Parenting and child adjustment after divorce: family relationship quality, parental stress, and child adjustment in post-divorce families
Hakvoort, E.M.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Children in stepfather families: Relationships with fathers and stepfathers

Abstract

A child who grows up in a stepfather family is generally confronted with both a non-resident father and a stepfather. We investigated relationships between such children and these two father figures, and examined associations with child adjustment. Thirty-seven 8- to 12-year-old children living in stepfather families participated in the study. Our results show that boys experience warmer relationships with their non-resident fathers than with their stepfathers. For girls, no differences were found: both relationships are positively associated with each other. We also found that boys’ social competence is associated with their relationships with their non-resident fathers, while for girls’ self-esteem their relationships with their stepfathers seems to matter most. Surprisingly, neither relationship is correlated with children’s problem behavior.

4.1 Introduction

As divorce rates have risen in most Western societies, the number of children growing up in divorced families has increased. In the Netherlands, where this study was carried out, it is estimated that around 35,000 couples break up each year. Under-aged children are involved in more than half of these break-ups (Wobma & de Graaf, 2009). Around three-quarters of these children remain with their mothers after the divorce (E-Quality, 2008), while maintaining regular contact with their non-resident fathers (Spruijt, 2007). Within five years, almost half of the divorced mothers in the Netherlands find new partners with whom they cohabit or marry (de Graaf, 2001). These families therefore become stepfather families. Around 7.2% of all families in the Netherlands with under-aged children are stepfather families (E-Quality, 2008).

A child in a stepfather family is confronted with a stepfather in the family, while his/her biological father lives elsewhere. There are several theories about how children deal with having stepfathers and non-resident fathers. The loyalty theory (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986) stresses that it is important for children to be loyal to their parents. When a child suppresses loyalty feelings toward the non-resident father – for instance, because of the presence of a stepfather – this can cause feelings of guilt and indirectly affect the child’s adjustment in a negative way. The evolutionary theory emphasizes the biological bond between parent and child (e.g., Buss, 2004). Based on this theory, it can be assumed that biological fathers are more inclined than stepfathers to invest in child-rearing and in their relationships with their children. The relationships between children and their biological (non-resident) fathers should therefore be better than the relationships between children and their stepfathers.

In this study, we examined whether the quality of the relationships between children and both their father figures differs, calculated associations between both relationships, and studied associations between the relationships with both fathers and child adjustment.

4.1.1 Children’s relationships with fathers and stepfathers: differences and associations

The results of studies that focused on differences between children’s relationships with their fathers and their relationships with their stepfathers are often ambiguous, and sometimes even contrary. For example, it was reported in a recent study (King, 2006) that roughly a quarter of all adolescents living in stepfather families have warm relationships with both father figures, and that roughly a quarter have poor relationships with them. One third of the adolescents have good relationships only with their stepfathers, and 16% have warm relationships only with their non-resident fathers. King (2006) asked the children in this study only one question, namely how they experienced their relationships with their non-resident fathers and with their stepfathers. Claxton-Oldfield, Garber, and Gillcrist (2006) asked the children in their study the same question, but also administered the Stepparent Behavior Inventory (Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1998) in order to measure two dimensions of parent–child relationships, namely warmth and control. The
authors reported a significant difference only on the warmth dimension: Adolescents experience their relationships with their non-resident fathers as warmer than those with their stepfathers. White and Gilbreth (2001) focused on the criticisms and compliments that children receive from their father figures. The authors did not report any difference at all on relationship quality between children and their fathers and stepfathers.

To understand the association between two or more family relationships, the literature frequently describes two perspectives, namely the spillover perspective and the compensatory perspective (Erel & Burman, 1995). According to the former, emotions and behavior in one family subsystem spill over into another subsystem. This should mean that children who have warm relationships with their non-resident fathers will also develop warm relationships with their stepfathers. Both relationships are positively associated with each other. According to the compensatory perspective, emotions and behavior in one family subsystem compensate for the emotions and behaviors in other family subsystems. This implies a negative association between two relationships. For example, children who have warm relationships with their non-resident fathers oppose their stepfathers because they feel loyal to their fathers. On the other hand, children who have poor relationships with their non-resident fathers can compensate for this by developing warm relationship with their stepfathers. Nevertheless, two recent studies failed to show a significant association between the relationships (King, 2009; White & Gilbreth, 2001), and thus do not support either the spillover or the compensatory perspective.

4.1.2 Children’s relationships with fathers and stepfathers, and associations with child adjustment

Family system theorists assert that an understanding of children’s functioning necessitates an understanding of family dynamics (Sameroff, 1994; Thelen & Smith, 1994). The quality of family relationships influences the functioning of the children, and vice versa (Cowan, Cohn, Cowan, & Pearson, 1996; Golombok, 2000). Furthermore, it is assumed that different family relationships mutually influence each other (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Erel & Burman, 1995). In our study, we focused on children’s relationships with their non-resident fathers and with their stepfathers.

After parental divorce, children’s relationships with their fathers remain important for their psychosocial adjustment. Children’s contact with their divorced non-resident fathers has increased strongly in the last 25 years, both in the USA and in the Netherlands (Amato, Meyers, & Emery, 2009; Spruijt, 2007). Several studies showed a positive association between contact between children and their non-resident fathers on the one hand, and children’s well-being and development on the other (e.g., Swiss & Le Bourdais, 2009). Bronstein and colleagues (1994) reported a positive association between non-resident father–child contact and children’s self-esteem. The frequency of father–child contact is also an important predictor of the subjective feelings that children have toward their non-resident fathers (Amato, Meyers, & Emery, 2009). Fabricius and Luecken (2007) found that the more time children spend with their non-resident fathers, the more positive they are about their current father–child relationships. However, this association can also be
the other way round: Children with warm father–child relationships are more inclined to have intensive contact with their fathers. The quality of children’s relationships with their non-resident fathers is associated with several aspects of children’s psychosocial adjustment. The higher the quality of the relationship between the child and the non-resident father, the lower the levels of internalizing and externalizing problem behavior in the child (King & Sobolewski, 2006). The frequency of contact between the non-resident father and the child declines when the mother marries or starts cohabiting with another man (Bronstein, Stoll, Clauson, Abrams, & Briones, 1994). Children’s relationships with their stepfathers are different from those with their non-resident fathers, in the sense that there is no biological kinship. From this perspective, it can be assumed that stepfathers are less involved in rearing their stepchildren, and that they have only a small influence on their stepchildren’s well-being. However, several studies have shown that the quality of the relationships between children and stepfathers is important for child adjustment: Children who report close relationships with their stepfathers, also report lower levels of internalizing and externalizing problem behavior (e.g., King, 2006; Yuan & Hamilton, 2006). In addition, children who have warm relationships with their stepfathers feel more fortunate and more satisfied with their lives than children who do not have good relationships with their stepfathers (Amato, 1994). Surprisingly, King (2006) reported that the relationship between child and stepfather is even more strongly associated with child adjustment than the relationship between child and non-resident father. King’s explanation for this is that a stepfather is part of the child’s family and therefore more available to the child than the non-resident father.

4.13 Research questions and hypotheses

It is unclear whether the quality of children’s relationships with their non-resident fathers and their stepfathers differs, and whether these relationships are associated with child adjustment. Most studies on this topic focused on children aged between 12 and 18 (e.g., King, 2006; Claxton-Oldfield, Garber, & Gillcrist, 2006, White & Gilbreth, 2001). We, however, interviewed children aged between 8 and 12. Furthermore, we used child reports to measure child adjustment and the quality of the child’s relationships with both father figures. Previous studies have shown that children of this age are reliable reporters about their own well-being and the quality of their family relationships (e.g., Herjanic, Herjanic, Brown, & Wheatt, 1975; Herjanic & Reich, 1997). Finally, some studies have shown that particularly girls experience problems in stepfather families (Needle, Su, & Doherty, 1990), while other studies report that boys in stepfather families show higher levels of problem behavior (Dunn et al., 1998). Because of this ambiguity, we answer our research questions separately for boys and for girls.

We had three main research questions:

(1) Is the quality of the relationship between children and their non-resident fathers different from the quality of the relationship between children and their stepfathers?
(2) Is the quality of the relationship between children and their non-resident fathers associated with the quality of the relationship between children and their stepfathers?
(3) Is the quality of both relationships (child–father, child–stepfather) associated with children's psychosocial adjustment?

4.2 Method

4.2.1 Recruitment

We established three criteria for including a child in the study: He/she had to be between 8 and 12 years old, his/her biological father must not be living at the child's address, and the mother had to have a new partner with whom she was cohabiting. With the help of the municipal registration offices of several cities in the Netherlands, 1239 families that met the first two criteria (child's age, living situation) were invited by letter to participate in the study. One hundred and eighty families responded to this invitation, and we sent them a short questionnaire about the demographic characteristics of the family. Of these families, 37 also met the third criteria (stepfather); these families participated in a more extensive part of the study, in which the children also participated.

4.2.2 Procedure

The families that had agreed to participate were contacted by phone in order to make appointments for home visits. The child questionnaire was administered during a one-hour interview with each target child in his/her home. During these sessions, the first author or one of her collaborators read the questionnaire items to the child and recorded the child’s answers. The mothers were asked to complete a questionnaire and return it to us in the stamped addressed envelope we had provided.

4.2.3 Instruments

Data were collected by means of maternal reports (family demographic characteristics) and child questionnaires (father–child relationship, stepfather–child relationship, psychosocial adjustment).

Demographic characteristics. Each mother was asked to complete a questionnaire concerning her age, educational level, working status, number of hours worked per week, number of children, time elapsed since divorce, contact frequency between the child and the non-resident father, and the father’s new living situation.

Family structure. Families were categorized based on three questions that were put to the mothers: “Do you have an ex-partner with whom you have children?”, “Is this ex-partner the father of the child who is participating in this study?”, and “Are you currently cohabiting with a partner who is not the father of the child who is participating in this study?” (0 = No; 1 = Yes).

Children’s relationships with their fathers and stepfathers. We used the child version of the Parent–Child Interaction Questionnaire (PACHIQ-Ch; Lange, 2001) to measure the quality of each
child's relationship with the father and with the stepfather. The items in the questionnaire concern interpersonal behavior and interpersonal feelings toward the father and stepfather separately. The children were asked to indicate how often they display a certain behavior or experience a certain feeling (1 = never; 5 = always). The PACHIQ-Ch consists of two scales: the acceptance scale (8 items, e.g., "When I do something for my father/stepfather, I see that he appreciates it;" Cronbach’s alpha: fathers = .82, stepfathers = .82), and the conflict scale (17 items, e.g., "When my father/stepfather and I disagree, we are able to talk about it;" Cronbach’s alpha: fathers = .81, stepfathers = .80).

Children’s psychosocial adjustment. Data on the psychosocial adjustment of each child were collected by means of child reports. Three aspects of psychosocial adjustment were measured, namely problem behavior (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ); Goodman, 1997), self-esteem, and social competence (Perceived Competence Scale for Children (PCSC); Harter, 1982).

The SDQ problem behavior scale consists of 20 items or statements, for example "I'm restless; I can't keep still for long" and "I get very angry and often lose my temper." Each statement has a response category ranging from 0 (= not true) to 2 (= certainly true). The sum of the scores of all items produces a total score that reflects the overall measure of problem behavior. Cronbach's alpha was .74.

General self-esteem and social competence were measured by two subscales of the adapted Dutch version of the Perceived Competence Scale for Children (PCSC Dutch version; van den Bergh & van Ranst, 1998). In the original PCSC, as developed by Harter (1982), the items are formulated as bipolar statements. The child first has to decide the kind of child he/she is and then report whether the description is "sort of true" or "really true" for him/her. Van den Bergh and colleagues showed that the response format used in the original PCSC was too complex for younger children (van den Bergh & de Rycke, 2003; van den Bergh & van Ranst, 1998). The response format is simpler in the Dutch version of the PCSC: Children are asked to rate on a 4-point scale whether the labels or statements are true for them (1 = not true at all; 4 = very true). Each subscale consists of 7 statements, for example "I feel pretty sure of myself" (general self-esteem) and "I have a lot of friends" (social competence). Cronbach's alphas were good (general self-esteem: $\alpha = .73$; social competence: $\alpha = .66$).

4.2.4 Participants
The participant group comprised 37 children (14 boys, 23 girls). The mean age of the boys was 10.93 years ($SD = 1.59$), and of the girls it was 10.74 years ($SD = 1.43$). The difference in age was not significant. Most of the participating mothers had two or three children ($M = 2.42, SD = 1.13$). The mothers had divorced about 6 years previously ($M = 6.27, SD = 2.53$). Over 83% of the mothers had a paid job; they were working about 22 hours a week ($M = 22.40, SD = 12.98$).

Of the non-resident fathers, 73% ($n = 27$) had new partners; of these fathers, 14 had children in these new relationships. Two children reported that they had not had any contact with their
non-resident fathers in the previous year. These children were omitted from the analyses. Of the remaining 35 children, 23 saw their fathers at least once a week and 12 saw their fathers at least once every two months.

Previous studies have shown that the frequency of contact between child and non-resident father predicts the quality of their relationship (Amato, Meyers, & Emery, 2009). We therefore calculated bivariate correlations between the frequencies of father–child contact and the main variables of the study. Because no significant associations were found, frequency of contact was not taken into account as a control variable in further analyses.

4.2.5 Analyses

We conducted a Wilcoxon signed-rank test to investigate differences between the father–child relationship and the stepfather–child relationship. Because our sample was small, we used a non-parametric test (van Peet, van den Wittenboer, & Hox, 2001). Bivariate correlations were then calculated between the relationship variables (acceptance, conflict) of the father–child relationship and the stepfather–child relationship. Finally, bivariate correlations were calculated between the relationship variables and the children’s psychosocial adjustment (problem behavior, self-esteem, social competence). All these analyses were carried out for the total group as well as separately for boys and for girls.

4.3 Results

4.3.1 Descriptive statistics

Table 4.1 shows the mean scores of the three variables on children’s psychosocial adjustment (problem behavior, self-esteem, social competence). The mean sum score for problem behavior was 14.71 ($SD = 4.62$). This score is significantly higher ($t(1146) = -4.80; p = .000$) than reported by Muris, Meesters, Eijkelenboom, and Vincken (2004) in a previous study that used a Dutch non-clinical sample of 8- to 13-year-olds ($n = 1111; M = 10.4; SD = 5.4$). However, according to the norm scores of the SDQ (Youth in Mind, n.d.), the mean score of our sample does not come within the clinical range. Mean scores for self-esteem and social competence were 2.79 ($SD = .48$) and 2.87 ($SD = .40$), respectively. Boys and girls did not differ significantly on any of the above-mentioned variables.

Table 4.1 Mean scores ($SD$) for children’s problem behavior, self-esteem, and social competence separately for the total group ($n = 35$), for boys ($n = 13$), and for girls ($n = 22$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Problem behavior</th>
<th>Self-esteem</th>
<th>Social competence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total group</td>
<td>14.71 (4.62)</td>
<td>2.79 (.48)</td>
<td>2.87 (.40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>14.85 (5.70)</td>
<td>2.80 (.42)</td>
<td>2.98 (.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>14.64 (4.01)</td>
<td>2.79 (.52)</td>
<td>2.81 (.44)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.3.2 Differences in relationship quality

The results of the Wilcoxon signed-rank test are shown in Table 4.2. For boys and girls together, we found significant differences on both acceptance ($z = -2.77; p = .006$) and conflict ($z = -2.22; p = .027$). The children showed higher levels of warmth ($M = 4.17; SD = .66$) and lower levels of conflict ($M = 1.82; SD = .47$) in their relationships with their biological fathers, than in their relationships with their stepfathers (acceptance: $M = 3.92; SD = .64$; conflict: $M = 2.00; SD = .45$).

Table 4.2 Results of the Wilcoxon signed rank test for differences between the quality of the father–child relationship and the quality of the stepfather–child relationship separately for the total group ($n = 35$), for boys ($n = 13$), and for girls ($n = 22$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child's relationship with non-resident father</th>
<th>Stepfather</th>
<th>Wilcoxon z-value</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total group Acceptance</td>
<td>4.17 (.66)</td>
<td>3.92 (.64)</td>
<td>-2.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>1.82 (.47)</td>
<td>2.00 (.45)</td>
<td>-2.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys Acceptance</td>
<td>4.34 (.46)</td>
<td>3.81 (.76)</td>
<td>-2.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>1.76 (.42)</td>
<td>1.98 (.42)</td>
<td>-1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls Acceptance</td>
<td>4.07 (.75)</td>
<td>3.99 (.57)</td>
<td>-1.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>1.85 (.50)</td>
<td>2.01 (.48)</td>
<td>-1.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When examined separately, differences between the quality of the father–child relationship and that of the stepfather–child relationship were found only for boys: Boys reported significantly higher levels of acceptance in their relationships with their non-resident fathers ($M = 4.34, SD = .46$) than in those with their stepfathers ($M = 3.81, SD = .76$) ($z = -2.28; p = .023$). For girls, no significant differences were found regarding acceptance of the father or stepfather. Irrespective of the child’s gender, no differences were found on conflict between child and father or between child and stepfather.

4.3.3 Associations between the father–child relationship and the stepfather–child relationship

Table 4.3 shows the bivariate correlations between the relationship variables (acceptance, conflict). For the total group, both acceptance ($r(35) = - .42; p = .012$) and conflict ($r(35) = .53; p = .001$) in the father–child relationship were significantly associated with conflicts in the relationship between child and stepfather. Children who reported high levels of conflict with their stepfathers, also reported higher levels of conflict and lower levels of acceptance in their relationships with their non-resident fathers.

When examined separately for boys and for girls, both relationships were significantly associated with each other only for girls: Acceptance of the non-resident father was negatively associated with conflict with the stepfather ($r(22) = - .44; p = .040$), and conflict between father and daughter was positively associated with conflict between stepfather and daughter ($r(22) = .57; p = .005$).
Table 4.3 Bivariate correlations between acceptance and conflict in the father–child relationship and in the stepfather–child relationship separately for the total group (n= 35), for boys (n= 13), and for girls (n= 22).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship with non-resident father</th>
<th>Relationship with stepfather</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acceptance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total group</td>
<td>.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05; ** p < .01

4.3.4 Children's relationships with fathers and stepfathers, and children's psychosocial adjustment

Table 4.4 shows bivariate correlations between the relationship variables (acceptance, conflict) and the variables regarding children's adjustment (problem behavior, self-esteem, social competence). The quality of the relationships with both father figures is not significantly associated with children's problem behavior.

Table 4.4 Bivariate correlations between children's relationships with their fathers and their stepfathers, and child adjustment separately for the total group (n= 35), for boys (n= 13), and for girls (n= 22).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Problem behavior</th>
<th>Self-esteem</th>
<th>Social competence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total Boys Girls</td>
<td>Total Boys Girls</td>
<td>Total Boys Girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with father</td>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>.07 .15 .03</td>
<td>.29 .37 .28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>.05 -.03 .11</td>
<td>-.37* -.34 -.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with stepfather</td>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>-.12 -.19 -.04</td>
<td>.32 .01 .53*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>.21 .37 .10</td>
<td>-.36* -.20 -.43*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05

However, significant associations were found between children's self-esteem and social competence and their relationships with their fathers and stepfathers. For the total group, conflicts with fathers and stepfathers were negatively associated with children's self-esteem ($r(35) = -.37, p = .031$ and $r(35) = -.36; p = .031$, respectively). For boys, acceptance in their relationships with their non-resident fathers was associated with their social competence ($r(13)= .56; p=.047$): Boys who reported higher levels of acceptance in the father–child relationship, also reported higher levels of social competence. For girls, the relationship with their stepfathers was associated with their adjustment. Both acceptance and conflict in the stepfather–child relationship was
associated with girls’ self-esteem (respectively, $r(22) = .53, p = .011$ and $r(22) = -.43; p = .044$). Girls who maintain warm relationships with their stepfathers (high levels of acceptance, low levels of conflict), reported higher levels of self-esteem than girls who did not have warm stepfather–child relationships.

### 4.4 Discussion

As a result of divorce and remarriage, a growing number of children in the Netherlands have both biological parents and step-parents. A large group of under-aged children are growing up with more than two parental figures. Our study focused on children's relationships with their non-resident fathers and their stepfathers. The results show that the presence of a stepfather in the family impacts boys and girls differently: A boy's relationship with his non-resident father is associated with the boy’s well-being, while a girl’s relationship with her stepfather seems to be important.

Boys reported higher levels of acceptance in their relationships with their non-resident fathers than in their relationships with their stepfathers. For girls, no differences were found. Nor were differences found in the degree of conflicts between children (boys and girls) with both father figures. These results are partially in line with previous findings. Claxton-Oldfield, Garber, and Gilchrist (2006), for example, reported that children in general experience their relationships with their non-resident fathers as more affective than their relationships with their stepfathers. In contrast, King (2009) reported no differences on children's relationship quality with their fathers and with their stepfathers.

Second, for both boys and girls the quality of the relationship between child and non-resident father was found to be associated with the quality of the relationship between child and stepfather. Children who reported high levels of acceptance in their relationships with their non-resident fathers reported low levels of conflict with their stepfathers. And children who reported high levels of conflict with their non-resident fathers also reported high levels of conflict with their stepfathers. This result is partially influenced by the results for the girls, for whom we found the same significant associations as described above. This result is in line with the spillover theory. According to this theory, emotions and behavior in one family relationship spill over into to another family relationship. In this study this means that a warm relationship with the non-resident father is associated with a warm relationship with the stepfather. Our study does not support the compensatory perspective, which stresses that emotions and behavior in one family relationship compensates for the emotions and behaviors in other family relationships. Several studies on relationships in families have confirmed the spillover perspective (Erel & Burman, 1995). However, our study is one of the first to show that the spillover perspective can also be used to understand how the relationship with the non-resident father is related to the relationship with the resident stepfather. Separately for boys and for girls, only for girls were conflicts with their
non-resident fathers associated with conflicts with their stepfathers. No significant associations were found for boys’ relationships with their father figures. It is possible that we did not find any significant associations due to the small number of boys participating in the study, as this decreases the statistical power of the correlation analyses. Nevertheless, all non-significant correlations did point in the right direction to support the spillover perspective.

We also examined whether the quality of children’s relationships with their father figures is associated with children’s psychosocial adjustment. Surprisingly, neither relationship was associated with children’s total problem behavior. This result conflicts with studies that reported a link between the relationships of children with their non-resident fathers and their stepfathers (e.g., King, 2006; Sturgess, Dunn, & Davies, 2001). A possible explanation for this is that in our study, children participated who reported relatively low levels of problem behavior. However, both relationships were significantly associated with the positive aspects of children’s well-being that we measured, namely children’s self-esteem and their social competence. Boys who reported higher levels of acceptance in their relationships with their non-resident fathers feel more socially competent than boys who reported lower levels of acceptance in their relationships with their non-resident fathers. Girls, who reported high levels of acceptance and low levels of conflict in their relationships with their stepfathers, also reported higher levels of self-esteem. It seems that boys’ relationships with their non-resident fathers influence their well-being, while for girls their relationships with their stepfathers are more important. This result is in line with previous studies. King and Sobolowski (2006) reported that boys who have warm relationships with their non-resident fathers have fewer problems at school and get higher grades. In a longitudinal study by Bray and Berger (1993) on children’s relationships in stepfamilies, it was found that the contact between non-resident fathers and their daughters declines after some time, while the frequency of contact between non-resident fathers and sons stays the same. This could explain why the relationship with the non-resident father is associated with the well-being of boys, but not that of girls. However, we also found a significant association between the quality of the relationship with the stepfather and the self-esteem of girls. Previous studies on the relationship between stepfathers and stepdaughters came up with mixed results. Vuchinich, Hetherington, Vuchinich, and Clingempeel (1991), for example, found that during adolescence girls have more conflicts than boys with their stepfathers. However, Martin, Anderson, and Mottet (1999) reported that adolescent girls are more likely than boys to maintain warm relationships with their stepfathers.

Our study had a number of limitations. First, its cross-sectional design gives no indication of the sequence of events. To infer causality, a longitudinal design is recommended for future research. Second, the study was based on a sample of families that voluntarily participated. It is possible that families that did not respond to our invitation have more difficulties regarding child adjustment and relationships with non-resident fathers. Finally, our sample was very small. Because the results were analyzed separately for boys and for girls, the statistical power of the analyses was low.
Concluding, it can be said that boys in general are more positive about their relationships with their non-resident fathers than about their relationships with their stepfathers. For girls, the quality of both relationships does not differ significantly. Furthermore, this study shows that the spillover perspective can also be used to understand associations between relationships in the family (stepfather–child relationship) and relationships outside the family (non-residential father–child relationship): Children who reported high levels of conflict with one of their father figures, also reported high levels of conflict with their other father figure. Finally, it appears that there are gender differences regarding the association between the quality of children’s relationships with both father figures and their child adjustment. Boys’ social competence is associated with their relationships with their non-resident fathers, while for girls’ self-esteem their relationships with their stepfathers seem to matter most. Surprisingly, neither relationship is correlated with children’s problem behavior.
References


