

## **PERCEIVED STEPFAMILY CHALLENGES: A CROSS-SECTIONAL DESCRIPTIVE STUDY AMONG STEPFAMILIES AND SOCIAL AND HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS**

**Anni K. Pakarinen and Laura I. M. Selänne**

**Abstract:** Professionals working in family services often come into contact with stepfamilies. Issues that often need professional support and stepfamily intervention include divorce, custody disputes, children's stress and adjustment problems, and challenges new stepfamilies encounter. The aim of this cross-sectional descriptive study was to explore the challenges of stepfamilies as perceived by the families themselves and by the professionals working in services for children, adolescents, and families. Data were collected in the spring of 2018 using semi-structured questionnaires among social and health care professionals and stepfamilies. The data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. The challenges reported related mainly to the complexities of managing a stepfamily, including parenting, role conflicts, issues arising from the former life, children's adaptation difficulties, and stepcouple relationships. Five themes were identified from the responses of professionals and parents in stepfamilies: many overlapping stories, children living amid changes, parenting under cross-pressure, love relationship is hard to maintain, and rocky road to a balanced family. These results provide perspectives from a wide range of stakeholders regarding the challenges stepfamilies face. Our study may offer valuable information for professionals working with stepfamilies and for researchers and decision-makers planning interventions for stepfamilies.

**Keywords:** stepfamily, stepcouple, children, adolescents, family relations

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The number of stepfamilies among the clients of developmental and family counselling programs organized by municipalities has increased (Finnish Government, 2019), with 95% of professionals who work in services for children, adolescents, and families reporting that they encounter stepfamilies in their daily work (Diverse Families, 2014). Divorce, custody disputes, emotional and behavioral symptoms in children, and the formation of families into stepfamilies are some of the themes encountered (Väänänen, 2013). In Finland, the national development of child and family services is topical (Aula et al., 2016) and actions geared towards an equal, child- and family-friendly society are emphasized (Finnish Government, 2019).

Socioeconomic disparities also play a role in family structures and transitions in Finland. Jalovaara and Andersson (2018) found that children of mothers with a low level of education are more likely to experience family changes, such as parental separation and stepfamily formation, compared to children of highly educated mothers. This suggests that stepfamily experiences can vary widely based on socioeconomic status, impacting children's well-being and opportunities (Jalovaara & Andersson, 2018.) Cultural context is another important factor, as non-marital cohabitation is common in Finland, with 54% of parents in a stepfamily cohabiting (Official Statistics of Finland [OSF], 2019). Cohabiting parents have higher separation rates than married parents, leading to a higher incidence of stepfamilies (Jalovaara & Andersson, 2018). Understanding such cultural nuances is crucial for comprehensively exploring stepfamily experiences (Jalovaara & Andersson, 2018).

According to the official definition, a stepfamily includes two adults and at least one child under the age of 18 who is a child of only one of them (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Official Statistics of Finland [OSF], 2021). The reason that official definitions of stepfamilies typically focus on children under 18 is that laws regarding custody and child support generally apply to this age group. However, family bonds, emotional ties, and financial dependencies can extend well beyond that age. Consequently, some research takes into account such practical considerations to address the ongoing evolution of stepfamily relationships into adulthood (Ihinger-Tailman & Pasley, 1987; Pryor, 2008). In this study, rather than broadening the research design to take in adult stepchildren, we use the official definition for stepfamilies.

According to statistics from 2019, stepfamilies accounted for 9.1% of all families with children in Finland, and a total of 10.3% of all children under the age of 18 were in stepfamilies (OSF, 2019). The number of children, adolescents, and parents belonging to a stepfamily is even larger than these figures indicate, as the statistics only consider those who officially live in the same household; also, they do not include stepfamilies formed by parents of the same sex (Ganong & Coleman, 2018). Internationally, stepfamily issues affect a large proportion of families with children. In Canada, 12% (Statistics Canada, 2016) of all children live in stepfamilies; in the United States, 26% do (Papernow, 2018). In the United Kingdom, stepfamilies account for 10% of all families with children; in Germany, it is 13% to 18% (Kreyenfeld & Heintz-Martin, 2011).

The main challenges for stepfamilies relate to parenting versus stepparenting, the loss of the previous family culture while constructing a new one, adaptation of children and adolescents to the change, and relationships with parents outside the household (Papernow, 2018). The challenges are largely due to the structure and dynamics of stepfamilies, which is different from that of nuclear families. Stepfamilies build relationships between family members in a much more complex context than nuclear families do (Ganong & Coleman, 2018; Jensen et al., 2017; Papernow, 2013). In comparison to biological mothers, stepmothers had more depressive symptoms and parenting stress, and felt that the child or children held them in lower regard (Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). In stepfamilies, money management is more commonly separated than in nuclear families, with parents being responsible for their own biological child's expenses (Raijas, 2011). Divorce is more common in stepfamilies than in nuclear families (DeLongis & Zwicker, 2017).

Research shows that children living in stepfamilies are more likely to be exposed to more stressors than the adults: the losses they have experienced, the dispute leading to their parents' divorce, and major changes involving stepfamily structure, new relationships, and the complexity of part-time residence can cause stress and confusion for children, which can manifest as adjustment problems (Broberg, 2012; Havermans et al., 2017; Papernow, 2013; Salo, 2011; Väänänen, 2013). In addition to adjustment problems, children and adolescents in stepfamilies have more problems with learning, behavior, mental health, and social relationships than children from nuclear families do (Broberg, 2012; Papernow, 2013; Perales et al., 2017; Saint-Jacques et al., 2018; Salo, 2011; Taylor et al., 2013). Adolescents living in stepfamilies have more frequent suicidal thoughts than adolescents of intact or single-parent families do (Samm et al., 2010). Moreover, Turner et al. (2013) noted that victimization — “maltreatment, assault, peer victimization, property crime, witnessing family violence and exposure to community violence” (p. 39) — is more common in stepfamily children and adolescents than in those from intact families.

However, some studies have found that being part of a stepfamily has a positive or neutral impact on children and adolescents. A study of children of Puerto Rican origin, conducted in New York City and in Puerto Rico, found that family structure was generally not associated with child psychiatric disorders (Santesteban-Echarri et al., 2016). Meanwhile, a significant relationship has been found between family climate and adolescents' well-being (Phillips, 2012). Recent studies highlight the importance of identifying and supporting structurally diverse families. Traditional comparative approaches, which often compare diverse family forms to the nuclear family, run the risk of overlooking the unique strengths and challenges of these families. Instead, a more inclusive and respectful approach that focuses on health, social justice, and dignity has been recommended for all family types (Russell et al., 2022). High-quality stepparent–child relationships are critical to the well-being of children in families with stepparents, which highlights the need for professionals to support families with children by promoting strong, supportive relationships (Jensen, 2022). Embracing family diversity and fostering quality relationships can improve family

stability and individual well-being, benefiting all members of structurally diverse families (Jensen, 2022).

While many previous stepfamily studies have been quantitative (e.g., Favez et al., 2015; Havermans et al., 2017; Jensen & Howard, 2015; Pace et al., 2015; Shafer et al., 2017), there is also a substantial body of qualitative research that provides in-depth insights into the experiences of stepfamilies (Pylyser et al., 2018). The target groups of these studies have been children, adolescents, or adults from stepfamilies (e.g., Jensen & Howard, 2015; Jensen & Pace, 2016; Santesteban-Echarri et al., 2016; Speer et al., 2013). However, there seems to be a lack of research from the perspective of professionals working with stepfamilies. This study thus employed a cross-sectional, qualitative survey to reflect both stepfamilies' and professionals' subjective experiences. We explored the everyday challenges of stepfamilies as perceived by stepfamilies themselves and by professionals working in services for children, adolescents, and families. This information provides a comprehensive understanding of stepfamilies' challenges and support needs.

## Methods

### *Participants and Procedures*

This study used a cross-sectional descriptive design. Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling method (Holloway & Galvin, 2016, p. 147). Stepfamily subjects were recruited by sharing information about the study in various social networks, including Facebook (Baltar & Brunet, 2012); professionals were recruited by email. Stepcouples<sup>1</sup> on a stepfamily cruise were also invited to participate in the study. This 24-hour Baltic cruise for stepcouples, organized annually by the Stepfamily Association of Finland (*Supli*), features an organized program for stepcouples, facilitated by experts from the association.

Families and professionals from all over Finland agreed to participate in the study, including social and health professionals ( $n = 21$ ); stepfamily parents ( $n = 36$ ), including biological parents (custodial and non-custodial) and stepparents; and stepfamily children and adolescents ( $n = 13$ ). Participating professionals' length of experience in their current jobs ranged from 1 to 33 years (mean 7 years, 9 months); their total length of work experience in the social and health field ranged from 2 to 38 years (mean 18 years, 6 months). Respondents included both social workers and health workers (Table 1).

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<sup>1</sup> A couple who are parents in a stepfamily (i.e., a stepmother, a stepfather, or both).

Table 1. *Background Information of Professionals (n = 21)*

Education/background	<i>n</i>
Bachelor of Social Services	7
Child and family work instructor	1
Child nurse	1
Cultural producer	1
Family therapist	2
Licentiate of Political Science	1
Master of Political Science	1
Master of Social Sciences	2
Psychiatric nurse	1
Psychologist	3
Public health nurse	1
Current job situation	<i>n</i>
Child nurse (kindergarten)	1
Child protection	1
Children's home supervisor	1
Divorce worker	1
Family counselor	1
Family instructor	1
Family psychologist	1
Family therapist	1
Family worker	1
Manager	1
Project worker	1
Psychologist in family counseling center	2
Public health nurse	1
Responsible family coach	1
Service manager	1
Service needs assessment	1
Social worker	4

The stepfamily adults who responded to the survey were mainly women (89%,  $n = 32$ ), and were from a variety of stepfamily types. The length of the stepcouple relationship ranged from a few months to 10 years. Their background informations is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. *Background Information of Stepfamily Adults (n = 36)*

Characteristic	<i>n</i>
Gender	
Female	32
Male	4

Age (years)	
26–35	10
36–45	21
46–55	5
Highest education	
Comprehensive school	1
Vocational school	7
High school	2
University of Applied Sciences	12
University, master's	11
University, licentiate	2
University, PhD	1
Time period of stepfamily situation (years)	
0–3	19
4–6	10
7–9	6
≥ 10	1
Role in stepfamily	
Custodial parent	6
Stepparent	14
Custodial and stepparent	14
Non-custodial parent	1
Custodial parent and non-custodial parent	1
Number of children in stepfamily (total)	
1–3	20
4–6	12
7–9	3
10	1
Children's living arrangements	
Shared residence	15
Shared and weekend residence	5
Weekends with another parent	4
Every other weekend with another parent	8
Every other week for two nights	2
Random visitation with another parent	1
All children live only with us	1
Type of stepfamily	
Both parents had biological child/children from earlier relationship and child/children in common	11
Both parents had biological child/children from earlier relationship, no child in common	9
Only respondent had child/children from earlier relationship	4
Only respondent's spouse had child/children from earlier relationship	10
Respondent's spouse had children from prior relationship & stepcouple has child/children in common	2

*Note.* Custodial parent: child's guardian, with whom the child lives. Stepparent: parent living with a non-biological child (e.g., stepfather or stepmother). Non-custodial parent: child's guardian, with whom the child does not normally live, but who is child's official guardian through a joint custody agreement.

Of the stepfamily children, six were between 8 and 12 years old, with boys in the majority ( $n = 4$ ). Among the seven stepfamily adolescents (ages 14–18), girls were in the majority ( $n = 5$ ). Their background information is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. *Background Information of Children and Adolescents ( $n = 13$ )*

Characteristic	<i>n</i>
Gender	
Female	7
Male	6
Age (years)	
8–12	6
13–18	7
Age when stepfamily life started (years)	
0–5	4
6–10	5
11–15	4
Number of siblings (bio and step) in family	
1–2	6
3–4	4
5–6	3

### ***Measures***

The data were collected using semi-structured Finnish questionnaires, developed by the authors for use in this study. Data collection took place during two weeks in April to May, 2018. Data from professionals were collected with an online open-ended questionnaire; stepfamily adults were given online and paper-based open-ended questionnaires, while data from stepfamily children and adolescents were collected with a paper-based Likert-type questionnaire (Holloway & Galvin, 2016, p. 92).

Professionals were asked if they met with stepfamilies in their work and, if so, what kind of work they were doing with them. Questions related to challenges were twofold. Professionals were asked what kinds of challenges they met when working with stepfamilies and what kinds of challenges stepfamilies have in their daily lives.

Stepfamily adults were asked what kinds of challenges they had experienced concerning stepfamily and family functioning, parenthood, children and adolescents, and their romantic relationship. Stepfamily children and adolescents filled in a structured, four-point Likert questionnaire with statements about stepfamily life.



### ***Data Analysis***

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019). The data retrieved from each group of participants (professionals, stepfamily parents, and children and adolescents) were analyzed separately.

The data retrieved from the professionals' questionnaires were inductively analyzed. First, relevant words, terms, and sentences were underlined with different colors in the text, with each color characterizing expressions or words with the same content. Second, relevant entries were retrieved from the material and coded using expressions or words that described and gave meaning to the studied phenomenon. Third, the codes were examined for a broader meaning. Codes with the same meaning were combined and preliminary themes were formed. Fourth, the preliminary themes were reviewed and refined. Some of the themes were discarded and merged with other themes. Fifth, the themes were named to reflect their content. Based on the analysis, five themes emerged: many overlapping stories, children living amid changes, parenting under cross-pressure, love relationship is hard to maintain, and rocky road to a balanced family.

The themes formed from the professionals' questionnaires guided the analysis of the data retrieved from the questionnaires for stepfamilies. The stepfamily data were deductively analyzed using the themes formed in the previous step. Relevant words, terms, and sentences were underlined with different colors in the text according to the themes.

Data were collected from children and adolescents using a four-point Likert scale questionnaire. They responded to statements by selecting one of the following options: (1) *It's OK and/or I'm satisfied*; (2) *There are some challenges with this thing*; (3) *There are more challenges with this thing*; or (4) *I can't say or does not apply to me*. The response frequencies for each statement were then calculated and described, providing an overview of the children's experiences and perceptions.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

The study was carried out in accordance with the ethical principles that guide responsible conduct in research. Ethical principles in human sciences include respect for the sovereignty of the subject, avoidance of harm, and protection of privacy and data (General Assembly of the World Medical Association, 2014; Shamoo & Resnik, 2009). Research permissions were obtained from relevant parties. A favorable opinion from the Ethics Committee of University of Turku, Finland (6/2018) and research permission from the target organizations (8/2018) were received for the development phase and feasibility study. Permission for the use of the questionnaires used in the study was obtained from their developers.

Our research procedures were in accordance with guidelines from the General Assembly of the World Medical Association (2014) and from Shamoo and Resnik (2009). Subjects were provided relevant information on which to base their decisions to participate in the study and were then asked for written consent to participate. Study participation was voluntary and subjects were



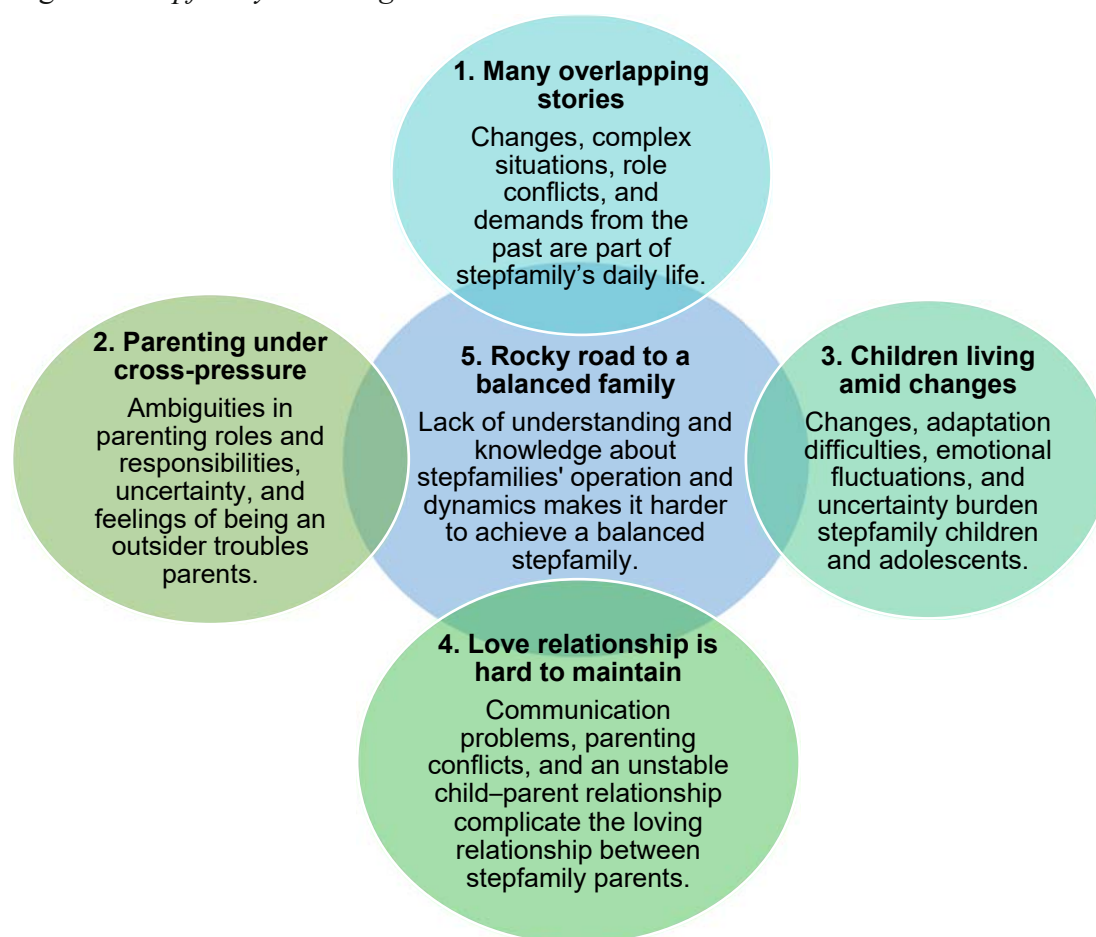
informed that they had the right to suspend their participation at any stage. Research work was conducted with honesty and accuracy in recording, presenting, and evaluating results. The research material was kept in a locked room and was not presented to persons outside of the research group. Results were reported without distorting the results. The method of reporting ensured that individual respondents were not identifiable from the results.

The children and adolescents were considered to be a vulnerable group and their right to self-determination was respected by asking them for consent to participate in the study (Farrell, 2005). In addition, children who had suffered a traumatic stress response or other mental symptoms caused by the separation process, and who were receiving treatment, were excluded from the study (Farrell, 2005).

## Results

Five themes were formulated from the answers of the professionals and the stepfamily parents who participated in this study (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Stepfamily Challenges*



### ***Theme 1: Many Overlapping Stories***

In responding to the questionnaire, the professionals described the relationships, adaptation, and situations in the daily life of stepfamily members with the terms “diversity”, “complexity”, “non-simultaneous situations”, “rapidly changing relationships”, and “unpredictability”. They saw adapting to the stepfamily situation and developing attachments between stepfamily members as taking time and sometimes creating challenges. According to them, a stepfamily also often experiences challenges related to unclear roles, conflicting expectations, and feelings of externality, as the following brief quotations<sup>2</sup> illustrate:

Adapting to a new situation with family members happens in different stages and time periods and can be difficult.

For many, the difficult thing is the feelings towards the spouse’s children, the fact that they don’t attach, or the children don’t attach, can’t find their own place ...

According to the stepcouples’ responses, the challenges they experienced were related to issues in the family’s daily life, such as how responsibilities and roles in the stepfamily are constructed, and how the boundaries of the stepfamily are defined. Finding a common time for all family members to meet and committed participation in that gathering was also seen as a challenging but important way to develop relationships between family members. Many respondents also mentioned the presence and impact of feelings of externality and jealousy on the well-being of family members. The stepcouples felt that they needed support in identifying and strengthening positive commonalities, as well as information on the developmental stages of stepfamilies. When considering the commitment of all family members to a stepfamily, one parent said, “When we are a family, we are a family, not separate entities.”

Elements from life before the stepfamily was formed sometimes pose challenges to stepfamily life, particularly when contact must occur with members of the previous family. Protracted differences between ex-spouses, as well as maintenance and appointment disputes, are, in the opinion of the professionals, the most difficult: they reported sometimes feeling like a “referee” amid ex-spouse disputes. According to them, these situations involve, among other things, bullying of ex-spouses and blackmailing ex-spouses in consultation with other family members. Other challenges to stepfamily life include difficult relationships and non-cooperation of an ex-spouse, the other biological parent’s lack of participation, and differences of opinion regarding child upbringing. Other demands and constraints from outside, often imposed by the ex-family, may also affect the daily life of the stepfamily, according to the professionals. They described the

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<sup>2</sup> Participant responses were in Finnish. The quotations appearing in this article were translated by the authors.

effects of a lack of cooperation, and of factors present in the environment more generally, as follows:

Fatigue, uncontrollability in one's family life when cooperation with another child's guardian does not work.

The environment also affects (sometimes even complicates) the life of a stepfamily.

Stepcouples also made reference to their former lives in their responses. Communication methods that had worked in the former life could fail to work in the everyday life of a stepfamily whose members did not all share the same customs and practices. Participants considered how best to maintain a businesslike relationship with the ex-spouse and other relatives, such as the grandparents of the children, in order to take care of the affairs of the children together, but also how to set the boundaries of the former life in relation to the stepfamily. Some of the stepcouples' responses revealed difficult and problematic issues related to their former life and the actions of non-resident parents, such as disputes over rights, including visitation rights, and efforts to influence or alienate the children, which were perceived as burdensome for the stepfamily:

Problems with appointments, postponement of appointments, bullying ...

Appropriate and inappropriate influence on children (alienation and attitudes) ...

### ***Theme 2: Parenting Under Cross-Pressure***

Parenting is often more challenging for parents who must care for both their own and another's children. According to the professionals, different parenting styles can cause disputes not just within a stepfamily, but also between a child's different homes. Biological parents may find it challenging to share parenting with both an ex-spouse and a new spouse. The professionals' responses highlighted the challenges stepparents face in adapting to a new parenting role, including a sense of being sidelined or excluded from parenting responsibilities — a feeling described as “outsourcing”. It is not always easy for a stepparent to find their place in the parental role, and their relationships with and feelings toward a spouse's children are often complex and emotionally nuanced. The birth of the first common child in a stepfamily signals a new stage during which conflicting feelings can often arise in parenting. Stepfamilies experience particular challenges in everyday life: managing children's affairs, matters related to the use of money, applying for various permits, and arranging meetings and housing for the children. The professionals described the role of stepparenting and the burden of parenting a stepfamily as follows:

Understanding, finding, and exercising one's role, responsibilities, and freedom.

The exhaustion of the stepmothers and the “being between a rock and a hard place” of the fathers, which, at its most awkward, completely paralyzes.

Parenting in a stepfamily was the topic that concerned stepcouples the most: how parental responsibility can be shared and how equality between parents and mutual respect can be

accomplished in the stepfamily. Challenges included coordinating differences in child-rearing practices and coping with the stress of change. In particular, the role, responsibilities, and rights of the stepparent and finding one's own place in the family were mentioned in many responses. A few participants shared painful experiences, such as a stepparent's grief over infertility and a non-custodial parent's longing for their children. Seeing one's own children less often than seeing a spouse's children often caused conflicting feelings in the non-custodial parent. Stepouples discussed their feelings about their spouse's children, such as how to attach to the children and how to deal with experiencing negative feelings about them. On the other hand, it was felt that it is important in stepfamily life to engage constructively and respectfully with all the children in the family and to make a point of spending quality time with the spouse's children. Stepouples consider the role and position of a stepparent as follows:

How much the stepparent can/should be involved when it is difficult at school ...

In a stepfamily, both parents must have the right to take care of everyday affairs and to discuss grievances, just as a father and mother did in a nuclear family.

### ***Theme 3: Children Living Amid Changes***

The professionals also considered the stepfamily situation from the children's viewpoint. They observed that children may not always easily adapt to the changes brought about by the stepfamily — a new parent, new siblings, and new living arrangements — and may experience a variety of emotional fluctuations, feelings of alienation, and a sense of inequality in the stepfamily. The professionals also raised concerns about children being left out, so that their situations and views are not considered amongst all of the other changes and challenges arising from stepfamily life. The professionals described the children's perspective in the stepfamily as follows:

The “disappearance” of children into the jungle of adult relationships ...

Often when the first common baby is born, the roles change again from the point of view of both parents and previous children.

The stepouples also reflected on what the changes brought about by the new situation meant from a child's perspective. They felt that they needed support to act in the best interests of the child and make the child's adjustment easier. Their responses referred to the difficulties children face in building relationships with stepfamily members — both the stepparent and new siblings — and of finding their own place in a stepfamily; many such challenges of child adaptation vary with the children's ages. The stepouples were also aware that children's responses to the separation and the new situation could include feelings of guilt, anger, fear of another separation, jealousy, and alienation. They felt that the children's everyday life concerns included adapting to their roles, rights, and responsibilities in the stepfamily, and to the different rules of two homes. The

stepcouples viewed an adolescent's adaptation to the new situation, and a child's fears about it, as follows:

In adolescence, stepfamily is the biggest problem. "You have ruined my life by separating!"

Children are afraid that are these two [are] going to separate also, will I get equal treatment?

#### ***Theme 4: Love Relationship is Hard to Maintain***

Although the professionals' responses did not tend to focus on the stepcouple relationship, the responses of the stepcouples themselves showed that they saw a well-functioning relationship as the driving force of the stepfamily. The relationship was seen as providing resources for stepfamily life and the motivation to work together for common goals. The importance of team spirit was emphasized. The stepcouples identified a need to find constructive means for resolving disputes. Mutual appreciation, love, openness, communication, and meaningful interaction were perceived as elements that nurture the couple relationship. However, maintaining a loving relationship during stepfamily life was seen as difficult, and dependent not only on equality in parenting and in sharing responsibilities, but also on the functioning of child–parent relationships. When challenges arose, the stepcouples felt it was important to support each other and maintain a conversational connection. Social support networks were also seen as relevant to the relationship. The stepcouples spoke of the impact of stepfamily challenges on their relationship as follows:

How do I manage a relationship so that it doesn't go under all the stepfamily shit?

How to support non-custody parent in a difficult situation? How to make time for a relationship?

#### ***Theme 5: Rocky Road to a Balanced Family***

Some of the professionals felt that stepfamilies lacked information about the stages and challenges of stepfamily development, which made the road to a balanced family through building a common history rockier than necessary. Everyday challenges professionals mentioned included stepfamily celebrations, coordinating schedules, managing the flow of information between different homes, and making family rules and agreements. One respondent noted the lack of information for stepcouples: "There is not enough understanding of the stepfamily's operating models, we try to put everyone involved in a certain mold."

With regard to achieving balance in family life, the main daily challenges the stepcouples reported were lack of time and of common family rules. When ordinary life includes extraordinary needs, such as helping a child transition between parents, finding the time to invest in turning a stepfamily into a cohesive family is difficult. The stepcouples wanted concrete advice and practical tips for managing a stepfamily's everyday life and challenges. A few of their responses revealed that they did not have information on where to seek help for their problems. Peer support was seen

as one way to get help with a stepfamily's challenges. The stepcouples described the challenges of everyday life as follows:

Or if living in different cities, how everyday life is taken care of.





Challenges related to time sharing (relationship time, quality time with one's own biological children, quality time with spouse's children, joint time).

### ***Experiences and Perceptions of Children and Adolescents***

The responses of the 13 children and adolescents who participated in the study give insight into the challenges of building of a balanced family life. Most reported feeling “OK and/or satisfied” with their current everyday life situation (Table 4). This indicates a generally positive perception of their daily experiences within their stepfamilies. However, some children did identify specific areas where they faced challenges.

Five children noted difficulties in their relationship with their stepmother, highlighting a potential area for improvement in building stronger bonds and understanding. Four children felt that their parents did not always listen to their opinions, suggesting a need for better communication and validation of the children's perspectives. Similarly, four children mentioned challenges in doing things together as a family, which could point to a need for more inclusive and engaging family activities.

Table 4. *Answers of Stepfamily Children and Adolescents (n=13)*

Item	It's OK and/or I'm satisfied 	There are some challenges with this thing 	There are more challenges with this thing 	I can't say or does not apply to me 
Rules of family/families are clear	9	1	1	0
Family celebrations and visits	9	2	1	1
Relationship with the biological mother	10	1	0	0
Relationship with the biological father	10	1	0	0
Relationship with the stepmother	2	5	0	4
Relationship with the stepfather	6	3	1	1
I feel safe	7	1	0	0
Family vacations and free time	9	2	0	1
I feel loved	9	1	1	0
I can talk about my things to family adults	7	3	1	0
Children are treated equally	7	2	1	1
My opinions are listened to	7	4	0	0
We do things together as a family	7	4	0	0
Relationships with sisters and/or brothers	8	2	1	0



Three children reported issues in their relationship with their stepfather, indicating that this dynamic might require additional support and attention. Additionally, three children felt they lacked opportunities to talk about important matters with the adults in their family, underscoring the importance of open and supportive communication channels within the household.

## Discussion

Stepfamilies need support for their specific challenges. Professionals also need more information about stepfamilies, and tools to support their well-being (Papernow, 2018). Families are increasingly diverse and often need support that is tailored to their specific situations, and thus is more challenging to provide. For services and interventions to meet families' needs, it is important to consider the specific requirements of each target group and use a family-centered approach. Stepfamilies are one special form of family with their own themes and many challenges, as shown in this and previous studies (e.g., Perales et al., 2017; Saint-Jacques et al., 2018; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). They need services that consider their specific characteristics.

The aim of this cross-sectional descriptive study was to explore the challenges of stepfamilies as perceived by stepfamilies themselves and by professionals working in services for children, adolescents, and families. Such professionals have detailed experiential knowledge of stepfamilies, but their perspectives have rarely been explored. This study attempted to fill this gap. Participant responses revealed multidimensional challenges, strengthening previous evidence that major challenges are common across stepfamilies regardless of the families' culture and region (Papernow, 2018). This study found that challenges were mainly related to complex situations, role conflicts and former life, parenting challenges, children's adaptation difficulties, and stepcouple relationships. Five themes were formed from the responses of professionals and stepfamily parents.

The first theme, *many overlapping stories*, revealed that stepfamilies face disruptive changes, complex situations, role conflicts, and demands arising from their prior lives. The process of adapting to stepfamily life and developing attachments to other family members may take a long time and happen non-simultaneously, causing interpersonal conflicts. Role conflicts, uncertainty regarding responsibilities, and disagreements about child upbringing also seemed to distress family members, a finding from many earlier studies as well (Ganong & Coleman, 2018; Jensen, 2017; Papernow, 2018). As found in other studies (Ganong & Coleman, 2018), having a difficult relationship and lack of cooperation with an ex-spouse was a major source of stress: many participants had even faced serious disputes over parenthood rights, including situations where the ex-spouse tried to alienate children from the other parent. These challenges may be long-term and affect stepfamily development, as found in a study by Stephenson and DeLongis (2019). They should therefore be addressed early on by professionals meeting with stepfamilies and during therapy sessions for divorcing parents.



The second theme, *parenting under cross-pressure*, showed that parenting challenges were related to different parenting roles, styles, and responsibilities. These issues seemed to challenge stepcouples the most. Stepparents may confront feelings of being left out because of the strong bond between the biological parent and their children. Different parenting styles between the stepcouples and between the different homes can be confusing for everyone involved, and cause disputes. Balancing the time and attention given to a parent's own biological children with that given to their spouse's children may be challenging, especially when it takes time to build warm and caring relationships with non-biological children. Unequal sharing of parenting responsibilities and uncertainty about whether the stepparent has the right to act as a parent seemed to cause conflicts within the stepcouples. Ambiguity in stepfamilies can create stress as family members navigate new roles and relationships without clear guidelines. This ambiguity can obscure family boundaries, disrupt routines, and complicate the integration of new family members (Jensen, 2021). In this study, most of the respondents were mothers and many of them stepmothers, which may have affected the results related to parenting. According to earlier studies, stepmothers perceive more strained roles, adjustment difficulties, and relationship struggles with children, spouses, and the biological mothers of their stepchildren than stepfathers do (Fellmann et al., 2008; Gates, 2019; Miller et al., 2018).

In regard to the third theme, *children living amid changes*, responses from the professionals and stepcouples revealed that the changes experienced by children and adolescents could lead to adaptation difficulties, emotional fluctuations, and uncertainty about their place in the new family. In their responses mentioning children's difficulties, both the professionals and the stepcouples showed concern towards the children. They understood that a child's adaptation to changes like a new home, stepparent, and stepsiblings was not always easy, and that problems may manifest as unpredictable emotional fluctuations and feelings of alienation. Respondents were also concerned that children may have feelings of inequality and of being left out, and may be aware of role conflicts in the stepfamily. As previous studies show (Broberg, 2012; Havermans et al., 2017; Papernow, 2013; Salo, 2011; Väänänen, 2013), these challenges are common in stepfamilies.

The fourth theme, *love relationship is hard to maintain*, was mainly reflected in stepcouple responses. Even though the professionals perceived a well-functioning relationship to be the driving force of the stepfamily, their responses did not include any further observations on this theme. The stepcouples perceived that maintaining a relationship while managing the complexities of stepfamily life is challenging, and dependent on other dimensions of stepfamily life like equality in parenting, equal division of responsibilities, and well-functioning child–parent relationships. The divorce experience can provide an opportunity to learn, reflect on past behavior, do self-examination, and grow as a human being; it can strengthen one's faith in the success of a new relationship and may make stepcouples more likely to seek professional help when facing challenges (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2012).

Responses grouped under the fifth theme, *rocky road to a balanced family*, showed that lack of time spent together, inconsistency of family rules, and disagreements about how to manage

upcoming events are among the challenges to achieving a balanced family. Both the professionals and the stepcouples felt that many of these challenges are caused by a lack of knowledge about stepfamilies' operation and dynamics, and conflicting expectations of family life. Both mentioned that stepfamilies need realistic information on stepfamily life and concrete advice on how to solve stepfamily challenges. This finding strengthens earlier knowledge that one of the main issues in working with stepfamilies is normalizing and providing knowledge about stepfamily-specific factors (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2020). Normalizing stepfamilies and providing them with stepfamily-specific information helps them to understand their challenges and situations as instances of a universal phenomenon (Papernow, 2018.)

Most stepfamily children and adolescents were satisfied with their everyday family lives. However, some perceived challenges in their relationship with their stepparent, their opinions being listened to, and doing things together as a family. Earlier studies show that the most commonly strained relationships in stepfamilies are between children and stepmothers, and particularly between stepmothers and stepdaughters (Bahn & Hong, 2019). In addition, research shows that stepparent–child relationships are associated with stepcouple relationship quality (Jensen & Ganong, 2020). Findings from the present study underscore the importance of parent–child relationships from the perspective of stepfamily functioning. Special attention should be paid to children's well-being in stepfamilies. From the beginning of stepfamily life, they need to feel that they belong in the family and that their opinions are taken into account. Spending time together as a family could be one way to promote healthy relationships between stepfamily members (Broberg, 2012).

### ***Limitations***

This study took a qualitative approach to investigating stepfamilies' challenges by analyzing the perceptions of different stakeholders who were expected to have subjective and first-hand knowledge of the phenomenon. However, qualitative design has some limitations (Queirós et al., 2017), and with a small and restricted sample, one cannot infer the generalizability or scalability of results. In the present study, however, we tried to mitigate this deficiency through our recruitment strategy, and tried specifically to reach professional informants who have extensive knowledge and experience from working with stepfamilies. We recruited stepfamilies from a stepfamily cruise to reach stepcouples who are active in taking care of their family relationships. This may have biased the results towards more optimistic responses, since the participating stepcouples were likely to be people who were well aware of stepfamily challenges and were trying to find ways to alleviate them. With that in mind, their responses may have been more detailed and insightful than a random sample of stepfamilies would have provided.

Some limitations may arise from the fact that only one researcher conducted the data analysis; therefore, some relevant themes may have been missed, and the outcomes may have been influenced by the researcher's personal biases. This might have been avoided if two independent researchers had been involved with the analysis. However, the analysis followed the strictly

predefined analytic framework by Braun et al. (2019) and used both the inductive and deductive approach. The researcher also tried her best to make as few assumptions as possible and to handle the data objectively and with an open mind.

### ***Conclusion***

Even with the limitations noted above, the study results increase our understanding of stepfamily challenges. Although the results are from only one country, they may be taken as offering a broader reflection of stepfamily life: the experiences and perceptions of these families may be considered universal, no matter the geographic setting, and even taking into account cultural differences (Ganong & Coleman, 2018; Papernow, 2018). A main strength of this study is its versatile perspective on the phenomenon of stepfamilies' challenges, which to our knowledge have not previously been studied as comprehensively, with participation from both the professionals who meet stepfamilies and stepfamily members themselves. In this research, we aimed to involve and give an equal voice to all relevant individuals.

This study of the challenges stepfamilies may face during their daily lives furnishes insights that could be used in clinical practice to help with the planning of better, more family-centered services for stepfamilies. The knowledge gained should also help professionals better understand stepfamilies and support them in their journey to achieve a better family balance, where every member of the family feels at home. The results of this study may also be used when developing stepfamily interventions. Future research could examine how these challenges may be better addressed, perhaps with different interventions, in the effort to find improved ways of helping stepfamilies flourish.

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