

**Forming a Union plus Kids:
The Role of Children in Stepfamily Formation**

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Extended Abstract

Given the rise in nonmarital childbearing coupled with the retreat from marriage and increasing rates of cohabitation, it has become increasingly important to understand the effect of children on the family formation processes of men and women in the United States. Demographic changes occurring during the 20th century have shifted the traditional definition of “family” away from two married parents living with their biological child(ren) to a complex variety of family forms. Unions between men and women have become increasingly less central and stable throughout young and middle adulthood. Furthermore, this lack of stability and centrality of unions has complicated the role of parenthood. Because the majority of children coreside with their mothers after union dissolution (Seltzer 1991), they are increasingly likely to experience living with their mother’s future partners. Men, removed from day to day living with their biological children, are increasingly likely to form new unions which include living with their partner’s children, creating a stepfamily.

Traditionally, entrance into stepfamilies was the result of spousal death or divorce and subsequent remarriage. However, increases in nonmarital births and cohabitation have made the pathways into such families varied and complex. As a result of these changes, the definition of stepfamilies must be expanded to include cohabiting couples living with one partner’s children. When cohabiting couples are considered in this new

definition, roughly two-thirds of all women and 30% of all children have spent some time in a stepfamily in the United States from the 1970's to the early 1990's (Bumpass, Raley and Sweet 1995). Clearly absent from these studies of stepfamilies is the experience of men. Given that stepfamily research has focused on women and children, much less is known regarding stepfamily living among men.

What little is known about men in stepfamilies has focused on socioeconomic factors or other background variables related to union formation. Many of these studies highlight the weakened provider status of stepfathers, particularly of cohabiting stepfathers (Manning and Lichter 1996). However, data used in these studies are static and not longitudinal, making causal inferences difficult. Few studies have investigated the processes leading to men's family formation and how their roles as fathers, both to resident and nonresident children, affect their choices regarding future family living. In addition, studies that do investigate these processes for men rarely compare their experiences with women, making the relationship between children, gender, and union formation relatively unclear as differences between men and women may reflect circumstances, such as custody arrangements, rather than true gender differences. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine how one's own children affect both men's and women's entry into a stepfamily, or living in coresidence with partner's children.

While prior research has examined the influence of children on women's later family formation, few have examined this from a male perspective. Understanding men's choices regarding family living is perhaps even more important as men are more likely than women to experience several transitions into and out of coresidential parenthood

roles and the lives of children. Therefore, the proposed research fills a void in the current literature on family formation by investigating the parental transitions and the effect of children on union formation for men, in comparison to women, as they move through adulthood. Why men choose to participate or not in family life is an important question to ask in light of men's changing roles within the family and the growth of single mothers in the partner market.

Data

To answer the research question, I use data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1979 (NLSY79). These data are specifically suited for examining the effect of children on family formation because they contain fertility and union formation information, as well as complete household rosters, for men and women collected as they moved through adulthood. A further advantage of this dataset is its longitudinal research design and retention rates. The first wave of data was collected in 1979 when respondents were between the ages of 14 and 21. Respondents were interviewed annually until 1994, then biennially from 1994 to 2002. Currently there are twenty rounds of survey data available to the public and respondents are now in their late 30's and early 40's. During the twenty-five years of data collection, 60.3% of eligible respondents answered every round of the NLSY79 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2002). Overall, these longitudinal data allow me to examine the role of children in union formation and parental trajectories with less of the measurement error often associated with cross-sectional or retrospective data.

The data also allow for straightforward operationalization of research concepts. Because data on fertility, union histories, and household members were collected almost

yearly, transitions between union statuses are more easily calculated and more reliable and than in other datasets. Other important concepts that can be measured directly include biological children's changing residential status and contact with biological children no longer living with the respondent. Contact with nonresident children has been shown to affect men's family formation (Stewart, Manning, Smock 2003). However, these results were based on cross-sectional data, not allowing for variation throughout the years. The NLSY79 collected contact with nonresident children at each data point, allowing me to include time-varying covariates for contact with children in my final models.

Another strength of the NLSY79 is its cohort timing. The influence of historic events varies depending on the stage of life at which they are experienced. This particular cohort transitioned into adulthood during a historically high period of family change. They were the first generation to experience a high likelihood of family breakdown during their childhood years, and also entered adulthood in an era of high divorce rates and increasing rates of cohabitation and nonmarital births. This cohort of individuals was at the forefront of family change, making them an important group of individuals to study since they are more likely than cohorts before them to experience complex family structures. Overall, this cohort of individuals provides important insight as to the future of family formation in the United States.

Analytical Plan and Expected Findings

The general aim of this paper is to examine how own children affect both men and women's entry into living in coresidence with partner's children using longitudinal

data collected as they experienced these family transitions. The goal of this analysis is two-fold. First, I investigate what factors lead men and women to live in coresidence with their partner's children, in turn, forming stepfamilies. Then I focus in particular on how one's own children, both residential and nonresidential, affect entry into a stepfamily.

To meet these two goals, I use event history techniques. Proportional hazard models are used to assess the effect of factors, such as socioeconomic and child characteristics, on the hazard of, or time until, entering a stepfamily union. This method allows me to assess the risk of the outcome occurring at each age until the event occurs, or the end of the observation period (when the case becomes censored). This technique also allows for the inclusion of time-varying covariates, such as residential status of own children and contact with nonresident children, whose values may change at every age until the outcome occurs.

First, I model what factors lead men and women to live in coresidence with their partner's children, forming stepfamilies. Prior research suggests that men who enter into such unions are likely to be of lower socioeconomic status. However, with more births occurring outside of married unions, more women with children are available in the marriage pool along with men not living in coresidence with their children, who may or may not be of lower socioeconomic class.

For similar reasons, I also examine how one's own children affect entry into a stepfamily. By doing this, I not only include children as a characteristic of the dependent variables (stepfamily) but also as an independent variable. Because of this, I can answer the following questions: (1) Does entry into stepfamilies differ by resident status of own

biological children? (2) Does contact with nonresident children increase the likelihood of forming a stepfamily? And (3) do these factors differ by gender of the respondent?

All analyses will be conducted separately for men and women. While I use both men and women in the analytic sample, the primary focus of this paper is how children affect the lives of men. Therefore, results for women will be used primarily for purposes of comparison, and all models will be tested for significant gender differences. My overall intention is to fill a void in the literature which has mainly focused on the effect of children on women's chances for future union formation. Therefore, my results should contribute to our general knowledge of family formation, especially among men, who are currently understudied in the literature.

Overall, I estimate the effect of own children on forming families with partners living in coresidence with children, a significant outcome often missing in current research on family formation. I expect that children do matter in the union formation choices of men and women. I also suspect that the effect of children will be greater for women, but that this may be mediated by the contact men have with biological children with whom he does not reside. In other words, men who maintain strong ties with their nonresident children may be less likely to form a union with a partner with coresidential children.

Conclusion

The implications for this research are varied. Men and women differ in their union formation strategies largely because of the presence of children. Men rarely engage in family life apart from women, making the connection between partners an

important component of the parenthood experience. However, the retreat from marriage and increasing instability of unions has weakened the connection between men and women and hence between men and children. At the same time, these weakened connections are creating multiple opportunities to parent, often extending across households.

While research shows many men as absent and removed from family life, another group of men are experiencing parenthood on a different level, a social one. Given these changes in family living, it is vital to investigate the link between children and subsequent family formation as complex parenting situations are likely to continue well into the future. This research adds to the growing literature on men in families and provides a comprehensive investigation of the effects of children on both men and women's family lives using data collected as individuals experience family change. Perhaps even more importantly, this paper begins to fill the void in the current literature by investigating the choices men make in terms of family living and how children facilitate or impeded men's romantic unions.

Work Cited

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