A STEP FURTHER: PARENTHOOD IN BLENDED FAMILIES

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid change in conjugal behaviour during the final decades of the twentieth century has transformed family life for both adults and children. Increasing separation and divorce among couples with children, reinforced by rising numbers of couples having children within cohabiting unions, shown to be less durable than marital unions, have contributed to growth of lone-parent families. This has, in turn, led to the formation of more stepfamilies, created when lone parents form a conjugal union with an individual or another lone-parent. This evolution has created the conditions for the emergence for yet another family type, formed when parents in a stepfamily decide to have a child together.

Little attention has so far been paid to the birth of a common child to a stepfamily couple. The first studies to take notice of this event did so in the context of research into factors contributing to the stability of stepfamilies rather than as an object of study in its own right (Ganong and Coleman, 1988; Wineberg, 1992). However, in our view, the arrival of a common child transforms the nature of the stepfamily by creating a genetic link between all family members, and marks the beginning of a distinctive family type. The present research, therefore, put the focus directly on the "blended family" (the term generally employed to describe stepfamilies with a common child). After a brief discussion of the terms used, we first analyse the transition from stepfamily to blended family, looking at whether the factors affecting stepfamily fertility are the same as those influencing fertility in intact families. The second analysis examines the impact that being born into a blended family has on children's subsequent family life, exploring the influence of stepfamily characteristics, and comparing it with the experience of children born into intact families.

DEFINING STEPFAMILIES AND BLENDED FAMILIES

A stepfamily is created when a lone parent starts living with, or marries, an individual or another lone parent. Men and women can enter stepfamilies as a stepparent or a biological parent (or both), and through a number of different pathways. For some, becoming a stepparent may be their first experience of parental *and* conjugal life; for many others, the transition to stepfamily life marks the end of a period of lone-parenthood, initiated either by the birth of a child outside a union, or more commonly by the separation of parents in an intact family. This

creates great diversity between stepfamilies, and raises the question of how to characterize different stepfamily types. To be classified within the general category of "stepfamily," a family is normally expected to fulfil two conditions: first, that one of the parents in the family is not the biological parent of all the children, and, second, that the parents and children share a residence. Obviously, the second condition is a slippery one when applied to the types of family studied here, where children may have more than one residence, alternating between the households of separated parents. Should a father whose children spend every other weekend with him be classified as a lone-parent? If he remarries, should his new family be classified as a stepfamily? We will not attempt to solve these problems here, but we will try to put very clearly how we have defined the family types included in our analyses.

A second important point that needs to be clarified is the lack of uniformity in the terms used to describe the different family types that are currently emerging. Some consensus is being reached, but the terms are still used inconsistently in recent publications. Take, for example, the definitions adopted by the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY), a panel study conducted jointly by Statistics Canada and Human Resources and Development Canada (HRDC), and the source of data for our second analysis. A "stepfamily" is the generic term referring to "a married or common-law couple residing in the same household, with at least one step child living with them who is the biological or adopted child of one parent but not the other parent." (User's Handbook and Microdata Guide, p. 55) A blended family is a sub-set of the stepfamily, and refers to families that include children who do not share the same natural parents. Two types of "blended family" are envisaged:

1) A couple with the biological children of the female partner as well as the biological children of the male partner - a family formed, in other words, at the union of two lone parents;
2) A couple with the biological children of the male, female or both partners, plus a child from the new union – a family formed, in other words, when a stepfamily couple have a child together.

While there is some justification for using a "not-full-sibling" criterion for classifying these families, the origin, composition and dynamics of the two types of blended family are so different that it may be necessary to distinguish between them to analyse them with any subtlety. In the first type, the relationship between the children in the family is that of stepsiblings, while in the second it is a half-sibling relationship. Moreover, in the first type, all the children have had similar life experiences, such as having a stepparent in the household, and most have lived in a lone parent family and have another biological parent living elsewhere. In the second type of family, only some of the children have lived these events, and their experience is not shared by their half-siblings born within the stepfamily and living with their two biological parents.

Finally, the first kind of blended family is formed when two lone parents marry or start living together, each bringing children from an earlier union with them into the new union; this event marks a transition from a lone-parent family to a stepfamily. The second is a transition that occurs *within* a stepfamily and creates a genetic link between all members of the family that is absent in the first type.

In fact, in terms of the relationships between the family members, the first type of blended family has more in common with stepmother or stepfather families than with the second type of blended family. The creation of the first type of blended family is also a relatively rare event: only 8% of the stepfamily episodes reported by Canadian women in the 1990 General Social Survey, for instance, included children from earlier unions of both members of the couple (see Table 1). In contrast, a common child was born within almost half (48%) of these episodes. In the present analysis, therefore, the focus will be on the emergence of the second, and most common, type of blended family.

FROM STEPFAMILY TO BLENDED FAMILY

- Setting the scene

Many children whose parents separated during the 1980s and 1990s had to adjust to the presence of stepparents as one, or both, of their parents entered a new union. This is clearly shown in Figure 1, which presents the proportion of children whose parents were not together at the NLSCY first wave (1994-95) according to both the time elapsed since the separation and the subsequent conjugal histories of their parents — that is, whether their mother, father or both parents had entered a new union by the second wave (1996-97) of the survey. Already, only two to three years after the separation, one or both parents of almost half the children had entered a new union: a quarter of mothers (14.6% + 10.3%) and almost one-third of fathers (19.5% + 10.3%). Over time, more parents entered new relationships and, 10-13 years after the separation, 85% of children had experienced the arrival of at least one new “parent” in their family environment; for more than half of these children there was both a new mother and a new father.

Looking at the evolution from the mother’s perspective, the same picture emerges. Among Canadian women starting families during the 1980s, for example, approximately one-third spent some time as a lone mother, and around 30% entered stepfamily life before the age of forty — twice the proportion among women starting family life twenty years earlier (see Juby and Le Bourdais, 1996, Table 2). In the United States, proportions are even higher, with about two-fifths of all women likely to spend some time in a stepfamily (Bumpass et al., 1995). This rapid rise in the number of women living in a stepfamily during child-bearing years is largely

responsible for the emergence of the blended family, as parents in stepfamilies decide to have a child together. However, not all couples choose to expand their family, and in the following analysis, we attempt to identify which characteristics of stepfamilies and their members promote or impede this transition.

- Data and method

This analysis draws on data from the 1990 General Social Survey on the family (GSS). In this survey, a large representative sample of Canadian men and women, aged 15 years and over, were asked retrospectively about all marital or common-law unions, and about all biological, adopted or step children they had raised. This information enabled us to reconstitute the family histories of all respondents, and thus to select our sample of those who had lived in a stepfamily. For reasons of coverage and reliability, the following analysis is based uniquely on data collected from female respondents aged 18 to 65 years at the survey,[1] and includes only first stepfamily episodes (n=481). Episodes starting after the age of forty were excluded, given that the birth of a child within the stepfamily is the object of study.

A proportional hazards model was used to analyse the transition from step to blended family (see Allison, 1984). The dependent variable is the instantaneous rate of birth, estimated from the moment the stepfamily couple started their conjugal life together. The independent variables are principally socio-demographic characteristics expected to influence the decision to have a child. Socio-economic characteristics could not be incorporated because this information, such as income data, referred to the situation at the time of survey rather than during the stepfamily episode. For the same reason, an important demographic characteristic also had to be omitted from this analysis: whether or not both partners were still fertile at the start of their union.[2] This factor is obviously crucial to the decision to have a child, and is likely to affect the different stepfamily types in different ways. Childless women entering stepfather families, for example, are less likely to have undergone voluntary sterilization than are separated or divorced women, who may have had their desired number of children before the breakdown of their first family.

In Table 1, distributions of the characteristics introduced into the model are presented for the sample as a whole, and for the different stepfamily types: stepfather, stepmother and stepfather/stepmother families. Stepfather families were further subdivided, according to the two

[1] This analysis is based on previous research, leading to the construction of the series of family episodes from information on unions and children collected in the 1990 GSS. This process, which is essential in order to identify stepfamily episodes and situate them in the life course, has not been carried out for the 1995 GSS.

[2] Although the respondents are asked whether they or their partner had had an operation to prevent pregnancy, there is no information on the timing of the event.

principal family pathways leading up to their formation: the first category includes women whose children were born within an intact family, while the second comprises those who were alone at their child's birth, and for whom the stepfamily is their first experience of a two-parent family. Stepfather families, by far the most common type of stepfamily reported by female respondents, representing over three-quarters (76%) of the families in the sample, were divided almost equally between the two types. Stepmother and stepfather/stepmother families made up one-sixth (16%) and one-twelfth (8%) of the sample respectively. Almost half (48%) the stepfamilies became blended families with the birth of a child within the family, although this proportion varied considerably according to the family type. In stepfather families, two-thirds of single mothers had a child with their new partner compared with just over one-third of separated or divorced mothers (35%). Stepfamilies in which both parents had children from a previous union were at a similar level (34%), while half the women entering stepfamily life as a stepmother, without children of their own, had a child within the union.

Also included were four demographic variables, measured at the start of the episode, shown in the literature to influence the decision to have a child: the mother's age, the number of children already present, the age of the youngest of these children, and the sex of the children. The distribution of these variables in Table 1 reveals the strong contrast between the two stepfather family types: single mothers were generally younger than separated or divorced women when they formed a stepfamily, and they had fewer and younger children. The other two stepfamily types fell between these extremes. In terms of the number of children already present in the family, stepfather/stepmother families, where both members of the couple had children at the start of the union, had the highest average number of children (3.4). This is double the figure for stepmother families and stepfather families created around a separated or divorced mother, and triple that for stepfather families formed by single mothers who rarely had more than one child at the start of their new union. Another factor that may or may not be linked to the decision to have an additional child is the desire to have children of a particular sex, or to have "one of each." Four-fifths of the stepfather/stepmother families included both boys and girls, a much higher proportion than that found in other stepfamily types.

The period of family formation is important because the transformation of both marital behaviour and fertility levels during the period affected the generations of women differently. First, the increase in separation and divorce in Canada following the Divorce Act of 1968 is evident in the distribution of stepfamily episodes from one period to another (rising from 23% before 1970 to 46% after 1980), and in their evolution by type. This is particularly clear in the distribution of stepfather families created by separated or divorced mothers. Only stepfather families created by single mothers are uniformly distributed over the three periods, reflecting the stability over time in the proportion of women having their first child outside a union. The fact

that more women become stepmothers is also a corollary of the growing proportion of separated fathers keeping contact with their children, though high proportions of stepmother families in the earliest period were largely the result of remarriage by widowers. Second, we would expect declining fertility levels during the period to be reflected in stepfamily fertility, with stepfamilies formed in more recent years less fertile than those formed earlier.

With research showing that marital unions are more fertile than common-law unions, we would also expect children to be born more frequently to married stepfamily couples than to those who were cohabiting. However, with cohabitation more common among stepfamily couples, the same patterns of behaviour might not be present. In our sample, more than half the couples (59%) were unmarried at the start of the stepfamily episode, although there was great diversity in the type of union chosen by the different types of stepfamily. Stepfather families created by single mothers were the most likely (68%) to begin at marriage — three times more likely than those created around separated mothers. This may be because, as a first union, these couples were more willing to give marriage a try than were other stepfamily couples. On the other hand, the low levels of marriage among couples in other stepfamily types may be a product of the divorce process itself: many unions were formed by previously married individuals who might not have been free to remarry at the start of the episode. This may explain why many couples who were cohabiting at the start of the episode married at some point before the survey. These marital status changes were integrated into the model in the form of a time-varying variable. Moreover, given the distinctive nature of union status in Quebec, the type of union was introduced in interaction with the region of Canada.

- Results

The parameter estimates for three models calculated by the proportional hazards model are presented in Table 2 in their exponential form. A coefficient greater than 1 indicates that the characteristic increases the probability of a transition from step to blended family through the birth of a child and, conversely, a coefficient smaller than 1 indicates that the characteristic decreases it. Variables such as stepfamily type were introduced as dummy variables, and coefficients are interpreted in relation to the reference category (given in parentheses). For continuous variables, such as mother’s age, the number of children and the age of youngest child, the coefficients represent the change in the instantaneous rate of having a child for each unit increase in the metric variable. All but two variables measure fixed characteristics, with values that remain constant throughout the episode. Both union status and “period” were introduced as time-varying variables whose values might change over time. A stepfamily

episode lasting from 1965-1975, for example, would be categorised as “before 1970” for the first five years of duration, and as “1970-1980” for subsequent durations.

The first model estimates the association between stepfamily type and the transition to a blended family, with stepfather families formed by separated or divorced women as the reference category. The results show that, along with stepfather/stepmother families, this stepfamily type is the least likely to become a blended family. In the two other family types, the conditional probability is significantly higher, with stepmother families 1.7 times more likely to have a child, and stepfather families created by single mothers 2.4 times more likely to.

This diversity totally disappears in the second model, with the introduction of four characteristics at the start of the stepfamily episode: the mother’s age, the age of the youngest child, and the number and sex of the children present. Of these, the ages of the mother and of the youngest child at the start of the stepfamily are closely linked to the likelihood of having an additional child. The coefficients show that the chance of having a child decreases as the age of both mothers and their youngest child increases. In other words, the younger the mother and the youngest child, the more likely is the transition from step to blended family. These two characteristics explain the stronger risk of transition among stepfather families formed by single mothers estimated in model 1; these mothers and their children were much younger than separated and divorced mothers and *their* children on entry into stepfamily life (see Table 1). That a woman’s age is important is to be expected given that involuntary and voluntary sterility increase with age for both women and men. It is also unsurprising that couples with younger children are more likely to have an additional child — when young children are already present, having a baby involves less of a change of lifestyle than when children are older, and at the same time it provides a sibling close in age to the other children in the stepfamily. What is more surprising, however, is that one of the principal fertility determinants in intact families, namely the number of children already present, has no significant effect on the decision to have another child in a stepfamily. If the desire to have children of a particular sex has an influence, there is no sign of any consistent pattern. However, the lack of significant results may mean that preferences are spread equally between wanting boys, girls and children of both sexes. The effect of these last two variables remained statistically insignificant even after testing for the possible patterns of collinearity with stepfamily type, given that stepmother/stepfather families have twice as many children as other families and are also less likely to fall into the “boys only” category.[3]

[3] Removing these variables from the equation had no significant effect either on the coefficients of the other variables included in the model.

The absence of any significant difference between stepfamily types remains when we take into account the type of union formed by the stepfamily couple and their region of residence, and the period during which the events occurred (see model 3). This does not mean, however, that these time-varying variables have no impact on the transition from step to blended family. Firstly, cohabitation reduces considerably the likelihood of having a child, and has an even greater negative impact on stepfamily fertility in Quebec than in the rest of Canada (though the difference between regions is not statistically significant). Given that cohabitation is closer to marriage in Quebec, one might have expected the opposite to be true. However, it is important to remember that the growing fertility of common-law unions is a recent development, particularly in evidence in the 1990s, after the 1990 GSS data was collected. There are, however, no significant regional differences in fertility among married stepfamily couples. Secondly, as expected, the probability of having a child declined over time, with stepfamilies in the 1980s significantly less likely than those in the 1960s to become blended families.

Overall, this analysis indicates that stepfamily fertility is to a great extent determined by the same factors that influence fertility in general — mother's age, the size of the birth interval, the period during which the family was formed, the type of union at birth, and the region of residence. However, this is certainly not the whole story. The fact that the number of children present at the start of the stepfamily has no significant effect on the likelihood of having a child suggests that fertility decisions within stepfamilies are subject to certain influences not at play in intact families. This is only to be expected given the very different circumstances in these two types of family. In most stepfamilies, only one parent has biological children — an experience that the other parent might wish to have. In addition, stepfamily couples are likely to share the same desire to "have a child together" as intact families couples, irrespective of how many children one or other has brought into the family from an earlier union (Vikat et al., 1999).

THE LIFE COURSE OF CHILDREN IN BLENDED FAMILIES

- Data

The second analysis takes the child rather than the stepfamily as the unit of study. The rise in numbers of stepfamily couples having a child together translates into a growing number of children born within this complex family system. In fact, by the end of the twentieth century, one Canadian child out of five was born into a family environment that did not conform to the nuclear family model: 7.5% were born to a lone mother, and the other 12.5%, born into two-parent families, had half-siblings in their family environment at their birth. These figures were estimated from information from the National Longitudinal Survey for Children and Youth

(NLSCY). The NLSCY is a panel study, repeated at two-year intervals at least until the year 2002; it provides a unique source of data on the family histories of a large sample of Canadian children, and is representative at both the national and provincial level. At the first wave, carried out during the winter of 1994-95, 22,831 children aged 0 to 11 years were included in the survey sample. Questions were put to parents, children and teachers on a variety of topics ranging from child development and school achievement, to family history and dynamics. The main data used here are drawn from the "Family and Custody History" section of the survey, which contains the complete, retrospective conjugal and parental history of the child's biological parents up to the time of survey. Using information on the number and type of earlier conjugal unions, whether children had been born within these unions, and whether these children were present in the household at the target child's birth, we were able to determine the type of family into which each child was born. Additional data on the subsequent conjugal behaviour of both parents indicated whether children experienced their parents' separation, and at what age.

In this analysis, half-siblings are considered "present" in the household if at least one of them lived in the household at least part of the time. These families fit the residence-based definition of the "blended family". The problem is how to classify the sizeable minority (39%) of children whose half-siblings were not present in the household at birth. While, from a purely residential perspective, these children are born into intact families, we cannot assume that their family experience is similar to that of children born to parents who have no children from earlier unions. Although the half-siblings are not physically present, economic and other resources may be diverted towards them. To circumvent this problem in the present analysis, these children have been assigned a separate category that sets them apart both from children born into intact families, and from those born into stepfamilies.

- Setting the scene

Figure 2 indicates the diversity of family configurations at birth for the growing proportion of children with half-siblings in their family network when the presence of their half-siblings and their origin (that is, whether they are the children of the mother, father or both parents) are taken into account. Having maternal half-siblings living in the household (32%), or paternal half-siblings living elsewhere (31%) were the most common situations, reflecting the greater propensity for children to remain with their mother after their parents separate. To have paternal half-siblings in the household was more unusual (15%), but this situation occurred, nonetheless, twice as frequently as having maternal half-siblings living elsewhere (7%). The remaining 15% of children had both maternal and paternal half-siblings: most often, only the mother's children were present in the household (8%); in 6% of cases, the children of both parents were present and, for a few (1%), the children of both parents lived elsewhere. In several

of the following analyses, these children have been grouped into three broad categories: a) all half-siblings living elsewhere (31% + 7% + 1%= 39%); b) maternal half-siblings only in the household (though the father may have children living elsewhere) (32% + 8% = 40%); and c) half-siblings from father or both parents in the household (15% + 6% = 21%).

Clearly, children are more likely to have close contact with maternal half-siblings than with their father's children from an earlier union. Overall, among children with maternal half-siblings, almost three-quarters had all their half-siblings present full-time in the household, and for only one in seven were they all living elsewhere. This contrasts strongly with the situation regarding their father's children from an earlier union: for almost two-thirds, all of their paternal half-siblings lived elsewhere full-time; the rest were divided equally between those with paternal half-siblings present full- or part-time.

- Family stability

Research has shown that having a child within a stepfamily acts as a protective factor for the family; in other words, stepfamilies that become blended families last longer than those that do not. However, when the same event is considered from the child's perspective, the basis of comparison broadens from stepfamilies to families in general; the relevant question becomes how children born in stepfamilies compare with children born into other family types in terms of family stability. Does the fact that their parents are already fairly advanced along their family life course reduce the likelihood of further family transitions, or, on the contrary, does the previous history of conjugal breakdown bode ill for the current union? Is the association between cohabitation and parental separation as strong among stepfamilies, where common-law unions are very common, as among intact families? Does it make a difference which parent brought children from an earlier union into the family, or how much time the children spend in the household, or how many and how old they are? Some clues to these questions may be gleaned from NLSCY data, which can be used to reconstruct both the family type at birth, and children's subsequent family life experience up to the time of survey.

Life table estimates of the probability that parents separate suggest a strong link between family environment at birth and the subsequent family life course. Figure 3 shows clearly that children born into stepfamilies were more at risk of family breakdown than children born into intact families. In addition, the experience of children with half-siblings not living in the household was closer to that of children born in stepfamilies than to that of children in intact families from whom they are indistinguishable in terms of the residential family group. At ten years of age, 43% of these children had separated parents, more than double the percentage found among children in intact families. Risks of family breakdown varied according to blended

family type: children born into stepfather families were most at risk, with a probability of parents separating (56%) that was appreciably higher than among children born into stepmother or stepmother/stepfather families (34%). Compared with children without half-siblings, having maternal half-siblings in the household at a child's birth tripled the risk of experiencing parental separation by the age of 10 (56% v. 19%). Clearly, although there is greater conjugal stability among stepfamily couples with a common child, the children involved are not guaranteed a stable family life course. The following section attempts to identify some of the factors that influence the probability that children experience their parents' separation.

- Analysis of parental separation among children born into a stepfamily

This analysis focuses on differences between children born into intact and blended families, using the four-category variable to classify children's family context at birth; it is based on a sample of 20,071 children born within a two-parent family for whom the pertinent information is complete. The parameter estimates for the full model is presented in Table 3 in their exponential form. Standard errors were adjusted to take into account possible clustering due to children in the sample belonging to the same family.

The dependent variable is the instantaneous rate of separation among the parents of the children in the samples, estimated from the moment of birth. The independent variables are limited to socio-demographic characteristics, as little other information on the situation at the time of birth was collected at the survey. These characteristics include the duration of the union at birth, and the birth cohort of the child. Other important characteristics, such as the age of the mother at the start of the union, could not be included, as this information was not available for the mothers of children living with a stepmother at the survey. Given the importance of the type of parental union at birth for the risk of separation, and the contrast in marital behaviour between Quebec and the rest of Canada, the type of union was introduced in interaction with the region of residence. Information on earlier unions was also included for two reasons. Firstly, distinguishing between parents who have or who have not lived in earlier unions enables us to control for the strong differences between stepfather families created by single mothers compared with separated/divorced mothers, discussed earlier. Secondly, a study of NLSCY data suggests than parents' conjugal history preceding the union in which the target child was born may also predict union instability (Juby and Marcil-Gratton, *forthcoming*). A four-category variable, summarising the earlier conjugal history of both parents, was created and included in the model: a) neither parent had had a previous conjugal union; b) one or both parents had been married, but never cohabited; c) one or both parents had cohabited, but never married; d) one or both parents had married and cohabited.

The analysis presented in Table 3 compares family stability for children in intact families (no half-siblings) with that of children whose half-siblings live elsewhere and with two types of blended family – those including maternal half-siblings only, and those with paternal half-siblings (plus maternal half-siblings in some cases). Among children born into "intact" families, according to the residence-based definition, having half-siblings in the family environment doubles the risk of separation compared with children whose parents have no children from earlier unions. In fact, the risk for children whose half siblings live elsewhere is almost as high as that for children born into stepfather families. However, children with paternal half-siblings in the family are not significantly more at risk of experiencing their parents' separation than children in intact families. These findings support other research on the subject which has demonstrated the greater stability of stepmother over stepfather families (Ambert, 1986; Desrosiers et al., 1995 Ferri, 1995).

Separation risks were lowest for children to parents who married without previous cohabitation, both within and outside Quebec. Children born in common-law unions were exposed to highest risks of separation in Quebec (3.96) and even more so in the rest of Canada (5.71). Children whose parents lived together before marriage were also more likely to experience their parents' separation, although in Quebec this increase was not significant. In this province, the gap in stability levels between different types of union appears to be getting narrower, and little difference remains between children born to couples who marry directly and those whose parents' lived together before marrying. In the second analysis (Table 4), therefore, as direct marriage is rare in second family episodes in Quebec, these two union types have been merged into a single category.

The positive effect of marriage on union stability is also reflected in the conjugal history preceding the union in which the target child was born. Even compared with children born to couples with no history of previous unions, those with a parent who had been previously married were less at risk of family disruption. This rather unexpected result stems from the fact that the "no previous union" category includes mothers whose first child was born outside a union. In order to evaluate the impact of the trajectory leading up to the creation of the family, we carried out a second analysis that included only the 2,855 children with half-siblings in their family environment at birth (not presented). In this model the "no previous union" category related directly to mothers whose previous child was born outside a union. This permitted us, in other words, to distinguish between the two very different types of stepfather family discussed earlier (i.e. families formed around single *versus* separated or divorced mothers). Our findings showed that children born into stepfamilies created by single mothers appear significantly more at risk of parental separation than children born to parents who had been previously married.

The duration of the union before the baby's birth is a strong predictor of family stability, with unions formed less than two years before the target child's birth significantly more at risk of breakdown than those existing for five years or more. The impact of the period was as expected: children born in the early 1990s were more likely to experience parental separation than those born in the 1980s.

Comparing children born within intact and stepfamilies shows how even half-siblings who are not present in the family influence the probability that children experience the breakdown of their parents' union. It also indicates that the greater stability of stepmother families over stepfather families, reported in the literature, remains even after the stepfamily couple have a child together; children born into stepmother families are significantly less at risk of family disruption than those born into stepfather families. Putting the focus specifically on children with half-siblings in their family environment highlights the link between the earlier conjugal and parental life course of parents and a child's subsequent family life course. Not only is the current union type strongly related to family stability, but the circumstances surrounding the birth of the half-siblings themselves continue to have an impact.

CONCLUSION

An inevitable consequence of changing marital norms, the blended family is here to stay, and likely to become increasingly common. While not a new family form, in that, in the past, lone parents often remarried and had additional children with their new spouse after the death of the first spouse, the trajectory leading up to the creation of these families is certainly unprecedented. Higher separation rates among couples in intact families mean rising numbers of lone-parents, the units upon which stepfamilies are built. The rising number of stepfamilies formed earlier in the family life course leads directly to the emergence of the blended family, as a high proportion – even the majority – of stepfamily couples decide to cement their relationship by having a child together.

Arising in response to these developments, stepfamily research has tended to oppose stepfamilies to intact families, focusing on their greater fragility and assuming them to be problematic; consequently, stepfamily diversity has been largely ignored (Coleman and Ganong, 1990). The life-course approach taken in this research, however, highlights the great variations in stepfamilies resulting from the complex conjugal and parental histories of both members of the stepfamily couple prior to their union. It shows that, beyond the simple differentiation of stepfamilies according to the sex of the stepparent, it is essential also to take into account the family life course preceding stepfamily formation; stepfather families, for instance, created around young single mothers differ in important respects from those formed around separated or

divorced mothers. Taking account of previous family history also provides a new perspective on intact families, uncovering differences that remain hidden by the residence-based definition normally used. In this research, intact families were divided only according to whether or not the children born into them had half-siblings living elsewhere at their birth. However, a third important means of entry into an intact family should also be mentioned here, in that for stable blended families it is likely to constitute the next family transition. When the last of the children from an earlier union grows up and leaves home, the "stepfamily" couple will find themselves living only with children from the current union.

The movement of children in and out of households over time, the fact that siblings may not all share the same living arrangements, and the fact that they can live in more than one household at one time, all create a reality that is difficult to get a handle on. While many problems of definition remain, looking at the stepfamily from the child's rather than the parent's perspective has at least clarified one important aspect. Classifying these new family types as they appear is quite a challenge, but essential for comparative research. At the beginning of the text, we explained our decision to restrict the term "blended family" to stepfamilies in which the parents have a common child. This choice was justified as the research progressed, and the uniqueness of this type of family became increasingly evident. Treating the creation of a blended family as a transition occurring *within* a stepfamily that creates a genetic link between all members of the family makes it possible to study the specificity of this type of family – a process that is all the more essential given the growing importance of this phenomenon.

Whether or not a stepfamily couple decides to have a child together is strongly influenced by the same factors that determine intact family fertility – type of union, mother's age and the age of the youngest child. However, the absence of any significant link with the number of children already present shows that stepfamily fertility decisions are also subject to different forces. Likewise, blended families also have a dynamic all of their own, with a more complex set of family relationships both within and outside the residential group than the intact family. As suggested by Cherlin (1978), stepfamilies are under stress because they lack guidelines for role performance, institutionalised procedures for dealing with problems, and social support. However, although having a child within the second union may add further complexity to an already complicated system, it is also associated with greater stepfamily stability. Does the fact that the stepparent also assumes the role of biological parent at the birth of the common child restore some level of "institutionalisation" to the blended family?

As a result of changes in conjugal norms, the family experience of children born at the end of the twentieth century bears little resemblance to that of their parents. The novelty, diversity and complexity of the modern family life course present a challenge for parents, children and policy makers alike, and at many different levels. Studies of father/child contact

following separation or divorce have shown, for example, that the younger children are when their parent's separate, the less contact they are likely to have with their father; they have also demonstrated a strong link between levels of father/child contact, and the regularity of child support payments (Seltzer, 1991; Cooksey and Craig, 1998). In other words, with parents separating earlier in a child's life, measures need to be taken to encourage the relationship fathers maintain with young children after separation.

Being born into a blended family may expose children to a higher risk of family breakdown than if they had been born to parents in an intact family; however, it also means that they have experienced parents, and at least one brother or sister, something denied to growing numbers of children born into intact families. The question, however, is not whether recent family transformations are positive or negative – the family has always been a vehicle for social change, and continues to be so. The real issue is how best to manage these changes at the individual and social level, in order to ensure children's well-being throughout childhood however simple or complex their family life course.

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Residence-based definition of the various types of two-parent family

FAMILY TYPE	HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION
INTACT FAMILY ▪ **No child(ren) from earlier unions** ▪ **Child(ren) from earlier union not living in household**	**Two biological parents + child(ren) from the current union only**
STEPFAMILY	**At least one parent is stepparent of at least one child in the household; no child common to the couple**
▪ **Stepfather**	Mother, her children + stepfather
o **single mother**	Single mother, her child(ren) + stepfather
o **separated or divorced mother**	Separated or divorced mother, her child(ren) + stepfather
▪ **Stepmother**	Father, his child(ren) + stepmother
▪ **Stepfather/stepmother**	Mother, her child(ren) + father, his child(ren)
BLENDED FAMILY	**At least one parent is stepparent of at least one child in the household + at least one common child**
▪ **Blended stepfather**	Mother, her children + stepfather + their child(ren)
▪ **Blended stepmother**	Father, his children + stepmother + their child(ren)
▪ **Blended stepfather/stepmother**	Mother, her children + father, his children + their child(ren)

Figure 1
Distribution of children whose parents were separated in 1994-95, by the time elapsed since separation and new conjugal unions of mother, father or both parents. NLSCY, Cycles 1 and 2.

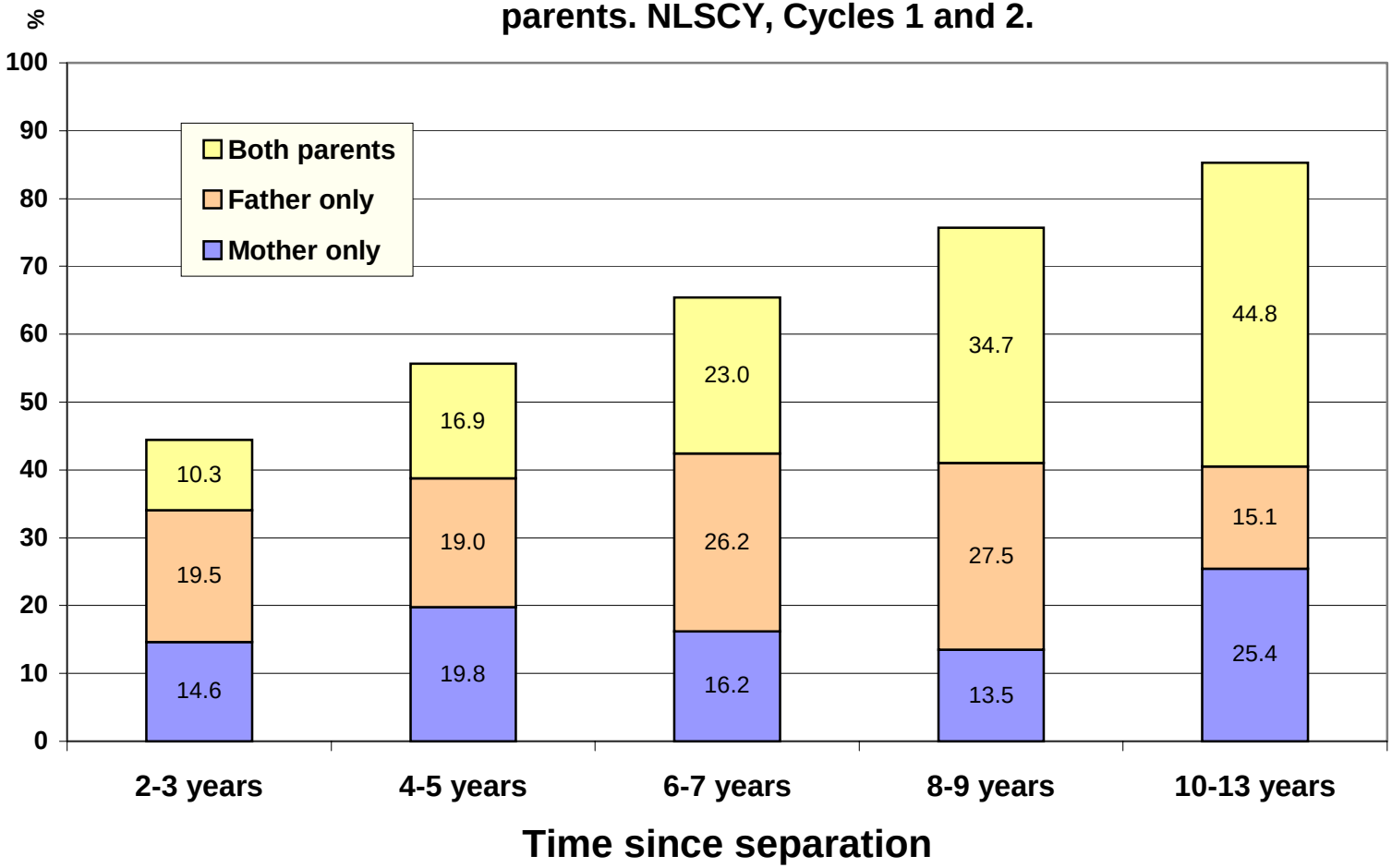

Table 1

Stepfamily characteristics for first stepfamily episodes declared by female respondents at the 1990 GSS, according to the type of stepfamily, Canada

Characteristic	Stepfather				
	Sep/Div mother	Single mother	Step mother	Stepfa./ Stepmo.	Total
Total number of stepfamilies	**193**	**171**	**79**	**38**	**481**
Percentage	**40**	**36**	**16**	**8**	**100**
Child born or adopted within stepfamily	**35**	**66**	**50**	**34**	**48**
Mother's age at start of episode					
➢ **Under 25 years**	**20**	**78**	**46**	**36**	**46**
➢ **25-29 years**	**26**	**16**	**28**	**24**	**22**
➢ **30-39 years**	**54**	**6**	**26**	**40**	**32**
	100	***100***	***100***	***100***	***100***
Average age of mother	**30.4**	**22.6**	**25.7**	**27.9**	**26.7**
Average number of children at start of episode	**1.8**	**1.1**	**1.7**	**3.4**	**1.7**
Average age of youngest child at start of episode	**6.6**	**2.7**	**6.2**	**4.3**	**5.0**
Sex of child(ren) present at start of episode					
➢ **Boys only**	**34**	**54**	**46**	**9**	**41**
➢ **Girls only**	**32**	**41**	**24**	**11**	**32**
➢ **Boys and Girls**	**34**	**5**	**30**	**80**	**27**
	100	***100***	***100***	***100***	***100***
Period of entry into stepfamily					
➢ **Before 1970**	**14**	**32**	**32**	**12**	**23**
➢ **1970-1979**	**28**	**35**	**19**	**48**	**31**
➢ **1980-1990**	**58**	**33**	**49**	**40**	**46**
	100	***100***	***100***	***100***	***100***
Type of union at start of episode					
➢ **Marriage**	**22**	**68**	**38**	**24**	**41**
➢ **Cohabitation**	**78**	**32**	**62**	**76**	**59**
	100	***100***	***100***	***100***	***100***

Table 2
Effect of socio-demographic characteristics on the risk of having a child among women living in a stepfamily, proportional hazards estimates[1], GSS, 1990 (n=476).

Variable	Category	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Stepfamily type	(Stepfather – mother div./sep.)	**1**	**1**	**1**
	Stepfather – single mother	**2.40*** **	**1.03**	**0.69**
	Stepmother	**1.71** **	**1.10**	**0.99**
	Stepfather/stepmother	**0.87**	**0.72**	**0.77**
At start of stepfamily:				
- **Mother's age**	Continuous variable		**0.94*** **	**0.93*** **
- **Youngest child's age**	Continuous variable		**0.90*** **	**0.92** **
- **Number of children**	Continuous variable		**0.95**	**0.95**
- **Sex of children**	Boys only		**1.09**	**1.07**
Region X	(Rest of Canada/Married)			**1**
Type of Union[2]	Rest of Canada/Cohab.			**0.41*** **
	Quebec/Married			**0.88**
	Quebec/Cohab.			**0.19*** **
Period in stepfamily[2]	(Before 1970)			**1**
	1970-80			**0.82**
	1980+			**0.70***

[1]The coefficients are (exp β), with levels of significance: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05.
[2]A variable whose value may change over time.

Figure 2
Residential status and origin of half-siblings (maternal or paternal) in children's family environment at birth

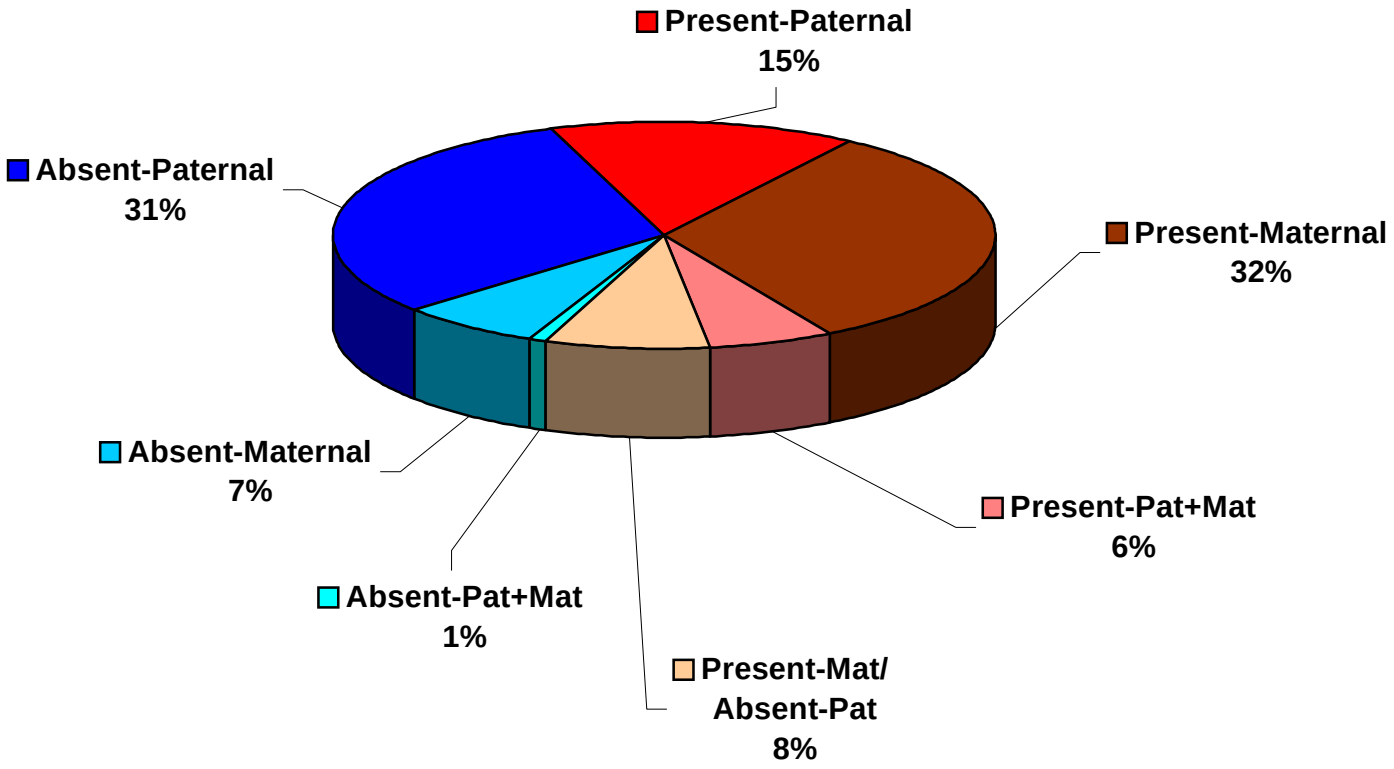

Figure 3
Probability of separation by children's family environment at birth, NLSCY, Cycle 1(1994-95)

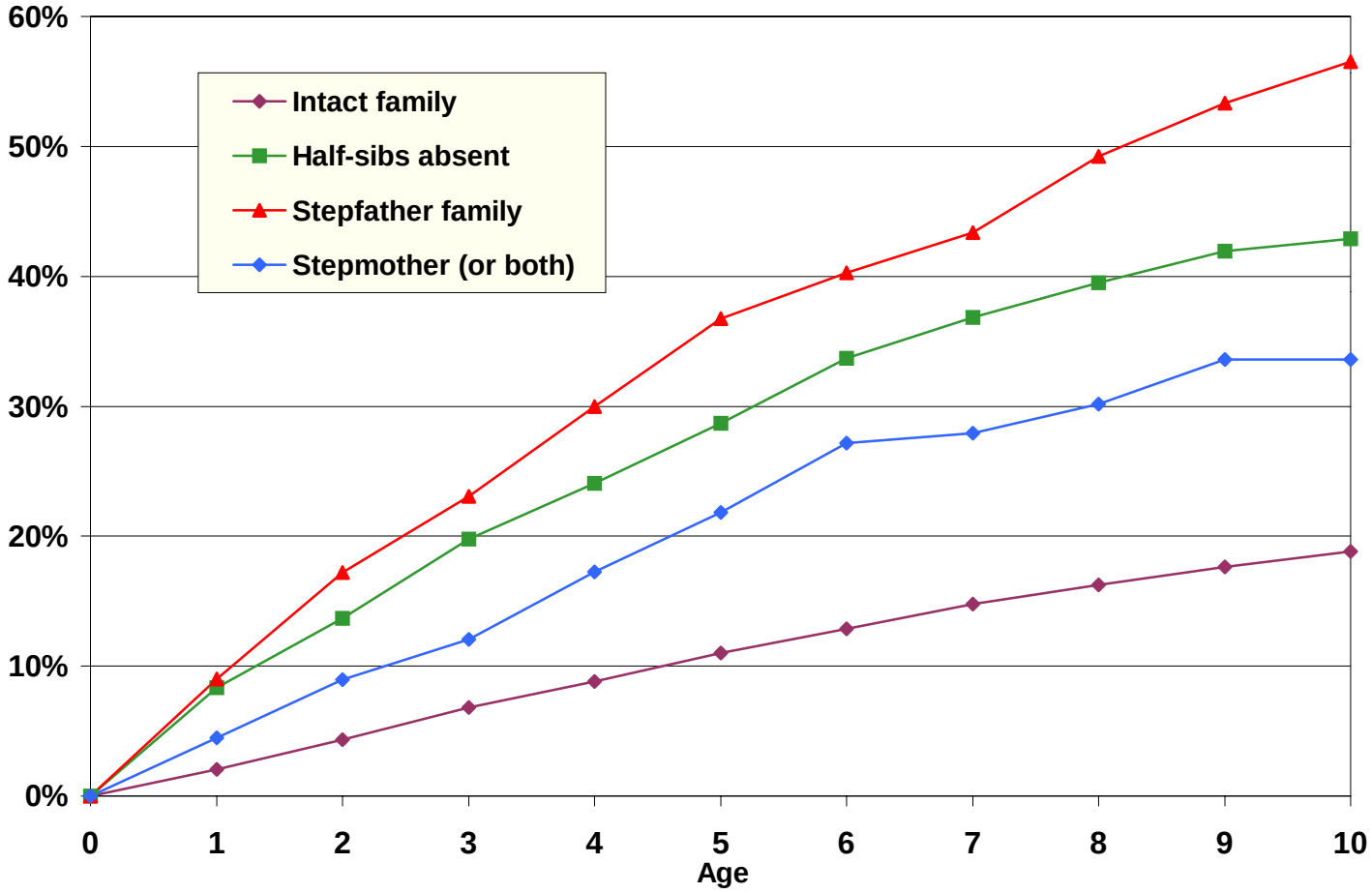

Table 3
Effect of socio-demographic characteristics on the risk of experiencing parental separation among children born in two-parent families, NLSCY, Cycle 1, 1994-95 (proportional hazards estimates).

Variable	Category	Coefficient
Family type at birth	(Intact family)	1
	Half-siblings not in hhold	1.95***
	Blended stepfather family	2.01***
	Blended stepmother or stepmother/stepfather family	1.25
Region of residence X type of union at birth	(Rest of Canada/ Direct marr.)	1
	R. of C./Married after cohab.	1.82***
	R. of Canada/Cohabitation	5.71***
	Quebec/Direct marriage	1.16
	Quebec/Married after cohab.	1.35
	Quebec/Cohabitation	3.96***
Duration of union at birth	(Less than 9 months)	1.70***
	9-23 months	1.57***
	2-4 years	1.13
	5 years or more	1
Type of previous unions (both parents)	(No previous union)	1
	Marriage only	0.69**
	Cohabitation only	1.24
	Marriage and cohabitation	0.91
Birth cohort	(1982-1988)	1
	1989-1995	1.25**

[1]The coefficients are (exp β), with levels of significance: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05.