

NINE

STEPFAMILIES WITH
ADULT STEPCHILDREN

For the adult child, becoming part of a stepfamily poses complex dilemmas and requires multiple adjustments.

—Sarah Corrie (2002, p. 137)

A review of the stepfamily literature would lead one to conclude that stepfamily life ends when the children turn 18. As discussed in previous chapters, the vast majority of stepfamily research focuses on remarried couples with nonadult (under age 18) children. Focusing only on stepfamilies with younger children is a problem for two reasons. The first is the aging of society. The Baby Boom generation, the nearly 80 million Americans born between 1946 and 1964, are beginning to enter later adulthood. For example, Bill Clinton (b. August 19, 1946), the first baby boomer elected president, is approaching our society's traditional retirement age of 65. Baby boomers grew up in a time of more liberal social values and are less adverse to divorce (and subsequent repartnering) than were previous generations (Cornman & Kingston, 1996). Therefore, although it is the case that divorce, cohabitation, and remarriage are more common among younger than older people, these trends will become increasingly common among older Americans. This was the situation for Rosemary and James, described in the fifth scenario of Chapter 1, who at the time of their marriage had four adult children between them.



Photo 9.1 Stepfamilies today often involve adult stepchildren.

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A second reason why it is a problem to focus solely on stepfamilies with younger children is that stepfamilies formed during the “divorce revolution” of the 1970s and 1980s are themselves aging. Millions of children who have *grown up in* stepfamilies are making the transition to adulthood or are adults in the midst of balancing career and family responsibilities. Likewise, this is the first time the American population has seen substantial numbers of older adults and elderly people who have experienced stepfamily living and long-term stepfamily relationships. Subsequent generations of elderly Americans will have even more experience with stepfamily living (Wachter, 1995).

Stepfamilies with adult stepchildren therefore include two groups: (1) stepfamilies formed when couples’ children are adults, and (2) stepfamilies formed when couples’ children were young but who are now adults. This chapter reviews what is currently known about “older” stepfamilies with respect to relationship quality and dynamics, social support, and well-being. With a few exceptions, most notably research by family sociologist Lynn White, this is a relatively new area of study with potential for growth. I close by making suggestions for future research topics.

THE RISE OF STEPFAMILIES WITH ADULT STEPCHILDREN

The Aging of Society

The aging of society has had a massive impact on family life, including stepfamily life. Population aging refers to two related trends: (1) an increase in the *percentage of the population* that is elderly (i.e., age 65+), and (2) an increase in the actual *number* of elderly Americans. In 2000, 12% of the population was 65 years of age or older, compared with 10% in 1970 (Himes, 2001). The difference sounds small, but it amounts to 35 million people. It is projected that by 2040, one in five Americans or roughly 20% will be age 65 or older (Himes, 2001). Whereas the former trend is primarily the result of low fertility and couples having smaller families (i.e., fewer children around means more old people), the latter trend is more the result of improvements in health, including new medicines, medical technologies and treatments, and changes in lifestyle (e.g., better nutrition, exercise) that allow older people to live longer. In 1970, the average length of life was 71 years, 67 for men and 75 for women (National Center for Health Statistics [NCHS], 2006). In 2003, the average length of life was 78 years, 75 for men and 80 for women (NCHS, 2006).

That American society is becoming older has a number of implications for family life. People will spend more years in family relationships; they will spend a smaller proportion of their lives parenting young children and a larger proportion as parents of adult children, and grandparenting will increase in prominence (Bianchi & Casper, 2000). The aging of society has important effects on stepfamilies as well, namely that an increasing proportion of stepfamilies will contain adult stepchildren. While understanding younger children and their well-being is extremely important, our attention needs to turn toward adult stepfamily relationships and the concerns of older stepfamily members.

RELATIONSHIPS IN STEPFAMILIES WITH ADULT STEPCHILDREN

Biological Parents and Stepparents

Given the older ages of the children in stepfamilies with adult stepchildren, it is not surprising that they tend to be *couple-* rather than *child-focused* (Berger, 1995). In fact, adult children sometimes perceive a remarried parent as too

couple-focused and not concerned enough about their needs and the needs of their children (i.e., the grandchildren and stepgrandchildren of the older couple). This may become a more pressing issue for families, because children are taking longer to make the transition to adulthood and establish their own careers, homes, and families (N. R. White, 2002). Yet there has been little research specifically on the couple relationship in stepfamilies with adult stepchildren, especially on couples who remarry or cohabit after their children are grown up.

Cohabitation is an important aspect of stepfamilies with adult stepchildren. It appears that older couples who cohabit are more likely to view their relationship as an *alternative to marriage* than are younger cohabiters (see Chapter 5). King and Scott (2005) found, using data from the two waves of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), that older cohabiters are less likely than younger cohabiters to have plans to marry their partner and are less likely to list assessing compatibility for marriage as a reason for cohabiting, despite having higher-quality and more stable relationships. The fact that these couples felt good about their relationship yet did not intend to marry is telling. Although the reasons aren't clear, older couples may eschew marriage in favor of cohabitation out of concern for their adult children's feelings, to protect their assets (i.e., children's inheritances), to avoid social security and tax penalties, and other financial reasons (King & Scott, 2005).

Another living arrangement increasingly being seen among older couples (but not limited to older couples) is *living apart together* (LAT). LAT couples are couples that "retain their own separate homes and one-person households, but from time to time live together" (De Jong Gierveld & Peeters, 2003, p. 189). Awareness of this trend is very new, and so far what is known about LAT is based on studies from Scandinavia, England, Europe (e.g., Italy, France, Germany), and Canada (Levin, 2004; Milan & Peters, 2003). LAT couples generally have children from previous relationships and might be considered a new kind of stepfamily. "Caring for others" (e.g., children) is a common reason why couples choose LAT, according to the Canadian General Social Survey (Milan & Peters, 2003). De Jong Gierveld and Peeters (2003), who studied older LAT couples in the Netherlands, indicate that the phenomenon is also driven by couples' desires to retain their independence with respect to their day-to-day activities, by personality conflicts and practical concerns like losing a pension or dividing inheritances, as well as by the desire for the comfort and companionship of a steady partner (De Jong Gierveld & Peeters, 2003). These data indicate that previously married adults who were older than 55 when their marriage

ended are three time more likely to form LAT relationships than adults who were under 55, and adults who were married twice or more are twice as likely to form LAT relationships as adults who were only married once (De Jong Gierveld, 2004). A report on LAT from the Italian National Institute of Statistics (2005) states that, "In the USA, the discussion about LAT relationships has just begun" (p. 11). LAT relationships needs to be incorporated into discussions of American marriage and cohabitation patterns, especially when investigating intimate relationships among older couples.

Relationships Between Biological Parents and Their Adult Children

Adult Stepchildren and Parental "Neglect"

Family therapist Patricia Papernow (1993), the inventor of the stepfamily cycle, argues that stepfamily dynamics can be just as complicated and stressful in stepfamilies with grown children as stepfamilies with young children. In her practice, Papernow has seen "children" as old as 50 having trouble accepting the changes resulting from a parent's remarriage, such as new holiday traditions. For example,

Because the parents of these young adults may feel freer to confide in them as equals, loyalty binds can be intense. Graduations, weddings, and other life-cycle events that should be sources of pride become painful reminders of a divided household, or worse, battlegrounds for warring ex-spouses. (p. 365)

Other family therapists have noticed "a significant increase in the number of adult children requesting help with adjusting to parental remarriage" (Corrie, 2002, p. 136).

Children who are young adults still have many developmental tasks to accomplish, and experiencing a parent's divorce or remarriage at this time can be unsettling. Young adults also need their parent to be interested in and supportive of their activities and to celebrate their achievements. Young adult children with divorcing and/or remarrying parents can at times feel neglected. One woman, a graduate student finishing her master's thesis, explains, "I *have* accomplished a lot. But it's like there's no place to take it to! My dad's acting like a teenager in love and my mom is going nuts. They're both too self-absorbed to notice" (Papernow, 1993, p. 366). Corrie (2002) identified eight

- Feeling emotionally distressed by a parent's decision to remarry
- Feeling rejected
- Feeling betrayed
- Experiencing feelings of anger toward a parent or stepparent
- Loss of self-esteem
- Struggling to accept a stepparent who is the same age as the client
- Disliking overt signs of a parent's sexuality (such as witnessing the new couple holding hands, embracing, or flirting)
- Problems coping with parental pressure to develop a close relationship with a stepparent

Figure 9.1 Dilemmas and Adjustment Difficulties Faced by Adult Children Experiencing Family Reconfiguration

SOURCE: From Corrie, S., "Working therapeutically with adult stepchildren: identifying the needs of a neglected client group" in *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 37, p. 138, copyright © 2002 The Haworth Press, Binghamton, NY.

common dilemmas faced by adult children whose parents have remarried (Figure 9.1). Notice that these issues are not that different from those of younger stepchildren (see Chapter 3). Lifecourse events that occur along with the remarriage (e.g., birth of half-siblings, younger stepsiblings moving into the home) also have the potential to affect adult stepchildren.

Contact and Closeness With Biological Parents

Before talking about stepfamilies, it is important to establish a baseline of relationship quality between adult children and their formerly single biological parents. Cooney (1994) examined parent-child relationships in a sample of young adults whose parents had recently divorced. The children's relationships with their mothers were similar to mother-child relationships in intact families, but children whose parents had divorced had less contact with their fathers than did children from intact families and daughters reported less intimacy with their fathers. These results are in line with studies of divorced parents with younger children showing low levels of nonresident parental involvement after divorce. Among children with divorced parents, adult children's closeness to parents was positively associated with contact. This was not true of children with married parents, suggesting adult parent-child relationships in divorced families are less

obligatory and more voluntary (Cooney, 1994). When studying stepfamilies with adult stepchildren, it is important to keep in mind that adult children have greater control over the parent-child relationship (Ambert, 2001).

Data collected by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) suggest that a divorced mother's remarriage (but not a father's) weakens ties to adult children (Lawton, Silverstein, & Bengtson, 1994; but see White, Brinkerhoff, & Booth, 1985). Remarried mothers, more so than fathers, may have increased domestic and caretaking responsibilities that negatively affect the relationship with adult children. This may be compounded by the older age of the new spouse. A 75-year-old remarried woman says,

My children always respected him and were always very good to him. My partner, however, couldn't get along with my children. When they were gone, he would always talk negatively about them. He found the grandchildren too noisy, and told me time and again that they didn't have good manners. My children never did anything right, in his eyes. They did their best to put him at ease, but he found everything too much (De Jong Gierveld & Peeters, 2003, p. 191).

A 68-year-old remarried woman reports the reverse problem; her partner's children would not accept her:

My children accept him and our relationship: they see him as their own father. But his children do not accept me: they didn't even come to our wedding (De Jong Gierveld & Peeters, 2003, p. 191).

There is also evidence of positive relationships between adult stepchildren and stepparents. One 71-year-old man who is cohabiting remarks, "And her children are fantastic to me. It's as if they were my own sons" (De Jong Gierveld & Peeters, 2003, p. 191). These are discussed in more detail in the next section.

Relationships Between Stepparents and Adult Stepchildren

Lynn White (e.g., White, 1994) is one of the few researchers who have examined stepfamily relationships in later phases of the life course. Using data from the NSFH, she found that, compared with biological parents with adult children, stepparents live further away from their children geographically, see their children less often, and have lower-quality relationships. Other research based on this same dataset suggests that this is the case in both blue-collar and

white-collar families (Kulis, 1992). Older stepparents give less advice and household help, provide less companionship to adult stepchildren, and receive less support from them (White, 1994). The difference in support between stepparents and biological parents was especially great for stepmothers. Another study by Pruett, Calsyn, and Jensen (1993) similarly found that college students from stepmother families perceived less social support (e.g., greater conflict and less cohesion) from their mothers than did students from intact families. Relationship quality was better if the stepparent had no biological children of his or her own, suggesting that biological children compete with stepchildren. Stepparents who come into the family later in life may feel especially competitive with their adult stepchildren. This may be true especially if the two are close in age (De Jong Gierveld & Peeters, 2003). Younger stepparents may even be motivated to have children (or additional children) so as not to be “upstaged” by the new babies of their adult stepchildren (Bernstein, 1989). It is difficult to imagine a healthy stepparent-stepchild relationship developing under these circumstances.

It is unclear how stepparent-stepchild relationships formed during the stepchildren’s childhood continue to unfold in their adulthood. As discussed in Chapter 3, researchers are just beginning to address potential changes in stepparent-stepchild relationships in stepchildren’s childhoods. Qualitative studies suggest that stepparents and stepchildren in stepfamilies formed in adulthood may always feel like “strangers” to one another (Berger, 1998, p. 75), perhaps because contact is minimal. Other stepparents may come to see his or her adult stepchildren as biological children and vice versa (De Jong Gierveld & Peeters, 2003).

The Special Case of Stepmother-Stepchild Relationships

What are stepmother-stepchild relationships like in stepfamilies with adulthood stepchildren? Recall from Chapter 3 that stepmothers tend to have more difficult and lower-quality relationships with their stepchildren than do stepfathers. The research cited above suggests that stepmother-stepchild relationships are less close than stepfather-stepchild relationships at the later stages of the lifecourse. Several other studies support this. White et al. (1985) examined stepparent-stepchild relationships in adulthood from the perspective of the stepchild. College students report much lower levels of attachment to stepmothers than to biological mothers, but the same level of attachment to biological fathers and stepfathers.

Similarly, Sauer and Fine (1988) compared 130 college students from intact families and 47 students from stepfamilies and found no differences in perceptions of relationships with stepfathers and biological fathers, but worse relationships with stepmothers than biological mothers. Neither study examined these relationships over time, however. Vinick and Lanspery (2000) interviewed 25 stepmothers about their relationships with their stepchildren from their initial meeting to the time of the interview, a period of time ranging from 10 and 41 years. They found that the majority (two thirds) of stepmother-stepchild relationships were “stable and positive” (i.e., did not change) or saw “positive improvement.” The remaining third were “stable negative” or became worse. Unfortunately, the authors do not distinguish positive (or negative) relationships that remained stable from those that experienced change. Nevertheless, this research suggests that stepmother-stepchild relationships in later life are either positive or improve over time. Stepmothers with adult stepchildren should approach their role in the same manner as stepmothers with younger stepchildren: with caution. Ann Landers frequently fields questions from stepmothers, including stepmothers with adult stepchildren (Figure 9.2).

Dear Ann Landers: I am married to a kind, considerate, thoughtful man. It's the second marriage for both “Ben” and me. We are in our 50s.

Ben's children are in their 20s. He has given them cars and paid their golf fees, and he continues to hand over spending money and buy them luxuries. Nobody works. They are all in college (for which their father pays, of course).

When I point out that his kids are taking advantage of him, Ben becomes sullen and uncommunicative. Our marriage would be perfect if it weren't for this problem. What should I do?

—Clear View

Dear Clear: Lay off. Your husband knows you are right, but he can't help himself. His relationship with his children was established before he met you.

The principal reason for the failure of second marriages is kids. So watch it, dear, lest you become a statistic.

Figure 9.2 Ann Landers: Clear View

SOURCE: Landers (1996, p. 28). Question used by permission of Esther P. Lederer and Creators Syndicate, Inc.; answer from *Wake Up and Smell the Coffee!* By Ann Landers, copyright © 1996 by The Eppie Co., Inc. Used by permission of Villard Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

In fact, in contrast to “evil stepmother” stereotypes, many older stepmothers feel that they often served as family facilitators, or the “carpenters” of the family (Vinick & Lanspery, 2000, p. 381). One stepmother explains:

My husband got himself a computer, and he was showing us what he was making. His daughter said, “You have never done anything for me.” He turned away; he was sick over it. He said, “How can she say that? She wanted a horse, so I bought her a horse. She wanted to play the piano, so I bought her a piano. She wanted to go to college, so she went.” I finally called (her) and said, “I think that you owe your father an apology. Don’t ever say that he hasn’t done anything for you, because he has.” The next day she did call. (Vinick & Lanspery, 2000, p. 382)

In contrast to Bernstein’s (1989) research described above, the authors of this study saw that positive relationships were more common if the stepmother came onto the scene later in the child’s life (after the difficult teen years), when the child’s biological mother is less involved. Positive relationships also seemed more common when the stepfamily resulted from the death of the spouse rather than divorce, in part because the children had better relationships with their widowed than their divorced fathers. Stepmothers who developed positive relationships generally took the lead to clear the air of past conflicts. Stepmothers who did not develop positive relationships with their stepchildren by the time the stepchildren were adults seemed regretful that they did not do more to improve the relationship:

There never really has been a heart-to-heart [conversation with the kids]. I’ve never imagined myself being that assertive. [But I] probably should. If we were of the type to read more self-help books, we would probably have done a lot of [that kind of thing]. I wouldn’t be so quick to assume that we deserve the program that was dumped on us—I, accepting the evil woman category, and [my husband] being the unfaithful father. You’re so willing to accept all of this and not do anything about it, instead of being more realistic and . . . setting certain expectations for them. (Vinick & Lanspery, 2000, pp. 382–383).

Many of the stepmothers in Bernstein’s (1989) sample also noticed a marked improvement in their relationship with their stepchildren once the children moved out of the house. A stepmother from this study remarked, “They’re

great to be with as long as they're not leaving their wet towels on my floor" (pp. 287–288). Studies that examine stepmother-stepchild relationships over time are needed, but the existing studies provide evidence that stepparent-stepchild relationships in stepchildren's adulthood are not static.

Step- and Half-Sibling Relationships in Adulthood

There is a great deal of ambiguity surrounding step- and half-sibling relationships in adulthood (as the letter in Figure 9.3 exemplifies). White (1998) examined the consistency of adult men and women's reports of their number of siblings over time using the NSFH and found significantly more discrepancies among adults who had complex family histories and step- and half-siblings than among adults with only full siblings. One possible reason is that adults have less contact with their step- and half-siblings than with full siblings (White & Reidmann, 1992b). The difference in level of contact is substantial. Based on the NSFH, adult full siblings saw each other an average of one to three times a month and saw step and half-siblings only a few times a year. Contact with step- and half-siblings was greater when there were no full siblings, when the stepchildren spent a greater portion of their childhood living with a stepparent, and when the stepparent was a stepfather rather than a stepmother. Distance had a stronger negative effect on step- and half-sibling contact than on full sibling contact, suggesting that step- and half-siblings were less likely to make the effort to see each other.

The more distant relationships between step- and half-siblings might be linked to the large age gaps between them (Bernstein, 1989; Farmer, 2005). Their interest in getting to know one another is often out of sync. Bernstein (1989) explains that when the stepfamily is first formed, the older children are generally adolescents and young adults and have little interest in spending time with the younger children. When the older children grow up, they experience renewed interest, but the younger children are now in *their* adolescence and are therefore not that interested in having a relationship, plus they have been previously rejected by the older siblings.

Nevertheless, stepsiblings can be important sources of support for young adults. Farmer (2005) conducted in-depth interviews with 29 college-aged men and women with one or more stepsiblings. She found that stepsibling relationships were either "close and positive" or "distant and neutral." Stepsiblings that lived together in the same household when they were growing up, stepsiblings that were close in age (but not too close), and stepsiblings with

Q: I am a 25-year-old single woman. My father recently married a woman with grown children. One of my new stepbrothers is 27, and I immediately hit it off with him. I'm very attracted to him, but I'm not sure it's ethical. What should I do? Should I talk to my dad about it?

—T. G., *Alabama*

Unethical? Not necessarily. You're not blood-related; you are both adults with lives that are separate from those of your parents and thus can conduct a relationship that need not affect their marriage. Unwise? Possibly. If things end badly and you end up hating each other, family functions could be extremely uncomfortable for everybody.

Before you even consider making a move, think about your own dating history. Are you a person who becomes very emotional over a breakup, gets attached quickly or (be honest) jumps from one relationship to another? If you say yes to any of those scenarios, set your sights on someone you won't have to pass the gray to at the holiday table.

Or do you consider yourself a sensible, "head first, heart later" dater? If so, proceed, but with caution. Instead of acting on the physical attraction, take some time to really get to know this guy as a friend and see whether he's someone who is kind, thoughtful, honest, loyal—and is worth taking the risk.

Although you don't need your dad's permission, be sure to let him know beforehand if you do decide to date his stepson, out of respect and courtesy. If he has reservations, consider his reasons with an open mind. He may know things about this man that make him undateworthy and could save you a lot of heartache.

Figure 9.3 RelationTips: Can You Date Your Stepbrother?

SOURCE: D. Hughes (2005). Originally appeared in the April 8–10, 2005, issue of *USA Weekend Magazine*. Reprinted with permission.

fewer full siblings had the best relationships in young adulthood. Female stepsiblings provided emotional support to both female and male respondents, but same-sex siblings felt they had more in common and could share activities:

My stepsister and I we go shopping together and stuff, so it's kind of neat that way that we have stuff in common just because we're both girls and we're about the same age, the same general size so we can kind of swap clothes and stuff. (Farmer, 2005, p. 59)

Many, though, had distant relationships:

After my stepsister moved out and I moved out, the chance that my stepsister and I would see each other was really slim. Although I go home a whole lot more often than she does because I'm closer. But, when we see each other it's just like, "Hi," "Hi, how are you doing?" We'll have a small conversation,

but we're always there for a reason and have got to go. And in the summer, I was always working and she was always working, so we'd hardly see each other. Since this school year started, I've emailed her once to say "Happy Birthday" and she emailed me back, but that was the extent of our communication this year so far. (Farmer, 2005, p. 46)

Adult stepsiblings may become even more distant and/or lose contact altogether with the death or divorce of their parent or parents (Bernstein, 1989). Their relationship with their former stepparents often ends at that point as well, even for stepparents and stepchildren who have been together for many years.

Grandparents and Grandchildren in Stepfamilies With Adult Stepchildren

Divorce and remarriage have become more common among older Americans. Children's relationships with their grandparents are negatively affected when their grandparents divorce. King (2003) examined a sample of White never-divorced and ever-divorced grandparents from rural Iowa and found that the grandparent role is less salient to divorced grandparents than to nondivorced grandparents. Divorced grandparents have less contact with their grandchildren and take part in fewer activities with them; they are less close with them and are less likely to think of themselves as "a friend" to their grandchildren; and they report more conflict. Whether the divorced grandparent had remarried made little difference, except that they took part in fewer activities with their grandchildren. Divorced grandparents are less involved in grandparenting than nondivorced grandparents in part because they tend to live further away and because they tend to be less close to their adult children. Similar to the effect of parental divorce on the parent-adult child relationship, divorce and remarriage among the grandparent generation appear to negatively affect the grandparent-grandchild relationship.

There is a lack of research on grandparents' relationships with adult (step)grandchildren in stepfamilies. One study of children's relationships with their paternal grandparents suggests that their pattern of involvement remains low and stable (Bray & Berger, 1990). Maternal grandparent-grandchild relationships and stepgrandparent-grandchild relationships can be an important source of support for children with divorced parents (see Chapter 6). However, it is unclear how this relationship develops as the child makes the transition to adulthood.

THE WELL-BEING OF LATER-LIFE STEPFAMILIES

The Well-Being of Parents and Stepparents

It is probably beneficial for older men and women with adult children to have an intimate relationship with a spouse or partner, although there are few empirical studies of this. Older single women without a boyfriend (i.e., “a special male friend whom you see exclusively”) who are the primary caretakers of aging parents are more depressed than married caretakers, are less likely to receive support from others, and get less satisfaction out of social network (Brody, Litvin, Hoffman, & Kleban, 1995). Older men and women who have formed partnerships (i.e., remarriages, cohabitations, or LATs) have a denser social network to draw upon (De Jong Gierveld & Peeters, 2003). Among older men (men over 50), cohabitators have more depressive symptoms than married men—a result not observed for older cohabiting versus married women (Brown, Bulanda, & Lee, 2005). Other research has focused on widowhood rather than on divorce. Widows and widowers have similar interest in dating and remarriage (Carr, 2004). Having supportive friends is associated with less dating among widowers, suggesting that friends can substitute for romantic partners later in life (Carr, 2004). Older men and women who want to date, and do date, after the death of a spouse are less depressed than those who are not interesting in dating, but it turns out that this effect is the result of the daters having more socioeconomic resources (e.g., education, income, and their own home) than of the dating (Carr, 2004).

The care and support of aging parents and stepparents is an important concern of adult children. For this reason, the adult children of divorced parents are often happy and relieved when their parents form a new union. Older adults who have been divorced have a lower income-to-needs ratio, fewer assets, and higher rates of poverty than men and women in first marriages; men and women in remarriages have similar rates of poverty as men and women in first marriages but still have lower incomes and fewer assets (Holden & Kuo, 1996), suggesting that older remarried men and women do not fully recover social and economic support lost through divorce. On the other hand, some argue that the more complex family networks of the remarried elderly may translate into greater financial and social support (Wachter, 1995; White, 1994). To help answer this question, I examine research that has looked at (a) public perceptions of obligations to aging stepfamily members,

- (b) perceptions of support among elderly stepfamily members themselves, and
- (c) actual support provided to elderly stepfamily members.

Public Perceptions of Obligations to Aging Stepfamily Members

The general public's perception of adult children's obligations to their aging divorced parents depends on the amount of contact that had been maintained between them. For instance, a nonresident father who rarely saw his children when they were growing up was deemed less worthy of their adult children's support than a father who had remained involved (Ganong & Coleman, 1999). The public perceives adult children to be less obligated to help aging stepparents, especially stepmothers, than aging biological parents (Ganong & Coleman, 1999). Like aid to biological parents, aid to stepparents is conditional and is based on prior contact and exchanges (Ganong & Coleman, 1999). This presents a problem, because men and women who have stepchildren are less likely to have had biological children (Stewart, 2000).

Stepfamily Members' Perceptions of Obligations to Each Other

Adult stepparents and stepchildren themselves perceive that they have very few obligations to each other, and that any obligations are conditional on the nature of their previous relationship (Clawson & Ganong, 2002). Others have compared perceptions of support among elderly men and women with different marital histories. Curran, McLanahan, and Knab (2003), using a national sample of men and women 65 and older, found that those in their second marriages have similar perceptions of overall support (e.g., had someone they could call in the middle of the night, had someone they could borrow \$200 from for a few weeks, had someone they could call for help or advice if feeling depressed or confused), but remarried men and women were less likely to be able to rely upon family for emotional support than first-married individuals, and remarried women perceive receiving less emergency support from kin. One possibility is that stepkin provide less emotional support than biological kin, although it is unclear from this study whether the relations are biological kin or stepkin. On the other hand, divorced people who have remarried perceive receiving more financial help from family than do divorced people who have been married only once, but this might be because remarried people tend to have greater financial resources than those who did not remarry.

Support Provided to Aging Stepfamily Members

Umberson (1992) found that divorced parents were more dissatisfied with their relationships with their adult children and had higher levels of relationship strain. They see their children less and receive less social support from them. Research on European couples indicates that repartnering may further hurt the biological parent-child relationship, which would translate into less social support (De Jong Gierveld & Peeters, 2003). Dissatisfaction and relationship strain were associated with increased psychological distress among the parents. As mentioned above, parents receive less social support from adult stepchildren than from biological children; however, also they give less support themselves (White, 1994).

In sum, adult children of divorce feel less obligated to help aging parents and stepparents, their parents perceive that they receive less support from their children, and they do indeed receive less support. These patterns are consistent with societal norms governing support to aging family members after divorce and remarriage.

The Well-Being of Adult Stepchildren

The lower level of well-being experienced by children from stepfamilies, compared with children from intact families, extends into adulthood (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). A stable family of origin is helpful to young people as they form and dissolve their own relationships, sometimes many times over, and make the transition to marriage and parenthood. A consistent finding on *nest leaving* is that stepchildren leave their parents' household at significantly younger ages than do biological children (Aquilino, 1991a; Kiernan, 1992). Several studies suggest that girls in American stepfamilies are more likely to leave home early than boys (Aquilino, 1991a; Cooney & Mortimer, 1997). A study of British stepfamilies found no gender differences, however (Kiernan, 1992). Reasons for early home leaving among young adults are family conflict, greater household labor (for girls), and premarital pregnancy (for girls; Cooney & Mortimer, 1997; Kiernan, 1992). Young adults from stepfamilies may move sooner, but they are more likely to remain close by than young adults from intact families (Garasky, 2002; Garasky, Haurin, & Haurin, 2001). This could be related to their lower educational and occupational prospects.

Stepchildren are also less likely to reside with their parents as adults than are biological children (Aquilino, 1990, 1991b). They marry earlier (Goldscheider

& Goldscheider, 1993) and are less likely to leave home to attend college (Aquilino, 1991a; Kiernan, 1992), perhaps because parents give less social and financial support to stepchildren than to biological children (Pruett et al., 1993; White, 1994). This, combined with poorer grades, mean that stepchildren face dimmer prospects for a college education and launching a successful career, buying a car or home, or starting a business, and may mean a greater likelihood of falling into debt in young adulthood. Older children whose parents have started a second family (with younger stepchildren and/or new biological children) often feel cut off financially, and many receive no help for their college educations. Some older children feel resentful and deprived when they perceive their younger step- and half-siblings getting a bigger piece of the family pie (Bernstein, 1989).

Cooney and Uhlenberg (1992) examined how parental support of adult children unfolds over time, based on comparisons of adults of different ages from the NSFH. They found that, in general, parental support (e.g., gifts, advice, childcare, etc.) declines over time, as does adults' perception of their parents as a *potential* source of support. Children whose parents are not married to one another are less likely to receive advice, gifts, services (e.g., transportation), and childcare from them and are less likely to perceive them as a potential source of support. Eggebeen's (1992) similar analysis of intergenerational exchanges between divorced parents and their children using the NSFH mirrors these findings. Because adult step- and half-siblings see each other less often than do adult full siblings (White & Reidmann, 1992b), they probably provide less social support to one another as well.

SUMMARY

Stepfamilies, like the children in them, grow up. A large cohort of children of divorce are themselves reaching adulthood, and adult children who grew up in intact families will increasingly see their parents divorce and repartner. People are living longer and are having fewer children, so relationships between adult children and their parents will increase in prominence. Yet, relative to what is known about stepfamilies with young children, there is very little information about how growing up in a stepfamily affects adult development. We also need more information about stepfamilies formed *after* children have reached adulthood. Increases in education, delayed marriage, and later parenthood are

extending adolescence and middle adulthood beyond the traditional ages. A later and longer transition to parenthood has implications for family relationships and stepfamily relationships (Holdsworth, 2005; N. R. White, 2002).

What research is available on stepfamilies with adult stepchildren suggests the following. First, stepfamily members continue to be disadvantaged as they age. Stepfamilies with adult stepchildren are associated with weaker emotional bonds and provide less social and financial support to each other than married, two-biological-parent families. Stepparents and stepchildren are at greatest risk. Stepparents have significantly fewer resources on which to draw as they age. Stepchildren make the transition to adulthood with fewer resources, setting them up for a lifetime of lower achievement, economic success, and personal fulfillment.

Although early life stepfamily experiences have enduring (and mostly negative) effects, stepfamily relationships continue to evolve over time. Adult children in stepfamilies should not be considered passive recipients of parental involvement. However, almost nothing is known about how adult children and stepchildren fashion relationships with older stepfamily members. Another problem is that researchers tend to focus exclusively on two stages in the lifecourse—nest leaving and the support of elderly parents—neglecting a rich phase of middle adulthood (step)parent-child interaction after the children leave the nest but before parents need eldercare.

For instance, adult stepchildren very much keep tabs on what Bernstein (1989) refers to as *the family ledger* (p. 296). As was discussed in Chapter 3, financial issues in stepfamilies are emotionally laden. Financial issues gain prominence in later-life stepfamilies because more wealth has been accumulated, wills are written, and decisions about inheritances need to be made. For instance, stepchildren are not entitled to their stepparent's estate unless they are specifically included in the stepparent's will (Fine & Fine, 1992). There can be painful feelings when furniture and other items are distributed to the children when older parents "downsize" and move into a smaller home. Dividing assets "equally" among all the children in the family, or dividing things according to need, might seem fair to older couples; however, this may be perceived as unfair to each parent's biological children. Aging parents may give away items or hold yard sales without thinking about the potential effects on their children, who may see their parents' material objects as representing pieces of them. Research on how stepchildren and stepparents interpret such seemingly mundane events could be used to enhance their relationships.

In conclusion, stepfamily research needs to be extended to the millions of stepfamilies with adult stepchildren. We need a better understanding of how stepparents interact with their adult stepchildren, paying careful attention to whether the stepfamily was formed during the child's childhood or adulthood. With recent federal proposals to privatize social security and further reduce welfare, this is a time of shrinking sources of support for both the elderly and children. It is vital therefore to understand how families, including stepfamilies, will support *themselves* in the coming years.