

Cluster: Families in transition

Project 4: Parent-child relationships in diverse postdivorce families and outcomes for children and parents

Aim

To examine the strength and ambiguity of (step)parent-(step)child relationships in postdivorce families and their impact on outcomes for children and parents.

Theoretical Background

Strong and high-quality parent-child relationships are related to more positive child and parent outcomes, such as their psychological well-being. A divorce often leads to weaker and more complex parent-child relationships. Children have less contact with one parent (typically the father) and when parents find a new partner, the relationship with the stepparent may be ambiguous and complicate biological parent-child relationships.

This project examines (step)parent-(step)child relationships in postdivorce families and how these relationships affect outcomes for children and parents. Contrary to most previous research, a wide range of postdivorce families will be included, comprising cohabiting and LAT stepfamilies and families with a joint physical custody arrangement. We examine the strength of social and financial ties between (step)parents and (step)children (i.e., parental involvement, relationship quality, parental financial support) and the extent of ambiguity of the stepparent role (i.e., normative expectations about this role). Child outcomes refer to psychological well-being, educational outcomes, and social-demographic outcomes (e.g., age leaving home, romantic relationships). For parents, we focus on psychological well-being as the main outcome.

To understand the strength and ambiguity of parent-child ties in postdivorce families and their impact on child and parent outcomes, we will use notions about the importance of biological relatedness, sharing residence, and the presence and role of other family members in the larger family configuration (Kalmijn, 2013; King, 2006). For instance, based on evolutionary theories, it can be argued that biological parent-child ties are stronger and less ambiguous than stepparent-stepchild ties and that strong biological ties have a greater impact on outcomes. Our comprehensive measures of family diversity allow for more nuanced tests than prior research of the role of residence and other family members extending beyond people's own household.

Research design

The project is part of the VICI-project 'Postdivorce family diversity and outcomes for children and parents' of Anne-Rigt Poortman. We will use the survey New Families in the Netherlands (NFN) held among recently divorced and separated parents. NFN is unique because it (a) is large-scale and longitudinal (wave 1/2012-13 (N ~ 4500), wave 2/2016-17 (N ~3500)), (b) includes a wide range of postdivorce families and child/parent outcomes, and (c) includes rich data about the strength and ambiguity of (step)parent-(step)child relationships. A third wave will be collected in 2019-20 to study the longer term dynamics. To better understand the ambiguity of step relationships, we also undertake spin-off studies in the context of wave 3 (e.g., a qualitative study about role ambiguity or vignette study about (step)parent's role).

Literature

Kalmijn, M. (2013). Adult children's relationships with married parents, divorced parents, and stepparents: Biology, marriage, or residence? *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 75, 1181-1193.

King, V. (2006). The antecedents and consequences of adolescents' relationships with stepfathers and nonresident fathers. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 68, 910-928.

Project initiators

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Location
Utrecht