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Stepfathers and Adolescent Well-Being: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Stepfathers may influence their children's development differently from either biological fathers or stepmothers due to differences in biological relatedness, social expectations, and relevant family processes; however, to date, little is known about the impact of stepfathers despite the increasing diversification of families. This systematic review synthesizes existing evidence on the connection between growing up in stepfather families and adolescent well-being. Findings from 29 empirical studies suggested that in *between-group* comparisons, adolescents with stepfathers demonstrated less optimal socio-emotional and behavioral outcomes than those from two-biological-parent families. However, *within-group* examinations of adolescents in stepfather families indicated that positive stepfather involvement and stepfather-stepchild closeness benefit adolescent well-being. Maternal involvement and mother-stepfather relationships may moderate the influences of stepfathers. These findings have implications for future research and practices involving stepfather families and adolescent development.

KEYWORDS

nonbiological fathers; stepfathers; adolescents; well-being

Family structures have become increasingly diverse and complex across the globe (Brown, 2006; Lamb, 2012), with the proportion of adults with a history of divorce or separation between the ages of 35 and 39 rising from 2% in the 1970s to 4% in the 2000s (Oritz & Roser, 2020). In the United States, divorce and repartnership rates (e.g., remarriage) remain high despite declining since their peak in the 1980s (Raley & Sweeney, 2020). Even in societies where divorce rates have traditionally been low (such as East Asia), remarriage and stepfamilies have been on the rise (Hu, 2020; Kim, 2009; Nozawa, 2015). Meanwhile, more children are growing up with parents belonging to a sexual and gender minority (e.g., families with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, asexual, intersex, and other LGBTQAI+ parents or family members; Reczek, 2020).

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These demographic trends have resulted in an increasing number of children growing up in stepfamilies, in which the child (or children) is from at least one of the adults' previous relationships (L. H. Ganong & Coleman, 2004). In 2019, only 62.5% of children in the United States (U.S.) resided with both biological parents, and 7.0% of all U.S. children lived with at least one stepparent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Reflecting such changes, the research since the 1980s on stepfamilies and remarriages has become not only more prevalent but also more inclusive (Eeden-Moorefield & Pasley, 2013; L. Ganong & Coleman, 2018). While earlier definitions of stepfamilies narrowly referred to remarried heterosexual couples with co-resident children, recent definitions typically incorporate first-married (transitioning from single-parent family), remarried, and cohabiting living arrangements, and sometimes sexual and gender minority couples with diverse socioeconomic statuses (SES) (L. H. Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Pasley & Moorefield, 2004).

Among the various types of stepfamilies, this study focuses on the influence of heterosexual stepfathers on their adolescent stepchildren's well-being (i.e., heterosexual men raising a non-biological child in a heterosexual relationship with the child's biological mother). We are interested in this specific group for several reasons over and above the increasing number of children living in stepfamilies and the general scholarly concerns of child, parental, and family adjustment in diverse family configurations (Coleman et al., 2000; Jensen & Sanner, 2021; Pasley & Moorefield, 2004). First, stepfathers differ from stepmothers in their socially expected roles as it regards family processes in union dissolution, repartnering, and the actual parenting experiences and behaviors expected in parenting. Therefore, theories and findings generated from stepmother families are not necessarily generalizable to stepfather families. Despite the contributions from existing empirical studies and reviews that include stepfathers, few have offered separate conceptualizations or examinations of the impact of stepfathers versus stepmothers on the well-being of children or adolescents (L. Ganong et al., 2022; Jensen, 2022; Jeynes, 2012). Second, studies on fathers, including stepfathers, tend to focus on infancy and childhood, leaving the influence of (step)fathers on adolescents understudied. Sensitive to influences from their surroundings, adolescents are vulnerable to stress and risk, which may trigger externalized or internalized problems that could have immediate and enduring developmental implications (Belfer, 2008; Eiland & Romeo, 2013). Therefore, whereas we recognize the theoretical and practical value of research on other diverse family types, efforts are particularly warranted to synthesize accurate, nuanced, and context-sensitive findings on child outcomes specifically in stepfather families (Raley & Sweeney, 2020); particularly on adolescents who experience such familial complexity at a critical developmental stage.

To address the above literature gaps, this study aims to provide an updated review of studies that examine how stepfathers influence the well-being of their adolescent stepchildren. The article begins with a brief introduction to the existing theoretical perspectives on stepfathers and on the specific developmental characteristics of adolescents that may impact the influence of stepfathers, followed by a detailed description of the process of our systematic review and its major findings; in the final section, our results are discussed.

Stepfathers versus biological fathers

Whereas empirical studies over the last four decades have recognized the overall developmental benefits of active and regular paternal engagement (Cabrera et al., 2014; Diniz et al., 2021; Geary, 2010; Lamb, 2012; Sarkadi et al., 2007), evolutionary, sociological, and psychological theories suggest that the behaviors and functions of fathers may vary according to the biological relatedness and family structure.

Emphasizing between-group comparisons, the *evolutionary perspective* posits that stepfathers are less likely than biological fathers to provide optimal parenting for their stepchildren because of lower inclusive fitness. That is, stepfathers are less motivated to invest in their biologically unrelated stepchildren due to the lack of a link between the survival of the children and the father's reproductive success (Daly & Wilson, 2001, 2008; Emlen, 1995). Several studies have found that stepfathers tended to provide less engagement and a lower quality of parenting (e.g., less monitoring, lower warmth) for their stepchildren compared to biological fathers in two biological-parent families, and to fathers in biological father-stepmother families (e.g., Cooksey & Fondell, 1996; Fisher et al., 2003). As an extreme indicator of poor parenting quality, stepfathers are more likely than biological fathers to inflict violence upon their stepchildren. This is reflected in the rates of maltreatment and child mortality risk observed in stepfather families versus biological-father families (Daly & Wilson, 1980, 1998, 2001, 2008; Giles-Sims & Finkelhor, 1984). On the other hand, stepfathers may also be motivated to invest in high-quality care for their stepchildren as a mating strategy to increase future reproductive opportunities. Specifically, paternal investment in non-biological children may lead to an increased likelihood of having future offspring with the children's mother, thereby partially offsetting the cost of caring for non-biological children (Anderson, 2000). Overall, whereas biological fathers are driven by both inclusive fitness and further mating opportunities to invest in their children, the involvement of stepfathers in rearing stepchildren is arguably driven purely by mating strategy (Anderson et al., 1999).

Compared to a focus on biological relatedness between stepfather versus biological-father families from an evolutionary perspective, the *sociological perspective* emphasizes the differences between the socially constructed family roles of stepfathers versus biological-fathers. According to the incomplete institutionalization theory, stepfathers lack clear norms regarding the role they are expected to perform (Cherlin, 1978). Stepmothers face high expectations as regards caregiving and there can be a social expectation of a wicked stepmother stereotype (Ceglian & Gardner, 2001); both of which could lead to role confusion and a lack of support and acknowledgement (MacDonald & DeMaris, 1996; Scholtz & Spies, 2023). Biological fathers are legally required to support their children even if their marital relationship with the biological mother ceases to exist. In contrast, expectations around the appropriate quantity and quality of stepfathers' involvement vary greatly (Hofferth & Anderson, 2003), which may leave stepfathers confused, hesitant, or unwilling to be involved in child-drearing. At the same time, the absence of expectations may be liberating, as they entail lower expectations in daily care responsibilities and parental monitoring (Hetherington & Kelly, 2003). In a recent study by Brown-Weinstock et al. (2023), the authors performed in-depth qualitative interviews with youths in stepfather families that revealed how the lack of clear social norms for stepfathers actually allowed for flexible adjustment to complex family dynamics; thus fostering positive stepfather-stepchild relationships (Brown-Weinstock et al., 2023). Compared to their predecessors several decades ago, stepfathers today may also be more involved and effective in rearing stepchildren than their predecessors, possibly motivated by the increasing social valuation of men's parental role and the strengthened recognition of stepfamilies. Both of which reduce the stigma and provide more supportive resources (Gold & Edin, 2021).

Meanwhile, the *psychological perspective* emphasizes the primacy of family *processes* involved in the formation and functioning of stepfather families as the key determinants of developmental outcomes (Ganong et al., 2022; Marsiglio, 2008; White & Gilbreth, 2001). The instability and complexity involved in parent-child interactions (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Papernow, 2018; Raley & Sweeney, 2020) throughout the family reconfiguration of a family, including factors such as: the children's experiences of their biological parent's last relationship, experience of parental loss, and changes of SES level. These are important issues to consider when examining the effect of stepparents on their stepchildren (Belogai, 2010; L. H. Ganong et al., 2011; Jensen & Howard, 2015; Jeynes, 2006). On the other hand, the addition of a stepfather could serve as an additional caregiving resource, which can alleviate the mothers' caregiving burden, provide additional financial support, offer extra socialization and control, and strengthen the connection between the family and the broader

community. Studies examining the quality of stepfather-child relationships have indeed shown that a close, positive tie with the stepfather is associated with adolescent well-being (Amato, 1994; Jensen, 2022; Johnson et al., 2018; King, 2006).

As the family is an integrated union built on interconnected relational ties and processes (Cox & Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1988), a stepfather's influence on his stepchildren may also be shaped by his relationship with his partner (i.e., the mother of the stepchildren) and his relationship with his stepchildren's nonresidential biological father (L. H. Ganong et al., 2011; Papernow, 2018). Mothers may function as a "gate opener" or a "gatekeeper" who determines the quantity and content of stepfather involvement (Ganong et al., 2016; Yuan & Hamilton, 2006). As regards the biological father-stepfather relationship, the two fathers may augment one another and create an accumulative effect so that the child has two father figures ("the accumulation model"), or substitute one another in that the stepfather replaces the (nonresident) biological father in the child's life ("substitute model"); alternatively, the child may lose both father figures as might occur in single-mother families ("loss model") (Manning & Smock, 2000; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; White & Gilbreth, 2001). Overall, the psychological perspective is valuable in understanding how children's interactions and relationships with multiple parental figures and the among-parent relationships may jointly shape child well-being.

All three theoretical perspectives above offer nuanced views on how stepfathers may influence child development and well-being. The evolutionary and sociological perspectives focus more heavily on *between-group* comparisons contrasting stepfather families with other family structures, whereas the psychological perspective tends to investigate and reveal *within-group* variances among stepfather families.

The developmental context of adolescence for stepfather-stepchild relationships

One important child characteristic that may shape the dynamic of a stepfather-stepchild relationship is the child's age. Adolescence, starting with puberty (10–12 years of age) and ending with physiological maturity (approximately 19 years of age) (American Psychological Association, 2002), may bring unique opportunities and challenges for new or existing (step) father-(step)child relationships. Although teenagers continue to rely on parents as their primary caregivers, providers, protectors, and supporters (Holden, 2010; Maccoby, 2000), the considerable physical, neurological, cognitive, and socioemotional changes during this stage (Berk & Meyers, 2016; Holden, 2010) may transform the parent-child relationship. Specifically, the previously vertical relationship where parents possess more power,

authority, and knowledge develops into a more horizontal relationship characterized by more equality and reciprocity in exchanges, power, and decision-making (Collins & Laursen, 2012). The developmental need for identity formation and autonomy may impel youth to test the boundaries set by their parents (Berk & Meyers, 2016; Brown & Rinelli, 2010), leading to more frequent and intense conflicts, especially from early to middle adolescence (Branje, 2018). Existing studies have consistently found that stepparents have more conflicts with adolescent stepchildren than with younger stepchildren (L. H. Ganong et al., 2011; Hetherington & Kelly, 2003; MacDonald & DeMaris, 1996). The renegotiation and reorganization of parent-child relationships might be more challenging in stepfamilies, especially if the relationships that have been formed when the children were older. In which case they may be more used to living alone with their biological parents and less eager to develop positive relationships with stepparents (Robinson, 1984). Several studies have shown that younger children under nine are more likely to accept a stepparent than older children between nine and 15 years of age, i.e., around the onset of adolescence (Hetherington et al., 1985; Hetherington et al., 1982).

During adolescence, the father-child relationship can experience changes in different ways from the mother-child relationship, possibly due to the different parental roles that fathers and mothers play in the families and due to the different histories between parents and their children before adolescence (Hadiwijaya et al., 2017; Laursen et al., 2010). For example, a study by Paterson et al. (1994) of 13- to 19-year-old New Zealand adolescents found that father-child closeness tended to decline in adolescence while mother-child attachment remained relatively stable. Specifically, both adolescent boys and adolescent girls reported fewer positive feelings toward their fathers than their mothers from early to late adolescence (Paterson et al., 1994). Therefore, stepfather-stepchild relationships may have a unique developmental trajectory and impact during adolescence.

Overall, existing theories and empirical findings have yielded a mixed image of stepfathers' potential contribution to adolescent children's development and wellbeing. On the one hand, stepfathers may be motivated to care for their stepchildren (i.e., from an evolutionary perspective, as a mating strategy), and similar to resident biological fathers, their positive involvement could serve as an additional care resource in the family and benefit the child through direct engagement and by contributing to the couple's relationships (i.e., psychological perspective). On the other hand, stepfathers may not devote themselves fully to raising biologically unconnected children (i.e., evolutionary perspective) and could feel confused and uncertain about their expected roles (i.e., sociological perspective). In addition, stepfathers may confront parenting challenges, especially when facing adolescent stepchildren, which could compromise the quantity and

quality of their involvement. Such inconsistent predictions warrant a systematic investigation of existing evidence on the relation between stepfathers' involvement and adolescent adjustment.

The present study

This systematic review examines the impact of stepfathers (both married and unmarried/cohabiting) in two-parent families on the well-being of their typically developing adolescent stepchildren. The objectives of this review are twofold: 1) to present an integrated and evidence-based overview of existing research on the impact of stepfathers on adolescent well-being and 2) to identify potential gaps in the literature and offer recommendations for future research.

Methods

Eligibility criteria and strategy

A set of inclusion and exclusion criteria were established for selecting articles. For the initial screening, we chose (1) empirical peer-reviewed articles in scientific journals with available abstracts (2) published in English (language mastered by all authors); which (3) examined stepfathers and their impact on the wellbeing of adolescents. While degree dissertations and book chapters offer valuable insights, this review only synthesizes peer-reviewed studies to prioritize scholarly rigor, in order to maintain consistency and comparability across the studies, and to enhance the transparency and reproducibility of our review process.

A hierarchical criterion of exclusion was created as follows:

1. The age range of the adolescents was restricted to nine to 19 years according to the definition of adolescence from American Psychological Association (2002) and the World Health Organization (WHO) (n.d.). See Table 1 (Eligibility Criteria) for specific details concerning the inclusion and exclusion criteria.
2. We defined well-being as broadly including the following: behavioral, psychological, and physical effects, such as psychological and emotional well-being, internalizing and externalizing problems, substance use, and other risk behaviors, academic achievements, as well as adolescents' attitudes and perceptions of themselves. However, the children's perception of their relationship with their parents or their parent's identity (e.g., how they label their stepfathers and how they perceive their mothers' marriage) were excluded; these factors might correlate with children's well-being but were not direct indicators of well-being.

3. We focused on community samples in the general population. Adolescent children with special conditions and needs were excluded as their physical, developmental, behavioral, or emotional characteristics and need of care differ considerably from their typically developing peers and should therefore be addressed in a separate review.
4. We selected studies that clearly identified stepfathers in their sample and included information on stepfathers' influence on adolescent outcomes. This meant excluding studies that did not differentiate between biological and non-biological parents, or those that labeled stepfathers in their sample without examining the impact of the fathers' biological relatedness on the measured well-being of the adolescents.
5. We only included stepfathers in heterosexual relationships in this review. Studies on sexual/gender minority families were excluded.

Study Selection

This study follows the general guidelines in the PRISMA 2020 expanded checklist (Page et al., 2021). A systematic data search was performed in Web of Science and PsycINFO, using a combination of the following search terms. Table 1 displays the inclusion and exclusion criteria following the PRISMA 2020 checklist (Page et al., 2021). Table 2 shows all search terms used for each search block.

Figure 1 presents the process of the identification, screening, and inclusion of selected studies. The initial search identified 433 articles that fit the established inclusion criteria. After removing seventy-one duplicates and seventy ineligible studies following the judgment of the automation tools, 292 articles were assigned for further screening. Two hundred and twenty-three were excluded because they were irrelevant to stepfathers'

Table 1. Eligibility criteria.

	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Population	Adolescents, youth, teenagers, young adults	Studies that do not target the specified population (e.g., studies focusing on children younger than 9 years old or adults older than 19)
Family Structure	Stepfathers, non-biological fathers, stepfamilies, male cohabitating partners, Male Cohabitating Partner (MCP)	Studies that do not involve the specified stepfather or stepfather family type (e.g., studies focusing on biological fathers or unrelated male individuals)
Comparison	Not applicable	Studies with comparison groups or conditions that are not relevant to the research question
Outcomes	Studies measuring psychological well-being, mental health outcomes, family dynamics related to stepfamilies	Studies that do not measure relevant outcomes or focus on unrelated aspects of family dynamics
Study type	Quantitative and qualitative studies, empirical research	Non-empirical studies, opinion pieces, reviews, and theoretical papers

Note. This table shows the eligibility criteria in four categories (Population, Family Structure, Comparison, Outcomes, Study Type), following the PRSIMA guidelines.

Table 2. Search terms.

Search block	Keywords (titles, abstracts, subject headings)
Category 1: Population	(Adolescents) OR (youth) OR (young adults) OR (teens)
Category 2: Family Structure	(Stepfather) OR (nonbiological father) OR (stepfamilies) OR (step-father) OR (non-biological father) OR (step-families) OR (male cohabitating partner) OR (MCP)
Category 3: Outcome	(Depression) OR (anxiety) OR (mental health) OR (psychological well-being) OR (academic performance) OR (academic achievement)
Category 4: Study Type	(Peer-reviewed empirical studies)
Category 5: Context	(Stepfamily) OR (blended family) OR (non-traditional family)
Final search	Category 1 AND Category 2 AND Category 3 AND Category 4 AND Category 5

Note. This table shows the search terms used in the process of studies identification through databases, following the PRSIMA guidelines.

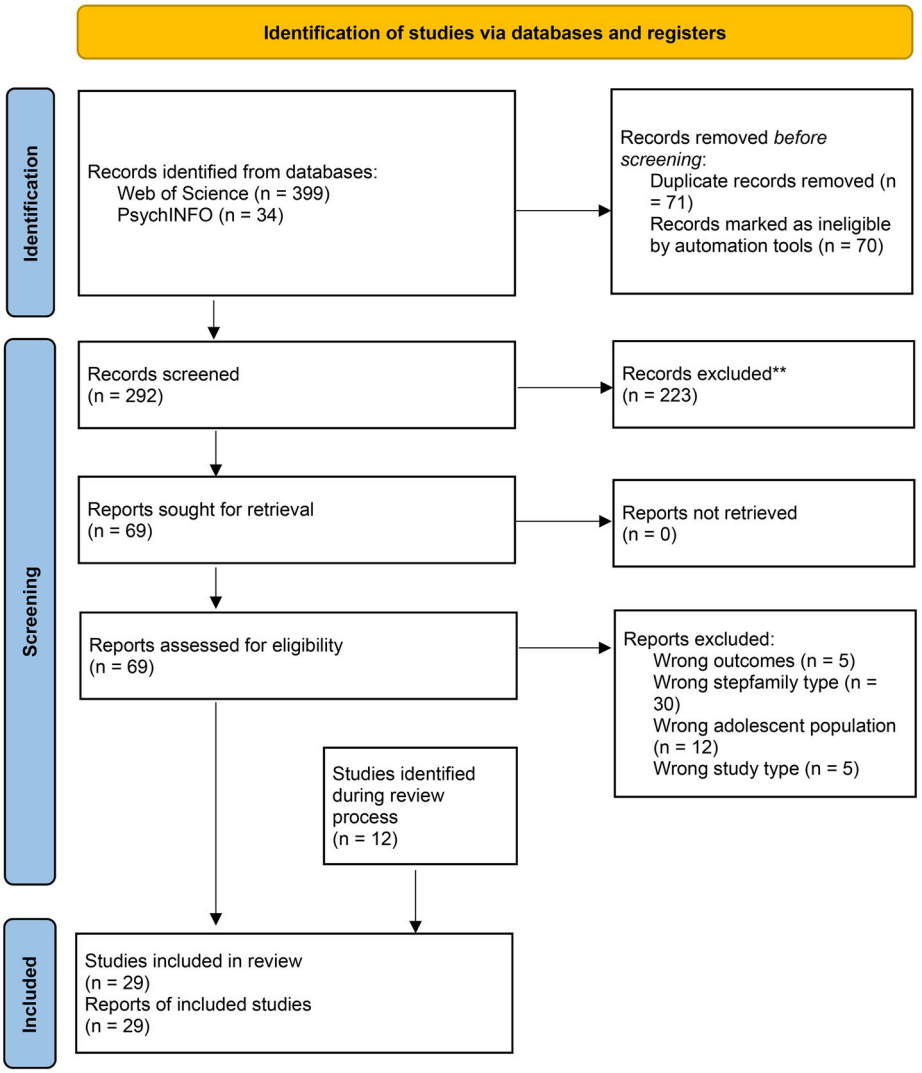

Figure 1. Flow diagram of the selection process.

Note. This figure illustrates the systematic search and selection process conducted in adherence to PRISMA guidelines. It encompasses identification, screening, and the inclusion of studies meeting predetermined criteria. **Excluded articles were the ones with titles or research questions not relevant to the impact of stepfathers on adolescent well-being.

impact on adolescent development. Sixty-nine articles were assessed for eligibility, and 52 articles were excluded after a full-text review. Among these 52 articles, 30 studies had other or unspecified stepfamily types, 12 studies had the incorrect child population, five were not peer-reviewed empirical studies, and five examined unsuitable adolescent outcomes. Additionally, we also examined studies included in other published reviews related to stepparenting, such as Jensen (2022), to identify stepfather-relevant data from studies that position themselves as generic. Ultimately, 29 articles were found that met all the inclusion criteria and were selected for data extraction (see Figure 1; see starred citations in References).

Results

General descriptions of the study samples and methods

Sample characteristics

Table 3 presents the main information extracted from each article, including the characteristics of the publication, the sample size, the study design, the independent variables of interest, and the outcome measures. Overall, of the total 29 studies, 25 were conducted in the U.S., one in England, one in Russia, one in Norway, and one in Germany. Twenty-seven studies included a large sample, ranging from 111 to 16, 684 adolescents, and only two had fewer than 100 participants (see Table 3). Four studies were conducted before 2000 and thirteen studies were conducted between 2001 to 2010. Twelve studies were from 2015 to 2023 (see Table 3).

Study designs and methods

Seven studies (Forehand et al., 2015; Gold & Edin, 2023; Jensen et al., 2018; Jensen & Harris, 2017a; Jensen & Harris, 2017b; Jensen & Lippold, 2018; Walper et al., 2015) used longitudinal designs. The study by Forehand et al. (2015) investigated the interplay of childrearing involvement by the male cohabiting partners of the youth's mothers and their parenting style on the change in adolescents' internalizing and externalizing problems across 13 months among a sample of African American families. Gold and Edin (2023) used data on stepfathers from two waves of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study in the U.S. The dataset included information on father-child closeness, active paternal engagement when the children were nine years old, and youth internalizing and externalizing behaviors, as well as school connectedness when the children were 15. Walper et al. (2015) used two waves of data, collected two years apart, from the German Family Panel ("pairfam"). The studies by Jensen and Harris (2017a, 2017b, Jensen et al., 2018) focused on examining the changes and effects of relationship qualities between multiple members within

Table 3. Studies reviewed (29 studies).

Author (year)	Country	Sample size	Study design	Independent variables	Dependent variables
Apel and Kaukinen (2008)	U.S.	8,330	Cross-sectional; Between-group comparison	Family type (Two-biological parents, mother-stepfather, single-mother, and other families)	Child's delinquent behavior
Barber and Lyons (1994)	U.S.	853	Cross-sectional; Between-group comparison	Family type (Married two-biological parents, and remarried stepfather families) Family environment	Child's adjustment
Beckmeyer and Russell (2018)	U.S.	681	Cross-sectional; Within-group & between-group comparison	Family type (Two-biological parents, stepfather, and single-mother families) Family management practices	Child's psychosocial maturity Positive friendship network School bonding
Belogai (2010)	Russia	52	Cross-sectional; Between-group comparison	Family type (Stepfather and biological father families)	Child's self-relation
Breivik and Olweus (2006)	Norway	2,550	Cross-sectional; Between-group comparison	Family type (Nondivorced two-parents, single-mother, stepfather, joint custody, and single-father families)	Child's adjustment
Bronstein et al. (1994)	U.S.	136	Cross-sectional; Within-group & between-group comparison	Family type (Two-biological-parents, stepfather, and single-mother family) Parental involvement Parental behavior Coparenting with noncustodial father Time spent with the noncustodial father	Child self-concept Child psychological problems Classroom behavior Peer popularity Academic performance
Brown and Rinelli (2010)	U.S.	13,282	Cross-sectional; Between-group comparison	Family type (Two-biological-parents, married stepfather, single-mother, and cohabiting stepfather families) Maternal socialization Maternal modeling	Child risk behaviors
Carlson (2006)	U.S.	2,733	Cross-sectional; Within-group & between-group comparison	Family type (Two-biological-parents, divorced-not remarried, mother-stepfather, and other families) Biological father involvement Mother involvement Family structure history	Child internalizing and externalizing problems Delinquency Negative feelings
Collins et al. (1995)	U.S.	78	Cross-sectional; Within-group & between-group comparison	Family type (Stepfather and stepmother families) (Step)parent-child communication	Child's subjective well-being Child's internalizing and externalizing problems
Demo and Acock (1996)	U.S.	850	Cross-sectional; Within-group & between-group comparison	Family type (First-married two-parents, single-parent (with divorce experience), stepfather, and single-mother (no divorce experience) families) Mother-adolescent relations Mother-father relations	Child's socioemotional well-being Child's academic outcomes Global well-being

(*Continued*)

Table 3. Continued.

Author (year)	Country	Sample size	Study design	Independent variables	Dependent variables
Falci (2006)	U.S.	1,443	Cross-sectional; Between-group comparison	Family type (Two-biological-parents, stepfather, divorced/separated, and never married families) Parent-adolescent relationship	Youth psychological distress
Flouri (2007)	U.K.	435	Cross-sectional; Between-group comparison	Father type (Biological resident father, biological nonresident father, and stepfather) Father's involvement Father's psychological distress Inter-parental conflict	Child's psychological adjustment
Forehand et al. (2015)	U.S.	111	Longitudinal; Within-group comparison	Involvement in childrearing activities Firm control parenting	Youth problem behaviors
Gold and Edin (2023)	U.S.	563 (wave 1) &738 (wave 2)	Longitudinal; Within-group comparison	Child's closeness to the stepfather Stepfather activities	Child's internalizing and externalizing problems School connectedness
Henry et al. (2011)	U.S.	594	Cross-sectional; Within-group & between-group comparison	Family type (Two-biological-parents, stepfather, single-mother families) Parental support & monitoring Parental academic support Parental educational aspirations for youth	Youth academic motivation
Jensen (2019)	U.S.	1,183	Cross-sectional; Within-group comparison	Youth-father interactions Family relationship quality Youth-mother interactions	Youth depression Youth delinquency Youth self-esteem
Jensen and Harris (2017a)	U.S.	758	Cross-sectional & Longitudinal; Within-group comparison	Stepfather-child relationship quality Mother-child relationship quality Nonresident father-child relationship quality Stepcouple relationship quality	Child depression
Jensen and Harris (2017b)	U.S.	1,233	Longitudinal; Within-group comparison	Stepfather-child relationship quality Mother-child relationship quality Stepcouple relationship quality	Child physical health symptoms
Jensen and Lippold (2018)	U.S.	881 (subsample 1) & 758 (subsample 2)	Longitudinal; Within-group comparison	Stepfather-child relationship quality Mother-child relationship quality Nonresident father-child relationship quality Stepcouple relationship quality	Child depression Child delinquency Child self-esteem
Jensen et al. (2018)	U.S.	191	Longitudinal; Within-group comparison	Stepparent-child affective quality Parent-child affective quality Stepcouple affective quality Stepcouple relationship quality	Child's internalizing problems Child's externalizing problems

(*Continued*)

Table 3. Continued.

Author (year)	Country	Sample size	Study design	Independent variables	Dependent variables
King (2006)	U.S.	1,149	Cross-sectional; Within-group comparison	Child's closeness to the mother, nonresident biological father, and the stepfather	Child's internalizing and externalizing problems Failing grades
King et al. (2018)	U.S.	16,684	Cross-sectional; Within-group & between-group comparison	Family type (Two-biological-parents, married stepfather, married stepmother, single-mother, and single-father families) Child's closeness to the mother, nonresident biological father, and the stepfather Family belonging	Child's internalizing and externalizing problems Failing grades Substance use
Merten and Henry (2011)	U.S.	7,114	Cross-sectional; Within-group & between-group comparison	Family type (Two-biological-parents, mother-stepfather, single-mother, and nonresident biological mother families) Mother-daughter relationship quality Race or ethnicity	Youth depressive symptoms Youth precocious events
Schenck et al. (2009)	U.S.	133	Cross-sectional; Within-group comparison	Child's perceptions of mattering to the mother, stepfather, and nonresident biological father	Child's internalizing and externalizing problems
Sweeney (2007)	U.S.	8,130	Cross-sectional; Between-group comparison	Family type (Two-biological-parents, single-mother (no divorce experience), stepfather (no divorce experience), single-mother (with divorce experience), stepfather (with divorce experience) families) Family income Parental presence Parenting style Total number of family transitions experienced by the child	Child's emotional well-being: depression and suicide ideation
Tillman (2007)	U.S.	13,988	Cross-sectional; Between-group comparison	Family type (Two-biological-parents, married stepfather, married stepmother, cohabiting stepfather, cohabiting stepmother, single-mother, and single father families) Family structure pathways, i.e., divorce or separation experience or loss of a biological parent	Child's academic outcomes
Walper et al. (2015)	Germany	2,618	Longitudinal; Between-group comparison	Family type (Stable two-parents, single-mother, stepfather, and prospective separator families) Economic deprivation Contact to father	Child's satisfaction with family, school, education, and career Overall life satisfaction Child's self-esteem
White and Gilbreth (2001)	U.S.	189	Cross-sectional; Within-group comparison	Child's relationship quality with the mother, father, and stepfather	Child's internalizing and externalizing problems
Yuan and Hamilton (2006)	U.S.	1,812	Cross-sectional; Within-group comparison	Parental involvement	Child's internalizing and externalizing problems

stepfather families (e.g., stepfather-child relationship, mother-child relationship, stepcouple relationship) on adolescents' physical health, depression, and overall adjustment over time. These studies examined the effects of stepfather families by considering the changing nature of the stepfather-stepchild relationship and adolescent adjustment well-being. The remaining 22 studies were cross-sectional, assessing stepfathering and adolescent adjustment at the same time point (see Table 3).

Regarding the comparative designs, 19 studies (see Table 3) used within-group comparisons. That is, they investigated the variations of stepfathers' behaviors (stepfather activities or involvement) or their relationships with stepchildren (closeness to stepchildren) within the stepfather-family population. Eighteen studies (see Table 3) compared stepfather families with other family types, such as two-biological-parent families and single-mother families. Three of these studies compared stepfather families with only one other family type: Belogai's study (Belogai, 2010) compared stepfather families ($n = 22$) with biological father families ($n = 30$). Barber and Lyons (1994) compared married two-biological-parent families ($n = 758$) and remarried stepfather families ($n = 95$). Collins et al. (1995) focused on stepfamilies and included stepfather families ($n = 41$) and stepmother families ($n = 37$). Fourteen of the eighteen between-group studies collected data on parental and familial characteristics such as household income and the parents' educational attainment as control variables when estimating the effects of family structures on child outcomes.

The adolescent outcomes examined were categorized into the following five domains: problem behaviors (internalizing and externalizing problems, delinquency, substance use), emotional well-being (self-relation, depressive symptoms, suicide ideation, life satisfaction), physical well-being (physical health and chronic illness), social relationships (friendship networks, schooling bonding), and academic achievement (GPA, failing grades, college expectations, academic motivation) (see Table 3).

Stepfathers and adolescent well-being: positive or negative?

Overall, compared to adolescents in two-biological-parent families, youths from stepfather families were more likely to have negative outcomes; however, among stepfamilies, active stepfather involvement and stepfather-stepchild closeness were associated with positive adolescent well-being.

Table 4 includes ten studies that compared adolescent outcomes by different family types. Table 5 displays the twenty studies that used regression or bivariate correlations to estimate the effect of stepfather family-related factors on adolescents' well-being or the associations between them. There are also studies employing both between-group comparisons and

regression models, such as Bronstein et al. (1994), Carlson (2006), Collins et al. (1995), Henry et al. (2011), Merten and Henry (2011), Tillman (2007), Sweeney (2007), and Walper et al. (2015).

Among the 18 studies that examined the effects of stepfathers using between-group comparisons, fourteen studies found negative effects of having a stepfather on adolescent well-being compared to adolescents living with two biological parents. Adolescents with a stepfather reported significantly higher self-fixation than those with a biological father (Belogai, 2010). The study by Breivik and Olweus (2006) found that, compared to teenagers from non-divorced two-biological-parent families, adolescents from stepfather families were more likely to demonstrate externalizing behaviors such as antisocial and violent behavior, smoking, or being sanctioned by teachers (see Table 4). They were found to be more likely to engage in risk behaviors such as drinking, smoking, and committing crime than their counterparts from two biological-parent families (Apel & Kaukinen, 2008; Brown & Rinelli, 2010). In fact, adolescents with stepfathers were reported to have the highest maladjustment levels, especially regarding externalizing problems, compared to those living with biological fathers and those living with their biological mothers only (Flouri, 2007; see Table 4). Adolescents from stepfather families were found to have lower emotional well-being than those from two-biological-parent families (Barber & Lyons, 1994; Carlson, 2006; Falci, 2006; King et al., 2018; Merten & Henry, 2011; Sweeney, 2007) and those from single-mother families (Sweeney, 2007), although they did not differ from those in single-mother families as regards academic performance (Demo & Acock, 1996; Tillman, 2007). The differences in mean levels of youth outcomes across family structures were not large (Falci, 2006), however, in Falci's study (Falci, 2006), family structure alone only explained two percent of the variations in adolescent psychological distress when race/ethnicity, household income, and family relationship variables were included in the model.

One study found no significant difference in adolescent outcomes between stepfather families and two-biological parents. The youths in stepfather families did not significantly differ from those in two-biological families in their satisfaction with family life, although their family satisfaction decreased over time (Walper et al., 2015; see Table 5). This finding echoes that of Collins et al. (1995) which found similar patterns of association between (step)parent-child communication and adolescent well-being in stepfather and stepmother families, although Collins et al. (1995) did not directly compare stepfather-adolescent communication and stepmother-adolescent communication.

Meanwhile, the nineteen within-group studies identified parental engagement and a close stepparent-stepchild relationship as factors that explain the benefits of having stepfathers. Gold and Edin (2023) found that shared

Table 4. Studies comparing adolescent outcomes by family type (10 studies).

Author (year)	Sample characteristics	Analysis techniques	Outcome variables	Mean (SD)				Size and significance
				Two-biological parents	Mother-stepfather	Cohabiting stepfather	Single-mother	
Apel and Kaukinen (2008)	8,330 NLSY youth	Descriptive statistics	Risk behavior	2.0	2.9	3.0	2.9	None provided
				Intact	Remarried			
Barber and Lyons (1994)	853 MSALT White students	MANOVA	Depression	3.9	4.4			$F(2, 758) = 9.7$, $p < .01$
			Worry	3.8	4.3			$F(2, 758) = 11.0$, $p < .01$
			Self-esteem	4.6	4.3			$F(2, 758) = 3.9$, $p < .05$
				Biological father	Stepfather			
Belogai (2010)	52 youth in Russia	t-test	Self-fixation	1	4			$p = .007$
				Biological parent	Stepfather	Single-mother		
Beckmeyer and Russell (2018)	681 NICHD adolescents	MANCOVA	Psychosocial maturity	3.38 (0.33)	3.30 (0.34)	3.26 (0.37)		$F(2, 680) = 7.26$, $p < .01$
			Positive friendship network	58.43 (7.17)	55.02 (7.95)	56.95 (6.81)		$F(2, 680) = 9.49$, $p < .001$
			School bonding	3.40 (0.52)	3.09 (0.62)	3.21 (0.61)		$F(2, 680) = 15.64$, $p < .001$
				Non-divorced	Stepfather	Single-mother		
Breivik and Olweus (2006)	2,550 pupils in Bergen, Norway	t-test	Antisocial behavior	0	0.26	0.33		$t = 1.72$, $p < .05$
			Violent behavior	0	0.28	0.28		$t = 1.78$, $p < .05$
			Sanctions by teachers	0	0.33	0.35		$t = 2.92$, $p < .01$
			Regular smoking	6.2%	10.97%	15.22%		$z = 2.54$, $p < .01$
				Two-biological-parents	Married stepfather	Single-mother	Cohabiting stepfather	
Brown and Rinelli (2010)	13,282 Add Health youth	Descriptive statistics	Drinking and smoking	0.19 (0.01)	0.25 (0.01)	0.21 (0.01)	0.33 (0.04)	None provided
				First married	Stepfather			
Demo and Acock (1996)	850 NSFH adolescents	Bonferroni	Socioemotional adjustment	2.58 (0.27)	2.47 (0.33)			$p < .05$
			Global well-being	3.59 (0.56)	3.24 (0.73)			$p < .05$

(*Continued*)

Table 4. Continued.

Author (year)	Sample characteristics	Analysis techniques	Outcome variables	Mean (SD)				Size and significance
				Two-biological parents	Stepfather	Divorced /separated	Never-married	
Falci (2006)	1,443 NLSY adolescents	Descriptive statistics	Psychological distress	3.45 (0.09)	4.02 (0.13)	4.15 (0.14)	3.91(0.13)	None provided
				Resident biological father	Nonresident biological father	Stepfather		
Flouri (2007)	435 fathers in South England	Kruskal-Wallis test	Child's total difficulties	8.50 (6.05)	9.52 (5.00)	12.78 (6.16)		$p < .001$
				Two-biological parents	Stepfather	Stepmother	Single-mother	
King et al. (2018)	16,684 Add Health 7–9th grade adolescents	Descriptive statistics	Child's depressive symptoms	−0.08 (0.01)	0.02 (0.09)	0.04 (0.04)	0.05 (0.01)	None provided
			Delinquency (0–14)	2.49 (0.04)	2.79 (0.09)	3.12 (0.18)	2.95 (0.08)	
			% Failed a class	24.80	33.91	34.95	38.49	
			% Alcohol use	14.79	19.30	21.61	17.38	

Note. MSALT = Michigan Study of Adolescent Life Transitions; NICHD = Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development; NSFH = National Survey of Families and Households; NLSY = National Longitudinal Survey of Youth; Add Health = National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health.

Table 5. Studies using regression or bivariate correlations to estimate the effects of stepfather family-related factors on adolescents' well-being (20 studies).

Author (year)	Sample characteristics	Analysis techniques	Predictor/correlate variables	Outcome variables	Coefficients	Size and significance
Beckmeyer and Russell (2018)	681 NICHD 15-year-old adolescents	Hierarchical multiple regression	Impulse control	Psychosocial maturity	$\beta = .36$	$p < .01$
			Parental knowledge	Positive friendship network	$\beta = .30$	$p < .01$
			Parental academic involvement	Positive friendship network	$\beta = .26$	$p < .05$
				Psychosocial maturity	$\beta = .24$	$p < .05$
				Positive friendship network	$\beta = .23$	$p < .05$
				School bonding	$\beta = .33$	$p < .01$
Bronstein et al. (1994)	136 fifth-grade children	Bivariate correlations	Stepfather parental behavior	Self-concept	$r = .64$	$p < .001$
			Noncustodial father involvement	Psychological problems	$r = -.46$	$p < .01$
				Classroom behavior	$r = .44$	$p < .05$
				Self-concept	$r = .61$	$p < .001$
				Psychological problems	$r = -.38$	$p < .05$
				Classroom behavior	$r = .43$	$p < .05$
Brown and Rinelli (2010)	13,282 Add Health youth	Logistic regression	Married stepfather family type	Drinking and smoking	$r = .40$	$p < .001$
			Single-mother family type	Drinking and smoking	$r = .36$	$p < .001$
			Cohabiting stepfamily type	Drinking and smoking	$r = .93$	$p < .001$
Carlson (2006)	2,733 NLSY youth	Ordinary least squares regression	Married-divorced-remarried stepfather family type	Externalizing problems	$r = 6.95$	$p < .01$
				Negative feelings	$r = .07$	$p < .05$
			Non-marital-birth married-stepfather family type	Externalizing problems	$r = 6.53$	$p < .05$
Collins et al. (1995)	78 12–18-year-old adolescents	Simultaneous multiple regression	Communication with stepparent	Adolescent well-being	$\beta = .29$	$p = .01$
Demo and Acock (1996)	850 NSFH adolescents	Multiple regression	Mother-adolescent disagree	Adjustment	$\beta = -.247$	$p < .001$
			Mother-adolescent support	Academic performance	$\beta = .1.050$	$p < .001$
			Marital happiness	Well-being	$\beta = -.467$	$p < .001$
				Adjustment	$\beta = .153$	$p < .01$
				Well-being	$\beta = .324$	$p < .05$
				Well-being	$\beta = .094$	$p < .05$
Flouri (2007)	435 fathers of secondary school-aged children	Multiple regression	Father's overall involvement	Child's prosocial behavior	$\beta = .03$	$p < .001$
				Child's total difficulties	$\beta = -.06$	$p < .05$
				Hyperactivity	$\beta = -.04$	$p < .001$
Henry et al. (2011)	594 Latino adolescents	Bivariate correlations	Stepfathers' parental support	Academic motivation	$r = .25$	$p < .05$
			Stepfathers' monitoring	Academic motivation	$r = .25$	$p < .05$
			Stepfathers' educational aspirations	Academic motivation	$r = .25$	$p < .05$

(*Continued*)

Table 5. Continued.

Author (year)	Sample characteristics	Analysis techniques	Predictor/correlate variables	Outcome variables	Coefficients	Size and significance
Jensen and Harris (2017a)	758 Add health adolescents who were 15 years old	Bivariate correlations	Stepfather-child relationship quality	Depression	$r = -.29$	$p < .05$
			Mother-child relationship quality	Depression	$r = -.33$	$p < .05$
			Nonresident father-child relationship quality	Depression	$r = -.07$	$p < .05$
			Stepcouple relationship happiness	Depression	$r = -.11$	$p < .05$
Jensen and Harris (2017b)	1,233 Add health adolescents	Bivariate correlations	Stepfather-child relationship quality	Physical health symptoms	$r = -.10$	$p < .05$
			Mother-child relationship quality	Physical health symptoms	$r = -.13$	$p < .01$
Jensen et al. (2018)	191 youth from PROSPER project	Bivariate correlations	Stepparent-child affective quality	Internalizing problems	$r = -.27$	$p < .05$
			Stepcouple relationship quality	Externalizing problems	$r = -.31$	$p < .05$
				Internalizing problems	$r = -.15$	$p < .05$
				Externalizing problems	$r = -.14$	$p < .05$
King (2006)	1,149 Add Health adolescents who were 18 years old or younger	Multiple regression	Close to both fathers	Externalizing problems	$\beta = -.37$	$p < .001$
			Close to only stepfathers	Internalizing problems	$\beta = -.31$	$p < .01$
				Failing grades	$\beta = -.98$	$p < .01$
				Externalizing problems	$\beta = -.31$	$p < .001$
				Internalizing problems	$\beta = -.20$	$p = .05$
				Failing grades	$\beta = -.59$	$p < .05$
King et al. (2018)	1,684 Add Health 7–9th grade adolescents	Ordinary least squares regression	Mother-child closeness	Child's depressive symptoms	$\beta = -.18$	$p < .001$
		Negative binomial regressions	Resident stepfather-child closeness	Delinquency	$\beta = -.16$	$p < .01$
				Child's depressive symptoms	$\beta = -.19$	$p < .001$
		Logistic regressions		Delinquency	$\beta = -.16$	$p < .001$
				Failing a class	$\beta = -.41$	$p < .001$
				Alcohol use	$\beta = -.30$	$p < .001$
Merten and Henry (2011)	7,114 Add Health adolescent girls	Multiple regression	Mother-stepfather	Depressive symptoms	$\beta = .91$	$p < .001$
			Single mother	Depressive symptoms	$\beta = .44$	$p < .01$
Schenck et al. (2009)	133 Mexican- and Anglo-American adolescents in stepfather families	Hierarchical multiple regression	Mattering to stepfather	Child report internalizing problems	$\beta = -.10$	$p < .01$
					$\beta = -.26$	$p < .001$
				Child report externalizing problems		
Sweeney (2007)	8,130 Add Health adolescents	Regression	Divorce experienced stepfather family type	Child's depressive symptoms	$\beta = .97$	$p < .05$
			No divorce experienced stepfather family type	Suicide thoughts	$\beta = 1.282$	*ns*
				Child's depressive symptoms	$\beta = 1.21$	*ns*
			No divorce experienced single-mother family type	Suicide thoughts	$\beta = 1.204$	$p < .05$
				Child's depressive symptoms	$\beta = 1.176$	$p < .05$
				Suicide thoughts	$\beta = 1.727$	*ns*

(*Continued*)

Table 5. Continued.

Author (year)	Sample characteristics	Analysis techniques	Predictor/correlate variables	Outcome variables	Coefficients	Size and significance
Tillman (2007)	13,988 Add Health adolescents	Ordinary least squares regression	Married stepfather family type (with two-biological parent as the reference category)	Child's GPA	$\beta = -.187$	$p < .001$
				School related problem behavior	$\beta = .139$	$p < .001$
Walper et al. (2015)	2618 15–17-year-old adolescents from the German Family Panel pairfam	Multiple regression	Stepfather family type	Adolescents' family satisfaction at wave 3	$\beta = -.054$	$p < .001$
				Adolescents' satisfaction with school, education, and occupation at wave 3	$\beta = -.010$	*ns*
				Adolescents' self-esteem at wave 3	$\beta = -.017$	*ns*
				Adolescents' life satisfaction at wave 3	$\beta = -.015$	*ns*
White and Gilbreth (2001)	189 NSFH 10-18-year-old adolescents	Multiple regression	Quality of child's relationship with stepfather	Internalizing problems	$\beta = -.112$	$p < .01$
				Externalizing problems	$\beta = -.090$	$p < .01$
Yuan and Hamilton (2006)	1,812 Add Health adolescents for depression and 1,804 for the problem behavior analysis	Multiple regression	Close to stepfather	Child's depression	$\beta = -.038$	$p < .001$
			Conflict with stepfather	Problem behavior	$\beta = -.065$	$p < .001$
			Years with stepfather * activities with stepfather	Child's depression	$\beta = .61$	$p < .01$
				Problem behavior	$\beta = .132$	$p < .001$
			Close to stepfather * close to mother	Child's depression	$\beta = -.002$	$p < .05$
				Child's depression	$\beta = -.028$	$p < .01$
				Problem behavior	$\beta = -.034$	$p < .01$

Note. NICHD = Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development; NSFH = National Survey of Families and Households; NLSY = National Longitudinal Survey of Youth; Add Health = National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health; PROSPER = Promoting School-Community-University Partnerships to Enhance Resilience; GPA = grade point average; ns = non-significant.

activities with stepfather at age nine explained the school connectedness of adolescents at age 15, and more active stepfather engagement was associated with a reduction in internalizing problems and an increase in school connectedness in the long term (Gold & Edin, 2023). Similarly, stepfathers' supportive parental behaviors were found to positively associate with adolescents' self-concept, classroom behavior, and negatively associate with psychological problems (Bronstein et al., 1994). In general, father involvement from any father figure in a two-parent family was found to have positive effects on adolescent wellbeing. For instance, although a married stepfather family type was significantly linked with externalizing problems and delinquency, father involvement reduced both the size and significance of the effect of the family structure on youth behavior (Carlson, 2006).

When adolescents reported better relationships or improved closeness with their stepfathers, they also had fewer parent-reported problem behaviors and lower levels of depression (Gold & Edin, 2023; Jensen & Harris, 2017b; Jensen et al., 2018; King, 2006; White & Gilbreth, 2001; Yuan & Hamilton, 2006; see Table 5). While youth depression did not significantly differ among various interactional patterns between adolescents and their stepfathers, Jensen's study (Jensen, 2019) found that youth delinquency was highest when youth reported having inactive and casually interactions with stepfathers; while youth self-esteem was highest when their interactions with a stepfather was versatile and frequent. In the only study that examined the physical health of youths as an outcome, Jensen and Harris (2017a) found that the stepfather-child relationship quality was negatively associated with adolescents' physical symptoms and also negatively predicted changes in adolescents' physical symptoms over time. Specifically, an increase of one standard deviation unit in the quality of the stepfather-child relationship corresponded to a decrease of 0.12 standard deviation in adolescent physical symptoms two years later (Jensen & Harris, 2017a). Adolescents who felt that they are important to their stepfathers had significantly fewer self-reported internalizing behaviors and fewer externalizing behaviors; this was reported by both the adolescents and their stepfathers (Schenck et al., 2009). Interestingly, Gold and Edin's longitudinal study (Gold & Edin, 2023) revealed that, although stepfather-stepchild closeness was not significantly related to any indicator of youth well-being at age nine, being quite or extremely close to a stepfather was associated with higher school connectedness at age 15 (Gold & Edin, 2023).

In contrast, low involvement or negative parenting by stepfathers could have detrimental effects. In the study by Forehand et al. (2015), black adolescents living with a male cohabiting partner (MCP) of their biological mother exhibited more internalizing problems when the MCPs were less

involved in daily childrearing activities and used high levels of firm control, compared to other combinations of MCP's involvement and control level.

Consistently across the studies (Yuan & Hamilton, 2006; King, 2006; White & Gilbreth, 2001) stepfathers were found to provide a unique added value above and beyond the adolescents' relationship with their biological parents. Adolescents who have closer relationships with both their stepfathers and mothers tended to fare better than those who were not close or had conflictual relationships with their stepfathers and mothers. For example, in the study by White and Gilbreth (2001), the stepfather-stepchild relationship uniquely contributed to 33% of the variance in the total effect of parent-child relationship on child internalizing problems; this was in addition to the 21% contributed by the unique joint effect of stepfathers and mothers. The interaction effect in Yuan & Hamilton's study (Yuan & Hamilton, 2006) indicated that adolescents who felt close to both their mother and stepfather had the lowest depression and problematic behavior. When the adolescent did not feel very close to their mother, an increase in the feeling of being separately close to the stepfather only slightly decreased depression and problematic behavior (Yuan & Hamilton, 2006). Among adolescents from stepfather families, closeness to stepfathers significantly predicted low externalizing and internalizing problems and less failing grades, whereas closeness to nonresident biological fathers only significantly predicted receiving failing grades (King, 2006). Similarly, the involvement by stepfathers and noncustodial fathers in the stepfather households were both significantly correlated with positive youth outcomes such as fewer psychological problems and better classroom behavior, whereas the involvement level of the noncustodial father was not significantly associated with youth psychological problems and self-concept, but with youth GPA and family income in single-mother households (Bronstein et al., 1994).

The effect of other family members

Studies on stepfathers that included biological mothers and nonresident biological fathers showed the embeddedness of the relationships across different dyads on adolescent well-being in a network of family relationships. In their study on stepfamily relationship quality and youth depression, Jensen and Harris (2017a) found both higher quality mother-child and stepfather-child relationships were directly associated with decreases in youth depression across adolescence; higher quality of mother-stepfather relationships (e.g., relationship happiness and harmony) were also directly associated with decreases in depression as adolescents grew older to emerging adulthood. While the stepcouple relationship quality was not directly

linked to youth internalizing and externalizing concurrently or longitudinally, it correlated with the mother-child and the stepfather-child affective quality, which in turn significantly predicted better youth outcomes (Jensen et al., 2018). In Jensen and Lippold's study (Jensen & Lippold, 2018), youth adjustment in stepfather families was optimized longitudinally when the relationship quality was consistently high among mother-child, stepfather-child, and step-couple dyads, as well as when a good nonresident father-child relationship was included. The biological mothers of youths may complement the stepfather-stepchild relationship. In Yuan and Hamilton (2006) study comprising 1,812 youths, adolescents' closeness to their stepfathers protected them against depression and problem behaviors (whereas the effect of adolescents' relationship with their biological fathers was insignificant). However, the association between the stepfather-stepchild relationship on adolescent adjustment became insignificant once maternal involvement was included in the analysis, although nonresidential biological fathers' involvement did not have such an effect (Yuan & Hamilton, 2006).

The evidence on the moderating effect of the stepfather-mother relationship was inconsistent. Some studies found a significant effect of the marital status of the biological mother and stepfather on adolescents. For example, adolescents from a cohabiting stepfather family were found to be the most likely to engage in drinking, smoking, and other risk behaviors (Apel & Kaukinen, 2008; Brown & Rinelli, 2010). White and Gilbreth (2001) found that the detrimental effect of poor stepfather-child relationships on internalizing and externalizing problems was particularly strong among adolescents whose stepfathers are cohabiting rather than married to their mothers. Adolescents in married stepfamilies or single-mother families had approximately 1.3 times higher odds of smoking, while youth in unmarried, cohabiting stepfamilies had nearly double the chances of smoking compared to those in families where adolescents had two biological parents that were married (Brown & Rinelli, 2010). However, Gold and Edin (2023) detected no significant effect of the mother and stepfather's marital status on adolescent well-being.

Discussion

The main goal of this study was to systematically review current research on the impact of heterosexual stepfathers on adolescent well-being, which has been tested empirically in the extant scholarship but not often synthesized and conceptualized despite the growing diversity of family formats (Jensen & Sanner, 2021). The results of the 29 selected empirical studies suggest that 1) the well-being of adolescents in stepfather families was generally lower than their counterparts in other family structures, especially those in two-biological-parent families, that 2) the involvement and

relationship of stepfathers with their adolescent children, rather than just biological relatedness, contributes to adolescent well-being; and 3) the influences of stepfathers are contextualized in the complicated family network with its resident and nonresident members.

Main findings

Our review found that compared with adolescents living with two biological parents, teenagers living with stepfathers tended to fare worse socioemotionally and academically. Such a pattern is in line with three theories: the evolutionary perspective that expects stepparents to have lower parental motivation; the sociological perspective that portrays stepfathers as disoriented about their roles, and the psychological perspective that hypothesizes a higher likelihood of past or current family conflicts in stepfather families. Admittedly, there remains a paucity of systematic comparisons between stepfather and stepmother families, those comparing stepfather-child and nonresident biological father-child dyads, and those comparing different children (i.e., stepsiblings) in the same stepfamily. In addition, there has been less discussion on the effect of remarried stepfather families following divorce or widowhood (e.g., biological father passing away) and potential differences in youth outcomes with distinctive experiences. This makes it difficult to come to conclusions on adolescent outcomes as regards the following: the relative importance of biological relatedness, role expectation, and psychological and familial processes. More research on comparing adolescent outcomes between single-mother families and stepfather families is warranted to disentangle the multifaceted nature of the effect of different family structures (Jeynes, 2012). To better understand stepfamily dynamics and its effects on the wellbeing of children and adolescents, attention needs to be paid to controlling for context-related variables such as years living in stepfamilies, parental divorce or pass-away, and income (L. Ganong & Coleman, 2018). The findings of this study indicate the need for further consideration being given to the potential challenges faced by the increased number of adolescents growing up in stepfather families.

Nevertheless, biological relatedness is not necessarily the only factor that determines the effectiveness of fathering. All the included studies that identified between-group differences were cross-sectional in nature, and one of the very few longitudinal studies that included stepfathers found no between-group differences between adolescents in stepfather families and those in two-biological-parent families (Walper et al., 2015). In the studies that attended more closely to family processes, stepfathers were found to actively talk to their children about schoolwork and academic achievements (Beckmeyer & Russell, 2018; Jensen, 2019). In some families,

they shouldered responsibilities for teaching, disciplining, and attending school activities with their children, much like biological fathers in two-biological-parent families (Flouri, 2007). Although it is unclear whether stepfathers have done this to please their partners (i.e., evolutionary perspective, as a mating strategy), such effort proved to be effective as most adolescents reported having close relationships with their stepfathers (Gold & Edin, 2021; King, 2006). Adolescents have also been found to benefit from their stepfathers' presence, involvement, and a positive stepfather-child relationship (Beckmeyer & Russell, 2018; Gold & Edin, 2023; Jensen & Harris, 2017a, 2017b; Sweeney, 2007). These findings suggest that motivated stepfathers can become effective parents and that they may influence the well-being of their children through mechanism similar to those found in biological fathers. The active involvement of stepfathers and the prevalent close relational ties between stepfathers and their children may reflect a shifting of cultural norms in contemporary Western societies toward greater paternal participation (Gold & Edin, 2023).

When situated in family systems, stepfathers appeared to provide an additional positive effect on adolescent well-being above and beyond that from either their biological fathers (King, 2006; Yuan & Hamilton, 2006) or biological mothers (King, 2006; White & Gilbreth, 2001; Yuan & Hamilton, 2006); this positive effect supports the accumulation model (White & Gilbreth, 2001). As Yuan and Hamilton (2006) demonstrated, when the necessity arises, stepfathers could substitute not only nonresident biological fathers but also the biological mother, in providing support for their adolescent stepchildren. These different mechanisms of support demonstrate how the family is "a complex, integrated whole" (Minuchin, 1988, p.8), with each family member– even nonresident ones– "necessarily interdependent, exerting continuous and reciprocal influence on one another" (Cox & Paley, 1997, p. 246). Further research on stepfamilies is needed to explore family processes, dynamics, and relationships in more detail and their impact on child well-being (Coleman et al., 2018). It could help generate contextual and nuanced findings that can inform programs, practices, and policy to better support the well-being of children and youths within various family structures.

One notable consideration arising from our review is the variability in sample sizes across the studies included. While the reviewed literature provides valuable insights into the associations between stepfathers and adolescent well-being, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations imposed by small sample sizes in some studies. Most studies conducted in the U.S. used nationally representative samples drawn from national projects (e.g., NICHD, NSFH, and Add Health). Studies with small sample sizes under 100 (e.g., Belogai, 2010; Collins et al., 1995), which could result from limited data availability, are susceptible to sampling biases and may lack

statistical power to detect meaningful associations or differences accurately. Consequently, caution is warranted when interpreting the findings from studies with limited sample sizes, and a meta-analysis could be attempted when relevant evidence continues to accumulate in the future.

Limitations and future directions

This review has several limitations that provide opportunities for future explorations. First, most of the included studies focused on one adolescent child in the stepfamily, whereas many stepfamilies are liable to have more than one co-resident child (Ganong & Coleman, 2004), and some may also have nonresident children (e.g., stepfathers' noncustodial biological children from previous relationships). We observed that three of the 29 studies included a question on the number of siblings (e.g., Flouri, 2007; Jensen, 2019; Yuan & Hamilton, 2006) without examining sibling effects. (Half-) Siblings living in or outside of the adolescent's current household can divide the attention of stepfathers and resources between their resident and nonresident stepchildren (Manning et al., 2003). A growing body of literature has provided evidence on the effect of the relationship quality between siblings and stepsiblings on individual child well-being in stepfamilies in comparisons with two-biological-parent families (Sanner et al., 2018). It may be helpful to consider the influences of siblings and half-siblings on both the behaviors of stepfathers and stepfather-stepchild relationships to compare stepfathers' treatment of and impact on children with different status of biological relatedness.

Second, due to the small number of studies included, we were unable to systematically compare the influence of stepfathers on adolescent boys and girls. In Carlson's study (Carlson 2006) focusing on father involvement across family structures, youth gender was tested as an interaction term with the degree of father involvement and the results showed little difference in how father involvement affected boys and girls in all families. However, two of the 29 selected articles revealed that girls in stepfather families may be in a more disadvantaged situation than boys. One study found general similarities between boys' and girl's adjustment associated with family relationship quality in stepfather families, with girls reporting higher initial levels of internalizing problems than boys in stepfamilies with low-quality relationships (Jensen & Lippold, 2018; see Bronstein et al., 1994 for an exception) Among the 29 articles reviewed, there was also one study particularly focusing on the population of adolescent girls (Merten & Henry, 2011), emphasizing the heightened risk for girls in mother-stepfather, single-mother, and nonresident mother families compared to biological mother-father families. This is consistent with the empirical findings of adolescent-parent relationships in general; these

findings indicate that adolescent girls perceive less availability from fathers than younger girls, while their perception of their mothers' availability does not vary with their age, in contrast, boys' perception of paternal and maternal availability did not change over time (Lieberman et al., 1999). Moreover, given the special association found in research between father involvement and outcomes for girls as regards female dating, violence, and risky sexual behaviors (Alleyne-Green et al., 2016), it would be meaningful for stepfather research to further explore this area. Future research could consider how differently girls might be influenced by stepfathers from boys.

Third, despite our effort to include studies from worldwide research, all studies in this review came from European and North American countries, despite the increase of stepfamilies in non-Western societies (Hu, 2020; Oritz & Roser, 2020). The four non-U.S. studies placed little weight on discussing country-specific economic, cultural, social, or legal backgrounds that may have important impact on children or stepfamilies adjustment; nor did they offer information on within-country diversities across race, ethnicities, and social class. In their study conducted in Germany with a nationally represented sample, Walper et al. (2015) mentioned the link between single parenthood and the higher likelihood of income poverty and downward mobility, which were common in most counties although had a weaker effect was observed in Scandinavian countries compared to the U.K. and the U.S. It has long been recognized that family processes relevant to step-parenthood may vary according to the following factors: parents' characteristics such as racial/ethnic identity, income, education, and social support (Jensen & Sanner, 2021; Ryan et al., 2015), and that parenting styles, behaviors, and beliefs can be greatly influenced by cultural norms and societal expectations (Bornstein, 2012; Harding et al., 2017). For example, Zhang (2020) pointed out that, unlike in western societies where divorced single motherhood were often associated with worsened educational outcomes in children, children of divorced single mothers in China performed better, as better educated women are more likely to seek divorce and then remain single afterwards in a hypergamous society. Changing attitude toward divorce and remarriage and the consequent normativity of stepfather families might influence both the resources (e.g., availability of support group) and stress level (e.g., stigma) faced by family members. It is therefore imperative for researchers to understand the stepfather families from diverse and changing sociocultural contexts through culturally sensitive investigation.

Conclusions and Implications

This systematic review synthesized major themes and findings concerning the effect of stepfathers on the well-being of adolescents. We observed a

trend toward poorer youth outcomes in stepfather families especially compared to those in two-biological-parent families. However, comparisons between adolescents from stepfather families and those from single-mother or stepmother families did not consistently support the disadvantage of having a stepfather. Our findings also suggested that positive parental involvement (e.g., shared activities, helping with homework, and talking about school) and a close stepfather-child relationship could benefit adolescents from stepfather families who might have disadvantages after experiencing parental divorce and family instability. However, this positive association may vary due to other familial conditions such as the involvement of the adolescent's biological mother. These findings call for more systematic inclusion in investigations of factors related to family processes (e.g., mother-child relationship, the presence of (half)siblings, years of living in stepfamilies, and divorce experience). As families continue to diversify, our review encourages future studies to examine the subtlety and nuance in stepfather families to better understand how parents and stepparents around the world can contribute positively to their children's well-being.

Our findings also have practical implications. The overall disadvantage of adolescents in stepfather families calls for greater attention on the potential challenges faced by adolescents, their stepfathers, and their families. For example, role clarification of the stepfather, possibly in discussion with the children's biological parents and other key childrearing agents (such as grandparents), may help stepfathers better perform their parental roles. Practitioners could also assist stepfather families in allocating appropriate time for adolescents to bond with both their biological parents and their new stepfather (Papernow, 2018). Findings from this review on the potential benefits provided by high-quality stepfathering provide evidence for interventions that encourage persistent efforts to identify effective strategies for supporting the involvement of stepfathers and cultivating positive stepfather-child relationships. Practitioners working with stepfamilies should be mindful of individual and contextual characteristics that might influence stepfather-child relationship quality, including the stepfather-mother dynamic and the family transition history and use such awareness to guide their assessments and interventions.

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