

Adolescent health brief

## Thriving in Stepfamilies: Exploring Competence and Well-being Among African American Youth

Francesca Adler-Baeder, Ph.D.\* , Christiana Russell, Ph.D., Jennifer Kerpelman, Ph.D., Joe Pittman, Ph.D., Scott Ketring, Ph.D., Thomas Smith, Ph.D., Mallory Lucier-Greer, M.S., Angela Bradford, M.S., and Kate Stringer, M.S.

*Human Development and Family Studies, Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama*

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**Abstract**

Although scholars conclude that children/adolescents in two-parent nuclear families have an advantage over those in stepfamilies, emerging evidence indicates that the experiences of African American youths have been overshadowed. In three replicated studies, we detected no differences on several important and commonly assessed well-being and competence indicators among samples of African American youth in two-parent nuclear and stepfamilies. © 2010 Society for Adolescent Medicine. All rights reserved.

**Keywords:**

African American adolescents; stepfamilies; blended families; African American mental health; family structure

Although children/adolescents can do well in a variety of family forms, it appears that adolescents in two-parent nuclear families have an advantage over those in other family forms, and that living in a stepfamily is associated with greater risk on a host of measures of social, emotional, and physical health and well-being [1,2]. Importantly, prior research on the relationship between family structure and adolescent well-being and competence uses study samples of primarily European Americans; therefore the experiences of ethnic minority families and adolescents are literally overshadowed [3].

Shaped by their socio-historical context, African American families tend to operate as a “pedi-focal” family system, centered on the children and are characterized by a communal-oriented philosophy, permeability of family boundaries, movement of children among households, and shared parenting among multiple parents [3]. Such cultural norms can support the characteristics and function in stepfamilies [4]. Stepfamily issues salient to majority culture, European American families — such as difficulties with

parenting someone else’s child or parenting of a nonresidential child — may not be as relevant among African-American families. In addition, youth from cultures that support multiparental models may be more accepting of the presence of a stepparent and their discipline attempts. Thus, assumptions are that among African Americans, stepfamily adjustment may be comparatively easier and stepparents may move more quickly into parenting roles, facing less resistance.

In 2006, 70.7% of children born to African American mothers were nonmarital births [5]. Among disadvantaged African American families, it is more likely that marriage to a stepparent will be a first marriage rather than a remarriage [6]. Thus, the introduction of a marital union may increase family economic and social stability, support and monitoring of children, and household maintenance.

In addition to cultural and practical considerations, the attenuation hypothesis suggests that African American children may be more accustomed to life transitions and stressful life conditions and have an enhanced capacity for adjusting to changes as compared with European American children [7]. Indications are that the effect of a divorce on adolescents may depend on the race and socioeconomic status of the family [7,8].

Some of the most common indicators of well-being assessed in family structure comparative studies are depression,

\*Address correspondence to: Francesca Adler-Baeder, Ph.D., 263 Spidle Hall, Auburn University, Auburn, AL, 36849.  
E-mail address: [Francesca@auburn.edu](mailto:Francesca@auburn.edu)

Table 1  
Demographics of samples of African American youth in 2-parent families

	Sample 1 (n = 548)			Sample 2 (n = 513)			Sample 3 (n = 451)		
	(Community-based)			(Family/consumer science classes)			(Health classes)		
	Total sample	Nuclear	Stepfamily	Total sample	Nuclear	Stepfamily	Total sample	Nuclear	Stepfamily
Male	47%	60%	40%	22%	57%	43%	51%	43%	57%
Female	53%	46%	48%	78%	21%	23%	49%	52%	50%
Mean age	15.0	54%	52%	16.2	79%	77%	16.5	48%	50%
Fathers less than 4-Year degree (%)	80%	14.9	15.1	16.2	16.3	16.1	16.5	16.5	16.5
Father employment		77%	84%	83%	84%	82%	78%	75%	81%
Full-time				83%	85%	79%	71%	78%	65%
Part-time				6%	4%	9%	10%	7%	12%
Mother employment									
Full-time				63%	62%	64%	62%	64%	61%
Part-time				15%	13%	15%	17%	14%	19%

self-esteem, social skills, and academic achievement [2]. Presented here are results from preliminary attempts to replicate these previous findings for three of the four areas. We examine large samples of African American youth in two-parent families and indicators of well-being and interpersonal competence.

## Method

### Sample

The analytic samples of African American youth in two-parent families were drawn from pre-program data collected for applied research studies involving adolescents in a southern state. Youth in Sample 1 voluntarily participated in a non-school-based educational program; Sample 2 youth participated in an elective Family and Consumer Sciences class; Sample 3 youth were in a required high school health class. Because there are systematic differences between the samples' contexts, we conducted these analyses first with the community sample, then replicated our analyses in each of the school-based samples. The institutional review board of the sponsoring institution approved all study procedures. Table 1 provides additional information on the samples' demographics.

### Measures

*Depression/Distress* was measured with the Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale. *Self esteem* was measured with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale [9]. *Conflict management skills* were measured using the subscale from the Interpersonal Competence Scale [10]. Cronbach's alphas ranged from .78–.88 in the three samples.

## Results

Our initial examinations use multivariate analysis of covariance, with father's education level as the covariate (a proxy for socioeconomic status) to determine the multivariate

effect of family structure for *depression, self-esteem, and conflict management skills*. The overall multivariate effect for family structure was not significant ( $F [3,510] = 1.61, p = .184$ ) for Sample 1. Findings were replicated in the sample of African American youth in Family and Consumer Science classes ( $F [3,440] = .31, p = .816$ ) and the sample of African American youth in Health classes ( $F [3,399] = 2.44, p = .064$ ). African American youth in two-parent nuclear families do not appear to have an advantage over African American youth in stepfamilies on the indicators of well-being and competence assessed.

## Discussion

For decades, studies of stepfamilies have either not addressed the small proportion of ethnic minorities in study samples, or simply controlled for race. The chorus of empirical generalizations regarding the well-being of children in stepfamilies as having a disadvantage in comparison with children in two-parent nuclear families may not be accurately capturing African American children's experiences in stepfamilies. Other research provides some evidence of this. Onset of sexual activity and rates of teenage child-bearing among African American girls with stepfathers were comparable to those in two-parent nuclear families [6]. Given the greater likelihood that stepfamily formation follows experience in a never-married home, combined with cultural norms for a multiparental family, it may be that for African American youth, the presence of a father, whether biological father or stepfather, serves to increase the likelihood of positive outcomes [6].

We offer here another step forward toward a broader family dynamics literature that considers ethnic diversity and cultural variations in the effects of stepfamily experience on adolescent health and well-being. In three samples of African American youth in two-parent nuclear families and stepfamilies, we can detect no effect of family structure on several important well-being and social competence indicators. We caution, however, that this is not evidence of

“sameness” of experience for African American youth in these family structures. Detecting no differences in outcomes does not imply there are no differences in family and individual processes between the groups.

Further analyses are planned that include hierarchical linear modeling and the development of more complex models for predicting well-being and competence among African American youth in diverse family forms that considers multiple levels of contextual influences and the interplay of multiple process variables. It is essential that we expand this research so as to inform our work with culturally and economically diverse stepfamilies. In prevention/intervention, we are relying on an incomplete empirical base for expected developmental patterns, family dynamics, and experiences in stepfamilies.

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