

## ❖ SIX ❖

MULTIHOUSEHOLD  
STEPFAMILIES

*If you are a non-custodial stepmother and you have no children of your own, it is a situation of enormous invisibility. People don't believe or take seriously your involvement with the children. No value, it seems, is attached to what you contribute. . . . You truly are an outsider.*

—Donna Smith (1990, p. 20)

Remember Bobby from the third scenario of Chapter 1? Bobby saw his father, Doug, every other weekend. Sometimes Doug's new wife, Leslie, and her three children went along on their outings. Clearly, Bobby has a relationship with a stepfamily, but should he be considered *part* of a stepfamily? Traditionally, the answer would be "no." Previous studies of stepfamilies focus almost exclusively on stepfamily *households* (members of stepfamilies who live together) and refer to them as resident stepfamilies. Nonresident stepfamily members like Bobby are not typically included in studies and they are not part of national statistics pertaining to stepfamilies. In this chapter, I argue that limiting studies of stepfamily life to resident stepfamilies is problematic. First, I discuss how researchers' continued use of the household as the unit of analysis does not reflect the reality of stepfamily relationships. Second, I review several conceptualizations of stepfamilies that

extend beyond household boundaries. Third, I describe what life is like for “part-time” stepfamily members and how not living in the stepfamily household affects their relationships and well-being. Finally, I discuss the implications of nonresident stepfamily relationships for future research.

## THE TRADITION OF THE HOUSEHOLD AS THE UNIT OF ANALYSIS

There is a disconnect in the way that members of stepfamilies *define* their families and the way that researchers *study* stepfamilies. In Chapter 2, I discussed how stepfamily members’ definitions of family often include people unrelated by blood or marriage and people living outside the household. Yet most studies of stepfamilies only include people residing together in the same household. One reason is that family scientists have traditionally relied on data collected by the U.S. Census, which defines families in terms of the number and composition of *family households*, defined by the census as “a household maintained by a householder who is in a family (a group of two people or more [one of whom is the householder] related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together), and includes any unrelated people who may be residing there” (U.S. Census, 2003, p. 5).

The National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) is one of the few surveys that provide direct information on stepfamily members who live outside the household. Studies based on these data show, for example, that roughly one in four married couples who have stepchildren living in their home (*resident stepchildren*) also have stepchildren residing outside their home in another household (*nonresident stepchildren*; Thomson, 1994). Nearly half (45%) of previously married cohabiting couples have both resident and nonresident stepchildren (Wineberg & McCarthy, 1998). Similarly, roughly half (47%) of married and cohabiting stepparents do not reside in their stepchildren’s household but live elsewhere (Stewart, 2001).

## WHY STUDYING STEPFAMILY HOUSEHOLDS DOESN’T WORK

Several trends indicate that it is important to examine stepfamily relationships both within and *across* households. These trends include (a) increased

involvement of nonresident fathers in their children's lives, (b) increases in father-physical custody and/or shared physical custody of children, and (c) instability in children's residence patterns. These trends reflect a general trend of increased involvement of fathers, including nonresident fathers, in the lives of their children (Pleck, 1997). *Nonresident parents* are parents that do not have physical custody of their children (or are otherwise not living with them), but who may visit them on weeknights, weekends, and/or during the summer. Of course, some nonresident parents visit minimally, and some do not visit their children at all. The majority of nonresident parents form cohabiting and married unions with new partners, many of whom have children themselves, creating a resident stepfamily. Nonresident parents who stay involved with children from previous unions create a kind of *stepfamily overflow*. Stepfamilies essentially spill over household boundaries to include children, parents, and other adults who live in other households. Seen another way, nonresident parent involvement creates stepfamilies that involve more than one household, which I refer to as *multihousehold stepfamilies*. Moreover, rather than thinking about biological parents and stepparents as resident or nonresident, we might think about residential status in terms of *degrees* of residence/nonresidence. Also, when one parent is resident and the other is nonresident, they may take turns engaging in these roles.

### Trends in Nonresident Parent Involvement

Due to high rates of divorce and nonmarital childbearing, roughly half of all children can expect to have a nonresident parent at some point during their childhood (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989a). For instance, the prevalence of nonresident fatherhood doubled between 1968 and 1997, increasing rapidly in the 1980s and stabilizing in the 1990s (Gupta, Smock, & Manning, 2004). Including nonresident family members in stepfamily research does not make sense if they have no contact with the stepfamily. In fact, there are plenty of children who have no contact whatsoever with their biological fathers and mothers, so called "deadbeat dads" and "deadbeat moms." Recent national data indicate that one in three children with a nonresident father did not see him at all in the previous year (Graham & Beller, 2002; Hofferth, Pleck, Stueve, Bianchi, & Sayer, 2002; Stewart, 2004). A substantial number of children do not receive financial support from their fathers. The 2002 Current Population Survey (CPS) indicates that less than half of all custodial mothers received child support payments from their children's nonresident father and only 60% had a

legal agreement regarding child support (Grall, 2003). Although mothers' reports of child support received tend to be lower than fathers' reports of child support paid, figures on child support payments are low regardless of who is doing to reporting (Seltzer, 1991; Manning & Smock, 2000).

Nonresident fathers are a diverse group of men, however. Multiple national data sources indicate that a sizable percentage of nonresident parents visit their children regularly and pay child support. Regarding visitation, the NSFH indicates that over one third of nonresident fathers see their children weekly (or more often) and 14% of nonresident fathers have periods of visitation with their children lasting one month or longer (Stewart, 1999b). The 1997 cohort of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth shows that more than one quarter of children in mother-custody homes stay overnight with their nonresident fathers "frequently," defined as 50 or more times a year (Argys et al., 2003). Roughly three fourths of mothers who were due child support in 2001 received a payment, a figure that has not changed since 1993 (Grall, 2003). However the proportion of mothers who received *all* the payments they were due has increased since 1993 from 37% to 46%. Visitation with nonresident parents, both mothers and fathers, tends to have a "Disneyland"-type fun-and-games quality, however (e.g., Stewart, 1999a, 1999b). These activities are less beneficial to children than involvement in children's everyday lives such talking about things going on at school (Lamb, 2002; Stewart, 2003).

Researchers speculate that increasing involvement of nonresident fathers is the result of stricter child support enforcement, increases in joint custody, divorce mediation, paternity testing, and parent education programs (Furstenberg & Harris, 1992; Pearson & Thoennes, 1998; Seltzer, McLanahan, & Hanson, 1998). There are significant barriers to "responsible fatherhood" (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998). Known factors associated with nonresident father involvement include physical distance, not having been married to the child's mother, race, education, income, and employment (Braver, Ellman, & Fabricius, 2003; King, Harris, & Heard, 2004; Stewart, 1999b). Other factors include rigid legal agreements specifying dates and times of visitation, children's extracurricular activities, as well as the demands of both parents' work schedules (Greif, 1997). Nonresident fathers' involvement with their children also declines when they acquire new step- and biological children (Manning & Smock, 1999, 2000; Manning, Stewart, & Smock, 2003). As children get older, they become increasingly involved in shaping the nature and extent of their interactions with their nonresident parents (Menning, 2004a).

### Changes in Child Custody and Growth of Single Fathers

The custody of children is generally negotiated by the parents and is legally formalized by the courts in divorce proceedings (Cancian & Meyer, 1998). Contrary to television portrayals of custody decisions as being acrimonious and contentious, the vast majority of cases go smoothly. One study of divorce cases in California in the 1980s suggests that the parents agreed on which parent should receive physical custody 80% of the time (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992).

The custody of children is divided into legal and physical custody. Whereas *legal custody* refers to who has the right to make decisions with respect to a child's upbringing (e.g., health care, religion, education, etc.), *physical custody* refers to where a child will live (Ferreiro, 1990). Custody is also divided into sole and shared (also called *joint*) custody. *Sole legal custody* means that one parent has the right to make the decisions for her child and does not require the approval or cooperation of the other parent, whereas *shared legal custody* means that both parents are involved in decisions regarding the child. *Sole physical custody* means that the child lives primarily with one parent and may have varying degrees of contact with the other parent. *Shared physical custody* means that the child lives part of the time with the mother and part of the time with the father (see Figure 6.1). This is generally not a 50-50 split, a situation referred to as *cocustody*. Parents with shared legal custody do not necessarily have shared physical custody, and most children whose parents have shared legal custody live with their mothers (Arditti & Keith, 1993). Shared legal custody of children is associated with greater increases of visitation between non-resident fathers and children, a greater likelihood of child support being paid, and fewer adjustment problems in children (Arditti & Keith, 1993; Gunnoe & Braver, 2001; Seltzer, 1991; Seltzer et al., 1998).

Child custody decisions are increasingly being made in a way that encourages both parents to stay involved with their children, resulting in more frequent interaction between children's "two families." This is happening in two ways. First, more fathers are being awarded sole physical custody of children. In a study of Wisconsin divorce cases between 1986 and 1992, one in four mothers was *not* awarded sole physical custody (Cancian & Meyer, 1998), and in 10% of cases, fathers were given sole physical custody. Moreover, not all custodial fathers are divorced fathers; substantial numbers of men with physical custody of children have never been married (Eggebeen, Snyder, & Manning, 1996; Meyer & Garasky, 1993). Nationally, the proportion of children living with a single father has tripled since 1970, although single-father families still



**Figure 6.1** More fathers and mothers are sharing custody of their children.

SOURCE: Hoest and Reiner (2005). Copyright © 2005 WM. Hoest Enterprises, Inc. Hoest, Bunny, & Reiner, John. Panel 3 from "Laugh Parade," *Parade Magazine*, Sunday, August 21, 2005.

represent only 5% of all families with children (Fields, 2003; Kreider & Fields, 2005). According to the 2001 Survey of Income Program and Participation, 80% of children who experienced their parent's divorce in the previous year lived with their mothers (Kreider & Fields, 2005).

A second change is growth in shared physical custody of children. The prevalence of shared physical custody varies widely from state to state (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). In the Wisconsin study, shared physical custody increased from 7% in 1986 to 15% in 1992 (Cancian & Meyer, 1998). Both shared physical custody and sole father custody are more prevalent among higher socioeconomic classes (Cancian & Meyer, 1998; Donnelly & Finkelhor, 1993) and families with older children (Arditti & Madden-Derdich, 1997) but it is a myth that all custodial fathers are high-income Whites (Meyer & Garasky, 1993). Shared physical custody may reflect greater parental cooperation and involvement, but it may also reflect parental conflict, inability to compromise, and gender discrimination (i.e., weaker economic position of the mother) rather than the best interest of the child (Comerford, 2005; Fineman & Opie, 1987).

Growth in fathers having physical custody has several implications for stepfamilies. Although 84% of children who live with a stepparent live with a biological mother and stepfather (Kreider & Fields, 2005), increasing numbers of children are living with biological fathers and stepmothers. Children in

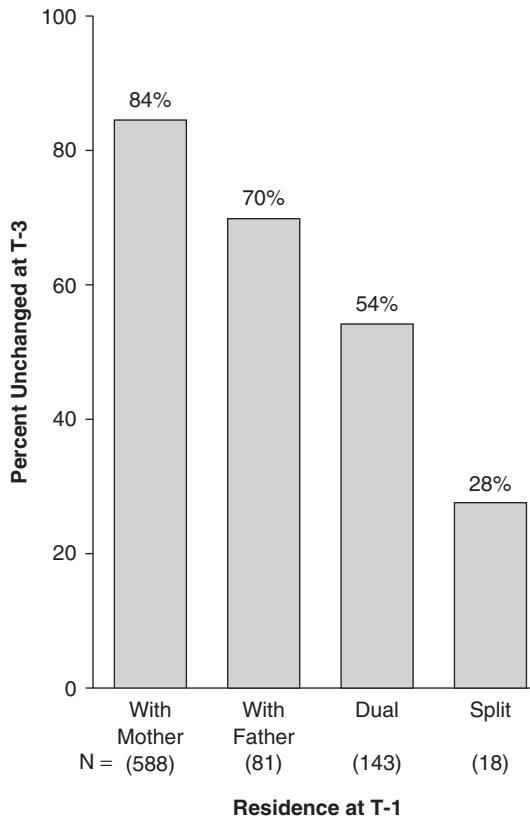
custodial father households are more likely to be living with a stepparent than children in custodial mother households because men with previous children have higher odds of union formation (marriage and cohabitation) than do women (Stewart, Manning, & Smock, 2003). For example, 33% of children living with an unmarried father live with their father's cohabiting partner compared with 11% of children living with an unmarried mother (Fields, 2003).

The increase in father custody means that an increasing number of non-resident parents are mothers. Mothers are more involved nonresident parents than are fathers. Nonresident mothers pay less child support than nonresident fathers, but they have somewhat higher levels of visitation with their children. They talk to them on the phone more often and have longer periods of visitation (Stewart, 1999b). Roughly 50% of nonresident mothers see their children weekly or more and 36% of nonresident mothers have periods of visitation with their children lasting one month or longer (Stewart, 2004).

### Dynamics of Children's Living Arrangements

Legal custody agreements and the realities of children's lives can be quite different. In other words, *where children actually live* is often different from what their parents agreed to in court. One of the most thorough examinations of children's residential stability is a longitudinal study of children of divorce from California (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). The first part of the study (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992) tracked children's residence patterns over a three-and-a-half year period (Figure 6.2). *Mother residence* and *father residence* are fairly stable: 84% of children living with mothers and 70% of children living with fathers at the first survey stayed with them over the course of the study. Only about half (54%) of children with *dual residence* (children spend at least 4 overnights with each parent in a typical two week period) and less than a third (28%) of children with *split residence* (full siblings who live with different parents) at the initial survey continued with this pattern. Most of the children who started out with dual residence changed to mother residence; they were twice as likely to end up with their mothers as their fathers. These findings suggest that it is difficult and perhaps impractical for children to spend substantial amounts of time in two separate households over the long term.

Simply comparing the residence of children between Time 1 and Time 2 (a three-year time span) masks movements that may have occurred between the two time periods. For instance, a child may have lived with his mother, moved in with



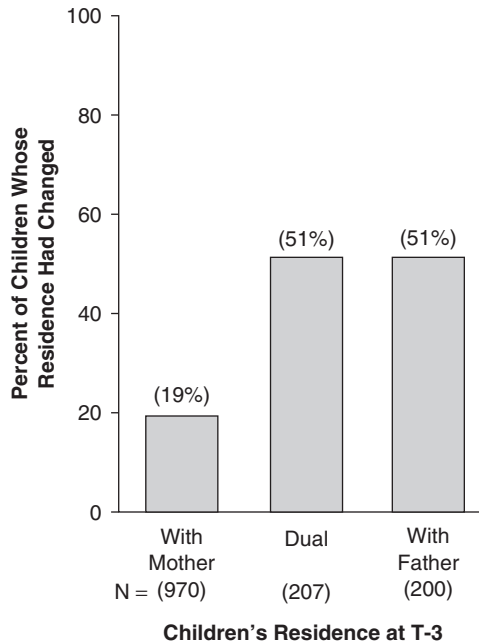
**Figure 6.2** Stability of Residence

SOURCE: Maccoby & Mnookin (1992). Reprinted by permission of the publisher from *Dividing the Child: Social and Legal Dilemmas of Custody*, by Eleanor E. Maccoby and Robert H. Mnookin, pp. 169–170, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Copyright © 1992 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

NOTE: Graph shows percentage of families in which the children retained the same residence at T-3 as they had at T-1. Data are from 880 families that provided data at all three time periods.

his father for a brief period, and then returned to his mother's home. Figure 6.3 shows the percentage of children who had ever changed their residence during the study. Whereas only about one in five children living with their mothers had lived somewhere else, *over half* of the children in dual residence or with their father had lived somewhere else previously. In fact, a follow-up study with the children when they had reached adolescence showed that father residence is the most unstable arrangement (Buchanan et al., 1996). The authors attributed this to social





**Figure 6.3** Percentage of Children in Each T-3 Residential Group Whose Residence Had Changed at Least Once Between T-1 and T-3

SOURCE: Maccoby & Mnookin (1992). Reprinted by permission of the publisher from *Dividing the Child: Social and Legal Dilemmas of Custody*, by Eleanor E. Maccoby and Robert H. Mnookin, pp. 169–170, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Copyright © 1992 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

pressure for the mother to retain physical custody initially combined with the child's desire to live with his father, as well as mothers' inability to deal effectively with a difficult child or maintain the household financially.

#### *The Well-Being of Children in Different Living Arrangements*

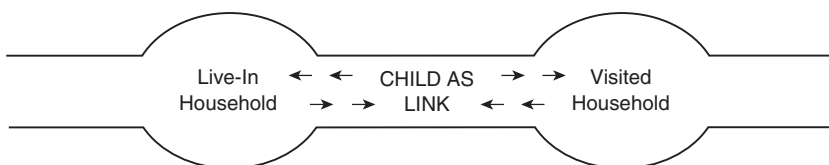
The most explicit test of how children fare in different living arrangements is based on the California study discussed above (Buchanan et al., 1996; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). This study is limited to children whose parents had divorced. Among these children, there were only minor differences in well-being for those in mother custody (children who reside more than half the time with their mothers), father custody (children who reside more than half the time with their fathers), and shared custody (children who spend roughly equal time living with each parent). When there were differences, children in shared custody had the

fewest adjustment difficulties (i.e., problem behaviors and school adjustment), followed by children living with their mothers, then children living with their fathers. Children living with their fathers were somewhat more troubled, as were children with a history of residence changes. For instance, studies based on national data indicate higher incidences of social and emotional problems among children in single-father than in single-mother households (Thomson, McLanahan, & Curtin, 1992). A study based on the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF) reveals few differences in well-being between children living with fathers apart from their mothers and children living with mothers apart from their fathers (Stewart, 2006). The lack of strong differences suggests to some extent that parents and children are self-selected into the groups they feel will work best for themselves and their children (Buchanan et al., 1996). That is, there is not strong evidence that it is the living arrangement itself that produces differences in children's well-being. Rather, any differences probably have to do with the particular characteristics of the specific children and families in each custody arrangement.

## CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF STEPFAMILIES THAT EXTEND ACROSS HOUSEHOLDS

Despite heavy focus on stepfamily households, there are numerous conceptual models that have incorporated people who live outside the household. Some examples of such models include *divorce chains* (Bohannon, 1970), *remarriage chains* (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994), *blended family systems* (Gold, Bubbenzer, & West, 1993), *linked family systems* (Jacobson, 1987), *remarried suprasystems* (Sagar et al., 1983), *extra-household networks* (Clingempeel, Brand, & Segal, 1987), *extended family networks* (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989a), *the new extended family* (Furstenberg & Spanier, 1984), and *the binuclear family* (Ahrns, 1979).

Jacobson's (1987) linked family system provides an illustration (Figure 6.4). In her conceptualization, the child is seen as the *link* between the *live-in household* (i.e., custodial household) and the *visited household* (i.e., noncustodial household). The child is considered part of both households, and members of both households are considered part of the child's family. The child is the main conduit of contact and communication between households, both positive and negative. Unfortunately, this sometimes results in the child being forced to act as "messenger" between warring parents. Even among low-conflict families, children's two households are intertwined and must work in tandem to coordinate work schedules, vacations, and the like (Jacobson, 1987, p. 270).



**Figure 6.4** The Child in a Linked Family System

SOURCE: Jacobson, D. S. "Family type, visiting patterns, and children's behavior in the stepfamily: a linked family system," in K. Pasley & M. Ihinger-Tallman, *Remarriage and Stepparenting: Current Research and Theory* (pp. 257–272), copyright © 1987. Used with permission of the Guilford Press.

Jacobson also notes that the figure is simplified in that it depicts only one child in each linked family system, and does not show, for instance, families with multiple children in the same system or multiple systems in the same family. A typology of the six major types of linked family systems is shown in Figure 6.5.

Given the sheer number of cross-household models that have been advanced over the years, it is surprising that they have not had much impact on the way that stepfamily research is actually conducted. One problem is that these models vary widely as to who is included in the system. Whereas some models include just parents, spouses, and children (e.g., Ahrons, 1979), others include grandparents and relatives (e.g., Gold et al., 1993), friends (e.g., Clingempeel et al., 1987), or remain vague as to which family members are to be included.

A second problem is that these models assume that the members of the stepfamily system spend time with one another (e.g., Crosbie-Burnett, 1989a). Information on contact between nonresident stepfamily members is generally not available in national surveys. Moreover, these models do not specify the amount of time that would be required, making it difficult for researchers to incorporate this idea into research studies.

A third problem is that the concepts and terminology of these models are unwieldy and rather confusing. Clingempeel et al.'s (1987) taxonomy of stepfamilies is typical. They include *nonresidential stepfather families* (i.e., wife has children but does not have custody), *nonresidential stepmother families* (i.e., husband has children but does not have custody), and *nonresidential stepparent families* (i.e., both spouses have children and neither has custody), in addition to *residential stepfather families*, *residential stepmother families*, and *residential stepparent families*. There is also little consistency across studies in the use of such concepts. For instance, *residence* and *custody* are often used interchangeably.

		VISITED FAMILY			
		Biological Mother	Biological Mother and Stepfather	Biological Father	Biological Father and Stepmother
HOME-BASED FAMILY	Biological Mother			/	1
	Biological Mother and Stepfather			3	2
	Biological Father	/	6		
	Biological Father and Stepmother	4	5		

**Figure 6.5** Typology of Linked Family Systems (Stepfamilies)

SOURCE: Jacobson, D. S. "Family type, visiting patterns, and children's behavior in the stepfamily: a linked family system," in K. Pasley & M. Ihinger-Tallman, *Remarriage and Stepparenting: Current Research and Theory* (pp. 261–262), copyright © 1987. Used with permission of the Guilford Press.

### NONRESIDENT STEPFAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships between biological parents and children who do not live together are an important part of stepfamily dynamics. Consider the family described at the beginning of the chapter. Leslie and her children will end up spending quite a bit of time with Doug's son, Bobby, over the years. Bobby will probably join them for at least some birthday and holiday celebrations. Any time Doug spends with Bobby alone takes away from his time spent with his stepchildren, however. Doug's child support payments to Bobby's mother may squeeze Doug and Leslie's household budget, perhaps causing them to argue. Moreover, chances are that Bobby's mother will remarry. What if Doug and Bobby's new stepfather do not get along? Bobby may feel "caught in the

middle” between the two men and may have trouble forming a strong bond with either. On the other hand, Bobby has the opportunity to have two strong father figures (and mother figures) involved in his life.

### **Relationships With Nonresident Biological Parents**

#### *Involvement Through Child Support*

Because most children remain with their mothers after divorce, the vast majority (roughly 80%) of nonresident parents are men (Stewart, 1999b). Thus most research on nonresident biological parents focuses on nonresident fathers. Stepchildren with nonresident biological fathers have a lot to gain from their father’s involvement. Probably their most important contribution is child support. First, half of children in single-mother households live below the poverty line, and another quarter are considered low income (U.S. Census Bureau, 1996). Added income in the form of child support lifts many children out of poverty. Although they are less likely to be poor than children in single-parent families (Kreider & Fields, 2005), children with a stepparent still have a lower standard of living (e.g., income, home ownership, etc.) than do children living with two biological parents (Thomson, 1994). Child support can substantially increase the economic resources of stepfamilies.

The payment of child support has been shown to have positive effects on children in single-parent families and stepfamilies beyond raising their standard of living (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). Although there is not a parallel set of studies on nonresident mothers’ economic contributions, one study based on the NSAF found child support from nonresident mothers to be associated with higher school engagement among adolescent children, including stepchildren (Stewart, 2006).

With respect to fathers, it has been suggested that child support payments have a symbolic meaning and may indicate to the child that the father cares and is committed to the child (Seltzer, 1994), although a potential reason many biological fathers may not pay child support or may make partial payments is that they themselves have low incomes (Garfinkle, McLanahan, & Hanson, 1998). Nonresident fathers who pay support may also have unobserved qualities (e.g., a strong work ethic) associated with more positive child outcomes (Graham & Beller, 2002).

#### *Involvement Through Visitation*

Nonresident fathers make important contributions to their children’s well-being through visitation. High-quality visitation between children and

nonresident fathers (i.e., high levels of communication, closeness, and authoritative parenting) has a positive effect on children's social and emotional well-being in single-parent families and stepfamilies (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Berg, 2003; Stewart, 2003). Visitation with nonresident fathers has also been linked to children's physical well-being in terms of a reduced likelihood of adolescent smoking (Menning, 2004b), food insecurity (Garasky & Stewart, 2004), and risk of being underweight (Menning & Stewart, 2005). Although there is much less evidence regarding the effect of nonresident mothers (e.g., Camara & Resnick, 1988; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992), research based on the NSAF indicates that visitation with nonresident mothers has a positive effect on school engagement and socioemotional health of both younger and older children (Stewart, 2006).



**Photo 6.1** Visitation with nonresident parents is beneficial to children.

© Royalty-Free/Corbis.

### Relationships Between Ex-Spouses/Ex-Partners

As described above, stepfamilies experience varying levels of involvement from nonresident parents. There has been surprising little research on the nature of relationships between ex-spouses and ex-partners and most of the studies have become somewhat dated. Nevertheless, available research indicates these too are important to stepfamily functioning and the well-being of adults and children in stepfamilies.

#### *Interparental Conflict*

It would seem reasonable to expect some degree of conflict and even hostility between ex-spouses. Stepchildren are exposed to significantly more parental conflict than children from original, two-parent families (Hanson, McLanahan, & Thomson, 1996). Yet only a minority of ex-spouses report having a negative relationship. Actually, most ex-spouses report that they are *indifferent* toward one another, restricting most of their interactions to child-related subjects (Ambert, 1989; Bernard, 1956; Duberman, 1975; Furstenberg & Spanier, 1984). Conflict between parents after divorce is lower when they are able to make the transition from spouse to *coparent* (Madden-Derdich, Leonard, & Christopher, 1999). *Cooperative coparenting* or *collaborative parenting* (Furstenberg & Spanier, 1984) is when the child's two biological parents work together and support one another's parenting role (Sobolewski & King, 2005). This stands in contrast to *parallel parenting* or *parenting apart*, in which ex-spouses each "do their own thing" with respect to the children (Furstenberg, Morgan, & Allison, 1987). Children whose parents adopt a cooperative style are less likely to feel caught in the middle (Amato & Afifi, 2006). Whereas conflict between divorced parents and feeling caught in the middle has a negative effect on children's well-being (Amato & Afifi, 2006), cooperative coparenting is associated with higher-quality nonresident parent-child relationships (Sobolewski & King, 2005) and more positive child outcomes (Amato, 2000; Buchanan et al., 1996).

Continued contact with ex-spouses can be stressful, though, especially for women. Relationships between children's biological parents may become more conflictual when one of the parents remarries (Ahrns & Wallisch, 1987; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Remarried couples have especially harsh views of ex-wives. In a study of newly remarried men and their wives (Guisinger, Cowan, & Schulberg, 1989), couples identified the children's biological

mother as a major source of stress and preoccupation. New wives' appraisals of their husbands' former wife are especially negative and do not appear to improve (Duberman, 1975; Guisinger et al., 1989). Remarried couples' resentment of ex-wives tends to center around the payment of child support, lack of time with the children, and ex-wives having "turned the children against us" (Duberman, 1975). How relationships with former spouses influence marital quality is unclear, due to a lack of rigorous research on this issue (Clingempeel et al., 1987). Although casting the ex-spouse as "the bad guy" may increase the solidarity of some couples (Furstenberg & Spanier, 1984), another study suggests that remarried couples who get along better with former spouses have higher marital satisfaction (Guisinger et al., 1989).

Not all ex-spouses have contact with new spouses, however (Ahrons & Wallisch, 1987; Ambert, 1989; Furstenberg & Spanier, 1984). In the study by Ahrons and Wallisch (1987), only half of divorced respondents had any contact at all with their former spouse's new partner (most of this was in regard to the children) and only a third of that group had sought to establish "a relationship" with the new spouse. In three quarters of cases, the children's biological parent described the child's stepparent as an acquaintance rather than a friend or relative. Their relationship was described as being "distant but polite," and few reported their interactions as hostile or argumentative. Most biological parents could separate their personal feelings from their appraisal of the stepparent as a parent. Two thirds felt that their child's stepparent was usually or always a caring person with the biological children, and 40% thought the stepparent was a good influence. Ambert's (1989) study reiterates a low level of interaction between ex-spouses and new spouses. In that study, the worst relationships between the former and new spouse seemed to occur when the new marriage was the product of an extramarital affair.

### **Relationships Between Nonresident Stepparents and Stepchildren**

Stepparents who do not live with their stepchildren or who live with them only part of the time, such as on weekends, are referred to as *nonresident stepparents* (Stewart, 2001). Stepchildren in other households would be referred to as *nonresident stepchildren*. Leslie, from the third scenario in Chapter 1, is an example of a nonresident stepmother because she and Bobby only have a "visiting" relationship; he lives with his biological mother full-time. Although Leslie



and Doug are married, nonresident stepparents need not be legally married to their stepchildren's biological parent (see Chapter 5). There is currently very little information on nonresident stepparent-stepchild relationships in either context.

*Effect of Nonresident Stepchildren  
on the Stepfamily System*

How nonresident stepchildren affect stepfamily relationship is not clear. One study indicates that resident stepchildren cause significantly more problems and less marital satisfaction in remarriages than do nonresident stepchildren (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982). Other research suggests that nonresident stepchildren may be disruptive to the stepfamily, and that these effects may vary by the sex of the children and whether the couple has a shared child. Juby, Marcil-Gratton, and Le Bourdais' (2001) study of Canadian stepfamilies found that, among stepfamilies with a common child (i.e., a child who is the biological child of both partners), having stepchildren residing outside the household increases the instability of the couple's union. Two studies fail to find differences in how the residence status of the child affects stepfamily harmony (i.e., the perception of the stepfamily as one group versus two) and marital satisfaction (Banker & Gaertner, 1998; Vemer, Coleman, Ganong, & Cooper, 1989). Gold et al. (1993) found that the residence of the stepchildren affects marital intimacy in different ways for biological parents and stepparents. Biological parents feel greater intimacy with their spouses when the children live *within* the household whereas stepparents feel greater intimacy when the children live *outside* the household.

*The Impossible Job of a Nonresident Stepmother*

Recall from Chapter 3 that stepmothers have more difficulty than stepfathers in establishing close relationships with their stepchildren. A common explanation is that, because most stepmothers do not live with their stepchildren, they have fewer opportunities for establishing a relationship (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Fine, 1995). Indeed, studies based on a small number of nonresident stepmothers indicate that they are less involved in parenting, are less likely to take on a parental role, and are less close to their stepchildren than are resident stepmothers (Ambert, 1986; Church, 1999). For instance, nonresident stepparents are more likely than resident stepparents to see themselves as "friends" or "extended family members" to children as opposed to "parents"

(Ahrons & Wallisch, 1987; Church, 1999). Orchard and Solberg's (1999) survey of stepmothers who were members of the Stepfamily Association of America found that stepmothers who had stepchildren who spent the majority of their time in their home had higher expectations for functional inclusion in the family (e.g., feeling welcomed into the stepfamily, sharing equally in discipline), parental love, household responsibility (e.g., household organizer, cook meals), and mother replacement (e.g., not competing for affection, not being wicked stepmother) than stepmothers who spent less time with their stepchildren. In another study of full- and part-time stepmothers, 30% thought that "spending more time together" would help improve their relationship with their stepchildren (Quick, McKenry, & Newman, 1994). This research suggests that, contrary to "wicked stepmother" stereotypes, many stepmothers actually *want* to spend more time with their stepchildren.

Nonresident stepmothering is associated with higher levels of stress than resident stepmothering (Ambert, 1986). Fine (1995) suggests that nonresident stepmothers may have greater stress than resident stepmothers because of greater role ambiguity. Their limited contact with their stepchildren gives them fewer opportunities to develop a clear, consistent, and positive relationship with their stepchild. Involvement with stepchildren has been shown to be positively associated with nonresident stepparents' marital satisfaction and satisfaction with their overall lives (Ahrons & Wallisch, 1987). Compared with nonresident stepmothers, stepmothers who lived with their stepchildren reported significantly higher levels of marital happiness and satisfaction with their spouses (Ambert, 1986). The effect of residence was not statistically significant for stepfathers. Because there were few nonresident stepfathers in the study, more research is needed.

Common themes that have emerged from qualitative interviews with nonresident stepmothers include dealing with difficult stepchildren, biological parents indulging the children during visits, feeling overburdened with extra housework and child care tasks, feeling underappreciated and rejected by stepchildren, and feeling guilty about having negative emotions toward stepchildren (Ambert, 1986; Jacobson, 1979; Smith, 1990). One former nonresident stepmother from Ambert's (1986) study explains:

His kids kept coming here because he didn't want to visit them at their place, because he hated his ex-wife. We had six kids here at times and his kids are the rough type: after they'd gone, the whole house was a mess for us to clean and the fridge was empty and I had to pay. They were just low class persons in a bad sense. (pp. 799–800)

A nonresident stepmother who took part in an education program dealing with problems in stepfamilies (Jacobson, 1979) concurs when she says, "When his children visited, they couldn't believe the TV set was mine. Everything else in the apartment is his. Somehow I'm less than a person—I'm an appendage of him, and they relate to me because they have to" (p. 205). Another part-time stepmother tells about her experience:

In the early stages I [had feelings of hatred toward the children] and I felt ashamed of the hatred in myself. I did not want the children to be hurt by it. I used to go off until I could control the hatred better. I felt everyone hated me. I felt mean! But as time goes by I have learned that I don't need to invest so much. . . . They have two very good parents already. . . . I can have closeness and fun without the whole burden. But it is muddling and difficult to get the balance right. (Smith, 1990, p. 20)

Nonresident stepmothers' relationships with their stepchildren may also depend on whether or not they have had a child with their spouse or partner. Stepchildren, including nonresident stepchildren, negatively affect stepparents' intentions to have additional children (Stewart, 2000). Yet Ambert (1989) found that having a biological child helped nonresident stepmothers feel more secure in their role and allowed them to better tolerate their stepchildren's visits.

### **A Note on Nonresident Step-, Half-, and Full Siblings**

An older estimate based on the 1980 census indicates that between two fifths and one half of children in remarried stepfamilies have stepsiblings living in other households (Bumpass, 1984). It is unclear the extent to which a child's nonresident half-siblings and stepsiblings are involved with them. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that nonresident biological parents might sometimes bring their stepchildren along on visits. Nonresident parents may also include children from their biological child's household on their outings. They may buy them toys and other gifts so that they do not feel left out. Nonresident parents may have special names for their children's step- and half-siblings (e.g., "little buddy").

In general, siblings that live farther apart are less close (Lee, Mancini, & Maxwell, 1990), and stepsibling relationships are more positive when the stepsiblings live together as opposed to in separate households (Ambert, 1986; Duberman, 1975; Farmer, 2005). Closeness of half-siblings in large part depends on whether they live together or not; half-siblings who live together can be indistinguishable from full siblings (Ganong & Coleman, 1994a).

### When Stepchildren Have “Two Dads” and/or “Two Moms”

Children in stepfamilies are in a unique position of having “extra” parents to the extent that nonresident parents remain involved in their lives. For example, children with a resident stepfather and a nonresident biological father have “two dads” and children with a resident biological mother and a nonresident stepmother have “two moms.” Children whose biological parents both remarry (or cohabit), which is not uncommon, have four parents. How these adults interact and get along has important implications for stepfamily functioning and well-being. Children’s relationships with their nonresident biological parents are influenced by their stepparents and vice versa, and their effects on children’s well-being are dependent upon one another. These processes are not well understood because most studies are based on cross-sectional data and therefore cannot determine cause and effect. Longitudinal data should be utilized for future investigations of these issues.

#### *Influence of Resident Stepparent on the Nonresident Biological Parent*

One hypothesis is that it is difficult for children to maintain strong relationships with two fathers and/or two mothers simultaneously. For children with resident stepparents, stepparents may act as a *substitute parent* and take over the parenting role, prompting nonresident parents to “back off.” A study based on the NSAF indicates that the presence of married and cohabiting stepparents is associated with fewer visits from nonresident mothers and fathers (Stewart, 2004). Yet other studies indicate that children’s relationships with their two fathers do not appear to be highly correlated and therefore children are not being forced to choose between them (Buchanan et al., 1996; White & Gilbreth, 2001). Either way, children who have a good relationship with both their stepfather and their nonresident biological father have better outcomes than children who have good relationships with just one father (Harker-Tillman, 2005; White & Gilbreth, 2001).

The presence of a stepparent is associated with whether nonresident parents pay child support. Attitudinal data on parental obligations indicate that both resident stepparents and nonresident biological parents are expected to financially support their children (Ganong & Coleman, 1999). The NSAF (Stewart, 2004) indicates that nonresident parents have a greater likelihood of paying child support and pay more child support when the children live with a stepparent (aside from a cohabiting stepfather, which is associated with less child support).

*Influence of the Nonresident Biological  
Parent on the Resident Stepparent*

Several studies suggest that children's relationships with their stepparents are influenced by their relationships with their nonresident biological fathers. Stepparents may be more likely to take on a parentlike role when the child has little or no involvement from his or her other biological parent (Filinson, 1986). Children's involvement with a nonresident father determines whether stepfathers' "demand for conformity" (i.e., the extent to which they feel the stepchildren should follow rules, be kind and considerate, control temper, always do what is asked) has a positive or a negative effect on stepparent-stepchild relationship quality (MacDonald & DeMaris, 2002). Harker-Tillman (2005) found using the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health that involvement with nonresident biological parent has a positive effect on academic outcomes when stepfamily relationships are poor and a negative effect when stepfamily relationships are good. Another study found no relationship between amount and quality of contact with nonresident fathers and overall stepfamily functioning or overall stepfather-stepchild relationship quality; however, in stepfamilies with the greatest contact from nonresident fathers, stepfathers have the highest regard for their adolescent stepchildren (Pink & Wampler, 1985). Previous studies have failed to find a link between the payment of child support and stepfamily adjustment, however (Benson & Pasley, 1993). Lower-quality stepmother-stepchild relationships (compared with stepfather-stepchild relationships) have been explained in terms of the somewhat greater involvement of nonresident mothers than fathers (Stewart, 1999b, 2004).

### **Relationships With Extended Family Members and Friends**

*Relationships With Parents and In-Laws*

Previous research on intergenerational relationships in stepfamilies has for the most part been limited to divorce. Parents are generally accepting of a child's divorce and subsequent remarriage (Duberman, 1975). Divorced and never-married daughters get more emotional support (e.g., advice, encouragement) and instrumental assistance (e.g., babysitting, transportation, help with repairs) from their parents than do married daughters (Marks & McLanahan, 1993; Spitze, Logan, Deane, & Zerger, 1994), although the daughters may not see it that way (Umberson, 1992). Mothers with sole physical custody of children are perceived as being particularly deserving of help from parents

(Ganong & Coleman, 1999) especially if she does not remarry (Clingempeel, Colyar, Brand, & Hetherington, 1992). Adult daughters in particular provide a lot of support to elderly parents, and a divorce might prevent them from carrying out their caregiving role (Spitze et al., 1994). Despite older work by Cicirelli (1983, 1984), which suggests that divorced and remarried children provide less helping behavior to elderly parents, newer research indicates that divorce does not negatively affect the amount of assistance daughters give to their parents (Marks & McLanahan, 1993; Spitze et al., 1994). More study of intergenerational support in remarried stepfamilies and other stepfamily contexts is needed.

#### *Relationships With Former In-Laws*

Even if they do not maintain a relationship with one another, ex-spouses and ex-partners do not always make a clean break from in-laws (Finch & Mason, 1990). The main reason is that any children remain the grandchildren of former in-laws. Many stepfamilies interact with former in-laws on a regular basis as a result of those ties. The extent of relationships with former in-laws after divorce depends on many things, such as the quality their relationship during the marriage, the amount of reciprocal support, how close the grandparents are to their grandchildren, whether the children's father stays involved with them, and whether either partner remarries (Anspach, 1976; Duran-Aydintug, 1993; Finch & Mason, 1990). Former in-laws who maintain relationship tend to be ones who continue to see each other as family and behave "as if" they are family after the divorce (Finch & Mason, 1990).

#### *Grandparents and Grandchildren*

Divorce and remarriage changes the nature of children's relationships with existing grandparents and introduces new stepgrandparents to family dynamics. It is not uncommon these days for grandparents to have grandchildren whose parents are divorced. One study based on a random sample of older adults indicates that half of them have a divorced child (Spitze et al., 1994). More recent data on grandparent-grandchild relationships in stepfamilies are needed. What is known is limited to stepfamilies formed by divorce, and this research is dated. Most biological parents perceive that their children's relationship with their "other" grandparents (their ex-spouse's parents) worsen after divorce (Ahrons & Wallisch, 1987).

Grandparent-grandchild relationships depend on who has custody of the children. Maternal grandparents tend to see their grandchildren more (because the children most often live with their mothers), whereas paternal grandparents tend to see their grandchildren less or not at all (Ahrons & Bowman, 1982; Bray & Berger, 1990; Furstenberg & Spanier, 1984; Johnson, 1988; Spitze et al., 1994). The vast majority of respondents from stepfamilies, when instructed to report on the grandparent "about whom they had the warmest memories," selected the parent of their resident parent, normally the maternal grandmother (Kennedy & Kennedy, 1993). Whether children maintain a relationship with their paternal grandparents really depends on how frequently the children see their father, who is usually the nonresident parent (Anspach, 1976; Furstenberg & Spanier, 1984). Children's involvement with great-grandparents appears to follow a similar pattern (Doka & Mertz, 1988).

Grandparents can make a positive contribution to stepfamilies. Grandparents often serve the role of intermediaries to keep everyone informed and involved regarding the children, in "preserving family claims" on the children, and by providing a "neutral zone" for ex-spouses, child care, and other assistance (Furstenberg & Spanier, 1984, pp. 128–129). Continuing relationships with paternal grandparents after a parent's divorce has been linked to fewer behavior problems in younger boys and girls but may be associated with lower self-esteem among older boys (Bray & Berger, 1990). Grandparents can be important sources of support to divorcing families, buffering the transition to single parent families and stepfamilies by providing economic and social support to grandchildren (Ahrons & Bowman, 1982; Johnson, 1988; Kennedy & Kennedy, 1993).

### *Stepgrandparents*

Divorce and remarriage are major transitions for parents and children, but less obvious are the changes in store for grandparents, especially for those who become stepgrandparents. Remarried women and their children can become integrated into the new husband's kin group with ease (Anspach, 1976). Stepgrandparents appear to accept new stepgrandchildren readily; only a small percentage (7.5%) of respondents reported that there was any difficulty on the stepgrandparents' part with respect to acceptance of the new children (Furstenberg & Spanier, 1984). This is referred to as *augmenting*, *extending*, and *expanding* the kinship network. Grandmothers may be more likely than grandfathers to treat biological grandchildren and stepgrandchildren differently (Henry, Ceglian, & Ostrander, 1993).

Becoming a stepgrandparent is a *process*, not unlike the process of becoming a stepparent. Henry et al. (1993) have identified four developmental stages and developmental tasks associated with associate with acquiring step-grandchildren. Among these stages is *accepting losses*, such as the fantasy of a “lifelong happy marriage” for their child and traditional grandparenthood for themselves (p. 28). In addition to accepting losses, stepgrandparents must cope with and learn to *navigate ambiguous family relationships* and accept new family members. Common issues that might face stepgrandparents are whether to extend monetary gifts to stepgrandchildren and whether and to what extent to include stepgrandchildren in family holidays and on vacations. In general, grandchildren’s relationships with stepgrandparents are not as close as relationships with biological grandparents (Kennedy & Kennedy, 1993; Sanders & Trygstad, 1989). Public attitudes suggest that stepgrandparents do have an obligation to stepgrandchildren, but that it is more optional than the obligations of biological grandparents and depends on the quality of their relationship (Ganong & Coleman, 1999). These obligations are in place only so long as the couple remains married.

#### *Relationships Between Former Stepfamily Members*

Stepfamily relationships often end. Data based on the NSFH indicate that 20% of married and cohabiting stepfamilies dissolve within two years, about a third dissolve within five years, and over half (54%) are dissolved within 10 years (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995). Stepfamilies begun by cohabitation are not more likely to dissolve than stepfamilies begun by marriage. Between 10% and 20% of children join a second stepfamily before they turn 18, and probably many more join additional stepfamilies after that, although there are not statistics that extend into the child’s adult years.

Almost nothing is known about relationships between ex-stepfamily members. One study of public attitudes indicates that most people feel that obligations to stepfamily members end at divorce (i.e., they are perceived as being completely voluntary once the marriage is over; Ganong & Coleman, 1999). There are no specific kinship terms for ex-stepfamily members (Ahrns & Wallisch, 1987), although some stepparents continue to “claim” their stepparent role after divorce (Thoits, 1992; White, 1994). The salience of the stepparent role is lower for divorced than for married stepparents, however (Thoits, 1992). White (1994) found not surprisingly that relationship quality and frequency of contact between stepchildren and stepparents is lower in stepfamilies that have ended through divorce than in intact stepfamilies. In that study,



more than half (57%) of stepchildren neither saw nor spoke with the ex-stepparent. Contact is somewhat greater when the relationship ended by a biological parent's death rather than divorce. The role of the stepparent remains more salient to men than to women after divorce (Thoits, 1992), probably because most stepfathers share a household with their stepchildren. Stepchildren whose stepfamily is no longer intact are less likely to perceive parents as sources of support than stepfamilies that are still together (White, 1994).

Laws about stepfamily relationships, discussed in greater detail in Chapter 10, are ambiguous. Stepparents are not generally legally obligated to support stepchildren financially after divorce from the child's parent, although in specific court cases they have been ordered by judges to pay support (Redman, 1991). Social relationships between former stepfamily members are also ambiguous. In the movie *Clueless*, the character Cher has a romantic relationship with her ex-stepbrother, illustrating the absence of an *incest taboo*, a general prohibition of sexual activity within a family (Beer, 1989), for ex-stepbrother-stepsister relationships (Mahoney, 1994b).

### *Relationships With Friends*

A common perception is that friends and neighbors quickly retreat from divorced couples. In particular, divorcées (i.e., divorced women) are viewed negatively by their peers. The few studies that have been conducted indicate that friends can be an important source of support for stepfamilies, sometimes even more so than family members. An early study by Duberman (1975) included friends along with extended family members in a group she referred to as "outsiders." She found that, while divorced and remarried couples often face "stupid questions" and are a subject of curiosity from neighbors, most outsiders are accepting of their new relationships, rather than rejecting or indifferent. A study by Marks and McLanahan (1993) examined sources of social support of traditional and nontraditional family structures using the NSFH. They found that single mothers, single fathers, and stepfathers (not stepmothers) had more supportive relationships with friends than with family members.

## SUMMARY

This chapter makes the case that family members (and, to a lesser extent, friends) who reside outside the stepfamily household are important to

stepfamily functioning. *Coresidence* therefore should not be a criterion for inclusion in stepfamily research. Rather, whether or not stepfamily members live together, and the extent of their involvement, should be important variables to include in stepfamily research.

The focus of previous studies on stepfamily *households* has resulted in numerous gaps in our understanding of stepfamilies. Studies of resident stepmothers (the minority of all stepmothers) do not come close to addressing the complexities of stepmothering (Santrock & Sitterle, 1987). As a result, therapists might encourage nonresident stepmothers to assume the mother role in the family regardless of their personal desires or practical concerns (Church, 1999). Similarly, stepfamily research needs to expand in response to changes in men's roles and greater involvement of men in their children's lives through visitation and physical custody (Dowd, 2000). It is not safe to assume that a stepchild as has a single residence or that a child has lived in a particular arrangement continuously. Most national-level family surveys accommodate some stepfamily relationships that cross household boundaries (e.g., those between nonresident fathers and children). However, they do not come close to accounting for the complexity of stepfamily relationships. We will not have a full understanding of stepfamily life until this problem is addressed.