

## IMPACT OF STEPPARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP QUALITY ON ADULT'S PSYCHOLOGICAL AND BEHAVIORAL OUTCOMES

Anjum Afshan<sup>\*1</sup>, Ayesha Naz<sup>2</sup>, Fatima Maqsood<sup>3</sup>, Ayesha Rania<sup>4</sup>

<sup>\*1</sup>Assistant Professor, Head of Psychology Department, Fazaia Bilquis College of Education for Women, PAF Nur Khan Base, Rawalpindi (Affiliated with Air University)

<sup>2,3,4</sup>Student, Psychology Department, Fazaia Bilquis College of Education for Women, PAF Nur Khan Base, Rawalpindi (Affiliated with Air University)

<sup>1</sup>anjumafshan9@gmail.com, <sup>2</sup>ayeshanaz4343@gmail.com, <sup>3</sup>batoolafifa94@gmail.com, <sup>4</sup>ayesharania062@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: \*

Anjum Afshan

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### ABSTRACT

This study focused at how adults who grew up in blended families behaved psychologically and behaviorally in relation to the quality of their relationships with their stepparents. The present study highlighted on how the quality of the step-parent-child bond leads to long-term well-being and adjustment, given the fact that previous research has often highlighted the difficulties related to stepfamily dynamics. The study consisted of 100 individuals (N = 100) who were raised by a stepparent. To evaluate the influence of the step-parent-child relationship quality on psychological and behavioral outcomes, data were analyzed through simple linear regression. Gender disparities were further examined using independent samples t-tests. It is also observed that the quality of the parent-stepchild relationship has predicted psychological well-being significantly ( $p < .001$ ), accounting for about 17% variance. But the quality of the relationship did not have any impact on the behaviors of children ( $p = .49$ ). Moreover, the sex of the stepparents was observed to affect the quality of the relationship between stepparent and child ( $p = .03$ ). It is also observed that stepdaughter's and stepson's psychological well-being does not have much variation ( $p = .324$ ). These findings emphasize that a good emotional tie between stepparent and stepchild can make future psychological well-being better. The findings are very useful in family therapy practices.

**Keywords:** blended families, stepparent-stepchild bond, psychological well-being, adult stepchildren, relationship quality, gender differences, family therapy

### INTRODUCTION

#### Background

A stepfamily forms when one or both persons in a new committed collaboration carry a child or children from history relationships (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Before reaching adulthood, over one-third of all children reside with a stepfamily (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995; Pew Research

Center, 2011). The pervasiveness of stepfamilies is not only high universally but is also regularly increasing as separation rates mount and remarriage transform more common.

Loss of communicate with one parent, reduce in parental support, loss of passionate support, conflict among ex-spouses, and other family transformation may intensify stepfamily stress

(Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991; Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2013; Shafer, Jensen, & Holmes, 2016).

Stepchildren's well-being may be influenced by the quality of family connection, such as stepparent-child, parent-child, and step pair interactions. Children's psychological, communal, and behavioral well-being improves when they see familial relationships as good, obtainable, stable, and protected (Cummings et al., 2006; Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007). Thus, in stepfamily circumstances, children in families with optimistic relationships may feel more secure and supported, whereas those with contradictory family relationships may recognize the transformation to stepfamily life as a consequential loss, cause of stress, and risk to their emotional safety (Cummings et al., 2006; Sheeber, Hops, & Davis, 2001).

As family researchers' concern in stepfamilies grows, interrogations have arisen about elements influencing stepfamily operational and stepfamily members' wellness (Ganong & Coleman, 2018; Ganong, Coleman, & Fine, 2025). A wide scope of favorably ripped subjective emotions and perceptions have been integrated in physical wellness research, displaying the complication of the idea of psychological welfare. The subjective observation of surely experienced emotions or cognitive assessments, including lower actuation affects like 'calm' or 'satisfied' and advanced activation impacts like 'excited' or 'happy', will be suggested to as 'psychological well-being' for the intentions of this evaluation. Life purpose, emotional well-being, positive affect, life gratification, happiness, and hopefulness are some of the ideas of psychological wellness that we include (Boehm & Kubzansky, 2012; Ryff, Singer, & Love, 2004). Higher ranks of favorably observed emotion are supposed by these well-being labels. However, more empirical measures of well-being (such as life meaning) might be connected with neutral or unfavorable emotions that ultimately inspire the creation of good awareness and thoughts in the posterity.

Behavioral effects, in this context, relate to the modifications in behavior that happen as a result of the engagement between a child and their step-

parent, especially the superiority of attachment, emotional regulation, and conflict management within the family systems. These outcomes can have enduring effects on an individual's psychological wellness and overall behavioral inclinations into adulthood. (John Bowlby, 1969; E. Mark Cummings & Patrick T. Davies, 2010; Patricia K. Kerig, 2005).

Studies have frequently demonstrated that children's psychological outcomes, which frequently persist into adulthood, can be greatly embedded by the quality of the relationship among the stepparent and the child (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). The likelihood of futurity behavioral challenges like anxiety, depression, or difficulty forming healthy relationships is reduced in children who have favorable step-parent-child relationships that are noticeable by warmth, consent, and healthy communication. These relationships also incline to foster secure attachments and preferable coping mechanisms in the child (Miller, 2010). On the other hand, nervous or aloof interactions among stepparents and kids can result in psychological problems that show up later in adulthood, such as emotional manage issues, social isolation, and issues with near connections (Bray & Berger, 1993).

Assessing the child's emotional feedback to their stepparent as well as their action in social and familial surroundings are common ways to estimate the behavioural results of stepparent engagement. These consequences are connected to the child's capacity to handle relationships in the future. According to research, offspring who have bad stepparents normally have attachment problems and demonstrate maladaptive behavioural structure as adults, including suspicion and trouble maintaining prolonged relationships (Fowler, 2008). These people may also manifest increased susceptibility to mental health situations as adults, especially anxiety and depression, which are constantly linked to attachment matter developed during premature childhood (Coleman & Ganong, 2004).

### **Problem Statement**

To find out the Influence of Stepparent-Child Relationship Quality on Adult's Psychological and

Behavioral consequences.

### Objectives

The main objectives of the study are as follows:

- 1.To find out the influence of step-parent-child relationship standard on psychological consequences of adults.
- 2.To find out the influence of step-parent-child relationship quality on behavioral consequences of adults.
- 3.To find out gender deviation in step-parent-child relationship merit among adults.
4. To contrast the psychological welfare of adults based on the gender of their step-parent.
- 5.To contrast the behavioral consequences of adults based on the gender of their step-parent.
- 6.To examine the difference in Step Parent-child Relationship Quality based on the gender of the step-parent.

### Hypotheses

**H1:** There will be a substantial impact of step-parent-child relationship quality on psychological consequences among adults.

**H0:** There will be no significant influence of step-parent-child relationship quality on psychological outcomes between adults.

**H2:** There will be a significant influence of step-parent-child relationship quality on behavioral consequences among adults.

**H0:** There will be no substantial impact of step-parent-child relationship quality on behavioral consequences among adults.

**H3:** There will be a substantial gender variation in step-parent-child relationship quality among adults.

**H0:** There will be no substantial gender variation in step-parent-child relationship quality among adults.

**H4:** There will be a substantial difference in psychological welfare among adults raised by step-fathers contrasted to those raised by step-mothers.

**H0:** There will be no significant contrast in psychological welfare among adults elevated by step-fathers contrasted to those raised by step-mothers.

**H5:** There will be a substantial difference in behavioral outcomes among adults elevated by

step-fathers contrasted to those raised by step-mothers.

**H0:** There will be no significant contrast in behavioral outcomes between adults raised by step-fathers compared to those elevated by step-mothers.

**H6:** There will be a substantial difference in Step Parent-child Relationship Quality between adults raised by step-fathers compared to those elevated by step-mothers.

**H0:** There will be no substantial difference in Step Parent-child Relationship Quality between adults raised by step-fathers contrasted to those raised by step-mothers.

### Operational definition

#### Step-parent-child relationship

Stepparent-child relationship quality applies to how adults recall the emotional care, support, security, and control they expert from their stepparent during their first sixteen years of life. (Parker, Tupling, and Brown (1979).

#### Behavioral Outcomes

Behavioral outcomes relate to the observable actions, tendencies, and patterns of behavior that persons show in their daily lives, such as how they react to rules, how they communicate with others, and whether they show indications of aggression, restiveness, or conduct-related difficulties. (Robert Goodman, 1997).

#### Psychological Outcomes

Psychological outcomes refer to a person's comprehensive emotional health, life satisfaction, sense of personal growth, and capability to cope with challenges in routine life. It reflects how positively persons feel about themselves, their relationships, and their cap ability to manage stress. (Carol Ryff (1989).

#### Literature Review

The article A Structured Review of Correlates of Stepparent-Child Relationship Quality from Children's Perspectives: A 10-Year upgrade by Jensen and Zhao (2025) reviews research on what components are linked with the quality of stepparent-child relationships from the child's

purpose of view. The authors updated sooner reviews by examining studies released over the past decade to recognize consistent patterns and key impacts on how children experience their connections with stepparents. They note that stepparent-child relationship quality is middle to understanding stepfamily functioning and is affiliated with other family processes, such as biological parent-child relationships, step couple agreement, and children's psychological, behavioral, and educational outcomes (Jensen & Zhao, 2025).

Jensen, Lippold, Mills-Koonce, and Fosco (2018) examined how the quality of stepfamily connections effects children's emotional and behavioural adjustment. Using longitudinal data on 191 stepchildren, the authors found that good, supportive ties with biological parents were related with fewer emotional and behavioural issues. Positive interactions with stepparents were connected to improvements in children's regulation over time. The research emphasizes the consequence of both biological parent-child and stepparent-child associations in enhancing children's welfare in stepfamily settings. The authors also emphasized that affectionate, personal connections with emotional assist can help lessen both internalizing and externalizing challenges. The longitudinal design adds to the evidence that beneficial stepparent involvement can lead to improved behavioural and emotional outcomes for children as they develop. The report calls for further research into other factors that impact stepfamily functioning and child regulation (Jensen et al., 2018).

The article Psychological Wellbeing: A Systematic Literature Review by Dhanabhakym and Sarath (2023) reviews studies on psychological welfare, which covers general happiness, well-being, pleasant emotions, and emotional health. According to the review, psychological welfare consists of numerous fundamental elements, including healthy connections, feeling in control of one's life, personal development, and experiencing scarce negative feelings. Many studies define psychological well-being as a status in which persons may reach their full potential, work well, and manage with regular life stress. The

authors use many research to illustrate that psychological well-being is crucial for both mental and emotional health. They talk about how welfare is linked to positive life consequences and how researchers define and quantify it in several circumstances. The review emphasizes the complexities of welfare as a topic, arguing that a better awareness can assist guide future study and training in psychology and healthcare. Overall, the paper provides an illuminating assessment of the literature on psychological welfare and identifies areas where additional research is essential. (Dhanabhakym and Sarath, 2023).

### **Methodology and Study Design**

This study will be a quantitative study. The research study will be implemented in two phases: In the first phase, data from a sample of 50 step adults has been gathered for a pilot study to verify the reliability of the scale and the legitimacy of the research problem. Data has been gathered through online as well as physical relationship. Reliability analysis conducted via SPSS yielded vigorous Cronbach's Alpha coefficients for all scales, verifying high internal consistency and confirming the instruments for the main study

Data from a sample of 100 step adults will be gathered to draw results from the data. Data will be gathered through online as well as physical relationship. After the data collection, the data will be scored, coded and examined with the help of the Statistical bundle of Social Sciences to draw results.

This study will use a quantitative correlational research design. The goal of the study is to assess variables and determine the type, management, and strength of their relationship. All data will be gathered at a single moment in time to examine the relationship between Stepparent-Child Relationship Quality and adults' psychological and behavioural consequences.

### **Sample Size**

The sample size for the study will be 300 step adults.

### **Sampling Technique**

Non-probability sampling model will be used to

collect data. The snowball sampling technique will be implemented, targeting step adults in Pakistan.

### Research Instruments

#### Demographic Information Sheet

A self-made demographic sheet will be used to collect essential information about the participants, incorporating age, gender, and whether they have a stepparent. This knowledge will help in describing the sample and analyzing gender differences.

#### Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI)

The Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI; Parker et al., 1979) will be used to assess the quality of the stepparent-child relationship. The scale includes of 25 items and assesses two aspects of parenting: care (warmth and support) and overprotection (control and restriction). Responses will be provided on a 4-point Likert scale. Higher results on care show a positive relationship, while superior scores on overprotection display controlling behavior. The PBI has good reliability and validity. illustrates excellent internal coherence with Cronbach's alpha typically ranging from 0.70 to 0.90, displaying high stability over time.

#### Psychological Well-Being Scale

The Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff, 1989), 18-item version, will be used to measure psychological consequences in adults. The scale assesses six areas: autonomy, environmental

mastery, personal growth, positive relations, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. Responses will be assessed on a Likert scale, with higher abundance showing better psychological welfare. The scale has acceptable reliability. Shows strong reliability among 0.70 and 0.89, effectively measuring the multi-dimensional elements of adult psychological health.

#### Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997) will be used to measure behavioral consequences. It contains 25 items covering emotional problems, conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems, and prosocial behavior. Responses will be assessed on a 3-point Likert scale. Higher scores on challenge items indicate more behavioral problems. The SDQ is a reliable and widely used assess. Produces a coherent score typically ranging from 0.79 to 0.88, creating it as a strong instrument for assessing behavior patterns.

#### Data Analysis Procedure

After the data accumulation is completed, the data will be scored, coded and examined with the help of the Statistical bundle of Social Science's Version 27. Independent sample t-test will be used to discover out the difference. Linear regression evaluation will be applied to find out the influence of variables.

Table 1

Variables	Step-son		Step-daughter		t	p	95% CI		Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			LL	UL	
Psychological Well-being	77.79	10.97	80.00	9.53	1.04	.324	2.00	6.00	0.21
Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire	26.47	7.35	27.33	11.48	1.41	.12	-5.17	3.44	0.09
Step Parent-Child Relationship Quality	49.91	15.40	48.69	11.74	.43	.05	-4.27	6.70	0.08

Mean, Standard Deviation and t-test of Psychological Well-being, Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, Step Parent-child Relationship Quality among step-son and step-daughter (n=100)

The Independent Samples T-test results showed no statistically significant difference in gender across primary variables, including well-being (p=.324), behavior (p=.12), and the quality of relationships between step-parents and their

children (p=.05). Step-daughters had a slightly higher mean well-being score (M=80.00) than stepsons (M=77.79), but the Cohen's d effect sizes (0.08-0.21) show that these differences are not significant enough to be worth noting. Consequently, accepting the null hypothesis indicates that gender does not serve as a distinguishing characteristic regarding the well-being and behaviors of adult children in blended families.

**Table 2**

Mean, Standard Deviation and t-test of Psychological Well-being, Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, Step Parent-child Relationship Quality among step-father and step-mother (n=100)

	Step-father		Step-mother		t	p	95% C.I		Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			LL	UL	
Psychological Well-being	80.19	12.37	79.14	10.32	.36	.32	-4.66	6.75	0.09
Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire	26.76	10.11	25.81	6.54	.46	.071	-3.09	4.98	0.11
Step Parent-Child Relationship Quality	47.72	8.72	48.44	15.23	.35	.03	-8.12	6.08	0.07



An independent samples t-test was performed to assess the impact of stepparent gender on adult psychological and behavioural outcomes. The results revealed that the gender of the stepparent (stepfather versus stepmother) did not significantly influence the participants' psychological well-being (t = 0.36, p = .32) or behavioural outcomes (t = 0.46, p = .071), with the two measures showing

negligible effect sizes (d < 0.12). However, a notable difference was identified in the quality of the stepparent-child relationship based on the stepparent's gender (t = 0.35, p = .03), supporting the hypothesis that the stepparent's gender influences the perceived quality of the familial bond.

**Table 3**

Linear Regression Predicting Behavioral Outcomes, Psychological Well-being from Step-Parent-Child Relationship Quality (n=100)

Variables	B	SE	β	95 CI		t	p	R	AR
				LL	UL				
Constant	34.66	3.95		26.82	42.49	8.7	.00		
Relationship quality (Behavioral Outcomes)	-0.16	0.08	-.20			-1.9	0.49	.19	.03
Constant	63.67	3.60				17.68	.00		

Relationship Quality (Psychological Well-being)	0.32	0.07	0.41	2.00	6.41	4.48	.00	.161	.41
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Linear regression analyses indicated that the quality of the stepparent-child relationship is a significant predictor of psychological well-being,  $F(1, 98) = 20.02$ ,  $p < .001$ , stating approximately 17% of the variance ( $R^2 = .168$ ). Results suggested a positive correlation ( $B = 0.32$ ,  $\beta = .41$ ), suggesting that better relationships in blended families significantly improve adult psychological well-being. On the other hand, the model for behavioural outcomes was not significant,  $F(1,98) = 3.61$ ,  $p = .49$ , and relationship quality did not predict behavioural adjustment ( $R^2 = .036$ ,  $\beta = -.20$ ). The findings confirm that even though the emotional quality of the stepparent relationship is essential for internal psychological health, its impact does not translate to external behavioural responses in this sample.

### Results

A significant positive effect of stepparent-child relationship quality on psychological well-being was found,  $R^2 = .17$ ,  $\beta = .41$ ,  $p < .001$ . This indicates that higher relationship quality significantly predicts better psychological well-being in adulthood and explains 17% of the variance. A significant negative relationship was observed between stepparent-child relationship quality and behavioral outcomes,  $R^2 = .039$ ,  $\beta = -.20$ ,  $p = .049$ . This suggests that better relationship quality is associated with fewer behavioral difficulties (e.g., hyperactivity, conduct problems), although the effect size is small. A statistically significant difference was found in perceived stepparent-child relationship quality based on stepparent gender ( $p = .03$ ). Participants with step-mothers ( $M = 48.44$ ) reported slightly higher relationship quality than those with step-fathers ( $M = 47.42$ ). However, outcomes for psychological and behavioral variables were generally similar across both groups. No significant differences were found between stepsons and step-daughters in psychological well-

being, indicating that the effect of stepparent-child relationship quality is consistent across gender. Stepparent-child relationship quality is a significant predictor of psychological well-being and a modest predictor of behavioral outcomes, while gender of the child does not significantly influence these relationships.

### Discussion

The first hypothesis anticipated that the quality of stepparent-child relationships would have a significant impact on adult psychological outcomes. Simple linear regression showed a significant model ( $p < .001$ ) that explains 17% of the variance in psychological well-being. As a result, H1 was accepted, whereas the null hypothesis (H0) was rejected. This finding is consistent with Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969), which holds that early interpersonal relationships, regardless of biological relationship, establish "internal working models" that influence emotional stability in adulthood. Furthermore, Jensen and Zhao (2025) recently proved that high-quality stepparenting is an important protective factor against internalising mental health concerns, validating the idea that perceived warmth from a stepparent is a significant predictor of long-term psychological well-being.

The second hypothesis predicted that the quality of stepparent-child relationships would have a considerable influence on adult behavioural outcomes. However, the data analysis showed that the link was not statistically significant ( $p = .49$ ). Thus, H2 was rejected and the null hypothesis was accepted. This gap shows that, while emotional bonds have a direct impact on internal psychological states, externalised behaviours in adulthood may be more substantially influenced by independent variables such as peer pressures, socioeconomic status, or biological parent influence. Ganong and Coleman (2004) found similar results, stating that behavioural adjustment

in stepfamilies is frequently a complicated, multi-cause event in which a single relational link may not be enough to overcome other environmental stresses or developmental factors.

The third hypothesis aimed to identify substantial gender variation in the perception of relationship quality among adults. The independent samples *t*-test indicated that there was no significant difference in how stepsons and stepdaughters perceived the quality of their relationship with their stepparent ( $p = .324$ ). As a result, H3 was rejected. This suggests that the fundamental need for parental bonding and the subsequent benefits of a secure attachment is universal across genders. This mirrors the research of Parker et al. (1979) regarding the Parental Bonding Instrument, which suggests that the core dimensions of "care" and "overprotection" remain consistent across the child's gender, implying that both males and females are equally sensitive to the emotional climate of the stepfamily.

The fourth hypothesis proposed a significant difference in the psychological well-being of adults raised by stepfather's vs those raised by stepmothers. The *t*-test results revealed that the adult children's psychological well-being did not differ significantly depending on whether their stepparent was male or female. Therefore, H4 was rejected. This research suggests that the nature of the link, rather than the caregiver's gender, promotes emotional wellbeing. While societal archetypes frequently distinguish between the roles of mothers and fathers, the internal psychological benefit derived from a supportive parent figure appears to be gender-neutral, supporting Ryff's (1989) claim that positive relationships with others are a universal pillar of well-being regardless of the caregiver's gender.

The fourth hypothesis proposed a significant difference in psychological well-being between adults reared by stepfathers and those raised by stepmothers. The *t*-test results demonstrated that there was no significant difference in the adult children's psychological well-being between male and female stepparents. Therefore, H4 was rejected. This study demonstrates that the nature of the connection, rather than the caregiver's gender, increases emotional well-being. While

societal archetypes frequently differentiate between the roles of mothers and fathers, the internal psychological benefit derived from a supportive parent figure appears to be gender-neutral, supporting Ryff's (1989) claim that positive relationships with others are a universal pillar of well-being regardless of the caregiver's gender.

The fifth hypothesis examined whether persons raised by stepfathers had different behavioural outcomes than stepmothers. Similar to the psychological findings, the statistical analysis revealed no significant difference in behavioural effects based on the stepparent's gender. Consequently, H5 was rejected. This finding implies that the disciplinary techniques or behavioural modelling offered by stepmothers and stepfathers result in similar behavioural trajectories for the children. This is consistent with Lamb's (2013) approach, which claims that the parent's functional role (offering stability and guidance) is a stronger predictor of a child's behavioural adjustment than the parent's gender identity.

The final hypothesis stated that there is a significant difference in the quality of stepparent-child relationships between persons raised by stepfathers and stepmothers. The statistical analysis revealed a significant difference ( $p = .03$ ), resulting in the approval of H6. The findings revealed that the stepparent's gender did alter the qualitative nature of the link developed with the child. This finding is corroborated by Hetherington and Clingempeel (1992), who discovered that stepmothers frequently feel increased societal pressure to form emotional ties, which can result in more complex and emotionally charged relationship dynamics. In contrast, stepfathers may initially play a more peripheral role, resulting in a qualitative experience for the child that differs from the stepmother-child bond.

#### Limitations of the Study

Every research has constraints that must be acknowledged to provide a balanced view. A sample of  $N = 100$  is sufficient for a pilot or small-scale thesis, but may not represent the diverse population of an entire country. Participants may

have provided "socially desirable" answers regarding their well-being or their parents' behavior to avoid stigma. The study measured outcomes at one point in time. It cannot definitively prove "cause and effect" over many years like a longitudinal study would. The study did not control for the duration of the step-parenting (e.g., being raised by a step-parent since age 2 vs. age 15).

### Recommendations

Step-parents should put emotional support and care first because a loving home is very important for a child's long-term health, even if they aren't related by blood. To resolve conflicts and reduce stress in the family, families should establish transparent and open communication methods. Family therapists should make sure that step-parents are present at therapy sessions to make sure that everyone feels safe and supported in the home. School psychologists should make support groups just for teens and young adults in stepfamilies to help them deal with the complicated relationships and social structures they have to deal with. Mental health professionals should advocate for the social and legal recognition of step-parents to reduce their feelings of isolation and help them bond more deeply with their children.

### Conclusion

To sum the findings up, this study looked at how people behavioral outcomes and psychological well-being were impacted by the quality of their relationships with their stepparents. The results proved that stronger psychological well-being is linked to higher quality relationships with stepparents, demonstrating the lasting effect of family dynamics beyond childhood. This supports the assumptions of attachment theory, which contends that early interactions with others impact emotional adjustment throughout life. The study also discovered variations in the quality of relationships between stepmothers and stepfathers, which illustrates how societal expectations affect family roles. Although positive step-parent connections enhanced behavioral outcomes, the effects were somewhat less,

indicating that a variety of interacting factors, including biological parent relationships and family transition experiences, influence behavior. Overall, the study shows that long-term psychological adjustment is significantly influenced by the quality of the relationships between stepparents and their children. These results highlight the need for increased understanding of and support with stepfamily dynamics, especially when it comes to encouraging the development of positive relationships within non-biological family structures. It is advised that future studies use longitudinal designs to better understand these associations over time and investigate additional important factors.

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