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*Differences Found in Care With Stepmothers*

By TAMAR LEWIN

Children raised in families with stepmothers are likely to have less health care, less education and less money spent on their food than children raised by their biological mothers, three studies by a Princeton economist have found. The studies examined the care and resources that parents said they gave to children and did not assess the quality of the relationships or the parents' feelings and motives.

But experts said that while the findings did not establish the image of the wicked stepmother as true, they supported the conclusion that, for complex reasons, stepmothers do invest less in children than biological mothers do, with fathers, to a large extent, leaving to women the responsibility for the family's welfare.

"Being raised by the biological mother gives children a lot of protection," said the chief researcher on the studies, Anne Case, a professor of economics at Princeton. "It's a very big thing to ask someone to care for children instead of the birth mother, who, as the sociobiologists tell us, invests so heavily in carrying the child, nursing the child."

The studies took their data from two of the broadest, most respected surveys of Americans' households, income, spending and health habits. While those surveys were not created to analyze stepfamilies, their information is detailed enough to allow comparisons between different kinds of families.

Among children over a year old, living with both biological parents, the health study found that 61 percent have had a medical checkup within the last year. But among those living with a stepmother and birth father, that number dropped to 46 percent -- and of those whose biological mother was dead, only 35 percent had seen a doctor.

Of the children living with their biological parents, 74 percent wear seat belts almost all the time, compared with 63 percent of those living with a stepfather and biological mother and 52 percent of those living with a biological father and stepmother.

Families with a stepmother reported overall household food spending that was about 5 percent lower for each stepchild than in families in which both biological parents were present, the food study found.

In families in which women care for both their stepchildren and biological children, the biological child, on average, went to college for a year, while the average stepchild did not go to college.

Children reared by a stepfather also have lower educational achievement than those reared by both biological parents, although, as in most other measures, the negative effect is only about half as much as with stepmothers.

Prof. Frank Furstenberg, a sociologist of the family at the University of Pennsylvania, said that he did not question the findings and believed that the studies raised important questions, but he noted that stepfamilies vary widely.

For example, women who take on a 2-year-old child step into a role very different from that of women who care for a 12-year-old stepchild, and for all stepmothers the relationships evolve as the family becomes better established.

"I don't think most stepmothers are evil," Professor Furstenberg said. "If

they're less involved, if they take a step back, it may be for the most noble motives, to give the parent more room, to decrease the tension. They may be relying on the child's father when perhaps their trust is unwarranted."

With more than half the nation's children living apart from at least one biological parent by the time they reach 18, the functioning of stepfamilies has become increasingly important. Most stepfamilies involve stepfathers, rather than stepmothers, and compared with families in which a single mother is rearing a child alone, the presence of the stepfather and his income help raise the family's standard of living.

Still, previous research has shown that children who did not live with both of their parents had bleaker futures: among other things, they were more likely to drop out of school, become delinquents or engage in early sexual activity and drug abuse than children raised by both parents.

But while those outcomes are well known, there has been almost no research on the care, attention and resources such children receive -- and therefore, no way to know whether the damaging effects reflect poor parenting, family instability, lack of money or other factors.

"What seemed important to us was looking at the input, which hasn't really been done," Professor Case said. "For example, on the lower educational achievement, there was always the question about whether it was because stepmothers were less-able parents or the household was unstable. But now that we know it's not that, since the biological children of those same women, living in the same house, are more likely to go on to college."

Many stepmothers are quick to acknowledge that being a stepparent is complicated, particularly when they take on older children and that it is unrealistic to imagine that the new bonds will be the same as those between a biological parent and child.

"I think it's very important, going into a stepfamily, to understand that family integration is a process that takes four to seven years," said Carol Albano-Lutz, a stepmother and psychoanalyst in Woodcliff Lake, N.J., who treats mostly children and adults in stepfamilies.

And, Ms. Albano-Lutz said, in part because society generally holds women responsible for family welfare, the most difficult process of family integration involves the stepmother.

Susan Sasse of Chesapeake City, Md., vice president of the International Stepfamily Association, a nonprofit group, said: "What I hear from new stepmoms all the time, especially with older kids, is, 'They just hate me. They don't want to give me a chance. They think I'm taking their dad.' "

Ms. Sasse is no longer in touch with her own stepmother, from whom, she said, she "learned everything a stepmother shouldn't do," a lesson that became valuable three years ago when she married a man with a 2-year-old daughter.

"We have custody of all the kids," she said. "I have a wonderful relationship with my stepdaughter. But it does make a difference that she has a biological mom out there. I'm a female influence, but I'm not her mother. You have to respect that a stepchild has that other parent."

Just what effect that other biological parent has, at least in terms of health care, was one of the surprise findings of the Princeton research.

"We expected that children living with stepmoms would have less health care if they were still in contact with the birth mother," Professor Case said, "because the stepmom might not know if the birth mother was taking care of it, or might be getting some message from the birth mother like, 'No, you're not going to take my child to the dentist,' "

"But we found just the opposite," she said. "Where stepchildren had contact with their biological mother at least two or three times a month, they had the same health care status as children who lived with both biological parents. Having a birth mother hovering was protective."

Professor Case said she initially expected that having a stepmother would be better for children than having no mother at all, but her findings showed that children reared solely by their biological fathers did as well on health measures as children with stepmothers.

The research also looked at adopted and foster children, but the samples of those families are small, and the results less conclusive and more complicated.

For example, if adopted children were the only children in the family, they were even more likely than biological children to attend college, but if the family included biological and adopted children, the adopted siblings were likely to get a year less schooling than the biological children.

The education and food studies are based on data from the University of Michigan's Panel Study of Income Dynamics, and the health data from the Child Health Supplement to the National Health Interview Survey, both nationally representative surveys of thousands of Americans.

In addition to Professor Case, the authors of the education and food studies were I-Fen Lin of Bowling Green State University in Kentucky and Sara McLanahan of Princeton. Professor Case conducted the health study with Christina Paxson of Princeton.