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In most states, stepparents have little or no legal decision-making authority. Stepchildren do not receive the legal recognition as dependents that triggers a safety net in the event of death or divorce, nor do former stepparents have the legal right to visitation or custody. However, the lack of legal recognition of the stepparent role may not reflect the reality of contemporary stepfamilies. This article examines stepfamily functioning with the aim of creating a new policy orientation. We draw on both the National Survey of Families and Households and an in-depth study of 27 stepfamilies to investigate the everyday functioning of stepparents with regard to caregiving tasks, discipline, distribution of economic resources, attitudes toward legal status, and perception of parental roles. The findings support a new policy initiative that would legally recognize stepparents as de facto parents for a variety of purposes.

Stepparents De Facto Parents or Legal Strangers?

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Stepparents are, generally speaking, legal strangers to their stepchildren (Mahoney, 1995). State laws give almost no recognition to the parental role of residential stepparents. They have no legal or decision-making authority in day care centers, schools, or other critical areas of their stepchildren's lives. Nor in most states are they required to support their stepchildren (Mason & Mauldon, 1996). Dependent benefits, including medical insurance and death benefits, sometimes exclude stepchildren. Similarly, in the event of death or divorce, there is no recognition of inheritance, visitation, or custody rights for stepparents; nor is there any obligation of child support or continuation of dependent benefits. Federal law goes further than state law in recognizing the dependency of stepchildren in determining benefits, including social security survivor benefits. Nev-

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ertheless, federal policies are inconsistent, and most fall short of fully recognizing the stepparent/stepchild relationship (Mason & Simon, 1995). These legal shortcomings may leave stepchildren without a safety net and, in the event of divorce, with no access to their stepparent (Mason & Mauldon, 1996).

The absence of a legal status for stepparents has historical origins deeply imbedded in the issue of inheritance. Until the 19th century, only biological parentage within a marriage created legal parental rights and obligations, and only biological children would inherit (absent a will to the contrary). It was the issue of inheritance that blocked the possibility of legal adoption, which was not an option in this country until the second half of the 19th century (Grossberg, 1985).

Until recently, death and not divorce was the cause of most stepfamilies. The issue of who was the guardian of the estate and of the child was critical among the propertied classes, where there were concerns that a stepparent could gain these rights (Mason, 1994). Modern stepfamilies are most often formed following a divorce rather than a death, and we now allow inheritance from nonbiological parents through adoption, yet we have not reviewed our legal assumptions regarding stepparents. Although the rights and obligations of biological parents, particularly unwed fathers, have been greatly expanded in recent years (Mason, 1994), stepparents have received almost no attention from policy makers. Does stepfamily functioning reflect the role of *legal stranger*, the term used by many courts? Does this designation hinder the functioning of stepfamilies? Does it further the best interests of the children or of the stepparent in the event of the dissolution of the family by divorce or death? What do stepparents and their spouses want with regard to legal protection?

We address these questions by drawing on the literature and our own data analysis. Following this, we propose a new policy initiative aimed at providing stepparents with a legal status, that of *de facto* parents, which we believe will better fit the reality of stepfamily functioning and better support stepfamilies.

Until recently, social science has provided us with little guidance for policy reform in this arena. Andrew Cherlin (1978) first noted that stepfamilies suffered from "lack of institutionalization" in 1978, but this work has not been followed by serious attempts to create new models or policy initiatives. More recent studies still find that the public views the stepparent role as ambiguous (Schwebel, Fine, & Renner, 1991) and that stepparents are uncertain about their own roles (Marsiglio, 1992).

Most studies of stepfamilies have focused on psychological functioning. The now-large literature emphasizes the hardships of adjustment and

the emotional complexities of stepfamily life (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Coleman & Ganong, 1990; Keshet 1988; Papernow, 1988; Schwebel et al., 1991; White & Booth, 1985). These findings are complicated by the fact that parenting behavior generally changes over time. Most stepparents enter their new marriages with unrealistic expectations. They envision idealized relationships, perhaps fantasizing about what family life will be like. They may see themselves as the healers who will restore families left in upheaval by divorce (Papernow, 1988). The reality, as has been chronicled by the numerous studies of stepfamily dynamics, is very different. Frustration will set in as the "healer" discovers that good intentions often get short-circuited in an inherently difficult situation. It is only with patience and hard work that functional family relationships can be developed. Doing so seems to require the rejection of preconceived notions of family functioning in lieu of innovative compromise (Keshet, 1988; Papernow, 1988).

Although there is general recognition that the stepparent role is different than the role of a biological parent, there has been little progress in reconceptualizing this role or discussion about the public policy desirability of doing so (Gamache, 1997). Fine (1994) suggested considering the English model, where stepparents may apply for parental rights without actually resorting to adoption. He qualified this suggestion with the caution that more research was required to determine the feasibility of such a scheme. A few scholars have written about the issues of support obligations (Riley, 1984) and the lack of recognition given to stepparents in custody proceedings (Silverman, 1992), but there have been few advances in promoting a new legal model.

The evidence on which to suggest a legal reconceptualization of the role of stepparents has grown in recent years. A major concern of public policy is the economic support of children. The stepfamily literature reveals little about how income and other resources are shared during second marriages (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994). Although remarriage restores family income to nuclear family levels, economic well-being plunges drastically when a remarriage ends in divorce (Bachrach, 1983; Mason & Mauldon, 1996), an event more common than in first marriages (Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988).

There is evidence that existing stepfamily policy does not match public attitudes. Ganong, Coleman, and Mistina (1995) found widespread support for the notion that residential stepparents are obliged to support their stepchildren. In the event of the dissolution of the stepfamily, there is a perception of continuing obligation but less so than for biological parents. Interestingly, this perception does not reflect the actual laws in most

states, which do not require that stepparents provide support in an intact marriage or in the event of divorce.

Another type of economic contribution that stepparents may make to the family is in the form of dependent benefits. Mason and Simon (1995) explore the complex world of medical insurance and federal and state dependent-stepchildren benefits, but their major finding is the state of confusion and contradiction that characterizes eligibility requirements. Moreover, most of these benefits are terminated summarily in the event of divorce or death, which is not the case with biological families.

Another major public policy concern is the strengthening of families. Currently, the law gives no recognition to the parenting performed by stepparents: They have no authority in the child's world; in most states, they cannot legally sign a field trip permission slip or authorize teeth cleaning. Studies of parental caregiving for the most part have focused on rule setting and enforcement. We know from these studies that the biological parent, particularly the mother, is more likely to take the lead in rule setting and discipline, at least in the beginning (Heatherington & Clingempeel, 1992). One study found that stepparents were actively engaged in child rearing and became increasingly involved over a 4-year period (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). The literature does not, however, reveal much about the allocation of specific caregiving tasks, such as helping with homework or providing transportation. Finally, there has been little research on the attitudes of stepparents and their spouses about stepparents' legal rights or obligations. As with all families, legal issues are more likely to assume prominence in times of family crises such as divorce or death. Still, attitudes toward the everyday issues of legal authority and support obligations have been largely overlooked, as have stepparents' attitudes toward adoption and continued access to stepchildren in the event of divorce.

The purpose of this article is threefold. First, we present new findings that illuminate the gap between the legal conception of stepparents as strangers and the actual role that residential stepparents play, as well as their understanding of that role. Our study is directed particularly at hitherto ignored issues. These include an examination of everyday parenting tasks such as helping with homework, transporting children, giving advice, and administering discipline. We also look at how stepfamilies allocate their resources, determine which parent provides children with medical and other benefits, and decide which parent declares children dependents for income tax purposes. Second, we query stepparents about their knowledge of legal rights and what concerns they may have about

them. These findings focus on questions of economic support, adoption, visitation in case of divorce, and authority in the public realm. Third, based on the results of this study and others, we evaluate the inadequacies of the current legal-stranger model and present a new legal model for consideration, a *de facto* parent model.

METHOD

Two sources of data are employed for this study. The first source is an in-depth qualitative study of 27 stepfamilies with minor children, and the second is the first wave of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). The NSFH provides quantitative measures of behaviors and attitudes from a nationally representative sample. Our in-depth interviews offer rich qualitative data not available in a large sample survey.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

We conducted in-depth interviews with 27 married couples in which at least one partner had children from a former relationship. We interviewed only married couples because they have a legal relationship. Subjects were recruited using convenience and snowball techniques. Husbands and wives were interviewed separately; interviews were semistructured, including questions about parental involvement in caregiving activities and discipline, the financial dependence of the stepchild(ren) on their stepparent, and knowledge of the legal rights and responsibilities of stepparents. Interviewers encouraged participants to respond to the open-ended questions with examples. Respondents were also queried about demographic information. Interviews lasted from 1 to 3 hours and were tape-recorded.

DESCRIPTION OF IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW SAMPLE

All but three of the study couples had dependent children who were still living in their home at the time of the interviews. The children of the remaining three couples had left home recently. Of the 54 participants, 42 (78%) were Caucasian. The largest number of participants (20; 37% of sample) were professionals (lawyers, professors, psychologists). The second-largest group (15; 28%) worked in other white-collar jobs. There were also four business owners, two blue-collar workers, four retirees, and three students. The remaining six respondents (10%) were not working by

choice. The ages of the participants varied from 29 to 76, with a median age of 45. The children of the respondents ranged widely in age, with the youngest child 6 months and the oldest children grown and living independently. In 16 of the couples (59%), the residential stepparent was the father. In California, joint custody is relatively common. As a result, many of the children of the couples interviewed were involved in joint custody arrangements but were living at least half of the time in the family interviewed.

NSFH

The NSFH is a national sample survey of American adults 19 and older (Sweet et al., 1988). In 1987 and 1988, 13,008 respondents were interviewed. These include a main sample of 9,643 respondents plus an oversample of minorities, newlyweds, single parents, individual parents in stepparent families, and individuals in cohabiting unions. Case weights supplied with the NSFH are used so the data constitute a nationally representative sample.

The NSFH contains numerous items on parenting attitudes and behavior. We report percentages based on stepparents' responses; elsewhere, we contrast the responses of biological and stepparents. Questions asked only of stepparents have sample sizes ranging from 1,038 to 1,050; items directed to both step- and biological parents have sample sizes ranging from 2,228 to 2,346, with about 32% hailing from stepfamilies. Supplementary analyses revealed that results were not an artifact of ethnicity, education, or respondent age.

FINDINGS: PARENTAL ACTIVITIES

NSFH

The NSFH data indicate that stepfamilies function very much like biological families on important parental caregiving tasks such as helping with homework and having private talks with children. About 43% of parents in both biological and stepfamilies said they frequently had private talks with their children. As for helping with homework, 51% of parents in biological families said they frequently helped with homework, as compared to 48% of those in stepfamilies.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Our in-depth interviews support the NSFH results and offer insight into the small differences between biological families and stepfamilies. On average, stepparents and biological parents put in a similar number of hours per week on parental tasks such as transporting children (3.0 hours for stepparents, 3.0 for biological parents) and helping with homework (2.6 hours for stepparents, 3.0 for biological parents). This and other small disparities may have more to do with the exigencies of everyday life than with a differentiation of the parent and stepparent roles. For transportation issues, it is largely a question of the parents' work schedules. As one stepfather commented, "Getting these kids out in the morning is a shared business. My wife usually makes breakfast, but I gather them together and drive them to school on my way to work." Help with homework was often provided by the parent who was considered more knowledgeable, something that could change over time. One stepfather noted, "When they were in grade school [my wife] did most of it. Now that [my stepdaughter] is doing algebra, she comes to me, I guess because I do it in my work."

FINDINGS: DISCIPLINE AND ADVICE

NSFH

The NSFH data suggest that discipline is a complex and seemingly contradictory topic for stepfamilies. About 66% stated that raising stepchildren was hard because they are used to different rules. On the other hand, 61% said it was just as easy to discipline stepchildren as biological children.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

There is greater role differentiation in the establishment and enforcement of rules than in other parenting tasks. Both parents are about as likely to participate in setting rules for the children as the biological parent alone. In 13 families, both parents set the rules, and in 10 families, only the biological parent did so. Both parents are also likely to enforce the rules, with biological parents only slightly more apt to do so. However, stepparents by themselves are unlikely to be the chief rule makers or the chief enforcers. This occurred in only two families.

Another instance of role differentiation concerns advice seeking. Children are far more likely to turn to their biological mother than their stepparent or their biological father (in 12 families, the children sought the advice of their biological mother first). There is, however, a qualitative difference based on the advice sought. Stepparents are often considered as specialists, looked to for specific advice on academic subjects such as math or on personal matters in which the gender of the stepparent is important. As one stepfather put it, "Just last year, when she started going to dances, she started asking me about what guys might be thinking, like, when they just hang out against the wall."

FINDINGS: PERCEPTION OF PARENTAL ROLE

Although it is useful to understand how parental tasks are allocated in stepfamilies, it is even more important to ascertain whether the stepparents consider themselves to be actual parents.

NSFH

The majority of NSFH stepparents (57%) believe it is false to state that "stepparents don't have the full responsibility of being a parent." Moreover, one half (50%) believe that stepchildren are just as satisfying as biological children.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

We asked stepparents and their spouses if the stepparent is considered a parental figure. (We devised this question wording carefully: We did not ask if stepparents considered themselves the equivalent of the biological parents). Strikingly, both partners in all but three stepfamilies interviewed considered the stepparent to be a parental figure. In two of the three families where this was not the case, the couple was engaged in a bitter dispute with an ex-wife. Only three of the stepparents qualified their parental status with a caveat about not taking the place of the other biological parent. As one stepmother put it, "When they come back from their mom's on Sunday night, I want to cry. They treat me different[ly]. They want me to know I am not their real mom."

FINDINGS: ECONOMIC ARRANGEMENTS

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

The NSFH lacks data on the management and sharing of resources within families, but our in-depth interviews allow us to address this topic. The majority of families in our sample (15) are one-pot families. For most, this means that all the income brought in by either spouse is put into a common pool from which all family expenses are paid. In some cases, this arrangement is not so straightforward. A few families among the 15 offer modified versions of the one-pot practice: Most common is the biological parent who receives child support from an ex-spouse and keeps it separately for some of the expenses of that child, or the stepparent who pays out support money for a nonresident child before he or she deposits money in the common pool. Fewer than 30% of our one-pot stepfamilies receive support from a noncustodial parent, but in all these families, the money is kept separate for that child's expenses. Sometimes, this includes payment for lessons or private schools that the family could not otherwise afford. One mother said,

I don't have a separate account. We do have a joint second checking account, but it's where I deposit her child support checks. That money is just saved up, and I pay school tuition with that, and so we don't use that money for anything else, but it's still a joint account.

Among the separate pot families, the fact that a stepparent maintains a separate pot by no means indicates that he or she is not helping to support the stepchild. No matter how much is held back as separate, all families share common household expenses. One father, whose wife was the stepmother and the secondary earner, described their system:

We've set up a household budget, and we've allocated a share of how much each other pays toward the budget determined by what share each of us—I don't know how to describe this—but what share each of us make proportionate with our income.

The arrangements dealing with medical benefits are far more complex. In the first place, employee-based medical plans differ widely with regard to who is considered a dependent child. In most cases, residential stepchildren are covered (Mason & Simon, 1995). When stepchildren are

covered, expediency appears to be the greatest decision maker. Children receive medical benefits from whichever parent has the more generous plan, or any plan at all. Sometimes, it is the noncustodial parent who offers this advantage, and in one case, it was the cohabiting girlfriend of the noncustodial parent whose plan somehow included the nonresidential children of her partner. Still, a number of stepchildren have currently or at some point in the past been considered dependents of their stepparents for these purposes.

Expediency may also determine who declares children as dependents for income tax purposes. Most trade off yearly with noncustodial parents. This may reflect a settlement agreement or the fact that joint custody is common in California.

FINDINGS: LEGAL STATUS

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

The NSFH does not address legal issues or questions relating to the stepparents' status with regard to outside institutions, such as the children's schools. In our interviews, we queried respondents about the legal rights and responsibilities of stepparents and asked them what they thought law and society could do to support them better. Questions about adoption were also asked of both spouses. Finally, the subject of whether the stepparent would want to pursue contact in the event of divorce or the death of the biological parent was addressed.

Not surprisingly, stepparents and biological parents, even those who are lawyers, were generally unclear about the legal rights and responsibilities of stepparents, although the great majority realized there were not many. None of them said legal considerations played a significant role in their decision to marry, although a few had discussed the issue. In response to what the law could do to improve their current situation, there were three patterns. A large group believed stepparents should have more authority with regard to the outside world: the right, for instance, to be involved in school conferences or to authorize legal permission. One biological father, engaged in an ongoing custody battle with his ex-wife, said, "It would empower my [current] wife to be considered as a parent by the school and by the courts." A second group called for more public awareness and education in the schools about the situation of stepfamilies and/or support and counseling for stepfamilies. A third group believed that their problems were their own and that the law could do nothing to help.

As to the specific question of whether the stepparent would like to continue contact with the stepchild in the event of divorce or death, the almost universal response was yes. Explanations of this sentiment varied considerably. One position was represented by the stepfather who said, half jokingly, that if he and his wife were to separate, he would want his stepson to live with him. In this case, the stepfather had known the teenage son from the time he was 2 years old. On the other end of the continuum was the stepfather who said that if the couple were to divorce, he would like to continue to see the children, but that the reality was that he would probably leave the area, making future contact difficult. That couple had been together for only about a year. Other stepparents pointed to the wishes of the stepchildren as determining the extent of contact to be maintained if the marriage ended. Only one stepparent indicated that she would not want to continue contact.

In contrast to the almost unanimous wish for continued contact with stepchildren, no stepparent wanted primary custody in the event of a divorce. However, most said they would consider it if their spouse died. Almost all stepparents qualified this response by referring to the nonresident biological parent. In only one case would both spouses definitely want the stepparent to seek custody of the stepchild in the event of the death of the biological parent. This couple had a mutual biological child, while the nonresident biological parent of the stepchild lived out of the area, and neither he nor his family had frequent contact with that child. In the only case where the other biological parent was deceased, the stepparents did not think the child would agree to it. The child was an older teen and had close relationships with relatives.

As for legal adoption of the stepchild, the majority of stepparents had at least considered the idea but rejected it because of the existence of the nonresident biological parent. In a few cases, there was concern about the name change, particularly where there were grandparents who would be unhappy (possibly because of inheritance issues). "They couldn't get around the name thing," explained one stepfather who had suggested the idea of adoption to his in-laws. Some believed the children would not want it. For others, it simply did not feel like the right decision.

DISCUSSION

It is not a secret that the emotional relationship between the stepparent and stepchild is different from that of a biological parent with his or her child. Less acknowledged or understood are the caregiving and economic

support provided by stepparents. Nevertheless, most stepparents see themselves as parental figures, as do their spouses. The findings of this study, highlighting several important aspects of stepfamily functioning and relationships, have policy implications for strengthening the legal role of stepparents and protecting the interests of their stepchildren.

Stepparents serve as primary caregivers. Our findings show that on important everyday tasks, they perform the yeoman work of helping with homework and shuttling the children back and forth, just as the biological parents do. On the more delicate issues of giving advice and setting and enforcing rules, they are less often the leaders, but they are still active participants. Stepparents also make a major difference to the economic well-being of their stepchildren, given that remarriage generally restores family income to predivorce levels (Bachrach, 1983; Mason & Mauldon, 1996). In contrast, absent biological parents rarely provide much financial assistance. On average, only 25% of all stepfamilies receive some form of child support, and that is likely to be far below what it costs to raise a child (Mason & Mauldon, 1996).

Stepparents may provide other material benefits. Although a minority of children in our in-depth interviews were listed as dependents on their stepparents' medical insurance, this may not always be the case. In times of family breakdown, dependent benefits can be even more critical. Other research has shown there is a great deal of contradiction in how stepchildren are considered for the purposes of dependent benefits. Many federal programs, including social security, recognize the dependent role of stepchildren for benefits, whereas state laws generally do not (Mason & Simon, 1995). State laws also do not recognize stepchildren as natural heirs in the event of the death of the stepparent, nor do most work-related life insurance plans. Neither do work-related medical benefits uniformly recognize stepchildren as dependents.

Our results show that many stepparents and their spouses would like more outside recognition of the stepparent's parental role, and nearly all stepparents express a desire to continue contact with their stepchildren if the marriage should end through death or divorce. Ambivalence about adoption is complex. Most do not consider it a possibility because of the existence of the nonresident biological parent. Others see themselves as lacking full parental status. Also, most stepparents are at least a little wary of yet another divorce. For all these reasons, legal adoption may not seem attractive to most stepparents.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND POLICY INITIATIVES

Stepparents perform parental duties, contribute to the support of their stepchildren, and consider themselves parental figures. Nevertheless, public opinion and state law offer little recognition of what stepparents do for their stepchildren. This lack of recognition can have negative consequences in intact families and even more so in the event of the dissolution of the stepfamily.

In intact stepfamilies, the authority of the stepparent may be seriously undermined in his or her dealings with the outside world. The inability to be recognized as a legitimate parental authority by schools, courts, camps, hospitals, and other institutions that deal with children may impair effective parenting, a concern that was expressed by many stepparents in our in-depth interviews. This lack of legal standing may have repercussions within the family and the extended family as well. Just as we depend on legal marriage to define our roles to the outside world and extended family—and to some extent within the nuclear family as well—the absence of legal recognition can influence public and private perception. The “incomplete institutionalization” of the stepparent role (Cherlin, 1978) is surely affected by the absence of legal recognition. More critically, in the event of the dissolution of the stepfamily, the lack of continuing rights and obligations may jeopardize the well-being of the stepchildren, who have been dependent, economically and otherwise. Unlike divorce in a biological family, divorce in a stepfamily offers no safety net of child support or benefits, and there is no expectation of continuing access to the nonbiological parent. In the event of the death of the stepparent, the stepchild is not considered a natural heir for purposes of inheritance and is not considered an automatic beneficiary on life insurance (Mason & Simon, 1995).

It is time, given the rapid increase of stepfamilies and our growing knowledge about their needs, to reconsider the stepparent/stepchild relationship. One possibility would be to create a new parental category, that of a *de facto* parent, which would legally recognize stepparents as parental authorities but not cut off the rights of nonresident biological parents and not continue indefinitely in the event of divorce. The concept of *de facto* parent is currently used loosely in the law with respect to those caring for children, but it has not taken on full form, with clearly delineated rights and responsibilities. Moreover, there is no consistency in the courts as to its use.

For the purposes of federal and state policy, a *de facto* parent could be treated virtually the same as a biological parent during the marriage. The same rights, obligations, and presumptions would attach vis-à-vis their stepchildren, including the obligation of support. These rights and duties would continue in some form, based on the length of the marriage, following divorce or the death of either the biological or the *de facto* parent. In the event of divorce, the stepparent would have standing to seek custody or visitation, but the stepparent could also be obligated for child support of a limited duration, perhaps half the length of the marriage. This support could extend to medical and other benefits on which the stepchildren rely. On the death of a stepparent, a minor dependent stepchild—but not necessarily an adult stepchild—would be treated like a biological child for purposes of inheritance and benefits.

Creating a *de facto* parent category for stepparents would not invalidate the existing rights and obligations of the biological parent who does not live with the child. Rather, this proposal would empower a stepparent as an additional parent. Multiple parenting is the barrier on which many family law reform schemes have foundered (Bartlett, 1984), including efforts to reformulate the role of stepparents. Working out the details is critical to the acceptance of such a concept. For instance, an important aspect of multiple parenting is legal authority. If stepparents are required to accept support obligations, fairness dictates that they must also be given parental rights. As noted above, a stepparent generally has no legal authority over a stepchild, even to authorize a field trip. If stepparents were given *de facto* status, teachers, doctors, camp directors, the courts, and other important people and institutions in the stepchild's life could look to the stepparent as well as the biological parents for consultation and approval. The parental role of the stepparent would be recognized as normative. When the biological parents have shared legal custody, the law could recognize the parental rights of three parents, rather than two. Although this sounds unusual, in practical terms, it is an accurate reflection of how many families now raise their children.

The model of *de facto* parent could be used for other classes of parental figures, such as long-term cohabitators who are not legally married to the biological parent (but who are referred to as stepparents). These parent figures, however, vary widely in their long-term commitment to the children or to the biological parent, to whom they have no legal tie. For these parent figures, an application process might be appropriate, as well as consent by the biological parent.

CONCLUSION

This study suggests that stepparents see themselves as parental figures, relied on by their stepchildren. Yet, public and legal recognition is ambiguous at best. The lack of legal clarification can have negative effects on the stepparent/stepchild relationship, both during the marriage and in the event of its dissolution. Limited legal recognition is particularly relevant when stepchildren are left with no economic safety net after a divorce. We suggest a new legal conceptualization of stepparents as de facto parents with most of the same rights and obligations as biological parents, but with a limited duration in the event the marriage ends. A new legal status could also promote a more complete social institutionalization of the stepparent role in society.

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