenting their children and the fathers would be more detached from their experience of parenting. Moreover, based on the academic research about stepmothers possessing more awareness of difficulties within their families, the researcher also held a bias of curiosity around whether or not the stepmoms would have more difficulties parenting than the stepdads. Other biases were around age and socioeconomic status, specifically that older age and/or higher income would translate to better parenting skills. The researcher also held a bias of curiosity about whether or not parents would show favoritism to their biological children versus having difficulties with their stepchildren. Finally, the researcher was aware of a bias toward certain coping skills as more effective for parents than others, such as friendship and religious practices. The researcher conducted the interviews and data analysis with an awareness of these biases and strove to bracket them, journaling before and after each interview and throughout the data analysis process so as to compare and contrast the researcher's presuppositions with the actual data gathered.

Results

Using Giorgi's (2009) data analysis method, the following five key constituents emerged from the data analysis: (a) I can parent, (b) my children get along, (c) we miss you, (d) let's talk about it, and (e) it's challenging and rewarding. All five constituents are equally important and are listed in no particular order/ranking. Each key constituent includes exemplary quotes of the elements outlined within each constituent. These key constituents are followed by the outlier experiences that also emerged from the data analysis: Different experiences. See Table 3 for an example of the applied data analysis process of Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) that led to the specific key constituents. The following is a discussion of the researcher's biases in relation to the results of the data analysis.

I Can Parent

Competency in parenting. A sense of competency in parenting their stepchild/children was strengthened by (a) the participant's experience of becoming the parent of their mutual genetic child, (b) previously parenting their stepchild, and/or (c) being a parent of their own biological child previous to their blended family. Their confidence in parenting was also impacted by the amount of authority they felt they had to parent all of their children within their blended family. Some parents also felt a greater sense of competency when their child learned valuable lessons from them.

> I feel that I am being a good parent. That [mutual genetic son] does love me. That's obvious now, and I feel that I treat him and [stepdaughter] pretty much the same. Maybe the age difference, is a little different there, but I feel like I'm doing the right thing even though [stepdaughter] doesn't necessarily show me the affection that I feel like I deserve. [laughter] . . . I don't second guess my thoughts or my actions. I'm just being myself and I know that it's good. And [mutual genetic son] is helping me with that. (E, line 741)

I try and reflect on how I was with [stepdaughter] when she was [mutual genetic son]'s age. [Mutual genetic son]'s getting to that age now when I was able to [spend] a good amount of time with [stepdaughter]. . . . I'm thinking about how . . . I was with her and sort of using those skills with [mutual genetic son]. . . . I feel like it's the right thing. . . . I'm not second guessing myself so much like I was back then with [stepdaughter] . . . even if [stepdaughter] was my biological child maybe I would still have those same reflections. That's how I'm considering it. [laughter] Yeah, it's nice to know that I'm treating them the same. It's coming from my heart and soul just as much for her as it is for him. (E, line 749)

Well, as a parent I guess I get trial and error on the older one and hopefully by the time the second one gets there, I won't make the same mistakes. (A, line 129)

Our relationship is definitely different than it is with her mother, obviously, and between her and my husband, her dad. [Mutual-genetic son] looks to me first and foremost for everything. . . . And I knew that to be true, as a mom. But, my experience as a stepmom was that . . . I was a more supportive role; typically the more, the male role in the family situation. . . . So, that was a little bit of an adjustment as a full-time mom. . . . From being a stepmom to also being a full-time mom. . . . It was actually really nice. [chuckle] Getting the love right away with no strings attached. [Stepdaughter] and I are definitely close. Closer to her than I am with any other kid. . . . Besides [mutual genetic son], but there is a barrier. It's kind of sad to me, actually. So, I am glad to know that it's not me as a mom or as a person, it's just the nature of our relationship, I guess. (E, line 36)

But I think it helps her [my stepdaughter] to see me being nurturing with other children too because she understands I'm capable of loving other kids. (D, line 48)

I show her [my stepdaughter] that I'm doing the same with [mutual genetic son]. I let her know that he's going to be doing these things, too. 'I'm not trying to make you make your own toast because you're my horrible stepdaughter, I'm doing it because I care about you and these are things you need to be able to do.' (D, line 164)

I have to openly admit that I have a greater appreciation for her [my stepdaughter] because I never saw the whole birth and whole process to get where she was at when I met her. I never had any kids of my own. . . . it all means so much more to me now that I've actually been through the shorter side of it. . . . It's kind of sad because I didn't get to see her at that age, but at the same time I'm glad that I've got to see it in one way . . . watching this little guy [my mutual genetic son] grow up . . . it just goes by so fast. (A, line 53)

For me it's enjoyable. It's where I saw myself when I was a young man, and it works out fairly well. You learn very quickly that some of your ideas as far as parenting, especially such a large brood, uh, are out to lunch, so you just have to discard that and move on. But also, after so many years of raising children, I have

some very tried and true methods that I don't really have to worry about. (B, line 43)

When parenting I find . . . with them being stepchildren there's multiple . . . influences on their lives . . . their father being one. His girlfriend is also in the picture and also my wife and myself. And also living with my mother- and father-in-law, their opinions go into a lot of things. . . . I usually find my opinion is on the bottom a lot of the times. . . . It's a day-to-day occurrence and it's very stressful. It feels like I'm being undermined every day. . . . I don't let them [my stepchildren] get away with everything. . . . I'll ask them nicely first . . . or I explain to them why and they'll just keep doing. . . . But if my wife comes along or anyone else . . . tells them the same thing I did, they'll listen . . . when it comes to me I'm still the low man on the totem pole. . . . It is very frustrating because I try to do everything I can and help out and try to be a role model for my kids. . . . I know it's a typical thing, kids don't want to listen to their parents . . . that's what my wife always tells me. . . . I'll set up examples for them and say, 'Hey, I just told [stepdaughter] . . . to not jump on the bed and she's still doing it. Why don't you [participant's partner] go tell her, I'll bet you she'll stop,' and then sure enough she'll stop. (C, line 37)

When I'm watching her today . . . that's the authority he gives me. He lets her know that she needs to listen to me. (D, line 160)

It used to really bother me that [stepdaughter] wasn't affectionate with me. And I used to talk about it a lot with [partner] and he would reassure me that, yes, she is very attached to you. You do have a special relationship. It's just different. And that doesn't bother me so much now that I have [mutual genetic son]. . . . Even though our relationship is the same, pretty much as it used to be even though we've started spending more time together. It's still not as affectionate as I would like, [laughter] but maybe that's just her style in general or maybe it's just because I'm a step-parent and that's how it is. I really don't know. (E, line 720)

It's okay, because I know that my husband and I are in an agreement, and I know that he'll always back me up, not that it's like, that I need a bodyguard when it comes to my stepson, but I know that interacting with him, I have the authority of a parent, because my husband supports that. And I also try to take into consideration all of our kids that are not going to take . . . I'm not going to treat him [stepson] differently and I'm not going to let him [stepson] get away with things that our little kids don't get away with. Eventually, they're going to be 11 sometime too and if I let their brother watch certain movies or say certain things or play certain games, they're going to expect that, too. So it's easy for me to uphold the standard in our home, because I know that my husband and I are in agreement about it, and that he won't question his dad's authority. (F, line 63)

You know, by performing to, quote 'my expectations,' end quote, I know that when the time comes, she [stepdaughter] can walk out the door, make up her own mind on how to do something, know how to be treated, know how to treat someone and step forward smartly and be able to accomplish stuff. . . . And as a

parent, your joy isn't in the fact that, 'Yeah, I taught them how to do that.' Your joy is in the fact that 'Hey, that's my kid and they know how to act right. Hey, that's my kid that just did something great,' because my kid did it, not because I taught my child how to do that. (B, line 255)

Participant feedback session. F shared during the feedback session that she feels she has learned a lot about what to do or what not to do from parenting her stepson [who is a few years older than her mutual genetic children], like a preview, or test-drive in parenting. Participant E shared in her feedback letter, "My step daughter can get pretty nasty mirroring her mother's discipline and my partner and I sternly discourage that trickle down affect. My stepdaughter is her own person, not merely a reflection of her mother, and we think she is old enough to start applying herself more independently."

Bonding with stepchild. For some parents, bonding with their stepchild occurred when they incorporated their stepchild into the routine with their mutual genetic child. The stepparent/stepchild bond was also strengthened during the occasions when they were the only parent present with their children. Some parents also felt they developed a deeper bond with their stepchild when they perceived their stepchild follow their example.

> She's [my stepdaughter] always been a part of our relationship. Which, [mutual genetic son] coming along has just added to that. She's a really good big sister and . . . I think it's actually brought us closer together, her and I. We can both focus on him together, or not focus on him together. [chuckle] We're like, 'Oh, [mutual genetic son], why did you do that?' It gives us a common goal and it helps her feel like she's a bigger person. She's more on our side sometimes. . . . Or more my side, specifically. . . . Because she knows the rules. (E, line 96)

> I include her [stepdaughter] with those things and just, you know, we have a little song that I sing for him [mutual genetic son]. I just include her in her relation with her brother. I think that's really important. I have brothers and I have step siblings and . . . They're awesome. You got to really nurture that and it helps our relationship too. It brings us closer together without me being her mom per se. (D, line 30)

It's actually easier when [partner] is not around, which we've only recently started doing. Her [my stepdaughter] and I and [mutual genetic son] will hang out while [partner] is at work. . . . we never really did that before. . . . [partner] . . . would want to take the time off and be with [stepdaughter], but his work commitment hasn't allowed that all the time now. . . . So we'll have her for a week at a time, and [partner] isn't always able to be there that whole time. So I think that's really nice. . . . I can take over some of the things that [partner] usually does, like reading the story at night. Snuggling on the couch after [mutual genetic son] goes to bed or takes a nap. Usually, [stepdaughter] will prefer to do that with [partner], if she is around. . . . I feel like they should have that time together. But it's nice to have it for myself too. (E, line 266)

I feel when it's the three of us, her and I get along so much better. It's nicer. It really is, because I can do things my way when [partner] is not there. . . . it gives me a chance to show myself to her. . . . I like it, it's cool. I try to take the opportunity to teach her the things that I value. . . . it's nice. It's really cool. (D, line 164)

She does everything that she's supposed to do. She goes to school every day, does her homework and her chores, and just has a good time. She's a pretty good kid. And that's cool, to know that you've rubbed off on a kid. . . . I don't like to use the word Nazi, but I'm known as the homework Nazi. I'm always the one that's, 'Is your homework done? Let's do your homework. Why didn't you do this yet?' I'm always the one that's all over her about her homework. And in a weird way it's kind of like, created a little bit of a bond because she always knows I'm going to come ask her and she gets excited when she's already got it done. (A, line 121)

 I just let her pick and choose what she likes, and it's cool when she chooses me. [laughter] It is, it's a good feeling. . . . I don't try to impose who I am on her. I just set my example and if she likes it go for it. (D, line 172)

It's wonderful. It's rewarding. . . . The more important thing . . . is the fact that she's [stepdaughter's] able to take care of someone else, which means all the problems that we had with her before, being selfish and thinking only of herself, that's not going to be a huge issue. . . . the fact that she's able to take care of her [little sister, mutual genetic child], means she's willing to sacrifice to take care of her. And that's one thing that I try to teach all of my girls. (B, line 271)

Set a standard in our home . . . about the kind of movies that we watch, what kind of music that we listen to. We can't control it when he's not with us, but we explain our reasons for certain things. . . . it's nice to know that he thinks about it. . . . I know that he takes it away and sometimes brings that up . . . to his mom or to other people. 'Sorry, I can't eat that,' or 'I can't watch that,' or 'that's not good for me.' Things that I know I've said to him, like, 'That has high-fructose corn syrup, you shouldn't drink it' . . . that I had influence, or that I had a part in his upbringing, even though I'm not with him all the time. But . . . the short amount of time that I do have has an impact, it has value. (F, line 191)

My Children Get Along

Adjusting to each other and getting along. After the initial adjustment to the birth of their half-sibling, the parents' stepchildren engaged in loving relationships with their half-sibling, the mutual-genetic child. The parents found it rewarding and/or heartwarming to see their children getting along.

> And the one cool thing is, is that she cares for our little kid as much as we do. (A, line 73)
> We were kind of concerned because for eight years, she was the only kid. And we knew that she was a smart girl but we didn't know how well she was going to handle her emotions regarding not getting all of the time from everybody. . . . you and I both know that babies take almost all the time for the first couple of years. . . . there's a lot of times where we have to schedule life around the little guy. . . . she's learned to . . . accept the fact that that's just how it is, unfortunately, sometimes. But she is just as excited to see that little kid as anybody else. (A, line 77)

> But I think it was hard for him at first to figure out his place, and then, within a year of us getting married we had a baby. And, that was the first time I ever really noticed he went home and told his mom, 'They don't like me. They don't have any room for me. They ignore me altogether.' And, she called me and she said, 'I know it's not true. I'm just calling to let you know what he's said and I know for sure it's not true.' And it wasn't. We went out of our way the very first weekend that he met his brother, we went out of our way to feed the baby, put him down, and spend all of our time with him, specifically playing games. . . . It was really hard because you want to feel like you have a nice little family unit, and it's under your control, and I'm in charge here, and I define how things are going to be, and I create the environment. And he [stepson] was upsetting the environment a little bit. He's never violent or verbally disrespectful, but just . . . trying to say things that he knew would upset . . . me, and I know, he went home and did the same thing to his mom. [chuckle] But . . . for the first . . . year we dealt with it a little bit. And then . . . when my first biological son started talking, he [first mutual-genetic son] loved his brother [stepson], and followed him around, and wanted to be where he was, and said his name, and wanted to sit on his lap and 'read me a book.' He [first mutual genetic son] won him [stepson] over, I think. (F, line 25)

> Like today she's like, 'I kind of have a cold so I'm being careful not to kiss him [mutual genetic son].' I'm just like, 'Oh, I 'm so glad you care.' I just really acknowledged that she's . . . putting her arm out there to him. She's extending herself and that's not easy. . . . It's rewarding. (D, line 30)

> That was when she was having the weird like, 'I don't know he's my brother,' but now she loves him. She's totally like kissy and she likes to help him up. Like

when he's crying, I'm like, '[Stepdaughter], it's okay, let him cry a little bit.' She's like, 'But he's going to be hurting,' and she's concerned. And I was like, 'Oh, I'm so glad you're concerned about him and that makes me feel really good.' It's really nice. I don't think she feels a threat. . . . It's her brother, it's totally her brother. I don't think she feels too different whether it would have been her full or half. . . . It's really nice. I feel good. . . . I just want to support that relationship. (D, line 200)

[The oldest stepdaughter had a] hard time with it when [first mutual genetic child] was born. . . . when he was born it was kind of hard for her because it was just basically the girls and then he came along. We did give him more attention just because he's a baby. . . . she went through a little phase. . . . I don't even think it was a few months, where she got pretty jealous. 'Why do you have to hold [first mutual genetic child] all the time . . .' But now, she's like the mom. . . . She wants to hold the babies all the time. She wants to help all the time. (C, line 181)

I really made it important to incorporate her with knowing that this is your brother because she was kind of uncertain in the beginning. . . . I can understand that, too, because I used to be a step daughter as well. . . . I think she feels the connection with him now and it makes me so happy. . . . I'm so glad to see it. And at the same time she understands I'm not her mom, but there is still a lot of love and trust there. And she sees [mutual genetic son] now as part of her family. (D, line 10)

A big age gap between my half-siblings. Parents shared about their experiences of the challenges and benefits of having a big age gap between their stepchild and their mutual genetic child.

She's [stepdaughter] become a very, very valued member to me in the family because she's very helpful. She's wonderful with the youngest one [mutual genetic child]. (B, line 255)

It's great. Yeah, she's going to baby sit him someday. . . . Usually if they're playing together really well, I'll get busy on something I need to do so I'm not really watching them so much, but I can hear them. And I love listening to their chatter. . . . Even if they're squabbling a little bit, it's still very reasonable because the age gap is good too. They're six and a half years apart, so [stepdaughter] can help him if they're fighting over a toy or whatever, she knows how to distract him, and then she can go get the thing she wants. And he learns a lot from her. It's good. Yeah, overall it's a very positive experience. (E, line 300)

They've got a huge age difference and I don't know if she kind of gets a little mother-hen idea in her head. She gets excited because she gets to hang out with the little guy. I don't know but I just know that we're really lucky as parents to have the opportunity to have two kids, even though they've got this huge age group between them, that they're excited to be around each other. (A, line 89)

There's a seven year gap between the older two [stepson and first mutual genetic son] and trying to find activities that are engaging for all of them and where the one year old isn't going to tear down everything. They'll build Legos and they want to go play outside and he's [stepson] on his bike and wants to take off and that's one thing that's hard, is trying to engage them all and I found we slip into a kind of rhythm where I have him [stepson] help me. He's [stepson] designated one or the other of the boys [mutual genetic sons] to kind of watch and help climb or whatever, if we go to the park, or to dress one. I try to give him more responsibilities so that all of our time together is time together. And then when they nap, I try to make special time for him where I say, 'Hey, what do you want to do? Let's go play a game.' Or 'I need your help with a project.' I try to find something to build or put together or something that I really need him for. . . . He's also my bug squisher, all those manly things when it's outside or around, so he likes that. It's good too that I try to put the little guys to bed first, because they all share a room still, all three. We're in a small space right now. And so I put the little guys to bed and my three year old says, 'What about [stepson]? Is [stepson] going to bed? Is [stepson] going to bed too?' 'Yeah but later, he's a big boy.' 'But I'm a big boy!' 'Not as big as [stepson].' So I put them to bed, and then, [stepson] and I do something together, always. So even if their dad's not around, I make sure that he and I have quality time reading something or watching something or playing something. And so he feels special. His bedtime's later. (F, line 75)

I think that we can really definitely improve on activities as a family but like I said earlier, it's hard to find age-appropriate things that are interesting to everyone. And he's not going to take all the boys to a baseball game because the little ones will last maybe five minutes. [laughter] So I think the older they get, the easier that'll be for us all to be together and to go on bike rides together and do things together . . . right now, it's more limited to eating and going to the park, [chuckle] those type of activities. (F, line 95)

Anytime you go somewhere and the kids are . . . throwing fits or acting up or whatever you want to call it, it always makes it harder on the other kid because the parents become irritable or . . . They have to cut short whatever fun they're having. I'm not saying that that's never happened. I mean we've gone and done things where . . . the little guy has decided that this ain't happening and he's going to throw the biggest fit in the world and we have to go. And she's been disappointed a few times. . . . it is what it is. . . . it's life. (A, line 115)

She [stepdaughter] does go in there [the playroom] and close the door and keep him [mutual genetic son] out every-so-often. [laughter] Which is hard on [mutual genetic son]. . . . She does a lot to include him too. It's usually just to keep him from destroying her art projects [laughter] or whatever she's working on. . . . And he's getting better about learning to give her her space too. He is only two. (E, line 540)

The fifteen year old gets treated no different than the two [-year-old]. Obviously coming in, at such a later stage in a child's life, you have to make adjustments, because they're not going to fit . . . your expectations with one child. . . . And

they have to learn you as a parent as well . . . you have the older ones to watch the younger ones, and, so on and so forth. So it's a little bit easier with a larger family. . . . For me it's enjoyable. (B, line 39)

Participant feedback session. Participant E also shared in her feedback letter,

Now that the kids are older (11 and 4) they definitely have a sibling rivalry with lots of squabbles and competitions, sometimes with crying and fighting, but generally enduring it as all siblings learn to do. I have 2 sisters and remember my sibling relationships to be similar.

We Miss You

Missing my stepchildren. The parents and their mutual genetic children missed the stepchild/children when they were gone visiting their other parent, even if it was easier to parent less children during those visitations. Most parents wanted more custody of their stepchild/stepchildren even though they respected their stepchild's need to be with their other biological parent.

I just love him [stepson]. I just wish that I could be with him all the time. There definitely is a vacancy . . . in our lives without him around. And I know I said that sometimes I'm relieved when he's at his home [the home of partner's ex]. But sometimes I'd be relieved if somebody will take my other kids for a couple hours too. So I think that's normal. . . . People talk about having an attachment to your first child and I have that. He is my first, for sure. (F, line 175)

We would love to have more time with her. A 50/50 even split is all we're asking for. . . . But she [stepdaughter's biological mom] just repeatedly refused. (E, line 242)

I'm sure life would be different if he [stepson] lived at our house all the time. If I chose the school and I did all the parent-teacher conferences . . . I like our family and I feel like it's really whole when he's with us and the boys [mutual genetic sons] get so excited. They are asking about him all the time, and when I tell them we're going to get him, they'd go 'Yay!' They don't leave him alone for the first day, usually. (F, line 103)

But my oldest son . . . he loves his sisters and he hates it when they go . . . it's heartbreaking . . . to see that, even if it's just for the weekend . . . he still knows that they're going to be gone and he'll cry and he . . . cries and cries like no other . . . Normally we try to bring him in and distract him in any way we can like, 'Hey do you want a popsicle? Or do you want to watch some cartoons or do you want to read a book?' He won't have anything. He just wants his sisters back. And he will say, 'I want my [sister] and [sister] back. (C, line 157)

She's [stepdaughter] currently at her other side's . . . she does two weeks every year in the summer there. And she doesn't get very excited to go there because she . . . doesn't have the same family there . . . when she's gone . . . the two kids are lost because they don't have each other. (A, line 81)

A week when they are gone, it's kind of like, 'Okay, there's less kids. I can get more done and stuff.' But, in reality . . . I'd rather have them here because I feel they're my kids. I understand . . . he [partner's ex] has his rights and stuff. . . . I mean they need to see their dad . . . but . . . I'm kind of selfish and I wish they would just stay here the whole time. . . . And usually when the girls leave that's when my boys start acting up really, really bad. The girls are gone and there's no one else to play with, and that's usually daddy's role and daddy becomes a human jungle gym. (C, line 141)

We're always sad, and once in a while, I'm relieved because it's a little . . . less laundry, it's less driving. . . . The other two [mutual genetic sons] are closer to the same schedule, closer to the same size, closer to the same food preferences, and conversation, and all of that. It's easier when they're closer in age because they have more of the same things. So once in a while, I am relieved, like, 'whew! I'm back to just two.' But for most part, we hate it. . . . I feel like I get a taste of what it's like to have him [stepson], and I get used to that, and we make decisions around that and everything, and then he goes. It's back and forth. (F, line 111)

It scares me a little bit at the thought of her [partner's ex] moving away, but at the same point you could tell yourself that it would be easier but it would be hard. You know, it would really be hard. Because her [stepdaughter's] mom talks about moving to [another country]. I don't know if she ever will; we'll see. . . . But I really hope that her and her brother can have a nice connection and I hope to have . . . I think her and I will have a connection. (D, line 241)

Participant feedback session. Participant F also shared during her feedback session that when parenting her stepson she has chosen to be as involved as she can be (instead of sitting on the sidelines because of less custody), and when she and her family are able to move they might move closer to her stepson's biological mom.

Visitations with my stepchildren. Parents experienced some difficulties with their family adjusting to the transitions between visitations. They observed their stepchildren taking time to transition back into the blended family structure after returning from visitation with the stepchild's other biological parent, and needing to understand their valuable place in the blended family.

[Partner] and his ex-wife, they aren't on good terms. Like, as I'm sure that's really common. So they don't really speak much at all except in email. . . . So the personal interaction, the exchange times, there's some friction, some space and it takes [stepdaughter] kind of awhile, sometimes like half hour to make the shift from one parent to the other. . . . She just doesn't like the change. . . . Once she's with us . . . she's fine. Sometime she has to kind of run around in circles and get her anxiety out a little bit . . . when she settles down, it's good. But just having them [partner and his ex, stepdaughter's biological parents] both in the same room, you can feel the animosity. (E, line 118)

You can see quite a few times where their manners start to slip . . . we are not trying to dictate everything that they do, but we are big on . . . saying please and thank you . . . as soon they get back, they're like, 'Get me some water.' I'm like, 'Heck no. That's not how you ask. . . .' it's just really small things. . . . You really see a difference and slowly . . . it gets out of their system in a couple of days when they're back at our house. (C, line 165)

They [partner's ex] have a very different lifestyle than we have, and I think that's part of the adjustment for [stepdaughter]; being in a completely different mindset from one household to another. I'm sure that's hard. (E, line 250)

We do have the top shelf of the toy shelf reserved for [stepdaughter]'s things, so [mutual genetic son] doesn't get into it. . . . She does go in there and close the door and keep him out every-so-often. [laughter] Which is hard on [mutual genetic son] but . . . I try and defend her space, try and distract [mutual genetic son]. (E, line 540)

I realized, we needed to do a few other things too to let him know where his place was going to be. (F, line 37)

It was very hard to explain to her [stepdaughter] that he's [mutual genetic son] a baby. He needs a lot more time and a lot more attention because he can't do anything on his own. She didn't really understand that and I think what really helped her out was like we would show her what needs to be done all the time . . . we had to change his diaper or wash his clothes or wash his hands and his face, give him a bath and give him a bottle. . . . There was a couple times where she would sleep in our room because she wanted to sleep in our bed. We were like 'Okay, the baby is in here.' Of course, the baby would wake up about every hour, wakes up [oldest stepdaughter], and then she realized that babies need attention 24x7 . . . eventually when they get a little bit older, you can start . . . pulling things back. . . . I think that's what really got her to understand . . . we got her more involved to . . . see what we do because explaining it to her wasn't really getting through to her. (C, line 209)

There are times when the girls [stepdaughters] have been gone for a week. And my wife and I, we'll take the boys [mutual genetic sons] out, and go to a restaurant or do something, and my oldest daughter hates that. She wants to be a part of everything and she'll say that's not fair. . . . She understands it already.

She's a really clever and smart kid. We told her . . . that's not fair to the boys to not be able to do anything because you guys aren't here. We would love to have you guys are here . . . we know you guys have fun at daddy [biological dad's] house . . . the boys deserve to have some fun too. . . . It's somewhat difficult, but we feel that the boys, if the girls aren't here, they deserve to have some fun or do stuff. But we're not going to plan anything really big like a trip to Disneyland or something if they're not around. . . . There's certain things we definitely will wait until the girls are back. (C, line 173)

And he usually is ready to go home. . . . And I'm not going to lie, a couple times this last year he said, 'I wish I didn't have to go. I wish I could live with you guys?' I take it with a grain of salt because I know it's possible that he's just saying that to make me feel good, you know, because he doesn't have to. . . . But I like to think it's true. And that sometimes he would like to stay with us, and live with us, and I would love it. (F, line 115)

Last year was his [mutual genetic son] first year with her being gone and he was . . . barely a year . . . they were laughing and playing for hours that night because they hadn't seen each other in two weeks. (A, line 81)

Participant feedback session. During the feedback session, participant F shared that she has chosen to homeschool her three mutual genetic sons, and she perceives that her stepson wishes he could be homeschooled with her as well. She shared that she wants to be the one to teach her children who they are and define their world until they are more capable of thinking for themselves.

Educating my mutual children. The parents helped their mutual-genetic child/children develop an understanding of where their half-sibling was going and when they would be back during the stepchild's visitations with their other biological parent.

I don't know what is it going to be like this year when she [stepdaughter] comes back but . . . he [mutual genetic son] asks for her all the time. For the last two weeks . . . he thinks . . . every time we get in the car, 'Are we gonna go get Sissy? We gonna go get' (A, line 81)

And I also think it helps him know that [stepdaughter] is going to that place, to have a visual, and to see the people and the place where her other life is. Before we included him in that exchange, he would get really upset when [stepdaughter] had to leave. Like, suddenly, she's gone. . . . And he would wake up the next morning, and then say, 'Sister here? Sister here?' 'No, not today, sweetie.' Then the next morning, 'Sister here?' 'No, not today, sweetie.' So now, sometimes he wakes up in the morning and says, 'Sister's at Mama [partner's ex, stepdaughter's

biological mom] house.' And he feels good about that because he knows. (E, line 336)

And then the boys [mutual genetic sons] are always sad, especially sometimes they're having an afternoon nap and his dad will take him [stepson]. They'll wake-up and say, 'Where's [stepson]?' And I know they don't quite understand it. It's been hard for . . . the middle one who's . . . almost four. . . . We call [stepson's] biological mom auntie because she's going to be in our life . . . Forever . . . and he didn't understand exactly why [stepson] has two moms, or who is his real mom. He hasn't asked all those questions yet, like, 'Why do we have the same dad?' He hasn't gone into that really in depth, but he understands that she's his mom. And so, he always asks us, 'Did he go to auntie's house?' And I'd say, 'Yeah.' He says, 'He is in auntie's house. But we'll see him,' I say, 'Yeah, we'll see him again.' And knowing that he's coming back is good. (F, line 111)

I think the hardest part is when the girls are gone. Especially my three-year-old son, he knows it when they leave. He knows that they're going to be gone . . . when he sees them drive off with their dad, he really starts freaking out. . . . Their biological father's name is [x], and he'll [mutual genetic son] want to say 'I go to [x's] house,' and it's hard to see that because it is kind of breaking up the family for a little bit. (C, line 141)

Transitions and parenting with my partner's ex. The parents included their partner's ex in the transitions or visitations by sometimes inviting the ex-partner to join a family activity, and discussing parenting/custody issues with the ex-partner. They also experienced challenges communicating with their partner's ex and dealing with some of the parenting choices of their partner's ex.

And one thing that his mom has done is he always talks to her on the phone. . . . She started this precedent. When we got married, or maybe before, that she'll promise him things. 'Okay, just one more day.' I can hear her on the phone. 'Just one more day, baby. I know that you love me so much and we'll get you a toy.' Or, 'We will see a movie,' it's like she has to . . . apologize for him having to be with us. That was really hurtful at first. Like, 'Wait a minute. You get him all the time and . . .' So, that was definitely hard for me. . . . And it was hard for him to be excited about leaving and going home, because our home is home, too. . . . But it's gotten better. (F, line 115)

There's moments of awkwardness like . . . today, her mom was supposed to pick her up and then [Partner] calls me, 'Oh no, she's [stepdaughter] staying here.' And then it's like, 'Alright well, looks like you're [stepdaughter] staying with us tonight,' only to find out her mom is actually picking her up. (D, line 10f)

I think that where we are now, we are at least on friendly terms, face-to-face, and her [partner's ex] and I have been doing a little bit of the email communications, because it's hard on [partner], he's pretty much like, 'I can't do this anymore. You do it.' 'Okay, I'll try.' It's a big responsibility but . . . It's nice to . . . be more of a participant . . . than being on the sidelines and having it happen to me. . . . And [mutual genetic son] has been the bridge for that. Because he's been with us during those exchange times. All . . . six of us, plus the kitty cats milling around together while [stepdaughter] gets ready to jump from one parent to the other, literally, she jumps . . . [mutual genetic son] . . . goes and talks to [partner's ex, stepdaughter's biological mom], and talks to [stepdaughter]'s cousin, and plays with the kitties, and we interact. And that's what I wished I had done earlier. (E, line 316)

Like the other day, she [partner's ex] came in and sat down. [Partner] wasn't home. And it was just the three of us or the four of us because [mutual genetic son] was there too, and I let her [partner's ex] hold [mutual genetic son]. That's something I feel comfortable with. (D, line 68)

So I said, 'Well, if it's just you guys [partner's ex and her current partner], maybe you should just come in the morning, come over and you could do breakfast with us. We do a big breakfast, my parents come, and my brother and sister come and all their kids and we'll just do Christmas breakfast. And he can open presents with our family and then you can take him and then you can go home and you guys can open presents at your house.' I said, 'I know it's not like first thing when you wake up, it might mess with your tradition a little bit but then [stepson] will get to wake-up and be with all of his parents . . .' And so she said, 'That would be awesome!' And then I was talking to her about Christmas Eve and I said, 'Well, we're doing a candlelight service . . . At our church and if I can get him a little bit earlier from you, we can go to that.' And she said, 'What time? Maybe we'd like to come?' So they came. (F, line 153)

She [stepdaughter] was wondering if her mom could come over. . . . I was cooking a dinner and [stepdaughter's genetic mom] was picking her up while it was time for dinner and I think [stepdaughter] mentioned to her dad, 'Can my mom stay? Can we just stay?' And he was like, 'Oh, not tonight.' And I was like, 'Well, how about we'll do breakfast . . .' Because I'm fine, I can cook some banana pancakes. I'll live for a couple of hours and [stepdaughter's genetic mom] can come over and make some banana pancakes. But at the same time, you've got to be careful. If you cook food that's too good . . . it puts on this competition and you've got to be careful. . . . It's tricky. (D, line 86)

And that's a hard thing to when they go to his, house there's a whole different set of rules. I mean, there's certain things like our daughter is six. She went through a phase where she wanted a binky, even when she was about five. We just finally broke her of it a few months ago and, we found out that he would just let her suck her thumb, or give her a binky anyways. (C, line 145)

It's frustrating because you get certain rules and . . . develop things in to them. Like we try to get them to do their chores and they don't do chores at their dad's house. But we try to get them to pick after themselves and they don't over there. You really see that when they come back home like it takes a few days to kind of get them back to a routine. But it can be pretty frustrating because . . . you worked really hard on potty training the kid for a while or not giving them a binky, something that they have been hooked on for a while, just to hear that they've been on it the whole time [at ex partner's house] and we're actually going to start all over again. And there's nothing really legally we can do about it. I mean we've talked to him before. . . . We try to get on the same page with him and he usually says, 'Yeah, okay. I understand.' He just says it, but he will do whatever he wants. It can get pretty frustrating. (C, line 153)

We keep hoping she'll rebel from her mother and want to come live with us full time or something. But also, we respect what she's doing. We don't talk bad about [partner's ex, stepdaughter's biological mom]. And I don't really think she talks bad about us either. She does have some pretty restrictive food, dietary restrictions. . . . We do get criticism, just passed through [stepdaughter]. . . . I feel angry . . . towards her mom because she's putting the burden on [stepdaughter]. But I ask [stepdaughter], 'Well, honey, I can make you something different, if you don't want to eat this food.' She'll be like, 'No.' But that's a lot of responsibility for a kid to have to make a decision that either goes against your mom or against your stepmom. That's not fair. I wish we could change that. I'm sure that it probably goes both ways and maybe that's just the way [stepdaughter] wants to deal with it. (E, line 432)

Participant feedback session. Participant D shared during her feedback session that she has found the custody visitations difficult because there are no legal parameters and therefore they do not have a regular schedule. She shared that she tries to communicate with her partner's ex about the visitation schedule but it is a tricky situation for her. Participant D also shared during her feedback session that she has since allowed her partner's ex to babysit her mutual genetic son on occasion. Additionally, participant E shared during her feedback session, "Frustratingly, there is little opportunity to strengthen a friendship with my partner's ex and we have made little progress on this."

Let's Talk About It

Talking with my partner. Communication between partners was a valuable part of their experience engaging in a blended family. Participants shared about their

experience of communicating with their partner regarding issues around parenting,

relationship maintenance, and their partner's experience.

> I don't feel like it's not my place to correct behavior that I don't like. My husband and I talk about and we deal with it. . . . And set a standard in our home. (F, line 187)

> That's what I love about [partner]. I mean, as much as he drives me crazy and all the problems he has, he's always willing to talk about it in the end. We always come up with some sort of agreement to where we can both feel comfortable. And that's . . . a strong point with blended families and just open communication. (D, line 26)

> It's something that I feel for all children, even my own, don't just buy them a whole bunch a crap because they end up being spoiled. And it's frustrating because she [stepdaughter] does ask for things constantly. . . . It [is a] huge value for me and I let him [partner] know that. I usually let him know when it's just him and I, like we went on a trip that weekend, and I just let him know in a nice way and he acknowledged it, he knows and he's good about it. (D, line 108)

> It used to really bother me that [stepdaughter] wasn't affectionate with me. And I used to talk about it a lot with [partner] and he would reassure me that, yes, she is very attached to you. You do have a special relationship. It's just different. (E, line 720)

> We used to talk about it a lot, me and [partner], on those breaks without [stepdaughter]. So I think we probably worked through a lot of it then and now the role is reversed, so [partner] is expressing the way he feels about having the sort of the negative energy flow where the child doesn't necessarily reciprocate, but that's not their job. (E, line 803)

> It's nice to know that he [partner] values my opinion for [stepdaughter] because he does listen to me. I see him take in things too. . . . Maybe not to the extent I would hope for, but he does do things a little bit differently, once I bring things up like that and . . . It makes me feel reward . . . respected. . . . I try to like . . . do same thing for him too. . . . I try to meet him in the middle and do what he feels I should do. . . . A lot of give and take and just finding the middle ground and listening to what the other person needs . . . so I'm okay with everything. . . . We talk, we do a lot of talking, don't just hide things. . . . That's the other thing that him and I both agree on, if something is bugging you, mention it, don't let it fester under the pillow and explode. Bring it up, maybe not right when the kids are around if you can help it, but bring it up at some point. And there's ways of doing it too that are nicely done. (D, line 124)

> The two girls [mother and daughter] . . . They're a little bit more emotional than I am. . . . I've had to learn not to make things so black and white or blunt. . . . I have to try to be nicer about the way I say things. (A, line 93)

Honestly the bigger struggle is in the wife to fall on the same page. . . . I'm also a very strict disciplinarian. So a lot of the things that I'm very strict on, she isn't as strict . . . which leads to a little bit of conflict. (B, line 45)

We still have our disagreements and we don't necessarily always agree with each other. We do more often than not . . . the important thing to remember in a situation where you disagree with someone's parenting technique is that you don't drill on them for it. You don't fault them for it. If you disagree with it, it might simply be because you don't understand it and that might simply be because your spouse didn't fully explain why they're doing that, or the cause that brought them to that realization. So, you have to keep an open mind and more importantly an open dialogue and speak with your spouse . . . nothing can be fixed or concluded if you don't talk about it. . . . So, the open dialogue is really the key to any relationship whether it be a blended family or not. (B, line 73)

When I pair them all together I just try to treat them as equally as I can. There might be certain times when I favor one over the other. . . . I also tell my wife too, if she sees that to correct me. . . . I don't wanna fall into that because I've seen other step-parents do that. . . . I want to make sure I'm doing the right things and if I'm not, I'm fine with my wife pointing that out to me. (C, line 77)

I know it's a typical thing, kids don't want to listen to their parents . . . that's what my wife always tells me. . . . I'll set up examples for them [wife and in-laws] and say, 'Hey, I just told [stepdaughter] . . . to not jump on the bed and she's still doing it. Why don't you [wife] go tell her, I'll bet you she'll stop,' and then sure enough she'll stop. (C, line 37)

Talking with my children. Some parents shared about their experience communicating to their children about their partner relationship and the different roles in their blended family, as well as trying to communicate effectively with their children in daily life.

He [participant's partner] said to him [stepson] one time, 'This is my girlfriend. Do you understand what that means?' And he [stepson] said 'She's your wife.' [Partner] 'Same thing, I'm going to be married to her forever. And I'm always going to protect her. And you need to be nice to her.' And so he established that really early. . . . It felt really good. It was like a knight in shining armor moment. It was good. Not like I needed his defense but it was more, we're a unified front. (F, line 63)

You don't want to be too child-centric sometimes, but I think there are moments where it's okay and it just reminds her [stepdaughter] that, 'I'm not trying to take your daddy away. . . .' You've got to be aware of that. But at the same time you need to make it aware to her that we are a couple, it's him and I . . . sometimes it's

him and I making the decisions, you're not going to . . . you've got to watch out too because . . . you can play parents and step parents against each, it's really easy. You've got to watch out when that game is starting. . . . You've got to . . . be ready to put it out real quick. . . . If he's [partner] getting angry and grouchy, she'll [stepdaughter] tell him, 'Quit getting so mad, dad,' and I'm like, '[stepdaughter], I'm handling this. . . .' You got to shoo her off . . . don't let her try to be the mediator because that's when you get into trouble. And he [partner] understands that. I think that's actually a huge thing I probably should have mentioned earlier, is yeah, just keeping her out of the big issues. She'll try to tell her dad that he's being mean . . . you gotta stick up for him and just let her know that we're a team and we're going to figure it out. You can watch out for you, but don't worry about us. So letting her know that is pretty important as well as letting her know that she's important too. (D, line 184)

Or in her [stepdaughter] case, every time she got in trouble . . . it used to drive me nuts when she would just stare at me. 'Just tell me what the problem is and we could solve it. Let's solve the problem now.' And she would just stare. (A, line 93)

So, I took her [stepdaughter] aside and I said, 'Listen, you're not going to be on the counseling any longer. You're not going to be going to physical therapy. This is the way you're going to act in school. This is what's acceptable. This is what is unacceptable. And this is what's going to happen to you when you do something unacceptable . . .' I said, 'When you do things like this it's not you doing it. It's our family that's done it. It's embarrassing to me. It's embarrassing to us as parents, and us as a family because even though your last name is not mine, they associate you with me. And if you're doing these things that means, I as a parent, have allowed you to do those. And that's totally unacceptable, because we both know I do not allow you to do those.' By the end of the school year, we're not getting notes, we're not getting emails, we're not getting phone calls from the teacher as he's going home on [freeway] in the middle of rush hour traffic. She's doing well in school, doesn't need counseling; doesn't need physical therapy. She's become a very, very valued member to me in the family because she's very helpful. She's wonderful with the youngest one. Her learning curve has jumped huge. (B, line 255)

I like it. It's just one of those times when she loves to drive me crazy all day and then at night she wants to be daddy's girl and just relax. I think she really loves to push my buttons. My wife, she laughs sometimes because my daughter and I, we go at it sometimes. I find myself arguing with a six-year-old at the top of my lungs. My wife has to remind me "You know you're fighting with a six-year-old" and I'll say "She started it though." It just goes back and forth. But yeah, at the end of the night . . . At the end of the day when it's like that, it's really nice. It's pretty frustrating, but it's fun. And I don't take it too seriously when we argue and stuff, it's kind of fun. (C, line 217)

When we [participant D and stepdaughter] have those deep talks . . . it's awesome. It gives me hope. . . . I think it does the same for her [stepdaughter].

And it lets us have a relationship with each other, it definitely brings us together, you know. It's awesome. And I know she remembers it and I'll remember it. We just got to remember those moments when we hate each other and I told her that too, I've let her know. 'There's going to be days where we're not going to get along.' You can't candy-coat it. She's like, 'That's not gonna happen!' [I'm] Like, 'oh, just you wait,' [laughter]. (D, line 52)

Well with [oldest stepdaughter] it kind of hurt because I don't want to hurt her feelings or anything. And it was very hard to explain to her that he's a baby. He needs a lot more time and a lot more attention because he can't do anything on his own. She didn't really understand that and I think what really helped her out was like we would show her what needs to be done all the time. Every time we . . . Well, not every time, but just about every single time, we had to change his diaper or wash his clothes or wash his hands and his face, give him a bath and give him a bottle, all this stuff. There was a couple times where she would sleep in our room because she wanted to sleep in our bed. We were like okay, 'The baby is in here.' Of course, the baby would wake up about every hour, wakes up [oldest stepdaughter], and then she realized that babies need attention 24x7. And eventually when they get a little bit older, you can start kind of pulling things back and I think that's what really got her to understand. Like we got her more involved to kind of see what we do because explaining it to her wasn't really getting through to her. She wasn't really understanding it. (C, line 209)

My partner's experience. Participants shared about their perceptions of their

their blended family as discussed by the couple.

He's [partner] a little bit heartbroken that he doesn't get the love from [mutual genetic son] that [mutual genetic son] gives to me. He [partner] also knows it's logical. I'm his [mutual genetic son] primary caregiver. But from his [partner] experience, [stepdaughter] would go to him first and foremost at that age. He was her primary caregiver. When she wasn't with her mom . . . when she was with us. So our roles were reversed. . . . I hadn't realized how much that impacted him emotionally. He comes home from work and if [mutual genetic son] doesn't greet him at the door with a big hello, 'Hi, papa I love you,' he's a little bit heartbroken every day. And he talks about how he feels just the same way I used to talk about, like I felt a little heartbroken in terms of [stepdaughter]. It's kind of nice to be on the other side. . . . And to work through it together. (E, line 753)
I try to parent [stepdaughter] the way I would [mutual genetic son] . . . it's more so [Partner] parenting [mutual genetic son] differently than [stepdaughter] because he's going to be taking in more of my opinion. . . . I just leave him alone as much as I can with how he is with [stepdaughter]. I'll voice my opinion. . . . I'm really into letting children do stuff themselves [laughter] because they need to. So, that's where we differ . . . and she's [stepdaughter] cool with it. . . . I teach her how to make her toast, and she likes it. I make it fun for her. He likes to just do things for her, which I mention to him. . . . he's like, 'Well, with [mutual genetic son], I'll let you . . . take care of all this stuff. . . .' What it comes down to,

is he kind of has to be the mom when he's home. If it's just me then it's just me. But when he's home I let him take care of her [stepdaughter]. . . . I have [mutual genetic son] too. So that's really nice having my own child because I can just do, take care of him. If it's just like when I'm watching her today though, I mean he lets me, that's the authority he gives me. He lets her know that she needs to listen to me. (D, line 156)

I don't think I could totally vent to him about [stepdaughter] because he definitely would go a little bit defensive. I have my friends for that. [laughter] I can carefully mention things. I have to be really selective on things that bug me but for the most part we have a pretty good pattern. (D, line 26)

It's Challenging and Rewarding

Coping strategies. Participants shared about their strategies and theories for dealing with the challenges of their blended family. Some strategies parents shared about included (a) choosing not to take things personally, (b) choosing to process difficulties on their own or with others, and (c) choosing to use healthy outlets.

[Stepdaughter]'s like, 'I know you guys are family but . . . I really like [biological mom's cultural] food. And I don't know if I can handle American food. . . .' Those comments you just kind of gotta smirk off and just not let it get to you. (D, line 12)

It's just one of those times when she loves to drive me crazy all day and then at night she wants to be daddy's girl and just relax. I think she really loves to push my buttons. My wife, she laughs sometimes because my daughter and I, we go at it sometimes. I find myself arguing with a six-year-old at the top of my lungs. My wife has to remind me 'You know you're fighting with a six-year-old' and I'll say 'She started it though. . . .' It's pretty frustrating, but it's fun. And I don't take it too seriously when we argue and stuff, it's kind of fun. (C, line 217)

There have been . . . a few times that I can remember where he [stepson] tried to be blatantly hurtful to me or disrespectful. One time was, after I just had a baby and he was like, 'Wow! You look like you're still pregnant.' And I said, 'That's really hurtful. I just had a baby, and it's still a little stretched out in the front,' and he was like, 'Oh, well you just looked fat.' And I was like 'Oh. Well, that happens and my body will come back eventually.' And I started to stifle a cry and I went back up because he's just a child. He said it maliciously I know it, but I need to get over it. (F, line 59)

When the days the cold comments come, or when I sense myself feeling . . . resentment . . . it's gonna happen. I get resentment. She [stepdaughter] wants to be around her dad all the time, we [participant and partner] haven't . . . had a night to ourselves for a while, I feel, it will fester in me and at that point I usually

just got to get out of the house. I got to call my friends, I gotta go out and do something. (D, line 56)

I'm just balancing how much I put myself out there. . . . what am I doing for myself. . . . I haven't bought clothes for myself in so long. . . . You've got to treat yourself once in a while. I've really figured that out, because you'll get really resentful. [laughter] So it's balancing that and just how needy you are . . . everybody gets needy, they want to be with their man. And it's not always so easy when he has a kid. And you have to balance . . . your neediness, and go off and hang out with your friends. You find ways to get those feelings met without him necessarily. Just keeping your emotions in check. (D, line 64)

It used to really bother me that [stepdaughter] wasn't affectionate with me. And I used to talk about it a lot with [partner] and he would reassure me that, yes, she is very attached to you. You do have a special relationship. It's just different. And that doesn't bother me so much now that I have [mutual genetic son]. . . . Every so often I would have these big emotional conversations with [partner] about it and I haven't had a need for that conversation. (E, line 720)

I decided early, like when I married my husband and I knew that I was acquiring a son, that I was going to do my best to love him like I'd given birth to him, and there's nothing that I wouldn't do for my [mutual genetic] boys. . . . If I'd sign them up for sports and had an obligation and had a team that was depending on them, then I would make that happen, so we go out of our way to do that for our older [stepson] boy too, where we can. That's not convenient, but I'm learning more and more that parenting is just a really long term inconvenience. [laughter] And so it comes with it. (F, line 81)

Those moments just give me hope that it's going to be okay. I think it does the same for her [stepdaughter] . . . it lets us have a relationship with each other, it definitely brings us together. . . . It's awesome. . . . I know she remembers it and I'll remember it. We just got to remember those moments when we hate each other and I told her that too, I've let her know. 'There's going to be days where we're not going to get along,' you can't candy-coat it. She's like, 'That's not gonna happen!' Like, oh, just you wait. [laughter] It's really rewarding. It's nice. It's tough though. I mean, you really got to put yourself out there. . . . When the cold comments come, you really got to put up a shield. . . . It's like being a friend, authority figure and a role model without being a parent. I mean, imagine that. (D, line 52)

Even though it's hard, it's not impossible and you can love a stepchild like they're your own and you just have to decide to get over the fact that your spouse slept with somebody else and had a child. And I had a moment right before we got married where I thought she took something from me. She had him first, she married him first and she had his first child and it's hard not to feel robbed but it's really not about you, it's about the kids that are already there, and about how healthy is your marriage going to be if you're going to hang on to that. So, you're only as good a parent as you are wife or husband, and in my case, I just decided

that being a good wife to my husband was loving his son. . . . [tearful] Really, really loving his son and accepting his ex-wife. (F, line 169)

Well, I know that kids have issues, and that they're going to have issues because they're people. But, I guess, I can't think of a single thing that could come up that I couldn't pray about or that I couldn't seek counsel from somebody who had already been there. I'm not afraid to ask for help or ask questions, and so nothing seems hopeless to me. . . . I can't imagine giving up on them [my children] ever or there ever being anything that he [stepson] could encounter that would be beyond my ability to have hope for. (F, line 203)

I mean, I try to read a lot of books. It helps . . . those relationship books. Another thing that actually helped too is just my classes that I take for [program], I mean how to communicate with children, because it works for everybody. . . . it truly works. Those classes, they've really helped me, and it's helped me with [stepdaughter] too. . . . I advise stepparents to take [program], because it will help you with everything. (D, line 144)

Recognizing what's within your control definitely makes a difference, and I think that's a perspective change. (F, line 203)
There's a lot of growing up involved with being a parent. (E, line 720)

Participant feedback session. During the feedback session, participant F shared

that she felt strongly that prayer and her religious/spiritual experience really helped her

cope in her blended family. Specifically, she considered prayer as a substitute for

presence with her stepson. Having less custody, she was not always with her stepson to

help him learn and develop, and so she would pray for him instead.

Lessons from other families. Recognizing what other traditional or blended

families have experienced, whether similar or different, and choosing to have a

benevolent attitude toward all of their children was important to parents.

I don't want to be against step mothers because I could totally understand. I mean I kind of have to force myself to do something just reminding it's good for everybody. But my friend's step mother just wasn't comfortable with her coming near their own kid, her own child that she had with her dad. Eventually, my friend, she ended up living with her mom full time and didn't have a relationship with her dad because he basically kind of did the new family . . . and whenever they visited, the step mom would always just shoo them away and talk about money, child support and all that stuff with them. That's just not right. . . . I can understand stepmothers who . . . have a hard time bonding with the kids. I don't

think it's a job for everybody. I really don't. I kind of got into this situation knowingly, I guess. I felt up for it. (D, line 204)

To me parenting . . . it's not fun, it's not stressful; it's a responsibility . . . I'm afraid today too many people don't take it that way. They want to be their friends. So, I'm never ever, I don't care how old they live to be and I do too, I will never be my child's friend, because I'm my child's parent. (B, line 97)

I try to keep it as equal as I can. . . . I do baby the younger ones [mutual genetic sons]. . . . My three year old [mutual genetic son] he's getting old enough to push my buttons so . . . I don't let as much slide with him, but when I pair them all together I just try to treat them as equally as I can. There might be certain times when I favor one over the other. . . . I also tell my wife . . . if she sees that to correct me. . . . I don't wanna fall into that because I've seen other step-parents do that where they . . . kind of neglect the kids, their step children. And pay more attention to their own biological kids. . . . It's not something I really have to twist my arm to do. . . . I want to be fair. I don't want to treat one better than the other. (C, line 77)

Like today she's like, 'I kind of have a cold so I'm being careful not to kiss him.' I'm just like, 'Oh, I'm so glad you care.' I just really acknowledged that she's . . . putting her arm out there to him. She's extending herself and that's not . . . It's rewarding. It's really rewarding . . . at the end of the day I really try to appreciate it because you don't necessarily appreciate it as much as you should when it's just happening in the moment but I try to . . . just reflect on it. . . . I'm appreciative of this. It is going well. We're doing a lot better than a lot of other families I have heard of. (D, line 30)

We don't have any friends. . . . None of our family has a blended family. They are all very traditional. . . . we definitely talk about our own experiences, but . . . it's a one way street. (E, line 815)

It's just that stepchildren didn't ever deter me from having my own. I never once thought, 'Oh, my kid will be better,' or 'My biological kids will never . . .' I have friends . . . that are in blended families and that have this sort of resentment towards their stepchild or behaviors that they feel are beyond their control that they are determined not to have in their biological children. And I don't feel like that, and I don't feel like it's not my place to correct behavior that I don't like. My husband and I talk about and we deal with it. . . . And set a standard in our home. (F, line 187)

So, I think that some of the other people I've talked to just have given up. 'Well, I can't affect him,' or 'if I could control his mom or his dad or . . .' Some of those other families are trying too hard to control the other spouse, and you can't do that. You can't even control the child, you can only control the environment in your home. (F, line 203)

Participant feedback session. Participant D also shared in her feedback session that she does not feel others understand her experience so it is not so easy to share about it.

Ultimately rewarding. Participants shared about their experience of parenting within their blended families as both challenging and ultimately rewarding. Seeing things work out with the family getting along was experienced as rewarding, and participants felt happy or satisfied with their family just the way it is.

> For me it's enjoyable. It's where I saw myself when I was a young man, and it works out fairly well. (B, line 43)

> It's been cool because she doesn't think of me as the step dad and she just appreciates all the effort that I put into a relationship with her. . . . It's been pretty rewarding because . . . she was a little hard to get to give in when she was younger but thankfully, I've known her since she was . . . four and a half turning five. . . . She doesn't really . . . know much better because she just thinks of me as dad. . . . I'm just lucky in that department. (A, line 45)

> It's a responsibility. Of course there are times that it's fun, it's enjoyable, it's rewarding. There are times when it's frustrating, aggravating and you're just left in awe at how your child can actually come to that particular conclusion. (B, line 97)

> It's wonderful. It's rewarding. It gives me a break [when stepchild takes care of younger mutual genetic child]. (B, line 217)

> Most of the time I'm proud. . . . I love having kids . . . there's definitely a lot of headache times. I'm sure I'm going to be either completely white haired or bald by the time I'm 30 . . . it's all worth it. The benefits and the fun times definitely outweigh the friction times and all in all I love it, I love being a parent. (C, line 89)

> The first time we met she [stepdaughter] just didn't want to talk to me. . . . But now . . . she practically runs me over when I get in the door. So, it's cool. . . . From any dads or . . . any parent or . . . anybody that loves their children, it's pretty heartwarming when you know your kid's excited to see you walk through the door instead of, they run to their room when you come in. . . . I'm lucky in that department. (A, line 61)

> When we [participant and step-daughter] have those deep talks. . . . it's awesome. It gives me hope. There are moments where I'm just like, 'Oh my god! What have I gotten myself into? It's like a nightmare.' Those moments just give me hope that

it's going to be okay. I think it does the same for her [stepdaughter]. And it lets us have a relationship with each other, it definitely brings us together. . . . It's awesome . . . it's a lot of work but it has really been rewarding. (D, line 52)

As a parent, your joy isn't in the fact that, 'Yeah, I taught them how to do that.' Your joy is in the fact that 'Hey, that's my kid and they know how to act right. Hey, that's my kid that just did something great,' because my kid did it, not because I taught my child how to do that. (B, line 255)

Yeah, it's ultimately very rewarding. It's busy, it's crazy sometimes, but [stepdaughter] is absolutely amazing. (E, line 84)

It's good. This is the family I've always wanted. I can't think of doing it any other way. [Tearful] . . . It's just having her in our lives is worth all the trouble. It really is. (E, line 482)

For me it's enjoyable. It's where I saw myself when I was a young man, and it works out fairly well. (B, line 43)

Yeah overall, it's been a very, very rewarding experience. I'd do it again in a heartbeat. (E, line 833)

Whether you give birth to them or you acquire them in the merger, it's worth it. (F, line 81)

Different Experiences

Of the experiences the participants shared, there were a few distinct differences that arose from the data analysis based on the demographic differences among the participants, including the more complex the blended family, the amount of custody, and playing a less parental role with their stepchildren.

Complex blended family. One participant had a more complex blended family than the other participants, in which there were stepchildren from their partner's previous relationship, a mutual genetic child, and additionally, biological children from the participant's previous relationship, ages ranging from 15 years old to 2 years old. This seemed to lessen the participant's experience of the distinction between the children per their relationship to the participant.

For me it's not really that much different. I've been raising kids since I was thirteen, thanks to my sister's promiscuity. . . . To me a child's a child. It doesn't matter whose progeny a child happens to be. So, the fifteen year old gets treated no different than the two [-year-old]. Obviously coming in, at such a later stage in a child's life, you have to make adjustments, because they're not going to fit, you know, your expectations with one child. . . . And they have to learn you as a parent as well, but after three years' time, it's a fairly fluid household. So, it's not a big deal actually. People when they hear that you have seven kids, especially seven daughters, they're like, 'Whoa!' Rarely do they realize that seven daughters is actually, overall, it's a lot easier than two. Financially, it's a struggle but you have the older ones to watch the younger ones, and, so on and so forth. So it's a little bit easier with a larger family. . . . You learn very quickly that some of your ideas as far as parenting, especially such a large brood, uh, are out to lunch, so you just have to discard that and move on. But also, after so many years of raising children, I have some very tried and true methods that I don't really have to worry about. (B, line 35)

To me being dad is a great honor. I couldn't imagine not being a dad. Again, to me it's a responsibility and regardless of whether you intended to have your children or not, now they're your children and it's your responsibility to ensure that they don't go out into society and become a bane to everyone's existence. (B, line 225)

Full custody. Two of the participants, fathers, had full or almost full custody of their stepchildren, so they did not share as much around navigating/incorporating the ex-partner (their stepchild's other biological parent) in the parenting process.

She grew up without a dad around when she was younger and she got to play on her own a lot. I guess she had a dad around but he wasn't, her other dad isn't that great. (A, line 137)

She's currently at her other side's for, she does two weeks every year in the summer there. And she doesn't get very excited to go there because she doesn't have a, she just doesn't have the same family there. (A, line 81)

Her [stepdaughter] biological father, they're probably never going to see that guy again. . . . Well that's actually a good thing. (B, line 241)

Less than parental. Two of the participants, both mothers, shared they felt that they were more of an aunt or friend to their stepchild, rather than a motherly role. Whether or not they were happy with this arrangement, it seemed to them that this was the very best role they could play in their stepchild's life at this point.

The way I explain to her is just like, 'If you ever needed a mom, you know I'd be your mom, but you have a mom and that would . . . I would be crossing a line that I can't because I respect your mom.' I let her know it's a respect thing. I'm not going to have that extra connection and she gets it. And I don't think she lets it hurt her. So I tell her there's another . . . 'I love [mutual genetic son] and I love you but there is an extra mother-son connection that I have with him and it doesn't mean . . . I don't have a special bond with you too.' (D, line 12)

I acknowledge her love for her mom and I let her know that I don't have a problem with her loving her mom. . . . last week I brought that up because I could tell she was kind of like angry. I could sense it in her and I can't remember how the conversation . . . started, but it ended with me just letting her know that, 'I'm okay with you loving your mom. I am not going to get in between that. I want you to love your mom. Your mom deserves that, she's your mom.' And she kind of got choked up a little bit, gave me a hug too. But I was like, 'I do hope you feel that you could have a relationship with me too without it affecting your relationship with your mom.' That's when she kind of choked up and she said, 'I do love you.' Because it's hard. You have that allegiance to your mom. . . . I remember. It was just totally distinct for me. (D, line 44)

But for [stepdaughter] and I . . . We've had to sort of teach ourselves to have a more friendly relationship. (E, line 266)

Our relationship is the same, pretty much as it used to be even though we've started spending more time together. It's still not as affectionate as I would like, [laughter] but maybe that's just her style in general or maybe it's just because I'm a step-parent and that's how it is. I really don't know. (E, line 270)

Participant feedback session. During the feedback session, participant D shared

that she felt comfortable with the terms *stepmom* and *stepdaughter* and is more like a

separate role than mom, because your stepdaughter's biological mom plays the primary

mother role. In her feedback letter, participant E responded to the reflection of her

experience of not being as close to her stepdaughter as she would like, perhaps a result of

the "step" relationship rather than her parenting style:

I still struggle with this, wondering if I can do more to be closer to her, snuggle her, reach out, mother her. She doesn't want this from me however, and we enjoy each other's company much more when I reach out as a friend or an Aunt, but that goes against my instincts and is challenging.

The Researcher's Biases

A recap of the biases the researcher worked to bracket while conducting this research included the following: the desire for the families to succeed and provide information surrounding their success; a bias that these parents would have significant challenges to share; a gender bias that the moms might have a harder time than the dads, and that mothers would have more interest in the topic than dads; another bias was that older and higher-income parents would have better parenting skills; the researcher was also curious whether parents would show favoritism to their mutual child and struggle more with their stepchild; and finally, a bias that certain coping skills might be more helpful than others, like religion and friendship.

Upon consideration of these biases, the following is a discussion of a comparison of the researcher's biases with the findings of this research. Some of the participants shared experiences that alluded to a sense of success, but all of the participants shared that they felt their experience was rewarding and they felt happy with their family regardless of the challenges they faced. It was therefore more relevant to their experience to consider the rewards and challenges rather than rate themselves on their level of success as a family. Given that all of the parents shared about challenges, participants' intensity of distress or impairment in response to the challenges ranged from very little to heightened frustrations. It also seemed that the level of custody had more of an impact on the level of challenges the parent faced, rather than the gender difference and traditions family gender roles. As such, it was unclear or impossible to ascertain within this research process whether the mothers were having any more difficulties than the fathers. It was clear, however, that all of the parents were deeply invested in the process of

parenting their children. Interestingly, the female participants had longer interviews than the men, although that did not impact the depth of information gathered as more or less from any of the participants.

It was also unclear from this sample whether age or family income made any difference in parenting skills. Many of the participants shared about their value of not favoring their mutual children over their stepchildren and expressed their efforts to treat their children as equally as possible. The participants also shared about a variety of coping skills, including communicating with their partner, taking time away from the family, talking with friends or extended family, spiritual or religious practices such as prayer, and gaining knowledge around parenting or blended families. Different participants found different coping skills more or less helpful.

Discussion

This study was conducted in order to discover the essential constituents of the experience of parenting in a blended family in which there is at least one stepchild and one mutual genetic child. Research specifically addressing the experience of parents with both stepchildren and mutual genetic children is sparse. Also lacking in the academic literature is qualitative research on blended families providing rich descriptions of the aspects of the experiences of blended family parents, underlying some of the patterns previously found in quantitative research (Coleman et al., 2000; Portrie & Hill, 2005; Stewart, 2005a, 2005b). Thus, this research was designed to address these gaps in the research regarding parents' experience of a specific form of blended family in a qualitative format.

Summary of Findings

In answer to the research question, "What is your experience of parenting simultaneously a mutual-genetic child/children and stepchild/children within a blended family?" the research participants answered providing information about their experience fitting into six categories: (a) I can parent, (b) my children get along, (c) we miss you (the stepchild), (d) let's talk, (e) it's challenging and rewarding, and (f) different experiences.

I can parent. The parents shared about their sense of competency in parenting as enhanced by becoming a biological parent to their mutual child and/or previously parenting their stepchild or their biological children from a previous relationship. Some parents also felt their sense of competency in parenting was directly related to the amount of authority they had to parent their stepchildren. Their competency was also

strengthened, and bonding often occurred with their stepchildren, when they observed

their stepchildren follow their example. Bonding also occurred when parents incorporated

their stepchild into the routine and care of their mutual children. Parents experienced

bonding with their children especially when they were the only parent present. See Table

4 below for an list of exemplary quotes of this theme.

Table 4

I Can Parent

A sense of competency parenting
Quote: "I feel that I am being a good parent. That [mutual genetic son] does love me. That's obvious now, and I feel that I treat him and [stepdaughter] pretty much the same. Maybe the age difference, is a little different there, but I feel like I'm doing the right thing even though [stepdaughter] doesn't necessarily show me the affection that I feel like I deserve. [laughter]… I don't second guess my thoughts or my actions. I'm just being myself and I know that it's good. And [mutual genetic son] is helping me with that." (E, line 741)
Quote: "I show her [my stepdaughter] that I'm doing the same with [mutual genetic son]. I let her know that he's going to be doing these things, too. 'I'm not trying to make you make your own toast because you're my horrible stepdaughter, I'm doing it because I care about you and these are things you need to be able to do.'" (D, line 164)
Quote: "It's okay, because I know that my husband and I are in an agreement, and I know that he'll always back me up, not that it's like, that I need a bodyguard when it comes to my stepson, but I know that interacting with him, I have the authority of a parent, because my husband supports that. And I also try to take into consideration all of our kids that are not going to take . . . I'm not going to treat him [stepson] differently and I'm not going to let him [stepson] get away with things that our little kids don't get away with. Eventually, they're going to be 11 sometime too and if I let their brother watch certain movies or say certain things or play certain games, they're going to expect that, too. So it's easy for me to uphold the standard in our home, because I know that my husband and I are in agreement about it, and that he won't question his dad's authority." (F, line 63)

Bonding with their stepchild
Quote: "I include her [stepdaughter] with those things and just, you know, we have a little song that I sing for him [mutual genetic son]. I just include her in her relation with her brother. I think that's really important. I have brothers and I have step siblings and . . . They're awesome. You got to really nurture that and it helps our relationship too. It

(Table 4, continued)
brings us closer together without me being her mom per se." (D, line 30)

Quote: "It's actually easier when [partner] is not around, which we've only recently started doing. Her [my stepdaughter] and I and [mutual genetic son] will hang out while [partner] is at work . . . we never really did that before. . . . . [partner] . . . would want to take the time off and be with [stepdaughter], but his work commitment hasn't allowed that all the time now. . . . So we'll have her for a week at a time, and [partner] isn't always able to be there that whole time. So I think that's really nice. . . . I can take over some of the things that [partner] usually does, like reading the story at night. Snuggling on the couch after [mutual genetic son] goes to bed or takes a nap. Usually, [stepdaughter] will prefer to do that with [partner], if she is around. . . . I feel like they should have that time together. But it's nice to have it for myself too." (E, line 266)

Quote: "She does everything that she's supposed to do. She goes to school every day, does her homework and her chores, and just has a good time. She's a pretty good kid. And that's cool, to know that you've rubbed off on a kid. . . . I don't like to use the word Nazi, but I'm known as the homework Nazi. I'm always the one that's, 'Is your homework done? Let's do your homework. Why didn't you do this yet?' I'm always the one that's all over her about her homework. And in a weird way it's kind of like, created a little bit of a bond because she always knows I'm going to come ask her and she gets excited when she's already got it done." (A, line 121)

My children get along. Parents shared observations of the initial challenges their stepchildren had adjusting to the birth of their half-sibling, the mutual child. After the initial adjustment, however, parents observed their stepchildren develop an overall acceptance of, and care for, their new half-sibling. The experience of witnessing their children getting along was heartwarming for parents. Parents also shared about their experience of the positive and negative dynamics inherent in having a large age gap between their stepchildren and mutual children. See Table 5 below for a list of exemplary quotes of this theme.

Table 5

My Children Get Along

Adjusting to each other and getting along
Quote: "We were kind of concerned because for eight years, she was the only kid. And we knew that she was a smart girl but we didn't know how well she was going to handle her emotions regarding not getting all of the time from everybody. . . . you and I both know that babies take almost all the time for the first couple of years. . . . there's a lot of times where we have to schedule life around the little guy. . . . she's learned to . . . accept the fact that that's just how it is, unfortunately, sometimes. But she is just as excited to see that little kid as anybody else." (A, line 77)
Quote: "I really made it important to incorporate her with knowing that this is your brother because she was kind of uncertain in the beginning. . . . I can understand that, too, because I used to be a step daughter as well. . . . I think she feels the connection with him now and it makes me so happy. . . . I'm so glad to see it. And at the same time she understands I'm not her mom, but there is still a lot of love and trust there. And she sees [mutual genetic son] now as part of her family." (D, line 10)

A big age gap between my half-siblings
Quote: "It's great. Yeah, she's going to baby sit him someday. . . . Usually if they're playing together really well, I'll get busy on something I need to do so I'm not really watching them so much, but I can hear them. And I love listening to their chatter. . . . Even if they're squabbling a little bit, it's still very reasonable because the age gap is good too. They're six and a half years apart, so [stepdaughter] can help him if they're fighting over a toy or whatever, she knows how to distract him, and then she can go get the thing she wants. And he learns a lot from her. It's good. Yeah, overall it's a very positive experience." (E, line 300)
Quote: "They've got a huge age difference and I don't know if she kind of gets a little mother-hen idea in her head. She gets excited because she gets to hang out with the little guy. I don't know but I just know that we're really lucky as parents to have the opportunity to have two kids, even though they've got this huge age group between them, that they're excited to be around each other." (A, line 89)

We miss you. The experience of missing the stepchildren while they were away

on custody visitations was felt by the parents, and they also observed their mutual

children missing their half-siblings as well. While the parents had less work when their stepchildren were away, they desired more custody of their stepchildren, even in view of their respect of their stepchildren's need to be with their other biological parent. Parents shared about their experience teaching their mutual children about their stepchild's visitations, where they go, who they visit, when they will come back, etc. They also observed that their stepchild had difficulty adjusting back into their household, and needed help feeling secure in their valued role in the family. Figuring out scheduling and parenting choices with their partner's ex was challenging for parents, and including or excluding their partner's ex in family life was an ever changing experience. See Table 6 below for a list of exemplary quotes of this theme.

Table 6

We Miss You

Missing my stepchildren
Quote: "I'm sure life would be different if he [stepson] lived at our house all the time. If I chose the school and I did all the parent-teacher conferences . . . like our family and I feel like it's really whole when he's with us and the boys [mutual genetic sons] get so excited. They are asking about him all the time, and when I tell them we're going to get him, they'd go 'Yay!' They don't leave him alone for the first day, usually." (F, line 103)
Quote: "A week when they are gone, it's kind of like, 'Okay, there's less kids. I can get more done and stuff.' But, in reality . . . I'd rather have them here because I feel they're my kids. I understand . . . he [partner's ex] has his rights and stuff. . . . I mean they need to see their dad . . . but . . . I'm kind of selfish and I wish they would just stay here the whole time. . . . And usually when the girls leave that's when my boys start acting up really, really bad. The girls are gone and there's no one else to play with, and that's usually daddy's role and daddy becomes a human jungle gym." (C, line 141)
Visitations with my stepchildren
Quote: "It was very hard to explain to her [stepdaughter] that he's [mutual genetic son] a baby. He needs a lot more time and a lot more attention because he can't do anything on his own. She didn't really understand that and I think what really helped her out was like we would show her what needs to be done all the time . . . we had to change his diaper or

(Table 6, continued)

wash his clothes or wash his hands and his face, give him a bath and give him a bottle. . . . There was a couple times where she would sleep in our room because she wanted to sleep in our bed. We were like 'Okay, the baby is in here.' Of course, the baby would wake up about every hour, wakes up [oldest stepdaughter], and then she realized that

babies need attention 24x7 . . . eventually when they get a little bit older, you can start . . . pulling things back. . . . I think that's what really got her to understand . . . we got her more involved to . . . see what we do because explaining it to her wasn't really getting through to her." (C, line 209)

Quote: "They [partner's ex] have a very different lifestyle than we have, and I think that's part of the adjustment for [stepdaughter]; being in a completely different mindset from one household to another. I'm sure that's hard." (E, line 250)

Educating my mutual children about their half-siblings

Quote: "And I also think it helps him know that [stepdaughter] is going to that place, to have a visual, and to see the people and the place where her other life is. Before we included him in that exchange, he would get really upset when [stepdaughter] had to leave. Like, suddenly, she's gone. . . . And he would wake up the next morning, and then say, 'Sister here? Sister here?' 'No, not today, sweetie.' Then the next morning, 'Sister here?' 'No, not today, sweetie.' So now, sometimes he wakes up in the morning and says, 'Sister's at Mama [partner's ex, stepdaughter's biological mom] house.' And he feels good about that because he knows." (E, line 336)

Quote: "And then the boys [mutual genetic sons] are always sad, especially sometimes they're having an afternoon nap and his dad will take him [stepson]. They'll wake-up and say, 'Where's [stepson]?' And I know they don't quite understand it. It's been hard for . . . the middle one who's . . . almost four. . . . We call [stepson's] biological mom auntie because she's going to be in our life . . . Forever. . . . And he didn't understand exactly why [stepson] has two moms, or who is his real mom. He hasn't asked all those questions yet, like, 'Why do we have the same dad?' He hasn't gone into that really in depth, but he understands that she's his mom. And so, he always asks us, 'Did he go to auntie's house?' And I'd say, 'Yeah.' He says, 'He is in auntie's house. But we'll see him,' I say, 'Yeah, we'll see him again.' And knowing that he's coming back is good." (F, line 111)

Transitions and parenting with my partner's ex

Quote: "She [stepdaughter] was wondering if her mom could come over. . . . I was cooking a dinner and [stepdaughter's genetic mom] was picking her up while it was time for dinner and I think [stepdaughter] mentioned to her dad, 'Can my mom stay? Can we just stay?' And he was like, 'Oh, not tonight.' And I was like, 'Well, how about we'll do breakfast . . .' Because I'm fine, I can cook some banana pancakes. I'll live for a couple of hours and [stepdaughter's genetic mom] can come over and make some banana

(Table 6, continued)

pancakes. But at the same time, you've got to be careful. If you cook food that's too good . . . it puts on this competition and you've got to be careful. . . . It's tricky." (D, line 86)

Quote: "I think that where we are now, we are at least on friendly terms, face-to-face, and her [partner's ex] and I have been doing a little bit of the email communications, because it's hard on [partner], he's pretty much like, 'I can't do this anymore. You do it.' 'Okay, I'll try.' It's a big responsibility but... It's nice to… be more of a participant… than being on the sidelines and having it happen to me… And [mutual genetic son] has been the bridge for that. Because he's been with us during those exchange times. All… six of us, plus the kitty cats milling around together while [stepdaughter] gets ready to jump from one parent to the other, literally, she jumps… [mutual genetic son]... goes and talks to [partner's ex, stepdaughter's biological mom], and talks to [stepdaughter]'s cousin, and plays with the kitties, and we interact. And that's what I wished I had done earlier," (E, line 316).

Let's talk. Good communication was highly valued among the parents. They shared about their experience communicating with their partner around parenting issues and about their relationship. They also shared about their experience communicating with their children effectively, as well as communicating about the different roles and relationships within their family. See Table 7 below for a list of exemplary quotes of this theme.

Table 7

Let's Talk About It

Talking with my partner

Quote: "That's what I love about [Partner]. I mean, as much as he drives me crazy and all the problems he has, he's always willing to talk about it in the end. We always come up with some sort of agreement to where we can both feel comfortable. And that's . . . a strong point with blended families and just open communication." (D, line 26)

Quote: "When I pair them all together I just try to treat them as equally as I can. There might be certain times when I favor one over the other. . . . I also tell my wife too, if she sees that to correct me . . . I don't wanna fall into that because I've seen other step-parents do that. . . . I want to make sure I'm doing the right things and if I'm not, I'm fine with my wife pointing that out to me." (C, line 77)

| (Table 7, continued) |
| Talking with my children |

Quote: "He [participant's partner] said to him [stepson] one time, 'This is my girlfriend. Do you understand what that means?' And he [stepson] said 'She's your wife.' [Partner] 'Same thing, I'm going to be married to her forever. And I'm always going to protect her. And you need to be nice to her.' And so he established that really early. . . . It felt really good. It was like a knight in shining armor moment. It was good. Not like I needed his defense but it was more, we're a unified front." (F, line 63)

Quote: "When we [participant D and stepdaughter] have those deep talks . . . it's awesome. It gives me hope. . . . I think it does the same for her [stepdaughter]. And it lets us have a relationship with each other, it definitely brings us together, you know. It's awesome. And I know she remembers it and I'll remember it. We just got to remember those moments when we hate each other and I told her that too, I've let her know. 'There's going to be days where we're not going to get along.' You can't candy-coat it. She's like, 'That's not gonna happen!' [I'm] like, 'oh, just you wait,' [laughter]." (D, line 52)

| My partner's experience |

Quote: "He's [partner] a little bit heartbroken that he doesn't get the love from [mutual genetic son] that [mutual genetic son] gives to me. He [partner] also knows it's logical. I'm his [mutual genetic son] primary caregiver. But from his [partner] experience, [stepdaughter] would go to him first and foremost at that age. He was her primary caregiver. When she wasn't with her mom . . . when she was with us. So our roles were reversed. . . . I hadn't realized how much that impacted him emotionally. He comes home from work and if [mutual genetic son] doesn't greet him at the door with a big hello, 'Hi, papa I love you,' he's a little bit heartbroken every day. And he talks about how he feels just the same way I used to talk about, like I felt a little heartbroken in terms of [stepdaughter]. It's kind of nice to be on the other side. . . . And to work through it together." (E, line 753)

Quote: "I try to parent [stepdaughter] the way I would [mutual genetic son]. . . . it's more so [Partner] parenting [mutual genetic son] differently than [stepdaughter] because he's going to be taking in more of my opinion. . . . I just leave him alone as much as I can with how he is with [stepdaughter]. I'll voice my opinion. . . . I'm really into letting children do stuff themselves [laughter] because they need to. So, that's where we differ . . . and she's [stepdaughter] cool with it. . . . I teach her how to make her toast, and she likes it. I make it fun for her. He likes to just do things for her, which I mention to him. . . . he's like, 'Well, with [mutual genetic son], I'll let you . . . take care of all this stuff. . . .' What it comes down to, is he kind of has to be the mom when he's home. If it's just me then it's just me. But when he's home I let him take care of her [stepdaughter] . . . I have [mutual genetic son] too. So that's really nice having my own child because I can just do,

(Table 7, continued)

take care of him. If it's just like when I'm watching her today though, I mean he lets me, that's the authority he gives me. He lets her know that she needs to listen to me." (D, line 156)

It's challenging and rewarding. Parenting simultaneously their mutual children and their stepchildren within their blended family was felt as both a challenging and rewarding experience. Parents shared about their coping and self-care strategies for managing the challenges by not taking things personally, processing issues alone or with others, education, and engaging in healthy outlets. Parents shared about their understanding of other blended and/or traditional families and concluded their desire and choice to treat all of their children equally and justly. Most rewarding for parents was observing their family getting along and enjoying and appreciating their family just as it is. See Table 8 below for a list of exemplary quotes of this theme.

Table 8

It's Challenging and Rewarding

Coping strategies
Quote: "Well, I know that kids have issues, and that they're going to have issues because they're people. But, I guess, I can't think of a single thing that could come up that I couldn't pray about or that I couldn't seek counsel from somebody who had already been there. I'm not afraid to ask for help or ask questions, and so nothing seems hopeless to me. . . . I can't imagine giving up on them [my children] ever or there ever being anything that he [stepson] could encounter that would be beyond my ability to have hope for." (F, line 203)
Quote: "When the days the cold comments come, or when I sense myself feeling . . . resentment . . . it's gonna happen. I get resentment. She [stepdaughter] wants to be around her dad all the time, we [participant and partner] haven't . . . had a night to ourselves for a while, I feel, it will fester in me and at that point I usually just got to get out of the house. I got to call my friends, I gotta go out and do something." (D, line 56)

(Table 8, continued)
Lessons from other families

Quote: "I try to keep it as equal as I can. . . . I do baby the younger ones [mutual genetic sons]. . . . My three year old [mutual genetic son] he's getting old enough to push my buttons so . . . I don't let as much slide with him, but when I pair them all together I just try to treat them as equally as I can. There might be certain times when I favor one over

the other. . . . I also tell my wife . . . if she sees that to correct me. . . . I don't wanna fall into that because I've seen other step-parents do that where they . . . kind of neglect the kids, their step children. And pay more attention to their own biological kids. . . . It's not something I really have to twist my arm to do. . . . I want to be fair. I don't want to treat one better than the other." (C, line 77)

Quote: "We don't have any friends. . . . None of our family has a blended family. They are all very traditional. . . . we definitely talk about our own experiences, but . . . it's a one way street." (E, line 815)

Ultimately rewarding

Quote: "Yeah, it's ultimately very rewarding. It's busy, it's crazy sometimes, but [stepdaughter] is absolutely amazing." (E, line 84)

Quote: "Most of the time I'm proud. . . . I love having kids. . . . there's definitely a lot of headache times. I'm sure I'm going to be either completely white haired or bald by the time I'm 30. . . . it's all worth it. The benefits and the fun times definitely outweigh the friction times and all in all I love it, I love being a parent." (C, line 89)

Different experiences. While the participants shared a lot of similarities, some differences stood out among them. One participant was in a complex family, in which both partners brought biological children from previous relationships, and they had a mutual child as well. This parent shared an experience of less distinction between his children based upon their relationship to him. Two of the parents, both fathers, had almost complete sole custody of their children and shared an experience of being the main father figure for all of their children, as opposed to sharing that parenting role with the other biological father. A different two participants, both mothers who had 30 to 50%

custody, shared about their experience of playing less of a parental role for their

stepchildren, as it best suited their stepchild's needs. See Table 9 below for a list of

exemplary quotes of this theme.

Table 9

Different Experiences

Complex blended family
Quote: "For me it's not really that much different. I've been raising kids since I was thirteen, thanks to my sister's promiscuity. . . . To me a child's a child. It doesn't matter whose progeny a child happens to be. So, the fifteen year old gets treated no different than the two [-year-old]. Obviously coming in, at such a later stage in a child's life, you have to make adjustments, because they're not going to fit, you know, your expectations with one child. . . . And they have to learn you as a parent as well, but after three year's time, it's a fairly fluid household. So, it's not a big deal actually. People when they hear that you have seven kids, especially seven daughters, they're like, "Whoa!" Rarely do they realize that seven daughters is actually, overall, it's a lot easier than two. Financially, it's a struggle but you have the older ones to watch the younger ones, and, so on and so forth. So it's a little bit easier with a larger family. . . . You learn very quickly that some of your ideas as far as parenting, especially such a large brood, uh, are out to lunch, so you just have to discard that and move on. But also, after so many years of raising children, I have some very tried and true methods that I don't really have to worry about." (B, line 35)

Full custody
Quote: "She's currently at her other side's for, she does two weeks every year in the summer there. And she doesn't get very excited to go there because she doesn't have a, she just doesn't have the same family there." (A, line 81)

Quote: "Her [stepdaughter] biological father, they're probably never going to see that guy again. . . . Well that's actually a good thing." (B, line 241) |

Less than parental
Quote: "The way I explain to her is just like, 'If you ever needed a mom, you know I'd be your mom, but you have a mom and that would . . . I would be crossing a line that I can't because I respect your mom.' I let her know it's a respect thing. I'm not going to have that extra connection and she gets it. And I don't think she lets it hurt her. So I tell her there's another . . . 'I love [mutual genetic son] and I love you but there is an extra mother-son connection that I have with him and it doesn't mean . . . I don't have a special bond with you too." (D, line 12)

(Table 9, continued)

Quote: "Our relationship is the same, pretty much as it used to be even though we've started spending more time together. It's still not as affectionate as I would like, [laughter] but maybe that's just her style in general or maybe it's just because I'm a step-parent and that's how it is. I really don't know." (E, line 270)

Current Research

In regards to the current research on parenting simultaneously mutual children and stepchildren within a blended family, the research of this study confirmed and clarified some of the previous research. In agreement with MacDonald and DeMaris (1996), the findings of this study also indicated a difference in the experience of becoming a first-time biological parent at the birth of the mutual child versus the experience of having already become a biological parent within a previous relationship and then having a mutual child within their current relationship. In their research, MacDonald and DeMaris found that first-time biological parents in blended families had a harder time deriving satisfaction from their stepchildren, and suggested that such parents probably experienced a higher level of role confusion than those stepparents who were already biological parents before entering their blended family.

In the sample from this research study, the parents whose first biological child was the mutual child within their blended family had a different experience than the one participant who was already a biological parent before the birth of his mutual child. The parent who was already a biological parent did not differentiate as much among his children based on his relationship to them. The other parents had a variety of experiences, but all of them did differentiate between their stepchildren and their mutual children in one way or another. This differentiation seemed to occur in relationship to how much

custody they had of the stepchildren, how much authority they had within their current relationship to parent those children, both of which are aspects of role negotiation for the parents. Moreover, the new experience of becoming a biological parent, and then navigating how much parenting they got to do of their stepchild, was an aspect of the experience parents shared about. Despite the difference in roles the parents played with their different children, most parents specifically shared about their values and efforts around treating all of their children equally and similarly.

In her research, Stewart (2005a) found that boundary ambiguity was highest for parents with two sets of stepchildren, who were more likely to have the most nonresidential children. In the sample of this study, only one parent had a complex blended family with two sets of stepchildren and a mutual child, and this parent shared an experience of having the lowest role ambiguity as compared to the other parents in this sample. The parent in the complex family had sole custody of all of the children and so there were no nonresidential children.

In general with this sample, the amount of custody also seemed to have the strongest impact on role ambiguity for the parents in this sample. The two parents in this sample who had majority custody of their stepchildrenfelt that they played the main parental role for thier stepchildren. The rest of the families, three stepmoms, and one stepdad, had less custody and more frequent visitations, thus impacting to what extent they played a parental role for their stepchild/stepchildren. Some parents were more comfortable in their role, and others were still negotiating how much impact they got to have in their different children's lives.

Much of the current research on parenting in this specific type of blended family focused on the impact of the birth of the mutual child on the parent and the family as a whole. A number of the studies examined whether or not parents expected the introduction of a mutual child to have a solidifying effect on the family and whether or not it actually did help solidify the family (Downs, 2003; Stewart, 2005a). All of the studies found that, while some parents expected that the birth of a mutual child might have a solidifying effect, that was only one of many reasons to have a mutual child, and in reality, the birth of the mutual child did not have a more or less solidifying effect on the blended family. Some of the parents from this study shared about their intentions around having a mutual child and discussed their curiosity of how it might impact their stepchild or how their custody arrangement might impact their mutual child. None of the parents shared expectations that their mutual child would necessarily help to solidify their family or increase their level of commitment to their family.

In sharing about their parenting experience, it was clear that the birth of their mutual child did not take away from the difficulties of step-parenting for the parents in this study sample. However, for some parents, having their first biological child, the mutual child in their family, increased their confidence in raising their stepchild and in being able to judge whether or not they were treating their stepchild fairly. This was an important value for many of the parents. Parents also shared about their experience of the push-pull between enjoying less responsibility when their stepchild was gone, and disliking the interruption to the family. Seeing their mutual children and their stepchildren miss each other especially impacted their wish to have more custody of their stepchildren. What the parents in this sample did share as one of the impacts of the

mutual child on their family was that it introduced a new sibling to their stepchild/stepchildren, whom their stepchildren could care for and be involved with. This half-sibling relationship was experienced as valuable to the parents of this sample.

Some of the current research of parenting in this form of blended family touched on aspects of the half-sibling relationship. In agreement with the findings of Ganong and Coleman (1988), the parents shared about their experience of their children not differentiating between each other as half versus full siblings. The parents also shared about their experience of helping their stepchild navigate the adjustment to the birth of their half-sibling, the mutual child. Their stepchildren had initial difficulties adjusting and did not seem to have a clear sense of what their relationship role was to their new half-sibling. Over time the stepchildren settled into a natural relationship with their half-sibling. This adjustment phase was also found by Ganong and Coleman.

However, the parents in this sample also shared about their experience of supporting their mutual children as they missed their half-sibling while the stepchild was gone on custody visitations. They shared about helping their mutual children grapple with, and develop an understanding of, the different custody situation and relational role of their half-sibling, the stepchild. In addition the parents also shared about their experience of their stepchildren missing their half-siblings, the mutual children, as well. These dynamics of the half-sibling relationship, as experienced by the parents, have not yet been addressed in the research literature.

Finally, the findings of this study agreed with previous research that co-parental communication was an important element of parents' experience (Golish, 2003; Schrodt & Braithwaite, 2011). All of the parents in this sample shared that their experience of

communicating about their parenting experience was invaluable, whether it was seeking

support, advice, accountability, understanding, or problem-solving. Parents also

discussed the importance of presenting a unified front to their children, especially

because of the different parental roles they played with their mutual and stepchildren, as

had also been established in the research literature (Golish, 2003).

Limitations

One limitation of this qualitative research is that the findings are not generalizable

to the broader public because of the small sample. However, given the level of depth and

richness of the material and the multiple reoccurring themes that came from this

qualitative research, the researcher conducted enough interviews to reach the point of

saturation of the material. The research gathered from this particular sample was

therefore sufficient for the purpose of this study, to paint a detailed picture of this

experience, shedding light on aspects of this experience that were not yet documented in

the research literature (Langdridge, 2007). Another limitation of the sample was the self-

selected nature of the research participants, who were recruited via flyers and online

advertising. Therefore, while the participants all qualified for the study as having

experienced the particular phenomenon, they were also all persons who were open to

sharing about their experience in verbal format and not a representative sample of the

general public. Also, while the sample was varied by age, gender, and socioeconomic

status, the participants' race and/or ethnicity were not gathered. Moreover, the

participants were minimally compensated for their participation in the study, which may

have impacted the particular content they shared. Yet, one of the participants declined

compensation, finding their fulfillment in contributing to the research rather than receiving compensation.

Another limitation worthy of note is the potential for the bias of the researcher to impact the results of the interviews conducted and the data analysis. In order to minimize potential biases, the researcher designed the method of the study to include a validation step of going back to the participants with their individual data analysis results for the purpose of gaining their feedback on the accurateness of the findings to their personal experience. All of the participants provided their feedback, validating the findings. Moreover, the researcher used field notes to journal personal biases throughout the research process, and reviewed those field notes to ensure an awareness of those biases and how they might impact the findings, which were discussed in the Project Method and Results sections.

Clinical Implications

Parents in blended families parenting both mutual children and stepchildren may experience challenges that compel them to seek support and insight outside of their family. Based upon the findings of this research, some clinical implications for these parents are as follows. As all of the participants shared about their experience of communication as an important aspect of their family life, interventions targeted at enhancing communication between all family members might be especially helpful to such parents (Golish, 2003). Specifically, providing communication support for the co-parental relationship between the partners might be essential to this type of parent (Schrodt & Braithwaite, 2011). Exploration of how the parents plan to parent their mutual children versus their stepchildren based upon the different roles they play and varying

levels of custody and involvement in the stepchildren's lives may be especially pertinent to the parents (Brown & Robinson, 2012; Howell et al., 1998; Svare et al., 2004). Also, providing support to the couple in order to convey a unified front to their children might also be helpful in navigating the different parental roles they play (Golish, 2003).

Many of the participants in this study conveyed that they did share about their experience with others but they had no one to relate to. This isolation might be remedied by creating or helping parents to access already established blended-family parent and family groups. The group format might help parents and their families to get in touch with others who are having a similar experience, and perhaps have a normalizing effect. Engaging with other blended families might also provide much needed support and valuable insights from other blended families.

Inherent in the experience of parents who have both mutual children and stepchildren is the half-sibling relationship between their children. Interventions focused on helping parents to facilitate positive half-sibling relationships might also be beneficial, not only because the experience of a warm half-sibling relationship was rewarding to parents, but also because there is evidence that a positive half-sibling relationship can be protective for siblings (Anderson, 1999; Deater-Deckard, et al., 2002). Also possibly helpful would be interventions that focus on preparing parents for navigating the challenges of visitations for their stepchild and the impact of their stepchildren's absence and re-entering of the family on their mutual children and the family as a whole.

Finally, as indicated in the current research literature, interventions that help improve self-care and coping skills for the stepparents are indicated, as they are more vulnerable to the stressors of blended family life (Schrodt & Braithwaite, 2011). The

participants of this study shared numerous coping strategies. They might benefit from interventions related to creating and/or bolstering self-care habits as a preventative measure against the negative impact of potential stressors within their family life. Specifically, coping strategies that center on supporting such parents in their two different roles as a parent of half-siblings might be essential to enhancing their parenting experience.

Recommendations

In short, based on the findings of this research, the following is recommended for parents who are simultaneously parenting half-siblings within a blended family. It is recommended that they get involved in some form of support group for similar families so that they can share their experience with others whom they can relate to. It is also recommended that they explore with their partner their ideas about parenting each of their children based upon their relation to the children. Given that good communication seems to be invaluable to blended families, it is recommended that such parents focus on fostering healthy communication among their family members. It is recommended that the parents give special attention to the half-sibling relationship between their children. Parents should try to support and nurture this relationship by educating their mutual children on the visitation process and empowering their stepchildren to take on an active role within their family and especially with their younger half-siblings. Finally, it is recommended that parents access a variety of healthy coping strategies to help them manage some of the stressors of parenting half-siblings within a blended family.

Future Research

A growing population, blended families come in many different forms. Parents in such families play a variety of different roles depending upon the make-up of their family. With the wide range of diversity of blended family types and with the various parenting roles parents engage in depending upon the family type, research is sparse on the experience of parenting within specific types of blended families. Moreover, this lack of research also corresponds to the lack of psychotherapeutic interventions, policies, and programs for the support of parents in those specific types of blended families.

As such, this focused study on the experience of parenting in the specific type of blended family in which both stepchildren and mutual children from the current relationship are present provides valuable insights into that unique experience. This research opens the door for a deeper understanding of this particular parenting experience. It also provides useful information for the development of future research, evidence-based clinical interventions, custody policies, and programs in support of parents in this form of blended family. Parenting in this form of blended family is a unique experience in and of itself and an experience that increasingly more parents are entering into, perhaps without resources, preparation, or access to others who are having a similar experience. This research is another step in the direction of building support for these parents.

However, there are still some unknowns about parents who simultaneously parent half-siblings within a blended family. It is still unclear what makes the experience of becoming a first-time biological parent within a blended family so different from the experience of those who are already biological parents before entering their blended

family. Research conveying the experience of becoming a first-time biological parent within a blended family could provide useful information for persons who are either considering entering into that experience or have already embarked on that path of parenthood. Additionally, information regarding the experience of parents who already have biological children and then enter a blended family and have a mutual child would also provide useful information for supporting such parents.

What is also still unknown is the impact of varying levels of custody of stepchildren on parents simultaneously parenting half-siblings within a blended family. Such research might shed light on the pros and cons of different types of custody arrangements as they affect the half-sibling relationship and the parenting practices surrounding that experience. Moreover, research pinpointing aspects of the half-sibling relationship would also provide useful information for parents to prepare for and support their half-sibling children. Future qualitative research that addresses the children's experience of their half-sibling relationship as well as their experience of being in this particular type of blended family, would also provide rich information about this experience.

As this qualitative study provided a rich description of the experience of parenting simultaneously stepchild and mutual children within a blended family, follow-up quantitative research focused on some of the key aspects of this research would provide generalizable insights for parents experiencing this unique parenting experience. It would also be especially beneficial if future research included representative samples of the U.S. population, including the wide range of races/ethnicities who are underrepresented in the current research on blended families. Moreover, as this research centered on families with

young children, future research should explore this parenting experience with adolescents. Future quantitative research on the half-sibling relationship could focus on the stepchild's experience of the birth of their new sibling and both the stepchild's and mutual child's experience of the stepchild's visitation schedule. As the perception of a warm half-sibling relationship was a rewarding experience for parents, such research could provide information to form interventions for helping parents facilitate an environment conducive to an enriching half-sibling relationship for their children.

Conclusion

Blended families have become a larger population over time and much is still to be discovered about this complex family form. There are many types of blended families, and one such type of blended family is that in which there are both stepchildren and mutual children from the current relationship. The unique experience of parents who are simultaneously parenting mutual children and stepchildren within a blended family has received very little attention in the research literature. This research was therefore created to address the question of what such parents experience parenting half-siblings within a blended family.

The participants in this research included six parents who varied in age, gender, and socioeconomic status. The participants were either married or cohabitating, in line with the general blended family population. The researcher implemented the qualitative research method known as descriptive phenomenology. Following Giorgi's (2009) method of data analysis, the researcher analyzed the data obtained in semistructured interviews with the six participants. The analysis provided a rich description of parents'

experience of simultaneously parenting mutual children and stepchildren within a blended family.

The findings of this study fell within six categories including: (a) I can parent, (b) my children get along, (c) we miss you, (d) let's talk, (e) it's challenging and rewarding, and (f) different experiences. These categories included an array of topics, some of which were supported by previous research and some that were new pieces of information about this unique parenting experience. Some of the most pertinent conclusions of this research centered on the topic of the half-sibling relationship. Specifically, this research sheds light on the parents' experience of the relationship between their mutual children and their stepchildren. The parents shared about how they were significantly impacted by how their half-siblings missed each other during the stepchildren's visitations with their other parent and how well their children got along. This information about the half-sibling relationship is virtually missing from the research literature. Future research on half-siblings and parenting half-siblings would provide a deeper understanding of this aspect of blended family life.

Another element of parents' experience was the different parental roles they played in relation to three issues: (a) the level of custody they had of their stepchildren, (b) the level of authority they had to parent their stepchildren regardless of type of custody, and (c) the level of family complexity. Future research on the experience of different levels of custody as it impacts the half-sibling relationship and the parental relationship could flesh out this picture. Finally, this research also supported the findings of previous research regarding the value of quality communication within a blended family, both between the partners and the parents and children.

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APPENDIX A

Screening Protocol

Screening Protocol

1. In your household is there at least one genetic child from the current relationship (cohabiting or married) and at least one stepchild who is genetically related to your partner?

2. Does the stepchild live in the home at least 30% of the time?

3. Is your mutual-genetic child between the ages of 6 months and 10 years old?

4. Is your stepchild between the ages of 2 and 11 years old?

5. Have you been cohabitating with your partner for at least 2 years?

6. What is your gender?

7. What is your age?

8. What is your socioeconomic status?

9. Would you be willing to meet with me to do an individual interview about your experience parenting simultaneously your mutual genetic child and stepchild within your blended family?

10. What are some dates and times that will work for you to meet for approximately 30 to 90 minutes for an individual interview?

11. I would like to gather some contact information in order to prepare for our interview and to mail you a copy of the consent form.

Phone numbers:

Email:

Mailing address:

12. Would it be best for us to meet at your home?_____If no, then let me provide you with the address of where we will meet for your individual interview: [I will need to research what could work best for this, especially depending upon where the participant lives.]

13. I look forward to meeting on_____date, time, place, duration_____for your individual interview. You can expect to receive a consent form in the mail which will provide you will more information about the research you are considering to participate in. Please feel free to call or email me with any questions or concerns about the research. At the interview I will review the consent form with you, especially concerning information about the research I am conducting and the interview process.

14. Do you have any questions for me?

APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol Project: Phenomenological study of the experience of parenting in a blended family.

Start Time of interview:_____End Time:_____Date:_____Place:

Interviewer:_____Interviewee code:

Position of interviewee: what type of participant, gender, family role, etc.

Participant Gender:_____Age:_____Socioeconomic Status

Level of Education:_____Religious affiliations

Partner Gender:_____Age:_____Socioeconomic Status

Level of Education:_____Religious affiliations

Relationship status:_____Length of current relationship:

Family members living in the home at least 50% of the time or more:

Gender:_____Age:_____ Relationship to Participant:

Gender:_____ Age:_____ Relationship to Participant:

Gender:_____ Age:_____ Relationship to Participant:

Gender:_____ Age:_____ Relationship to Participant:

Gender:_____ Age:_____ Relationship to Participant:

Gender:_____ Age:_____ Relationship to Participant:

Gender:_____ Age:_____ Relationship to Participant:

Gender:_____ Age:_____ Relationship to Participant:

Introduction to interview: see informed consent.

Notes on any questions of the participant:

Interview Questions:

"Please describe for me an experience of parenting simultaneously your mutual genetic child and stepchild."

"What was the experience like for you?"

"How did you feel?"

"What did you think?"

"What did you do?"

"What else can you add about the experience?"

Notes:

(Thank the individual for participating in the interview. Assure him or her of the confidentiality of the responses and remind the individual of potential future contact. Provide compensation.)

APPENDIX C

Consent Form

Antioch University Seattle Informed Consent Form

Date:

Dear _____

        Thank you for your interest in my dissertation on the experience of parenting simultaneously a mutual genetic child and stepchild within a blended family. This will include an in-person interview lasting about 30-90 minutes, possible brief follow up phone conversation to clarify any details in the previous interview, and request for your feedback on mailed transcript and data analysis of your interview. The individual interview will take place either at your house or at a local private office. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. The transcriptionists will be coded and kept separately from your identifying information. You will be asked to consider whether or not you would like to exclude parts of the transcript if you do not wish have a certain section or the entire interview included in the data. You will also be asked to confirm and/or clarify the findings in the data analysis as an accurate portrayal of convey your experience of parenting simultaneously your mutual genetic child/children and stepchild/children within your blended family. Upon completion of this research you will receive a mailed copy of the findings and your incentive of a gas gift card for $20 dollars. The audio recordings will be destroyed one year after the completion of the study.

        If you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time, and if you do withdraw from the study, you will not be subjected to reprimand or any other form of reproach. You will still receive your incentive of a gift card for two movie tickets at the completion of the study.

Description of any attendant discomforts or other forms of risk involved for subjects

taking part in the study:

A possible risk or discomfort for you in the research process may be the content of the

interview. It may lead you to consider difficult issues that are yet unresolved. Should you

feel you need support for processing difficult issues that arise in the interview, you will

be provided with referral information for a counselor who works with parents and

blended families.

Description of benefits to be expected from the study or research:

A possible benefit of the research to you would be that it could provide a portrait of the

experience of parents in blended families raising both step and mutual-genetic children.

Such findings could shed light on the essence of this experience, and perhaps spur on

future research for the benefit of your particular population.

Appropriate alternative procedures that would be advantageous for the subject:

Should you feel that you cannot complete the interview for any reason you may end the

interview. At that point you would be provided with referral information for a counselor

who works with parents and blended families. At the completion of the research study

you will be provided your incentive of a gift card for two movie tickets.

I have read the above statement and have been fully advised of the procedures to be used

in this project. I have been given sufficient opportunity to ask any questions, I had

concerning the procedures and possible risks involved. I understand the potential risks

involved and I assume them voluntarily. I likewise understand that I can withdraw from

the study at any time without being subjected to reproach. I may also ask for a summary

of the results of this study.

Signature _____   Date

      Subject and/or Authorized Representative

Signature _____   Date

      Subject and/or Authorized Representative

APPENDIX D

Recruitment Advertisement

Parents interested in sharing about their experience of parenting:

Are you are parent of genetic children and step children? You may be eligible to participate in my doctoral research on Blended Families. I'm looking for parents who are willing to share about their experience of parenting in a Blended Family in a one-on-one interview.

Eligibility includes the following criteria:

Children ages 10 and under
1 or more genetic child from the current relationship
1 or more stepchild from partner's previous relationship
Cohabiting with your partner for 2 or more years

If you are interested in sharing about your experience of parenting in a blended family please give me a call so that together, we can further the research on blended families.

Nicole Josephsen
(phone number)
(email address)

Gas Gift card for $20 provided upon participation in the study.