

THE CHARACTERISTICS AND WELL-BEING OF ADOPTED STEPCHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

This study draws upon 22,680 children from the 2002 National Survey of America's Families to investigate the demographic and family characteristics and well-being of stepchildren who have been adopted by a stepparent ($n = 140$) relative to children with two biological parents, children with two adoptive parents, and children with one biological parent and one nonadoptive stepparent. Five percent of all stepchildren and one quarter of all adopted children have been adopted by a stepparent. How the characteristics of adopted stepchildren compare to those of other children depends on the child's age—whereas younger adopted stepchildren are most similar to children with two biological parents, older adopted stepchildren are most similar to nonadopted stepchildren. Adopted stepchildren of all ages have significantly more behavior and emotional problems than children with two biological parents but have similar levels of school engagement. There were no significant differences between children with two adoptive parents, nonadopted stepchildren, and adopted stepchildren on any measure of well-being regardless of the child's age. Implications for practice and policy include increasing awareness of adopted stepchildren and paying greater attention to the legal context under which stepchildren are adopted.

Key words: Adopted children, adopted stepchildren, adoption, stepchildren, stepfamilies

Although the exact numbers are unclear, the adoption of a stepchild by a stepparent is thought to be one of the most common forms of adoption in the United States (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2008; National Adoption Information Clearinghouse [NAIC], 2006) and Europe (Ball, 2002; Loftus, 2003). Yet, very little is known about adopted stepchildren (Chambers, 1990; Fisher, 2003; Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & McDaniel, 1998). One reason is the inconsistent handling of these children by researchers. Whereas some studies placed adopted stepchildren in the same category as biological and/or adopted children (e.g., Bray & Berger, 1993; Stewart, 2001), other researchers treat adopted stepchildren just as they would stepchildren (e.g., Hamilton, Cheng, & Powell, 2007; Moorman & Hernandez, 1989; Norton & Miller, 1992). Still others treat the adoption of stepchildren as “special case” within the stepfamily (e.g., Ganong et al., 1998) and adoption (e.g., Appell, 2000; Feigelman, 1997; Fisher, 2003) literatures, or are vague as to how they were handled in the analysis (Cebello, Lansford, Abbey, & Stewart, 2004).

Another reason for the lack of information on adopted stepchildren is that there are no specific estimates of this practice. Government reports do not distinguish children adopted by stepparents from children adopted by relatives, also referred to as “kin adoption” (Kreider, 2003). Relative adoptions are estimated to represent about 40% of all adoptions nationally and adopted stepchildren are thought to make up the largest percentage of that (Flango & Flango, 1994 cited in Adoption Statistics, 2006). Relative adoptions have been rising in recent years, and researchers have attributed the increase to stepchild adoption (Chandra, Abma, Maza, & Bachrach, 1999). Despite this growth, because of their relatively small numbers it is difficult to find a large enough sample of adopted stepchildren for detailed analysis. One previous estimate based on data from the National Survey of Families and Households suggests that roughly one in

ten married stepparents with resident stepchildren had legally adopted at least one of them, but this amounted to only 33 cases (Stewart, 2007). Other studies yielded less than 30 such cases (Lamb, 2007; Schwartz & Finley, 2006). Because findings based on such small sample sizes can be dubious (Cheng & Powell, 2005), researchers have had no choice but to lump adopted stepchildren in with other groups of children. Thus, for quite some time we have not had a good understanding of the sociodemographic characteristics of adopted stepchildren, nor do we know how these children compare to other children with respect to socioemotional outcomes. In a previous issue of *Family Relations*, Ganong et al. (1998, p. 70) state, “Currently, it is impossible to say how many stepchild adoptions occur annually, and we cannot predict who is likely to adopt until we have demographic profiles of stepfamilies in which stepchildren have been adopted.” This fact has not changed since that article was published over a decade ago, and newer studies remain few.

The goal of this study is to investigate the sociodemographic characteristics and well-being of adopted stepchildren, in comparison to children in other family structures (children with two biological parents, children with two adoptive parents, and children with one biological parent and one nonadoptive stepparent). The analysis is based on the 2002 National Survey of America’s Families (NSAF). A particular strength of the NSAF for this analysis is that it contains large numbers of children from nontraditional family structures (e.g., stepfamilies, adopted families) in addition to children with two biological parents. The number of adopted stepchildren in this sample ($n = 140$) is sizable enough for detailed analysis and is currently the largest sample of adopted stepchildren available. Moreover, the sample is drawn from a national study whereas previous studies are based on small and select samples (Ganong et al., 1998; Wolf & Mast, 1987).

This study contributes to the literature on family structure and children's well-being in several ways. First, American families are becoming increasingly diverse and a better understanding of new family forms is greatly needed (Moore & Keyes, 2003). Second, there has been growth in both stepfamilies and adopted families, and these families themselves are diversifying (Stewart, 2007; March & Miall, 2000). Third, there have been no prior studies of the characteristics and well-being of adopted stepchildren in relation to children in other family forms. The present study therefore includes comparisons not only to children with two biological parents, but also to children with two adoptive parents and to children with one biological parent and one nonadoptive stepparent. A final contribution is a separate analysis of younger (age 6-11) and older (age 12-17) children. Adolescence is a distinct developmental phase (Furstenberg, 2000) and is thought to be a particularly difficult period for adopted children and stepchildren (Feigelman, 1997; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Moreover, family dynamics in stepfamilies and adoptive families have been found to vary considerably by the child's age (Stewart, 2007; Fisher, 2003).

Uncovering family structure differences should not be used as evidence for so-called "deficits" in children's well-being typically associated with nontraditional family forms (i.e., families that do not include two married parents and their biological children). A limitation of this study is that it is cross-sectional and is therefore limited for examining family processes over time and selectivity of children into different living arrangements, factors that would help clarify differences in well-being between children from various family types (e.g., Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; Morrison & Ritualo, 2000; Heard, 2007). For example, The NSAF does not contain information on the age of the child at the time of adoption or the relationship history and dynamics of the child's parents. Family transitions tend to be more difficult for older than

younger children (Fisher, 2003) and parental conflict has negative effects on children regardless of family structure (Amato, 2000). That said, there is still a need for basic descriptive information on rarer family forms that could form the basis for further research on this topic.

BACKGROUND

Current high rates of divorce, cohabitation, and nonmarital childbearing mean that parenting is occurring under increasingly complex conditions. Indeed, millions of parents in the U.S. and worldwide are committed to and invest in raising nonbiological children (Fisher, 2003; Hofferth & Anderson, 2003). Contemporary families are therefore now conceptualized in broad terms as a system of relationships that, "subsumes any and all varieties of living arrangements, household patterns, legal and residential structures, and so on, as well as the ongoing decision-making processes that occur within these patterns and arrangements" (Scanzoni, Polonko, Teachman, & Thompson, 1989, p. 52). Families are dynamic entities, adapting and changing as they move through the typical stages, transitions, and events of family life (White & Klein, 2008). The developmental trajectories of biological children, stepchildren, adopted children, and adopted stepchildren are very different and each of these groups of children arrived at their current place in the family through very different mechanisms. Developmentalists would therefore consider family structure differences the result of long-term family processes rather than as the result of a discrete event, such as a divorce. For example, lower levels of well-being among children from divorced families may in fact predate the divorce (Amato, 2000).

Children's trajectories and family relationships are also embedded within a system of norms, laws, policies, and institutions which provide the parameters within which children's developmental processes unfold. The conditions under which U.S. stepparents adopt their stepchildren are less clear than in some other countries and laws vary from state to state (Ball,

2002; Fine, 1994; Loftus, 2003; NAIC, 2006). In contrast to Great Britain, for example, in most states of the U.S. children cannot legally have two parents of the same sex (Slater, 2000-2001). The addition of a new parent to the family does not pose a problem if one of the child's biological parents is deceased, but the death of a parent among children under age 18 is rare (Krieder & Fields, 2005). Otherwise, adopting a stepchild requires the consent of both the child's biological parents unless it can be determined that one of the parents has not fulfilled his parental duties or is otherwise incapable of consenting to the adoption (Mahoney, 1994). The child's nonresident parent must agree to relinquish his parental rights and responsibilities and is no longer responsible for child support (NAIC, 2006). Thus, whether a stepchild is adopted hinges largely on the involvement of the nonresident parent (Ganong et al., 1998; Lamb, 2007).

Characteristics of Adopted Stepchildren Compared to Other Children

Previous studies demonstrate numerous demographic differences (e.g., race, age, marital status, education, employment, income) between stepfamilies, adoptive families, and two biological parent families (Fisher, 2003; Jones, 2009 but see Ceballo et al., 2004). There are also differences among different kinds of stepfamilies and adoptive families. For example, children adopted by two nonbiological parents tend to be adopted into white families with higher incomes and more education, whereas kin adoption is more common among black, lower income, and less educated families (Bachrach, Adams, Sambrano, & London, 1990). Some, albeit limited evidence, suggests that there are demographic differences between adoptive and nonadoptive stepfamilies as well. For example, whereas studies typically report lower levels of education, income, and assets in stepfamilies compared to two biological parent families (Stewart, 2001; Thomson, 1994), one study found no difference in income and employment between adopted stepchild families and two biological parent families (Wolf & Mast, 1987).

The Well-Being of Adopted Stepchildren Compared to Other Children

Children with Two Biological Parents. Children raised by two biological parents have been the standard group to which all other children are compared (Hamilton et al., 2007). Numerous studies show that children from both adoptive families and stepfamilies have worse academic, behavioral, and emotional outcomes than children from two biological parent families although the differences are not as great as is often assumed (Fisher, 2003; Krieder, 2003) and some studies find no differences or find that differences diminish over time (e.g., Borders, Black, & Pasley, 1998; Feigelman, 1997). Researchers have offered a number of potential explanations for the discrepancy: a lack of early bonding between the parent and child (Glenn, 1994), a lack of clear social roles for parents (Cherlin, 1978), a lack of genetic relatedness (Daly & Wilson, 1988; Flinn, 1988; Hofferth & Anderson, 2003), stigmatization and lack of social support (Fisher, 2003; March & Miall, 2000; Wegar, 2000), and having had experienced a major loss (March & Miall, 2000). Moreover, children in nontraditional families (including adopted stepchildren) tend to have been through multiple family transitions and which is negatively related to child well-being (Heard, 2007). Thus, I hypothesize that adopted stepchildren will exhibit lower levels of well-being than children with two biological parents.

Children with Two Adoptive Parents. I am aware of only one study that has specifically compared adopted stepchildren to children with two adoptive parents and it focuses on the parent-child relationship as opposed to children's well-being. In it, young adult children with adoptive fathers and young adult children with adoptive stepfathers reported similar levels of nurturance and father involvement. Both were significantly higher than nonadoptive stepfathers' scores on these variables (Schwartz & Finley, 2008). There are other similarities between adopted children and adopted stepchildren. All adopted children, whether adopted by a

stepparent or not, must acknowledge that a biological parent has chosen to withdraw from their life which can negatively affect their self-esteem (Fisher, 2003). They also share the experience of the legal process of adoption and therefore may have in common the process of sorting-out self-identities, loyalty conflicts, and social roles (Ganong et al., 1998). Similar to other adopted children, adopted stepchildren may receive a so-called “adoption advantage” (i.e., above-average parental investment) to compensate for the lack of biological relatedness and the extra challenges parents expect their adopted children to face (Hamilton et al., 2007). This research indicates that adopted stepchildren and children adopted by two parents may have similar levels of well-being.

Other research, however, suggests the potential for differences between adopted stepchildren and children with two adoptive parents. Adopted stepchildren start out as stepchildren. The process and circumstances of adoption are unique for stepchildren as are parents’ motivation to adopt (Fisher, 2003; Wolf & Mast, 1987). On the positive side, adopted stepchildren, unlike children adopted by two parents, have at least one biological parent in the home and a stepparent who wants to adopt him or her. On the other hand, some of stepparents’ reasons for adopting a stepchild, such as a name-change for the child, to provide them with health insurance, or to establish a “proper” family (Mason, Harrison-Jay, Svare, & Wolfinger, 2002; Phillips, 1992; Wolf & Mast, 1987) may or may not reflect the high level of commitment commonly associated with adoption (see Ceballo et al., 2004). Some evidence suggests that the adoption may have little effect or no effect on the stepchild, or even may have a negative one (Ganong et al., 1998). On balance, I hypothesize that the well-being of adopted stepchildren will be lower than that of children with two adoptive parents.

Children with One Biological Parent and One Nonadoptive Stepparent. There remains the question of how adopted stepchildren compare to stepchildren who have not been adopted. First, adopted stepchildren and nonadopted stepchildren share the experience of living in a stepfamily and all the complexity and ambiguity in relationships that stepfamily living entails. Second, any anticipated differences may be washed out by the fact that the majority of stepparents who want to adopt their stepchildren probably cannot because of the continued involvement of the nonresident biological parent (Lamb, 2007; Mason et al., 2002; Reitz & Watson, 1992). Third, whether a legal adoption has even taken place may not even be known to the stepchild (Ganong et al., 1998). Nevertheless, that “piece of paper” may be quite meaningful, signaling the stepparent’s love, commitment, and desire to parent (Lamb, 2007; Schwartz & Finley, 2006) a desire for family unity, a good stepparent-stepchild relationship, and a shift in role from a stepparent to a “real” parent (Ganong et al., 1998; Wolf & Mast, 1987). The adoption may in fact give stepchildren an adoption advantage (see above) over nonadopted stepchildren. I hypothesize that adopted stepchildren will have significantly higher well-being than nonadopted stepchildren.

In sum, the goals of this study are, first, to compare the demographic and family characteristics of adopted stepchildren to children with two biological parents, children with two adoptive parents, and children with one biological and one nonadoptive stepparent. The second goal of this study is to provide comparisons of the well-being (school engagement and emotional and behavior problems) of adopted stepchildren to children in these other family groups.

METHOD

Data

This study is based on data from the 2002 National Survey of America’s Families (NSAF), a nationally representative sample which provides a range of information on the economic, health,

and social characteristics of children and their families (Abi-Habib, Safir, & Triplett, 2002). The NSAF is ideally suited for this project for several reasons. The NSAF is probably the largest family survey conducted in recent years and the 2002 round contains information on over 34,000 children and 40,000 families. These data contain a rich set of family environment and child outcome measures that have been shown to have a high degree of validity and reliability (Ehrle & Moore, 1999). Most importantly, this dataset contains a large number of adopted stepchildren.

Analytic Sample

The main analytic sample is comprised of 22,680 children between the ages of 0-17 who live in married couple households that contain either the child's two biological parents ($n = 19,615$), two adoptive parents ($n = 412$), one biological parent and one nonadoptive stepparent ($n = 2,513$), or one biological parent and one adoptive stepparent ($n = 140$). In 90% of cases, the adoptive stepparent is the child's stepfather, similar to previous studies (Wolf & Mast, 1987). The sample is further divided into younger (age 0-11) and older (age 12-17) children. Results of a Chow test indicated that separate analysis should be conducted by age (results not shown).

The sample is limited to married couples because in general only married stepparents are granted custody of stepchildren (Mason, Fine, & Carnochan, 2001). For the analysis of child well-being, the sample is further limited to children over age 6 because key outcome measures do not pertain to young children. Cases missing on child outcomes were removed from the sample (roughly 2%). Information on the children and their families is provided by the "most knowledgeable adult" (MKA), defined as the adult considered most knowledgeable about the focal child's health and education. Typically this person is the child's biological mother.

Variables

Children's Well-Being. Two preconstructed measures of child well-being, the Child School Engagement Scale and the Child Behavioral and Emotional Problem Scale, were used. These scales represent important domains of children's psychosocial adjustment (Bornstein, Davidson, Keyes, & Moore, 2003). The School Engagement Scale is the sum of the MKA's report of how much of the time (1 = *none of the time*, 2 = *some of the time*, 3 = *most of the time*, and 4 = *all of the time*) the child (a) cares about doing well in school, (b) only works on schoolwork when forced to, (c) does just enough schoolwork to get by, and (d) always does homework. This scale ranges from 4 (*none of the time* on all four items) to 16 (*all of the time* on all four items), with scores less than or equal to 10 indicating "low" school engagement (Chronbach's alpha = .76; Ehrle & Moore, 1999). The Child Behavioral and Emotional Problem Scale is the sum of the MKA's report of the extent to which, in the past month, the child (a) doesn't get along with other kids, (b) can't concentrate or pay attention for long, (c) has been unhappy, sad, or depressed, (d) feels worthless or inferior, (e) has been nervous, high-strung, or tense, and (f) acts too young for his or her age. For children age 12-17, the last three items were replaced by "has trouble sleeping," "lies or cheats," and "does poorly at school" (1 = *never true*, 2 = *sometimes true*, and 3 = *often true*). This scale ranges from 6 (*never true* on all six items) to 18 (*often true* on all six items), with scores greater than or equal to 12 indicating a "high" level of problems (Chronbach's alpha = .73 [age 6 to 11] and .75 [age 12 to 17]; Ehrle & Moore, 1999).

Family Structure of Child. Children are divided into the following family types: two biological parents, two adoptive parents, one biological parent and one nonadoptive stepparent, and one biological parent and one adoptive stepparent. Family types were dummy coded for multivariate analysis with one biological parent and one adoptive stepparent serving as the reference group.

Sociodemographic Variables. Previous research indicates that the social and demographic characteristics of children and their families will vary by family structure and may affect the relationship between family structure and children's well-being. Multivariate models include the following characteristics of the child: gender (1 = *female*), years of age (at time of outcome assessment), race (Hispanic, White, Black, Other Race), and physical health (1 = *fair or poor*). Characteristics of the MKA include gender (1 = *female*), age (in years), education (less than high school or GED, high school or GED, some college, college degree or more), employment (full-time, part-time, not employed), physical health (1 = *fair or poor*), foreign born (1 = *yes*), and religious service attendance (never, yearly, monthly, weekly). The NSAF also includes measures designed to assess the quality of parenting in the child's home. The aggravation in parenting scale measures how much time during the past month (1 = *all of the time*, 2 = *most of the time*, 3 = *some of the time*, 4 = *none of the time*) the MKA felt (a) the children were harder to care for than most, (b) the children do things that really bother him or her a lot, (c) felt he or she was giving up more of his or her life to meet the children's needs than he or she ever expected, and (d) angry with the child. Responses were reverse coded and were summed into a scale ranging from 0-16 with higher scores indicative of higher aggravation (Chronbach's alpha = .63). A score greater than or equal to nine is indicative of "high" aggravation (Ehrle & Moore, 1999). The parental mental health scale measures how much of the time (1 = *all of the time*, 2 = *most of the time*, 3 = *some of the time*, 4 = *none of the time*) the MKA has been (a) a very nervous person, (b) felt calm or peaceful, (c) felt downhearted and blue, (d) been a happy person, and (e) felt so down in the dumps that nothing could cheer him or her up. Responses to the questions about feeling calm or peaceful and being a happy person were reverse coded. Answers to these items were summed into scale ranging from 5 to 20 (Chronbach's alpha = .81). Scores were then

rescaled (by multiplying scores by five) so that they range between 0 to 100, with higher scores indicating higher mental health. A score of 67 or lower is indicative of “poor” mental health (Ehrle & Moore, 1999). Lastly, the NSAF contains information on the characteristics of the child’s household including family income (in dollars) and the number of minor children in the household.

Analysis Plan

For each age group of children, the sociodemographic characteristics and well-being of children in the four family structures are compared with significance tests conducted between family groups. Then, the family structures of children are compared in a multivariate context using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. Despite some degree of skewness in the distribution of behavior problems and school engagement, OLS is considered a robust analytic technique for large sample sizes (Lumley, Diehr, Emerson, & Chen, 2002). All results were weighted to account for the complex cluster sampling design of the NSAF (Flores-Cervantes, Brick, & DiGaetano, 1997).

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the composition of children in married, two-parent households by age and family type. For children under 12, 91% lived with both of their biological parents, 2% resided with two adoptive parents and 7% lived with one biological parent and one nonadoptive stepparent. Less than 1% of the sample lived with an adoptive stepparent. Among children age 12 to 17, 78% lived with both biological parents, 2% lived with two adoptive parents, 19% lived with a stepparent, and less than 1% lived with an adoptive stepparent. Overall, among stepchildren, about 5% have been adopted by a stepparent. Among adopted children, about one quarter (25.4%) have been adopted by a stepparent (data not shown).

Table 1 about here

The next two tables describe the child outcomes and sociodemographic characteristics of adopted stepchildren compared to children in other family types (Table 2 and Table 3). Among younger children, school engagement did not vary significantly across family type. However, adopted stepchildren had significantly more emotional and behavior problems than children with two biological parents and children with one biological parent and one nonadoptive stepparent. Results for older children were similar, except that the difference between adopted stepchildren and nonadopted stepchildren was not statistically significant.

Among both age groups, adopted stepchildren were comprised of roughly half boys and half girls. This supports Wolf & Mast's (1987) claim that the gender of the child is not a factor in whether a stepchild is adopted by a stepparent. Among younger children, adopted stepchildren were significantly older (~8) than children with two biological parents and two adoptive parents but were similar to nonadopted stepchildren. The age of the child did not vary across family groups among older children. With respect to race and ethnicity, about 9% of younger adopted stepchildren were Hispanic, 73% were White, 12% were Black, and 6% were some other race. Among older children, 13% were Hispanic, 68% were White, 17% were Black, and 2% were some other race. Adopted stepchildren were not significantly different from other children in this respect, except that among older children, a greater proportion of adopted stepchildren were Black compared to children with two biological parents. This trend mirrors research showing higher levels of kin adoption among African Americans (Chandra et al., 1999). Among the younger children, adopted stepchildren had poorer physical health compared to the other groups of children, but this difference was not statistically significant. The child's physical health also did not vary across family groups for older children

Table 2 and 3 about here

The majority of the time (over 80%) the adopted stepchild's main caregiver (MKA) was female and was the child's biological mother, similar to children in the other family groups. Among the small number of children who had a biological father and an adoptive stepmother, about half the time the MKA was female (data not shown). Among younger children, the age of the MKA of adopted stepchildren was similar to that of children with biological parents and nonadoptive stepparents, but was significantly younger than children with two adoptive parents. The age of the MKA of older adopted stepchildren was significantly lower than that of children with two biological or two adoptive parents. Among younger children, a smaller percentage of the MKAs of adopted stepchildren had a college degree (30%) than children with two adoptive parents (51%) and a higher percentage had a college degree than children with one biological parent and one stepparent (13%). There was no difference in the MKA's level of education by family type among older children. Among both younger and older children, the level of employment of the children's main caregiver did not vary by family type.

Among younger children, the MKAs of adopted stepchildren had significantly less parental aggravation than did children with two adoptive parents, but were similar to the other children. There was no difference in parental aggravation among older children. Yet, the MKAs of adopted stepchildren had significantly lower mental health than the MKAs of biological or adopted children (for younger and older children) and nonadopted stepchildren (for younger stepchildren). The physical health of the MKA of younger and older adopted stepchildren was not significantly different from the other children, nor was the percentage of MKAs that were foreign born. Compared to children with two adoptive parents, children with an adoptive stepparent had an MKA who attended church less often. The family income of younger children

with an adoptive stepparent was similar to children in other family groups but the family incomes of older adopted stepchildren was significantly lower than that of children with two biological or adoptive parents. The households of children with an adopted stepchild contained fewer children, on average, than the households of nonadopted stepchildren (for younger children) and more than children with two adoptive parents (for older children).

What do these descriptive data say about the characteristics of adopted stepchildren compared to other children? First, there are more similarities than differences across child groupings. Nevertheless, among children under age 12, stepchildren who have been adopted by a stepparent showed the most similarities to (and fewest significant differences from) children with two biological parents. Among children age 12 and over, adopted stepchildren were most similar to nonadopted stepchildren. In fact, there were no significant differences whatsoever between these two groups. The demographic profiles of both younger and older adopted stepchildren were least similar to children with two adoptive parents. In general, children adopted by two parents were the most different from all other children (biological, step-, or adopted step-). Similar to other studies of children adopted by two parents, a significantly higher percentage of the adopted children in this sample were White and had older, more educated parents who had higher church attendance and greater incomes compared to children in other family types (data not shown).

Table 4 compares the well-being of adopted stepchildren to children in other family groups, controlling for the sociodemographic variables described above. The multivariate analysis indicates that the only significant differences in well-being between adopted stepchildren and children in other family groups were with children who had two biological parents. Among both younger and older children, adopted stepchildren had significantly more behavior and emotional problems. There were no significant differences in school engagement between adopted

stepchildren and children in other family types. However, there were significant differences between children in two biological parent, nonadoptive stepparent, and two adoptive parent families (data not shown). Among younger children, nonadopted stepchildren had significantly more emotional and behavior problems than children with two biological parents. Among older children, both children adopted by two parents and nonadopted stepchildren had significantly less school engagement than children with two biological parents and significantly more emotional and behavior problems. There were no significant differences between adopted children, stepchildren, and adopted stepchildren on any measure of well-being regardless of the child's age.

Table 4 about here

DISCUSSION

This study provides much needed information on the characteristics and well-being of stepchildren who have been adopted by a stepparent, a relatively small, but important group. Stepchild adoptions comprised a little over a quarter of all adopted children in the NSAF, which makes it a relatively common form of adoption in the United States. Despite the fact that adopting a stepchild is a form of adoption, the demographic profiles of adopted stepchildren (older and younger) were actually the least similar to other adopted children (as opposed to children in other family groups). These findings suggest that researchers should be careful about combining adopted stepchildren and children adopted by two parents. It turns out that younger adopted stepchildren are most demographically similar to children with two biological parents whereas older adopted stepchildren are the most similar to nonadopted stepchildren. Researchers studying nontraditional family forms might keep this in mind as they go about their work.

These findings could be partially explained by the age of the child at the time of the adoption, which unfortunately is not available in the NSAF. Parents who adopt stepchildren at a younger age or soon after stepfamily formation may be motivated by a desire to legitimize the family, reduce relationship ambiguity, and present themselves as a “regular family” (i.e., two biological parent; Cherlin, 1978; Ganong et al., 1998). This process is easier early on before family dynamics become set. Stepchildren who are adopted at older ages or after a longer time in the stepfamily may have become accustomed to stepfamily life and therefore may continue to operate as a member of a conventional stepfamily.

With respect to the well-being, both younger and older adopted stepchildren are similar to the other groups of children with respect to school engagement, but have significantly more emotional and behavior problems than children with two biological parents. There were no significant differences in well-being between adopted children, nonadopted stepchildren, and adopted stepchildren on any measure of well-being regardless of the child’s age. Thus, there does not appear to be an adoption advantage for adopted stepchildren (Hamilton et al, 2007) over nonadopted stepchildren, nor is there evidence of a “stepchild disadvantage” for adopted stepchildren relative to children adopted by two parents. Given the lack of significant differences in well-being between children who are likely to have vastly different family histories, these findings should be explored further using different data sources and a more comprehensive set of variables.

Similar to previous studies of family structure, children in the nontraditional, nonbiological family groupings (even among married couples as was the case in this study) fared slightly worse than children in two biological parent families. Yet, It is important that differences between children not be exaggerated (Fisher, 2003). None of the children (on average) scored in the

clinical range of low school engagement and high behavior and emotional problems (Ehrle & Moore, 1999). Nevertheless, with the focus shifting from anticipating problems to the prevention of problems, it is important to understand differences even among children in the normal range (Moore & Keyes, 2003). Too often, children who do not live with two biological parents forms are considered a “lost cause.” The results of this study provide support for the basic resilience of children as opposed to resignation.

Implications for Future Research, Policy and Practice

The results of this study have important implications for both policy and practice. For practitioners, this study may help increase awareness of families with adopted stepchildren. One problem professionals who work with nontraditional families must grapple with is ambiguous labels. Whereas some children refer to an adoptive stepparent as “my dad” or “my mom,” others refer to them as “my stepdad” or “my stepmom”—the unique situation of families with adopted stepchildren may go unrecognized unless explicitly stated. Stepchildren who were adopted so that the family would resemble a traditional nuclear family may feel pressure to keep the adoption a secret. Adopted stepchildren may also be expected to behave toward their adoptive stepparent as they would a biological parent or as they would if they had been adopted at birth. The parents and other children in these families may experience similar pressures. The results of this study may prompt family therapists, teachers, physicians, attorneys, and other professionals to delve deeper into the particular details of children’s family relationships.

Many other questions relevant to adopted stepchildren remain. What should happen should child’s original biological parent want to change the terms of the adoption? To what extent does the adoption of a stepchild alter the evolution of stepparent-stepchild relationships? What happens to the stepparent-stepchild relationship should the parents of an adopted stepchild

divorce? There are an unlimited number of questions about stepchild adoption that need to be addressed.

The information in this study may be also useful to family and legal policymakers who must sort out biological parents', stepparents', and adoptive stepparents' different roles, rights, and responsibilities. In particular, stepparenting, open adoptions, and the adoption of stepchildren challenge current laws that limit children's number of legal parents to two. Such laws perpetuate the "blood is best" perspective and fail to recognize that children can benefit from having relationships with all of the parents in their lives (e.g., King, 2006; Siegel, 2008; Von Korff, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2006). In Great Britain, for instance, stepchild adoption comprised half of all adoption orders in 1998. Following a 2000 amendment to the *Children Act 1989*, which allowed children to have a legal relationship with a stepparent in addition to their two biological parents, this figure dropped to 35% (Ball, 2002). This suggests that stepchild adoption may be an imperfect solution for stepparents and stepchildren who want to formalize their relationship. In the U.S., adoption remains the only mechanism that can provide stepparents with any legal rights, and this is not possible for the majority of stepfamilies. Unfortunately, we do not have information on the number of stepparents who would adopt their stepchildren (or otherwise establish a relationship) if they were able. These numbers would help establish a need for laws better suited to the needs of stepfamilies. Right now, stepparents who do not adopt their stepchildren have fewer legal rights than legal guardians and foster parents (Malia, 2005). Gay and lesbian couples face similar issues and must petition for a "second parent" adoption, which is not allowed in every state (Human Rights Campaign, 2009). Until laws forcing the child's noncustodial parent to relinquish his or her parental rights are changed, the genuine effect of stepchild adoption on children's well-being will remain unclear. In general, more research is

needed on children who have or have the potential to have multiple parents. The U.S. currently lags behind other countries in recognizing new family forms and developing policies that maximize, rather than minimize, parental investment in children (Ball, 2002).

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Table 1

Children in Married, Two-Parent Households by Birth/Adoption/Stepfamily Status

	<u>Age 0-11</u>		<u>Age 12-17</u>		<u>Total Sample</u>	
	<i>n</i>	Percent	<i>n</i>	Percent	<i>N</i>	Percent
Biological parents	14,051	90.7	5,564	78.4	19,615	86.6
Adoptive parents	263	1.5	149	1.9	412	1.6
Biological parent/stepparent	1,139	7.3	1,374	19.0	2,513	11.2
Biological parent/adoptive stepparent	73	0.5	67	0.8	140	0.6
Total	15,526	100.0	7,154	100.0	22,680	100.0

Note: Weighted percentages and unweighted *ns*.

Table 2

Descriptive Characteristics of Children Age 0-11 by Parental Status (means and percentages)

Variables	Biological	Adoptive	Biological	Biological	All
	Parents	Parents	Parent/ Stepparent	Parent/Adoptive Stepparent	
	(n = 14,051)	(n = 263)	(n = 1,139)	(n = 73)	(N = 15,526)
Child outcomes^a					
School engagement	13.3	13.2	12.8	13.2	13.2
Behavioral and emotional problems	7.7 ^b	8.6	8.2 ^b	9.0	7.8
Characteristics of child					
Gender					
Male	50.8	51.4	51.5	48.0	50.8
Female	49.2	48.6	48.5	52.0	49.2
Age	5.3 ^b	5.7 ^b	8.0	8.1	5.5
Race/ethnicity					
Hispanic	16.3	4.9	17.1	8.5	16.2
White	71.1	76.4	64.7	73.4	70.7
Black	6.6	10.0	14.9	12.1	7.3
Other	6.0	8.8	3.3	6.1	5.9
Physical health fair or poor	3.1	2.5	3.1	5.7	3.1
Characteristics of MKA					
Gender					

Male	19.0	19.1	15.1	12.0	18.7
Female	81.0	80.9	84.9	88.0	81.3
Age	35.1	43.6 ^b	32.3	33.6	35.0
Education					
Less than high school/GED	9.6	3.7	10.7	4.4	9.5
High school/GED	24.0	17.9	38.3	32.6	25.0
Some college	27.8	27.3	37.8	32.8	28.5
College degree or more	38.7	51.1 ^b	13.2 ^b	30.1	37.0
Employment					
Full-time	48.2	42.1	66.0	51.0	49.4
Part-time	22.4	21.3	16.8	24.7	22.0
Not employed	29.4	36.6	17.2	24.3	28.6
Parental aggravation	6.1	7.1 ^b	6.3	6.1	6.2
Mental well-being	81.6 ^a	80.3 ^b	80.4 ^b	76.2	81.5
Physical health fair or poor	7.6	14.2	9.7	5.8	7.9
Foreign born	14.8	9.6	8.8	5.3	14.3
Religious service attendance					
Never	14.7	10.2	21.5 ^b	8.5	15.1
Yearly	21.5 ^a	16.4 ^b	22.2 ^b	35.5	21.5
Monthly	19.6	16.9	20.6	20.4	19.6
Weekly	44.3	56.5 ^b	35.6	35.6	43.8
Characteristics of household					
Family income (\$10,000)	70,183.0	74,456.9	61,705.4	69,797.87	69,623.9

Number of minor children	2.5	2.2	2.8 ^a	2.3	2.5
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Note: All analyses are weighted using NSAF sample weights.

^aFor children age 6 to 11 ($n = 6,937$). ^bSignificantly different from biological parent/adopted stepparent at $p < .05$.

Table 3

Descriptive Characteristics of Children Age 12-17 by Parental Status (means and percentages)

Variables	Biological	Adoptive	Biological	Biological	All
	Parents (<i>n</i> = 5,564)	Parents (<i>n</i> = 149)	Parent/ Stepparent (<i>n</i> = 1,374)	Parent/Adoptive Stepparent (<i>n</i> = 67)	
Child outcomes^a					
School engagement	12.9	12.2	11.7	12.4	12.7
Behavioral and emotional problems	7.7 ^b	8.6	8.5	9.0	7.9
Characteristics of child					
Gender					
Male	50.4	47.8	57.0	58.6	51.7
Female	49.6	52.2	43.0	41.4	48.3
Age	14.4	14.2	14.5	14.4	14.4
Race/ethnicity					
Hispanic	13.8	5.0	12.4	13.1	13.3
White	73.8	81.9	71.5	67.7	73.5
Black	6.7 ^b	12.9	12.6	16.9	8.0
Other	5.8	0.3	3.5	2.3	5.2
Physical health fair or poor	3.4	1.6	4.6	0.7	3.6
Characteristics of MKA					

Gender					
Male	22.7	23.6	24.5	14.1	23.0
Female	77.4	76.5	75.5	85.9	77.1
Age	42.9 ^b	48.0 ^b	38.8	37.2	42.2
Education					
Less than high school/GED	8.8	5.1	8.7	15.6	8.8
High school/GED	26.0	17.4	36.3	28.4	27.8
Some college	30.4	37.2	34.6	29.3	31.3
College degree or more	34.9	40.3	20.4	26.6	32.2
Employment					
Full-time	59.4	56.5	69.0	60.2	61.2
Part-time	21.7	12.3	13.9	9.3	20.0
Not employed	18.8	31.2	17.1	30.5	18.8
Parental aggravation	6.2	6.5	6.4	6.0	6.2
Mental well-being	81.5 ^b	81.4 ^b	79.0	75.9	80.9
Physical health fair or poor	10.3	14.9	16.1	18.5	11.5
Foreign born	17.5	4.7	8.3	7.2	15.5
Religious service attendance					
Never	13.3	1.8 ^b	20.7	24.9	14.6
Yearly	21.0	16.6	26.4	19.5	21.9
Monthly	17.9	15.1	18.8	20.0	18.0
Weekly	47.8	66.5 ^b	19.8	35.7	45.5

Characteristics of household

Family income (\$10,000)	78,935.0 ^b	85,908.0 ^b	69,994.3	57,833.6	77,209.41
Number of minor children	2.3	2.0 ^b	2.5	2.6	2.3

Note: All analyses are weighted using NSAF sample weights.

^aFor children not missing on child outcomes ($n = 6,960$). ^bSignificantly different from biological parent/adopted stepparent at $p < .05$.

Table 4

Ordinary Least Squares Estimates of the Effect of Parental Status on Children's Well-Being among children age 6 to 11 (n = 6,937) and age 12 to 17 (n = 6,960)

Independent Variable	<u>Children Age 6-11</u>		<u>Children Age 12-17</u>	
	School Engagement	Emotional and Behavior Problems	School Engagement	Emotional and Behavior Problems
Parental status				
Biological parents	0.07	-1.03*	0.03	-0.93**
Adoptive parents	0.00	-0.46	-0.99	-0.16
Biological parent/stepparent	-0.16	-0.73	-0.74	-0.48
Biological parent/adoptive stepparent ^a				
Characteristics of child				
Gender				
Male ^a				
Female	0.93***	-0.28***	1.46***	-0.32**
Age	-0.07*	0.09***	-0.03	-0.02
Race/ethnicity				
Hispanic	-0.32	-0.26*	-0.09	-0.01
White ^a				
Black	-0.05	-0.25	-0.17	-0.06

Other	-0.21	0.22	-0.45	-0.08
Physical health fair or poor	-1.43***	1.57***	-0.23	1.21***
Characteristics of MKA				
Gender				
Male ^a				
Female	-0.06	-0.08	0.02	-0.15
Age	0.01	-0.02**	0.02*	-0.01
Education				
Less than high school/GED	-0.50*	0.29	-0.53**	0.03
High school/GED ^a				
Some college	0.09	-0.02	0.20	0.12
College degree or more	0.23	-0.03	0.52***	-0.04
Employment				
Full-time ^a				
Part-time	0.15	-0.24**	-0.07	0.10
Not employed	0.27*	-0.11	0.23	-0.19
Parental aggravation	-0.24***	0.31***	-0.27***	0.37***
Mental well-being	0.00	-0.03***	0.02***	-0.03***
Physical health fair or poor	0.22	-0.04	-0.39	0.40**
Foreign born	-0.17	-0.16	0.12	-0.50**
Religious service attendance				
Never	-0.24	0.04	-0.80***	0.36**
Yearly	-0.07	0.07	-0.36**	0.09

Monthly	-0.04	0.06	-0.28	-0.04
Weekly ^a				
Characteristics of household				
Family income (\$10,000)	0.03**	-0.02**	0.03*	-0.01
Number of minor children	-0.03	-0.12***	0.05	-0.03
Intercept	14.01***	10.00***	11.50***	10.01***
R^2	0.13	0.23	0.19	0.26

Note: All analyses were weighted with NSAF sample weights. ^aDenotes reference group.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.