

Research Bites

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Step-family Living: What Hurts, What Helps

Imagine embarking on a journey without a map, traversing unfamiliar terrain without a guide. This illustrates the experience of many individuals in step-families—a unique, intricate, and often uncharted realm of family dynamics.



"I wish that I would have known the kind of challenges that will be thrown at me and my siblings. I wish that I had been given the resources to utilise, if ever I needed any." (SC004, Female Step-child)

Introduction

In recent years, Singapore has witnessed a notable shift in family structures. Influenced by factors such as high divorce rates and an increasing number of remarriages, the traditional nuclear family model has given way to the emergence of step-families.

Step-families are households where at least one spouse has been previously married, divorced, or widowed, and has subsequently entered a new union, bringing with them at least one child from their previous relationship into the newly formed family unit.¹

At the same time, the frequency of marriage dissolution has been documented to be higher among remarriages compared to first marriages, signifying potential unique challenges within step-families.

As these families become increasingly prevalent in Singapore's family landscape, gaining insight into their lived experiences is crucial. Of particular concern is the impact on the children involved, as the essence of a step-family hinges upon the presence of children from previous relationships.

In this issue of Research Bites, we delve into the intricacies of step-family life in Singapore through the findings of our qualitative study involving 40 step-family members.

The study (1) explores the factors contributing to both positive and negative experiences within step-families, and (2) investigates the impact of parental re-partnering on the lived experiences of step-children.



Sample

- 20 step-children aged 16 and above
- 10 step-parents
- 10 re-partnered biological parents

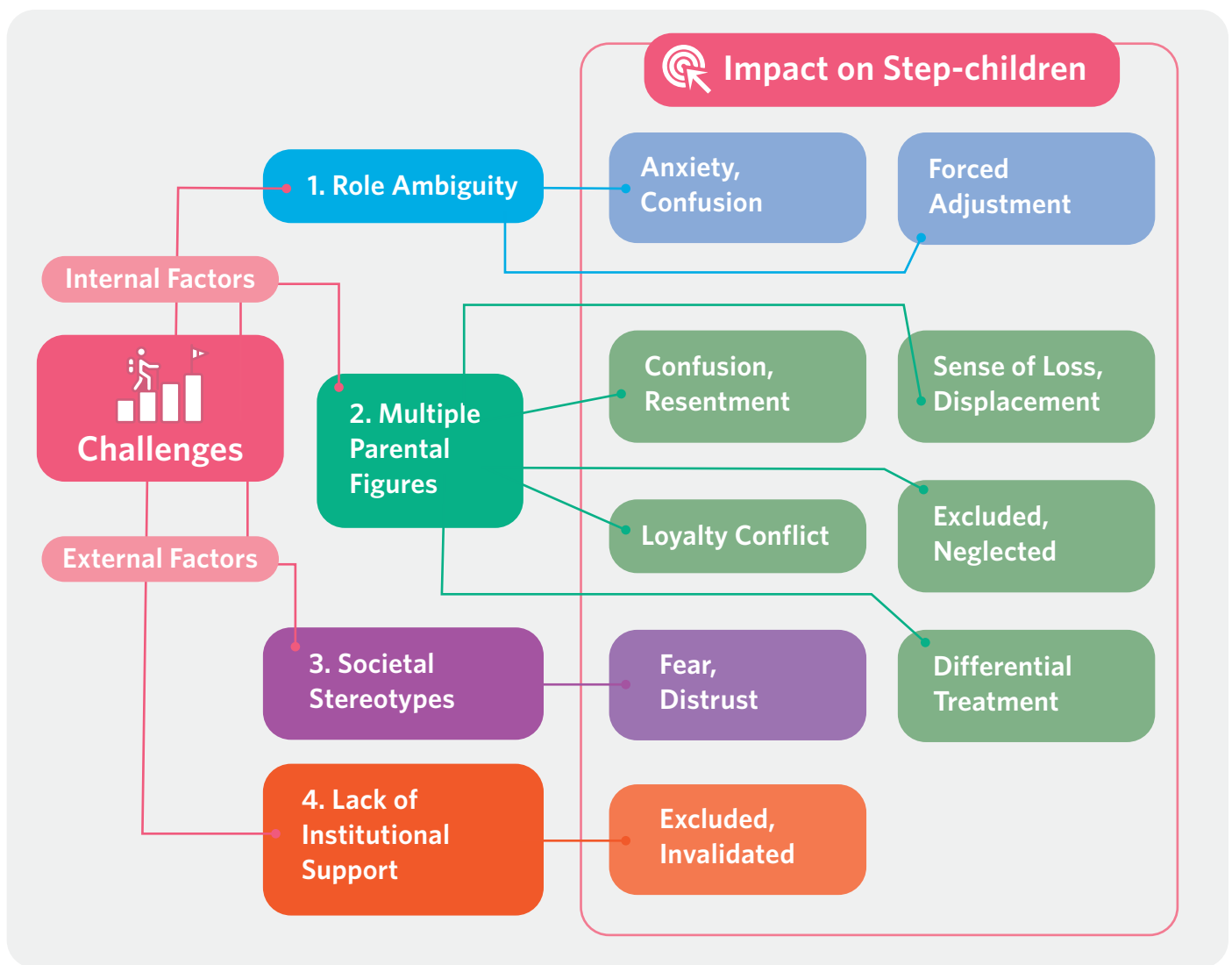
Participants are not necessarily from the same family. It is worth noting that parents and step-parents were selected regardless of their marital or cohabiting status, and that the retrospective experiences of young adult step-children are included in the study. This provides a range of perspectives with respect to parental re-partnering, a term that is used throughout this article.

What Hurts: Challenges of Step-family Living and its Impact on Step-Children

Step-families have unique dynamics that distinguish them from traditional nuclear families. With these unique dynamics come a range of challenges, both internal and external, that step-family members must navigate. These challenges can have a significant impact on children.

The following chart (see *Figure 1*) provides an overview of the challenges associated with step-family living and its impact on step-children.

Figure 1: Overview of Challenges Associated with Step-family Living and Impact on Step-children



1. Role Ambiguity

One of the prominent challenges that surfaced among many participants is **role ambiguity**, a concept encapsulating the uncertainty and confusion experienced by family members as they navigate their roles within the step-family dynamic.

This internal challenge arises when a parent re-partners, introducing a new person into an established family dynamic, disrupting existing routines, traditions, and relationships.

This restructuring leads to uncertainty for everyone involved, particularly for the step-parents and step-children. Step-parents, for instance, often find themselves navigating unfamiliar territory, being unsure of their role, authority and place within the family.

As one step-parent expressed,

"If you're coming into the family, you have no control . . . Raising the kids, not a lot of control. You can try but you have to accept that, regardless, you are not their parent per se, so it's a very big oxymoron, parent but not parent."
(SP001, Step-father)



Meanwhile, step-children face uncertainty regarding their position in the new family structure and the role of the new step-parent. Adding to the complexity, many step-children also shared they often feel excluded from crucial family discussions and decisions. One step-child shared,

"I remember their wedding. I had no idea what was going on." (SC008, Female Step-child)

The impact of role ambiguity on step-children is significant. It contributes to **feelings of anxiety and confusion** among step-children, as they struggle to understand their place within the new family structure.

"I'm like okay, this person, is he here to love me? Is he here to provide? Is he just here for my mom? Like very confused as a child because you don't really know and no one's telling you anyway." (SC018, Female Step-child)



Motivated by a desire to resolve ambiguity, re-partnered parents also often rush the integration process, advocating for quick acceptance of step-parents, including the use of parental titles. Yet, this well-intentioned push overlooks the step-children's emotional readiness and timing, leading to **forced adjustments** that may intensify their **feelings of uncertainty and unease**.

"[My dad] asked us to call her mom very forcefully which was very awkward . . . I did feel awkward calling a stranger my new mom." (SC013, Female Step-child)

2. Multiple Parental Figures

Another unique challenge within the step-family unit emerges from the existence of multiple parental figures: the biological parents and one or more step-parents. This dynamic can potentially lead to **conflicts over parenting practices and approaches** within and outside of the step-family unit.

2a. Divergent parenting styles

Within the immediate step-family unit, step-couples, where at least one person is a step-parent, often face disagreements on how to blend their parenting styles harmoniously.

For example, within the step-couple, parenting approaches may differ. The re-partnered biological parent may prioritise creating a

nurturing and understanding environment for their children who have experienced loss. On the other hand, the step-parent may emphasise the importance of structure and boundaries for the well-being of the children. The **collision of these parenting styles** becomes particularly evident in scenarios involving discipline and authority.

As a result, step-children struggle to understand the expectations and boundaries associated with each parental figure, leading to **confusion and resentment**. One step-child reflects,



"Like my mom says, it's okay. But then, my stepdad says no, you should be punished even worse. So, it's very difficult to understand, and of course, because he's not my real dad, then the resentment grows right, because, like, okay, who are you?" (SC008, Female Step-child)

2b. External co-parenting dynamics

Parenting conflicts may also extend beyond the immediate step-family unit, particularly when ex-spouses are part of the co-parenting equation. This dynamic is illustrated by a re-partnered biological father, who shared his concerns:

"The problem now is that I think [my son] has been hearing things from my ex-wife's side ah . . . He has been reminded of what it used to be." (BP002, Re-partnered Biological Father)

This external conflict can have ripple effects on the new partner as well, with **restrictive gatekeeping behaviours from ex-spouses** aimed at controlling or limiting the involvement of the new step-parent.

Consequently, caught in the crossfire of these adult relationships, children experience **loyalty conflict**. A loyalty conflict occurs when an individual, often a child in a step-family, feels torn between competing allegiances to different family members. This conflict can arise when a child feels caught between their biological parent and a step-parent, or between their biological parents if they are separated or divorced. As one step-mother recounts,



"[The children told me,] Mama don't allow me to take a picture with [you]. So, every time we want to take a family photo, they will cover their faces like that." (SP003, Step-mother)



2c. Shift in Parental Priorities

The presence of multiple parental figures can also lead to shift in parental priorities. When a biological parent re-partners, they often find themselves balancing the needs and demands of their new partner with those of their children from the previous relationship. This can lead to **changes in family routines and dynamics** that inadvertently affect the **time and attention** given to the children. One female step-child shared her experience:

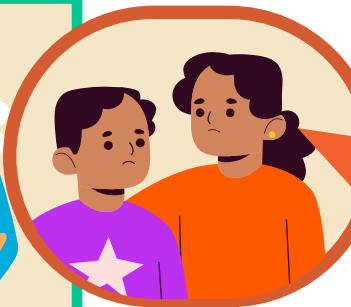
"Last time when I was in primary school, [my father] will try to allocate Sundays [for us] to go out. To just hang out. When my [step]-mum came in, a part of me was a bit unsettled because she broke the whole regime. So, I don't hang out with my dad anymore on Sundays." (SC006, Female Step-child)

This adjustment period can lead to children **feeling a sense of loss and displacement**. Sometimes parents can be overly invested in their new relationship, that they may intentionally or unintentionally **exclude or neglect** their children, as illustrated by the following step-child,

"I remember when [I visited my father and his new family], then the neighbours came, my father and my stepmother introduced their two sons only." (SC015, Female Step-child)



In some cases, parents might even fail to recognise or address instances where their children are **treated unfairly by other family members**.



"During [fasting month], my [step]grandma would cook for my [half-siblings]. My siblings and I had to pack food from our [biological] grandparents' house because [my step-grandma] wouldn't cook for us." (SC004, Female Step-child)

3. Societal Stereotypes

Step-families also face external challenges from societal stereotypes. Participants shared that step-families are sometimes viewed as "broken," and step-children may be unfairly labelled as "troubled" or "problematic."

Perhaps, one of the most enduring stereotypes is the **portrayal of step-parents as inherently malevolent figures**. This stereotype, perpetuated by literature, folklore, and media, fosters the belief that step-parents are cruel or indifferent to their step-children's well-being.

Consequently, these negative stereotypes instil **fear and distrust** in step-children, hindering the development of positive relationships with their step-parents. For instance, one step-child shared her initial apprehension,

"I heard stories of how step-mothers and step-fathers don't treat their own step-children well. So, I often had this fear... and it scares me because when [my step-father] first came, I really felt a bit scared and awkward at that time. But he wasn't like that." (SC019, Female Step-child)

4. Lack of Institutional Support

Finally, another significant external challenge faced by step-families is the lack of institutional support. Many participants shared that there are **inadequate resources and services available** to address the unique needs of step-families. This lack of support can create an environment where step-family members feel isolated, exacerbating the challenges they already face.

Participants highlighted the **lack of support from schools** as a major concern. Step-parents and step-children expressed frustration over the education system's limited understanding and awareness of the specific dynamics and issues within step-families. This lack of recognition can lead to **environments that are not inclusive and insensitive** to the experiences of step-family members.

Step-parents, for instance, often feel overlooked and excluded by schools, as communication is primarily directed towards biological parents.

For the step-children, on the other hand, this can manifest as exclusion from discussions and activities about family dynamics in the classroom. For example, school assignments or discussions that assume a traditional family structure can inadvertently alienate step-children, making them feel that their family situation is abnormal or less valid.

Consequently, step-children voiced feelings of **exclusion and invalidation**. As one step-child puts it,

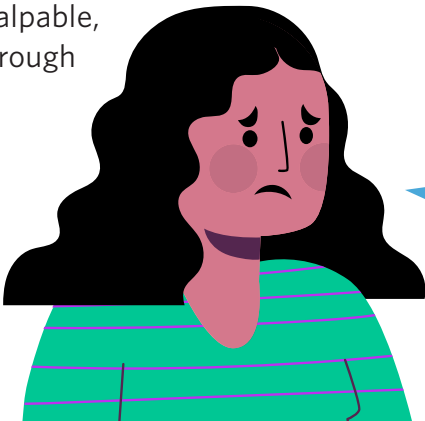


"They always teach children about a complete family. But then you have to understand that with the changing dynamic, it is no longer about a mum and a dad." (SC005, Male Step-child)

Long Term Impact on Step-children

Unsurprisingly, the enduring effects of parental re-partnering led many step-children to a **deterioration of their mental well-being**. During the interviews, the profound emotional weight of their experiences was palpable, often expressed through sobs and tears shed by several step-children.

For some, the emotional distress was so overwhelming that it has led them to thoughts of self-harm or suicide, as illustrated by the following step-child,



"I had to find a third party to help me settle [my family issues] because at that point of time I literally was going to go crazy . . . Actually, I had depression . . . I almost committed suicide before." (SC019, Female Step-child)

Furthermore, these traumatic experiences reverberated throughout their lives, affecting not only their relationships within the step-family, but also their interactions with others. As one step-child expressed,

"I really still feel like that hurt . . . Even though it's been like a long time, it still affects me even like in my other kind of friendships and relationships. Like that feeling of rejection and stuff." (SC016, Female Step-child)



What Helps: Adaptive Strategies

Amidst the challenges, participants also shared insightful adaptive strategies they developed to cope with their family situations.

1. Fostering Trust and Bonding

One key approach shared by most participants from all three groups (biological parents, step-parents, and step-children) involves the intentional effort by parents and step-parents to **build trust and foster bonding** within the family unit.



Parents and step-parents achieve this through spending quality time together and **engaging in active communication**, such as having small, regular talks between step-parents and step-children, and ensuring regular check-ins from parents on their children's well-being. For instance, one re-partnered mother mentioned how her husband takes her children out for activities even when she's not around,

"My husband likes to do activities even when I'm not there. (...) he would take my kids to go . . . for example, you know, a 5-kilometer rollerblading . . . So all these things they bond from there. So, I think they start from strangers, but only for a very short period of time, then after that they become very, very close." (BP003, Re-partnered Biological Mother)

2. Fostering Equality and Inclusivity

Another significant adaptive strategy shared by participants is **fostering equality and inclusivity** within the step-family. Understanding the importance of fairness and acceptance, participants emphasise the need for equal treatment and inclusion of all family members, regardless of their biological or step-relationships.

"So, [my step-father and my mum] will go shopping for us and they would buy [my half-siblings and us] like the same pants, same sandals and like same T-shirt, maybe different colour but same design... To make us feel like we are one big family." (SC008, Female Step-child)

3. Allowing Progressive Integration

Another key strategy requires a delicate balance between patience and understanding by parents and step-parents. Many step-children shared that parents typically insist on rapid adjustments upon re-partnering.

While this may stem from a well-intentioned desire for family cohesion, it often neglects the emotional needs and individual pacing of step-children. Central to overcoming this challenge is **allowing progressive integration**, wherein relationships are permitted to develop organically and gradually.



"My mom told me, 'me getting married to him doesn't mean that he is your father . . . He can be a father figure to you if you would like, but you don't have to call him Daddy . . .' I think we are at a very good place right now."
(SC009, Female Step-child)

4. Granting Autonomy to Step-children

Lastly, participants also underscored the importance of **granting autonomy to step-children**. Autonomy in this context means allowing step-children to have a say in their relationships and roles within the family. This includes giving them the freedom to choose how they interact with step-parents, decide on what to call them, and participate in family

decisions. By respecting their preferences and involving them in conversations about family dynamics, participants shared that step-children can develop a stronger sense of control and ownership over their place in the family, which can significantly enhance their integration into the step-family unit.

What Helps: Advantages of Step-family Living

Despite the hurdles, participants also shed light on the bright side of step-family life, highlighting the unique advantages and positive experiences they have encountered within their family units.

1. Expansion of Resources

One notable advantage highlighted by participants is the **expansion of resources** that comes with being part of a step-family. This expanded pool of resources provides step-family members with additional sources of assistance, guidance, love, and stability beyond what may be available in their biological family alone.



"Imagine having one very nice household. A nice household is considered having stability in finance, stability in emotions, stability in relationships, and having a proper home . . . Imagine (having) that times two." (BP004, Re-partnered Biological Mother)

2. Gaining Step-siblings

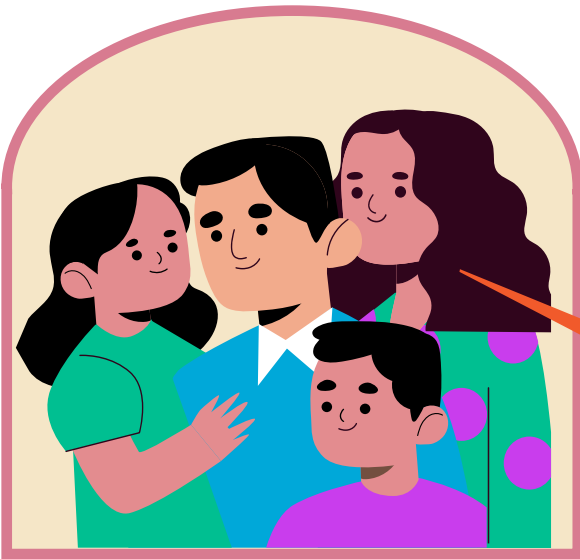
Another benefit of being part of a step-family is **gaining step-siblings**. According to some participants, particularly the step-children, step-siblings offer the opportunity for companionship, shared experiences, and increased emotional support within the step-family, sometimes more than what their own siblings can provide.

"Having my stepbrother... It was just an exciting time; how often do you get another sibling? It was quite a rare thing. So, it was really welcoming for us." (SC010, Female Step-child)



3. Sense of Completeness

Participants also emphasised the **sense of completeness** that accompanies the formation of a step-family. This feeling of wholeness encompasses a deep sense of belonging and satisfaction derived from having a fully integrated family structure.



"We are happy now . . . [the children] like to count like, 'Mummy, there are four of us in the house . . . we have a dad now.'" (BP001, Re-partnered Biological Mother)

4. Personal Growth and Development

Finally, an interesting observation is the growth in personal development experienced by both step-children and step-parents. Through the interviews, majority of the step-children exhibited resilience and a capacity to derive meaning and fulfilment from their experiences. Many described themselves as growing up to be tough and mature individuals.

For step-parents, their involvement in a step-family provides valuable hands-on parenting experiences. Through nurturing and caring for their step-children, step-parents develop essential caregiving skills and gain firsthand experience in parenting. This immersive role not only prepares them for the responsibilities of parenthood but also enriches their understanding of familial dynamics.

Key Takeaways

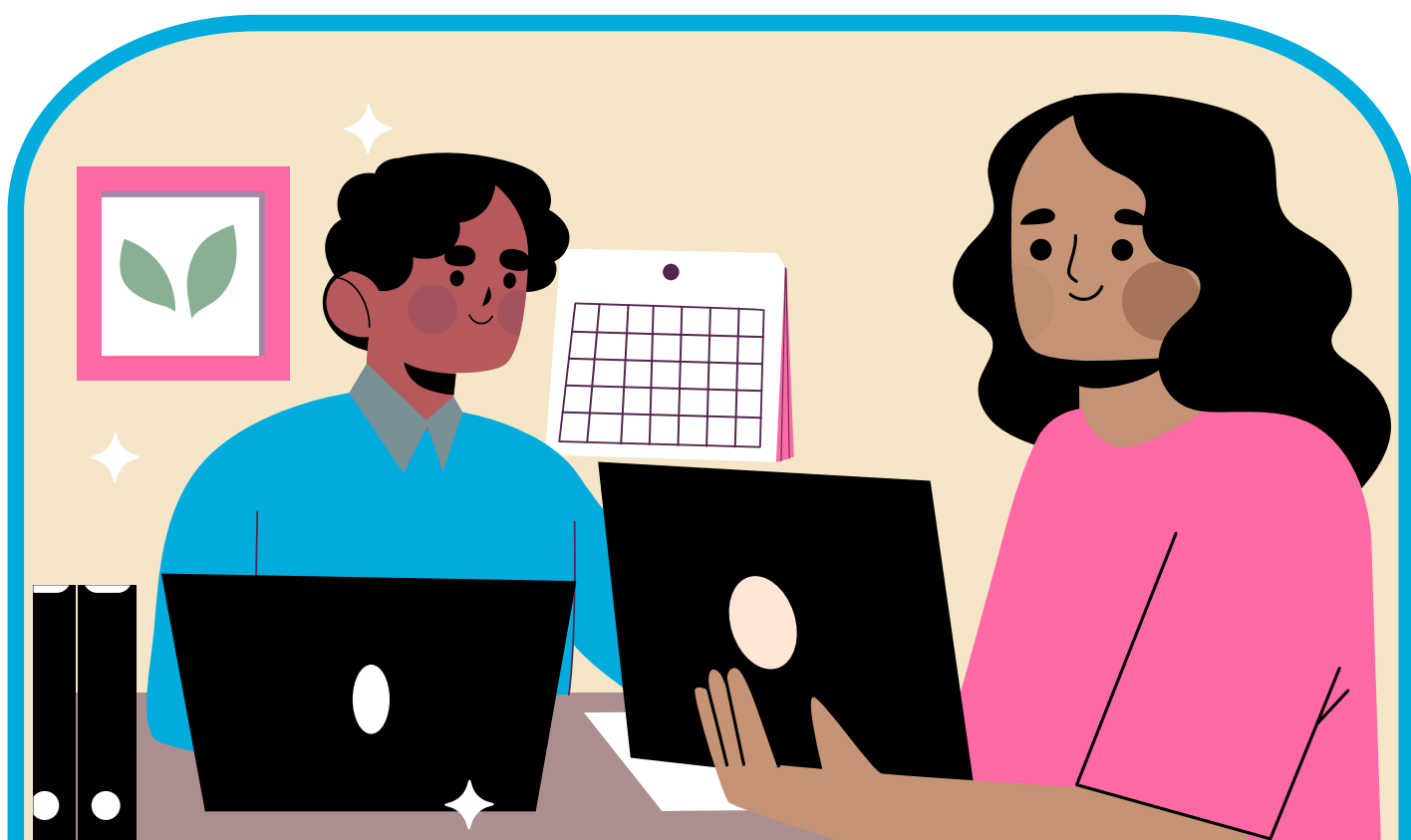
This study sheds light on the lived experiences of step-families in Singapore. One of the central findings of our study is the acknowledgment of the various challenges that step-families face. The challenges highlighted are not about putting step-families in a negative light but rather, by acknowledging these complexities, step-families can better understand and navigate their unique experiences. This nuanced understanding is also crucial for professionals working with step-families in developing targeted interventions and support mechanisms tailored to the needs of step-families in Singapore.

Our study also highlights the profound impact of parental re-partnering on step-children. Through our interviews, we uncovered the emotional turmoil experienced by step-children as they grapple with feelings of loss, displacement, and longing. This aspect of our research underscores the importance of considering the well-being and voices of step-children in family interventions and support services. Previous research have indeed emphasised the significance of validating the

experiences of step-children and prioritising their emotional well-being and the importance of comprehending the perspectives of children on their family situations.²⁻³

In addition to exploring the challenges, the study also illuminates the adaptive strategies employed by step-family members and the advantages of being in a step-family unit. By documenting these positive aspects, the study hopes to contribute to a more balanced understanding of step-family dynamics and offer practical guidance for practitioners and professionals working with step-families. Moreover, by recognising the advantages of being in a step-family, practitioners can help step-family members capitalise on these strengths to overcome challenges and build strong, resilient family bonds.

Through our study, we have pinpointed several unmet needs within the realm of step-family support services, notably the absence of tailored resources and lack of support for step-families, particularly for step-children. In light of these, we propose two recommendations.



Recommendations

1. Building Step-family Friendly Schools

In line with participants' insights and studies which emphasise the importance of recognising and accommodating diverse family structures in educational institutions,⁴⁻⁶ our first recommendation revolves around the establishment of step-family friendly schools, tailored to meet the unique needs of students from step-family backgrounds. This initiative could involve several key components.

Firstly, school administrative practices can involve all relevant caregivers, including the step-parents. Studies have shown that the involvement of both the primary parent and the step-parent may be beneficial to child educational outcomes.⁷

Educational programmes can promote awareness of step-family dynamics, incorporating diverse family structures into discussions and providing resources and training for teachers. Revamping book collections to include positive depictions of step-families is also crucial.

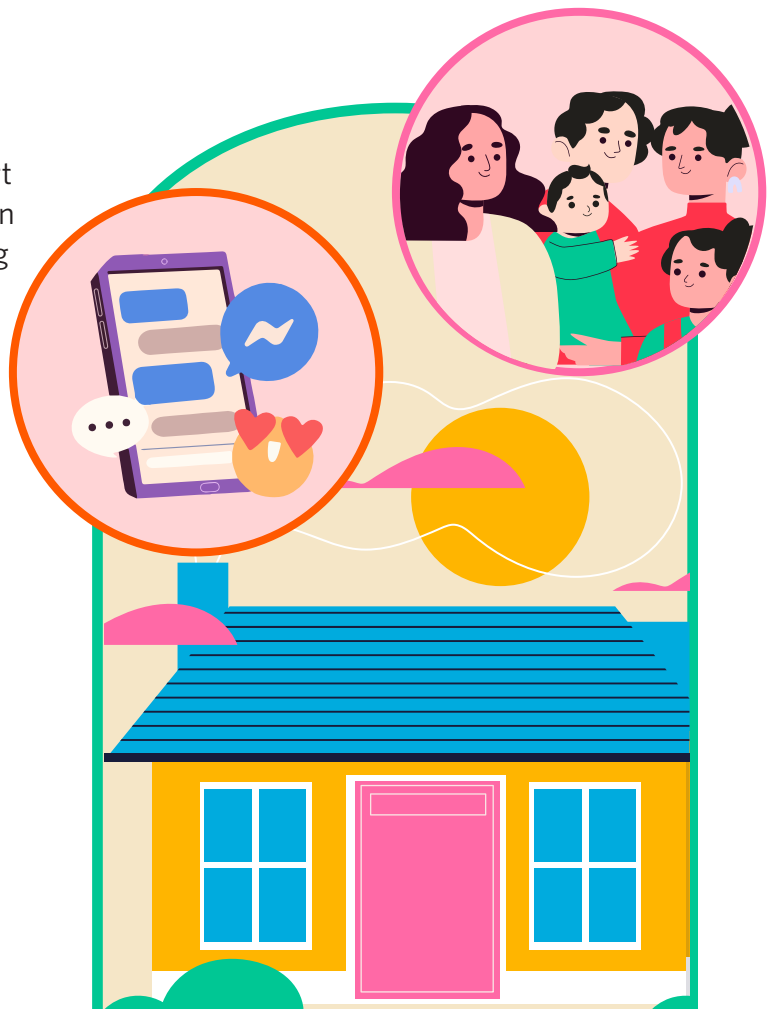
Additionally, offering counselling and support services tailored to the needs of step-children is essential, along with implementing training for school personnel.

Finally, schools can implement policies that promote inclusivity and support step-family integration. These policies could include facilitating communication between the households of both of the child's parents and ensuring inclusive participation in school events. These measures aim to create an inclusive educational environment that supports the diverse needs of step-families, fostering a sense of belonging and community for all involved.

2. Establishing a Centralised Resource Centre for Step-families

In our conversations with step-family members, another significant concern that surfaced was the lack of adequate tailored resources and services for step-families in Singapore. Many of the challenges that step-families face also stem from a lack of knowledge in navigating the step-family dynamics. To address this, the second recommendation proposes the creation of a centralised resource hub specifically tailored to support step-families, incorporating both online and physical features.

The hub would serve as a comprehensive and easily accessible platform offering a wealth of information, professional support services, peer networks, educational workshops, and community partnerships. This initiative draws inspiration from successful models such as the National Stepfamily Resource Centre and Stepfamilies Australia.⁸



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Research Bites

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Published in July 2024

Produced by
Singapore Children's Society
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