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Stepfamily Formation: Implications for Adolescent Ties to Mothers, Nonresident Fathers, and Stepfathers

Valarie King

The Pennsylvania State University

Abstract

This study examines how the entrance of a stepfather influences adolescent ties to mothers and nonresident fathers, and how prior ties to each biological parent influences the development of stepfather-stepchild ties. Data come from 1753 adolescents in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health who lived with a single mother in Wave 1 that remained single, cohabited, or married by Wave 2, approximately one year later. Stepfamily formation had little consequence for adolescent-nonresident father ties. Adolescent-mother closeness, however, declined when cohabiting, but not married, stepfathers entered the household. Close ties to married stepfathers were more likely to develop when adolescents were closer to their mothers before stepfather entry. Prior ties to nonresident fathers were unrelated to stepfather-stepchild ties.

Keywords

adolescents; mothers; nonresident fathers; parent-adolescent relations; stepfamilies; stepfathers

Due to high rates of divorce, nonmarital childbearing, cohabitation, and remarriage, an increasing number of American children are experiencing multiple family transitions, along with new parenting figures, as they grow up. With one third of births occurring to unmarried mothers (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008), and almost half of marriages likely to end in divorce (Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2006), children are increasingly growing up living apart from their biological fathers. Almost one third of all children will experience living in a married or cohabiting stepfamily (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995). Although the majority of current stepfamilies, about three quarters, involve married couples, children are increasingly likely to be living in cohabiting stepfamilies, about half of which will transition into a married stepfamily within a few years; most of the rest will dissolve (Bumpass et al.; Kennedy & Bumpass).

We know surprisingly little about how the entrance of a stepfather into a child's life influences ties between children and their biological parents, or in turn, how ties to biological parents influence the development of ties to a new stepfather. Even less is known about these processes in cohabiting stepfamilies (Stewart, 2007). It is important to better understand how stepfamily formation influences children's ties to their parents because close ties to resident mothers, nonresident fathers, and stepfathers are all associated with better outcomes for children (e.g., King, 2006). To the extent that ties to mothers or nonresident fathers are weakened by the entrance of a stepfather, there is cause for concern. If, however, the entrance of a stepfather has little effect on children's ties to biological

parents, or if it improves these ties, then child well-being may be enhanced, especially if children are also able to develop close ties to the stepfather.

The research evidence is decidedly mixed regarding whether a mother's remarriage negatively affects nonresident father involvement or her relationship with her children. Further, most prior research relies on cross-sectional data that compare children living in different family structures, but longitudinal data are necessary to determine whether *changes* in family structure influence *changes* in the biological parent-child relationship (Manning & Smock, 1999). Even the few longitudinal studies in this area, which tend to be limited to small and nonrepresentative samples, often focus on relationships after the remarriage takes place, comparing newly remarried families to never divorced and/or single mother families (e.g., Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992), or remarried families at different points in time after the remarriage (e.g., Bray & Berger, 1990). By selecting families that have already experienced the entrance of a stepfather, it is unclear whether any differences in parent-child relationships existed prior to the transition. Stronger evidence would involve following children in single mother families over time, comparing those that later transition to a stepfather family to those that remain living with a single mother. This type of design controls for parent-child ties before the entrance of the stepfather to the household, controlling for a potentially important source of selection into new partnerships, and allows stronger inferences about the effects of a new stepfather on biological parent-child ties (Thomson, Mosley, Hanson, & McLanahan, 2001).

To go beyond existing work, this study employs such a design. Using relatively recent and nationally representative data from two waves of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) that are approximately one year apart, two key questions are addressed: (a) How do adolescents' relationships with nonresident fathers change when a stepfather enters the household? (b) How do adolescents' relationships with mothers change when a stepfather enters the household? I focus on the closeness of adolescent-mother and adolescent-father bonds, although frequency of contact with the nonresident father is also considered, because closeness is a particularly salient dimension of the parent-child relationship that is associated with better outcomes for children (King, 2006). Both adolescents who experience the entrance of a married stepfather and those who experience the entrance of a cohabiting stepfather between the two waves are examined to test whether the type of stepfather makes a difference. Adolescents who remain living with a single mother serve as a comparison.

Although the primary focus is on how stepfather entry affects adolescent-biological parent ties, the data also afford an opportunity to examine how adolescent ties to each biological parent influence the development of ties to stepfathers. Thus two additional questions are addressed: (c) Is the quality of the nonresident father-adolescent relationship before the mother's marriage to the stepfather associated with the development of close ties to the stepfather after he enters the household? (d) Is the quality of the mother-adolescent relationship before the mother's marriage to the stepfather associated with the development of close ties to the stepfather after he enters the household? These latter questions are limited to a consideration of married stepfathers because adolescents with cohabiting stepfathers were not asked the key question regarding how close they are to the stepfather. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first study to empirically test these two associations, which will contribute to our knowledge regarding factors that promote or hinder the development of close stepfather-stepchild ties.

From a family systems perspective, the entrance of a stepfather will influence all other family members and their interaction with one another (Adamsons & Pasley, 2006; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Whether these changes will be largely negative or

positive is open to debate and varies among the multiple theories explaining stepfamily functioning. For example, stress perspectives highlight the negative stressors that result from remarriage and suggest that a mother's repartnering will have negative effects on parent-child relationships. Other perspectives (e.g., risk and resiliency) point out potential benefits of repartnering as well, such as improved economic circumstances and parenting support that can neutralize any negative influences or even improve parent-child relationships (Bray & Easling, 2005).

How the Entrance of a Stepfather May Affect the Father-Child Relationship

There are several reasons why stepfather entry may negatively affect nonresident father involvement. Nonresident fathers may withdraw from their children's lives because they feel rejected, displaced, or that their role has been usurped by the stepfather (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991); the presence of a stepfather makes their own involvement seem less necessary (Furstenberg & Cherlin) or creates role ambiguity or discomfort (Seltzer, Schaeffer, & Charng, 1989); or the remarriage re-ignites old conflicts with the mother (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Mothers may view the nonresident father's involvement as less necessary or not worth the effort to encourage now that they can rely on a new partner (Seltzer et al.). Stepfathers may not welcome the nonresident father's involvement or continuing contact with the mother, or may act as substitute parents, effectively taking over the parenting role (Stewart, 2007). Children may also find it difficult to maintain close bonds with two fathers, favoring bonds with an available stepfather over a geographically distant or less involved nonresident father (King, 2007).

Alternatively, there is no inherent reason why ties to one father should make it difficult to be close to the other father, especially if both fathers make a good faith effort to support each other's ties to the children (King, 2007; Marsiglio, 2004). Stepfathers may welcome the nonresident father's involvement if it means being able to spend more time alone with the mother. The entrance of a stepfather may prompt nonresident fathers to reaffirm their commitment to their children and increase efforts to stay involved so that they are not replaced by stepfathers (Buehler & Ryan, 1994). To further complicate matters, the influence of a stepfather may depend more on the quality of the stepfather-child relationship that develops than on just whether a stepfather is present. Indeed, a poor relationship with a stepfather may prompt children to spend more time with their nonresident fathers.

The research evidence is mixed. Most studies focus on nonresident father contact, although some assess relationship quality or closeness, or other indicators of involvement (e.g., frequency of father-child activities). Some studies suggest mother's remarriage decreases nonresident father involvement (e.g., Juby, Billette, Laplante, & Le Bourdais, 2007; Seltzer, 1991; Seltzer et al., 1989), whereas others find little or no effect of mother's remarriage (e.g., Buchanan et al., 1996; Day & Acock, 2004; Sobolewski & King, 2005). Most of this research (see Juby et al. for an exception) relies on cross-sectional data and compares remarried and single mother families. Few studies examine whether the influence of stepfathers varies by stepfather-child relationship quality, and they too are limited to examining cross-sectional correlations between the stepfather-child relationship and the nonresident father-child relationship. Findings suggest little or no association (e.g., Buchanan et al., 1996; White & Gilbreth, 2001).

How the Entrance of a Stepfather May Affect the Mother-Child Relationship

Stepfathers may compete with children for the mother's time and attention, leading her to focus less on her children and creating child resentment (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Adolescents in particular may resist the entrance and authority of a stepfather, and a troubled stepfather-child relationship may spill over into the mother-child relationship (Hetherington

& Stanley-Hagan, 2000). Alternatively, remarriage has the potential to reduce family stress. Stepfathers usually bring economic resources into the household (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994), and can serve as an extra parenting figure, providing increased monitoring and supervision of children while providing social support to the mother, enhancing her parenting ability (Buchanan et al., 1996; Thomson et al., 2001).

Again, evidence is mixed. Some studies suggest that mother-child relationships deteriorate after remarriage in terms of closeness, warmth, mother involvement, and mother's monitoring and control of children (e.g., Day & Acock, 2004; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994), although there is some suggestion that the disruption may be largely confined to the first year or two after remarriage (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002). Other studies suggest that mother's remarriage has few consequences for mother-child relationships (e.g., Buchanan et al., 1996; Hawkins, Amato, & King, 2006). Again, however, this research (see Thomson et al. for an exception) relies on cross-sectional comparisons of different family structures, or follows remarried families after the remarriage has occurred.

The Entry of Married Versus Cohabiting Stepfathers

The entrance of married and cohabiting stepfathers may have similar effects on biological parent-child ties. Both situations can introduce stress and require family adjustments, as well as bring benefits in terms of improved economic resources or parenting support. There are several reasons, however, to expect that cohabitation may induce more stress and offer fewer benefits than marriage. Cohabiting stepfathers tend to be poorer and less educated than married stepfathers, indicating that they likely bring fewer resources into the family (Manning & Brown, 2006). Cohabiting mothers report more depression, less support from their partners, and more unstable relationships than married mothers, suggesting that they gain less from cohabitation than marriage (Brown, 2006; Stewart, 2007). Adolescents tend to be less accepting of a cohabiting stepfather's authority and feel less close to him than adolescents with married stepfathers (Buchanan et al., 1996). Relationship duration prior to stepfather entry may also be longer, on average, in married stepfamilies, affording these adolescents more time to get to know the stepfather and adjust to the mother's relationship before he enters the household.

These differences between married and cohabiting stepfamilies suggest that the mother-child relationship may be more adversely affected by the entrance of a cohabiting stepfather. Consistent with this premise, Buchanan et al.'s study (1996) of adolescents in California found that the presence of a new spouse strengthened a resident parent's parenting whereas the presence of an unmarried new partner weakened it. Thomson et al. (2001), however, reported no differences in mothering behavior between single mothers who transitioned into marriage and those who transitioned into cohabitation in their national, longitudinal study.

To the extent that adolescents view cohabiting stepfathers as less legitimate, are less accepting of their authority, and are less close to them, the presence of cohabiting stepfathers may have fewer negative implications for nonresident father-child ties. Rather, it may be married stepfathers who are more likely to serve as substitute father-figures, with negative implications for nonresident father-child ties. Consistent with this hypothesis, Hofferth, Pleck, Stueve, Bianchi, and Sayer (2002) found that nonresident father contact was higher for children living with cohabiting stepfathers than married stepfathers.

How the Prior Father-Child Relationship May Affect the Stepfather-Stepchild Relationship

It may be difficult for children to have strong relationships with two fathers, and children who have a close relationship with an involved nonresident father may be less likely to develop close ties to a new stepfather. Children close to nonresident fathers may be more resistant to having a stepfather enter the family, less willing to accept the stepfather's authority (Buchanan et al., 1996), or may avoid forming a close relationship with a stepfather so as not to hurt the nonresident father's feelings (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). When nonresident fathers are relatively uninvolved though, children may be more likely to develop close ties to stepfathers and may even welcome having a new father figure in their lives. Stepfathers may feel better able, or more compelled, to step in when nonresident fathers are uninvolved. Mothers may be especially supportive of the stepfather-stepchild relationship if the stepfather is the only available father figure for her children. If the nonresident father is involved, however, the stepfather may back off from extensive engagement with the child (Harris & Ryan, 2004; Marsiglio, 2004). Involved nonresident fathers may interfere directly with the stepfather-child relationship or their involvement may simply minimize the stepfather's opportunities to develop an involved relationship with the child (Marsiglio).

Alternatively, having close ties to a nonresident father may not necessarily preclude children from developing close ties to a stepfather (King, 2006). Many nonresident fathers have withdrawn from the child's life before the remarriage takes place, and many of those who do remain involved often adopt a companionable or permissive role rather than an instrumental or disciplinarian role that would compete with a stepfather's exercise of authority or parent-like role (Bray & Easling, 2005). Further, children who have close relationships to nonresident fathers may be more likely to develop close ties to stepfathers to the extent that child characteristics (e.g., easy to get along with) play a role in contributing to the quality of all the child's relationships (Dunn, Cheng, O'Connor, & Bridges, 2004).

I was unable to find any studies that directly examine how a nonresident father's involvement prior to remarriage is associated with the development of ties to a new stepfather. Most studies examining correlations between indicators of the nonresident father-child relationship and indicators of the stepfather-child relationship at a single point in time after the remarriage find no association (e.g., Buchanan et al., 1996; White & Gilbreth, 2001), although a few report a negative correlation between frequent nonresident father contact and stepfather-child relationship quality (e.g., Dunn et al., 2004).

How the Prior Mother-Child Relationship May Affect the Stepfather-Stepchild Relationship

A very close mother-child bond may hinder opportunities for the stepfather to develop strong ties (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Children who are very close to their mothers may feel more threatened by the entrance of a stepfather whom they may view as a competitor for the mother's time and attention (Thomson et al., 2001). Alternatively, a close mother-child relationship could facilitate the development of a close stepfather-child bond. Mothers with close ties to their children may be particularly concerned with ensuring that the stepfather-child bond is also close, and children who are close to their mothers may be more willing to accept her new partner and want the new relationship to succeed (Marsiglio, 1992). Again, I could find no research directly examining how ties to stepfathers are affected by the quality of the mother-child bond prior to remarriage, but cross-sectional

studies are consistent in finding a positive correlation between the quality of mother-child and stepfather-child ties after remarriage (e.g., Dunn et al., 2004; King, 2006).

Controls

Multivariate analyses control for a number of individual and family background characteristics that previous research suggests are associated with adolescent-(step)parent ties in nonresident father families (see King, 2006), including adolescent age, gender, race/ethnicity, and immigrant status, whether the adolescent was born in marriage, household income, mother education, nonresident father education, years since the adolescent lived with the nonresident father, and whether the nonresident father pays child support.

METHOD

Data

Data come from the first two waves of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), conducted in 1995 and 1996 (see Harris et al., 2003, for a detailed description of the data). The Wave 1 sample includes interviews with 20,745 high school and middle school students. A parent figure (usually the resident mother) also completed a questionnaire ($n = 17,670$). The sample is representative of children in grades 7 through 12 in the United States when sample weights are used. In Wave 2, 14,738 (72%) of the adolescents were reinterviewed. No parents and no adolescents who were seniors during Wave 1, were reinterviewed at Wave 2. The analysis sample was restricted to adolescents who: (a) had valid sample weights (adolescents without sample weights are not part of the nationally representative portion of the Add Health survey), (b) reported at Wave 1 that they were living with a single biological mother (no partner in the household), and also had a living nonresident biological father, and (c) were reinterviewed in Wave 2, still had a living nonresident father, and were living with their mother who was currently single ($n = 1564$), cohabiting with a partner ($n = 82$), or married to the adolescent's stepfather ($n = 107$).

Missing data were rare (1% of the sample or less) for most study variables. The few exceptions were the nonresident father's education (14% missing), payment of child support (15% missing), marital birth status (15% missing), and household income (21% missing). The estimation maximization algorithm in SPSS 14.0 was used to impute missing values. This produces more reliable estimates than mean substitution or listwise deletion when up to 50% of cases are missing (Acocck, 2005; Allison, 2001). The Wave 2 sample weight was used to correct for the differential probabilities of sample selection. The survey (SVY) procedures in Stata (Stata Corporation, 2005) were used to adjust the standard errors of model estimates for the weighted, clustered, and stratified design of Add Health (Chantala & Tabor, 1999).

Measures

Family structure trajectory—All adolescents were living with a single mother in Wave 1 and are grouped into one of three trajectories by Wave 2: stable single mother, cohabiting stepfather enters the household, or married stepfather enters the household. Although it is possible that additional changes could have occurred between the two waves that are not reflected by using household composition at two fixed time points (e.g., a single mother could have cohabited with a partner after Wave 1 but the relationship ended before Wave 2), the short time frame between the two waves minimizes the frequency of such occurrences. Family structure trajectories are represented as a set of dummy variables in the regression models with stable single mother serving initially as the omitted reference group. Differences between all three trajectories are tested by alternating the omitted group.

Closeness to mothers, nonresident fathers, and married stepfathers—

In separate questions during both waves, adolescents reported how close they felt (1 = *not at all close*, 2 = *not very close*, 3 = *somewhat close*, 4 = *quite close*, 5 = *extremely close*) to their mothers and to their nonresident biological fathers. Adolescents answered the same question with regard to resident stepfathers in Wave 2 if the stepfather was married to their mother. For some analyses, closeness is dichotomized into *close* (original scores of 4 or 5) and *not close* (original scores of 1, 2, or 3), consistent with some prior studies using these measures to distinguish close relationships from those where problems appear to exist (e.g., King, 2006; Scott, Booth, King, & Johnson, 2007).

Changes in adolescents' closeness to mothers and nonresident fathers—

Changes in closeness are measured in three different ways to test the robustness of the findings on the basis of alternative specifications. First, change in *closeness* is measured with a change score derived from subtracting the Wave 1 measure of closeness from the Wave 2 measure. Change score methods are appropriate when using two waves of data to estimate how a transition affects outcomes (Johnson, 2005). This measure captures all changes in closeness, both big and small. Change in *being close* is derived from subtracting the dichotomized Wave 1 measure of close from the dichotomized Wave 2 measure of close. This measure captures more dramatic changes in closeness whereby adolescents move from being close to not close to a parent, or vice versa, over time. A drawback of the preceding two measures is that adolescents who do not change are grouped together regardless of how close they are to a parent (e.g., adolescents who are not at all close to their mothers at both waves are in the same group as adolescents who are extremely close to their mothers at both waves). The third measure distinguishes among the group of adolescents who do not change markedly in closeness to identify those who remain close and those who remain not close to their parent. This measure is created from the cross-classification of being close to a parent in Wave 1 (1 = *close*, 0 = *not close*) and being close to a parent in Wave 2 (1 = *close*, 0 = *not close*), resulting in four categories: *remain close*, *remain not close*, *increase to being close*, *decline to not close*. By starting with the dichotomized version of being close, this measure also reflects more dramatic changes in closeness.

Contact and changes in contact with nonresident fathers—In both waves, adolescents reported how often in the past 12 months (0 = *not at all*, 5 = *more than once a week*) they talked with the nonresident father in person, or on the telephone, or received a letter from him. Change in contact is measured with a change score derived from subtracting the Wave 1 measure of contact from the Wave 2 measure. Alternative codings of contact into categories reflecting frequent and infrequent contact (similar to the different versions of closeness) were also considered, but did not alter findings or conclusions resulting from the original change score.

Control variables—Control variables come from Wave 1. Adolescent's age is measured in years ($M = 15.0$, $SE = .13$). Adolescent's gender is a dichotomous variable (1 = *male*, 47%; 0 = *female*). Race/ethnicity is measured as a set of dummy variables that includes non-Hispanic Whites (55%; omitted reference group), non-Hispanic Blacks (30%), Hispanics (11%), and all others (4%). Immigrant family is a dichotomous variable indicating whether the adolescent is an immigrant or the child of an immigrant (1 = *yes*, 12%; 0 = *no*). Marital birth is a dichotomous variable created from the marital and fertility histories in the parent survey indicating whether the adolescent was born within marriage (1 = *yes*, 60%; 0 = *no*). Income is reported in the parent survey and refers to the total household income from all sources in thousands of dollars ($M = \$25,647$; $SE = 1218$). The log of income is used in the regression models to minimize skewness. Mother education ($M = 3.9$, $SE = .09$) and nonresident father education ($M = 3.7$, $SE = .08$) are ordinal variables, with 1 = *an 8th grade*

education or less to 7 = postgraduate training. Years since lived with the nonresident father refers to the number of years since the adolescent lived with the biological father ($M = 8.5$, $SE = .20$). For adolescents who never lived with their biological fathers, this variable corresponds to their age. Child support is a dichotomous variable created from mother reports and indicates whether nonresident fathers paid any child support in a typical month (1 = *yes*, 59%; 0 = *no*).

Analytic Strategy

First, a descriptive analysis compares adolescents in the three family structure trajectories (married stepfather enters, cohabiting stepfather enters, mother remains single) on three alternative measures of closeness to nonresident fathers including mean levels, the percentage reporting being close, and the percentage in each closeness group on the basis of stability and change over time. It is expected that adolescent-father (and adolescent-mother) closeness will decline on average regardless of whether a stepfather enters the household, as children move through adolescence and begin to pull away from family relationships and spend more time with peers (Furstenberg, 2000; King, 2006). Of importance is whether adolescents who acquire a stepfather experience a greater decline than those who do not acquire a stepfather.

Differences between the three groups of adolescents are then examined in a regression framework that includes all control variables. Ordinary least squares regression is employed to examine changes in levels of closeness and changes in being close. Multinomial logistic regression is employed when considering the closeness groups on the basis of change and stability. I focus on the specific contrast most relevant to this study, which compares adolescents who decline over time from being close to a nonresident father to not being close to him with adolescents who remain close to their father, because it directly tests the hypothesis that adolescents who experience the entrance of a stepfather will be more likely to experience a decline in closeness to nonresident fathers than those who remain living with a single mother. Then changes in nonresident father contact are considered.

Another set of analyses consider whether adolescent closeness to married stepfathers is associated with changes in the level of closeness to nonresident fathers, changes in being close to nonresident fathers, and changes in the frequency of nonresident father contact. There were too few cases in the married stepfather subgroup to adequately test a model that categorized them into closeness groups on the basis of stability and change.

Next, analyses on closeness to mothers are conducted that parallel those examining how closeness to nonresident fathers change. Finally, ordinary least squares regression models test whether the quality of the nonresident father-adolescent relationship or the quality of the mother-adolescent relationship before the mother's marriage to the stepfather at time 1 is associated with the development of close ties to the stepfather by time 2.

RESULTS

How Do Adolescent-Nonresident Father Relationships Change When Stepfathers Enter?

Results suggest that the entrance of a stepfather, whether married to the mother or not, does not affect an adolescent's closeness to, or contact with, the nonresident father. As Table 1 reveals, all three groups of adolescents experienced a similar decline in average levels of closeness to nonresident fathers over time, with no significant differences in the mean level of change between the groups. Likewise, changes in the percentage of adolescents who reported being close to the nonresident father over time did not significantly differ between the groups. Classifying adolescents by stability and change in being close to a nonresident father over time also showed no significant differences between adolescents who gained a

stepfather and those who did not. This classification further illustrates that the majority of adolescents remained fairly stable in their reports of being close to a nonresident father, with a somewhat higher percentage remaining not close to their father (roughly half) than remaining close (around one third). For those who did change, almost as many became closer to their nonresident fathers as experienced a decline.

Regression results in Table 2, which include control variables, reinforce these findings. Models predicting changes in closeness and changes in being close replicate results in Table 1. The third regression shows no difference in the likelihood of a decline in being close to the nonresident father compared to remaining close to him between adolescents who experienced the addition of a stepfather (whether married or not) and adolescents whose mothers remained single.

Results from models examining adolescents' contact with nonresident fathers provided similar findings, with no significant differences in levels of contact over time by whether a cohabiting or married stepfather entered the household (tables not shown; all tables referred to but not shown are available upon request). Similarly, none of the models testing whether *closeness* to a married stepfather is associated with changes in the level of closeness to the nonresident father, changes in being close to the nonresident father, or changes in the frequency of contact with the nonresident father revealed a significant association (tables not shown). Thus, adolescents who developed a close relationship with the stepfather were not more (or less) likely to experience a disruption in ties to their nonresident fathers than adolescents who did not become close to their stepfathers.

How Do Adolescent-Mother Relationships Change When Stepfathers Enter?

Unlike the results for nonresident fathers, there is some evidence that the adolescent-mother bond may be negatively affected when her cohabiting partner enters the household, but not necessarily when she (re)marries. All three groups of adolescents experienced a decline in average levels of closeness to mothers over time (see Table 3). The magnitude of this change was largest for adolescents who experienced the entry of a cohabiting stepfather, but not significantly so. The difference between these adolescents and those whose mothers remained single, however, did approach significance at $p = .06$.

The difference between adolescents who acquired a cohabiting stepfather and those whose mothers remained single did reach significance when change was measured as being close to the mother or not. Despite a larger percentage of adolescents in the former group reporting that they were close to their mother at time 1 (98% vs. 91%), they were more likely to report no longer feeling close to her after she cohabited with a partner (83%) than adolescents whose mothers remained single (89%), an overall drop of 15% versus only 2%. Adolescents who acquired a married stepfather, however, did not differ from adolescents whose mothers remained single in their reports of being close to their mother over time. The difference between adolescents who gained a married stepfather and those who gained a cohabiting stepfather approached ($p = .08$), but did not reach, statistical significance, a likely result of the relatively smaller sizes of these two groups.

Classifying adolescents by stability and change in being close to their mothers also revealed a significant difference between the groups. The dominant pattern was that most adolescents, over 80%, were close to their mothers and remained so over time. The main difference between the groups was that a greater percentage of adolescents who acquired a cohabiting stepfather reported that they were no longer close to their mother at time 2 (16%) compared with adolescents whose mothers married (9%) or remained single (6%). They were also less likely to report becoming close to her during this time period, 1% versus 6% and 4%, respectively.

The regression results in Table 4 replicate these findings, which are unaffected by the addition of controls. What stands out across the three different ways of assessing change in closeness to mothers is the greater likelihood of experiencing a drop in closeness to mothers among adolescents whose mothers began cohabiting with a partner compared with adolescents whose mothers remained single.

Is the Quality of Nonresident Father-Adolescent Ties or Mother-Adolescent Ties Before Mother's Remarriage Associated With Developing Close Ties to Stepfathers?

Neither closeness to a nonresident father nor frequent contact with him at time 1 were associated with adolescent reports of closeness to the stepfather at time 2 (tables not shown). This was true regardless of whether closeness to the nonresident father or stepfather was measured as a dichotomous variable or not. As Table 5 reveals, however, closeness to the mother before the stepfather's entrance into the household was strongly associated with adolescent reports of closeness to the stepfather at time 2, suggesting that a close mother-adolescent bond enhances the development of close ties to stepfathers. Alternative models (e.g., dichotomizing closeness to the mother or the stepfather; including closeness to, and contact with, nonresident fathers in the model) yielded similar results.

DISCUSSION

Prior research conducted largely on cross-sectional data offered mixed findings regarding whether mother's remarriage negatively affects nonresident father involvement. Results from this longitudinal study suggest that the entrance of a stepfather, whether married to the mother or not, does not affect adolescent closeness to, or contact with, nonresident fathers. Even adolescents who developed a close bond with a stepfather after the mother's marriage to him did not appear to be more likely to experience a decline in nonresident father involvement. Although it may be difficult for many adolescents to maintain close ties to nonresident fathers and stepfathers, as evidenced by the large percentage of adolescents who reported not being close to each of them (over half for nonresident fathers and 45% for stepfathers; see also King, 2006), this likely results from the difficulties entailed in maintaining ties with each father individually rather than from stepfather entry negatively influencing nonresident fathers-child ties. These findings suggest little cause for concern over stepfamily formation on father-child ties, and provide little support for stress perspectives that emphasize negative effects of mother's repartnering. Future theory development on stepfamily dynamics would benefit from greater focus on potential benefits, or at least more benign influences, such as the ability of nonresident fathers and stepfathers to support each other's ties to the child or at least not interfere with them (Marsiglio, 2004). Both theory and research would benefit from more emphasis on the importance of family transitions over static family structure comparisons for understanding how individuals are influenced by changes in family structure (Demo, Aquilino, & Fine, 2005).

In contrast to results for nonresident fathers, this study finds evidence that the adolescent-mother bond may be negatively affected when mothers cohabit, but not necessarily when they (re)marry. Although most adolescents remained close to their mothers over time, a greater percentage of adolescents who acquired a cohabiting stepfather reported that they no longer felt close to their mother after he entered the household than adolescents whose mothers remarried or remained single. These results are also consistent with Buchanan et al.'s (1996) study that reported similarly good relationships between adolescents and their resident mothers when the mother was remarried or had no new partner, but more troubled relationships when the mother was involved in new relationships that did not involve remarriage. These results provide some limited support for stress perspectives that suggest repartnering can have negative effects on mother-child relationships, at least when repartnering involves cohabitation.

Given the importance of positive mother-child ties for child well-being and the rise of cohabiting stepfamilies, the finding that mother-adolescent ties may be weakened by the entrance of a cohabiting stepfather raises some concern and suggests a need to better understand and identify the mechanisms underlying these patterns. For example, future research should consider to what extent more troubled mother-child relationships in cohabiting stepfamilies reflect cohabiting stepfathers bringing fewer resources into the household, or less committed or tension-filled family relationships. Weaker mother-adolescent ties in cohabiting stepfamilies may also reflect variation in the length of time that mothers and adolescents have known the stepfather, both before and after his entry into the household. In remarried stepfamilies, the mother-stepfather relationship may be of longer duration and more settled, and children may have had more time to accept and adjust to the stepfather's presence in the family (Buchanan et al., 1996). The current study is limited in not being able to account for the exact timing of stepfather entry or how long the mother and adolescent knew the stepfather before he joined the household.

Just as there was no evidence that the entrance of a stepfather negatively influences nonresident father-child relationships, results provide no evidence that the relationship adolescents develop with stepfathers depends on the prior involvement of the nonresident father. The mother-adolescent bond, however, appears to be strongly associated with the development of close ties to married stepfathers. Consistent with cross-sectional evidence from prior research (e.g., King, 2006), adolescents who were closer to their mothers were more likely to develop close ties to a new stepfather, suggesting that a close mother-child bond facilitates the stepfather-child relationship. Indeed, given the large variability in closeness to stepfathers, this study suggests that the strength of the mother-child bond prior to remarriage may be an especially important factor that sets the stage for whether adolescents develop close ties to a stepfather after he joins the household, and in turn, go on to benefit in terms of better child outcomes associated with having close ties to both mothers and stepfathers. This finding is contrary to concerns that children who are close to their mothers will feel threatened or displaced by a new stepfather, leading to difficulties in their relationship with him (Thomson et al., 2001). Future research should explore the mechanisms underlying these patterns as well. Neither this study nor prior research can rule out the possibility of child effects playing a significant role here. It may be that positive child characteristics (e.g., having a warm personality) contribute to the quality of all the child's relationships.

Future research should also examine the development of ties to cohabiting stepfathers, which this study was unable to do. The closeness of the mother-child bond may be more strongly associated with the development of close ties to married stepfathers than cohabiting stepfathers if mothers are more likely to foster such ties in the context of marriage if they view partner commitment as being higher than in a less certain cohabiting relationship (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Adolescents may also be less receptive to a mother's attempt to integrate a cohabiting partner if the mother-child bond is weakened by his entry.

It should be noted that the present study focuses on adolescents and examines changes in parent-child relationships and the development of ties to stepfathers close to the time of the transition, within one year of the stepfather's entrance to living in the household. Results from this study may not be generalizable to younger children, and further changes in the mother-child, nonresident father-child, and stepfather-child relationship may occur with the passage of time. For example, examining relationships shortly after the mother's repartnering among a sample of adolescents may promote conditions that make it more likely to find negative effects of this repartnering on the mother-child relationship given prior studies suggesting that a mother's parenting is most impaired in the early stages of

marital transitions and stabilizes the least when stepfamilies are formed in adolescence (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2000).

Influences of a mother's repartnering on the nonresident father-child relationship may also be more likely to occur closer to the transition, although given that in the case of adolescents, a number of years have passed on average since the nonresident father left the household, the nonresident father-child relationship may be firmly established by this point and more resistant to experiencing changes due to other events. Consistent with this premise, a recent study examining nonresident father contact trajectories found that the majority of nonresident fathers were consistently either highly involved or rarely involved in their children's lives over the course of their childhood (Cheadle, Amato, & King, in press).

With regard to stepfather-child relationships, adolescence is thought to be a difficult time to form a new stepfamily and an attachment to a stepfather (Bray & Easling, 2005), indicating that the development of ties to stepfathers may differ for younger children. In addition, the adolescents in the current study are likely still adjusting to the presence of the stepfather and further changes in this relationship will likely occur. Prior research is mixed on how the stepfather-stepchild relationship changes over time with some suggesting improvement, others suggesting stability, and still others suggesting that the relationship deteriorates (Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Stewart, 2007).

Future research would benefit from considering children of all ages and following relationships over time. Given the negative association found in this study between the entrance of a cohabiting stepfather and a decline in an adolescent's closeness to the mother, a fruitful area of research would be to examine whether this relationship recovers with the passage of time and how it is affected by further transitions such as the dissolution of the cohabiting relationship or its progression into marriage. Future research should also examine other factors that may be associated with family structure change and changing family relationships, such as changing economic circumstances or residential mobility. This study explained little of the variance in changing closeness to biological parents, suggesting the need to consider other important factors.

The modest number of adolescents who acquired a cohabiting or married stepfather precluded an examination of more complex family patterns and interactions. For example, some research suggests that adapting to stepfamily life is more difficult for girls than boys (Stewart, 2007). Additional models predicting changes in closeness to each biological parent that included an interaction term between adolescent gender and family structure trajectory were tested, but the interactions were not significant, suggesting patterns were similar for boys and girls. A more definitive test, however, requires a larger sample.

The modest sample of stepfamilies also limits the ability to detect smaller group differences that may exist in the population. At the same time, more confidence can be put in the significant differences that were found. Changes in closeness to parents can be reasonably measured in different ways, and several alternative specifications were purposively tested in this study to check the robustness of results. The fairly consistent results across these alternative specifications gives further confidence in study findings and conclusions.

An increasing number of U.S. children are growing up apart from their biological fathers and experiencing transitions to stepfamily living. Using relatively recent and nationally representative data, this study makes important contributions toward understanding how the entrance of a stepfather into an adolescent's household influences ties between adolescents and their biological parents, and how ties to biological parents influence the development of ties to a new stepfather. Going beyond the cross-sectional approach of most prior work, this longitudinal study suggests that the entrance of a stepfather has little consequence for

adolescent's ongoing relationships with their nonresident fathers, at least within the first year of stepfather entry. Adolescent's closeness toward their mothers, however, appears more likely to decline when a cohabiting stepfather enters the household, but not necessarily if a married stepfather joins the family. Adolescents also appear to be more likely to develop close ties to married stepfathers when they have closer ties to their mothers before the stepfather enters the household; close ties to nonresident fathers had no association with the development of close ties to stepfathers.

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Table 1

Adolescents' Closeness to Nonresident Biological Fathers Over Time by Family Structure Trajectory

	Married Stepfather Enters Household (<i>n</i> = 107)	Cohabiting Stepfather Enters Household (<i>n</i> = 82)	Stable Single Mother (<i>n</i> = 1564)
Closeness ^a , <i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>)			
time 1	3.43 (.15)	3.07 (.17)	3.14 (.06)
time 2	3.25 (.17)	2.93 (.17)	3.08 (.06)
Change (t2-t1)	– .18 _a (.14)	– .14 _a (.10)	– .06 _a (.04)
Close ^b , %			
time 1	44	43	43
time 2	45	36	42
Change (t2-t1)	1 _a	– 7 _a	– 1 _a
Closeness group ^c , %			
Remain close	33	32	32
Remain not close	43	52	47
Increase to close	12	5	10
Decline to not close	11	12	11
<i>F</i> ^d = .42			

Note: All values are weighted except *n*. Mean levels of change across a row that share subscripts do not significantly differ from one another at $p < .05$.

^a Range from 1 (*not at all close*) to 5 (*extremely close*).

^b Scores of 4 (*quite close*) or 5 (*extremely close*).

^c Created from the crosstabulation of close at wave 1 and close at wave 2, where close = *quite* or *extremely* (scores of 4 or 5) and not close = *not at all*, *not very*, or *somewhat* (scores of 1, 2 or 3).

^d Design-based *F*.

Table 2

Unstandardized Coefficients From Regressions Predicting Changes in Adolescents' Closeness to Nonresident Biological Fathers by Family Structure Trajectory

Predictor	Change in Closeness ^a		Change in Being Close ^b		Decline to Not Close (vs. Remain Close) ^c	
	B	SE B	B	SE B	B	SE B
Married stepfather ^d	-.16 _a	.14	.01 _a	.06	-.09 _a	.47
Cohabiting stepfather ^d	-.07 _a	.12	-.06 _a	.06	.12 _a	.58
Adolescent age	.01	.02	-.01	.01	.11	.07
Male adolescent	.02	.06	-.01	.03	-.36	.24
Black (vs. White)	-.03	.08	-.06	.03	-.12	.30
Hispanic (vs. White)	-.15	.14	-.07	.05	.46	.39
Other (vs. White)	-.19	.28	-.11	.13	1.17*	.55
Immigrant	.04	.12	.09	.05	-.29	.36
Marital birth	-.02	.10	-.04	.04	-.09	.28
Income	.14*	.06	.04	.02	-.23	.18
Mother education	-.04	.02	-.01	.01	.09	.10
Father education	.02	.02	.01	.01	-.14	.09
Years since lived with father	-.01	.01	-.01	.01	.08**	.02
Child support paid	-.16	.08	-.03	.03	-.21	.30
R ²		.02		.01		
F ^e		.77		.98		4.05***

Note: All values are weighted. Coefficients within a column that share subscripts do not significantly differ from one another at $p < .05$. $N = 1753$.

^a Ordinary least-squares regression; Wave 2 closeness (1 to 5) - wave 1 closeness (1 to 5), where 1 = *not at all close* and 5 = *extremely close*.

^b Ordinary least-squares regression; Wave 2 close (0, 1) - wave 1 close (0, 1), where 0 = *not at all*, *not very*, or *somewhat close* and 1 = *quite or extremely close*.

^c Multinomial logistic regression, where decline to not close = *quite or extremely close* at W1 but *not at all*, *not very*, or *somewhat close* at W2, and remain close = *quite or extremely close* at W1 and W2.

^d Omitted category is stable single mother.

^e Design-based *F*.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

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Table 3

Adolescents' Closeness to Biological Mothers Over Time by Family Structure Trajectory

	Married Stepfather Enters Household (<i>n</i> = 107)	Cohabiting Stepfather Enters Household (<i>n</i> = 82)	Stable Single Mother (<i>n</i> = 1564)
Closeness ^a , <i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>)			
time 1	4.67 (.07)	4.79 (.05)	4.62 (.03)
time 2	4.53 (.07)	4.48 (.12)	4.50 (.03)
Change (t2-t1)	– .14 _a (.07)	– .31 _(a) (.10)	– .12 _(a) (.02)
Close ^b , %			
time 1	92	98	91
time 2	90	83	89
Change (t2-t1)	–2 _{(a)b}	–15 _(a)	– 2 _b
Closeness group ^c , %			
Remain close	83	82	85
Remain not close	1	1	5
Increase to close	6	1	4
Decline to not close	9	16	6
<i>F</i> ^d = 3.38**			

Note: All values are weighted except *n*. Mean levels of change across a row that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .05$. Mean levels of change across a row that share subscripts within parentheses differ at $p < .10$.

^aRange from 1 (*not at all close*) to 5 (*extremely close*).

^bScores of 4 (*quite close*) or 5 (*extremely close*).

^cCreated from the crosstabulation of close at wave 1 and close at wave 2, where close = *quite* or *extremely* (scores of 4 or 5) and not close = *not at all*, *not very*, or *somewhat* (scores of 1, 2 or 3).

^dDesign-based *F*.

**
 $p < .01$.

Table 4

Unstandardized Coefficients From Regressions Predicting Changes in Adolescents' Closeness to Biological Mothers by Family Structure Trajectory

Predictor	Change in Closeness ^a		Change in Being Close ^b		Decline to Not Close (vs. Remain Close) ^c	
	B	SE B	B	SE B	B	SE B
Married stepfather ^d	.01 _a	.08	.01 _(a)	.05	.20 _a	.45
Cohabiting stepfather ^d	-.19 _a +	.10	-.13 _(a) *	.06	1.12 _a **	.36
Adolescent age	.02	.01	.01 *	.01	-.02	.09
Male adolescent	.01	.04	-.01	.02	-.08	.28
Black (vs. White)	.07	.06	.04	.02	.46	.31
Hispanic (vs. White)	.13	.11	.03	.04	-.26	.48
Other (vs. White)	-.07	.15	-.05	.08	.96	.54
Immigrant	-.01	.09	-.02	.04	-.08	.44
Marital birth	-.01	.05	.01	.02	-.25	.25
Income	-.10 _a **	.03	-.04 *	.01	.58 _a ***	.15
Mother education	.01	.02	.01	.01	-.02	.09
Father education	.01	.02	.01	.01	-.28 *	.12
Years since lived with father	-.01	.01	-.01	.01	.04	.03
Child support paid	.04	.05	-.01	.02	.14	.27
R ²		.02		.03		
F ^e		1.88 *		2.17 *		2.99 ***

Note: All values are weighted. Coefficients within a column that share subscripts do not significantly differ from one another at $p < .05$. Coefficients within a column that share subscripts within parentheses differ at $p < .10$. $N = 1753$.

^a Ordinary least-squares regression; Wave 2 closeness (1 to 5) - wave 1 closeness (1 to 5), where 1 = not at all close and 5 = extremely close.

^b Ordinary least-squares regression; Wave 2 close (0, 1) - wave 1 close (0, 1), where 0 = not at all, not very, or somewhat close and 1 = quite or extremely close.

^c Multinomial logistic regression, where decline to not close = quite or extremely close at W1 but not at all, not very, or somewhat close at W2, and remain close = quite or extremely close at W1 and W2.

^d Omitted category is stable single mother.

^e Design-based *F*.

+ *p* = .06.

* *p* < .05.

** *p* < .01.

*** *p* < .001.

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Table 5

Unstandardized Coefficients From Regressions Predicting Adolescents' Closeness to Married Stepfathers After (Re)Marriage by Closeness to Resident Mothers Prior to (Re)Marriage

Predictor	Closeness to Married Stepfather ^a	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>
Closeness to mother ^b	.76***	.18
Adolescent age	-.05	.06
Male adolescent	-.09	.28
Black (vs. White)	-.53*	.21
Hispanic (vs. White)	-.43	.27
Other (vs. White)	-.37	.35
Immigrant	-.15	.30
Marital birth	-.31	.32
Income	.05	.14
Mother education	.14	.09
Years since lived with father	-.05*	.02
Child support paid	-.50*	.24
<i>R</i> ²		.29
<i>F</i> ^c		5.19***

Note: All values are weighted. *N* = 107.

^aWave 2 closeness (1 to 5).

^bWave 1 closeness (1 to 5).

^cDesign-based *F*.

* *p* < .05.

** *p* < .01.

*** *p* < .001.