

What have we learned during the past ten years concerning the adjustment of stepchildren ?

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Introduction

- In the United States, more than two thirds of women and three quarters of men remarry after divorce. These second marriages often involve children (Shoen & Standish, 2001).
- 7.2% of American children under the age of 18 live with a biological parent and a stepparent (Kreider, 2008).
- The last decade has given rise to numerous studies that allowed us to refine our understanding of these families. Such studies focus on the capacity of stepchildren to adjust.

Research questions

- How do the children and adolescents who live in stepfamilies adjust themselves to their new environment?
- What are the elements which promote or hinder the adjustment of youngsters in a stepfamily context?

Methodology

- Articles related to the implications of living in a stepfamily context, published in English or in French from 2000 to 2009.
- Six databases: *PsycInfo*, *Current Contents*, *Sociological Abstracts*, *Family and Society Worldwide Studies*, *Famili@* and *Cairn*.
- 1890 identified articles. Inclusion and exclusion criteria application: N= 280 (retention rate of 14,8 %), from which 197 concern the *adjustment of youths*.
- Evaluation and retention of articles based on the methodological robustness: 100 studies on the adjustment of stepchildren, 1 meta-analysis and 5 literature-review.

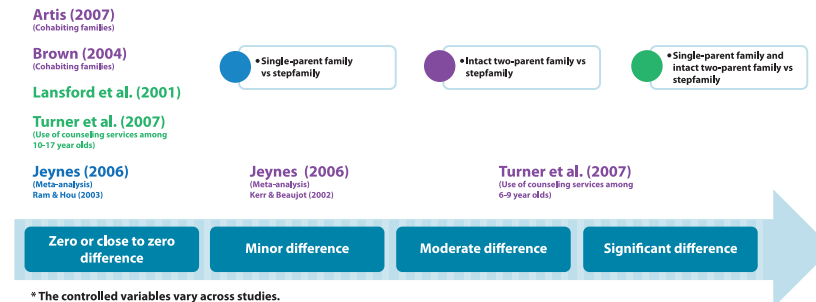
Methodological characteristics of the selected studies (N=100)

Characteristics	
Sample size (all families)	• Average : 3991 • Min : 15 - Max : 35 938
Sample size (stepfamilies)	• Average : 548 • Min : 10 - Max : 2358
Sample (youths' ages)	• 0-5 years old : 19% • 6-10 years old : 37% • 11-15 years old : 71% • 16 years old and older : 70%
Sample (type of stepfamily)	• Patriarchal : 44%, Unspecified : 51% • Patriarchal : 30%, Unspecified : 51% • Mixed : 17%, Unspecified : 54% • Fertile union : 9%, Unspecified : 90%
Sample origin	• North America : 69% • U.K. : 16% • Europe : 6% • Australia/N.Z. : 2% • Missing : 7%
Sampling method	• Random : 57% • Nonprobability : 43%
Methods	• Quantitative : 84% • Qualitative : 13% • Mixed : 3%
Design	• Cross-sectional : 71% • Longitudinal : 29%
Type of analysis	• Comparative studies with others family structure : 57% • Intrafamilial : 23% • Mixed : 20%

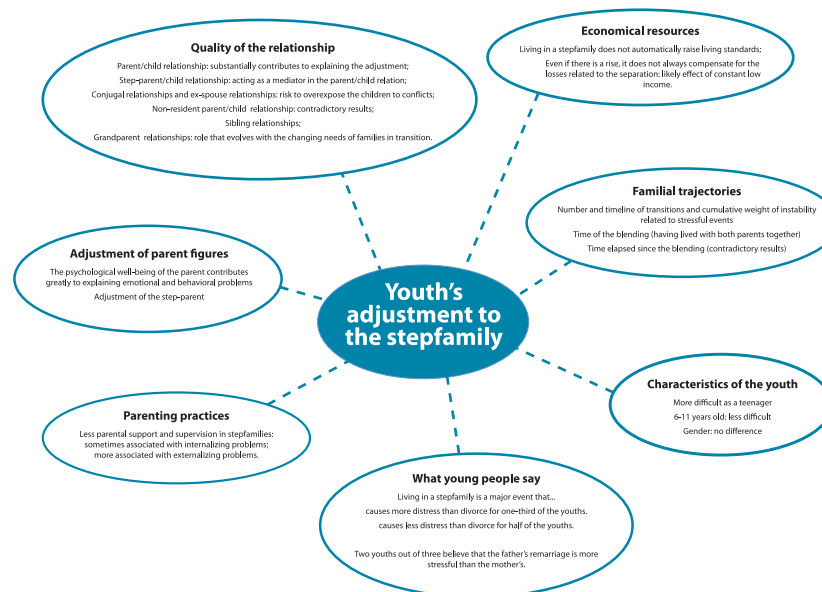
Results

1. The adjustment level of children growing up in stepfamilies is not as high as the one of children living in two-parent/intact families, and is often equal to the one of children from single-parent homes.
2. Family blending has a less significant impact on the child's adjustment than the parental separation. However, the family blending is another transition requiring the child's adjustment capacities.

Adjustment and family structure: summary of the results*



3. Family structure acts as a front that conceals what contributes to the familial experience, e.g. relational processes, child and adult characteristics, familial trajectories.



Strengths and limitations of the studies from the last decade

- More robust specifications and estimates; wider representation of samples related to the youths who come from stepfamilies.
- It is still difficult to speak about the consequences of living in a stepfamily on the youths' adjustment: the specifications and estimates do not allow to establish causal links between the studied variables. Methodologically, many studies show weaknesses in the sampling.
- Many comparative studies are conducted, yet only few intrafamilial stepfamily studies, which makes it difficult to establish distinctions between different subgroups (mixed stepfamilies, fertile union, etc.).
- The analyses focus on calculations of averages or risk coefficients, which allow to capture an overall portrait but levels the differences.

Avenues for research

- Distinguish the youngsters of stepfamilies who are doing well from the ones facing major difficulties. This will allow for the identification of familial processes that either support or hinder the adjustment, and, moreover, to understand the diversity of the youths' adaptive trajectories.
- Continue developing longitudinal research in order to obtain a picture of the child's functioning before the parental separation and before one or both of the parents remarry.



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