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### ABSTRACT

Most articles and books about stepfamilies are written from a stepparent's point of view and often state that stepchildren, because of their outrageous behaviour and negative attitudes towards the stepparent, have been the primary cause of the downfall of an otherwise positive relationship. To date little, if any, information has been made available as to the antecedents of that behaviour or if indeed, the stepchild's actions and/or reactions have been justified.

The purpose of this research project was to determine how children felt about their experiences in a stepfamily and also to compare the data collected, to find similarities and differences in the opinions of children presently in stepfamilies and adult children of stepfamilies.

The project took place in three urban centres on Vancouver Island, and utilized a sample of 6 children and 4 adults. Age ranges were:

- Children – 12 to 16 years of age
- Adults – 30 to 46 years of age.

Males and females were equally represented in both categories. And all participation was voluntary.

Interviews were conducted in a conversational style and utilized an open-ended non-directive questioning format that encouraged trust and allowed the participants to

achieve the comfort level necessary to share personal information on the following topics:

- Their expectations of a stepfamily relationship
- Their actual experiences in a stepfamily
- The changes they recommended for achieving a more positive stepfamily environment.

Study results suggested that stepchildren think there are many ways to improve stepfamily relationships. Primary choices for both age, and gender, participants were:

1. Communication within the family – Children want to know things before they happen and be included in family discussions, decision-making and problem solving.
2. Non-favoritism of the mutual and/or biological child – Children realize that favoritism is often unconsciously executed, but feel every effort should be made to eliminate it.
3. Family membership/status – All children should be accepted/treated as a family member. Stepparents should make a conscious effort to be as fathering (or mothering) as possible. They should include their stepchildren in family outings; let them know they are loved, and stress that family means, “leaving no-one out”.

Additional findings, from data analysis, isolated a profile for the ‘successful stepparent’ and for the ‘wicked stepmother’.