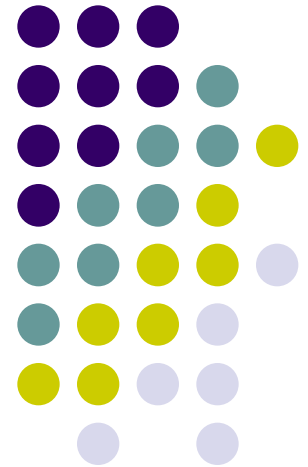
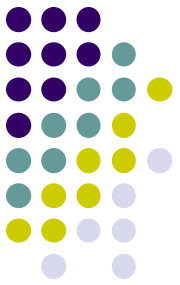


# Living in a stepfamily: The rewards and the challenges

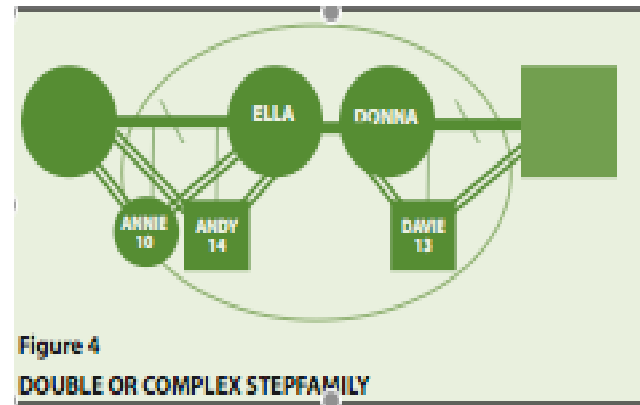
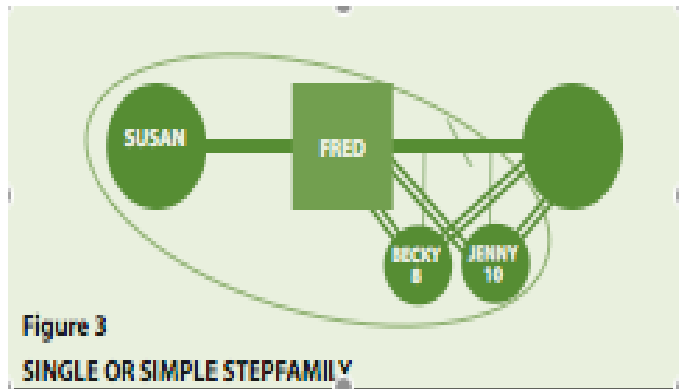
**Dr Claire Cartwright**  
**School of Psychology**  
**The University of Auckland**



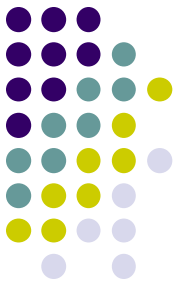


# What is a stepfamily?

A family or household that includes (at least) a parent, the parent's child/ren and the parent's partner/spouse



In some stepfamilies, both parents have children from previous relationships

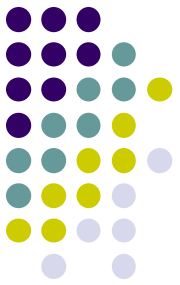


# Stepfamilies are more complex

- The children's other parent also has a household and may also have repartnered
- Children can have two parents, two stepparents, siblings, and stepsiblings. They also have step-grandparents.
- They have extended families and extended stepfamilies

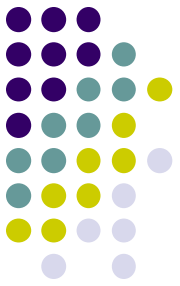
# Stepfamilies

[www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

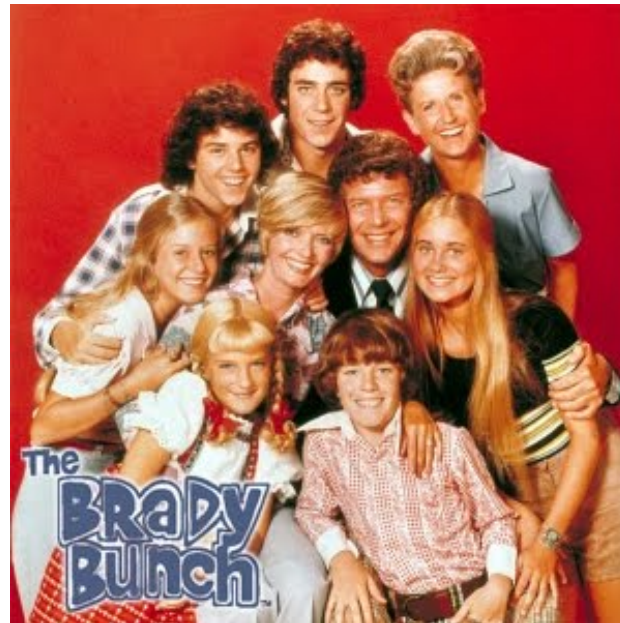


- Stepfamilies have always existed
- In previous centuries, stepfamilies formed after the death of a spouse and parent
- From the 1960s to 1980s onwards a large increase in stepfamilies forming after divorce of parents

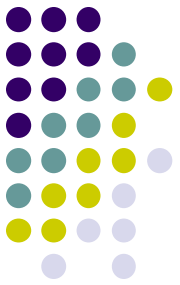
# Stepfamilies



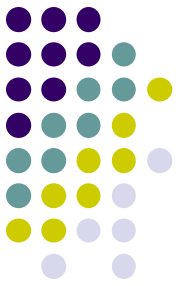
- Initially, remarriage was seen as a positive development that would heal the hurts of divorce



# History of research



- Initially American therapists drew attention in the 1970s to the unexpected challenges that their clients were facing
- Two longitudinal studies began in the early 1980s in USA (Mavis Hetherington, James Bray and colleagues).
- A large number of studies compared the outcomes for children in non-divorced families and stepfamilies and found increased risks of adjustment difficulties

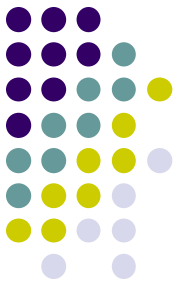


# History of research

- This “comparison deficit” approach was critiqued
- Researchers turned towards understanding more about stepfamilies and how they work
- Increasing New Zealand research in recent years

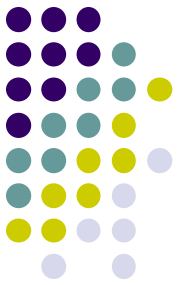
# Main reasons for repartnering

Cartwright, 2011 N=99



In love with new partner	89%
Emotional support	49.5%
Practical support	18%
Wellbeing of children	19%
Financial support	6%

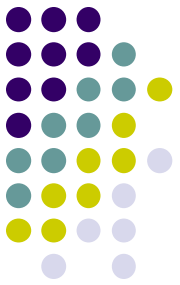




## Hopes (N=97)

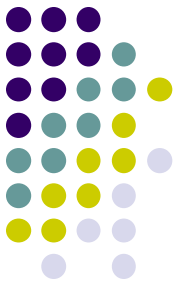
Having a good couple's relationship	61%
Having a family	34%
Being good for the children	25%
Providing a role model	12%

# Period of “dating”

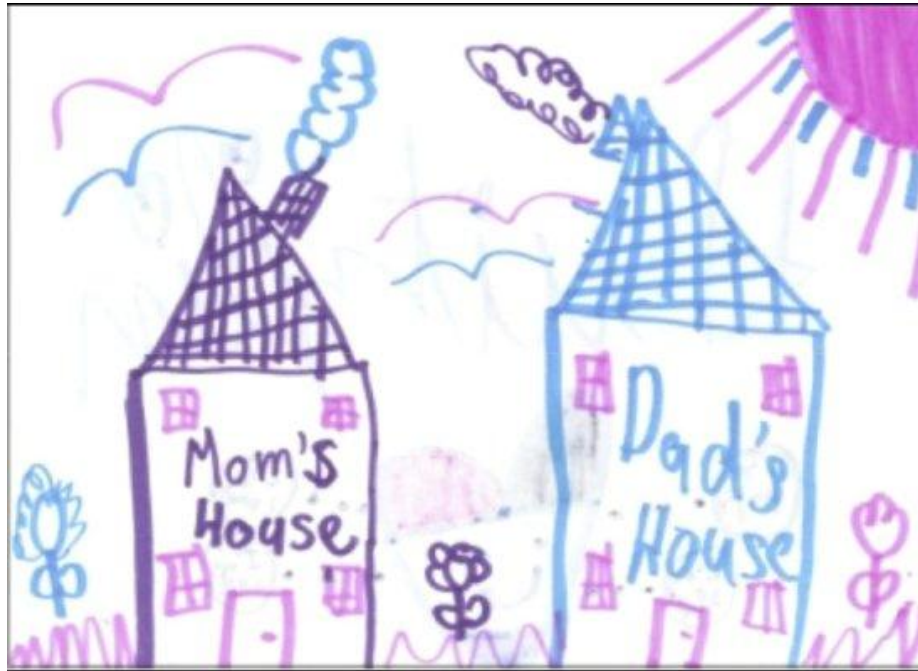


DATING PERIOD	
0 – 6 Months	34%
6 – 12 Months	28%
1 – 2 Months	28%
2 – 4 Months	10%

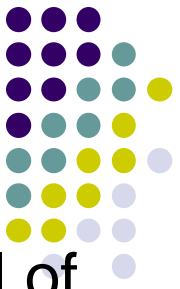
# Children's responses



- Many children do not want their parents to separate
- Children adjust to separation with time and fare better if parents cooperate with each other



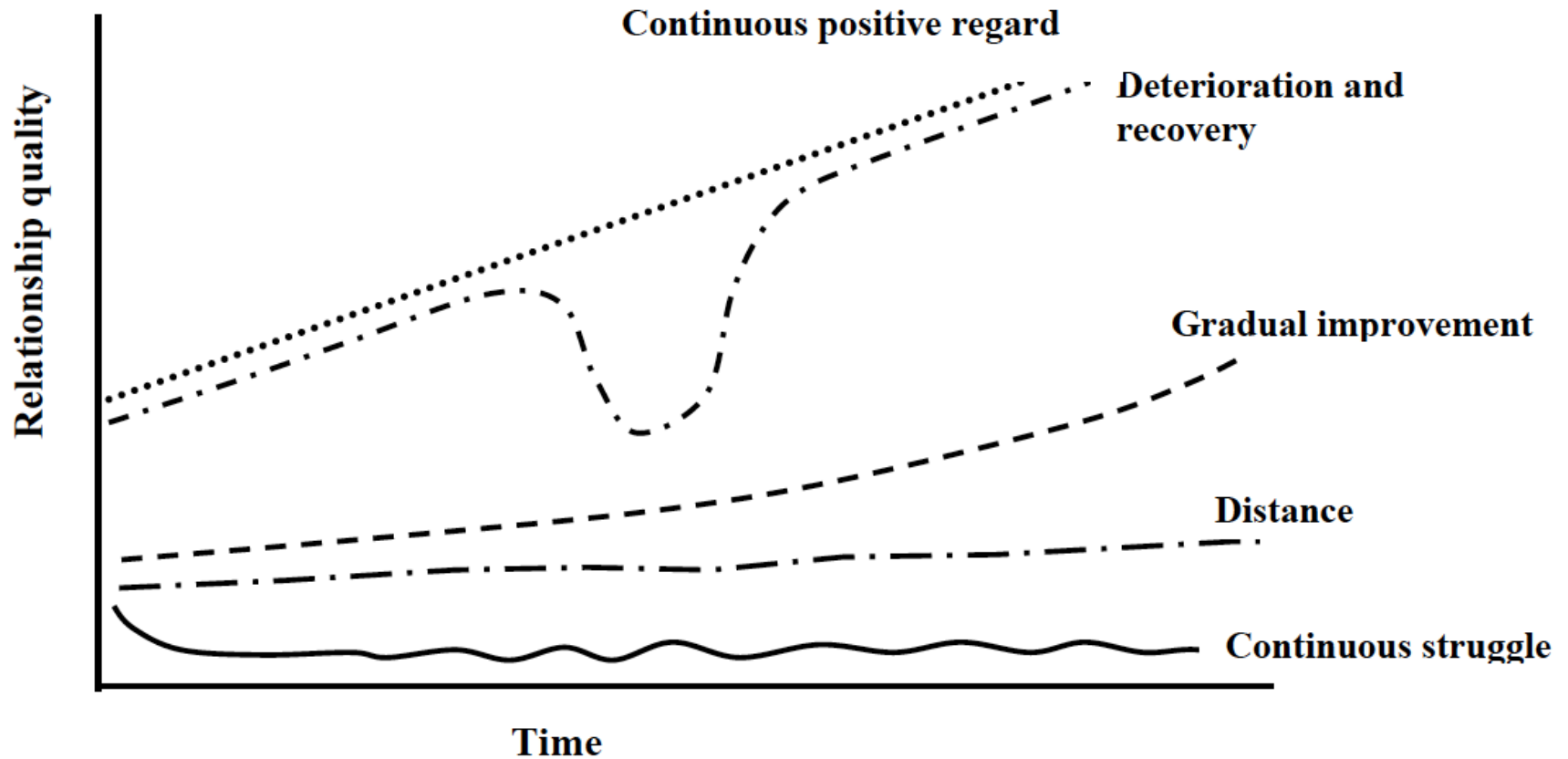
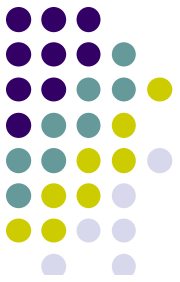
# Children's responses

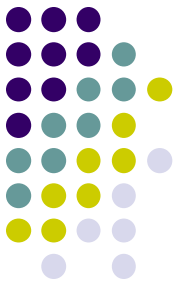


- Children's readiness for a parent's repartnering – level of adjustment effects response
- Having a relationship with the parent's new partner (and children) prior to living together helps
- Many children experience difficulties adjusting to the new stepparent and rebel against stepparent influence
- Some describe positive relationships from the beginning

# Types of relationships with stepfathers

(Kinniburgh-White, Cartwright & Seymour, 2011)



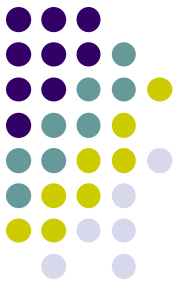


# What works for stepparents

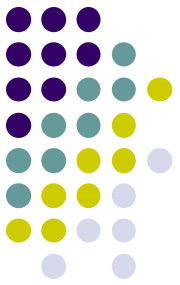
- Taking time to get to know the child and build a friendly relationship
- Understanding the importance of the parent-child relationship – children need the parent's time and attention
- Supporting the parent's discipline of children

# Stepfamily Architecture

(Papernow, 2013)



- The parent is the insider (the stepparent and children want/need the parent) and the parent feels like the “meat in the sandwich”
- The stepparent is the outsider (to the parent-children relationships)
- The children may feel like outsiders
- The children may feel torn between their separated parents, and the stepparent and parent of same gender



# The couple's relationship

- The reason the stepfamily exists
- Comes under pressure because of (added) tensions around the children and other stresses
- Needs to be nurtured– quality time
- Benefits from understanding of each other's positions



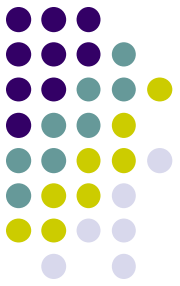


# Relationships with former spouse

Some former spouses and stepparents build friendly relationships or have non-conflicted relationships (Cartwright & Gibson, 2013)

*Dealing with the ex-partners, on both sides, who make the situation difficult by acting jealous or tell the children things that are not appropriate. Routine and planning things is hard as the ex-partners never help in anyway*

# Relationships with former spouse

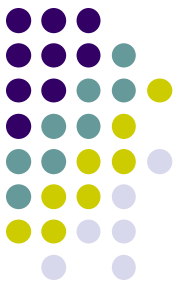


- Some former spouses talk about feeling threatened by the entrance of a new partner
- Importance of remaining respectful to the “other” parent and cooperative co-parenting

# Stepmothers



- Face extra challenges
- Impact of gender expectations – women may be expected to and may expect to take on a parenting role with the children
- May include cooking meals, preparing lunches, doing the laundry, helping with homework, and discipline
- Children tend to resent stepmothers doing these activities

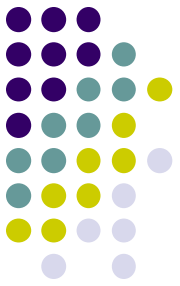


## Anna Miller, Doctoral student, Impact of stepmother stereotypes

*I'm hypercritical of myself*  
*I question myself and my interactions*  
*I'm cautious about what say and do*  
*I'm constantly biting my tongue*  
*I tread very carefully*  
*I evaluate all my responses*  
*I monitor myself*  
*I try not to rock the boat*  
*I struggle with what I'm supposed to do*  
*I'm self-conscious*  
*I'm paranoid about coming across as the evil stepmother*  
*I do a lot of explaining of who I am, almost apologetically*  
*I walk on eggshells*  
*I've kept my emotions in check at all times*  
*I'm consciously aware of everything I do and say*



# Living in a stepfamily – The positives

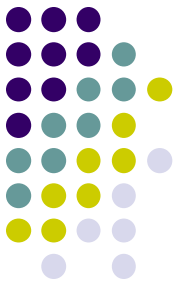


Being a family

Benefits of the couple's relationship

Giving guidance/having a role model

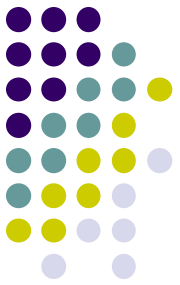
Stimulating or fun environment



*Fun, interesting, refreshing, vibrant, good mix of adult to adult time, and good quality time with the children, harmony and open access*

*My kids get to see and experience a family working*

*Becoming a part of their lives and being a good influence, also contributing to the family unit*



## References

Papernow, P. (2013). *Surviving and thriving in stepfamily relationships*. New York: Routledge

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Rodwell, J. (2002). *Repartnered families*. Auckland: Penguin.