

# Parenting style and practices in stepfamilies

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**Abstract:** There are several studies on the best way to raise a child, ie, what would be the consequences of our actions for our children. We tend to think of how to educate children in a traditional family, but society has undergone many changes and, hence, family structures have undergone changes too. Today, we find a large number of stepfamilies facing the same issues concerning how to educate a child. Stepfamily configuration often entails more than just the addition of a new parent figure. The objective of this study was to shed some light on how these stepfamilies deal with issues of parenting style and practices. We reviewed the Brazilian and international literature concerning parenting styles and practices in stepfamilies. The papers identified were organized and submitted to analysis. We identified very few papers addressing parenting styles and practices, pointing to an important but unaddressed social change as reflected in new family structures. There is a need for longitudinal studies aimed at understanding not only a particular moment in time, but also moments within a context, ie, an analysis with a holistic approach without preconceived ideas.

**Keywords:** parenting styles, parenting practices, stepfamilies

## Introduction

Many studies in psychology focus on the effects of parenting style and practices on the development of children and adolescents.<sup>1-4</sup> It is interesting to notice that parenting styles and practices are closely related. According to Sampaio and Gomide,<sup>5</sup> for example, parenting practices are characterized as strategies and techniques used by parents to guide their child's behavior, whereas the parenting style is a result of a set of parenting practices that can, depending on frequency and intensity, shape prosocial or antisocial behavior.<sup>3</sup> The study of parenting style approaches child rearing objectively, investigating the range of parental behaviors that create the emotional milieu in which parent-child interactions are expressed, based on the influence of parents on behavioral, emotional, and intellectual aspects of childhood development.<sup>6</sup>

Constant attention has been given to child care, but the ways to deal with and raise a child and the person responsible for this has changed over time. Contrasting with the traditional family structure in which the father was the provider and the mother was responsible for housework and child care, nowadays we find families with a range of different configurations and structures. According to Watarai,<sup>7</sup> the family should be approached and named according to the arrangements of its members. When we talk about traditional or nuclear family we are referring to the family that consists of a father, mother, and children,<sup>8,9</sup> whereas new family configurations can consist of an adult and one or more children, known as the monoparental family. The stepfamily

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is another category, consisting of a couple and children, but at least one of the children is the fruit of a previous union of either spouse.<sup>9,10</sup>

The lack of consensus around the term “stepfamily” and the few relevant publications found may result from the recentness of this new form of family arrangement in society and could reflect the complexity involved in classifying the new forms of kinship created in these families.<sup>11</sup> Meuders-Klein and Théry<sup>10</sup> argue that children are the main reference for classifying and analyzing stepfamilies; in addition to a stepfather or stepmother, they may also have full siblings (same father and same mother), half-siblings (same mother and different father or same father and different mother), and step-siblings, who are children from previous relationships, (different parents).

Changes in the parent–child relationship resulting from ongoing changes in the family have led to increasing questioning about the role of parents in child-rearing.<sup>12,13</sup> Concomitantly, technical and scientific knowledge has contributed to many of the changes in parent–child relationships observed over recent decades.<sup>14</sup> Studies of parenting style and practices do exist, but what studies are there about parenting style and practices in stepfamilies? Which age group has drawn the attention of the scientific community? Which members are focused upon in these families? The present study reviewed the Brazilian and international literature about parenting style and practices in stepfamilies from January 2006 to May 2011.

## Materials and methods

Considering the issue to be explored we chose to do a systematic review, ie, a rigorous synthesis of the research using critical, explicit, and systematic search methods. This should be done in two steps: first, a thorough search of the literature for related papers, then checking the identified articles against predetermined criteria.<sup>15–17</sup>

Among the different methods of performing a systematic review, the integrative review offers the best results, because it is a specific examination of the empirical and theoretical literature and enables a deeper and broader understanding of

a specific issue. This kind of review incorporates strategies to avoid bias, and evaluates and summarizes the relevant studies that answer a common question.<sup>18,19</sup> We used the following steps to develop our methodology (Figure 1).

To identify studies on parenting style and practices in stepfamilies, we used the keywords “parenting style” and “parenting practices” concomitantly to search in the Web of Science, SciELO, PsycINFO, and Science Direct databases. The Web of Science database contains more than 9200 journals covering the psychology field published in more than 45 languages. SciELO is an electronic library containing Brazilian and other South American scientific journals. PsycINFO is part of the American Psychological Association, and Science Direct contains more than nine million articles covering many fields, including psychology.

## Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Our restriction criteria were the type of publication (journal), population (human), area (psychology), and language (English, Portuguese, and French) from January 2006 to May 2011.

We excluded all studies that dealt with parenting style and practices as secondary objectives in nonfamiliar institutions (orphanages, schools, hospitals), in “traditional” families (father, mother and children), in homosexual families, and those focused on assisted reproduction, adoption, divorce, or separation. All papers on parenting style and practices in stepfamilies were included.

## Searching and categorizing the research

When the final set of papers was identified, we searched for their full versions. These papers were categorized in the program Microsoft Access® (Microsoft, Redmond, WA) and submitted to analysis. Use of this database enables the user to analyze a whole set of empirical material through tables automatically built by the researcher. Using this tool, ie, crosschecking information across all articles, it was possible to collate information in the literature in respect to parental style and practices in stepfamilies, thereby achieving our main goal.

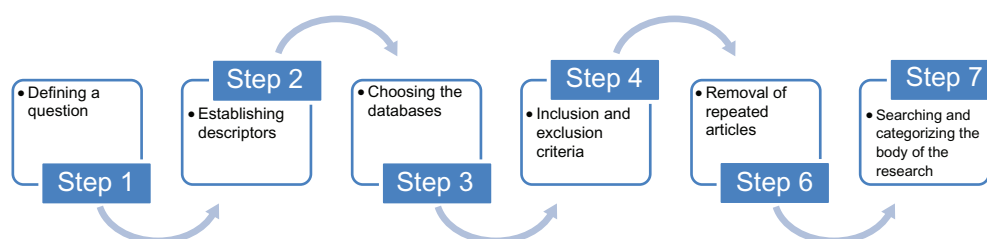


Figure 1 Research flow diagram.

## Results

We found 3232 papers and their respective abstracts (540 papers in 2006, 512 in 2007, 652 in 2008, 562 in 2009, 689 in 2010, and 96 papers from January to May 2011). After removing duplications, 2909 papers addressing parenting style and practices met our inclusion criteria. We analyzed the abstracts of these papers in order to classify them according to the objectives of the present study, and found that 1681 papers studied parenting style and practices as a secondary objective, 560 studies were carried out in nonfamilial institutions, and 668 studies addressed our research question in families (Table 1).

We found 613 papers on “traditional” families and only 55 papers on “nontraditional” families (Table 2), out of which four studied parenting style and practices in stepfamilies (Table 3). No review on papers or studies done in Brazil related to parenting style and practices in stepfamilies was found. The age range of the children studied varied from childhood to adolescence, with more emphasis on preadolescence and adolescence. Three studies used data from one larger study. The main focus of these studies was behavioral problems, academic achievement, family composition, and parental style and practices in different types of households (Table 4).

## Discussion

Although the family is considered to be the basic unit of society, its precise definition may vary over time and between cultures. In the western world, the family determines parenting practices, provides the milieu in which the child lives, and establishes pathways of interaction between parents, children, and grandchildren. The family fosters development in the early years, and creates conditions for formation of identity, living together, and emotional exchanges among its members, including care regarding parents and children and transmission of values.<sup>14</sup> The study of parenting style is of great relevance, because it involves the family and

consequently all of society. The way an individual is raised is clearly important for determining the makeup of that individual.<sup>6</sup>

## Adolescence

Adolescence is still the best studied phase in terms of parenting style and practices in both nuclear families and stepfamilies, probably because it is the period in which we notice the greatest difficulties in the parent–child relationship.<sup>20–29</sup> The studies show that parenting style has a significant influence in several areas of the psychosocial development of adolescents, including social adjustment, psychopathology, and academic achievement. The most frequent parenting styles reported by adolescents are the authoritarian and the authoritative.<sup>28</sup> Both have high demandingness as a characteristic but differ in terms of responsiveness.<sup>1,4</sup>

Parental demandingness includes all parental attitudes that seek to control the behavior of the child by setting limits and rules. Parental responsiveness includes tolerant attitudes that, through emotional support and verbal give-and-take, favor the development of autonomy and self-assurance in the child.<sup>4</sup> The basic difference between the typology proposed by Baumrind<sup>2</sup> and the model put forward by Maccoby and Martin<sup>4</sup> is the separation of this permissive style into two, ie, indulgent and neglectful.

The authoritative style results from a combination of high demandingness and high responsiveness. Authoritative parents use inductive discipline, and have open and clear communication with their children, based on mutual respect. They have high expectations of child behavior in terms of responsibility and maturity. In addition, they are affectionate when interacting with their children, responsive to their needs and, frequently ask their opinion when they judge it to be appropriate, encouraging decision-making and providing opportunities for development of their abilities.<sup>1,4</sup>

The authoritarian style results from a combination of high demandingness and low responsiveness. Authoritarian parents tend to emphasize obedience through respect for authority and order, and frequently use punishment as a method of behavior control. They do not encourage verbal give-and-take and autonomy, reacting with rejection and low responsiveness to the child’s questioning and opinions.<sup>1,4</sup>

## Step-parenting

Researchers have investigated the age of the child when separation occurred and when the stepfamily was formed.<sup>29</sup> According to Saint-Jacques and Lépine,<sup>29</sup> if the parenting style stabilizes approximately 6 years after the formation of

**Table 1** Papers found using “parenting style” and “parenting practices” as keywords, after removal of duplications from January 2006 to May 2011

Year	Parenting style and practices secondary objectives	Nonfamilial institutions	Family
2006	331	83	126
2007	310	65	137
2008	365	131	156
2009	257	163	142
2010	349	112	86
2011	69	06	21
Total	1681	560	668

**Table 2** Distribution of articles identified showing different configurations of family

Year	"Traditional" families	Assisted reproduction	Homosexual families	Adoption	Divorce or separation	Stepfamilies
2006	119	–	01	03	02	01
2007	131	01	01	03	01	–
2008	140	03	05	–	06	02
2009	130	02	05	02	02	01
2010	72	04	02	05	03	–
2011	21	–	–	–	–	–
Total	613	10	14	13	14	04

the stepfamily, studies should take into account how long the stepfamily has been together. But what may happen over these 6 years? The child can mature, separation of the parents may become more distant, the relationship between the mother and stepfather may become more stable, and the stepfather could be better accepted in their lives and participate more in family decision-making, so all in all, many events may influence parenting style and family relationships. Hence, the need for further studies is evident, but in view of the complexity of the subject, such studies should be undertaken without time constraints.

According to Meuders-Klein and Théry,<sup>10</sup> the children are the main reference for classifying and analyzing stepfamilies. Hence, the child's age could explain why some children are resistant to a stepfather's efforts to establish a relationship.<sup>30</sup> Some investigators have pointed out that mothers tend to be more involved than fathers in the child's everyday tasks and are usually in charge of childhood education.<sup>31,32</sup> However, there are an increasing number of fathers who share or even fully assume the responsibility of raising children.<sup>31</sup> In addition, some researchers have found that stepfathers can exceed expectations with regard to the parenting practices considered to be essential for promoting self-esteem, autonomy, and social skills in children, such as those related to setting limits, communication, teaching of responsibility, and expression of affection.<sup>33,34</sup> In one study, it was expected that fathers would make better use of these parenting practices than stepfathers, but both showed similar results.<sup>35</sup>

One possible explanation is the short duration of the stepfamily relationship, in which the stepfather is still in the process of courting the mother. An alternative explanation is that mothers become more selective when choosing their new partners.<sup>35</sup>

We should question why we have low expectations of stepfathers. The number of studies of stepfamilies is still low, and those addressing parenting styles and practices in stepfamilies are even fewer. However, there seems to be a trend of comparing traditional structures and models with new ones, assuming that the traditional ones are right and must be followed. According to Burr,<sup>36</sup> we need a critical review in relation to what is considered correct family style and practices. According to Watarai,<sup>7</sup> most children remain with their mother when a separation or divorce occurs, allowing better study of the relationship between a child and a stepfather than between a child and a stepmother.

## Different types of siblings

Male adolescents fare worse for behavioral problems and poor school achievement, particularly when they live with the stepfather's family, although findings in nuclear families have been similar.<sup>28,37,38</sup> In contrast, girls maintain higher school achievement and have fewer behavioral problems than boys.<sup>28,39</sup>

The presence of step-siblings in the home is more harmful for the adolescent's school achievement than the presence of half-siblings. In homes where the adolescent cohabits with both step-siblings and half-siblings, school achievement is

**Table 3** Articles found concerning parental styles and practices in stepfamilies

Year	Authors	Country	Title	Journal	Database
2006	Simons et al <sup>30</sup>	US	Parenting practices and child adjustment in different types of households: a study of African-American families	<i>J Fam Issues</i>	PsycINFO
2008	Tilman <sup>28</sup>	US	"Non-traditional" siblings and the academic outcomes of adolescents	<i>Soc Sci Res</i>	Science Direct
2008	Berger et al <sup>35</sup>	US	Parenting practices of resident fathers: the role of marital and biological ties	<i>J Marriage Fam</i>	PsycINFO
2009	Saint-Jacques and Lépine <sup>10</sup>	Canada	Le style parental des beaux-pères dans les familles recomposées [The parenting style of stepfathers in the recomposed family]	<i>Can J Behav Sci</i>	Science Direct

**Table 4** Study characteristics

Authors	Saint-Jacques and Lépine <sup>10</sup>	Tilman <sup>28</sup>	Simons et al <sup>30</sup>	Berger et al <sup>35</sup>
Study	Empirical study Quantitative study	Empirical study Quantitative study	Empirical study Quantitative study	Empirical study Quantitative study
Sample	104 adolescents 11–20 years	11,036 adolescents 12–20 years	867 Afro-American families 10–12 years	2098 children 5 years
Purpose	Contribution of parenting style adopted by step-parents	Duration of time spent living with “nontraditional” siblings Association between sibling composition and academic outcomes	Differences in parenting practices and child outcomes by type of household	Differences in parenting practices of four types of resident fathers
Instruments	Youth self-report Parental authority questionnaire Child parental acceptance-rejection questionnaire	Parental questionnaire School administrator questionnaire	Diagnostic Interview Schedule for children	Mother’s questionnaire
Database	–	National longitudinal study of adolescent health	Family and community health study	FFCWS – longitudinal birth cohort study
Author comments	Stepfather is authoritarian and authoritative Different factors such as age children at the time of reconstruction	Importance of considering the composition of family Impact of family structure upon well-being of adolescents Interactions with siblings	Grandmothers and other relatives can substitute when a father is not present Children in single-mother households and step-parent families show more behavioral problems	Social fathers engage in parenting practices that are of equal, if not higher, quality to those of biological fathers Marriage appears to be more closely linked to higher-quality parenting practices

**Abbreviation:** FFCWS, Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study.

higher than in homes where the adolescent lives with only one of these groups.<sup>28</sup> The relationship between siblings was studied in other contexts (birth of a second child, adoption) and different results were observed, mainly depending on preparation and adaptation.<sup>40</sup> In the study by Tilman,<sup>28</sup> the results concerning relationships between half-siblings and step-siblings were teased out from other findings and presented in isolation, making it difficult to understand those relationships. The gender of the child also influences the extent of adaptation, with girls appearing to develop a better relationship with half-siblings and stepfathers than boys.<sup>28</sup> Gilligan<sup>41</sup> agrees, and suggests further that girls seem to develop better relationships in other situations as well.

## Household configuration

Another important issue concerning family structure is the number of caretakers, eg, mother, father, step-parent, and grandparent. In homes with only one caretaker (usually a single mother), the results were worse in terms of child adaptation.<sup>30</sup> When a stepfather marries into such a family, he is able to develop better parenting practices, since it seems that when the relationship becomes legalized, the stepfather is “authorized” to take part in the child’s life.

The family members focused upon in the literature have been stepfathers, fathers, and children, and the subjects studied were the stepfather’s parenting style as perceived by adolescents, comparisons of parenting practices used by fathers and stepfathers, and the child’s adaptation and school achievement in families containing “nontraditional” siblings. We are passing through a period of great social change and, in this context, the evidence suggests that the role of the stepfather is better appreciated.<sup>29</sup> It is also important to check for the existence of problems prior to the arrival of new siblings, because they may not necessarily be the source of conflict.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

The papers analyzed point to a period of important social change, which is reflected in new familial configurations. However, traditional family models are still being used for research purposes, without adapting methods and assumptions to the current reality. We found more studies about parenting styles in nuclear, intact, or traditional families than in stepfamilies. Hence, studies and validation of methods used for other family structures are urgently needed, as well as more information on parental styles and practices in stepfamilies.

Low expectations still exist with respect to stepfamilies in terms of academic achievement by children and behavioral and adaptation problems, but these have not been substantiated by our review. In addition to the new family configurations, there are other factors involved that were not being dealt with in current research. Furthermore, there is a need for longitudinal studies, which aim at understanding not only a particular moment in time but also moments within a context, ie, an analysis using a holistic approach without preconceptions.

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## Disclosure

The authors report no conflicts of interest in this work.

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