

**Cluster:** Families in transition

## **Project 5: Family relationships in diverse postdivorce families and outcomes for children and parents**

### **Aim**

To examine the strength of family relationships and the extent of family boundary ambiguity in postdivorce families and their impact on outcomes for children and parents.

### **Theoretical Background**

Previous research about postdivorce family living has focused on (step)parent-(step)child relationships and how these relationships affect child and parent outcomes. Less attention has been given to other family relationships, such as ties to (step)grandparents or (step)siblings, though these relationships also change after divorce or repartnering. It is important to study family relationships as they may be a source of support for people after divorce, but can also be a source of stress because of the uncertainty about who belongs to the family (i.e., family boundary ambiguity; Stewart, 2005).

This project shifts the focus to family relationships beyond the parent-child tie in postdivorce families. We examine the strength of ties to other family members (e.g. quantity/quality of ties to (step)siblings and (step)grandparents) and the extent of family boundary ambiguity. A wide range of postdivorce families will be included, comprising cohabiting and LAT stepfamilies and families with a joint physical custody arrangement. Family boundary ambiguity will be studied for a wide range of family members and is measured by not only attitudes but also family behavior (e.g., who is present at birthdays). We furthermore examine how the strength and boundary ambiguity of these family ties affect outcomes for children (e.g., psychological well-being, educational performance) and parents (e.g., psychological well-being).

To understand the strength and ambiguity of family relationships and their impact on child and parent outcomes, we extend previous theoretical notions used in the (step)parent-(step)child literature to apply to other family relationships (e.g., Steinbach & Karsten, 2018). These notions refer to the importance of biological relatedness, sharing residence, and the presence and role of other family members. For instance, biology and sharing residence predict variations in sibling ties with strongest ties being expected in the case of shared full-time residence and between full biological siblings.

### **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 of family relationships and boundary ambiguity. Wave 3 will be collected in 2019-20 to include information about sibling relationships. To better understand the role of ambiguity, we also conduct a qualitative study about the terminology used for stepfamily.

### **Literature**

Steinbach, A. & Hank, K. (2018): Full-, half-, and step-sibling relations in young and middle adulthood. *Journal of Family Issues*, 39, 2639-2658.

Stewart, S. D. (2005). Boundary ambiguity in stepfamilies. *Journal of Family Issues*, 26, 1002-1029.

### **Project initiators**

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### **Location**

Utrecht