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**ACHIEVING POSITIVE STEPFAMILY RELATIONSHIPS:
NEGOTIATING FAIRNESS, FORGIVENESS, AND ACCEPTANCE**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

Being part of a stepfamily is a common experience for many children and parents in Aotearoa New Zealand. This type of family structure comprises a range of complex relationship dynamics that need to be negotiated, nurtured, and developed into healthy family functioning.

This research was based on a positive psychology perspective (the study of wellbeing) and examined the typical fairness issues stepfamilies encounter, and the strategies they used to resolve those issues. Each family member's emotional reactions to those situations, and if forgiveness was given and why, were also investigated.

Forty one stepfamilies were recruited to participate in this research, from which 79 were stepchildren and the rest were a combination of step and biological parents.

The research involved holding a family meeting, which was supported by an instructional DVD. During this meeting each participant recorded their responses in a specifically designed research booklet, and the Brief FAM General Scale was used to assess family functioning.

Each participant was asked to recall and offer a situation and a resolution in regards to fairness that they had instigated. From this all other family members would respond by rating their emotions, fairness, and forgiveness in their response booklets.

Descriptive statistics and Generalised Estimating Equations were used to analyse the quantitative responses, and thematic analysis tools to analyse the qualitative responses.

Fourteen scenario categories and seven resolution categories were developed from the 589 situations recorded. The top issues were *differential treatment of children*,

fighting amongst children, household chores, and missing out. The main resolutions were *compromise, communication, and sharing.*

Emotionally participants were more negative towards themselves than other family members around these situations. Situations causing the most emotional distress were when children missed out due to either living between two households or were neglected by their other biological parent. Forgiveness generally occurred when a situation had been rectified or improved, or a person wanted to move on from it. Forgiveness tended not to be given when a perceived offense was reoccurring or not rectified. Step relationships did not significantly influence fairness or forgiveness ratings compared to the nature of the situation and the resolution end result, both of which significantly influenced these ratings.

Advice was provided by the participating stepfamilies for other stepfamilies that are either in the beginning stages of their stepfamily development, or not functioning as well. Seven themes emerged from this advice using qualitative analysis: hold family meetings to work through issues; spend quality time with each other, listen to each other, use compromising and negotiation strategies, show every family member respect, treat all family members equally, express love to each family member, and do not bring your children into you and your ex-partner's feud.

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this research would not have been possible, and from your involvement other stepfamilies will be able to benefit from it.

Thank you to both my stepmother's for their input into my life and the inspiration they gave me for this project. They are living proof that stepparents can be essential to one's life and also make wonderful parents, thank you.

And last but certainly not least I am especially grateful to my wonderful husband James, who has supported me in every way during the years whilst I have been doing my doctoral study, and sharing the load while we had our two children (Gabriella and Hugo) during this time. You have been my rock, thank you so much my darling - I love you.

FOREWORD

It can be a difficult and at times thankless role for anyone to ‘step’ into an already established family as a new parent. It is difficult to create a new relationship with children, carrying with it the expectation to love and care for them immediately as if they are your own. I come from a large blended family where I have the experience of two stepmothers; one who brought me up from 5 years old, and the second who came into our family when I was 10 years old. The label of stepmother with all its baggage does not quite hold the true meaning of the relationship that I have with my Mum-Sera, my first stepmother, who I consider an additional parent as well as a loving person in every way. As far as I am concerned I have three parents that influenced who I am today (my father, mother, and Sera). If someone was to look closely at my personality they could make the mistake of assuming that I am actually Sera’s biological child, as we not only look similar but I have gained several similar personality traits. The relationship that Mum and I have is one type of relationship that is possible between a stepmother and stepchild.

My second stepmother Yukiko and I have a different relationship. It was a little rocky when I was an adolescent but now that I am an adult there is mutual respect and love. Time can strengthen relationships and bonds if two people are willing to work at it, and our relationship is another type of stepmother-stepchild bond.

Mum (Sera) brought up my brother and me as an extension of her own children. After asking her how she felt about us when we first came into her life she replied:

“My first thoughts of you Celia when I first met you was this tiny little 5-year-old girl that was a little nervous, wore glasses but very mature for your age, acted very brave to come into my home, and seemed to accept me straight away. From that moment our connection was solid although you were often teary as you were frightened because you were so confused and worried about both of your parents.”

You soon became clingy to me and started to call me Mummy Sera and became adjusted to your new family very quickly

You became my little buddy and you were always happy with me no matter what we did and where we went. When you dropped calling me Mummy Sera to MUM and hearing two little children calling me Mum made me very proud and very important in your life.

Money was scarce but we seemed to get by. You and Andrèa were just as important to me as my own children. I nursed you both when you were sick, bathed you, took you to school and school concerts, and took you both backwards and forwards to your Mother's every school holidays and every second weekend. It broke my heart having to drop you off at boarding school and seeing you get distressed when I left, but I was rewarded with a big smile when I used to pick you up.

I sometimes have tears in my eyes when people ask me about you and Andrèa; they are tears of love, joy, and memories. You and Andrèa are my children and I will love you both forever.

Celia you have made me proud.

Love you,

Mum."

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