

ADOLESCENTS' ADJUSTMENT TO DIVORCE AND LIVING IN STEP-  
FAMILIES

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## ABSTRACT

The step-family is no longer the exception in society. Globally statistics reveal the growth in this type of family structure. Divorce and living in step-families is a life-transforming experience; adolescent's life is profoundly altered. They encounter differences in feelings over the two-time periods. There is a need to learn more and gain a better understanding of adolescents' adjustment and coping with the changes caused by divorce and remarriage. The key question this research aims at answering: "How does divorce and remarriage influence the adolescent's life?" And "Do other factors and structures play a role to influence that outcome?"

The main purpose of this thesis was to explore how adolescents adjust to their parents' divorce and living in step-families. This research was based on information gathered from the adolescent's perspective. Participants all attended the Dawid Bezuidenhout Senior Secondary School in Khomasdal, Windhoek. The qualitative approach and phenomenological design was applied. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 participants; video and audio recordings as well as field notes were taken. This data was analyzed using content analysis and the information was organized into themes, patterns and trends.

For the purpose of answering the research questions in a systematic way, eight themes prominent in the literature on adolescents living in a step-family relationship were focused upon. Eight themes emerged from the study: the demise of the family of origin, the adolescents' experiences of their parents' divorce and remarriage, the complexities of step-families as compared to the family of origin, coping strategies

recommended for the adolescent living in step-families, how the adolescents' behaviour is being affected by co-occurring stressful life experiences and distressed relationships, the adaptation patterns amongst adolescents in step-families, support systems needed for adolescents to adapt successfully in step-families, and further research.

The findings indicated that adolescents have diverse experiences of their parents' divorce and remarriage and they are affected by the dynamics in the step-family. The findings confirm that adolescents cope better with the trauma of divorce and remarriage when they have a strong support network.

In conclusion, all parties involved in a step-family household have to work on a new form of intimacy, communication skills, and parent-child relationship, as these factors influences the adjustment of adolescents in step-families.

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## DEDICATION

To my faithful husband, Lennon, without whose love and encouragement this thesis would not exist.

DECLARATION

I, Amanda Anne Solomon, hereby declare that this study is a true reflection of my own research and that neither this work, nor any part thereof has been submitted for any degree in any other institution of higher education.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

#### *1.1. Introduction*

Compared to traditional family structures consisting of the biological parents and children, families in the 21st Century are going through rapid changes (Charles, Davies & Harris, 2008; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001; Silva & Smart, 2000). Raley and Bumpass (2003) and Pasley (2001) state that half of the Americans today are or will be in a step relationship in their lifetime. The escalating divorce figures globally, the migrant labour system, the high rates of dysfunctional families, and the prevalence of high numbers of single mothers in Namibia, have awakened a deep concern for marriages in Namibia (Unicef, 1991; Hishongwa, 1992). Although statistics on remarriage is not available in Namibia, research has shown that the divorce rate in Namibia is 17% of marriages (Whittaker, 2007). Worsening this situation, according to Wallerstein and Johnston (1990), is that the divorce rate is more frequent in remarried families especially when step-children are involved.

Since divorce and remarriage profoundly alter the adolescent's life, it is important to address the question: **“How does divorce and remarriage influence the adolescent's life?”** And **“Do other factors and structures play a role to influence that outcome?”** The main objective for this particular study lies in identifying the factors that help adolescents embrace the challenges of adjusting to remarriage.

Central to the current research is the changing form of the family unit. A remarried family with children is traditionally known as step-families. Literature also reveals a vast array of labels to describe a step-family such as reconstituted, blended, merged, combined, reorganized and reconstructed family (Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Hetherington, 1999; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). However, this thesis will use the term “step-family.” To denote a family formed by the marriage or long-term cohabitation of two individuals, when one or both have at least one child from a previous relationship living part-time or full-time in the household. The individual who is not the biological parent of the child or children is referred to as the step-parent. Therefore the researcher is interested in selecting this topic to learn what factors contribute to these adolescents embracing the challenges of adjusting to the remarriage of their parents.

### *1.2. Context of the problem*

The formation of step-families is typically characterized by two phases, namely divorce and remarriage. The Namibian family unit was harshly impacted by the long period of colonialism, compounded by the dehumanizing policies and effects of apartheid, including racial discrimination, land dispossession, forced settlement, extended absence of key family members under the migrant labour system, and neglect and deprivation of basic services (UNICEF, 1991; Legal Assistance Centre, 2011).



Family structure and functioning was disrupted and the effects from the migrant labour system included widespread fragmentation of households, prevalence of high numbers of single mothers, and a widespread sense of low esteem and hopelessness leading to alcohol abuse, domestic violence, child abuse and marital breakdown. For example, research by the Legal Assistance Centre published in a 2010 report on cohabitation noted that interviewees reported that married men from rural areas who move to urban centers' in search of work opportunities often take a new partner, whilst still maintaining involvement with their wives back home. A major study of intimate-partner violence undertaken by the World Health Organization gathered data from a number of countries, including Namibia, in 2001 and found that of women in Windhoek who had experienced *physical* violence since age 15, 4% reported a step-father as the perpetrator. 71 of women who had experienced *sexual* violence before age 15, step-fathers were also identified as the perpetrators 4% of the time, although this figure dropped to 1% for sexual violence after age 15. The percentages relating to memories of childhood abuse may be underestimated, as some women who experienced childhood sexual abuse may have been unwilling to discuss it or may have repressed painful memories. It may also be that the category "*step-father*" was problematic, as some women may refer to a mother's unmarried partner as something other than a step-father – such as simply the mother's boyfriend (LAC, 2011). These subsequent effects have made the family in Namibia dysfunctional and have reduced the effectiveness of the family as the basic institution for socialization, and economic and emotional support (Hishongwa, 1992). The formation of step-families in Namibia has historically mainly occurred as a result of foreign military occupation, land alienation and labour migration (UNICEF, 1991).

The family structure in many parts of Namibia is weakened. Thousands of men from the rural areas left their families to become contract workers for the whites in mines and factories, on the railways, as domestic workers, to name a few. The contract labour system contributed to the destruction of normal social life, especially a stable family life as men were not allowed to take their families with them to their workplaces. Many problems arose. Contract workers established a second family. Alcoholism became a major problem, and some men abandoned their families, thus affecting the economic and social lives of many Namibian women. In the absence of the men, women took care of the children, domestic animals and subsistence farming (Hishongwa, 1992).

In the 1930's and 1940's, widows and divorced women survived by choosing to remarry, that is if they were at the best childrearing age. Women in Namibia marry early. A Namibian census conducted in 2001, indicated that 29% of the population aged at least 15 years and above are currently formally married, either traditionally or by civil marriage. However since the 1950's onwards there was a drastic decrease in remarriage because of socio-economic changes in society, such as changes in the inheritance system, and more women entering the labour market. (Siiskonen, 2009; Central Bureau of Statistics, 2003).

Research on how adolescents function in the step-family is a concern for professionals such as teachers, social workers, childcare providers, counselors, and attorneys. If professionals understand how step-family life affects adolescents they will be able to give appropriate support, counseling and therapy. This study provides

Namibians with baseline information which will aid step children, step-families as well as professionals working with these phenomena.

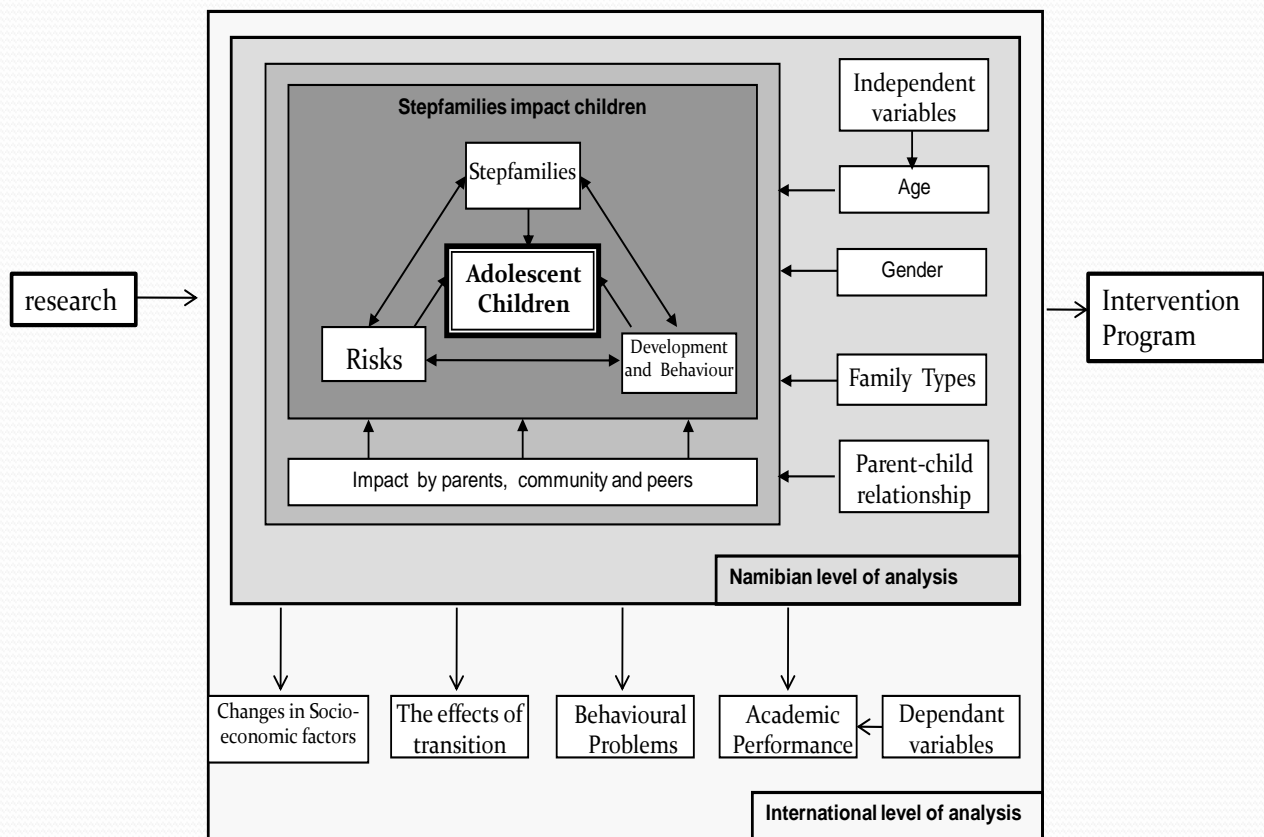
### *Structure of the Research Field*

A visual reflection of the content of the thesis is provided in Figure 1 on page 4. A “Structure of the Research Field” gives a visual summary of the research study. Central to this study is the adolescent children within step-families. These children’s lives are impacted by the step-family formation which may put them at risk. Their development and behaviour may be impacted by parents, community and peers. From a Namibian level of analysis, independent variables such as age, sex, family types and the parent-child relationship is relevant to this study.

From an international level of analysis the focus is on changes in socio-economic factors, the effects of the transition, behavioural problems, and academic performance will be discussed as dependent variables. Ideally this baseline information will set the platform to draw up an intervention program to help adolescent’s cope better in step-families.

Figure 1

# Structure of the research field



### *1.3. Statement of the Problem*

The step-parent family structure has the potential to be remarkably complicated compared to the original family ([www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/pubs/briefing/briefing\\_6.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/pubs/briefing/briefing_6.html) retrieved on 26/05/10). Unlike the original family where the members of the family are added gradually, the step-family has many different existing structures which are rapidly superimposed, making adjustment rather difficult for adults and children.

A significant challenge that many children experience is the loss of a parent (usually the father) through a traumatic experience, such as divorce or death. In the step-family, this is compounded by the fact that the step-parents are often strangers to these children. Naturally, this influences the parent-child relationship, and may negatively impact the children as Pryor and Rodgers (2001, p.9) point out: "Step-families are poor substitutes for the original biological families and pose significant dangers for children." Hetherington (1999) show that children's behaviour and development are affected by the type of family in which they live. Children living in single-parent or step-parent families are at greater risk for a range of negative outcomes, such as higher rates of juvenile delinquency, poor parent-child relationships, deprivation due to a poor economic situation, greater susceptibility to peer pressure and deviant peer relationships, thus increasing the risk of drug and alcohol use (Wallenstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000).

An important factor influencing adolescents' adjustment to step-families is the adolescent phase. Adolescence is a challenging phase in life. According to Gouws,

Kruger and Burger (2000) the adolescent life phase is characterized by rapid growth and change. It is the developmental phase in the human life cycle that is situated between childhood and adulthood. It is linked to body growth acceleration, the reproductive organs become functional, sexual maturity is attained and secondary sexual characteristics appear. This phase generally also includes changes in cognitive, social, emotional, moral, and religious development. This family transition may entail a number of risk factors for children, such as increased stress, diminished parenting practices, disrupted family roles, and increased conflict (Brown, 2006). According to the American Institute of Stress ([www.stress.org](http://www.stress.org) retrieved on 21/06/10), divorce and transition counts amongst the five highest stressors for human beings. These stressors are particularly prevalent in step-families.

Another important factor influencing adolescents' adjustment to step-families is their parents' parenting skills (<http://parenthood.library.wisc.edu/Lerner/Lerner.html> retrieved on 24/05/10). Step-parents need to have knowledge about themselves and the way they processed their divorce and associated trauma before they are able to support their step children in forming a new family. Step-parents need specific communication skills to be able to verbalize the hurts of the past and the dreams of the future family. They have to be mature in their structure and order arrangements by disciplining children according to their age and temperament, taking into consideration the demands of being the best step-parent they can be. The mindset of step-parents is influenced by religious morals and values towards divorce and remarriage. If they are rigid in the application of their beliefs it could have a

negative influence on postmodern adolescents who have liberal viewpoints towards divorce. Custody arrangements can also worsen the adolescents' adjustment in the step-family (Howden, 2004).

The statement of the problem, as stated above will help to address the following key research question: **“How does divorce and remarriage influence the adolescent’s life?”** And **“Do other factors and structures play a role to influence that outcome?”**

#### *1.4. Significance of the Study*

The findings of this study are of great importance having both theoretical and practical value. The theoretical value lies in the fact that it will make important contributions to the limited body of knowledge on the adolescent’s adjustment to divorce and living in step-families in Namibia. The practical value of this study lies in the fact that adolescents will have a guide on how to cope better in step-families. Awareness-raising will be done during parent-teacher meetings and school assemblies, support groups will be started, and training of teachers and principals may be conducted. It may also serve as a foundation for the development of an intervention program on adolescents’ adjustment to divorce and living in step-families, which could be run at schools or youth groups. The findings may motivate other researchers to undertake future research in this area.

Research on step-families is a comparatively new area of investigation in the social sciences, with the majority of current knowledge about step-families coming from the last decade and a half of research (Pasley, 2001). It is therefore not surprising that professionals (e.g., teachers, social workers, childcare providers, counsellors, attorneys) working with families may not have a solid working knowledge of the research on step-family experiences, due to the likelihood that their program of study did not include information on the study of step-families.

The researcher acknowledges that there is a notable gap in research on step-families in Namibia. The only empirical social work study of step-families conducted in Namibia that is known of is a very small unpublished study of step-parenting carried out in Rundu by Hamutenya (1998). The findings support the general sense that step-families are common and experience unique problems. The results indicated that 67% of the participants perceived step-families as very prevalent and common in their community, while 23% responded that its occurrence is “*average*.” The participants indicated that the high number of step-families is due to the high rates of divorce and teenage pregnancies (Hamutenya, 1998). This report seeks to provide some insight into the prevalence of step-families, yet little is known about step-family dynamics in Namibia. The researcher is not aware of any data relating the prevalence of step-families in Namibia. According to the study by Hamutenya (1998) it appears that in Namibia large numbers of step-families exist. The growing number of step-families in Namibia is part of the global trend, as international literature suggests that step-families are on the rise around the world.



The most recent statistics from the United States indicate that almost half (42%) of adults surveyed have a step-relative, defined as including a step-parent, step sibling or step child (Parker, 2011). According to data from the United Kingdom for 2009, step-families accounted for 15% of families with dependent children (Newport, South Wales: Office for National Statistics, 2009). Given the increasing numbers of children undergoing the experience of the divorce and remarriage of their parents, it is clearly urgent that these gaps on step-families be systematically researched.

The current research will play a role in highlighting the strengths these adolescents possess to help them adjust to the challenges they face. A broader motivation for this study is to close the gap in the knowledge field and understanding of how Namibian children learn to cope with changes associated with remarriage. Studying these families from the adolescents' perspective will contribute to affirming their effective functioning and adjustment, in turn, expanding the existing research and making it relevant to Namibia. It will provide Namibians with a local resource, which will aid children in step-families, as well as scholars and professionals working with these children.

### *1.5. Limitations of the Study*

One of the limitations pertains to the non-probability sampling method that was used. With purposive and snowball sampling, the sample was not randomly selected and therefore not representative of the general population. Being a qualitative study, the emphasis was to capture the richness of the data; therefore findings could not be

generalized to the general population of remarried families in Namibia. Another limitation was the exploratory nature of this research, which implies the study of a new and unstudied area in the hope of stimulating future research. The field of adolescent's adjustment to divorce and living in step-families is new and relatively unstudied in Namibia. This means that the researcher had scarce Namibian research material from which to draw as a resource. The small sample size was another limitation of this study, making it difficult for all ethnic groups to be well represented. In Namibia there are thirteen ethnic groups. This study was limited to identifying information which may be useful as foundational data needed in an intervention program for adolescents who are in step-families. It does not include the designing or testing of an intervention program.

### *1.6. Summary*

The changing family structures of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have led to a growth in the number of children living in step-families. The researcher was concerned about how adolescents adjust and cope with family transitions such as divorce and remarriage. The main objective of the study lies in identifying how divorce and remarriage of an adolescent's parent influences an adolescent's; identification of factors that help adolescents deal with the challenges of adjusting to remarriage. The study also explores the factors that will determine the positive or negative outcome in the adolescent's life. The findings of this study provide foundational data which is needed in the development of intervention programs and will act as a guide to help adolescents cope better in step-families.

## CHAPTER 2

### THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE DYNAMICS BETWEEN ADOLESCENTS AND STEP-FAMILIES

#### *2.1. Introduction*

This chapter is a comprehensive review of the existing and accessible literature on the adjustment of the adolescent to the divorce and remarriage of their parents. According to Mouton (2008), the importance of the literature review is to learn how other scholars have theorized and conceptualized issues around the research problem under study. The knowledge gained will help the researcher to critically discuss what various authors are saying. This chapter will show how the various inputs contribute to the development of the topic of investigation: The adolescents' adjustment to divorce and living in step-families. From a social workers holistic view, the researcher cannot separate the experiences of adjustment to divorce and transition to living in step-families; these two issues are inter-related and therefore cannot be treated separately.

This chapter begins with a historical overview of step-families followed by a discussion on the three intersecting theories that form the conceptual framework for the research. The Family Systems Theory focuses on the formation of step-families, adjustment patterns in step-families, and finally the challenges experienced by adolescents living in step-families and a detailed discussion is given of adolescent

identity development, crisis, transition and adjustment. Identity Development Theory focuses on the developmental period in which adolescents adjust to making transitions between childhood and adulthood. This conceptual framework is nested within the Stress, Appraisal and Coping Model.

## *2.2. A historical overview of step-families*

Little is known about the early family life of step-families, yet a Biblical record of Matthew 1: 18-23 (Bible) relates the story of Jesus, who was born of a virgin, Mary, while she was engaged to Joseph. Their marriage can be regarded as one of the first step-family unions to be recorded. It confirms that step-families already existed as far back as Bible times. However it was only from the late nineteenth or early twentieth century that research on step-families emerged. At that stage the majority of step-families were created by remarriage following the death of a spouse, or the marriage of an unmarried mother of a child born out of wedlock. An historic account of the changing family patterns indicate the emergence of the “modern” family as follows: the economic depression of the 1930’s, world War II of the 1940’s, the baby boom of the 1950’s, and the increasing economic and political unrest of the years since the 1960’s have all influenced the American family (Benokraitis, 1996).

According to statistics from the United States Census Bureau and the Step-family Foundation, one in three Americans are involved in a step-family situation, and 1,300 new step-families are formed each day. As of 2004, 50% of children under the age of 13 lived with one biological parent and the parent's partner. It is estimated that there

are more step-families than traditional nuclear families in the United States (<http://www.healthofchildren.com/S/Step-families.html> retrieved on 22/01/12).

### *2.3. Theories related to step-families:*

As the intent of this chapter is to get a better understanding of the dynamics between adolescents and step-families, Family Systems Theory will set the pace for discussion. Important concepts such as divorce, remarriage and the formation of step-families, adjustment patterns in step-families, and finally the challenges experienced by adolescents living in step-families adolescence will be defined and discussed as the chapter unfolds.

#### *2.3.1. Family Systems Theory*

The Family Systems Theory of Bowen is a theory of human behaviour. It views the family as an emotional unit. Family Systems Theory uses systems thinking to describe the complex interactions in the unit. It is the nature of a family that its members are intensely connected emotionally. Often people feel disconnected from their families, but this is related more to feelings that family members have toward each other. Family members strongly affect each other's thoughts, feelings, and actions. It often seems as they are living under the same "emotional skin." Family members seek each other's attention, approval, and support and react to each other's needs, expectations, and distress. The connectedness and reactivity make the functioning of family members interdependent. A change in one person's functioning

is predictably followed by common changes in the functioning of others. Families differ somewhat in the degree of interdependence, but it is always present to some degree (<http://www.thebowencenter.org/pages/theory.html> retrieved on 18/11/11).

Using the Family Systems approach, the family is seen as an open, on-going, goal-seeking, self-regulating social system sharing the features of all these systems. It has become a preferred theoretical framework in the analysis and treatment of dysfunctional families. Bowen's interpretation altered the way people thought about family psychotherapy and it helped to explain how processes in the family of origin may influence the attitudes of children and adolescents towards marriage. Bowen saw how one person was a part of an emotional system. In addition, Bowen believed people were influenced by relationships and were usually totally unaware of this. For example, in most relationships people solicit each other's attention, approval and support and react to each other's needs, expectations and distress. Bowen saw this connectedness and reactivity between family members as interdependence. For example, every action affects all other persons in the family (Strong, De Vault & Cohen, 2005).

Family Systems Theory typically deals with current, on-going problems, observing and intervening in those interactional processes that maintain dysfunction such as can be the experience after divorce or remarriage. The on-going relationships and enduring transactional patterns represent the essential aspects of family systems (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2002). It proposes that individual family members can best be understood by allowing for a network of mutually dependent relationships in

families. The family system is made up of subsystems, for example, parent-parent, father-son, mother-daughter (parent-child), spousal and personal subsystems. These subsystems have important tasks; one is maintaining boundaries, as well as keeping the subsystems separate. The purpose of the boundaries is in effect a separation between the outside and the internal systems. However, step-families have more permeable boundaries where a non-resident parent is allowed into the subsystem to maintain his/her relationship with the children. The step-family also has a more complex extended-family network as it consists of relationships with the former in-laws and the new extended step-family (Dunn, 2010).

In remarriage, there are now more than two sets of couple subsystems. Firstly, the original couple subsystem, where certain habits, rules and rituals were set up to govern the interactions within the family. Secondly, the new step-family has a new couple system that is still in the process of building these habits, rituals and rules. But the two subsystems have to allow a certain level of permeability of the boundaries to allow interaction with the children. In the parent-child subsystem there are also multiple changes following divorce. These include changes in the daily routines of life, the child spending less time with the non-resident parent, new routines being developed with the resident parent and the added responsibilities of the home. When a parent remarries it introduces a whole new range of changes and all of these are once more re-negotiated. It is this renegotiation of roles and rules that might prove to be too much for children and parents to cope with. It is this blurring of the boundaries within subsystems that can lead to dysfunctional families.

The family exerts a powerful influence on each family member's feelings and behaviours. It is assumed that families are self-regulating, each part carries out certain functions, and that family roles and functions are established by rules and structures. This pattern of interaction is important and in step-family structures. It is a major challenge to integrate relationship subsystems into a functioning family. It is predicted that children's well-being is linked with the interplay of relationships (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001).

The human family is a multigenerational, natural, living system and the emotional functioning of each member of the system affects the functioning of the other members in predictable ways. Thus the secret to developing functional families is finding the healthy balance between belonging to a family and maintaining a separate identity. One example is when parents are able to provide enough love and support, but also leave enough space for the child to develop independence (Crosbie-Burnett, 1995).

Family systems thus influence their environments and are in turn influenced by their surrounding circumstances. For example, when looking at divorce, family systems theory suggests that the family needs to be viewed in its entirety because one may be misled by focusing on only particular individuals or dyads within the family. For instance, a family systems theorist would struggle to see how one can understand how children are affected by their parents' divorce without understanding how children are affected by their parents and by extra familial institutions (e.g., the school) and how parents are affected by their divorce. Price, Price, and McKenry,



(2010) contend that children are ultimately influenced by the effects that divorce has on their parents.

Therefore within a family systems view, it is important to be sensitive to the effects of divorce on children and parents and it needs to be considered holistically and not in isolation from other processes and effects occurring within the family. The Family Systems Theory will help us understand how families function and how they deal and cope with situations that is stressful. Furthermore, it will also help to explain what it is about family functioning that result in children having negative or positive attitudes towards marriage. It also helps professionals understand that work done through one service in turn affects the work of other service providers.

In review of the empirical literature on Family Systems Theory and adolescents adjustment in step-families, attention will now be given to the Namibian family.

#### *The structure of the Namibian family*

Namibia has a strong representation of the nuclear and the extended family. The nuclear family is made up of parents and unmarried children living together under one roof. The nuclear family tends to be burdened by the demands of a busy life. Without the support and assistance of a big family, children's care is often a serious problem, especially if both parents work. Some children grow up in a nuclear family without much knowledge of their grandparents, family origin, history and traditions.

When problems and stresses arise, nuclear families tend to have limited help because of the small number of family members.

On the other hand, the extended family is made up of all members of a nuclear family, plus the grandparents, aunts, uncles, and/or cousins, all living together as one family. In traditional African societies, most families are extended. In rural Namibia, the extended family system is more functional. The realities of economic hardships in the urban centers put a lot of pressure on the extended family system. In the urban areas of Namibia the nuclear households are more prevalent. The shift towards nuclear family patterns often sacrifices the economic security and social support afforded by the extended family systems in the face of significant challenges (Arnold, 1998).

During the last two decades, African families have experienced progressive change requiring adjustments to family structures, roles, and functions. They have faced multi-dimensional challenges like changes in social structures, globalization, socio-economic pressures, and poverty levels have increased. Recurring droughts and famines, civil strikes and armed conflicts, rural-urban migration, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, have made some families more vulnerable, and have contributed to the disintegration of families (Ababa, 2004).

### *The step-family*

Step-families have become an integrated part of society and it is here to stay. In post-modern times such as the present, step-families are formed more after divorce or cohabitation of two adults (Qu & Weston, 2005). Marriages have become more fragile than they were in the twentieth century; a contributing factor is the changing norms of male-female equality (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000). Approximately half of marriages each year are remarriages for one or both partners. Other Western countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand have also indicated a marked increase in divorce and remarriage rates over the last few decades. According to the British National Counseling Society the number of children living within a step-family in Britain has risen by over 300 000 throughout the past 12 years; now standing at 900 000. According to Statistics Netherlands, the number of step-families in Netherlands has increased from 114 000 in 1998 to 149 000 in 2007.

### *The formation of step-families*

Although marriage is intended to be a permanent union, it is not always possible. The death of a spouse, divorce or new family structures like co-habitation, and children born out of wedlock are ways many step-families are formed today.

### *Divorce*

Divorce is one of the complex social problems in today's society. According to Ohinz (2010) most people today believe that the survival of a marriage depends upon the personal commitment of the couple who enter into marriage. Serious disputes between couples may result in their separation or the decision to dissolve the marriage. Attempts of negotiation and reconciliation usually precede the termination of a marriage. Divorce is always an unhappy event because it represents failure. For the couple they have failed to maintain a link between themselves and their families. It is officially recognized as a marriage that is beyond reconciliation and therefore leads to termination.

Divorce has become an epidemic. In most societies where the adversarial system is practiced, divorce is granted on explicit grounds, such as adultery, desertion, and cruelty. The Namibian legal system permits divorce, and the high divorce rates (17% as mentioned earlier) cause's young people to feel uncertain about entering into marriage. According to Saad (2008) in a sociocultural context, the United States has previously disapproved divorce on moral grounds. However, since 2001, most Americans view divorce as morally acceptable. Those showing a lower tolerance of divorce include people 65 and older, political conservatives, and a few religious individuals.

Hughes (2009) suggests that the rising divorce rates are affected by the fact that men and women are economically independent and are in less need of each other.

Reliable birth control also allows men and women to separate sexual activity from having children. It has affected all socio-economic and cultural groups. Disadvantaged groups have a higher incidence of divorce. Contributing facts are premarital pregnancy, youthful marriages, low education level, and low income (Santrock, 2004). Parental divorce will affect more and more children.

The decision to divorce is rarely a sudden act. Many people go through a number of small acts such as discussions, arguments, and retaliations. These occurrences cool off the relationship and this leads to the final step in the process of the couples growing estrangement. The most common grounds for divorce as suggested by Eshelman (1997) include the breakdown of marriage, incompatibility, cruelty, desertion or irreconcilable differences. Other reasons for divorce include problems such as physical assault, alcoholism or infidelity and lack of emotional fulfillment, to name a few. In the past, divorce has often been regarded as a source of stigma. Today it continues to be so in some circles, however it may also symbolize freedom and new opportunities, and it may also bring exhilaration and relief. When divorce occurs it ends a customary social relationship, and dissolves the nuclear family. Divorce is a complex and emotional transition, and most people experience it as a severe crisis (Santrock, 2004).

The break-up of the family structure as a result of the divorce can leave children unsettled as they have to deal with feelings of insecurity and abandonment. If not dealt with effectively it can lead to problematic adjustment (Botha, 2009). The effects of divorce are inescapable and long lasting. Some adolescents engage in

acting out behaviour such as promiscuity, alcohol and drug abuse, indicating their low self-esteem. Many children of divorce experience increased risks for social, emotional, and academic difficulties. On the other hand, there are children who successfully adjust to the disruptions and who do not display significant signs of distress as a result of their parents' divorce (Thompson & Henderson, 2007).

Some areas in which adolescents experience positive outcomes include maturity, because many assume added responsibilities. The development of an improved self-esteem, because there are those who cope effectively with the changes to their life's circumstances and some develop empathy, due to an increased concern for family members. The first year following the divorce is generally a period of extensive disruption, disorganization, depression, restlessness, feelings of failure, hostility, anger, anxiety, self-blame and a chaotic search for escape from distress (Louw et al., 2004). Gradually the individual begins to make a determined effort to regain his/her footing, to start functioning again, and to restore order to his/her life. For some this includes remarriage.

### *Remarriage*

Remarriage is defined as,

“.. a family that is formed when separate families are united by marriage or other circumstance; a step-family. 2. various kinship or no kinship groups whose members reside together and assume traditional family roles” Barker (2003, p. 46).

Another view is that remarriage "...has a role structure in which at least one parent has been previously married and which includes children from one or both of these marriages" Johnson (2000, p. 119). Remarriage is when previously married persons, after divorce, see remarriage as a solution to their problems. Remarriage brings about step-families. For the purpose of the study, a step-family is defined as a family which has reformed due to divorce and one of the adults is not the biological parent of the child. Step-families are also described as parts of another family which have reformed due to divorce or the death of a parent. Another occurrence is when one adult brings a child into a family with one of the adults being a stranger to the child (child born out of wedlock). One other grouping is between those who have made a commitment to one another but have not married (cohabiting) say Robinson and Smith (1993).

Research has revealed three common types of step-families, namely (1) step-father, (2) step-mother, and (3) blended or complex step-family. In step-father families, mothers are the custodians of her children. When she remarries, she introduces a step-father into her children's lives. In step-mother families, the reverse occurs where the father has custody and when he chooses to remarry; he introduces a step-mother into his children's lives. The blended or complex step-family is when both partners bring children from a previous relationship to live in the step-family (Santrock, 2004).

*Society's perception of the step-family*

Society characterizes step-families in two major ways. Firstly step-families are seen as an incomplete institution and thus are generally ignored in legal and social policymaking and by social institutions. Secondly step-families are viewed as stigma (negative attitude), perceiving them as less functional and more problem-plagued compared to nuclear families. In certain circumstances the Australian Family Law Act imposes financial responsibilities for step children upon the step-parent; although currently the step-parent's legal status is still unclear (Monahan & Young, 2006).

Unlike a first marriage, step-families start out with a set of legal strains. These strains usually deal with custody of children, visiting rights, and support payments, and, as such, bring additional stresses and strains to the marriage. Many formerly married persons, who remarry enter a field cluttered with unresolved issues left over from the previous marriage(s). Often such persons have to also deal with new issues arising out of the effort to deal with the spouses' conflicting hopes, expectations, and obsessions. Couples need to master feelings of grief, anger, and personal failures and overcome doubt about their ability to sustain a lasting relationship. Family roles must be restructured and new identities forged. Noncustodial parents face drastic changes in relationships with their own children and need to find ways to maintain meaningful bonds with them.



Cummings and Davies (1994); Webster-Stratton (2003), all argue that growing up with two parents is better for children, but only when both mother and father are the biological or “intact” (as opposed to remarried) parents. In fact, there is some evidence that second marriages can actually be harmful to adolescents. Moreover, marriage can help children only if the marriage is a healthy one. While the definition of a “healthy marriage” is itself subject to debate, it is typically characterized as high in positive interaction, satisfaction, and stability and low in conflict. Unhealthy marriages which are characterized by substantial parental conflict, pose a clear risk for child well-being, both because of the direct negative effects that result when children witness conflict between parents, and because such conflict has an indirect effect on parenting skills. Marital hostility is associated with increased aggression and disruptive behaviour on the part of children which, in turn, seems to lead to rejection by peers, academic failure, and other antisocial behaviours.

When step-families are formed, there is an instant increase in the number of family members and a corresponding rise in the complexity of relationships. There is an immediate change in status as children become members of a second family which also includes a new extended family. With extra members in the family, the resources such as time, affection, energy and money need to be shared amongst all. The resulting competition for these resources can leave a child feeling that s/he has lost out as they now receive less than before (Price et al., 2010). There may be no blood ties between some members, thus weakening the incest taboo (Coleman et al., 2000; Nicholson, Phillips, Petersen & Battistutta, 2000). Often children’s sibling order can change, as they make room for his/her and our children. Step children may

feel less valued and they may hide their emotions. Step-families are more complex than first families and operate differently, and relationships evolve slowly.

Prior to remarriage, the child parent relationship precedes the new partner relationship making bonds stronger between biological parent and child. After remarriage children feel threatened by the new person in their parent's life. They fear that the biological parent will love them less. The tension in balancing the relationships equally may cause the biological parent to feel torn between children and new partner and at the same time children often feel torn between parents or step-parent. Often the step-parent has no shared experience of parenting their partner's children and sometimes no parenting experience at all. In such situations, the new step-parent needs to learn about child development and parenting. It may happen that the step child's behaviour does not match up with the step-parent's expectations, which may likely be characterized by conflict in relationships between step-parent and children (Howden, 2007 & Hetherington et al., 1998).

The step-parent may have little or no shared history with step children. Therefore step-parents need to gradually get to know the children in a natural way (Whiteman, 2007). In this new family structure where there are no established norms, it becomes necessary for negotiation and development of new family traditions, rules, roles and institutional support. The new family goes through a period of mourning the loss of what was familiar in the nuclear family. It is helpful for step-parents to observe the family customs and traditions and gradually integrate into the life of the step

children. Children in step-families are often part-time residents of two households, with each home having their own rules and norms.

It is unfair and unwise for step-parents to take on a major disciplinary role in step-families, as children will take any kind of discipline best if it comes from the biological parent. In step-families, it is normal that there may be intense feelings of anger and resentment, especially amongst adolescents. The step-parent should try not to personalize the anger and respond with kindness, be patient and compassionate, knowing that this is a very difficult transition for all family members (Whiteman, 2007).

Recent studies ([www.fetalneonatal.com](http://www.fetalneonatal.com) retrieved on May 26, 2010) show that step children have, on average, a higher possibility of problems in social relations, health, internalizing and externalizing problems, and educational achievement. It is fairly common for them to leave home earlier and with less support than those growing up with both biological parents.

Howden (2007) suggests that most step-families go through stages, which may include: fantasy, confusion, a crazy time, stability and finally commitment. During the fantasy stage there is an expectation from children that parents will re-unite, while parents wish this step-family will be one big happy family. In the confusion stage reality begins to dawn and family member's sense that something is wrong. The crazy time is when emotions are high, issues are open but unresolved. After the storm settles stability begins as the step-family begins to experience a sense of "us"

or “our family.” Now uncertainties have been cleared and the step-parent’s role is clear. In the final stage of commitment this family accept the past, they find ways to cope with changes and they continue to work together.

Multiple changes occur such as the amount of contact with one parent; often their contact with their father will be reduced. Children may have to move from their family home or change schools, live in two homes, and sometimes move in with their grandparents. They may have a lower income which may mean they may have a decrease in their standard of living. They may have more responsibility placed on them. The custodial parent may be physically and psychologically less available for children due to increased demands. Flexibility is just part of step-family living, to accommodate all the changes.

According to Strong et al. (2005) step-families need not only be characterized by negative outcomes as they can add certain strengths to the family and can even be beneficial to children. Firstly, a step-family can provide companionship, love and security where the nuclear family might have been riddled with conflict and violence. It can also improve the economic situation of the family. It can result in parents being happier where the problems in the first marriage made them unhappy. A step-family can bring in new positive role models and new skills in the children’s lives. It can bring added support through the presence of a step-parent, added siblings and the now extended family.

According to Coleman, Ganong and Fine (2000) many long-term step-families function quite similarly to first-marriage families. The newly formed step-family may have more problematic interaction patterns than do first-marriage families. However, when the step-family survives the crisis period (usually the first two years), interaction patterns may become similar to those in first-marriage families.

Stepfamilies are formed after the death of a spouse or divorce, when partners chose to remarry, or co-habitation or first time marriage occurs where one or both partners have a child from a previous relationship.

A divorce attorney, Preller (2012), quoting South African statistics on divorce, notes that in 2010, data on 22 936 divorces from civil marriages were processed, indicating a drop of 7 827 or 25,4% from the 30 763 cases processed in 2009. The data from 2010 indicate that the largest number 5 989 (27,3%) of the marriages lasted between five and nine years. This group is followed by marriages that lasted less than five years 4 577 (20,9%). Thus, almost half (47,7%) of the 22 936 divorces in 2010 were marriages that lasted less than 10 years. In 2010, 12 486 (54,4%) of the 22 936 divorces had children younger than 18 years. Overall, there were 20 383 children (younger than 18 years old) involved in divorce indicating that, on the average, there was between one and two children per divorce. Whittaker (2007), a clinical psychologist practicing in Windhoek, Namibia, expressed his concern for the high divorce rate in Namibia. His research indicates that in 2005, there were 256 divorce cases and 1403 marriages, while in 2002 the divorce cases were 539 and

2967 marriages occurred. This brings the divorce rate in Namibia to a high 17% of the marriages.

According to Becker (1995), a study on Kwanyama women showed remarriage of divorcees were common, they often married three or more times. Regarding marriages in the Herero traditions, women are denied the right to choice. For example, if a man's wife dies it is not uncommon for the family to give a younger unmarried sister to take her place as a "wife" and caretaker of the children. In the case of a man dying, the woman is expected to accept one of the brothers as her husband, thus restricting their possibilities for marrying a desirable partner. These traditional customs add to the high rates of remarriage for all age-groups in Namibia. Fanning (2005) notes that 50% of children will be part of a step-family, and within that step-family scenario, 93% of the children live with a stepfather and only 7% live with a step-mother. Children in step-families are members of two households and, as a result, may experience confusion, discipline issues, loss of stability, and conflicting feelings of loyalty (<http://www.healthofchildren.com/S/Step-families.html> retrieved on 22/01/12).

There are a few key differences between the dynamics in a step-family and the dynamics of a first-time nuclear family: first-time nuclear families are characterized by a man and a woman being married and then they have children born into the family, and biological parents bond with their child as the child grows. They live together under one roof. Step-families ultimately result from a loss, death of a parent/spouse, divorce, end of a long-term relationship, changes in lifestyle (e.g.,

moving, loss of job), and, therefore, involve grief on the part of both parents and children (<http://www.healthofchildren.com/S/Step-families.html> retrieved on 22/01/12).

This grief may remain unresolved and affect step-family relationships. The role of the step-parent and status in the family is often unclear with regard to authority, level of involvement with the step child, and discipline. In addition, no legal relationship exists between step-parents and step children. Step-parents must assume parental roles before there is an emotional bond with the step child. The latter are often required to make instant adjustments to a parental role. Step-families must cope with outside influences and ongoing change due to issues with the other biological parent and family members. A key contributor to the high divorce rate of remarriages as proposed by Walsh (2003) is the complexity of step-family integration.

These complex set of changes in remarriage and step-family integration involve the pre-divorce tensions, separation, reorganization of households and parent-child relationships, In addition to these complexities, research shows that society generally sees the step-family as less functional and problematic (Ganong & Coleman, 1997). This stigmatized view influences the level of social support step-families receive, which in turn affects their ability to function effectively (Cherlin, 1978; Coleman, Ganong & Fine, 2000). Part of the transition at adolescence involves a decrease in parental supervision. Attention will now be paid to parenting styles.

### *Styles of parenting:*

The type of parenting children receive directly influences their development and well-being. Psychologist Baumrind (1991) is a historic source, identifying the four patterns of parenting styles. It is based upon two aspects of parenting behaviour: control and warmth. *Parental control* refers to the degree to which parents manage their children's behaviour, from being very controlling to setting few rules and demands. *Parental warmth* refers to high levels of parental acceptance and response of their children's behaviour as opposed to being unresponsive and rejecting. When combining the two aspects of parenting behaviour in different ways, four primary parenting styles emerge: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive and neglectful parenting.

### *Authoritative Parenting*

Authoritative parents are warm but firm. They encourage their adolescent to be independent while maintaining high levels of support, monitoring their actions. These parents do not invoke the "because I said" rule, instead, they are willing to discuss, listen to, and take into account their teen's viewpoint. Authoritative parents set clear rules, are flexible and show understanding, and value the adolescents' opinions, although ultimately the responsibility reside with the parent. These parents are sensitive to their adolescents' emotional needs and they try to understand their heartache, anger, or disappointments before passing judgments or administering punishment. Authoritative parents are both demanding and nurturing, this type of



parenting has been found to be optimal for children and adolescents. In that it promotes confident, responsible and independent behaviour, parental relationship is based on mutual respect and love.

Adolescents from authoritative parental homes usually have a positive opinion of their parents and of their relationship with their parents (Gouws, Kruger, & Burger, 2000). However, during the early phase of step-family life it is suggested that authoritative parenting may be difficult for step-fathers to achieve. As step-fathers are still establishing relationships with step children it may be particularly challenging to monitor step children. Thus it is more common for step-parents to practice a neglectful (disengaged) parenting style. Even the mothers in a second marriage family were identified to also use a neglectful (disengaged) parenting style (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Adolescents of authoritative parents learn how to negotiate and engage in discussions. They understand that their opinions are valued. As a result, they are more likely to emerge as socially competent, responsible, and autonomous youth.

### *Authoritarian Parenting*

Authoritarian parents display little warmth and are highly controlling. They are strict disciplinarians, and tend to use a restrictive, punitive style, and insist that their adolescent follow parental directions. These parents invoke phrases such as, “you will do this because I said,” and “because I’m the parent and you are not.” Authoritarian parents control and dominate adolescents’ behaviour, and rarely

engage in discussions with their teen and family rules and standards are not debated. These parents believe the adolescent should accept, without question, the rules and practices that they establish. Research reveals that adolescents of authoritarian parents learn that following parental rules and adherence to strict discipline is valued over independent behaviour. As a result, adolescents may become rebellious or dependent. Those who become rebellious might display aggressive behaviours. Adolescents who are more submissive tend to remain dependent on their parents.

### *Permissive Parenting*

Parents are very warm, but undemanding. They are indulgent and passive in their parenting, and believe that the way to demonstrate their love is to give in to their adolescent's wishes. Permissive parents invoke such phrases as, "sure, you can stay up late if you want to," and "you do not need to do any chores if you don't feel like it." Permissive parents do not like to say no or disappoint their children. As a result, adolescents are allowed to make many important decisions without parental input. Parents do not view themselves as active participants in shaping their adolescent's actions; instead they view themselves as a resource, should the adolescent choose to seek their advice. Research findings show that adolescents of permissive parents learn that there are very few boundaries and rules and that consequence are not likely to be very serious (Baumrind, 1991). As a result, teens may have difficulty with self-control and demonstrate egocentric tendencies that can interfere with proper development of peer relationships.

*Uninvolved (Neglectful) Parents*

These parents are not warm and do not place any demands on their adolescent. They minimize their interaction time, and, in some cases, are uninvolved to the point of being neglectful. Uninvolved parents are indifferent to their adolescent's needs, whereabouts, or experiences at school or with peers. Uninvolved parents invoke such phrases as, "I don't care where you go," or "why should I care what you do?" Uninvolved parents rarely consider their adolescent's input in decisions and they generally do not want to be bothered by their adolescent. These parents may be overwhelmed by their circumstances or they may be self-centered. Parents might also engage in this style if they are tired, frustrated, or have simply "given up" in trying to maintain parental authority. Research supports that adolescents of uninvolved parents learn that parents tend to be interested in their own lives and less likely to invest much time in parenting. As a result, the adolescent generally show similar patterns of behaviour as adolescents raised in permissive homes and they may also demonstrate impulsive behaviours due to issues with self-regulation.

Negative parenting styles such as authoritarian and neglectful parenting, when parents do not give their children proper emotional support or control, together with a poor quality of parental functioning have implications on the adolescent's behaviour and well-being. Conflicted relationships with the custodial parent are linked with a variety of negative child outcomes, including lower academic achievement, internalizing problems, externalizing problems, reduced self-esteem, and poorer social competence (Amato, 2000). Some may experience internalizing

problems such as depression, anxiety, and a general unhappiness. Others may experience externalizing problems which may include misbehaviour, aggression and delinquent behaviour. This maladjustment behaviour could be associated with the fact that there are many different co-existing structures which make adaptation rather difficult for adults, children, and adolescents, within a step-family.

The parent-child relationship following a divorce and remarriage is critical to the adolescent's adjustment. An increased level of attachment to the parents increases the probability that an adolescent will be socially competent (Santrock, 2004). To facilitate an adolescent's adjustment parents can help their children in providing them with warmth, understanding, nurturing, good parenting skills and a stable home environment, along with a consistent stress-free visitation arrangement with the non-custodial parent. This is important for the psychological health of the adolescent.

Consistency of parenting is vital in the child's behaviour and emotional development and refers to how rules are made, what the rules are, the methods of discipline and the expectations of behaviour within a home. It also refers to the fact that parenting practices need to be consistent in both parents. We find that after divorce because of less communication between parents in relation to these matters that there is an increasing possibility of inconsistency. Disagreement between parents on parenting issues can result in confusion in the child, leaving him/her uncertain about behaviour expectations, it can also add to a dislike of a particular parent, or the child can use this disunity to manipulate parents to change or not enforce rules. This in turn leads to behavioural and emotional problems and difficulty in adjustment (Buchanan,

Maccoby & Dornbush, 1996). The researcher is of the opinion that these parenting styles are universal and applicable to Namibian parents as well.

*Adolescents' emotional experience during the divorce of their parents*

When divorce breaks down a family, there is a loss of a sense of belonging and meaning, which was found in the family of origin. Parental preoccupation with the divorce may leave adolescents feeling lonely, overlooked by their parents, rejected and they may experience conflicting loyalties (Thompson & Henderson, 2007). Adolescents may respond with anger, resentment, anxiety, depression or even aggression, as daily routines are disrupted and the family structure changes. After the divorce there may typically be a period of confusion and apprehension about the future and changing relationships around them.

The lives and relationships of children in divorcing families are profoundly affected, leaving them feeling insecure, fearful, trapped, unloved and guilty (James & Gilliland, 2005). Adolescents may worry about the parent-child relationship also being terminated, after the divorce of their parents. They may experience changes in sleeping patterns, eating habits and concentration levels; and have emotional swings. Children may want more contact with the non-custodial parent as they may continue to hope for reconciliation of their parents. However as reality slowly dawns the adolescent eventually acknowledges the marital rapture and accepts the loss of the pre-divorce family and the permanence of the divorce (Moos, 1986). In homes that are broken by divorce, it is likely for such children to experience much emotional

disturbance and conflict. For example constant bickering, nagging, blaming, and name-calling between parents, can be most distressing and can result in the child experiencing a conflict of loyalties.

Children as well as adolescents have to adjust to redefining relationships with both parents (Thompson & Henderson, 2007). They have to adjust to the separation from one parent and forming new and different relationships with the custodial parent. They automatically become members of two households, each affecting the other and not much is known about how children negotiate the transition between two homes and what the challenges are. This new lifestyle may create positive or negative feelings. Divorce threatens the normal adolescent development move toward individualization (Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000). The transition, after the divorce of their parents, makes it difficult for them to move toward independence and separation from their parents.

During this time many adolescents take on some of the parent's roles and responsibilities as the custodial parent is usually overloaded; in their new role as a single parent. The adjustment in roles and responsibilities shortens their time for growing up and pushes them into adulthood; not giving them enough time for the transition from childhood (Kirby & Dean, 2002). While for some adolescents these adjustment difficulties impact upon their development of maturity and moral growth, others develop a more realistic understanding of finances, as they practice new family roles and responsibilities, and it helps these adolescents show some positive changes.

*Custody dynamics*

The sharing of custody is seen as having a more positive affect on children and adolescents. This however depends on the level of conflict between parents: it certainly is true where low levels of conflict exist but not true when a high level of conflict remains between parents. According to Buchanan et al. (1996) access and regular contact with both parents are more advantageous to the child's adjustment to divorce or re-marriage. However this can also create greater conflict for the child as they now have to manage the differences in two homes. By comparison, the divorced custodial parents tends to invest less time, are less supportive, have fewer rules, dispense harsher discipline, provide less supervision, and engage in more conflict with their children. This is due to the fact that the parents themselves are suffering the emotional effects of trauma and are challenged to cope with the demands of being divorced or remarried.

The problems experienced by adults after a divorce often results in adolescents being neglected by their parents. For example after the divorce the custodial parent may engage in less effective parenting because of irritability, insensitivity to their children's needs, less warmth and love in their disciplinary techniques which are often inconsistent all of which are outcomes of the trauma the parent is enduring. A decrease in involvement by the non-custodial parent alternatively, often results in overcompensation, setting fewer demands and being too permissive. This negatively influences the child's development (Louw, Van Ede & Louw, 2004).

To gain a better understanding of how adolescent's adjust to making the transitions between childhood and adulthood, views of the Identity Development Theory will be discussed.

### *Identity Development Theory*

When studying adolescence as a developmental stage in a person's life many authors differ in their opinion's concerning how to define adolescence. Some authors view adolescence as the period between puberty and the completion of physical growth, roughly from 11 to 21 years of age (Louw et al., 2004). Others define adolescence as the period of physical and psychological development from the onset of puberty to complete growth and maturity (Gouws, Kruger, & Burger, 2000). Still other like Santrock (2004) describes adolescence as a period of development in which the individuals push for autonomy and seek to develop their own identity. Santrock (2004) views adolescence is a time of evaluation, of decision making, of commitment, of carving out a place in the world. The adolescent's thoughts are more abstract and idealistic; they are pre-occupied with thoughts about the future, which friends to choose, whether to go to college, who they should date, and whether to have sex or not, and so on. Peer relationships become more intimate; they start dating and begin sexual exploration. Adolescents show a considerable interest in their body image. Their relationship with parents takes on a different form. These developmental changes coincide with social and familial changes in the adolescent's life and this transition is often stressful. A more recent definition states:



Mosby's Medical Dictionary (2009) describes adolescence as the period in development between the onset of puberty and adulthood. It usually begins between 11 and 13 years of age with the appearance of secondary sex characteristics and spans the teenage years, terminating at 18 to 20 years of age with the completion of the development of the adult form. During this period, the individual undergoes extensive physical, psychological, emotional, and personality changes.

It is during this life phase that adolescents continue to develop their social and intellectual skills that will prepare them for adult roles and responsibilities. Adolescents develop a more sophisticated reasoning ability; they become more knowledgeable, and make important educational and occupational decisions that will shape their adult careers. As their cognitive abilities increase they are able to perform tasks more easily, quickly and efficiently. With their heightened cognitive abilities they display more insight in dealing with problems. These biological, cognitive and psycho-social changes provide a wealth of developmental opportunities for the adolescent to engage in behaviours that lead to health risks, on the one hand, or to develop a healthy life style, on the other. Adolescence is a period of normal growth toward biological, cognitive, and psychosocial maturity, although it represents a difficult phase in human development it is not necessary a period of storm and stress. While it is a period of growth, increased autonomy, and exploration, it also involves risks (Gouws et al., 2000).

Remarriage and the formation of step-families occur at a time during an adolescent's life. Erikson's theory of identity development is pertinent to this research study as it

situates the study within the developmental stage of the adolescent. At the core of Erikson's theory is the acquisition of an ego-identity, and the identity crisis is the most essential characteristic of adolescence. Erikson describes adolescence as the period during which the individual must establish a sense of personal identity. During this developmental period adolescents must answer questions for themselves about where they came from, who they are, and what they will become. According to Erikson, in a period of rapid social change adolescents seek autonomy from their parents or guardians; the older generation is no longer able to provide adequate role models for the younger generation. However, even if the older generation can provide adequate role models, adolescents may reject them as inappropriate for their situation (Erikson, 1968).

It is during this developmental stage that adolescents have a greater affiliation with their peers. Erikson believes that the importance of the peer group cannot be overemphasized. It is their peers that help adolescents find answers to the question "Who Am I?" as they depend on social feedback as to what others feel and how they react to the individual. These transitions cause youth to rarely identify with their own parents; they often rebel against their dominance, their value system, and their intrusion into their private life, since they must separate their identity from that of their family. During this period the adolescents must assert their autonomy in order to reach maturity and engage in abstract thinking (Muuss, 1975).

Erikson outlines that each stage poses conflicts or crises that must be resolved in order for the adolescent to constructively move on to the next stage of development.

If the adolescent fails to resolve these crises it may negatively affect their development. However, a positive outcome of the identity crisis is dependent on the adolescents' willingness to accept his past and establish continuity with their previous experiences. In finding an answer to the questions: "Who Am I?" "Where am I going?" "Who am I to become?" adolescents have to make a commitment to a system of values - religious beliefs, vocational goals, a philosophy of life, and an acceptance of their sexuality. Only once adolescents achieve these aspects of ego-identity is it possible for them to move into "adult maturity," achieve intimacy of sexual and affectional love, establish deep friendships, and achieve personal self-abandon without fear of loss of ego-identity (Muuss, 1975). Erikson's theory outlines how adolescence is a developmental period which comprises of rapid cognitive, emotional, social and biological changes, and these transitions may result in stress (Erikson, 1968).

In review of the empirical literature on Identity Development Theory and adolescents' adjustment in step-families, attention will be paid to the application of this theory in step-families.

#### *Application of theory to adolescents in stepfamilies*

The adolescent develops a sense of their own identity. They need to establish their gender role, career and ethnic identities. They must also learn to exercise more control over their emotions and express their emotions in socially acceptable ways. Increasingly, society confronts them with considerable demands, and this combined

with all the changes taking place, may cause considerable stress for many adolescents. It is important to keep in mind that forming a new step-family involves many new issues and challenges. Brown (2006) indicated that the transition into a step-family increases the chances of a negative impact on the adolescents' wellbeing.

The diversity in children's responses to these changes in family structures and functioning is compelling and requires researchers to explore children's adjustment patterns to these new family structures. As more is understood about the adjustment of adolescents in step-families, one could draw upon the success and failures experienced by surviving step-families, creating an adequate model for step-families to follow over time. Hetherington (2003, p. 217) emphasized that "the vast majority of step children are resilient and able to cope with, or even benefit from their new situation."

According to Ohanessian and Lerner (1996) the family forms an integral part of adolescents' environment, and their perceptions of family relationships have a marked influence on their emotional adjustment. For example the effects of stress vary from person to person, adolescent to adolescent. An event, such as living with only one parent after divorce, may be perceived as minor and positive by one adolescent but major and extremely negative by another. The majority of young people face the stress of negative life events, find internal or external resources, cope and move on, but for others, the events pile up and the stresses are too great.

*Adolescent crisis, transition and adjustment*

Attention will be paid to the development of the adolescent in a step-family, the crisis that occurs in the step-family, the transitions to be made and how adjustment takes place. During this transition between childhood and adulthood, there are certain developmental tasks to be accomplished. These developmental tasks are: adjusting to physiological changes and becoming comfortable with their own bodies. They work toward independence from parents and other adult authority figures, building new and meaningful social and working relationships with others for their personal benefit and for the benefit of society. They seek economic and social stability, and they develop a personal value system, and as they undergo rapid cognitive changes they learn to verbalize conceptually (Louw et al., 2004).

During this developmental period adolescents chop and change between being children and being adults. This life stage is also characterized by an increase in risk-taking behaviours. For example, behaviours linked to careless driving, substance abuse, unprotected sexual behaviour, eating disorders, delinquency, homicidal and suicidal behaviour, and dangerous sports. Poor relationships with parents are associated with depression, and aggression. To eliminate these depressed and negative feelings adolescents may seek to change these negative emotions by their risk taking behaviour. Data suggests that depression during adolescence is highly prevalent, and is related to risk taking behaviours like smoking, or sexual risky behaviour. They gain social rewards by participating with peers in risky behaviours. Adolescents and their peers have less concern about the future, as well as for the

consequences of risky behaviour. Alternatively, parents usually value the wellbeing of their children, and are concerned about the long term implications of their risky behaviour (Michael & Ben-Zur, 2007).

In contrast, peers can also have positive effects on adolescent behaviour. According to Strong et al. (2005) peers provide positive influences to adolescents, for example, they learn to develop intimate relationships and tend to be more democratic in gender roles (i.e. the expected behaviour for males and females) than do parents. It is also true that peers influence one another through modelling behaviour. These may include negative behaviour such as substance abuse, gang membership, and violence. It is within these peer groups, for example, that adolescents identify with their peers and tend to yield to pressure and conform to peer group values, behaviour, and tastes in such things as clothing, food, and entertainment. At this stage of development the adolescent searches for a personal identity and wants freedom and independence of thought and action, but on the other hand, there is an underlying continued need to a strong dependence on the parents and feelings of loss are suffered in separating from them. Thus it is not surprising that parental monitoring and support are vital to adolescent identity formation (Moore, Evans, Brooks-Gunn, & Roth, 2001). Adolescents continue to feel close to their parents, to respect them, and to feel they can rely on them.

To compliment Erikson's theory, this study includes the Stress, Appraisal and Coping Model in order to see how the adolescent will cope.

*The Lazarus and Folkman Stress, Appraisal and Coping Model (1984)*

Stress is the usual result of any rapid change (Isaacs, 2008). According to Isaacs (2008) stress is the internal state of the individual, an external event, or the interaction between a person and his or her environment. Stress is regarded as feelings of tension, frustration, worry, sadness and withdrawal that commence from a few hours to a few days. Adolescents who have experienced their parents' divorces and remarriages suffer more or less persistent difficulties in social, emotional, behavioural, cognitive, and school adjustment. One then understands that adolescents who have the resources of a social support network will cope and adjust better to transitions like their parents' divorce and remarriage.

One of the major principles in Lazarus and Folkman's Stress, Appraisal and Coping Model (1984), is that the way a person appraises an encounter, determines how the individual will cope. Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional view to stress and coping has received widespread support. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) believe that an individual's perception or appraisal of the experienced event, whether discrete or chronic, is critical in determining how the event impacts on him and ultimately how he will cope with that event. According to the stress-appraisal-coping model, divorce and remarriage would be perceived as stressors that may increase the risk-related outcomes in step-families. Their conceptualization of stress and coping is based on the person-environment interaction theory of human action and reaction (Sieffge-Krenke, 1995). Essentially, person-environment interaction theory views the

individual within a social context, as this creates a complex set of interactions and produces human actions and reaction or human behaviour.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) view stress and adjustment and coping as transactional in nature, complex and dynamic interactions or transactions occur between an individual and the environment where an individual reacts to demands in the environment. When an individual perceives that he does not have the necessary resources to deal with the demands, then stress is experienced. For example after the divorce the adolescent will need to deal with the loss of one parent, and possibly a drop in the standard of living. The lack of these resources amongst others will lead to stress. In this way stress and coping is defined as “the constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/ or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 4). The authors rejected a linear view of stress which views an event as simply producing stress which in turn leads to an emotional/somatic/behavioural problem. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) argue that:

“the transactional model that underlies our cognitive theory of stress views the person and the environment in a **mutually reciprocal, bi-directional relationship**... Further; in traditional models variables **retain their separate identities**. In a transactional model separate person and environment **join together to form new meanings via appraisal**; threat, for example, does not refer to separate person and environment factors, but to the integration of both in a given transaction. The transactional model is concerned with **process and change**...” (p. 325-326).



The cognitive activities of appraisal and coping play a crucial role in the way the individual copes with stressful life events and can be viewed as a “continuously changing set of judgment’s about the flow of events for the person’s well-being” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 326). The authors (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; Forehand, Wierson, Thomas, Fauber, Armistead, Kempton & Long, 1991; Hetherington, 1993; Mccombs, & Forehand, 1989) contend that although individuals experience stress as a felt inability to cope with change, families are organized units that also demonstrate group symptoms of stress. They describe family stress as a disturbance in the organization and process of family life.

#### *Mediators of stress among adolescents*

Several mediators of stress among adolescents will now be discussed.

Children in divorcing families, their lives and relationships are profoundly affected by the divorce of their parents. The following mediating factors affects peoples standard of living, placing them in lower occupational attainment and wages throughout adulthood.

##### *1. Economic decline*

Some researchers have suggested that children’s post-divorce adjustment is largely complicated by the economic hardship the custodial parent faces following divorce. The dramatic decline in resources contributes to additional life stresses such as

moving to a smaller residence in neighborhoods with increased crime, poverty, high exposure to substance abuse, lower quality schools, and loss of a familiar and developed community support group and friends. Many custodial parents with lower income need to work additional hours (often working two jobs) to cover the basic life necessities and bills. Furthermore, economic hardship due to parental divorce might lead to some adolescents abandoning their plans to attend college or university. Financial constraints are one of the highest predictors of depression in single parents.

## 2. *Exposure to violence and victimization as mediator of Stress*

Turner, Finkelhor and Ormrod (2007) documented that youth in step-families were at particular risk for sexual assault and parental assault. They also indicate other investigations that compared children living with both parents and adoptive parents, to children living in single parent - and step-parent families. They found that children in step-families have greater lifetime exposure to several forms of victimization, which included sexual assault, child maltreatment, and being exposed to family violence. Hetherington (1999) supports these findings pointing out that step-families are particularly likely to be characterized by conflict in relationships between parents and children. Adolescents have difficulty in establishing interfamilial relationships in the new family. This is usually contributed to having a stronger attachment to the biological family. The reason being they have a longer association and a deeper appreciation of the family of origin and their role in it.

## 3. *Lack of effective discipline as mediators*

Some other areas of concern are that adolescents from divorced families are more likely to be at risk of lack of effective discipline.

4. *Loyalty toward one or both parents as mediators of stress among adolescents*

Adolescents may also experience conflicts in loyalty toward one or both parents. This confused emotion encourages their preference to withdraw from the home and rather choose the company of their friends.

5. *Coping Mechanisms as mediators of stress among adolescents*

For some adolescents a failure to cope with the divorce of their parents can be characterized by regressive behaviours and early sexual activity (Kirby & Dean, 2002).

6. *Affirmation, respect and trust as mediators of stress among adolescents*

Affirmation, respect and trust are displayed in actions that demonstrate to family members they are valued and supported within the family. Communication where sharing is regular and that is direct, arms a family to better cope with any conflict. Taking responsibility for ones actions involves contributing to the running of the home chores and responsible behaviour. This is influenced by morality, a code of ethics and a strong spiritual orientation, which places the family within a larger

purpose. Rituals and Traditions instill a strong sense of 'who we are, where we come from and where we are going.'

#### 7. Crisis management *as mediators of stress among adolescents*

Crisis management is the ability of the family to unite in the face of challenges and surmount the obstacles. A family that is able to realize when it needs help and asks for it is a strong family. Spending time together as a family, playing, relaxing and enjoying each other makes members feel valued and worthwhile. Finally, Strong et al. (2005) say that a strong family is one that has a wellness orientation, seeking ways and resources that will produce optimal health in all areas of life, i.e. physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual and social.

#### *Moderators of Stress among adolescents*

##### 1. *Identity Development stage resolution*

Divorce and its related transitions have a direct impact on children and may be particularly challenging for the adolescents who is similarly undergoing critical developmental changes (Hines, 1997). In addition, life crisis such as the divorce or the remarriage of their parents may amplify the adolescent's challenge relating to normal developmental tasks. These crises may also promote a host of other potentially stressful changes in the larger social milieu in which they grow up: such as changes in schools, in neighbourhoods, in their relations with extended families

and peers, as well as in their economic circumstances ([www.fetalneonatal.com](http://www.fetalneonatal.com) retrieved on May 26, 2010).

## 2. *Strong families as buffers of Stress among adolescents*

Cumulative family instability is associated with problem behavior, early sexual involvements, early childbearing, and low cognitive and academic achievement, poor outcomes such as these are not often automatic, but are dependent on intervening variables, referred to as moderators or buffers. Strong families should then be presented as buffers of Stress to explore the possible influence of adolescent's well-being.

Strong et al. (2005) have collated a list of characteristics that mark a strong family that they have gleaned from various researches. They are: (1) commitment; (2) affirmation, respect and trust; (3) communication; (4) responsibility, morality and spiritual orientation; (5) rituals and traditions; (6) crisis management; (7) ability to seek help; (8) spending time together; and (9) a family wellness orientation. Commitment is characterized by a strong sense of identity with the family unit.

## 3. *A high level of motivation as buffers of stress among adolescents*

A high level of motivation to work towards success, solve problems and defend any threats to the family is present.

## 4. *Adjustment patterns in step-families as buffers of stress among adolescents*

Accounts of children in step-families and single-parent families reveal more negative stress in their lives. Their adjustment difficulties and behavioural problems may be attributed to their reaction to stress. Adjustment difficulties for step children may be seen within the normal range for such behaviours, thus not suggesting a need for clinical intervention unless the behaviour continues for an extensive period. According to Amato (2000) it might be difficult to reach broad generalizations about the role of parental remarriage in the adolescent's adjustment. Some children may experience a re-emergence of problems during the adolescent developmental life phase. Eventually most children adapt successfully to this new life transition and have no ill effects.

Several factors have been identified which may contribute to how well children adjust to a step-family. For Kirby and Dean (2002) it includes multiple factors such as gender of custodial parent, parenting style, marital status, parent-child relationships, and the amount of contact with the non-custodial parent. Lofquist (1993) has identified that the following factors do affect children's adjustment in step-families: the child's gender, the age of the child, individual differences in temperament, intelligence, behavioural patterns, and parenting factors.

The effects of remarriage vary with children's ages, children's gender, and the time since divorce and other factors. Researchers such as Hetherington and Kelly (2002); Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan (2002) found that 20% of children from step-families showed adjustment problems compared to 10% in families that never

divorced. Kirby and Dean (2002) write that most children of divorced or remarried parents experience adjustment problems during the first two years of the newly formed family structure. Several factors are discussed below in more detail: namely, the child's gender, the child's age, parent-child relationships, sibling relationships, and personal resources.

a. *Gender of the child.*

The child's gender affects children's adjustment outcome. Some evidence suggests that girls have more adjustment problems in step-families than boys do. Girls in step-families typically report more stress than boys in step-families. Higher stress may lead to adjustment difficulties such as poor academic performance and problem behaviours such as the use of alcohol, drugs, early sexual relations (half a million teenage girls give birth each year), and drop out of school (half a million young people drop out of school each year) Hughes (2009). Parents tend to report an increase in negative behaviours in daughters following remarriage and a decrease in negative behaviour in sons. This is often explained by the close mother-daughter relationships formed prior to the remarriage and the perceived threat to that relationship by the addition of a stepfather. Or in father residential homes, daughters tend to take on the role of the woman in the home and manage the home chores such as cooking and cleaning and feel slighted that the step-mother now takes over this role. This makes girls more resistant than boys to accepting a new step-parent (Buchanan et al., 1996).

b. *Age of the child.*

Age of the child is another factor affecting children's adjustment. Adolescents have a more difficult time than do younger children, in part because adolescence is a time of developmental change. The formation of a step-family also produces change and may generate added stress. Adolescents may show a reluctance to establish ties as they strive for autonomy and turn toward peers for support. Younger children may show some reaction and behavioural change following a remarriage, but once a consistent routine is established, adjustment problems typically disappear.

c. *Power Struggles between parents.*

Children might also find themselves as a pawn in the power struggles between parents. This leads to depression and is harmful to the child. It negatively affects adjustment and also negatively impacts on the formation of the adolescents intimate relationships. Buchanan et al. (1996) say that a closer relationship with the non-custodial parent results in less depression and a more positive adjustment. In particular, the more a non-custodial parent remembered special days such as birthdays and holidays, the more positive relation it showed in the child's adjustment. This indicates that non-custodial parents have a positive role to play in promoting adjustment.

d. *Acceptance of the step-parent*



Buchanan et al. (1996) suggests that greater acceptance of the new partner and more time spent in family activities enhance family bonds and helps to set up barriers against deviance in the adolescent. Greater acceptance of the step-parent leads to less depression, less anxiety and less deviance in the child, resulting in a better adjustment to the step-family.

*e. Custody issues*

The trend today is that many divorced people choose to remarry, and the formation of step-families produces more changes and may generate added stress. Remarriage introduces a second major life crisis and for some adolescents these multiple high levels of stress may lead to adjustment difficulties. The adjustment problems are poor academic performance and problem behaviours such as engaging in delinquent activities, low self-esteem, the use of alcohol, drugs, early sexual activities, and dropping out of school early, teenage pregnancies, and sexually transmitted disease. Researchers have found that these factors contribute to the lower general well-being of adolescents in step-families (Hughes, 2009).

It is important to keep in mind that forming a new step-family involves many new issues and challenges. Brown (2006) indicated that the transition into a step-family increases the chances of a negative impact on the adolescents' wellbeing. This family transition may entail a number of risk factors for children, such as increased stress, diminished parenting practices, disrupted family roles, and increased conflict.

Adolescents from previous marriages will most likely struggle with sibling jealousy centering on attention from the biological parent, showing resistance to the authority of the step-parent, and turf battles over sharing space and possessions.

There is debate around the issue of whether children fare better with a same-sex parent or not. Most researchers support the fact that same-sex parenting is more effective and beneficial to the child and that the loss of a same-sex parent in divorce is more damaging to the child. This is based on the fact that children need an adult same-sex role model. According to (Buchanan et al., 1996) there are some studies that show that children in the custody of same-sex parents fare better in social competence, in sex-role development, have higher levels of self-esteem, and lower levels of behavioural problems, have a better understanding of the divorce and living arrangements, than children living with opposite-sex parents.

For many children and adolescents divorce may result in a possible diminished contact with the noncustodial parent, often with geographical moves, the addition of step siblings, an altered extended family, and with the introduction of a new parent figure. It may also abruptly hurl them into the world of adult responsibilities. The freedom to pursue different roles may be restricted when adolescents accept some responsibility for their divorced or bereaved parents. Adolescents growing up in such families are expected to do their share to help their overloaded parent with daily chores and household management. Additionally, these adolescents may be the primary source of emotional support for depressed or grief-stricken parents.

*f. Parental Control and Management*

Parental control and management is a strong predictor of the adjustment a child makes to divorce and remarriage. According to Buchanan et al. (1996) this refers to the parents' awareness of the adolescent's activities and the maintenance of an organized home. It refers to regular routines and rules for things such as meal times, doing chores, bedtime, TV watching or visiting with friends. If these routines and rules were consistent and the household was well managed it results in less substance abuse, anti-social behaviour and deviance. It also aided in a positive adjustment and the general well-being of the child.

*g. Sibling relations.*

Sibling relationships make a significant difference in the adjustment of children in step-families. The presence of half or step siblings show a higher rate of adjustment problems than those families who are without such siblings. The adolescent may be angry of the intrusion of other children into their life. Another contributing factor is increased conflict between siblings during the early period of the new step-family. A third contributing factor is likely to be parental differential treatment of siblings. Poor sibling relationships appear to increase adjustment problems over time.

Contrary to these associations between siblings and poor adjustment, there is also evidence that sibling relationships can play a positive role in step children adjustment. Key qualities of the relationship is showing affection, being supportive, offering acceptance and their influence can act as a protective factor (Graham-

Berman, unpublished). More generally, not only siblings but grandparents and other adults play a more significant part in the adjustment of children and adolescents in step-families. Perhaps it is because custodial biological parents are more distant and disengaged with their children during the early stages of remarriage ([www.fetalneonatal.com](http://www.fetalneonatal.com) retrieved on 26 May 2010).

5. *Personal Resources and Positive Skills as buffers of stress among adolescents*

Another important factor to consider is what personal resources and positive skills the adolescent brings to assist them in their adjustment to the step-family (Buchanan, 1996). These include conflict resolution styles, close relationships with others and involvement in other interests. In conflict resolution one considers whether the adolescent resolves conflict through compromise and discussion, through aggression, through avoidance or through engagement in extra-curricular activities. Those who show the best adjustment are the children who apply a constructive conflict strategy such as compromise. According to Buchanan et al. (1996) a close relationship with a friend is a strong source of support to the adolescent in stressful situations. Engagement in activities that the child enjoys such as sport and music rewards the child with pleasure and satisfaction and meaningfully occupies their time. In turn this helps them in the adaptation process. Academic and social competence has also been noted as an asset making children more resilient and better able to cope with stress.

Step-families face the difficult challenge of integrating all the new members of the step-family into a working unit and have them adjust to all the new boundaries and

rules. While it can be challenging, there are ways to have a successful transition. Louw et al. (2004) recommends that step-families who wish to make positive adjustments to the reconstituted family need to keep the following in mind: have realistic expectations for the new relationships and, to allow time for adjustment before loving relationships can be formed between step-parents and step children. It will be unrealistic for step-families to expect to continue where the original family left off. Step-families have to form new norms, traditions, develop new communication styles, their own disciplinary techniques, and find their own problem-solving strategies. It would be advisable for the step-parent not to compete with the biological parent, but assume a different position.

#### *6. Lack of parental support as moderator of stress among adolescents*

Lack of parental support in decision-making, concerns about parents as sexual beings, and worries about sex and marriage.

#### *Specific problems experienced by adolescents*

The remarriage of parents arouses conflict in both parents and children regarding the children's acceptance of a step-parent. Adolescents in particular struggle with feelings of anger and disloyalty to the absent biological parent, affecting their acceptance of the new spouse as a source of parental gratification (Moos, 1986). A sensitive and practical problem for both adolescents and their parents is figuring out what to call their step-parents. Additionally, they have to deal with the instant

addition of extended new step-family members namely the former spouse and step-grandparents, and step-siblings. Furthermore the handling of added sexuality in the household intensifies problems for all. The changes in family structure and the introduction of new relationships bring about emotional upheavals, losses, and painful role changes reverberating throughout the family, touching children as well as adults.

One of the challenges the adolescent faces in step-families is to cope with changes in the family structure. Strong et al. (2005) says that the first- denominator is that all members in the step-family have suffered loss of a primary relationship, either that of a spouse or parent. The child has to cope with parents living in separate homes and any conflict between these homes caused by hurt, jealousy or power struggles between parents. Automatically the child becomes a member of both the custodial and non-custodial parents' homes and has to adapt to the different roles, rules and regulations in each. The child has to form new relationships with the custodial and non-custodial parents as their roles change and in addition, in the case of remarriage, a bond with the step-parent. In the step-family the roles of the step-parent or step-grandparents are not clearly defined and can be further complicated by the acceptance or non-acceptance by the child.

The divorce and remarriage of parents causes the adolescent to experience a loss of family stability and to suffer from the need to achieve self-direction and maturity too quickly. This life transition abruptly hurls them into the world of adult responsibilities. As previously mentioned, adolescents who grow up in such families

are expected to do their share to help their overloaded parent with daily chores and household management, and sometimes even be a source of emotional support to grief-stricken parents.

After divorce many children experience the loss of daily contact with the non-custodial parent (mainly the father). Some children may retain a relationship and visitation times are arranged, while others lose all contact. Non-custodial fathers normally take a low disciplinary role and act more like companions to their children (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). The father's availability and accessibility and his disciplinary role are not the most crucial components of father-child relationships. However, children benefit when fathers are involved in the caring and nurturing processes, and engage in general parenting behaviour like physical play, support and monitoring. Positive benefits for children include cognitive competence, empathy and the children are more self-controlled (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). The father's involvement with his children following divorce and remarriage is determined by geographical distance of the parents homes, the type of relationship he had with his former partner, employment status, payment of child support, the children's ages at the time of divorce (had close relationships already formed), and the marital status at the time of each child's birth.

Divorce and remarriage affects individuals and include disruptions in parent-child relationships, continuing discord between former spouses, loss of emotional support, economic hardship, and an increase in the number of other negative life events, such as moving (Amato, 2000). The absence of the father is one of many factors

associated with a range of children's problems from poor academic achievement to youth suicide, teenage pregnancies (Amato, 2001; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001; Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2002). On the other hand, fathers deprived of contact with their children, experienced grief, despair, frustration and anger with their situation and this sometimes leads to paternal disengagement (Smyth, 2004; Howden, 2007).

Marguardt (2004) identified that children from divorced and remarried families are confronted with challenges that children in traditionally married-parent families do not have to face. For example, environmental circumstances undergo numerous changes. The children now experience multiple home environments with each home having their own rules and new norms are established. Many children suffer from psychological distress which often brings about negative changes in their behaviour, as well as academic problems.

In cases where step-parents lack the experience of being a parent, expectations may not be clear, and step children are likely to react in a hostile manner perceiving the step-parent as an intrusion into their lives. Adolescents may find it difficult to build a relationship with a step-parent, because they are struggling with issues of identity and have a desire for independence. This presents in demonstrations of rebellion against authority and disagreements with measures of control.

Adolescents prefer freedom and autonomy rather than forming a new attachment to a step-parent who may be totally unfamiliar. This takes away their freedom, but it also means being controlled by an unfamiliar adult who is replacing their biological



parent. This usually contributes to the challenges in forming relationships in step-families.

*How adolescents adjust in their step-families*

The adolescents' social environments and family values, school, and peer group interact powerfully in influencing their lives. A large number of adolescents have to cope with various problems, such as the pressures of schooling, meeting peer demands. Apart from these, more and more children and adolescents are confronted with the break-up of their families by divorce and the building of new relationships with step-families (Keats, 2001).

Adolescents learn best to cope with changes caused by remarriage when parents show sensitivity to their child's needs. The parent-child relationship following a divorce and remarriage is critical to the child's adjustment. Although it is painful not being with both parents, it is in maintaining meaningful relationships with their parents that help children cope. Parents need to guard against criticizing the other parent in front of the child. Because when there is on-going conflict between their parents' children tend to have long-term adjustment difficulties.

To facilitate a child's adjustment, parents can help their children by exercising good parenting skills, and by providing them with a warm, understanding, nurturing, and stable home environment. Parents can also provide a consistent stress-free visitation arrangement with the non-custodial parent. The child is likely to have adjustment

problems if frequent contact occurs in undesirable circumstances. The quality of parent-child relationships, the family environment and family structure have a significant impact on children and adolescents' development in many domains. It has been found that family environments influence children and adolescent's active coping behaviours. Families that model low conflict, cohesiveness, and are communicative, often have children who more frequently use active coping behaviours and show less problem responses when dealing with stressful life events.

The benefit of supportive parent-child relationships may assist children to move past obstacles and challenges through using effective coping behaviours (Zimmer-Gembeck, & Locke, 2007). Adolescents, who have more positive relationships with their parents, use fewer avoidance strategies and less wishful thinking when they have problems at home. Other factors which also influence how well children adjust are the child's age, gender and temperament. Children who have a 'difficult' temperament struggle to adjust if the child's parents have difficulty coping with stress and the demands of life. Parents who manage to have fewer disruptions and establish a stable routine contribute to the child's ability to cope. Another coping method for adolescents is that family roles must be restructured and new identities need to be forged.

Parents can support the adolescent by telling others about their divorce and remarriage making it easy for children to connect with supporting networks such as understanding teachers and grandparents, to name a few. (Hetherington et al., 1989). While another recent study of U.S. young adults by Ruiz and Silverstein (2007),

found that close and supportive relationships with grandparents reduced depressive symptoms especially among young people whose families of origin were absent of a parent (see also Kennedy & Kennedy, 1993). Related studies by Lussier et al. (2002), Ruiz and Silverstein (2007) confirms these findings, they showed that close relationships with grandparents following parental separation were associated with fewer adjustment problems among young people. Child's adjustment is enhanced also by the following:

1. Prior to the remarriage, parents need to discuss it with the child,
2. Answer the child's questions,
3. Read age appropriate books with the child,
4. Reassure the child of their love,
5. Be consistent in their parenting,
6. Do not interrogate children about their visits with other parent,
7. Most importantly be sensitive to the child's emotional needs.

Adolescents who cope successfully after the divorce and remarriage of their parents are those children who work through the trauma. This involves going through the normal grieving process, experiencing denial, anger and depression and finally coming to a point of acceptance, focusing on the future, taking responsibility for their actions, and acting with integrity (Whiteman, 2007).

One study found that children who use active coping skills (such as problem solving and gathering social support) tend to adjust to divorce more quickly than children

who rely on avoidance or distraction as coping mechanisms. Children's social support from peers was positively related to adjustment, being a protective factor. Children who place some of the blame for the divorce on themselves tend to be more poorly adjusted. Custody arrangements following divorce tend to show that children fare better under joint physical custody rather than sole mother or father custody.

According to Niolon (2003) step-families can manage change by considering visits to step-grandparents, rules imposed by ex-partners about parenting. Care about children's development and changing needs, integration of non-custodial children, and changing roles of parents and step-parents over time. Furthermore, looking into the unpredictable results of the numerous new relationships brought about by step-families, including people with different experiences, needs, and opinions. Ganong, Coleman and Jamison (2011) make the following suggestions for developing a closer relationship between the step child and step-parent:

1. "The step-parent should take a supportive role.
2. Allow the biological parent to do most of the disciplining.
3. The authoritative step-parenting style is best, showing increased warmth and flexible control.
4. Befriend step children and try to build close relationships with them before attempting to discipline them.
5. Step-parents should engage step children in activities that are supportive and fun until relational bonds are firmly established.
6. Show an interest in raising your partner's children."

Following these suggestions is likely to promote greater opportunities for bonding, and may help adolescents cope better in step-families. It is clear that step-parents, who invest more in their step children's lives, develop closer relationships with them. However, contrary to these findings, King (2007) points out that closeness to residential step-mothers was not related to adolescents well-being. As more time together means more opportunities for conflict.

Step children's response to step-parents' behaviour may be instrumental in how step-relationships develop over time. Open and flexible communication with step-parents on a daily basis, is related to more satisfactory relationships between step-parents and step children. Avoiding conversations may be predictive of problems between step-parents and step children (Gosselin & David, 2007). Stepfathers, who brought resources into the household, treated the mother well, left the discipline to the biological parent, and tried to befriend the step children, they developed positive relationships with their step children (Barness et al., 1998, & Schmeedde, 2007). Furthermore good relationships between the spouses, together with mutual support and cooperation, are important for successful step-family functioning.

Today's families need support to make adjustments in each life stage, and to build resilience to meet life's challenges. Research and prevention programmes can contribute to the strengthening and resiliency of all families. To manage change in the family it is important to create a sense of togetherness and belonging. Strong families make time to eat, play, work, and share outside activities together, thus

enriching family life. For significant positive change to take place within the step-family, each family member has to change the way they interact with one another to aid adjustment.

#### *2.4. Summary*

In summary, the main focal points of this chapter addressed the following themes: the dynamics between adolescents and step-families, the formation of step-families, and challenges put to adolescents living in step-families. The information gathered will contribute to step-families being understood as a unique family form, having their own rules, roles and norms. Particular attention was given to the developmental stage of the adolescent. It was noted that adolescence is a time of multiple transitions, namely, the transition to puberty and transitions involving parent-child relationships, school, peers, and cognitive and emotional abilities. During this period they experience changes in roles and status that redefine their place in society and may present in the form of confrontations and conflicts with their parents.

What has been emphasized is that divorce is an increasingly common phenomenon. Its frequency and the fact that so many lives are affected by this life transition, needs to be understood so that it can be normalized to give people the means to cope and make successful adjustment. Divorce is difficult for parents and children. Each family member's adjustment is affected by the level of stress and how their parents handle their relationships with each other and the children.

The literature summarized above suggests that often children's standard of living drops when parents' divorce and the father move out of the house. A decline in financial contributions, loss of parent time and supervision, contributes to absent fathers losing touch with their children's needs and losing an interest in their well-being. Less frequent visits of a parent is likely to let children feel abandoned. To eliminate these insecurities parents should plan special activities with their children reconnecting the parent-children relationship.

Life changing experiences such as the loss of the relationship of a parent, fear of abandonment, possible change in residence, school, and friends, and the uncertainty about having their needs met resulting in anxiety, sadness, and a low self-esteem. These cause stress and tension for children and adolescence in divorcing families, manifesting themselves in depression and conduct disorders.

From the discussions of risk taking behaviours of adolescents, issues of particular importance were that parental warmth and support facilitate a positive relationship. Hence, it may be expected that adolescents show less risk taking behaviour, as they are less orientated toward their peer group. However, greater involvement of adolescents toward their peers will be related to more risk taking, aggression, more depression, and they are also less concerned about the consequences of their risk taking.

The literature attests to the hurdles faced by step-families. These include family acceptance of the step-parent, step siblings, environmental changes, parental

discipline and nurturing roles, sustaining generational boundaries, and coping with the impact of the absent biological parent. From the literature reviewed it is evident that the family is a significant facilitator of coping, and the home environment promotes belonging and competence, influencing the adolescent's adaptation to change in the form of more active and fewer avoidance coping behaviours. It is important to remember that relationships in step-families require time to build and grow. In this chapter step-families were viewed from, Family Systems perspective, Identity Development Theory and the Stress, Appraisal and Coping Model.



## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### *3.1. Introduction*

This chapter describes the procedures followed for conducting the research study. It also explains the way in which the sample population was drawn, how interviews were conducted and recorded. The main objective of this study was to gain insight into adolescent's feelings and perceptions about their experiences within step-families. The following research questions were addressed: **“How does divorce and remarriage influence the adolescent's life?”** And **“Do other factors and structures play a role to influence that outcome?”**

#### *3.2. Research methodology*

The qualitative research approach was applied. A qualitative approach was selected because it focuses on the reality of what is happening. By using this approach, the researcher gained in-depth information about the adolescents transitioning into a step-family and gained a richer understanding of the experiences of the children in step-families.

### *3.3. Research Design*

In-depth information about the adolescent's adjustment to their parent's divorce and living in step-families was gathered using the phenomenological research design. This data was gathered using semi-structured interview schedules. The semi-structured interviews gave adolescents the opportunity to talk openly about their personal experiences and creating meaning of those experiences. The semi-structured interviews produced rich data, as participants committed themselves to disclose sensitive information. The semi-structured interviews enabled sufficient flexibility for the researcher to explore participants' responses in depth.

According to De Vos et al. (2005, p. 270) a phenomenological research design describes the "...meaning of experiences of a phenomenon, topic or concept for various individuals." The researcher eventually reduced the experiences to a central meaning to capture the essence of the experience of the participants. For this study one continuous interview worked best. Factors like time, school schedule, study program, exams and for some participants travelling costs, made it more convenient to have one continuous session instead of two short sessions.

### *3.4. Sampling*

A non-probability sampling method was used. The researcher studied the school records; however the school records, and designed an information sheet which all learners attending the Dawid Bezuidenhoudt Senior Secondary School completed.

The information sheet was used to screen participants that matched the sample requirements. Learners who were in nuclear families and single parent households, and others who matched the requirements but failed to give their consent to be interviewed, were not considered for the study. Twenty participants were selected via purposive sampling by evaluating the information. This allowed the researcher to identify those children between the ages 14-18 years, both male and female, whose parents have divorced and remarried, and who indicated a willingness to participate in this research study.

After identifying possible participants, letters were sent to their parents explaining the aim of the study and the interested families returned a signed consent form. Only nine learners returned their signed consent forms. The low response rate of the parents was because learners failed to give the letters to their parents. Other parents were fearful of how the interview may affect their household. After the researcher telephonically answered parent's concerns, the parents either gave telephonic permission or returned the signed forms. It was not necessary to implement snowball sampling as there were sufficient learners to draw upon from the completed information sheets.

### *3.5. Research instrument*

Semi-structured interviews were the method of data gathering. The use of semi-structured interviews assisted adolescents to share their beliefs of, give accounts of and share their perceptions on marital separation and living in step-families, helping

the researcher understand their behaviour. De Vos et al. (2005) state that semi-structured interviews are interviews organized around areas of particular interest, allowing sufficient flexibility to explore participants' responses in depth. In this study one session was conducted without utilizing any of the researcher's prior information, experience or opinions in a particular area to prevent bias. The aim was to understand the experience of the adolescents and the meaning they make of that experience. What was important was that the information gathered be understood from the participant's perspective.

Focus points of the semi-structured interview schedule were the adolescents' feelings and experiences of divorce and remarriage; how they adjusted to their step-families; how they projected their experiences in their behaviour and contributing factors that created stress which also influenced their behaviour. The researcher wanted to understand what support is needed for adolescents to adapt successfully in their step-families.

The semi-structured interview questions were compiled using key concepts and noting previous recommendations made by other authors. The researcher was also guided by the research questions selected for this study. The research instrument was tested and no suggestions for modifying of the instrument were made. The researcher was also able to determine a time frame for the interview. Testing the schedule helped in establishing effective communication techniques to build rapport with the participants. Furthermore it created an opportunity to test the credibility and accuracy of the interview schedule. Their in-depth descriptions of problems,

experiences and patterns of interaction within step-families established the validity of the study. The researcher ensured credibility by spending sufficient time with participants to establish rapport, set them at ease, and consequently they felt comfortable sharing personal and sensitive information. Repetition and rephrasing of questions were used to enhance credibility.

### *Credibility*

As described in De Vos et al. (2005, p. 346), this is “ an in-depth description showing the complexities of variables and interactions will be embedded with data derived from the setting that it cannot help but be valid.” Rothmann (2000) suggest that the validity of the research will be ensured through credibility and transferability. To ensure credibility of the interview, the researcher followed critical steps like spending sufficient time with participants to establish rapport, to facilitate comfort and to increase the willingness to make known sensitive information. The researcher also used repetition and rephrased questions to the participants to gain credibility.

### *Accuracy*

To demonstrate reliability the researcher used methods such as asking for clarification and following-up when unsure of certain facts (Shank 2006). The researcher also ensured reliability by considering whether the concluding findings were supported by sufficient evidence and whether they had a consistent logic

(Whittaker, 2009). Extra steps such as verifying information and ensuring thoroughness was critical to ensure reliability and accuracy that would not otherwise be present (Shank, 2006). These helped to increase the trustworthiness of the study (Maree & Van Der Westhuizen, 2009).

Procedure followed in gathering information. After receiving the signed consent forms from participants, the researcher made arrangements with the Life Skills Teacher to interview learners who were in grades 8, 9 and 11. Telephonic appointments were made with the grade 10 and 12 learners as they were on study leave. The interview schedule was developed to ensure that the overall research questions were answered. The researcher focused on how to structure the interview, and how to promote a natural flow of conversation by noting the order in which the semi-structured questions were asked.

The interviews took place at the Dawid Bezuidenhoudt Senior Secondary School, in a room adjacent to the office of the Life Skills Teacher. Generally the interviews were an hour long. As a means of introduction the researcher clarified the research topic, the aim of the study and explained the role of the interview (De Vos et al., 2005). Because a semi-structured interview schedule was used enough time was allowed for participants to talk in an open and relaxed way about their experiences. Throughout the interviews the researcher used methods such as asking for clarification and following-up certain facts that were unclear. The same semi-structured questions were used throughout to ensure that accuracy and precision was maintained, increasing the trustworthiness of the study.

The participants were able to understand the questions and they felt secure enough to share their stories. It confirmed that participants were able to supply the relevant data without putting them through much distress or exposing them to emotional harm. The interviews were recorded on video camera with the consent of the participants. The video tapes were labeled and filed to make retrieval easier for data analysis and writing the final research document. During the interviews field notes were taken.

At the end of the interview the signed consent forms, the questionnaire, video tapes and field notes were numbered, dated, and identified to be filed. Debriefing was done by the researcher at the end of the interview; to confirm that none of the participants were re-traumatized by reflecting the stories of their past and current situations. This included questions like: “how do you feel now?” “Would you like to have counseling?” These questions were to certify that participants did not suffer any emotional harm or too much distress after sharing their stories. Most participants found the interview therapeutic and felt better after sharing their story. One participant indicated a need for counseling. Telephonic contact was made with the biological mother and an appointment was arranged with a psychologist with her permission. After the interview each adolescent was thanked for participating in the research, and was rewarded with a cold drink and a packet of chips.

### *3.6. Data analysis*

Whittaker (2009) describes data analysis as the process of making sense of the information the researcher collected and searching for what lies deeper. From these rich and complex accounts the researcher exercised judgment to identify patterns to be able to understand their experiences. The interviews were typed daily into word-processing documents recording every word. These transcriptions were then analyzed manually to take apart words, sentences and paragraphs which were important for the research study. Having a good overview of the data the researcher identified similarities and differences and could start seeing links and relationships between different aspects of the participants' experiences.

From (De Vos et al., 2005) content analysis was done to identify what the most common occurrences were. Reading and re-reading the daily field notes, as well as watching the video recordings made it possible for the researcher to make sense of what the adolescents had said. Being familiarized with the data the researcher could then generate codes. The transcript was divided into two columns, the first column for the words and phrases used by the participants, while the second column was used to record codes. Faced with these rich and complex accounts the researcher organized the daily field notes as well as audio materials into manageable themes, patterns, trends and relationships. This method of analysis allowed the researcher to construct and narrate the participants' reality of what they experienced in step-families and how they coped with adjusting to these new relationships.



The recorded data obtained during individual interviews was edited and explained in order to reach appropriate conclusions. Interpretations were explained either to support or falsify existing data. Themes were reviewed to check whether they reflect the meanings of what the participants had said overall. The researcher showed the connections between the research results and the literature reviewed. The information will be presented and visualized in Chapter 4.

To add to the “richness” of the elements of the report, the researcher incorporated short, eye-catching quotations, embedded quotations and long quotations of the participants to provide readers with enough evidence to accept the interpretations as plausible. These were complimented by the researcher’s own perceptions and interpretations of events, activities and conversations. Information from the themes identified was used to draw out key elements needed in an intervention program to assist adolescents in their transition to step-families, as well as benefit step-families and professionals working with this phenomenon.

### *3. 7. Research ethics*

At the time learners were ready to participate in the semi-structured interview they were informed about the purpose of the study. They were given the opportunity to make a voluntary and informed decision to participate in this research study. Their parents were given the same opportunity to consent to or decline the participant’s involvement in this research study. Before proceeding with the semi-structured

interview, participants were informed that they may withdraw from the research without detrimental results to themselves.

They were reassured that all information would be treated confidentially and their anonymity would be respected. The researcher encouraged participants to indicate any mental discomfort or distress at any time during the interview. An opportunity for debriefing was created at the end of the interview session, and enquiries were made whether participants needed counselling. The participants were informed that only people who were professionally involved would have access to this information.

In summary the researcher applied the following ethical procedures:

- a. The researcher stated clearly the true purpose of the study, enabling the participants to give their voluntary and informed consent.
- b. Participants were informed that they may withdraw from the research without detrimental results to them.
- c. Regarding the participants' privacy and dignity the researcher informed the participants of their right for confidentiality and anonymity and all information was treated with confidentiality.
- d. To protect participants from unwarranted physical or mental discomfort, distress, harm, danger or deprivation the researcher created opportunity for debriefing.

### *3.8. Summary*

This chapter has aimed to give the reader a clear view of the research methodology, sampling strategy, the research instrument, the procedure followed to gather information, data analysis and how research ethics was applied. The semi-structured interview schedule was tested to ensure that questions were formulated in such a way that participants could respond with quality answers. Ethical considerations such as confidentiality, protection of participant's identification, consent letters, permission to be interviewed and safe filing of data were applicable to this study.

## CHAPTER 4

### DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH RESULTS

#### *4.1. Introduction*

This chapter will present the results of the study, based on the gathered information. Data will be presented in tables, graphs and discussions. The adolescents own words will be quoted and will be linked to the themes that were identified by the researcher in order to respond to the sub-research questions. More specifically, eight primary themes emerged:

1. The demise of the family of origin,
2. Adolescents' experiences of their parents' divorce and remarriage,
3. The complexity of step-families as compared to the family of origin,
4. Coping strategies recommended for adolescents living in step-families,
5. Factors influencing the adolescents' behaviour,
6. The adaptation patterns amongst adolescents in step-families,
7. Support systems needed for adolescents to adapt successfully in step-families,
8. Further research needed.

The main results will be discussed and summarized, by explaining the main trends, patterns, similarities and differences that emerged from the information collected.

The discussions will reflect the link between literature and the key findings.

#### *4.2. Sample demographics*

A non-probability sampling method was used. There was no fixed number representing each sex, age group or grade. The sample consisted of 20 participants, fourteen (14) females and six (6) males. The age group ranged between 14 – 18 years of age, and these participants were in grades eight to twelve. The findings of this study reflected a high representation of the participants (70%) living with a stepfather, while the minority group (15%) lived with a step-mother.

Only three of the participants (15%) had different living arrangement: 2 of the participants (10%) lived with their maternal aunts, of whom one lived with her grandparents over weekends, and the remaining participant (5%) lived with his biological mother who is still a single parent after her divorce. The latter two groups were included as their circumstances continue to place them from time to time into their step-family homes. Their contributions added value to the study.

The age range of participants at the time of their parents' divorce varied, showing no fixed age as being a more dominant time period. Again the age of participants at the remarriage of their parents varied, however participants who were 12 years of age stood out as the most common age for this sample. The period that participants were living in step-families fluctuated between 1-13years; with 5 and 6 years being represented highest in the population group. This information is displayed in Table 1.

*Table 1: Participants' Socio-demographic Characteristics*

Participant No	Sex	Age (years)	Grade	Participant lives with	Participant's age @ divorce of parents (years)	Participant's age @ remarriage of parents (years)	Period participant is in step-family (years)
1	F	16	10	Biological mother & stepfather	1	12	5
2	F	15	9	Biological mother & stepfather	6 months	4	11
3	F	15	9	Biological father & step-mother	7	8	7
4	F	14	8	Biological father & step-mother	5	8	6
5	F	14	8	Biological mother & stepfather	2	2	12
6	M	16	8	Biological mother & stepfather	2	3	13
7	M	18	12	Biological mother & stepfather	7	12	6
8	F	15	9	Biological mother & stepfather	6	13	4
9	M	17	11	Biological mother (single parent)	7	9	8
10	F	15	9	Biological mother & stepfather	2	10	5
11	M	18	11	Biological mother & stepfather	13	16	2
12	F	16	11	biological mother & stepfather	10	12	4
13	F	14	8	biological mother & stepfather	6months	9	5
14	M	14	8	biological father & step-mother	10	12	3
15	M	17	10	maternal aunt	11	16	1
16	F	17	11	biological mother & stepfather	3	12	5
17	F	14	8	biological mother & stepfather	1	4	10
18	F	16	11	maternal aunt	4	10	6
19	F	17	11	biological mother & stepfather	6	6	12
20	F	16	10	biological mother & stepfather	5	14	2

The process was discussed thoroughly in the previous chapter. As stated earlier, eight themes emerged from the study:

1. The demise of the family of origin,
2. Adolescents' experiences of their parents' divorce and remarriage,
3. The complexity of step-families as compared to the family of origin,
4. Coping strategies recommended for adolescents living in step-families,
5. Factors influencing the adolescents' behaviour,
6. The adaptation patterns amongst adolescents in step-families,
7. Support systems needed for adolescents to adapt successfully in step-families,
8. Further research needed.

The following section will discuss and summarize, by explaining the main trends, patterns, similarities and differences that emerged from the information collected. The discussions will reflect the link between literature and the key findings. The themes will be used to discuss the findings of this research.

#### *4.3. Theme 1: The demise of the family of origin.*

Fifteen participants who were 7 years and below when their parents divorced felt that they could not remember details about their family of origin. During the interviews, several participants described the family of origin as having the following characteristics: fighting, arguing, physical and verbal abuse, cheating on partner,

aggression, and lying. If more of the sample had insight into their family of origin, one could expect a broader range of responses and possibly a wider range of patterns may have been identified. Participants' describe the relationships in the family of origin as follows:

*Quotations:*

**Participant 2:** "My father likes lying; it triggered arguments and fights between my parents; he ran away from us and keeps moving from place to place, he never supported us."

**Participant 7:** "My father was a physically violent man, my mother and I suffered both physical and mental abuse. He cheated on my mother with her best friend."

**Participant 9:** "My father beat my mother; there was much violence in my family of origin."

**Participant 20:** "I was 5 years old when my parents divorced; I was too young to understand anything. My father asked for a transfer from his work and relocated."

It seems that when the family of origin breaks up it is preceded by a series of disputes such as desertion, fighting, arguing, physical and verbal abuse, adultery, lying, lack of support and aggression as identified by the participants. In support of their experiences Eshleman (2003) identified similar reasons for the breakdown of



marriages, they include issues like: incompatibility, cruelty, desertion or irreconcilable differences, physical assault, alcoholism or infidelity, and lack of emotional fulfillment, to name a few.

Children coming from divorced homes often do not escape the effects of divorce. According to James and Gilliland (2005) the lives and relationships of children in divorcing families are profoundly affected, leaving them feeling insecure, fearful, trapped, unloved and guilty. Experiencing these emotions affects their self-esteem and contributes to feelings of mistrust for marriage, which may influence their decision to marry in future. According to Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2002) more young people are replacing marriage with cohabitation. Unlike the family of origin these family members now experience changes in family structure, emotional upheavals, and loss of family stability. As indicated by Louw et al. (2004) the first year following the divorce is generally a period of extensive disruption, disorganization, depression, restlessness, feelings of failure, hostility, anger, anxiety, self-blame and a chaotic search for escape from distress. They also experience loss of emotional support, economic hardship and painful role changes reverberating throughout the family, touching children as well as adults. Children from divorced families need to overcome their hurt, anger, and guilt and make the necessary emotional, intellectual and social adjustments.

*Minority Themes:*

Adolescents from divorced families may be resilient and strong, as this life crisis, trauma, and disruptive life events better equip them to deal with adult life. As a mature and stable person, they can organize themselves and maintain their integrity while they adapt to life changing events. Inevitably they establish self-control, clear functional boundaries, and workable family communication patterns and use good coping patterns. This trend is supported by Goldenberg & Goldenberg (2002) who suggest that adolescents are able to call upon outside resources such as family and friends in times of crisis. A vast majority of children grow up to be competent, normal, functioning adults.

By way of contrast, some children may never recover after the divorce of their parents. According to Kirby and Dean (2002) they are characterized by regressive behaviours, and early sexual activity. Such children may suffer emotional distress connected with grief, loneliness, and poor self-esteem. Amato (2000) regards economic hardship (poverty) due to parental divorce as a reason for some adolescents to abandon their plans to attend college or university. These mediating factors affect a person's standard of living, resulting in lower occupational attainments and reduced wages throughout adulthood. Many young girls become teen-mothers, and this contributes to complicating their marriages and inevitably the cycle of divorce continues. Santrock (2004) contends that disadvantaged groups have a higher incidence of divorce. Contributing facts are premarital pregnancy, youthful marriages, low educational levels, and a low income.

*4.4. Theme 2: The adolescents' experiences of their parents' divorce and remarriage.*

Participants reported that their parents' divorce changed the family structure and household reorganization occurred. Some experienced a fluctuation of negative emotions:

1. Many feared abandonment as one or both parent figures disappeared out of their lives.
2. The stigma of divorce and living in a step-family lowered adolescent's self-esteem.
3. Poor school performance was influenced by poor concentration and lack of emotional and moral support.
4. Economic changes often lead to diminished lifestyles as in most cases funds had to be shared with more family members now.
5. Diminished relationships with the non-custodial parent, either because the non-custodial parent moved away or broke all ties.
6. Different losses were experienced such as one or both parents, change homes, schools, friends, finances, to name a few.
7. Discomfort in living with a stranger (step-parent), sharing a room with step-siblings.
8. Loneliness, neglected by parents and step-parents, ashamed to talk to friends.
9. Conflict resulted from anger, and the inability to accept a step-parent.

10. Tension in the presence of a step-parent as both do not know how to behave.
11. Resistance in accepting that the divorce is final and parents will not reconcile.
12. Introduction to new relationships such as step-parent, step-siblings, step-relatives.
13. New rituals and routines take the place of old ritual and routines.

These family transitions impacted the participant's lives.

**Participant 1:** "My father disappeared out of my life; I met him for the first time in 2008, when I was 13 years old. After my parents' divorce I lived with my maternal grandmother for 3 years."

**Participant 7:** "I was very close to my father, growing up without him was difficult."

**Participant 15:** "My parents' divorce came as a shock to me. My brother and I went and lived with my grandmother. My relationship with my parents changed. I did not like my father anymore, my mother went off with my stepfather and my parents neglected us. Their divorce affected my academic performance. I failed."

**Participant 11:** “After my parents’ divorce I went and lived with my grandmother, there I did not get the attention I needed. I was very emotional and found it difficult to concentrate on my school work. I failed that school year.”

**Participant 14:** “My family of origin consisted of five members, now we are many. My step-mother has four children from her previous relationship. I learnt to do new things in my step-family, such as cultivating the land, cleaning the house, bathing and sleeping at fixed times.”

Inevitably, divorce changes the family structure, some children moved in with their grandparents, or lived in a single parent house-hold. Their lives were disrupted by the reorganization of the household. Participants experienced anxiety and feared being abandoned by their parents as some were separated from either biological parents or their non-custodial parent. As children they had to adapt to living apart from their biological parents and to the new circumstances. Despite the fact that a few participants still haven’t adjusted well, the literature indicates that a vast majority of children are resilient and adapt to their new situations (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2002).

Initially participants mourned the loss of the original family and still hoped and prayed for their parent’s reunion. Their mourning reflected in their low academic performance as they testified that they had failed their grades in school. This observation was in-line with Moos’s (1986) prediction that children continue to hope for the reconciliation of their parents. However, they eventually acknowledge the

marital rupture and accept the loss of the pre-divorce family and the permanence of the divorce.

From the analysis of the data, most participants were seven years and younger at the time of their parent's divorce. This occurrence was congruent with predictions from literature that most divorce takes place prior to the seventh year of marriage (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2002). Many could not recall their experiences because they were too young. However, many reported moving in with their grandparents, with a few participants reporting that they were neglected by their parents after the divorce.

Many were found to be anxious over an uncertain and unfamiliar future, they feared being abandoned by their parents, and a common fantasy regarding parental reconciliation was shared. Remarriage has become a familiar phenomenon following divorce; bringing with it a series of new changes and challenges. The adolescent had initially found it difficult to adjust to life with only one parent, and deal with visitation issues relating to the other parent. Following a remarriage, most participants experienced a diminished relationship with the non-custodial parent (mostly fathers). Thus it was a common situation for adolescents to report having formed a closer relationship with their stepfather, because they spent more time together. However, time spent together was not the only contributing factor for the stronger bonds. Other determining factors included acceptance, mutual respect, open communication, doing things together and support.

From the interviews it was evident that participants experienced feelings of loneliness, rejection, being trapped, being betrayed, and neglected. This seems to be a pattern observed also by Louw et al. (2004) who said the problems experienced by adults after their divorce often results in adolescents being neglected and overlooked by their parents. Most participants experienced a lower economic status, this change resulted from a larger family size, having to support two homes, greater financial demands, unemployment of a spouse, no child support, an irregular or low income, and mismanagement of resources. In instances where mothers resigned from their jobs, the family had to depend totally upon the stepfather. Adolescents hated having their stepfather being in control of the finances because it reduced their independence and created stress.

After divorce and remarriage, the family members were introduced to new relationships. Inevitably, the participant's interactions with their biological parents took on new forms. They lost daily contact with the non-custodial parent, and arrangements had to be made for visitation. Some found that living with a single parent created stronger bonds between them, while an absent non-custodial parent (father) left a void. Participants expressed feelings of sadness that they never had the opportunity to get to know their biological fathers.

**Participant 12:** "I did not get to know my father very well. My mother speaks badly about my father, I'm sad I never got to know my father, I feel confused."

Others felt uncomfortable on irregular visits with their non-custodial parent and communication was difficult. Intimate, loving relationships diminished as participants experienced feelings of anger and dislike towards the non-custodial parent whom they blamed for the divorce.

**Participant 17:** “My relationship with my father changed after the divorce. I did not like my father, because he cheated on my mother, my father also neglected us after the divorce. My mother went off with my step-father and neglected me and my brother.”

Remarriage adds instant new family members: step-parents, step siblings, and extended social networks, and they come in many different sizes and forms. These multiple relationships bring major adjustments. Participants, who were the only child, suddenly had many step siblings, repositioning of sibling order often changed, sharing space, and time and resources added stress in the early phases of the remarriage.

**Participant 2:** “Rituals changed a lot in her step-family, in the past when she came from school she had to clean the house, the T.V. was put on only at certain times. Now the T.V. is on 24/7, and this home stays dirty.”



*Minority Themes:*

A unique and different phenomenon was noted in this study which showed that most remarriages from our sample group occurred when participants were 12 years old. This is opposed to what the research findings say. According to Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2002) most cases of remarriage occur when children are minors. One may wonder if this is a reflection that more people are cohabiting, and that they decide to remarry much later in their relationship. Yet very few participants knew their step-parents prior to the remarriage. Can it be related to the fact that so many of the participants went to live with their grandparents after their biological parents divorced and only joined the step-family much later in the second marriage? Participant 15 said: “My mother went off with my stepfather after her divorce and I grew up with my grandmother.” The limited time for interviews did not allow the researcher to explore this more, but future research could shed more light concerning this issue. Only one participant experienced friendly relations between stepfather and biological father.

**Participant 21:** “There is a friendly relationship between my biological parents. My step-father also has friendly relationships with my biological father. My step-father treats me like his own child. There is no difference between how I see my step-father and my biological father. All children are treated equally. There is no difference for me if I am with my dad or step dad.”

Their free and open relationship possibly explains the reason why this participant was of the opinion that she sees no difference between her biological father and stepfather. She feels passionate about both “dads” and has an excellent relationship with her stepfather, who is like a real father to her. She rated her relationship with her biological father to be good merely because they have less contact. The peaceful relations between her parents generated feelings of security and well-being.

#### *4.5. Theme 3: The complexity of step-families as compared to the family of origin*

The adolescents in the study were faced with the following challenges: accepting the divorce and remarriage of their parents, adjusting to a new person/s (stranger/s) in the home, communication difficulties, and building a relationship with step-parent and step siblings. Participant 12: “I needed to get use to/ adjust to having a new person live in our home. My step-father must show that he loves my mother. He must prove to her why he wants another family. He must share my mothers’ emotions, show my mother true affection by taking her on dinner dates. He needs to get along with her kids. It is not easy for me to show affection and warmth. I cope with my step-father, because my mother talks about him to me, it helps me understand him better.”

#### *Quotations:*

**Participant 1:** “Accepting the new person into my home was very difficult, it was difficult to talk to my step-parents.”

**Participant 2:** “It is not easy to accept my stepfather, he is an alcoholic. He beats, insults and curses my mother and me, I have made three suicidal attempts. We don’t talk directly to each other, we communicate through my mother.”

**Participant 3:** “Step-parents don’t care, they treat you like a maid, and step children are not treated like the step-parents children. Parents don’t have time for you, they don’t address problems you point out, and they don’t listen to you, adults are always right.”

**Participant 7:** “We became poorer after my mother remarried, half my mother’s salary goes toward my stepfather’s medical bills, my pocket money decreased or sometimes it is not available, our standard of living changed. I feel trapped in the house as we no longer go out. My mother gives a lot of attention to my stepfather, I feel like an outcast.”

**Participant 9:** “When my biological parents have disagreements, my mother denies me the opportunity to visit my biological father (non- custodial parent).”

People divorce to dissolve an unhappy marriage. For many people today divorce is followed by remarriage. This blending of two families is a complex and difficult process. According to Coleman, Ganong, and Fine (2000) a newly formed step-family may have more problematic interaction patterns than a first-marriage family. This study confirmed this statement as participants faced challenges such as developing relationships with new family members, defining roles for new

relationships, economic hardship, moving into the step-parent's home, moving away from their support system, defining new rules, communication difficulties, rivalry and jealousy between step siblings and building stepsibling relationships, and a lack of attention from the biological parents. When entering a new marriage, the parent's attention is now divided between the new spouse and the children and in some cases step children and other social networks.

According to Howden (2007) and Hetherington et al. (1998) children feel threatened by the new person in their life; they fear that the biological parent will love them less. A willingness to learn to share time and space is important in restructuring family bonds. Participants who shared a close relationship with the custodial parent prior to remarriage now mourn the loss of that closeness. As Participant No. 20 said: "Previously, I had the freedom to walk into my mother's room at any time, however now I must knock and ask for her permission to enter the room."

Those participants who were very young (6 years and below) at the time of their parents' divorce and remarriage and who were in stable home environments in the second marriage found it easier to accept the step-parent. In cases where hostility occurred between ex-spouses the custodial parent denied visitation between the children and their non-custodial parent. Such behaviour led to those participants feeling confused and they were challenged with a conflict of loyalties between parents. Participants reported that parents discussed money issues with them; spoke negatively about the other parent in front of them. To avoid loyalty conflicts parents can help their children maintain a positive relationship with the other parent.

Participants are burdened with verbal and physical abuse by step-parents who are aggressive, jealous and have no or little control over their alcohol consumption. They are grieved and feel powerless as they witness the repeated physical and verbal abuse inflicted upon their biological parent. It instills feelings of fear, distrust, hatred, anger, and disrespect. In view of the above, it is therefore not uncommon that adolescents in step-families are at risk of being abused. Equilibrium can only be obtained after underlying fear, anger, and resentment is dealt with and if love and respect is displayed between all family members.

Participants indicated that for them to experience healing and acceptance of the new step-parent factors such as time, fair treatment, a deeper knowledge of the step-parent, and consideration for the custodial parent's happiness, and visible contributions made by step-parents towards the step-family's needs could dissolve disequilibrium. Furthermore working on practicing open communication, sharing their feelings and concerns, their likes and dislikes in family meetings, family activities and outings also enhanced relationships and improved understanding between family members.

Contact between the children and the step-parent prior to the remarriage hardly ever took place. To illustrate this point participant no. 9 says that: "My father never told me about my step-mother, I was shocked to come home from school and find people moving her furniture into our home." Parents can help to decrease the period of disequilibrium and conflict in the early stages of remarriage by creating opportunities for children to learn to know the step-parent before the remarriage. They can help

their children by talking about their losses, sadness, fears and involve them in the decision making process. Preparing children for being open to forming new relationships, parents can talk about the new person in their life, fill in the past histories, and do fun things together. One-to-one time between parent-child and step-parent and child is important in order to form a stable and integrated family structure.

There are positive benefits of remarriage, it reduces the heavy burden of being a single parent, it lightens financial burdens, and it provides assistance with child-rearing. Children can benefit from mingling with step siblings. Unfortunately, negatives may be that the family may be financially worse off, and their living standard may change. Independence may be lost, as the dominant figure controls the purse and makes all the decisions. Choosing the wrong partner a second time round may mean more trauma and heartache for the family. Unhappiness at home has its own implications; some find it hard to concentrate on their school work. Others walk around with their peers to avoid being in a tense environment at home, they look for love elsewhere and may end up with a pre-marital pregnancy. Hughes (2009) list the adolescent's adjustment problems as being poor academic performance and problem behaviours such as engaging in delinquent activities, low self-esteem, the use of alcohol, drugs, early sexual activities, and dropping out of school early, teenage pregnancies, sexually transmitted disease. These factors contribute to the lower general well-being of adolescents in step-families (Michael & Ben-Zur, 2007). They identify with their peers and tend to yield to their peers

pressure and conform to peer group values, behaviour, and tastes in such things as clothing, food, and entertainment.

It appears from the findings that children from step-parent families have higher deviance rates (e.g. contact with the law, arrests runaways, school discipline, and truancy). Some of the participants were suspended from school for short periods due to disruptive behaviour, and not adhering to school policy. Adolescents report more susceptibility to pressure from friends to engage in deviant behaviour; present to clinics more severe behavioural problems; are found by parents to be more difficult to manage and report lower self-concepts. Children who live in step-families during adolescence have lower academic performance, poorer school attendance records, and more problems with school authorities than their peers who grow up with both their parents. The majority of the participants in this study showed poor academic performance. From the testimonies of the participants coming from more supportive step-families, that they performed academically better.

According to Arnold (1998) children in step-families are also less likely to stay in school continuously, graduate from high school, attend college, and graduate from college. Children raised in step-families marry at younger ages. Step children are significantly more likely than children from intact families to marry early. Adolescents in step-families are three times more likely than adolescents living with their nuclear families to have needed psychological help within the last year. Despite the fact that children in step-families seem to be at greater risk of adjustment problems, most of these children are doing fine. At the time of being interviewed,

most participants reported that the first two years in a step-family was a time of great adjustment, but after accepting the remarriage, open communication, engaging in family activities, getting to know the step-parent, they are mostly doing fine. According to clinical tests, between 2/3 and 3/4 of children in step-families (and even more if the child is living in a well-established step-family) do not exhibit serious emotional or behavioural problems. In the long run, the response of most children to the challenges of life in a step-family seems to be characterized by resiliency and adaptability. Children in step-families are often disadvantaged because their relationships with step-parents are characterized by less closeness and greater conflict than parent-child relationships.

A National Institutes of Health (NIH) study of step-families found that a step-family has a unique natural life cycle, takes several years to develop into a family unit, and is at greatest risk for failure during its first two years. According to U.S. Census Bureau statistics, the average marriage in the United States only lasts seven years, and one of every two marriages ends in divorce. Step-families are at greater risk for failure and broken marriage due to the increased stresses of step-family life. These stresses include the unclear role and authority of the step-parent, financial responsibility for step children, conflict between custodial and noncustodial parents, and emotional tensions.

Adolescents are especially vulnerable to psychological and emotional problems resulting from a combination of their developmental stage and family stresses. Medical professionals, such as pediatricians, psychologists, and therapists, can



provide resources and referrals for adolescents requiring treatment and/or therapy for depression, oppositional defiance disorder, and unresolved feelings of anger, resentment, and loss.

*4.6. Theme 4: Coping strategies recommended for the adolescent living in step-families.*

Although there may be hundreds of ways that adolescents have used as coping strategies, the sample group found the following to be most helpful:

- a. Put aside your pride, be humble and give your step-parent a chance.
- b. Consider your parents happiness, by looking beyond your own losses and pain.
- c. Accept your step-family, make friends with them.
- d. Build your self-esteem, accept the marriage, and be positive.
- e. Respect your step-parents; do not take your anger out on your step-parents.
- f. Pray every day, experience God's love and presence in your life.
- g. Hold on to your dreams, build a better future for yourself.
- h. Be yourself, pretending is harmful.
- i. Find Minority Themes,
- j. Read the Bible, be guided by God's wisdom and power.
- k. Do what you are told, to maintain peace and growth.
- l. Get to know your step-parent; it helps you understand many things better.

- m. Forgive and make peace, with your circumstances.
- n. Share your emotions with someone you can trust.
- o. Allow interaction to occur, be a part of family activities.
- p. Take an interest in the new step-family members, spend time doing things together.
- q. Don't be afraid of the step-parent; make time to get to know one another better.
- r. Respect each other, watch how you speak and behave.
- s. Practice open communication; speak about the things that make you happy and sad.
- t. Don't put pressure on step-parents; give a step-parent the opportunity to get to know you.
- u. Don't look for arguments with step siblings, make friends.
- v. Create space between yourself and your step-parent to promote well-being.

*Quotations:*

**Participant 2:** "Don't take serious what step-parent is saying to break down your self-esteem. Don't try to commit suicide or hurt your step-parent."

**Participant 12:** "I cope by ignoring my stepfather."

**Participant 4:** “It is important to be yourself, don’t talk back to step-parent, find something else to do for example take a walk, listen to music, or hangout with a friend.”

**Participant 8:** “Try to learn to know your step-parent, don’t judge the person.”

**Participant 9:** “Talk to friends, from the beginning make peace with being in a step-family, understand why things happened, and build a relationship with your step-parent.”

**Participant 13:** “Don’t be scared of your step-parent; make time to get to know each other well.”

**Participant 16:** “When your step-parent makes you mad, don’t hit or fight with your step-parent, show respect.”

**Participant 18:** “Take it easy, your step-parent don’t know what to do, don’t put pressure on step-parent, just be kids, don’t look for arguments with step siblings.”

There is diversity in how well adolescents cope with divorce and the remarriage of their parents. According to Buchanan, Maccoby and Dornbusch (1996), a child’s success or failure to cope with this life crisis depends on different factors. The most commonly suggested conditions include: the loss of a parent, inter-parental conflict, diminished parenting and the quality of parenting that is maintained by the custodial

parent. Children depend on their parents to provide them with a sense of security which helps them cope with their developmental tasks.

At the time of divorce, when one parent leaves the home they realize that their parents are not always there and they fear abandonment by the other parent too. Ensuring continuing contact with both parents may reduce anxiety over losing one or both parents. Research done by Buchanan et al. (1996) indicated the importance of parents protecting their children from the exposure to conflict between parents, as it is seriously harmful to children. Evidence exist that there is a diminished quality of parenting for the first two years following the divorce of parents. Factors which show this deterioration in the quality of parenting is seen in areas such as parents being: emotionally unstable, less patient, inability to maintain organized household routines and allowing adolescents to make decisions without parental input. The custodial parent has to maintain quality parenting to help the child cope with the adjustment needed.

Some of the worst things a child can experience are the divorce of their parents. After surviving this life crisis, children may determine that no other difficult experience will get them down again. They compare a new crisis to the time of their parents' divorce and remarriage and are better able to put life experiences into a proper perspective (Whiteman, 2007). From the above it is clear that finding coping strategies that work is important for managing future crisis. Now that some time has passed in the step-family life, participants in this study have looked back at their own experiences and offer advice to other children and adolescents on coping strategies.

Participants experienced the time of their parents' divorce as a time of emotional upheaval. Many changes took place which disturbed their sense of security. For them restoring their sense of security became important. One of the best ways to do this was forming new attachments. Since many participants went to live with their grandparents after their parents' divorce, their attachment to their maternal grandmothers helped them cope with all the changes and challenges. They were able to have more open communication with their grandmothers. Maternal grandmothers were instrumental in encouraging their grandchildren to talk, and accept new relationships such as a step-parent. Their grandparents offered a protective and supporting role, providing financial assistance and stability.

The researcher is of the opinion that adolescents should talk to their biological parents about their parents' decision to divorce and remarry. Such open discussion and honest questioning helps adolescents verify facts. They gain a better understanding of the situation and do not cling to a false hope that their parents may reconcile. Parents' invitation to their children to share their feelings and express their pain could accelerate acceptance and growth in spite of difficult transitions.

When parents restructure the family by adding a step-parent a whole new set of adjustments is needed. Whiteman (2007) explains that becoming part of a step-family marks the end of the fantasy that their parents may get back together, and it arouses feelings of fear that the step-parent will take away the love their parent has for them. Furthermore, it creates anxiety about whether or not they will get along with the step-parent. From the interviews, adolescents explained that they generally

viewed this new person as an intruder, but they suggested that adolescents be guided by their parents need for love. The adolescents recommended the following guidelines as good coping strategies: treat the step-parent with respect, consider your parent's happiness, and get to know your step-parent, allow interaction to occur, take an interest in the new step-family members, and accept the marriage as soon as possible. It was observed that participants who applied these coping strategies found equilibrium sooner.

Some participants had to deal with a step-parent who abused alcohol, and became aggressive, used verbal and physical abuse. This unpredictable and unstable home environment drove them to their knees in prayer every day. In addition participants received strength from God through Bible reading, participating in church youth groups, and attending church regularly. It is hardly surprising that research on parental hostility shows that youth from such homes exhibit more psychopathology and more problems than youth not exposed to such hostility (Lauren, Papp, Cummings & Schermerhorn, 2004). They experience distress and anxiety which affects the adolescent's adjustment and well-being. Participants recommend coping strategies like building your self-esteem, holding onto your dreams, be yourself, find positive Minority Themes for example doing what you are told, offer your forgiveness, make peace, listen to music, practice open communication, don't put pressure on step-parents, don't look for arguments with step siblings, and create space between yourself and the step-parent.

*Minority Themes:*

Society associates divorce with failure. Shame is a common feeling experienced by members of divorcing families. Most children are taught to keep family matters private and guard the secrets of the home. As a result adolescents do not talk about what is going on at home. By keeping silent, adolescents tend to feel very alone and different. This behaviour robs them of support from teachers and classmates. The findings of the present study suggest that participants have kept the secrets of their home private. Learners who were in the same class were not aware of others in step-families. Only those who had best friends in the same class felt the freedom to share some of their family issues. Some participants choose a healthier option by talking to their life Skills teacher about their problems, thus she could be sensitive to their needs and emotional condition.

The non-custodial parent is a key player in children's adjustment to divorce and remarriage. The results of this study provided patterns of poor contact with the non-custodial parent. Participants either grew up without knowing their biological fathers or only met them in their teen years. Others would visit only over major holidays, or once a month to collect their child support money. As expected, this poor relationship with their non-custodial parent may have interfered with the adolescent's adjustment. Research has found that the loss of contact with one of the parents after divorce has a negative effect on children, creating feelings of intense dissatisfaction, and depression (Whiteman, 2007). These negative feelings can be countered by introducing joint custody arrangements, providing a much higher rate for father involvement and adolescents will more likely be well-adjusted youth.

#### *4.7. Theme 5: Factors influencing the adolescents' behaviour*

Participants in the study reported behaviour patterns such as rebelliousness, avoidance, lack of communication, suicidal attempts, poor concentration, low self-esteem, poor academic performance, telling lies, disrespectful, unable to cope, ignoring the step-parent, and moving away from step-family.

#### *Quotations:*

**Participant 1:** “I forced myself to visit my dad and step-mother, I only done it for my Dad’s happiness, but I haven’t gone there for three years now, because I want to avoid conflict with my step-mother.”

Participant 2: “I don’t like being home, my stepfather is an alcoholic, we have problems, he argues and insult me, and he tortures me by repeatedly telling me that my father ran away. I made three suicidal attempts.”

**Participant 3:** “My stepfather doesn’t buy us enough food, he uses the money on alcohol and we have to go without food sometimes. He also buys us cheap clothing. My mother became irresponsible and left her job. My stepfather is not staying with me in a good way, I’m not treated like the other children, it makes me sad and I cry.”

**Participant 6:** “My stepfather has no control over his drinking, he beats my mother often, he is jealous he assaulted one of my mother’s male friends who came to visit



her. Things are bad now, he also chase me out of the house, when I'm alone I remember all the bad words he says to me, and I remember the fights and I cannot cope.”

Negative stressors resulting from divorce, remarriage and the adolescent developmental stage are affected by distressed relationships. The losses which adolescents experience, like the loss of a former way of life, loss of one biological parent, drop in family income, and changes in relationships contribute to high behavioural disturbances. Adolescents may struggle with emotional stability, self-confidence and self-esteem. Other life stresses to which they had to adapt were the illness of a step-parent, residential moves were common – for some it meant several moves, for a few participants it was accompanied by a change of school, others experienced changes in parental employment (unemployment of custodial parent), a new person (step-parent), and many who had lived with their grandparents after their parents' divorce experienced moving into the step-family household.

Difficulties in the step-parent-child relationship, problems with the non-custodial parent, and step siblings, role ambiguity, and adjusting to new rules increased family problems. Such problems brought about behaviour patterns such as more conflict, arguments, avoidance, disrespect, and rebellion. As no direct question was asked to participants concerning their substance use, stealing, vandalizing property, getting into trouble with the police, or breaking school rules (i.e. cutting classes, arriving late, cheating on tests) this study is not able to report about these behaviours. Nevertheless, as it was a primary purpose to allow participants to share their stories

on levels they felt comfortable these behaviours were unreported. Still valuable information was gathered from the data collected.

For many participants these behaviour patterns continued for about one to two years, with a few exceptions. These behaviour patterns were adequately predicted by the literature which specified that a typical behaviour of teenagers is to seek independence, when they experience conflict at home they find excuses to get out of the house, whether it's to a church youth group, sports or friends. When the problem does not go away they become angry at the person which in their perspective is causing them pain. They deflect their pain elsewhere, mostly at the step-parent by talking rudely, ignoring him/her, and being disrespectful.

### *Minority Themes*

All participants rated their relationships with the custodial parent as excellent; only one participant described her relationship as fair because she and her custodial mother have their ups and downs. She expressed it as: "fair arguments." From the above one can see that positive attachments between the participants and their custodial parents helped adolescents develop coping skills. However participants expressed their powerlessness and helplessness when other family dynamics which include poverty, alcohol abuse, verbal and physical abuse, and unfair treatment by the step-parent, negatively affects them. These conflicting relationships are linked to lower academic achievement, internalizing problems, externalizing problems, reduced self-esteem, and poorer social competence as explained by Amato (2000).

Similarly, participants in this study were challenged with low self-esteem, as step-parents used words to break down their self-worth. As a consequence, adolescents displayed non-compliant, acting-out behaviour, defiance, long periods of refusal to speak to a step-parent, isolation, resentment and they associated with 'questionable' friends. This behaviour increased stress, making it more difficult to develop positive attitudes toward life and the step-parent. Adolescents lacked concentration and self-confidence which affected their academic success.

According to Hughes (2009) high levels of family stress may lead to adjustment difficulties for some adolescents. The adjustment problems are poor academic performance and problem behaviours such as engaging in delinquent activities, low self-esteem, the use of alcohol, drugs, early sexual activities, and dropping out of school early, teenage pregnancies, sexually transmitted disease. Researchers have found that these factors contribute to the lower general well-being of adolescents in step-families. One wonders why most of these reactions were not observed in our sample group. It could be as a result that participants were mostly young school going children who were selected in a school environment. Possibly if participants were selected away from this demographic location one would expect a broader range of responses. It could also be explained in terms of adolescents preferring not to ventilate negative behaviours about them, which would put them in a bad light since, during this developmental stage it is important what people think of them. Another possible explanation could be that the limited time for interviews never allowed for deeper exploration of their behaviour patterns.

*4.8. Theme 6: The adaptation patterns amongst adolescents in step-families.*

Participants used both positive and negative patterns to adapt to step-family living. Important patterns were text a friend, visiting with a friend, listen to music, run to release stress, cry, talk to biological parent(s), don't talk bad (respect), focus on the positives, spend time together, learn to understand each other, accepting step-parent, go live with other relatives (create space), do things that interest all members, get to know step-parent before the marriage, spend time together, accept that step-parent do things differently, practice open communication, leave home and return when biological parent returns home, don't show anger, avoid step-parent in order to avoid conflict, and limit the time you spend with your step-family.

*Quotations:*

**Participant 8:** "Sitting together to discuss new rules for the step-family, and sharing what's in the heart."

**Participant 13:** "In the beginning it was difficult to accept my stepfather, but after a while I accepted him."

**Participant 14:** "Accept what is done, and stop wishing that biological parents will get back together."

**Participant 9:** “My mother is my mentor; she never talked badly about my father after my parents’ divorce.”

**Participant 12:** “If your step-parent doesn’t accept you, appreciate other people who are close to you.”

**Participant 16:** “It makes it easy when your biological parents show that they remember you and that you still important to them.”

**Participant 19:** “Getting to know my stepfather before he married my mother helped me to cope and adjust well.”

**Participant 20:** “Spending time together as a step-family, playing games and traveling together was important in my adjustment process.”

Amongst the many challenges accompanying divorce is that of managing lingering hurt as well as emergent hurt for example when one or both parents enter new marital relationships. The step-family may face multiple dilemmas, including establishing new rules, routines and rituals. Participants felt it was best to come to terms with and accept that step-parents do things differently. Instead of just focusing on the pain of losing how things were in the past allow yourself to see some positives. Over-time you may need to talk to a biological parent, grandparent or friend so they can help you look at things differently. Adapting in a step-family takes time, give yourself time to get to know your step-parent, spend time together, learn to understand each

other, practice open communication, and do things that interest all members. Showing respect to a step-parent can go a long way to facilitate adjustment.

According to Louw et al. (2004) as mentioned earlier in the literature review they support these findings by recommending that step-families who wish to make a positive adjustment to the reconstituted family need to keep the following in mind: Have realistic expectations for the new relationships, allow time for adjustment before loving relationships can be formed between step-parents and step children. Step-families have to form new norms, traditions, develop new communication styles, develop their own disciplinary techniques, and find their own problem-solving strategies.

For some adolescents it was easier to withdraw or act out in anger, or avoid contact with the step-parent, and limit the time spent with the step-family. Some participants explained that they deliberately left the room for another one, not to share the same space with a step-parent. Others chose not to visit with non-resident step-parents. These hostile behaviour patterns did not accelerate acceptance, instead it strengthened feeling of rejection, dislike, and opposition. The literature supports these findings, Hetherington (1999) points out that step-families are particularly likely to be characterized by conflict in relationships between parents and children. Adolescents who in their own time gained the ability to verbally express their hurt and fears with a biological parent, friend, relative, or social worker, were able to successfully complete the grieving process. And finally they were able to accept the step-parent and the marriage and be ready to move on.

The best predictors of positive adjustment is ensuring peaceful home environments, by managing family conflicts in positive ways, like talking instead of acting out. Step-families must take into account the importance of the parent-child relationship, and the link between family relationships, economic and social stress, and multiple family transitions. In the current study participants noted that the above factors played a major role in the adjustment to step-family living.

*Minority Themes:*

The diversity that exists in family structures, family functioning, parenting styles, together have pervasive implications for adolescent development. Some just don't adjust well to their step-family and prefer to take time out to provide space for the adolescent and adults. In times of stress and conflict, moving to another relative's house can result in positive outcomes. For example participant 7 said: "In the beginning my stepfather came down on me hard, I could not watch T.V. when he was is doing his Bible study. I was not allowed to disturb him when he was busy. It caused much conflict and unhappiness. I moved out and went to live with my aunt for two months, my stepfather and I reached a compromise and I moved back. Now we have an excellent relationship, and he has shaped my life in a new positive direction."

Blending families through remarriage involves many dynamics, including sharing family resources, possibly changing homes, moving away from a familiar community, friends and school. As such, adolescents may resent the new family and

take out their distress on the new step-parent as the person causing all the changes. For this purpose, parents should not rush into marriage but allow a reasonable courtship period to ensure compatibility before marriage. However, to consider only the couple's compatibility will be insufficient; it should extend to the potential step-parent-step child relationship and between potential step-siblings. This time is important to learn and experience their family differences with the view to determine compatibility, adaptation and change. It will give all members involved some idea of what to expect after remarriage and give them time to prepare adequately. From the interviews, a common comment made by participants was that they only met the step-parent two or three times before the marriage. As alternative to how things have been done, couples can follow a healthy courtship period in which members get to know one another before the remarriage to facilitate adjustment in future.

*4.9. Theme 7: Support systems needed for adolescents to adapt successfully step-families.*

*Patterns:*

The participants identified important support systems they used for adapting successfully in step-families to be: a good relationship with their biological parent, supportive grandparents, caring extended family members, loving and helpful step siblings, caring church and youth groups, loyal friends, open communication, step-parents who create a friendly home environment, step-parents who keep their



promises, parents and step-parents ensuring stable living conditions, reading related books, and upholding religious morals.

**Participant 13:** “sharing a room with my cousins helps me cope.”

**Participant 14:** “Listening to my father’s advice to take it easy, and copying my brother’s behaviour towards my step-mother was important in my adaptation process.”

**Participant 16:** “Step-parents should make sure that living conditions are stable, and that they make a contribution to providing for the family’s needs.”

**Participant 20:** “My aunt gave me books to read up on step-families, it helped me look at things from another point of view.”

**Participant 1:** “God helped me through everything, when nobody understands me I pray and read my Bible and God gives me strength to cope.”

Resources can help adolescents cope with the trauma of divorce and remarriage, or the lack there of may compromise their favorable adjustment. Step-families face dynamics such as sharing no family histories, having different beliefs, adjusting to new relationships, and several other problems. To work out their problems, step-families often use grandparents, clergy, support groups, and other community-based programs to help them (<http://www.oppapers.com/essays/Families/181678>, retrieved 02/06/2010). Similarly, participants used resources such as biological parents,

supportive grandparents, caring extended family members, loving and helpful step siblings, caring church members and youth groups, and loyal friends to help them through this difficult period in their lives.

To build stable step-family relationships, adolescents need to draw on internal resources such as trust, respect and love. While most participants were resilient and adapted fairly well to their step-family situations, some experienced problems at school, and had conflict at home mostly with the step-parent. The step-parent-step child relationship is important to the adolescent's adjustment therefore using resources like open communication, creating a friendly home environment, keeping promises, providing stable living conditions, reading related books, and practicing religious morals can enhance their relationship.

*Minority Themes:*

One adolescent required therapy and was seen on several occasions by a social worker to help him adapt to the new family dynamics. It was observed that participants were willing to participate in adolescent support groups, as an alternative to suffering on their own. The researcher could sense the openness of school staff members to be educated on step-family dynamics. Broader community awareness could include talks at parent-teacher meetings, school assembly gatherings, church groups, radio talks, and media publications.

*4.10. Theme 8: Further research needed*

There is a notable gap in research on step-families in Namibia. From the reviewed literature, it is clear that research on step-families is a comparatively new area of investigation in the social sciences, with the majority of current knowledge about step-families coming from the last decade and a half of research (Pasley, 2001). The scarce Namibian literature also motivates further research. In the last chapter of this research the final conclusions about the study are drawn and recommendations for future work are made.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### *5.1. Introduction:*

Divorce, remarriage, and the formation of a step-family are traumatic events for children and adolescents. Transition of this life crisis can be eased by including children and adolescents in discussions and preparations for the step-family's future. With cooperation and understanding among step-family members, a step-family can function successfully and even heal emotional scars of the past divorce.

The purpose of the current study was to increase people's knowledge regarding the adolescent's adjustment to their parent's divorce and living in step-families. The data gathered for this research study was based solely on information gathered from the adolescent's perspective. In this final section, conclusions and recommendations will be presented according to the eight themes. They are based on the research data collected during the interviews, to assist in service provision and future research studies.

5.2. *Theme 1: The demise of the family of origin.*

**Conclusion:** Marriages associated with negative characteristics such as fighting, arguing, physical and verbal abuse, cheating on partner, aggression, and lying were the main indicators for divorce.

**Recommendations:** Professionals should become proactive educators on matters like the adolescent's beliefs and moral values, communication skills, conflict resolution skills, parenting skills, building self-esteem and choosing positive attachments, and premarital education. Adolescents will be better equipped to deal with adult life and it will protect them from the occurrences of problem behaviours and possibly ensure healthy marriages.

Future work should continue to explore the extent to which attention should be directed toward prevention and early intervention in marital dissolution. Professionals should assist with helpline services, providing education and support, counseling for the individual, couples and the family. Marital enrichment programs as well as programs on economic well-being will build marital relationships.

5.3. *Theme 2: Adolescents' experiences of their parents' divorce and Remarriage.*

**Conclusion:** Adolescents experienced major changes and adjustments after their parents' divorce and remarriage. These life transitions were associated with losses, new relationships, new rituals and routines.

**Recommendations:** Counseling of the adolescent will be helpful in establishing acceptance with new family members, facilitating problem solving, and establishing support for each other. Dealing with loss?

*5.4. Theme 3: The complexity of step-families as compared to the family of origin.*

**Conclusion:** This research raised awareness that step-families are far more complex than the family of origin. A number of challenges identified by the participants were communication difficulties, conflicts between family members in step-families, and difficulties in accepting and adjusting to the new relationships and the family dynamics.

**Recommendations:** Family meetings and discussions are important strategies to address the above mentioned challenges. Expanding and developing counseling programs and support groups and access to social workers would be of great assistance. Expand public education on the vulnerability of step children, especially to neglect, sexual abuse and domestic violence. Publicize relevant services, laws and resources available to assist step children suffering abuse or neglect.

*5.5. Theme 4: Coping strategies recommended for adolescents living in step-families.*

**Conclusion:** Adolescents' coping behaviours are positively influenced by their support networks, such as maternal grandparents, good relationship with custodial

parent, and maternal aunts. By relying on these support systems during difficult life transitions they are protected by such support against the ill effects of acute stress.

**Recommendations:** Different forms of creative art can be used, for example: kinetic art, creative drama, role-play, bibliotherapy, and group counseling to help adolescents gain insight, consider relationships, and develop coping strategies. The adolescent can apply more effective coping strategies, e.g. the problem-focused coping strategies which consists of active measures aimed at changing the source of stress, (for example, adolescents allow extra time for study or join a study group), and also the emotion-focused coping strategy which entails efforts to change the adolescent's emotional responses to stress. School policies and activities can allow for step-parent participation in the child's school life. On special occasions they can make references to step-parents. The school may be the one place children can find structure and familiarity after the formation of a new step-parent home. The employment of full time school counsellors can assist school personnel to make the school environment more comfortable and accepting for children experiencing the transition of their parents' divorce or remarriage (Thompson & Henderson, 2007).

Counsellors need to give young people in step-families emotional support. They can use creative arts (kinetic art, creative drama, role-play, bibliotherapy, and group counselling) to help children gain insight, consider forming new relationships, come to terms with their loss, address their feelings of helplessness, role frustrations, communication difficulties, and developing coping strategies (MacFarland & Tollerud, 2004).

Counsellors can assist adolescents in step-families to work through their feelings and concerns. Family counselling is encouraged to help step-family members increase awareness and acceptance of each other and their individual differences, facilitate problem-solving, and build support for each other. They can provide opportunity for adolescents to express and clarify their thoughts and feelings. Help them define new routines, expectations, visitations with the non-custodial parent to be planned, and agree on discipline guidelines (Thompson & Henderson, 2007).

Papernow (2006) believes that step-families need to follow a carefully planned program rather than regard life as something that just happens. This will be possible as researchers become more familiar with step-family issues and together with practitioners, and policy-makers these professionals can help improve step-family life. According to Howden (2007) it is important to constantly reframe the step-family as a worthwhile contemporary family form, instead of comparing it to the nuclear family form.

*5.6. Theme 5: How the adolescents' behaviour is being affected by co-occurring stressful life experiences and distressed relationships.*

**Conclusion:** Due to stressful life experiences such as divorce and remarriage adolescents may encounter distressed relationships. They adopt behaviour patterns such as rebelliousness, avoidance, lack of communication, suicidal attempts, poor concentration, low self-esteem, poor academic performance, telling lies,



disrespectfulness, inability to cope, ignoring the step-parent, and they may decide to move away from the step-family.

**Recommendations:** Psycho-education, focusing on about the different types of emotions and the possible behaviour changes that could be expected from adolescents after their parents' divorce and remarriage, will prepare adolescents for co-occurring stressful life experiences. It can be in the form of workshops, information pamphlets, or training of support systems such as teachers, youth group leaders, parents, step-parents and grandparents. Psycho-education could focus on giving guidelines and information on how to assist adolescents achieve reasonable emotional adjustment. It could also help them adjust to the loss without nurturing unrealistic expectations.

*5.7. Theme 6: The adaptation patterns amongst adolescents in step-families.*

**Conclusion:** Given the current state of research on children in step-families, it would be premature to suggest that no differences exist between these children and children living in first-marriage families. We cannot assume that all children in step-families will have problems. It is safe to say that children may encounter temporary difficulties in making the shift from one family to another. Ultimately most children seem to function and develop normally. Adolescents in step-families need time out to divert attention to friends, music, and sports when it becomes too difficult to cope. Creating space between conflicting parties is helpful.

**Recommendations:** Aim for low step-parent-step child conflict, by working toward step-family harmony, instead of stressful and problematic step-parent-step child relationships. Draw upon the success and failures experienced by surviving step-families. Social workers can create an adequate model for step-families to follow, emphasizing the features that make a family “strong” and “prepared.”

*5.8. Theme 7: Support systems needed for adolescents to adapt successfully in step-families.*

**Conclusion:** The adolescent’s successful adjustment is influenced by a good relationship with their custodial parent, supportive grandparents, caring extended family members, loving and helpful step siblings, caring church and youth groups, loyal friends, a friendly home environment, step-parents who keep their promises, parents and step-parents ensuring stable living conditions, and related literature.

**Recommendations:** Developing positive support systems will be the work of adolescents, parents, and social workers.

*5.9. Theme 8: Further research needed*

**Conclusions:** People do not know how to deal with step-families, they are so complex and people need guidance while children need protection. Studies which have considered what the cumulative effects of family instability and dissolving of family bonds has on adolescents are limited.

**Recommendations:** Longitudinal studies to track changes to family systems, through qualitative and quantitative approaches will provide valuable insights into adolescent's adjustment to family transitions. To strengthen such findings, information could be gathered from adolescents as well as their parents. With the additional data gathered from the relevant parents a more complete picture of the relationships in step-families would be gained.

Future research would benefit from greater attention to diverse family structures, maintenance, functioning, processes, and outcomes associated with remarriage and step-families. More studies are needed that contribute to healthy and well-functioning step-families, focusing specifically on how the adolescent's behaviour is being affected by co-occurring stressful life experiences and distressed relationships.

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**Annexure 1:****Information Sheet**

Name : \_\_\_\_\_  
 D.O.B. : \_\_\_\_\_ Age : \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Cell No. : \_\_\_\_\_ Postal address: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Parent / guardian name: \_\_\_\_\_ Cell : \_\_\_\_\_

**Please tick with [ X ] only which applies to you.**

**1. How does your family structure look like?**

- Two biological parents (married) [ ]  
 Two biological parents ( not married ) [ ]  
 Single parent [ ]  
 Biological mother + stepfather [ ]  
 Biological father + step-mother [ ]  
 Both not your biological parents [ ]  
 Grandparents [ ]

**2. How does your sibling structure look like? (Write the number)**

Brothers & sisters from same parents' brothers: \_\_\_\_\_ sisters: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Step-fathers children \_\_\_\_\_  
 Step-mothers children \_\_\_\_\_  
 Child/ren born into your step-family \_\_\_\_\_

**3. When did your step-parent come into your life?**

- After living with a single parent [ ]  
 After the divorce of your biological parent [ ]

**4. Are your biological parents divorced? Yes [ ] No [ ]**

**5. How old were you when your parents divorced?** \_\_\_\_\_ years

**6. How old were you when your parent/s remarried?** \_\_\_\_\_ years

**7. How long are you living in a step-family?** \_\_\_\_\_ years

(Step-family: A family which has changed due to divorce and one of the adults being a stranger to the Child.)

8. Are you willing to participate in an academic research study? Yes [ ] No [ ]

**Annexure 2**

**Department of Human Sciences: Section Social Work**

Amanda Solomon

P.O.Box 8341

Bachbrecht

Windhoek

14 September 2011

Dear Sir/Madam (Parents/Guardians)

**Re: Permission to interview your child, as part of my post graduate study.**

I am a registered student at the University of Namibia, doing my Master's Degree in Social Work. I am studying under the supervision and mentorship of Dr. M. Grobler. The topic of my study is: "Adolescents' adjustment to divorce and living in step-families." This study will provide Namibians with a local resource, which will aid children in step-families, as well as scholars and professionals such as teachers, social workers, childcare providers, counsellors, and attorneys working with children. If professionals understand how step-family life affects adolescents they will be able to give appropriate support, counselling and therapy.

Herewith I request permission to interview your child. The interview will be conducted with tact and professional discretion so as not to disturb the harmony in the family. For academic purposes these interviews need to be recorded. Arrangements will be made with the school principal and learners for a suitable time, not to interfere with their academic program.

The Social Worker's code of ethics will be practiced throughout this study.

Thanking you for your support and approval.

Sincerely

Amanda Solomon

Post Graduate Researcher

Cell: 081-2792279

**Please return the signed letter with your child.**

I (parent/guardian) .....

parent of

(Child's name) ..... Grade: .....

Hereby give permission for the above mentioned child to be a participant in a post-graduate study: **Adolescent's adjustment to divorce and living in step-families**, conducted by Amanda Solomon (post graduate researcher). Please return the signed letter to Mr. Hill or the school Secretary.

Parents/Guardians signature:

.....

Date: .....

### **Annexure 3 - Questions for Semi-structured Interviews**

*Introduction: discuss questionnaire.*

Family is a very important part of our lives; can you tell me about your family of origin (parentage)?

Today family structures are changing, can you tell me about your parents' divorce? What were your experiences?(Academic performance, any behaviour and/or relationship problems, changes in socio-economic factors, psychotherapy)

If you wanted to describe your step-family to a friend via email/face book, how would you describe your step-family?

How would you rate the quality of your biological & step-relationships using a scale of: excellent, good, fair, or poor – explain your rating?

Step-parent

Step siblings

Step-grandparents

Custodial parent

Non-custodial parent

Biological grandparents

What efforts have you and your step-parent and step siblings made to build and maintain a relationship with each other?

What do you think are the main challenges of young people living in step-families? What has been challenging for you? How did you handle those challenges?

Adolescents are resilient (able to overcome difficulties they have to face), how do you cope with your step-family?

Step-parent

Step siblings

Family rituals/everyday routines

Phases: early, middle & later

Affection/warmth

Expectations

Outside influences

Religion/Prayer/Bible

What advice would you give other adolescents who are in step-families and who want to know how they can cope with the situation?

Would you say that you have adapted successfully to your step-family?

What was the main factor that helped you in this adaptation/ coping process?

What resources are important to adapt and cope in a step-family?

**Annexure 4**

Amanda Solomon  
P.O.Box 8341  
Bachbrecht  
Windhoek  
19 July 2011

Ministry of Education  
Director of Education, Khomas Region  
P/Bag 13186, Windhoek

Dear Sir

**Re: Permission to conduct my post graduate study at David Bezuidenhout Secondary School.**

I am a registered student at the University of Namibia, doing my Master's Degree in Social Work. I am studying under the supervision and mentorship of Dr. M. Grobler. The topic of my study is: Adolescents' adjustment to divorce and living in step-families. This study will provide Namibians with a local resource, which will aid children in step-families, as well as scholars and professionals such as teachers, social workers, childcare providers, counselors, and attorneys working with children. If professionals understand how step-family life affects adolescents they will be able to give appropriate support, counseling and therapy.

Herewith I request permission to conduct my research study at the David Bezuidenhout Secondary School in Khomasdal. Unstructured-interviews will be conducted with 24 learners who are in step-families, after obtaining permission from the school principal, the learners, and their parents. For academic purposes these interviews need to be recorded. Arrangements will be made with the school principal, learners and their parents that the interviews will not interfere with their academic program, either after school or during the school vacation, over the period August to October 2011. The participants will also be told that they will be given the

results of the study when all the research has been completed. The information will be presented and visualized to help adolescents in future to cope better within step-families.

The Social Worker's code of ethics will be practiced throughout this study.

Thanking you for your support and approval.

Sincerely

Amanda Solomon

Post Graduate Researcher

Cell: 081-2792279

Fax: 213292