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"Parent Teams" and the Everyday Interactions of Co-parenting in Stepfamilies

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Abstract

Family scholars have yet to explore substantially the day-to-day interactions of stepfamily systems. Our focus was on the everyday interactions of parent teams, adults who are coparenting within different stepfamily households, describing the characteristics of their communication. Twenty-two parents, stepparents, and partners (*N* = 22) kept diaries for two weeks, each time they interacted with an adult in the other household. Results detail the frequency, timing, location, and length of interactions; initiator, channel, and topics; and reasons for interaction. Interactions were short, everyday encounters rather than extended, planned meetings. The majority of the interactions were via telephone, followed by face-to-face and electronic mail. Participants cited convenience and proximity as reasons for choosing these channels. The majority of topics discussed involved issues surrounding the children, involved little conflict, and adults were moderately satisfied with the interactions. Results suggest that these parent teams had achieved a state of equilibrium and developed ways to interact that worked reasonably well.

Stepfamilies involve a plethora of personal relationships that vary considerably in form, structure, and complexity. Scholars across disciplines have examined a variety stepfamily issues, for example, perceptions of stepparent roles (Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1998; Fine, Ganong, & Coleman, 1999), the development of stepfamilies (e.g., Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999; Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001), conflict (e.g., Burrell, 1995; Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990), dialectical tensions managed by stepparents and stepchildren (Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, in press; Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998), disclosure and avoidance (Golish, 2000; Golish & Caughlin, 2002), and the post-

divorce relationships between ex-spouses (e.g., Ahrons, 1981; Masheter, 1991, 1994). Collectively, this growing body of research confirms the contention of a number of scholars that the stepfamily is a unique family form worthy of study.

Despite the heightened interest in stepfamily development, most research on communication among stepfamily members is relatively recent, and communication scholars are now beginning to study communication in stepfamilies systematically. Cherlin and Furstenberg (1994) argue that stepfamily members must "create a shared conception of how their family is to manage its daily business" (p. 370), yet relatively little is known about how stepfamily members create this shared conception through communication. In this study, we examined the everyday interactions that constitute and sustain co-parental relationships in stepfamily systems, what we labeled "parent teams." Three goals guided the present study.

First, communication and personal relationships scholars call for studies of everyday interaction that both constitute and maintain relationships (e.g. Barnes & Duck 1994; Baxter, 1992; Dainton, 1998; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996). Golish (in press) points to everyday talk as a maintenance tactic central to families, especially stepfamilies, but scholars have not yet studied the content of this talk. The study of everyday interaction is particularly important in stepfamilies, especially among the different adults who interact as they co-parent children.

Second, stepfamilies exist beyond the boundaries of single households (Coleman, Ganong & Fine, 2000) and involve larger webs of individuals in different residences. The need to study stepfamilies as part of a larger system of families and relationships also mirrors researchers' calls to study relationships as embedded in larger social webs (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2002; Duck, 1993; Milardo & Wellman, 1992). It is important to understand the influence that these adults in the different households have on how children are raised. One way to study the influence of the adults in different households is through everyday talk. Previous researchers exploring everyday talk have been concerned primarily with dating or married couples, and much of the stepfamily literature shares the same focus on dyadic interactions (e.g., stepparent-stepchild, child-nonresidential parent). Therefore, the second goal for the present study is to move the focus on communication in stepfamilies beyond the boundaries of a single household to the multiple households of stepfamilies.

To accomplish this goal, a systems perspective guides the present inquiry. Noller and Fitzpatrick (1993) argue that systems theory is especially useful in guiding family communication research as it stresses "the importance of communication in defining the nature of relationships in the family and the communicative nature of behavior" (p. 42). A systems perspective is the most frequently used theory to guide family communication scholarship. Systems theory centers the focus of inquiry on interdependence of interactants, takes into account subsystems and hierarchies within a family, and brings a focus on boundaries within and beyond family borders, and in our case, beyond the borders of single households (Galvin & Brommel, 2000; Vogl-Bauer, 2003).

Third, when moving the scholarly focus beyond a single household to the larger family system, researchers are able to emphasize the set of adult relationships that form around co-parenting children in different households, and these complex sets of relationships are the most understudied. These adult relationships warrant investigation, as several scholars

identify the importance of understanding the interaction of parents, stepparents, and parents' partners in the extended stepfamily network (Baxter et al., in press; Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990; Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, & Pauk, 2001; Golish, in press).

With these three goals in mind, the present study contributes to our understanding of stepfamily life by analyzing the communication that occurs among adults who are co-raising children in different households. Scholars have used a diversity of labels for shared parenting. These labels include, for example, "co-parenting" (Ahrons, 1981), "cooperative shared parenting" (Kruk, 1993), or "parental coalition" (Visher & Visher, 1989). We have labeled these groups of adults "parent teams," and focus on how these different adults interact and negotiate the boundaries of stepfamily relationships. Our use of "teams" implicates the interdependence of these adults among the households in stepfamily systems in which children reside. More importantly, our focus on everyday interactions between adults co-parenting children underscores the importance of communication research to family practitioners and stepfamily members themselves, as they must negotiate a stream of complexities and opportunities stemming from their stepfamily status in addition to the normal challenges that face all families. Ultimately, it is through communication that complex stepfamily issues are managed, either positively or negatively (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Burrell, 1995; Golish, in press).

Co-parenting

Scholars stress the importance of studying relationships in stepfamilies as they exist across households (Coleman et al., 2000). Dunn and Booth (1994) concluded that "we still have very little systematic information on the links between different strands in children's complex relationships" (p. 220). Looking at this issue from a systems perspective, there is a need to better understand the interaction of the various adults who function in different roles in relation to the children. This may range from a relatively "simple" set of two households where both parents have remarried, to a complex system of multiple households if parents and their new partners have produced multiple families. At times, these adults will be interacting dyadically (i.e., in a phone conversation), and at other times multiple adults may be involved.

One of the true challenges the various members of these co-parenting teams face is managing the boundaries of the stepfamily configuration (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Bray & Berger, 1993a; Fine & Kurdek, 1995). Emery and Dillon (1994) argued that one of the major tasks in divorce is that the adults must renegotiate the boundaries of intimacy (intimate versus businesslike relationships) and power. These families must negotiate complex issues such as scheduling of visitations, discipline, and finances. How these boundaries are negotiated and enacted affect both the adult relationships and certainly the experiences of children in stepfamilies. Whiteside (1998) concluded that those co-parents who, over time, developed the ability to work cooperatively and who could develop "adequate boundaries as well as adequate communication . . . may be able to respond effectively to the challenge of developing constructive two-household parenting environments for their children" (p. 18).

Although family scholars and practitioners have begun to focus on co-parenting relationships among ex-spouses, there is a need to study the interactions among the larger web of adults who play different roles in co-parenting children. Therefore, the research question that guided the present study was: What are the characteristics of communication among adults who are co-raising children in stepfamilies?

Method

Procedures

Adults who were co-raising children kept an interaction diary over a two-week period. Some scholars seeking to study relational interaction have used diaries in their research (e.g., Baxter & Wilmot, 1986; Dainton, 1998; Duck, 1991; Duck & Miell, 1986; Duck, Rutt, Hurst & Strejc, 1991; Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996; Leach & Braithwaite, 1996). Duck argued that scholars in the natural sciences have traditionally relied on diaries and logs to create a "good descriptive base," while many social scientists move ahead into generalizing and theorizing, missing detailed accounts of naturally-occurring social behavior" (p. 150). Since our purpose was to study everyday interaction among adults who were co-raising children in different households, we chose diaries as a starting place.

There were several advantages to using diaries. First, diaries served as an "annotated chronological record or log" (Zimmerman & Welder, 1982, p. 116) and were especially useful as they provided the researchers with "the possibility of gaining some degree of access to naturally occurring sequences of activity" (Zimmerman & Weider, 1977, p. 489). Second, rather than recalling and reporting activities long after they occur, researchers asked participants to write diary entries about events as close to their occurrence as possible. Duck (1991) stressed that "the flow of the interaction is not interrupted" and participants can report their experiences very close to the time they are experienced (p. 151). Duck et al. (1991) articulated the diary advantage of gathering data over time rather than more static one-time reports often captured in paper and pencil measures. Third, diary procedures were not as invasive (or impossible) as observation, video recording, or audio recording of interaction might be. Fourth, keeping diaries was a convenient way for participants to take part in a study, as they could respond on their own time schedule (Duck, 1991). Finally, diaries were beneficial in accommodating a diversity of behaviors and situations (Zimmerman & Weider, 1982). Specifically, diaries allowed insight into participants who have individual and role differences, as well as interactional differences. As noted earlier, these differences were especially apparent and prevalent in stepfamily structures, making this method even more appropriate when studying this type of family unit.

We solicited participants via a convenience, snowball sampling technique, locating participants through college student contacts via announcements in classes (many from stepchildren), and by soliciting participants via personal networks of colleagues and friends and through churches. Like all researchers looking to locate and work with participants beyond a college population sample, locating parents and stepparents who were co-parenting and who were willing to keep a diary for two weeks was extremely challenging.

The participants were asked to keep a chronological diary of all contact with the adults in the other household for a period of two weeks. To increase convenience for our informants, participants chose between hard copy, electronic, or audio-taped diaries. Prior to actual data collection, the diaries were pilot tested to verify the clarity of our instructions and items. We asked four participants who met the criteria for our study to keep diaries for a week and give us feedback on the procedures. All four participants chose either hard copy or email formats, and all indicated they understood the instructions, the items, and the diary recording procedures. During our subsequent data collection, most of the participants chose a hard copy format. Of the 22 individuals who completed diaries in this study, fourteen were in hard copy and eight were kept electronically.

We provided each participant with instructions and ample diary sheets (participants were told they could obtain more forms at any time). One form was to be completed each time the participant interacted with the adults in the other household for a period of two weeks. The first section of the diary focused on describing the interaction itself (e.g., who contacted whom, which adults were involved, through what channel, and length, reason, and topic of interaction), followed by seven semantic differential questions focusing on participants' perceptions of conversational effectiveness, satisfaction, level of conflict, and overall feelings regarding each interaction. Although the use of valid and reliable measures for each of these perceptions would have been statistically ideal, we anticipated that some participants would complete multiple diary sheets in a given day. Consequently, we used seven items rather than seven instruments to reduce respondent fatigue and to ensure completion of each diary entry. Although there are several criticisms associated with using individual items, the goals of the present research endeavor were descriptive and exploratory, and a brief indication of how participants felt about each interaction was sought in retrospect.

Participants

Our participants (*N* = 22) included adults who were co-raising children in stepfamilies and who met the following criteria: (a) at least one of the divorced parents had a new relational partner (whether remarried or cohabitating), (b) at least one of the children was spending time in at least two different households during the week, (c) at least one of the children had to be five years of age or older, and (d) at least one of the children had to be living at home.

Of the 22 participants, 15 were female and 7 were male, with a mean age of 42.5. The participants resided in five different states. Twenty-one were Caucasian and 1 was Hispanic. Ten of the participants were parents (4 females and 6 males) and 12 were stepparents (11 females and 1 male). In terms of education, the participants ranged from a high school equivalent diploma to a Ph.D., with 8 having earned some sort of graduate degree. The average length of the stepfamilies was 6.46 years with a range of two years to 11 years, 11 months. Finally, the number of children in these stepfamilies ranged from one to six, with a mean of 2.95 children per stepfamily. Given the complexity of stepfamily forms (e.g., Ganong & Coleman, 1994), the number of children in the stepfamily was somewhat difficult to determine; therefore, the number of children was based on those whom the adult

reported interacting with. The age of the children ranged from 7 months to 23 years, with an average age of 11.96 years.

While we invited the participation of multiple adults from each family, this did not occur with much frequency. In our sample, four of the adults were from the same family (two separate stepfamilies). In both of these instances, the participants were currently married to each other. While it would have been advantageous to secure the participation of multiple adults, in some cases, this was not possible logistically. In other instances, the participants reported discomfort with asking the other adults to participate, expressing fears that multiple adults participating might threaten what some described as a somewhat fragile peace. We read through the diaries as they were returned, and data gathering ceased, as suggested by Leininger (1994), when recurring patterns in the entries appeared and a point of saturation was reached.

Data Analysis

After the diaries were completed, the contents of 136 completed diary entries were analyzed. First, two of the researchers compiled demographic and frequency data. Second, two of the researchers analyzed the three open-ended questions (why communicate via this channel, topics discussed, and reasons for contact) using a constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to create categories from the themes discussed in the diaries. The researchers first analyzed the diaries separately to create categories of responses for these four questions. The researchers then met and discussed the category system until they came to agreement. They coded five diaries and found that all items were accounted for in the coding scheme. The researchers then continued on to code all of the diary entries for each individual diary. They each coded the diary entries separately, identified discrepancies between their ratings (there were few), and then discussed each coding decision until they reached agreement. The researchers then worked together to choose representative exemplars to present in the research report, looking for the best examples they could find that would stand alone out of context to other information in the diary.

Finally, we aggregated the data within participants in order to obtain descriptive statistics. We obtained the average number of diary entries and talk time for the participants, as well as descriptive statistics for each of the seven remaining diary items to provide some indication of how the participants felt about their interactions.

Results

The purpose of the current study was to describe the characteristics of communication among the different adults who were co-raising children in stepfamilies. This description was achieved by looking at the everyday interactions these parents and stepparents in the different households enacted. Descriptive statistics revealed that, overall, parents and stepparents who were co-raising children in stepfamilies reported moderate levels of satisfaction with how both parties acted during the interactions. This included moderate levels of satisfaction with the methods used to communicate ($M = 5.25$, $SD = 1.52$), the level of agreement reached *(M = 5.24, SD = 1.33)*, and the pleasantness of the interactions *(M = 4.79, SD = 1.52)*, as well as relatively low levels of conflict overall among all who participated (both

parents and stepparents alike) (*M* = 2.02, *SD* = 1.02). To answer our research question about the characteristics of communication between the adults in parenting teams, we focused the remaining descriptive analyses on three major areas: (a) the frequency, timing, location, and length of the interactions, (b) the initiator of the interaction and by what communication channel, and (c) the topics discussed and the reasons for the interaction.

Frequency, Timing, Location, and Length of Interaction
We used the diary entries to describe how frequently these adults interacted with one another in the two-week period. Twenty-two participants produced 136 diary entries, recording an aggregated average of 6.18 *(SD* = 5.60) interactions for a two-week period. We analyzed the time of day these adults interacted, dividing the day into morning (6:00 a.m.–noon), afternoon (12:01 p.m.–6 p.m.), and evening (6:01 p.m.–midnight) periods. These interactions were relatively spread throughout the day: 30.9% of the interactions occurred during the morning hours, 39.7% took place in the afternoon, and 27.9% took place during the evening hours.

We also analyzed the location of these interactions. This allowed determination of whether participants contacted the others from home, work, or other locations. Overall, the greatest number of these interactions took place, or were initiated from, the home of the respondent. About sixty-five percent (65.4%) of the interactions took place in the respondent's home, while only 7.4% occurred at the home of the other adults. Only 13.2% of the interactions took place, or were initiated from, the respondents' workplace (and all of these cases were phone calls or email; there were no face-to-face contacts at work). Finally, 4.4% of the interactions took place at events, such as children's sporting events, and 7.4% were classified by respondents as "other."

Last, we analyzed the length of these interactions. Again, comparisons were difficult as participants were reporting face-to-face, phone, and written interactions. Since email interactions did not have a length in time (some participants reported physical length of email messages, e.g., "25 lines"), we omitted written communication and analyzed only those diaries in which face-to-face and telephone interaction occurred. Our initial analysis of the aggregated data revealed an average length of 12.79 minutes (*SD* = 17.32, *n* = 21, one participant who used only email), with average interaction times ranging in length from 2 minutes to 1 hour, 23 minutes (one set of adults drove together to a child's event). Thus, we performed an outlier analysis and excluded any participants whose average interaction time exceeded an upper limit of 30.67 minutes in length. Based on this outlier analysis, the average interaction time ranged from 2 to 25 minutes, with a mean length of 9.30 minutes of interaction (*SD* = 6.75, *mdn* = 7.63, *n* = 20).

Interaction Initiation and Communication Channel
For the second part of our analysis, we analyzed who initiated these interactions: self, current partner, ex-partner/spouse, ex-partner's new partner, or mutual. Most of the interactions were initiated by the respondent (30.1%), their ex-partner (34.6%), or their current partner's ex-partner (25.0%). Taken together, these accounted for most of the interactions (89.7%). Participants reported 6.6% of the interactions as initiated mutually. Interestingly,

and importantly, very few of the interactions were initiated by the new partner of the ex-spouse (2.2%) (i.e., a nonresidential stepparent).

Although many of the interactions were between two members of the parenting team, there were also interactions that involved more than two parents. As we did not specifically ask participants to list all of the adults involved in the interaction, there is no way to count what percentage of the interactions involved multiple adults. However, there were diary entries in the data set where participants mentioned three or four adults. For example, one father wrote that he interacted with his ex-wife and her new spouse at their daughter's open house at school (13:D11) (note: all names were changed to protect anonymity and exemplars are cited by participant and diary entry numbers; 13:D11, means participant #13, diary entry #11). In another example, four members of one parenting team all sat together at their son's sporting event and discussed a wide variety of topics, including

> [the] financial plan for the kids' college funds, how [they] should all get together to talk about what kinds of things [they] planned to pay for college, whether or not John (the stepfather) would give Jimmy (the son) his used Shadow when he turned 16, . . . how Jimmy could learn to fix his mother's car as part of paying off the debt he owes for losing his new Rio and new 128 MB memory card, and whether or not Jimmy was learning the value of things and whether he will expect to have everything paid for his college fund. (10:D2)

Likewise, there were often multiple family members present during interactions at one of the homes as the children were being picked up and/or dropped off. For example, one stepfather wrote that when the girls' father brought them back home, the four adults discussed "if he should just take one girl at a time [since] they were at that age that they fight" (11:D2). These examples, in turn, highlighted the presence of multiple parents and stepparents during co-parenting interactions that involved primarily instrumental tasks.

Next, we analyzed the communication channel used in these interactions. In the diaries, respondents indicated whether the communication took place via telephone (57.4%), face-to-face (22.8%), email (15.4%), or messages sent through the children (3–7%). We had expected that more messages might be sent through the children than were reported by these participants. While we did ask parents to fill out diary sheets when the other adults communicated with them via the children, it is impossible to know how often they included these types of interactions in their diaries if they did occur.

Finally, we asked respondents to indicate why they chose the particular channel they did. Convenience was the reason cited most often, accounting for 47.8% ($n = 65$) of the diary entries. For example, one mother said that the phone was the "easier way to contact and communicate" (5:D2), and a father indicated simply, "It's quick" (15:D7). The second most frequently cited reason for the channel participants used was proximity (19.9%, $n = 27$), which we coded in face-to-face interactions when adults found themselves in the same place (versus a planned interaction or appointment). For example, one stepmother offered, "She [child's mother] came to get Sam for dinner" (7:D7). Another father wrote that he had a face-to-face interaction with his ex-wife at her house because he went "to pick up Carrie's (his daughter's) clothes" (13:D23). A small amount of the channels were chosen because of

trust issues (5.9%, *n* = 8), when the participants felt they needed things in writing. One father explained why he used email with his ex-wife, "Email is cheap and convenient, plus, I'm more comfortable putting in writing my words and getting her comments in writing. Call it a trust issue" (8:D1). A very small percentage of the channel choices were motivated by the specific desire for face-to-face interaction (versus proximity) (2.9%, *n* = 4). For example, one father wrote that he went over to his ex-wife's house to talk about how "Steve (the stepfather) had grabbed Carrie's face and called her a bitch and I went . . . to confront the situation." When asked why

> he chose face-to-face interaction he said, "because it was very important" (13:D13). The remaining responses were "no answer" (23.5%, *n* = 32), as these were inter-actions initiated by the other party.

Topics Discussed and Reasons for Interaction

For the third and final part of our analysis, we categorized topics under five general topics of children, adult, finances, need for information, and rapport talk (see Table 1). Not surprisingly, issues related to the children were the most frequently cited topic of discussion, comprising 66.7% (*n* = 112) of the topics discussed overall. Child schedule and visitation was the most frequent topic of these interactions (32.1%, *n* = 54). For example, these adults discussed who was going to pick up the children and when, schedules for health-care appointments, and visitation changes. One stepmother recorded, "She [the birth mother] asked if Sam could go to dinner on Wednesday of this week. Set up a time to pick him up on Saturday" (7:D1). Another mother called the stepmother because "she wanted to know if the guys [children] were coming to her house that night or in the morning" (10:D5). Another mother wrote that she called her ex-husband to "give him the details on events for the kids over the weekend" (23:D19).

Table 1. Frequency of Topics Discussed (*N* = 136 diary entries)

Topic	Frequency	Percent
1. Children	112	66.7
a. child's behavior	(18)	(10.7)
b. child's status	(16)	(9.5)
c. schedule/visitation	(54)	(32.1)
d. child's needs	(11)	(6.5)
e. child's location	(5)	(3.0)
f. upcoming child event	(8)	(4.8)
2. Adults	17	10.1
a. adult behavior	(10)	(6.0)
b. adult status	(7)	(4.1)
3. Finances	5	3.0
4. Needed Information	23	13.7
5. Rapport Talk	11	6.5

Note: We coded more than one topic discussed for 32 diary entries.

The second most frequent child-related topic involved children(s)' behaviors (10.7%, *n* = 18), which often included discussions about behavioral problems of the children. For example, one mother wrote about "having difficulties getting Jane to do chores" and discussed "keeping Jane until she finished her chores" (5:D2). Another mother talked to her ex-husband about "her son's social activities—if he was drinking and having sex and what to do about it" (23:D1). An equally important child-related topic was child status (9.5%, *n* = 16), which typically included discussions pertaining to children's health. As one father wrote, "My daughter, April, had been to the doctor's office a few days before, yet my ex-wife hadn't notified me of what happened. So I asked." (8:D1). A stepmother spoke with both the mother and the stepfather on two instances about their son's "swollen glands" and his "medicine for his strep throat" (10:D4, 10:D7). Needs of the child(ren), which included both instrumental and emotional needs, appeared in 6.5% of the interactions (*n* = 11). For example, one father wrote about his daughter's feelings of abandonment and expressed the need "for the adults to get together" to talk about what she needed (13:D14; 13:D15). Another stepmother wrote that her son's mother called her to see "if we could get him a haircut this weekend because he needed one" (20:D1). Other child topics included upcoming child events (4.8%, *n* = 8) and child's location (3.0%, *n* = 5).

The next most frequent topic occurred when parents/stepparents "needed information" (13.7%, *n* = 23). For example, one stepmother emailed the children's mother with "several phone numbers including her parents, our cell number, and gave her the names of the lodges in the mountains" before they went on vacation (7:D4). In another family, a son who had been away on military leave had surprised his parents with the news that he was getting married. A series of phone calls and face-to-face interactions were based on information such as when and where the wedding was and "other issues surrounding the wedding—photos, presents, lunch" (12:D1, 12D:2, 12:D3).

Topics related to the adults were much less frequent (10.1% overall, *n* = 17) and included adult behavior (6.0%, *n* = 10) and adult status (4.1%, *n* = 7) (e.g., health or well-being). For example, one mother called her ex-husband about why he had hung up on her the night before (1:D4) and said "he should spend more time with his son by himself [without his new girlfriend around]" (1:D5). Another stepmother contacted her son's mother because she

> wanted her to know that he has requested to be in contact with some of his old friends who in the past had gotten into trouble with him. I asked her to respect our wishes and not let Scott associate with these kids while he is in her care. (7:D3)

When discussing adult status, topics including adults' health or well-being were most common. For example, a father contacted his ex-wife to tell her about getting his foot run over by a forklift at work (l6:D4). There were eleven instances of rapport talk among these adults (6.5%). One stepmother described an email exchange she had with her husband's ex-wife, "Betty wanted to discuss Kendra's new kitten. Just chit chat . . . just small talk"

(7:D6). In another interaction between these two women, the stepmother called Betty because she had seen her driving in town and thought Betty looked upset. The stepmother called her and they had a 15-minute conversation

> I decided to call her once we got home. . . . I saw she was upset and I wanted to offer a shoulder or some help. . . . I told her I was there for her. If she needed or wanted to talk, I was here. Call me anytime. She said she didn't want to burden me with her miserable problems anymore. (7:D15)

Finances were not discussed much at all in these two weeks (3.0%, *n* = 5), and these particular interactions came mostly from one family where one of the adults was experiencing financial difficulties.

We also categorized the reasons for the interactions. These reasons included asking and giving information, requests, decision-making, proximity, and interpersonal reasons (rapport talk, support, and complaints) (see Table 2). The majority of the interactions involved information exchange (55.4%, *n* = 82), either requesting (34.5%, *n* = 51) or giving (20.9%, *n* = 31) information. For example, one mother wrote that she called her ex-husband "to know if he was going to David's [her son's] awards night" (1:D1). In other instances, the participants reported that the interaction was due to receiving information. One father wrote that his ex-wife contacted him to tell him "his son had a date" so he could ask him about it (8:D4).

Table 2. Reasons for Interaction (*N* = 136 diary entries)

Reason	Frequency	Percent
1. Information	82	55.4
a. ask for information	(51)	(34.5)
b. give information	(31)	(20.9)
2. Requests	33	22.3
3. Decision-making	14	9.5
4. Proximity	10	6.8
5. Interpersonal reasons	9	6.1
a. rapport talk	(5)	(3.4)
b. support	(1)	(0.7)
c. complaints	(3)	(2.0)

Note: We coded more than one reason for 12 diary entries.

The second major category of reasons for interaction was requests (22.3%, *n* = 33). Several of the requests reported were over the phone and involved an adult asking to speak to a child; other requests, however, were related to managing child schedules or activities. For example, one stepmother contacted the birthmother because she

> wanted to ask to adjust the custody arrangements for the summer months to have the drop offs be on the evening before they would normally be during the

school year so that the boys could sleep in the mornings and everything would still be fair since the number of days would not change. (10:D10)

These requests sometimes led to a decision being made, which was the third major category of reasons for interaction (9.5%, *n* = 14). For example, one father wrote that he had a conversation with his ex-wife because they "had to discuss some issues" (increasing child's time at mother's house, child's music camp, scheduling, and child's future college education) and "it was their monthly meeting" (15:D1).

The fourth category of reasons for interaction was proximity (6.8%). The majority of these interactions was due to being at the same place at the same time and was face-to-face interactions. Sometimes the adults (two, three, or four adults) interacted because they were at the same event (e.g., a child's sporting event) or simply because they were at each other's house ("She was dropping the boys over" 10:D11). The last category of reasons for interaction was for interpersonal reasons (6.1%, *n* = 9), which included rapport talk (3.4%, *n* = 5), support (0.7%, *n* = 1), and complaints (2.0%, *n* = 3).

The categories for the reasons for interactions were consistent with those of topics discussed. Over half of the interactions were to get or receive some sort of information (almost exclusively about the children). Very few of the interactions were for interpersonal reasons between different adults in the parent team. Interestingly, decision-making was not reported frequently as a reason for communication, emphasizing the day-to-day instrumentality of the interactions recorded in this data set.

Discussion

In their investigation of stepfamily development, Braithwaite et al. (2001) stressed the importance of identifying "the specific communication messages and behaviors that will lead families to develop flexible boundaries, feelings of solidarity, and the ability to adapt and find workable expectations and roles" (p. 244). The primary goal in this present study was to provide a description of the communication among adults who are co-raising children in stepfamilies. We focused our analysis on describing (a) the frequency, timing, location, and length of the interactions; (b) who initiated the interaction and by what communication channel; and (c) the topics discussed and reasons for interaction.

For the frequency, timing, location, and length of the interactions, interactions with the adults in the other household overall did not occur on a daily basis; rather the interactions averaged a little over three times per week, and the actual amount of the interactions differed greatly (ranging from once to 23 times over the two week period). Additionally, these interactions tended to be short encounters rather than extended, formal, planned meetings. Taken together, our analysis indicates that most of these adults interacted occasionally over the two-week period, but certainly not on a daily basis. We noted with interest that these adults differed greatly in the amount of interactions they had. The commonality for the most part, however, was that these interactions were relatively short in length. Looking at the subsystems invoked, while many of these interactions were dyadic, not all of them were, and we regret that we did not ask informants to list all of the adults present or participating in each interaction. These adults reserved most of their interactions for home,

rather than the workplace, and the greatest amount of interactions took place in the afternoon. We suspect that many of these afternoon interactions occurred either when picking children up from school or when delivering them to the home of the other parent. Consequently, several interactions were prompted by children returning home from school or events with information that needed to be exchanged with the other household.

Through analysis of who initiated the interaction and through what channel, we found that most of the interactions were initiated by either the respondent, the ex-partner, or the current partner's ex-spouse. Very few of the interactions (2.2%) were initiated by the ex-partner's new spouse. Ganong and Coleman (1994) pointed out that relatively little is known about nonresidential stepmothers and stepfathers and they cite the difficulties these adults have concerning their own role definitions in relation to their stepchildren. Researchers have found that nonresidential stepmothers often report higher stress levels than do residential stepparents (Ambert, 1986), and perhaps this finding is related to their interaction in this system. In addition, Ganong and Coleman warned that relationships between ex-spouses may be more difficult after remarriage if the ex-partner perceives the remarriage as a rejection or as a competition for children's affection. They suggested "these insecurities may manifest themselves in hostile, unpleasant ways that damage the relationships between all of the parental figures and the children" (p. 98). Even though in the present study the children lived in both homes, the data indicated that the communication among the adults in these homes was not initiated equally. Our findings led us to the desire to know more about these parental partners and their role in the stepfamily system, as well as their perceptions concerning the interactions and of the functioning of these parent teams.

The majority of the interactions in the present study took place over the telephone, followed by face-to-face and electronic mail interactions. While the reasons why were explored somewhat in the results, it was particularly curious that respondents did not use email more than they did. It may be that our participants simply did not need to use email, as they often encountered one or both of the other adults face-to-face when picking up and dropping off children, or at child events. It is likely too that the availability and/or use of this form of communication is not yet as widespread as we might have thought (most recent statistics put Internet use in the US at about 50% of the population, with some expectation that this level will level out at about 60%, see Morrisette, 1999). It will be interesting, and important, to track the use of email communication among parent teams as the years go on and how co-parents negotiate boundaries using this technology. This channel seems ideally suited to quick interactions, as already represented by our participants, and we anticipated that email has some of the benefits—and dangers—of removing some of the immediacy and nonverbal feedback of the verbal channel of communication (e.g., Walther, 1996).

Finally, our last major category for analysis concerned the topics discussed and reasons for interactions. While it was not surprising that children accounted for most of the topics discussed by these adults, we anticipated that topics related to the adults would account for a larger share of the messages, especially complaints about behavior of the adult(s) in the other household, as previous researchers have cited the frequency of conflict in step-

families (e.g., Baxter et al., 1999; Ganong & Coleman, 1994). When coupled with participants' reports that they were moderately satisfied in their interactions with the adults from the other household, and given that there was little overt conflict in these interactions, the results suggest that these parent teams had achieved a system of equilibrium and communication that worked at least reasonably well most of the time for the different parties involved.

While a large portion of the research involving stepfamilies has focused on major problems or issues (e.g., conflict, role ambiguity), the adult-to-adult interactions in the present study were fairly mundane and the interactions rarely involved large problems. This finding was consistent with the data on the reasons for the interaction. Whereas only a few of the interactions were initiated for decision-making purposes (9.5%), most were initiated to ask or give information (55.4%) and/or to make a request (22.3%). This is a departure from the literature and suggests, as do Coleman (1994) and Golish (in press), that researchers need to resist focusing on the problems in these relationships to the exclusion of what seems to be working well.

Interestingly, findings were somewhat consistent with what others have found concerning everyday talk in dyadic interactions. For example, Goldsmith and Baxter (1996) found that making plans represented only 10.7% of the events reported by their informants. They found that having serious talks about the relationship were relatively rare, while others have found talking about the relationship to be a taboo topic (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). Of course, comparisons between these studies have their limitations as different types of relationships are being examined in these studies. For example, Duck et al. (1991) looked at the influence of everyday talk on relational intimacy, and Dainton (1998) looked at how everyday interaction sustains and maintains marital relationships. The function of talk among these stepfamily parent teams, however, may be somewhat different as the focus of their interactions is not on the relationships between these adult interactants, but rather on forces *outside* of the relationship, most often the children and their care. In fact, it is more likely that these adults often maintain peace among their households by keeping the focus of their talk *off* their relationship and on issues of raising children. All this raises intriguing questions on the function of everyday talk that researchers have not considered, especially when moving the focus beyond the dyad.

The results of the present study can also help to advance research on everyday talk that is less voluntary than that which occurs in relationships studied by previous researchers (e.g., intimate and marital relationships). Communication among adults co-raising children in stepfamilies was often based on necessity and not due to goals of increased intimacy (e.g., Duck et al., 1991). Given the choice, it is likely that many of these adults, ex-spouses and new partners alike, would not choose to interact on their own. In fact, Ganong and Coleman (1994) argued that when former spouses maintain a relationship with one another, it is almost always because they share parenting duties for their children.

In terms of the existing co-parenting literature, these results have painted a picture of the specifics of interactions that these adults have in the course of raising children across two households. This addressed an expressed need in the literature (Coleman et al., 2000; Dunn & Booth, 1994). These adult alliances were important as children were impacted by a variety of adults beyond their parents (and sometimes other children as well) as parents

date, cohabit, and/or remarry. Whiteside (1998) argued that co-parents need to develop ways to function cooperatively, to develop workable boundaries, and develop ways to communicate most effectively. From our data, we are left with the impression that many of these stepfamily systems had indeed developed ways of interacting and operating that seemed to work for them, at least reasonably well most of the time. Since the families in our study had been a stepfamily for approximately six and a half years on average, it is possible to speculate that this investigation is viewing the outcome of a process that these adults went through to develop the ways they communicate when co-parenting children. Future researchers need to describe and explore the process the members of the family system go through as they negotiate co-parenting in stepfamilies.

As with any research, this study has some limitations. First, the use of purposive sampling may have resulted in the participants being overly educated when compared to the general public. Eight of the twenty-two participants had completed some sort of graduate degree. Additionally, to a certain extent, participants were self-selected. This sample does not represent parenting teams who do not interact with each other at all due to negative or strained relationships, location, etc. Second, it is necessary to study multiple informants within each stepfamily. While the present sample included two families in which two parents/stepparents from the same household were represented, other participants expressed reluctance with having adults from other households participate. Of course, stepfamily relationships are often tenuous and sensitive by nature and it was important to us that our research not interfere in the normal day to day functioning of these complex family systems. Finally, in the present study, we viewed the communication of parent teams only from the perspective of the adults. Dunn and Booth (1994) warned, however, of the importance of understanding the perceptions of children in stepfamilies and point out that their perceptions "do not always mesh with the perceptions of others in the family" (p. 221). For example, in the current study, adults reported sending messages to one another through the children only 3.7% of the time. We suspect this figure is very low, and future endeavors should study children's reports of, and experiences with, the communication of these parent teams. Of course, there is a need to cast an even wider net and look at other important relationships that influence stepfamily members, for example, grandparents, family members no longer cohabiting, and friends and fictive kin who are central to the lives of stepfamily members and who influence the relationships and interactions of stepfamily members.

The results of the present study have added importantly to the stepfamily literature in several ways. First, the use of diaries provided unique insight into how the adults in the different stepfamily households communicated. As previous researchers have noted, stepfamilies are very diverse in their structure and make-up. A diary method has given voice to the variety of interactions between different adults in a stepfamily system, and consequently, we are able to provide researchers a starting point into how these stepfamily "parent teams" interact. Second, the diary method allowed a focus on everyday interaction, fulfilling the first goal in this study. In contradiction to finding a general focus on problems in the stepfamily literature, we discovered that communication was rarely initiated because of serious problems or complaints about the behavior of the adults in the other household. The communication focused on the day-to-day maintenance of the stepfamily

systems, thereby reinforcing and perpetuating existing stepfamily structures that turn parents' and stepparents' attention to the care of the children. Finally, these results extend previous stepfamily research that has either focused on interactions between the ex-spouses or between the residing parent and new stepparent. The second and third goals in the present study involved moving from the perspective of a single household to a broader perspective that focused on the communication among the adults in different households. By asking participants to keep a diary of interactions with any adult in the other household, a wider picture of communication and levels of interdependence among the different adults in the stepfamily system was achieved.

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