Gaining a Child: Comparing the Experiences of Biological Parents, Adoptive Parents, and Stepparents

Rosario Ceballo,* Jennifer E. Lansford, Antonia Abbey, and Abigail J. Stewart

This study compares the experience of gaining a child through birth, adoption, or marriage, extending the focus of investigation beyond biological parenthood and the transition made by first-time parents. Using a subsample from the National Survey of Families and Households (N = 204), we compared reasons for having children, parental well-being, family relationships, and work roles among parents who gained a child biologically, through adoption, or by becoming a stepparent. Overall, there were many similarities in the impact of gaining a child across the three parental groups. Repeated measures analyses of covariance showed that across family groups, after gaining a child, respondents reported less depressed affect, more disagreements with their spouse, and more support from their own parents. The differences across groups suggest that the experience of becoming an adoptive parent or a stepparent may be less stressful than the adjustment to biological parenthood.

Although marked by society as a generally glorious life event, research indicates that the birth of a child presents many new parents with a potentially difficult and complicated adjustment period. The transition to parenthood has been widely studied, and the array of negative individual and relational outcomes following the birth of a first child is one of the most consistent findings reported in the literature. Indeed, Cowan and Cowan (1998) declared that “the normal process of becoming a family in this culture, at this time...stimulate(s) moderate to severe distress for a substantial number of parents” (p. 170) who attempt to juggle the numerous economic and emotional needs of their families. Hence, adding a first child to a household is consistently associated with an initial decline in marital quality (e.g., Crohan, 1996; Demo & Cox, 2000), an increased risk for psychological symptoms (Cowan & Cowan, 1995; Cox, Paley, Burchinal, & Payne, 1999), and shifts in intergenerational relationships and support structures (Cowan & Cowan, 1998; Fischer, 1988; Hansen & Jacob, 1992).

Most of the research covering the transition to parenthood focuses on the adjustment process for first-time, biological parents. This is true despite the number of families that include more than one child, and the different ways in which adults can become parents, including adoption and stepparenthood. Currently, in the United States, stepfamilies are the fastest growing family structure group (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999), with about half of all marriages representing a remarriage for one or both partners (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Ganong & Coleman, 1994), and about 65% bringing a child from a prior marriage into the new one. Moreover, more than one million American children are living in adoptive families (Grotevant & Kohler, 1999). Because negative stereotypes dominate our perceptions of many “nontraditional” family forms (Wegar, 2000), it is important to establish whether such families actually suffer in their adjustment to gaining a child.

Using data from a nationally representative sample, the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), we compared the psychological implications for parents of gaining a child through birth, adoption, or marriage. Specifically, this study investigated psychological well-being, marital quality, family relationships, and work roles in three different parental groups. The literature on the “transition to parenthood”—though it focuses mainly on gaining children by birth and on the birth of first children—offered an initial framework for our study. Research on family adaptation in the context of adoption and remarriage helped us elaborate this framework for considering the likely implications of gaining a child under all three circumstances and potential differences among them.

The routes to becoming a parent of a biological child, an adopted child, or a stepchild are quite different. Therefore, we begin by considering the reasons that parents in all three groups choose to have children. In national surveys, married American women identified three common, anticipated advantages to having children: providing fun activity and stimulation, bringing love and affection, and benefiting the marital relationship (Fawcett, 1988). The disadvantages of having children consisted primarily of economic costs, physical strains, and psychological losses such as the restriction of freedom and flexibility. Before examining differences in adjustment after gaining a child, our study considered differences among adoptive parents, biological parents, and stepparents in the importance they place on different reasons for having a child. First, we review the relevant literature on psychological well-being, marital quality, family relationships, and work roles as they pertain to our three different parental groups.

Psychological Well-Being

Not surprisingly, the transition to parenthood has a dramatic impact on parents’ psychological well-being. An increased risk of depressive symptoms accompanies the birth of a child for both fathers and mothers (Cox et al., 1999; Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Gallant, 2000). For women, evidence indicates that postpartum depressive symptoms are related to decreased marital satisfaction (Cox et al.; Hock, Schirtzinger, Widaman, & Lutz, 1995). In a study of 136 primarily White, rural families, the couples who had the highest levels of depression showed the greatest risk for long-lasting declines in marital satisfaction (Cox et al.). Few studies focus on understanding the transition to adoptive parenthood and how it may resemble or differ from the experiences of biological parents. Given the additional challenges particular to the adoption process and adoptive family life, several researchers initially hypothesized that the transition to adoptive parenthood would be characterized by a difficult adjustment period (Brodzinsky & Huffman, 1988; Levy-Shiff, Goldshmidt, & Har-Even, 1991). Some of the unique challenges...
facing adoptive parents include the public, intrusive scrutiny of the adoption process and the likelihood that they have negotiated a painful period of infertility (Brodzinsky, 1990; Brodzinsky & Huffman; Rosenberg, 1992). Couples struggling with infertility are highly susceptible to a host of psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and marital difficulties (Abbey, Andrews, & Halman, 1994a, 1994b; Brodzinsky & Huffman). Further, the stresses of infertility appear to be more difficult for women than for men (Abbey et al., 1994a, 1994b).

Perhaps due to the particularly stressful nature of infertility for women, Abbey and colleagues (1994b) found that the transition to parenthood was positively associated with global life quality and increased personal control among infertile women who eventually have a child. Similarly, Gliedden (2000) reported positive adjustment for mothers following the adoption of children with developmental disabilities.

Contradictory findings concerning remarried adults’ mental health have been reported. Neff and Schluter (1993) investigated the relation between depressive symptoms and marital status in a random sample of 1,784 Anglo, African American, and Mexican American adults. Remarriage was associated with higher levels of depression among the married respondents across all racial groups. However, other researchers have found that remarriage is not related to adults’ psychological well-being, and some report more distress among divorced than remarried individuals (Coleman et al., 2000; Shapiro, 1996). These findings have not explicitly addressed how psychological well-being is affected by the experience of gaining a stepchild.

Marital Quality

Gaining a child takes a modest toll on the quality of marital relationships. Following the birth of a child, marital relationships are characterized by increased conflict and negative interactions, declines in marital satisfaction and sexual intimacy, and disruptions in leisure time spent as a couple (Belsky & Pensky, 1988; Cowan & Cowan, 1988, 1995, 1998; Crohan, 1996; Hackel & Ruble, 1992). Recent studies have employed longitudinal designs (following couples before and after a child’s birth) and childless comparison groups to demonstrate that the decline in marital quality is not simply due to a general decline in marital satisfaction occurring with the passage of time in all married relationships (Cox et al., 1999; Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrere, 2000). In a longitudinal study of 65 White and African American parents, Crohan found that couples who became parents reported lower levels of marital happiness and more frequent conflicts, in comparison to the 106 couples who remained childless during a 2-year period. Further, several studies indicate that mothers report greater declines in marital satisfaction and increases in marital tension than do fathers (Belsky & Pensky; Crohan; Levy-Shiff, 1994; Shapiro et al.). Although the initial drop in marital satisfaction after the birth of a child is highly reliable and persists even after the birth of a child (Shapiro et al.), it is important to note that this decline is generally a modest one, and most parents anecdotally report that the rewards of parenting are well worth the initial sacrifices (Belsky & Pensky; Cowan & Cowan, 1988; Levy-Shiff).

Many researchers identify a couple’s division of labor as the greatest source of conflict or harmony in marital relationships following the birth of a child (Belsky & Pensky, 1988; Cowan & Cowan, 1988). Cowan and Cowan (1988) found that men’s and women’s satisfaction with the division of household and child-care tasks was significantly associated with each spouse’s marital satisfaction at 6 and 18 months postpartum. Regardless of how egalitarian a couple’s division of household tasks may have been before a pregnancy, after a child joins the family, most couples resort to traditional gender roles with women carrying the heaviest burdens of housework and childcare—even when both partners are employed outside the home (Belsky & Pensky; Cowan & Cowan, 1988, 1998; Crohan, 1996; Hock et al., 1995; Sanchez & Thomson, 1997).

Despite the particular stresses that adoptive parents contend with, empirical findings do not confirm the hypothesis that adoptive parents experience more adverse family interactions compared to nonadoptive parents. Some studies indicate that there are few differences in interpersonal relationships and less marital conflict for adoptive couples compared with nonadoptive couples (Brodzinsky & Huffman, 1988; Ward, 1998). One reason that the transition to adoptive parenthood may have fewer negative effects on marital quality than does the transition to biological parenthood is that after a lengthy period of longing to become parents, adoptive parents may be more appreciative of the rewards accompanying their transition to parenthood status (Brodzinsky & Huffman; Levy-Shiff et al., 1991). Additionally, adoptive parents tend to be older and to have been married longer than their nonadoptive counterparts. Hence, they may enter parenthood with a greater array of coping strategies, more financial security, and better developed marital communication skills (Brodzinsky & Huffman; Levy-Shiff et al., 1991), all of which could buffer marital relationships from the demands of parenting.

Several studies have examined the marital quality and adjustment of couples undergoing remarriage and stepfamily formation (e.g., Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). In general, studies and clinical reports indicate that acquiring stepchildren upon remarrying can create a difficult transition for many couples (Keshgi-Genovese & Genovese, 1997; Whitsett & Land, 1992). The stressful effect of stepchildren is implicated in the higher divorce rate among remarried couples with stepchildren as opposed to those without stepchildren (Coleman et al., 2000; Fine & Kurdek, 1995; Ganong & Coleman, 1994). In a survey of 88 couples, Gold, Bubenzer, and West (1993) found that stepparents reported less marital intimacy when their families included residential children, compared to those families with nonresident children. Additionally, remarried couples reported higher levels of tension and disagreements relative to their counterparts in first marriages, and the majority of disagreements centered on issues concerning stepchildren (Coleman et al., 2000). On the other hand, other researchers have reported few, if any, long-term differences in marital quality in stepfamilies compared to other types of families (e.g., Bray & Kelly; Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001).

Family Relations and Social Support

In many families, the birth of a child brings an increase in contact between relatives across generations (Cowan & Cowan, 1998; Fischer, 1988). For instance, Fischer noted that once a child is born, one of the first things new parents are likely to do is share the news with family and close friends, quickly incorporating the child into an extended family network. However, researchers have focused far less attention on the dynamic changes and adjustments that occur in intergenerational relationships after the addition of a new family member (Hansen &
the addition of a stepchild to a family. Therefore, focusing on changes in extended family relationships following the birth of a child (Cutrona, 1984; Levy-Shiff, Dimitrovsky, Shulman, & Har-Even, 1998). In a sample of 71 primarily White, middle-class women, Cutrona found that low levels of social support were significantly related to women’s depressive symptoms 8 weeks after delivery.

Many adoptive parents may harbor uncertainties about extended family members’ reactions to an adopted child, making it difficult for adoptive parents to count on family members for support and assistance during their transition to parenthood. In their study of 104 first-time parents, Levy-Shiff and colleagues (1991) reported that involvement by maternal and paternal grandparents far exceeded what the adoptive parents had predicted, and this support was related to more satisfactory familial experiences.

Once again, there is a dearth of work investigating extended family relationships in stepfamilies. Although some studies have examined how adult children’s experience of divorce affects their relationships with and support provided by their parents (e.g., Johnson, 1988; Spitze, Logan, Deane, & Zerger, 1994), a smaller body of research has examined relationships outside the immediate stepfamily, such as relationships with stepgrandparents (e.g., Henry, Ceglian, & Ostrander, 1993; Sanders & Trygstad, 1989). Several researchers note many similarities in family dynamics among stepfamilies and first-time married families (see Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2000). In other studies, remarried couples have described their families as less cohesive and more stressful than individuals in first marriages (Coleman et al., 2000; Kheshgi-Genovese & Genovese, 1997; but see Bray, 1999). Overall, little research has focused on changes in extended family relationships following the addition of a stepchild to a family.

Work Roles

Cowan and Cowan (1988) used an instrument called “The Pie,” in which parents divide a circle into representations of the amount of time and importance of their roles as parent, partner, or worker/student. Not surprisingly, the “parent” dimension increased greatly after the transition to parenthood, whereas the “partner” role sharply declined. Although the importance of the “worker” role remained stable for most men, women tended to show steep declines in their “worker” roles. Following the birth of a child, women who placed greater importance on work and employment and who were committed to their prior expectations of an egalitarian division of labor with their spouses were more likely to experience a decline in marital satisfaction, perhaps because of the inherent difficulty in reconciling the competing demands of mother, wife, and worker (Cowan & Cowan, 1998; Crosby, 1987; Hackel & Ruble, 1992). Yet again, there is little research addressing work roles among adoptive parents and stepparents. Hence, investigating parents’ work roles is an important piece of understanding the adjustment that all parents make after gaining a child.

Goals of the Present Study

The primary goal in the present study was to explore the effects of adding a child to a family, with an inclusive focus on adoptive parents and stepparents rather than simply first-time biological parents. We addressed the gap in the transition to parenthood literature that has long ignored the status of nonbiological parents. In addition to including diverse ways of adding a child to a family, we also included first-time parents and parents who gained an additional child. Few studies have explored changes in parents’ well-being and family relationships with the addition of a second child, and most of these focus exclusively on the interaction between mothers and their first-born children. For example, with a sibling’s arrival, most young first-born children experience a decline in positive or playful maternal attention and an increase in confrontational or prohibitive interactions with their mothers (Dunn & Kendrick, 1980; Kendrick & Dunn, 1980). Thus, our study was more inclusive of the diverse ways of adding a child to a family than most previous research.

We first examined whether parents who gain a child in different ways differ in the importance they place on reasons to have a child. Because the transition to parenthood is deliberate and often takes place at a more secure life and career stage in the cases of adoption and stepparenting, we expected that these parents may be less likely than biological parents to express time and money concerns about gaining a child. Whereas biological parents may be the most likely to view gaining a child as producing a particular desired kind of family member or strengthening love and group ties, stepparents may be the least likely to hold this view.

Next, we investigated how the addition of a child affects the psychological well-being, marital quality, family relationships, and work roles among parents of biological, adopted, and stepchildren. Based on the literature, we anticipated that gaining a biological child will be associated with decreases in psychological well-being and marital quality. We anticipated that these effects may be lessened or reversed for stepparents, and especially for adoptive parents, for whom parenthood often is a long-desired and frustrated goal. We expected that gaining a biological or adopted child, but not a stepchild, will be related to increased support from respondents’ family of origin and satisfaction with those relationships. Lastly, because women tend to assume more childcare responsibilities (Hock et al., 1995; Sanchez & Thomson, 1997), we expected that gaining a child will lead to more time spent on household work and less time in paid employment for mothers and stepparents. Because parenthood may have relatively uniform effects on adults’ work roles, we did not expect differences among the three family groups in these areas.

Method

Participants

This study included data from 204 families that participated in the first and second waves of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH; Sweet & Bumpass, 1996; Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988). The NSFH is a two-wave panel study (Time 1 in 1987–1988; Time 2 in 1992–1994) of a randomly selected, nationally representative sample of adults ages 19 and older, and oversampling for minorities, single-parent families, families with stepchildren, cohabiting couples, and recently married couples. At Time 1, the full sample included 13,007 households drawn from a multistage probability sample from 100 sampling areas within the coterminous United States; at Time 2, 10,007 original main respondents were reinterviewed. One adult from each
household was randomly selected to be the main respondent for the family.

The sample for our study was limited to main respondents (51% women, 49% men) who gained a child in one of three ways between Times 1 and 2: adoption, biologically, or through becoming a stepparent. By Time 2, these families had at least one child 18 years of age or younger in the household. Because of the relatively small number of families that adopted a child between Times 1 and 2: adoption, biologically, or through never-married respondent parents were included. Eighty percent of this sample were never-married respondents’ role as a spouse. Parents rated on a 7-point scale ranging from very unhappy to very happy. Marital relationship. Four measures were used to assess respondents’ role as a spouse. Parents rated on a 7-point scale ranging from very unhappy to very happy a single item assessing the overall quality of their relationships with their spouses. A scale reflecting disagreements with spouse was created by averaging six items (on 6-point scales ranging from never to almost every day) asking parents how often in the past year they had open disagreements with their spouses about household tasks, money, spending time together, sex, in-laws, and the children. A composite variable reflecting division of household labor was created by taking the sum of the number of hours per week the respondent spent preparing meals, cleaning up after meals, cleaning house, doing outdoor and other household maintenance tasks, shopping for groceries and other household goods, washing and ironing clothes, paying bills, doing automobile maintenance, and driving other household members, minus the sum of the number of hours per week the respondent’s spouse spent in these activities. Thus, a positive score indicates that the respondent reported doing more house-

Procedure and Measures

Respondents completed face-to-face interviews at both times. Interview questions were developed by the NSFH research team or culled from established measures with the goal of constructing a broad survey regarding family structures and relationships. For the present study, theoretical considerations and empirical verification through reliability, correlational, and factor analyses were used to create scales and conceptual clusters of the variables. Measures were available from both time points unless otherwise indicated. Descriptive statistics for the dependent variables are provided separately by family group in Tables 3 and 4.

Reasons to have a child. At Time 1, respondents were presented with a list of 11 reasons that people often consider before having a child or another child. They were asked to indicate on 7-point scales, ranging from not at all important to very important, how much these reasons mattered to them. Six items reflected reasons not to have a child related to time and money (e.g., having time and energy for career). Five items reflected reasons to have a child related to parents’ sense that having a child would result in stronger love and group ties (e.g., having someone to love).

Parent well-being. The short form of the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977) assessed depressed affect. It included 12 items rated on 7-point scales asking on how many days in the last week the respondent had experienced affective and somatic symptoms such as sadness, loneliness, or a poor appetite (Time 1 $\alpha = .93$; Time 2 $\alpha = .90$). Life satisfaction was assessed by a single question asking parents to rate how things are going these days on a 7-point scale ranging from very unhappy to very happy.

Demographic Information about Families at Time 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Characteristics</th>
<th>Gained Adopted Child</th>
<th>Gained Biological Child</th>
<th>Gained Stepchild</th>
<th>Statistic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent age (years)</td>
<td>37.63, (7.36)</td>
<td>32.07, (4.79)</td>
<td>38.41, (6.74)</td>
<td>$F(2, 199) = 19.63^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household income (dollars)</td>
<td>55,234 (48,489)</td>
<td>42,380 (32,313)</td>
<td>56,089 (46,812)</td>
<td>$F(2, 191) = 2.04$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent education (years)</td>
<td>13.69 (2.43)</td>
<td>13.01 (2.40)</td>
<td>12.81 (2.40)</td>
<td>$F(2, 201) = 2.50$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of youngest child (years)</td>
<td>3.92, (3.73)</td>
<td>2.45, (2.16)</td>
<td>10.47, (9.32)</td>
<td>$F(2, 187) = 100.02^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children in household</td>
<td>2.08, (1.22)</td>
<td>2.19, (1.35)</td>
<td>2.19, (1.16)</td>
<td>$F(2, 191) = .17$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>63</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never married</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Subscripts of a and b denote means that differ significantly.

*p < .01. **p < .001.
hold labor than her or his spouse; a negative score indicates that 
the respondent reported that the spouse did more household 
labor. Parents’ Time 2 reports of satisfaction with the spouse in 
eight domains (understanding, love and affection, time together, 
demands, sexual relationship, money, work around the house, 
parenthood) were averaged to create a scale (items rated on 7-
point scales ranging from very unhappy to very happy: \( \alpha = .87 \)).

**Parental role.** Three Time 2 measures were used to assess respondents’ role as a parent. Parents reported their overall 
satisfaction with family life using a single item rated on a 7-
point scale ranging from very dissatisfied to very satisfied. Par-
ents also reported whether any of their children were particularly 
hard to raise (0 = no, 1 = yes). Family cohesion was measured 
using three items from Rossi and Rossi’s (1990) scale averaged 
with two additional items. Specifically, parents indicated on 4-
point scales ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree 
whether their family has fun together, things are tense and 
stressful in the family (reverse coded), family members show 
concern and love for each other, family members feel distant and 
apart from each other (reverse coded), and whether the family 
works well as a team (\( \alpha = .78 \)).

**Role as adult member of family of origin.** Respondents’ role 
as an adult member of their family of origin was assessed by two 
measures. Five dichotomous variables (0 = no, 1 = yes) were 
summed to create an index reflecting whether parents received 
support during the last month from their own parents with shop-
ing, errands, or transportation; housework, yard work, or car 
repairs; advice or encouragement; child care while the repon-
dent or spouse was working; and child care at times other than 
while the respondent or spouse was working. Respondents rated 
the overall quality of their relationships with their mother and 
father using a single question with a 7-point scale ranging from 
very poor to excellent at Time 1 and an 11-point scale ranging 
from really bad to absolutely perfect at Time 2; responses were 
standardized to compare across times.

**Role as a worker.** Two measures were used to assess respondents’ roles as workers. Parents reported the number of hours per 
week they worked at a paid job. In addition, parents reported 
whether their jobs were one of the most satisfying parts of their 
lives using a single item rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 
strongly disagree to strongly agree at Time 1, and their overall 
job satisfaction on a 7-point scale ranging from very dissatisfied 
to very satisfied at Time 2; responses were standardized to 
compare across times.

**Results**

**Preliminary Analyses of Demographic and Control 
Variables**

Family group differences on demographic variables are pre-
sented in Table 1. Parents who had a biological child between 
waves were younger than were parents who adopted or gained a 
stepchild between waves. The youngest child in the household 
was older for parents who gained a stepchild between waves than 
for those who adopted or gained a biological child between 
waves. Men and women are not represented in equal proportions 
across groups. For example, men were more likely to gain a 
stepchild between waves than were women (because we 
restricted analyses to children living in their parents’ household, 
and children primarily stayed with their biological mothers) and 
are overrepresented in this group. Men are underrepresented in 
the group that gained a biological child, because we did not 
restrict the sample to married respondents, and never-married 
and divorced mothers with custody of their children are included 
in the group that gained a biological child. Thus, we controlled 
for parent age, age of the youngest child in the household, and 
parent gender in later analyses.

We also examined the age of the children at the time of their 
adoption or the time they entered their stepfamilies. Each family 
group significantly differed from the other groups on the child’s 
age at the time the child entered the family, \( F(2, 179) = 72.58, 
\ p < .001 \). The median age of children at the time of their 
adoption was 1 year (SD = 5.00); the median age of children at the 
time their stepfamilies were formed was 8.80 years (SD = 3.86). 
In addition, we examined the age spacing between children age 
18 years or younger who lived in the household in families that 
had more than one child. Families that gained a stepchild had 
closer spacing between their two youngest children \( F(2, 124) = 5.86, \ p < .01 \) and between their youngest and oldest 
child \( F(2, 124) = 7.75, \ p < .01 \) than did families that adopted 
or gained a biological child. The mean age space between 
the two youngest children in families that gained an adopted, 
biological, and stepchild was 4.35 (SD = 2.99), 4.21 
(SD = 2.12), and 2.84 (SD = 1.65) years, respectively. The 
mean age between the youngest and oldest children in families 
that gained an adopted, biological, and stepchild was 7.76 
(SD = 3.96), 6.50 (SD = 3.81), and 4.53 (SD = 3.35) years, 
respectively. In later analyses, we controlled for the age of the 
youngest child in the household, because this did not restrict the 
families included to those that had more than one child (as the 
age spacing variable would have) and was clearer than age at 
time of entry into the family. (In families with more than one 
child, this would have been an average age for the family rather 
than the age of a particular child.)

Economic status of the family, number of years of education 
completed by the parent, number of children in the household, 
parent’s race (child’s race was not assessed), and parent’s marital 
status were considered as potential control variables. However, 
preliminary analyses revealed that family structure groups did 
not differ with regard to these variables (see Table 1); thus, they 
were not included in subsequent analyses. The length of parents’ 
marrages did differ by family structure group, \( F(2, 166) = 18.04, \ p < .001 \ (M = 11.07, 7.13, \text{ and } 5.14 \text{ for adoptive 
parents, biological parents, and stepparents, respectively); adoptive 
parents had been married significantly longer than biological 
and stepparents, who did not differ significantly from one another. 
Because 17% of our sample was not married, we did not control 
for length of marriage in the analyses. Although the correlation 
between length of marriage and parent’s age was modest \( r = .35, 
\ p < .001 \), by controlling for parent’s age, we removed at least part 
of the variance associated with length of marriage.

To provide a context for understanding how the control 
variables relate to other variables of interest, Table 2 shows 
correlations between the three control variables (parent gender, 
parent age, and age of the youngest child in the household) 
each of the dependent variables. As shown, women reported 
higher levels of depressed affect, doing more household labor, 
and receiving higher levels of support from their own parents 
at both times than did men. Women also reported working fewer 
hours per week than did men at Time 2. Older respondents 
reported lower life satisfaction at Time 1, lower quality mar-
rriages at Time 1, doing less household labor at both times, less 
satisfaction with their parental roles at Time 2, and receiving less
First-Time Parents Compared to Other Parents

In our sample, 25 (37%) of the adoptive parents, 30 (44%) of the biological parents, and 19 (28%) of the stepparents became parents for the first time between data collection waves. One-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) and chi-squared tests were conducted to examine potential demographic differences between first-time and other parents. First-time parents were significantly younger than were parents gaining an additional child, $F(1, 200) = 29.79, p < .001$ ($M = 32.73$ versus $37.93$), and had significantly higher education levels, $F(1, 200) = 5.40, p < .05$ ($M = 13.69$ versus $12.88$). However, first-time parents did not differ from others in terms of gender, race, marital status, or household income.

Multivariate analyses of covariance (MANCOVAs) were conducted to investigate whether first-time parents differed from other parents in the importance they placed on reasons to have a child or another child, controlling for parents’ age and gender. There was no significant main effect of first-time parent status on reasons related to time and money. Similarly, there was not a significant interaction effect for first-time parent X family group. There was a main effect of first-time parent status on reasons related to love and group ties ($Pillai’s F[5, 164] = 2.92, p < .05$). Follow-up univariate tests revealed that first-time parents at Time 2 were more likely to say that giving their parents grandchildren, $F(1, 168) = 4.10, p < .05$ ($M = 3.41$ versus $2.27$), and having at least one boy and one girl, $F(1, 168) = 4.23, p < .05$ ($M = 3.85$ versus $2.63$), were important reasons to have a child than were other parents. The first-time parent X family group interaction did not significantly predict reasons related to love and group ties.

To examine whether first-time parents differed from other parents on the role characteristics of interest, we conducted 3 MANCOVAs (controlling for parent gender and parent age). There was one significant main effect of first-time parent status: First-time parents were less likely than other parents to say at Time 2 that any of their children were hard to raise, $F(1, 179) = 5.11, p < .05$ ($M = .14$ versus $.34$). There was one significant first-time status X family group interaction, $F(2, 140) = 4.61, p < .05$. Respondents who became first-time adoptive and stepparents were less satisfied with their jobs at Time 1 than were not-first-time adoptive and stepparents, but those who became first-time biological parents were more satisfied with their jobs at Time 1 than were not-first-time biological parents. Out of 22 MANCOVAs conducted to investigate this question, one effect would be expected to be significant by chance. Thus, we found little evidence that gaining a child for the first time was differentially related to well-being and role quality compared to gaining an additional child, so the following analyses included both first-time parents and those gaining an additional child.

### Differences Among Families in Reasons for Having a Child

MANCOVAs were conducted to investigate whether respondents who adopted a child, had a biological child, or

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Correlations of Control Variables with Well-Being and Role Quality Measures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Well-Being</td>
<td>Parent Gender&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Well-being:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depressed affect: Time 1</td>
<td>.18*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depressed affect: Time 2</td>
<td>.24**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life satisfaction: Time 1</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life satisfaction: Time 2</td>
<td>−.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Role Quality:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall quality of marriage: Time 1</td>
<td>−.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall quality of marriage: Time 2</td>
<td>−.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagreements with spouse: Time 1</td>
<td>−.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagreements with spouse: Time 2</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Division of household labor: Time 1</td>
<td>.59***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Division of household labor: Time 2</td>
<td>.60***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with spouse: Time 2</td>
<td>−.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with parental role: Time 2</td>
<td>−.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children hard to raise: Time 2</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family cohesion: Time 2</td>
<td>−.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental support: Time 1</td>
<td>.19**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental support: Time 2</td>
<td>.16*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with parents: Time 1</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with parents: Time 2</td>
<td>−.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of hours worked: Time 1</td>
<td>−.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of hours worked: Time 2</td>
<td>−.25**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with job: Time 1</td>
<td>−.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with job: Time 2</td>
<td>−.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>Gender was coded 1 = male, 2 = female. <sup>b</sup>See Table 1 for descriptive data.  
<sup>*</sup>p < .05. <sup>**</sup>p < .01. <sup>***</sup>p < .001.
gained a stepchild between Times 1 and 2 differed in the importance they placed on different reasons to have a child or another child at Time 1, controlling for parents’ age and gender. As predicted, family groups differed both in the importance of time and money (Pillai’s $F_{[12,394]} = 2.60, p < .01$) and love and group ties (Pillai’s $F_{[10,396]} = 3.03, p < .01$) as motives for having a child. Follow-up univariate Bonferroni tests were used to protect against Type I error; they revealed that respondents who subsequently gained a biological child were more likely to consider being able to buy a home or better home as a reason not to have a child than were respondents who subsequently adopted a child (see Table 3). Also as expected, respondents who gained a stepchild were least likely to say that giving their child a brother or sister, having someone to love, and having at least one boy and one girl were important reasons to have a child. However, there were no differences on these variables between adoptive and biological parents (see Table 3).

Well-Being and Role Characteristics After Gaining a Child

Three (family groups) X 2 (time points) repeated measures analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) were conducted to compare parent well-being, marital quality, and characteristics of parents’ family and work roles, controlling for parents’ age, gender, and age of the youngest child in the household. Preliminary analyses revealed that although there were main effects for gender on some outcomes of interest (see Table 2), gender did not interact with time or family group; thus, results are combined for men and women. The sample size for these analyses varied, because not all respondents had all roles (e.g., some were spouses and parents but did not work outside the home; others were parents and worked outside the home, but were not married). Thus, analyses were conducted separately by role, and respondents without a given role were excluded from those analyses.

Well-being. There was a significant main effect of time on depressed affect. As shown in Table 4, at Time 2, stepparents reported less depressed affect than at Time 1. A significant time X family group interaction predicted life satisfaction. Individuals who gained a stepchild reported higher life satisfaction at Time 2 than at Time 1. Further, respondents who gained an adopted or biological child reported higher life satisfaction at Time 1 than did respondents who gained a stepchild, but at Time 2, respondents who gained an adopted child or stepchild reported higher life satisfaction than did respondents who gained a biological child.

Marital relationship. Analyses of the marital relationship were restricted to respondents who were married to the same spouse at both times ($n = 35$ adoptive and $31$ biological parents). Respondents who had divorced and remarried between waves and those who had not been married at Time 1 were excluded. Because so few stepparents were married to the same spouse at both times ($n = 10$), this family group was excluded from these analyses. In relation to overall marital quality, there was a significant time X family group interaction (see Table 4). Marital quality decreased over time for respondents who gained a biological child but increased (although not significantly) for respondents who adopted a child. At Time 2, adoptive parents reported higher marital quality than did biological parents. Disagreements between spouses increased following the addition of a child for both adoptive and biological parents, but the increase was more pronounced for parents who gained a biological child. There were no significant time or family group effects on division of household labor. Finally, a one-way ANCOVA revealed no differences at Time 2 between parents who had adopted or gained a biological child in their satisfaction with their spouses (satisfaction with spouse was not assessed at Time 1).

Parental role. Additional one-way ANCOVAs were conducted to compare the quality of the parental role among parents who gained a child in different ways (the parental role variables were not assessed at Time 1, and many of the respondents became parents for the first time between waves). These analyses revealed that parents who had adopted a child were more satisfied with their family life than were biological parents, and adoptive parents reported higher family cohesion than did either biological parents or stepparents. Families did not differ in whether they reported that their children were hard to raise.

Role in family of origin. A 3 (family groups) X 2 (time points) repeated measures ANCOVA included the 199 respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3 MANCOVAs of Reasons to Have a Child by Family Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reasons</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Related to time and money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress and worry of raising children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time and energy for career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainty about ability to support a child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time for leisure/social activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being able to make major purchases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being able to buy a home or better home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Related to love and group ties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving my parents grandchildren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving my child(ren) a brother/sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone to care for me when I’m old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone to love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having at least one boy and one girl</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Analyses controlled for parent age and gender. $N = 204$ (68 in each family group). Subscripts of a and b denote means that differ significantly.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
who had at least one living parent (see Table 4). Adoptive and biological parents reported receiving more support from their own parents at Time 2 than at Time 1. Family groups did not differ in support received from their parents at Time 1, but at Time 2, adoptive and biological parents received more support than did stepparents. There were no time or family group effects on parents’ reports of the quality of their relationships with their own parents.

Work role. A 3 (family groups) X 2 (time points) repeated measures ANCOVA included the 169 parents who were working for pay (see Table 4). There were no time or family group effects on parents’ reports of the number of hours they worked or job satisfaction.

### Reasons for Having a Child in Relation to Well-Being and Role Characteristics After Gaining a Child

In the final set of analyses, we conducted a series of regressions to examine whether respondents’ ratings of the importance of different reasons for having a child at Time 1 were related to their well-being and role characteristics after gaining a child by Time 2. To avoid multicollinearity problems that would arise from entering highly correlated reasons as separate predictors in these regressions, we began by averaging the six items reflecting reasons not to have a child related to time and money ($z = .84$), and the five items reflecting reasons to have a child related to the sense that having a child would result in stronger love and group ties ($z = .78$) to create two composite variables ($r = .35$). These two variables were entered in all regressions along with dummy variables reflecting whether the parent had adopted a child or gained a stepchild, interaction terms between these dummy variables and the composite reason variables, and the control variables (parent age, parent gender, and age of the youngest child in the household).

### Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gained Adopted Child</th>
<th>Gained Biological Child</th>
<th>Gained Stepchild</th>
<th>Main Effects</th>
<th>Interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Well-being (N = 204)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>1.10 (1.11)</td>
<td>.93 (1.20)</td>
<td>1.40 (1.51)</td>
<td>1.28 (1.08)</td>
<td>1.46a (1.56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life satisfaction</td>
<td>5.71 (1.14)</td>
<td>5.59 (1.00)</td>
<td>5.68 (1.03)</td>
<td>5.16 (1.31)</td>
<td>4.86ad (1.42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Relationship (N = 66)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall quality</td>
<td>5.70 (1.88)</td>
<td>6.12 (1.89)</td>
<td>6.14a (1.22)</td>
<td>5.31bd (1.58)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagreements</td>
<td>1.82c (1.46)</td>
<td>2.10b (1.72)</td>
<td>1.63a (1.35)</td>
<td>2.37b (1.91)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Division of labor</td>
<td>–5.11 (42.80)</td>
<td>.84 (33.05)</td>
<td>–1.71 (22.45)</td>
<td>4.71 (20.55)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>–5.47 (1.24)</td>
<td>–5.68 (1.83)</td>
<td>–5.68 (1.28)</td>
<td>–5.83 (1.05)</td>
<td>–3.13*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Role (N = 204)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental support</td>
<td>–5.95 (1.15)</td>
<td>–5.68 (1.28)</td>
<td>–5.83 (1.05)</td>
<td>–3.13*</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children hard to raise</td>
<td>–2.28 (4.5)</td>
<td>–2.0 (4.0)</td>
<td>–3.2 (4.7)</td>
<td>–4.3</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family cohesion</td>
<td>–4.30 (5.1)</td>
<td>–4.02 (4.9)</td>
<td>–3.77 (6.6)</td>
<td>–6.82**</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role in Family of Origin (N = 199)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental support</td>
<td>1.03 (1.03)</td>
<td>1.83bc (1.46)</td>
<td>1.28c (1.14)</td>
<td>1.82bc (1.41)</td>
<td>.84 (1.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with parents</td>
<td>–0.07 (1.01)</td>
<td>–0.01 (1.02)</td>
<td>–0.01 (1.02)</td>
<td>–0.07 (1.01)</td>
<td>–0.04 (1.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Role (N = 169)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of hours</td>
<td>40.87 (16.04)</td>
<td>38.79 (16.84)</td>
<td>40.90 (18.09)</td>
<td>41.05 (14.24)</td>
<td>41.33 (18.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>–0.03 (.96)</td>
<td>–0.03 (1.09)</td>
<td>.04 (1.01)</td>
<td>–0.03 (1.05)</td>
<td>–0.02 (1.05)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Analyses controlled for parent age, parent gender, and age of the youngest child in the household. Subscripts of a and b denote means within family groups. Subscripts of c and d denote means within time that significantly differ by family group.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
gaining a stepchild (β = .59, p < .05) on the respondents’ relationship with their own parents suggested that for stepparents, placing more importance on time and money reasons for not having a child at Time 1 was related to higher quality relationships with their own parents at Time 2; this was not the case for other parents.

Importantly, reasons for having a child were not significant predictors of depressed affect, life satisfaction, division of household labor, satisfaction with the parental role, whether children were hard to raise, family cohesion, parental support, number of hours worked, or job satisfaction. Thus, most evidence regarding links between respondents’ endorsement of reasons to have or not have a child at Time 1 and their well-being and role characteristics at Time 2 after gaining a child were found regarding the marital relationship, especially for those whose reasons related to time and money.

**Discussion**

Recall that our main goal was to explore parents’ reasons for having a child and how the addition of a child affects parents’ well-being, family relationships, and role characteristics. In contrast to previous research that focuses primarily on first-time biological parents, we included adoptive parents and stepparents. Although we found some differences between biological parents, adoptive parents, and stepparents, it is important to note that in most instances the impact of gaining a child did not vary across these parental groups. Overall, new parents appear to share rather similar experiences. This overall finding, as well as specific results about differences, help advance our understanding of the reasons that different types of parents may choose to have children and the consequences of doing so.

As expected, parents who gained a biological child, an adopted child, or a stepchild differed in the importance they placed on reasons for having a child or another child. Compared to respondents who became biological parents, adoptive parents were less likely to consider their ability to buy a house as important. This may reflect the greater financial stability generally reported among adoptive parents, who also tend to be older and at more secure careen and life stages than adults making the transition to biological parenthood (Brodzinsky & Huffman, 1988; Levy-Shiff et al., 1991). For many couples who contemplate adoption, the financial costs of doing so may be a relatively minor concern, overridden by their strong desire for a child. Compared to adoptive and biological parents, stepparents were less likely to place importance on reasons reflecting a desire for love and group ties. This finding corresponds with the particular situation of many stepparents whose primary focus may be the marriage rather than parenting.

Some of our findings are in keeping with the vast literature on the transition to first-time, biological parenthood. Respondents who acquired a child through biological parenthood showed a decline in marital quality and an increase in spousal disagreements. This is consistent with prior research (e.g., Belsky & Pensky, 1988; Cox et al., 1999). Parents who adopted a child also reported more disagreements with their spouses after adopting, but they reported an increase rather than a decrease in overall marital quality, and at Time 2 they reported higher marital quality than did biological parents.

Thus, we found evidence to suggest that adopting a child may put less strain on the marriage than does gaining a biological child. Because adoption is by definition planned and a more publicly “chosen” act, the decision to gain a child may be less likely to cause disharmony among adoptive parents. Adoptive parents generally go through a comprehensive, in-depth screening process regarding their finances, marital relationship, physical and psychological health, extended family support, and home inspection. They also must agree regarding the decision to add the child to the family. As such, adoptive parents may deal with their distress, expectations, and potential conflicts before the addition of the child in a formalized way that is not required of biological or stepparents.

Adoptive parents also appeared to be at an advantage in their parental role. Compared to biological and stepparents, parents who had adopted a child reported greater satisfaction with their family and higher family cohesion than did parents who had gained a biological or stepchild. Levy-Shiff and colleagues (1991) similarly report that adoptive parents had more satisfying experiences following the transition to parenthood when compared to biological parents. Perhaps some of the same factors hypothesized to bolster the marital quality of adoptive parents also place them at a slight advantage in their parental role, compared to biological or stepparents. Finally, in keeping with previous research (Fischer, 1988) and our expectations, support from their own parents increased for all parental groups following the addition of a child, and parental support was highest for biological and adoptive parents.

In contrast to previous findings, gaining children in all three ways was not related to changes in the division of household labor, to the number of hours in paid weekly employment, or to job satisfaction. In addition, stepparents reported less depressed affect and higher life satisfaction following the addition of a child. A key difference between our study and previous work that may account for these discrepancies is that the time interval following the addition of the child was longer (over 2 years, on average) than the time in most transition to parenthood studies. Thus, although there may be changes in these domains in close temporal proximity to the addition of the child (e.g., Cowan & Cowan, 1988), it appears that with time, some of these effects disappear. This explanation corresponds with research on stepfamilies suggesting that although there may be disruptions in individual and family functioning surrounding the remarriage, these effects dissipate over time (Bray & Kelly, 1998).

Several explanations may account for the positive outcomes reported by adoptive parents in our study. Adoptive parents who have struggled to overcome infertility may have solidified their marriages and strengthened their ability to negotiate stressful life transitions. In addition, their tendency to be older and married longer than nonadoptive parents also may foster greater marital problem-solving skills (Brodzinsky & Huffman, 1988; Levy-Shiff et al., 1991). This would be consistent with Belsky and Rovine’s (1990) finding that demographic, personality, and marital characteristics assessed prenatally predicted husbands’ and wives’ adjustment during the 3 years following the birth of their first child. For previously infertile adoptive parents, a child may represent the culmination of a protracted period of deprivation and longing for children. However, evidence that the transition to parenthood is not completely carefree for adoptive parents is demonstrated in their increase in spousal disagreements.

For stepparents, an increase in life satisfaction after gaining a child may reflect the benefits of marriage and society’s approval of marriage. It also is possible that stepparents may deny or repress negative feelings in the hope for a smooth
transition, defying expectations for problems that arise in stepfamilies. This is all the more likely for parents who are in the “honeymoon period” of stepfamily formation (Bray & Kelly, 1998). Indeed, biological parents may be at a disadvantage in terms of gaining a child, because they have not faced the complexities of doing so through adoption or stepparenting but instead are approaching parenthood from a position of cultural pronatalism and idealization of parenting.

Whereas most research on the transition to parenthood has focused on first-time parents, our study does not distinguish between first-time parents and those who gain an additional child. Our findings regarding the lack of differences in well-being, family relationships, and work roles for parents gaining a first child compared to those gaining an additional child are surprising and warrant caution until future replication. It is quite possible that after the initial adjustment to a new child, parents’ marital and psychological functioning return to equilibrium, whether it is the birth of a first or successive child. Additional children may have a greater impact on more tangible characteristics, such as the allocation of financial resources and the distribution of leisure time across family members.

The strengths of our study include the use of a randomly selected, nationally representative sample and longitudinal data. However, the subsample used in this study was relatively small, particularly for some of the analyses. Although we recognize that there may be important differences between stepmother and stepfather families and simple versus complex stepfamilies, we were not able to examine these groups separately. Further, we did not have information on the specific circumstances surrounding the adoptions. Because most of the children were adopted when they were quite young, our results may not generalize to parents who adopt older children, particularly those with special needs. In addition, all of the data were self-reported, some (e.g., life satisfaction) using single-item measures, and await corroboration by future studies. Despite these limitations, this study is the first to examine simultaneously gaining a child through adoption, biological parenthood, and stepparenthood.

**Implications for Future Research, Policy, and Practice**

Several implications for future research are suggested here. First, further comparison of first-time adoptive parents, biological parents, and stepparents would be useful in linking findings more closely with the transition to first-time, biological parenthood literature. Second, data collected in close temporal proximity to the addition of a child and additional waves of data would help to track changes in parents’ well-being, marital quality, and role relationships over time. Third, research that extends our focus beyond the first-time transition to parenthood and that addresses the impact of adding subsequent children is needed, as well as the transition to parenthood made by lesbian and gay couples. Finally, qualitative studies may be useful in helping to elucidate sources of stress and strength as children enter different types of families.

Our findings have several implications for social policy. We question public policies that aim to promote “family values” associated with traditional, two-parent biological families, such as marriage promotion laws. Following the addition of a child, adoptive parents and stepparents in our study reported positive marital and family life qualities; in other words, they were not functioning more poorly than biological parents. Consequently, policies that assist all families, regardless of family structure or biological connections to children, will have the widest and most useful impact. For instance, flexible work hours and job sharing arrangements will benefit many women who continue to carry disproportionate shares of household responsibilities after the arrival of a child to maintain both family and work obligations. Such policies also will make it easier for men to increase their family commitments without implicit or explicit penalties at work.

Despite an academic call for preventive programs to assist families with the transition to parenthood (Cowen & Cowan, 1998), few supportive educational programs are available. Ironically, families with adopted children are overrepresented among referrals for psychological and special education services (Benson, Sharma, & Roehlkepartain, 1994; Grotevant, 1997; Haugaard, 1998). Some research indicates that these high referral rates are caused by professional biases and a greater acceptance of nonfamilial intervention among adoptive parents (Peters, Atkins, & McKay, 1999; Warren, 1992). Countering this trend to expect more problems among nontraditional families, our findings highlight the strengths and coping resources within adoptive and stepparent families. Further, educational programs and therapeutic interventions that aim to ease the transition to parenthood may gain insights by using adoptive families as a model, stressing the need to bolster marital communication skills, joint decisionmaking plans, and conflict resolution strategies prior to the arrival of a child when possible, or as soon thereafter as possible.

These findings also provide an important message for individuals who work in therapeutic settings with diverse families. Parents may be reassured to learn that the experience of changes in the marital relationship and other roles are common following the addition of a child to the family, but that some of these changes appear to fade over time. Further, parents who gain a child through adoption or through becoming a stepparent may be encouraged to consider some of the benefits of their situation compared to biological parents, rather than approaching the formation of nonbiological families from a deficit perspective.

**References**


