

An exploratory study of the lived experience and contributing factors to blending stepfamilies — A dynamic systems and transformational learning theories approach

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In the process of blending together, two single-parent family systems experience significant and unique challenges. Blending difficulties create barriers within the family system to relationship development and family functioning and without in academic, vocational and social arenas. With one-third of all Americans as part of stepfamilies, expanding research on this significant and growing population is vital.

The purposes of conducting this exploratory study were to: 1) gain a better understanding of what it is like to be part of a blending family system for both parents and children, 2) examine the impact of attitudes and behaviors on blending outcomes, and 3) provide empirically-based knowledge to support a strengths-based approach to blending stepfamilies to promote intervention, program and policy development.

Two theoretical frameworks (Dynamic Systems Theory and Transformational Learning Theory) organized and guided the study. The mixed-methods research design produced informative results about the lived experience of blending stepfamilies and highlighted six common thematic categories/constructs: Relational, Family Structure and System, Boundaries, Managing Conflict, Commitment and Communication. Communication was identified as providing the central role in promoting family blending processes and behaviors within each of the constructs. Study respondents offered “Three Most Important Points of Advice,” facilitators, and obstacles specific to stepfamily blending.

Correlation and multiple regression analyses provided consistent evidence that behavioral scales were strongly related to positive family blending outcomes, while in most cases the attitude scales had no such relationship. Study findings suggest that modifying beliefs may have little to no effect and that a more behavioral approach will be more effective in improving blending family outcomes.

The input of 286 blending parents and children yielded significant data, both in terms of quantity and quality. The mixed methods research design provided a lens to create a Blending Stepfamily Developmental Model, which highlights the transformation process of blending families and activities that influence outcomes. The results of this study have implications for practice, policy and research that can promote the development of education, clinical interventions, program and policy advancement, and spur additional studies on a variety of blending family related topics.