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Building Trust and Authority: Stepparents' Experiences of Discipline and Boundary-Setting in Blended Families

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Abstract

Blended families present unique challenges for stepparents, particularly in establishing authority, setting boundaries, and building trust with stepchildren. This qualitative study explored stepparents and stepchildren lived experiences of discipline and boundary-setting within blended family contexts in Johannesburg, South Africa. Guided by Social Learning Theory and a transformative paradigm, the study employed interpretive phenomenology to examine the behavioural, relational, and structural factors shaping stepparent-child interactions. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with ten stepparents and ten young adults raised by stepparents and analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. Findings indicate that stepparent authority is negotiated rather than assumed, especially in the absence of biological ties, and initial resistance, boundary testing, and fear are common during early interactions. Over time, authority and trust develop through consistent, fair, and responsive caregiving, reinforced by supportive biological parents and open communication. Harsh or coercive discipline may yield short-term compliance but often undermines trust and emotional well-being, whereas respect-based authority grounded in empathy fosters sustainable relational bonds. Participants highlighted patience, deliberate communication, and emotional regulation as critical strategies for navigating stepfamily dynamics. These findings underscore the importance of gradual role integration, collaborative co-parenting, and fairness in fostering stepfamily cohesion, demonstrating that effective stepparenting emerges from relational negotiation, modelling, and mutual respect rather than control or fear. The study provides practical insights for stepparents and biological parents seeking to enhance trust, authority, and emotional security within blended families.

Keywords

blended families, stepparenting, trust-building, authority negotiation, discipline and boundary-setting, family dynamics

INTRODUCTION

Blended families, in which one or both partners bring children from previous relationships, have become increasingly common worldwide as divorce, remarriage, cohabitation, and repartnering rates continue to rise (Ganong & Coleman, 2011). Despite their growing prevalence, stepfamilies remain what sociologists call an "incomplete institution," meaning that social norms, cultural expectations, and legal frameworks are still largely organised around the traditional nuclear family (Boss, et al 2016; Ganong et al., 2011). As a result, stepfamilies often face heightened relational complexity, especially around the processes of trust-building, establishing cohesion, and negotiating parental roles. These challenges emerge as partners and children work to integrate previously separate family histories, loyalties, and routines, often under conditions of emotional sensitivity shaped by past relationships and transitions.

Within these dynamics, stepparents frequently occupy an ambiguous and sometimes contested position in the family system. They must integrate into pre-existing parent-child relationships while navigating unclear expectations about their authority, caregiving responsibilities, and emotional involvement (Oliver-Blackburn, et al., 2022). Research shows that the absence of widely accepted social scripts for stepparenting particularly regarding discipline and boundary-

setting can create uncertainty, tension, and role strain (Ganong & Coleman, 2018; Sanner & Ganong, 2017). Stepparents who attempt to assert authority prematurely, before establishing relational trust, may encounter resistance from children, loyalty conflicts, or undermining from other family members (Ganong et al., 2011). Consequently, scholars emphasize the importance of gradual role negotiation and relationship-building as foundational to effective discipline and healthy stepfamily functioning.

Research suggests that stepparent effectiveness in discipline is often dependent on the quality of the stepparent–child relationship, which develops gradually and is influenced by factors such as the child’s age, the biological parent’s support, family history, and the level of conflict with non-resident biological parents (Ganong et al., 2019). Many scholars argue that stepparents who attempt to assert authority prematurely may face resistance, leading to conflict and weakening of family cohesion (Papernow, 2013; Sweeney, 2010). Conversely, stepparents who prioritise relationship-building empathy, consistency, warmth, and open communication often find that authority emerges more naturally over time (Witbooi, 2024). Boundary-setting, therefore, becomes a negotiated process shaped by interpersonal trust, cooperation between co-parents, and broader socio-cultural expectations about parenting roles.

In blended families, the biological parent often serves as a “gatekeeper,” influencing the stepparent’s legitimacy in disciplinary matters (Sanner et al., 2022). Where biological parents actively support or co-construct disciplinary strategies, stepparents typically experience greater confidence and smoother integration into parental roles. However, where biological parents are inconsistent, overprotective, or conflicted, stepparents may feel undermined or excluded, intensifying emotional stress and uncertainty (Ganong, et al., 2024). Given these complexities, exploring stepparents’ lived experiences of discipline and boundary-setting is essential for understanding how trust and authority are built within blended family systems, and how supportive interventions might strengthen family functioning.

Research Aim

To explore how stepparents in blended families build trust and establish authority in the processes of discipline and boundary-setting, and to understand the behavioural, relational, and structural factors that shape their experiences.

Research Objectives

1. To examine stepparents’ lived experiences of discipline and boundary-setting within blended family contexts.
2. To explore how trust and authority are negotiated between stepparents, children, and biological parents during disciplinary interactions.
3. To identify behavioural and relational factors including modelling, reinforcement, and parental support that facilitate or hinder effective discipline and integration of stepparents into parental roles.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), which provides a powerful behavioural framework for understanding how stepparents build trust and authority in blended families, particularly in relation to discipline and boundary-setting. SLT posits that behaviour is learned through observation, modelling, and reinforcement processes that are highly relevant in stepfamily environments where roles are ambiguous and social norms are less clearly defined. As stepparents and children come together with different relational histories and expectations, early interactions become key learning moments. Children observe how stepparents communicate, express warmth, handle conflict, and collaborate with the biological parent, shaping their perceptions of the stepparent’s legitimacy. Similarly, stepparents adapt their approach based on children’s responses and the level of support or gatekeeping demonstrated by the biological parent.

A central concept within SLT reciprocal determinism highlights how behaviour, family environment, and personal beliefs continually shape one another. This dynamic explains why stepparent authority is strengthened when biological parents reinforce disciplinary decisions and weakened when parental support is inconsistent or conflicted. Through ongoing cycles of behavioural reinforcement, trust and authority are gradually co-constructed rather than assumed. Stepparents who model empathy, consistency, and respectful communication often receive more cooperative behavioural responses from children, making boundary-setting smoother and more collaborative. By illuminating how behavioural learning, relational patterns, and environmental cues interact over time, Social Learning Theory offers a robust foundation for examining the processes through which stepparents negotiate disciplinary roles and foster stable, trusting relationships within blended families.

METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm

This study was guided by the transformative paradigm, which was particularly suited to research involving marginalised or socially complex family structures such as blended families. The transformative paradigm acknowledged that knowledge was shaped by issues of power, inequality, voice, and social justice (Mertens, 2010). In the context of stepfamilies often characterised by ambiguous roles, contested authority, and limited societal guidance this paradigm supported an inquiry that sought not only to understand lived experiences but also to highlight structural and relational conditions that shaped them (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By prioritising participants’ voices and valuing experiential knowledge, the transformative paradigm positioned the research process as collaborative and sensitive to the emotional and relational complexities of stepfamily life (Mertens, 2010; Patton, 2015).

Research Approach

A qualitative research approach was adopted to allow for an in-depth exploration of how trust and authority are constructed within blended family systems. Qualitative methods are particularly appropriate for capturing interpersonal dynamics, subjective meanings, and relational interpretations that cannot be quantified (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This approach enabled participants to narrate their experiences of discipline, boundary-setting, and trust-building in their own words, providing rich insights into the behavioural, emotional, and contextual factors shaping these processes (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Patton, 2015).

Research Design

The study employed a phenomenological design, specifically interpretive phenomenology, to explore the lived experiences of both stepparents and young adults raised by stepparents. Interpretive phenomenology was particularly suited for understanding how individuals made meaning of relational processes such as discipline and trust-building, and how these meanings emerged from everyday interactions (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This design enabled the study to access the subjective realities of participants, capturing variations in their experiences while identifying common themes that characterised stepfamily disciplinary dynamics (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By focusing on participants' personal narratives, the study provided rich insights into the emotional, behavioural, and contextual factors that shaped stepparent–child relationships, allowing for a nuanced understanding of authority negotiation and relational trust within blended family systems (van Manen, 2016).

Study Site

Data were collected in the city of Johannesburg, South Africa. The research was conducted within selected urban and peri-urban communities where blended families were prevalent. The selection of these sites ensured access to diverse experiences shaped by varying socio-economic and cultural contexts.

Participant Selection

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who could provide rich, relevant, and diverse insights into the phenomenon under study, ensuring that those selected had substantial lived experience with stepfamily disciplinary dynamics. The study included two participant groups: ten stepparents who had been part of a blended family for at least two years and had actively participated in discipline and boundary-setting within the household, and ten young adults aged 18–30 years who had been raised by a stepparent during childhood or adolescence. Inclusion criteria were designed to ensure that participants could provide meaningful perspectives on the relational and authority dynamics inherent in blended families. Recruitment was conducted through community organisations, social networks, and referrals via snowball sampling to reach individuals who may not have been accessible through formal institutions, thereby enhancing the diversity and depth of the data collected (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016; Palinkas et al., 2015).

Data Generation Methods

Data were generated using semi-structured, in-depth interview guides specifically designed to explore key aspects of discipline, boundary-setting, trust formation, and parental role negotiation. Separate guides were developed for stepparents and young adults to ensure relevance to each group's experiences. Interviews focused on early experiences of role negotiation and adjustment, processes of establishing discipline and boundaries, interactions among stepparents, biological parents, and children, perceptions of trust, legitimacy, resistance, and emotional responses, as well as factors that facilitated or hindered authority-building. Each interview lasted 60–90 minutes, was conducted in participants' preferred languages, and was audio-recorded with permission to ensure accurate data capture (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), following the systematic approach outlined by Smith, et al (2009), which involved immersing in each interview transcript through reading and re-reading to gain a holistic understanding, making descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual notes, developing emergent themes from significant insights within participants' narratives, clustering related themes into superordinate categories, treating each case with interpretive openness, and finally identifying patterns across cases to integrate perspectives from both stepparents and young adults, thereby deepening the understanding of trust and authority construction; this process was further informed by Social Learning Theory, which provided a framework for interpreting how behavioural modelling, reinforcement, and reciprocal interactions shaped disciplinary relationships (Bandura, 1977; Smith, et al., 2009).

Trustworthiness

To enhance the trustworthiness of this study, several strategies were employed. Credibility was addressed through prolonged engagement with participants, member checking, and triangulation of perspectives from both stepparents and young adults, ensuring that the findings accurately reflected participants' experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). Dependability was established by maintaining a detailed audit trail documenting all methodological decisions, coding processes, and reflexive notes, allowing for consistency and replicability of the research process (Creswell & Poth,

2018). Confirmability was ensured through reflexive journaling, which helped to bracket researcher biases, alongside transparent analytic procedures that allowed findings to be traced back to the data (Nowell et al., 2017). Transferability was supported by providing thick, rich descriptions of participants' contexts, relationships, and experiences, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other similar settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Collectively, these strategies strengthened the study's methodological rigor and the trustworthiness of its outcomes.

Ethical consideration

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Wits Ethics Committee under non-medical protocol number H24/01/23 to ensure adherence to research standards. Participants received detailed information sheets and provided voluntary informed consent (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Confidentiality was maintained using pseudonyms and secure data storage, and anonymity was ensured by removing identifying details from transcripts and reports (Saunders et al., 2015). Participants were allowed to withdraw at any stage without penalty, and non-maleficence was upheld by offering referrals to counselling if sensitive issues arose (Orb et al., 2001). In line with the transformative paradigm, efforts were made to minimise power imbalances and create a safe environment that centred participants' voices (Mertens, 2015).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the intricate and negotiated nature of stepparent–stepchild relationships, where authority, trust, and emotional bonds develop gradually rather than being assumed. In the absence of biological ties, stepparents often face contested legitimacy, boundary testing, and children's resistance, which are further complicated by perceptions of favouritism or unequal treatment. Over time, however, consistent communication, emotional presence, fairness, and support from biological parents facilitate role integration, trust-building, and cooperative discipline. Participants emphasised that authority grounded in respect, empathy, and collaboration is more sustainable than fear-based control, while patience, deliberate communication, and reflective practice underpin successful stepparenting. These findings underscore the relational and iterative processes through which stepfamilies navigate authority, trust, and family cohesion, aligning with recent research on stepfamily dynamics (Al-Taie & Abdulhussein, 2025; Ganong et al., 2022; Jensen, 2025; Lobo et al., 2025).

Table 1 Stepparenting: Themes, Findings, and Implications

Major Theme	Key Findings / Insights	Implications
Negotiating Authority and Boundary-Setting in the Absence of Biological Ties	Authority is not automatic; it is relationally negotiated. Early stages involve contested legitimacy, role ambiguity, resistance, fear, and challenges from children and extended family. Discipline may shift from fear-based to relationally sensitive, while unfairness or favoritism undermines trust.	Effective authority depends on emotional investment, patience, fairness, and consistent boundary-setting. Addressing loyalty conflicts and family dynamics is essential for legitimacy and family cohesion.
Negotiating Trust and Authority Through Relational Processes	Trust and authority develop gradually through respect, empathy, consistency, presence, and collaborative engagement. Roles evolve over time from outsider to co-parent, with children's loyalty and power dynamics shaping compliance.	Relationally earned authority fosters long-term stability and cooperation. Sustainable stepfamily integration requires consistent, fair, and emotionally attuned interactions.
Behavioural and Relational Conditions Facilitating or Hindering Stepparent Integration	Role modelling, reinforcement of shared parenting norms, biological parent support, and reflective adaptive practices facilitate integration. Inconsistency, lack of support, or absence of reflection hinders authority and relational acceptance.	Active co-parent collaboration, modelling positive behaviour, and adaptive learning are critical for trust-building, authority, and harmonious stepfamily functioning.

Major Theme 1: Negotiating Authority and Boundary-Setting in the Absence of Biological Ties

This theme captures stepparents' lived experiences of discipline and boundary-setting within blended family contexts, illustrating how authority is neither automatic nor uncontested. Rather than being conferred by adult status alone, authority emerged as emotionally charged, relationally negotiated, and socially mediated. Participants' narratives highlight how the absence of biological ties generates role ambiguity, challenges legitimacy, and intensifies sensitivity around discipline, particularly during the early stages of stepfamily formation.

Sub-theme 1.1: Contested Legitimacy and Role Ambiguity

Stepparent authority was consistently described as fragile, conditional, and highly dependent on relational acceptance. Participants reported that children frequently challenged their legitimacy, often explicitly invoking the absence of biological ties. As one participant reflected, "*Children are at times good, but their responses remind me that I'm just a stepparent,*" while another recalled a direct confrontation: "*The 12-year-old said, 'You're not my mom!'*" Such accounts illustrate that authority in stepfamilies is not positional but relational constructed through ongoing interaction, trust-building, and emotional investment rather than assumed by role designation alone.

Extended family dynamics further complicated these negotiations of authority. One participant explained, *“The biological grandmother made me feel less of a mother, questioning everything I do,”* suggesting that external family members can actively undermine stepparent legitimacy. Such interference not only weakened the stepparent’s authority but also signalled to children that disciplinary power resided elsewhere, thereby reinforcing role ambiguity. This finding echoes existing literature which suggests that unclear boundaries and divided loyalties within extended family systems often destabilise stepparental roles and delay the consolidation of authority (Al-Taie & Abdulhussein, 2025; van Houdt et al., 2022).

Reflections from adult children further revealed how loyalty conflicts shape perceptions of stepparent authority. One participant noted, *“I felt she would take away my father from me,”* highlighting how fears of emotional displacement can manifest as resistance to discipline and boundary-setting. Within this context, authority became entangled with deeper concerns about belonging, identity, and emotional security. These findings suggest that resistance to stepparent authority is not merely behavioural but rooted in unresolved attachment anxieties and perceived threats to existing family bonds.

Overall, this sub-theme underscores that authority in blended families is negotiated within a complex emotional terrain shaped by biological ties, extended family influence, and loyalty dynamics. Effective boundary-setting, therefore, appears to depend less on enforcing control and more on cultivating relational legitimacy over time.

Sub-theme 1.2: Early Resistance, Fear, and Boundary Testing

The initial stages of stepfamily formation were marked by pronounced emotional uncertainty, fear, and boundary testing by both children and stepparents. Participants described early interactions as “awkward” and “rocky at first, testing boundaries,” highlighting a transitional period characterised by unclear expectations and fragile relational dynamics.

Stepparents reported considerable fear and hesitation around disciplining, with one participant noting, *“They were scared of me and sometimes I felt really scared to discipline,”* underscoring mutual apprehension rooted in role ambiguity. Children’s resistance was often intensified by loyalty conflicts toward biological parents, as reflected in the statement, *“Wuuu... horrible. He felt I was here to take his place.”* Notably, even adult children recalled experiencing *“curiosity and apprehension”* during early interactions, suggesting that emotional uncertainty transcends developmental stages. Consistent with qualitative research, these findings indicate that early stepfamily transitions are characterised by fear, resistance, and cautious engagement as family members test boundaries and negotiate emerging roles (Fang & Zartler, 2024). Consequently, boundary-setting in this phase was tentative, emotionally charged, and highly susceptible to misinterpretation.

Sub-theme 1.3: Discipline as an Emotional and Moral Tension Space

Discipline emerged as a key site of tension in stepparents’ narratives, where the demands of care, authority, legal boundaries, and moral responsibility intersected. Participants described their disciplinary practices as evolving over time, often reflecting a gradual shift from harsh, fear-based strategies toward more emotionally attuned and relationally sensitive approaches. Early in the stepfamily formation, some stepparents reported believing that strictness and severity were necessary to establish control and legitimacy. As one participant reflected, *“At first I felt being harsh was the way, but later I realised they need love and attention.”* This shift highlights a growing recognition that discipline in stepfamilies is inseparable from emotional connection and trust-building.

Despite this evolution, some accounts revealed a continued reliance on coercive practices, justified as a means of asserting authority in relationships where trust was not yet firmly established. Statements such as *“The shouting and beating made her gain respect because it instilled fear”* reflect the persistent belief that fear can substitute for relational authority. However, participants also acknowledged the limitations of such approaches, noting that while harsh discipline sometimes produced short-term compliance, it often undermined trust and negatively affected children’s emotional well-being. These accounts underscore the dilemma stepparents face as they attempt to balance the need for authority with the fragile nature of stepchild–stepparent relationships.

Disciplinary practices were further shaped by awareness of legal and human rights frameworks, which constrained the use of physical punishment and reinforced alternative approaches. As one participant noted, *“Faced with human rights and country laws, I can only verbally discipline.”* This awareness prompted greater reliance on dialogue, explanation, and emotional regulation, even when such strategies felt less immediately effective. Consistent with existing literature, the findings suggest that coercive discipline is associated with poorer long-term relational and developmental outcomes, whereas warmth, consistency, and emotional responsiveness support healthier adjustment and more sustainable authority in stepfamily contexts (Huang & Chazan Cohen, 2025; Repond, 2024; Ganong & Sanner, 2023).

Sub-theme 1.4: Experiences of Unfairness, Favouritism, and Emotional Harm

Perceptions of unfair treatment and favouritism emerged as powerful factors that undermined both the legitimacy of authority and stepchildren’s emotional security within the family. Participants described experiences of punitive and unequal discipline, often perceived as arbitrary or undeserved, as illustrated by statements such as *“She would beat me for crimes I didn’t commit”* and *“She favoured her kids more.”* Such practices were not interpreted merely as disciplinary actions but were internalised as signals of rejection and exclusion. Over time, these experiences eroded trust in the stepparent’s authority and reinforced feelings of marginalisation within the household.

Notably, some stepchildren appeared to normalise unequal treatment, accepting it as an unavoidable consequence of their non-biological status. One participant reflected, *“I accepted the situation because I’m not the biological child,”* highlighting how hierarchical distinctions within blended families can become taken for granted. This normalisation may serve as a coping strategy but simultaneously obscures the emotional costs of persistent inequity. Existing research consistently demonstrates that perceived parental favouritism is associated with both internalising (e.g., anxiety, withdrawal) and externalising (e.g., aggression, defiance) difficulties, particularly during adolescence, a developmental period marked by heightened sensitivity to issues of justice and fairness (Jensen & Thomsen, 2024; Eradus et al., 2024). Collectively, these findings underscore that boundary-setting perceived as unjust not only weakens parental authority but also inflicts enduring emotional harm, with implications for stepchildren’s well-being and long-term relational trust.

Major Theme 2: Negotiating Trust and Authority Through Relational Processes

This theme explores how trust and authority in stepfamilies are not automatically granted but are continuously negotiated through relational, emotional, and temporal processes. Rather than being imposed through hierarchical control or coercion, authority emerges through ongoing interactions characterised by mutual respect, emotional attunement, and consistency over time. Participants’ accounts underscore that legitimacy in the stepparenting role is constructed gradually, shaped by the quality of relationships among stepparents, children, and biological parents.

Sub-theme 2.1: Authority as Earned Through Respect Rather Than Imposed Through Fear

Participants consistently emphasised that sustainable authority is cultivated through respect, empathy, and collaborative engagement rather than enforced through fear or unilateral decision-making. Expressions such as *“Authority is earned, not demanded”* and *“Acting alone has never worked”* reflect a clear rejection of authoritarian, fear-based approaches to discipline and boundary-setting. Instead, participants highlighted the importance of listening, explaining expectations, and aligning with both children and biological parents in the exercise of authority.

Adult children’s reflections further reinforced this perspective, with one noting, *“When I felt respected and heard, I was more likely to follow rules.”* Such accounts suggest that compliance in stepfamily contexts is closely tied to relational trust and perceived fairness rather than positional power. These narratives align with empirical evidence indicating that authoritative parenting characterised by warmth, responsiveness, and clearly communicated boundaries promotes internalised self-regulation, cooperation, and psychological security. In contrast, authoritarian approaches rooted in control and fear have been shown to erode trust and intensify resistance (Awiszus et al., 2025; Cupar, 2025; Jo, 2025).

Within the emotionally sensitive and often precarious terrain of stepfamilies, authority grounded in respect emerged as not only more ethical but also more effective. Participants’ experiences illustrate that relationally earned authority supports stability, fosters mutual understanding, and strengthens long-term family cohesion.

Sub-theme 2.2: Building Trust Through Consistency, Presence, and Fairness

Trust emerged as a gradual, relational process grounded in stepparents’ consistent engagement, emotional availability, and fair treatment of children. Participants highlighted the importance of everyday, intentional behaviours such as *“spending quality time, listening actively, and following through on promises,”* which signalled commitment and reliability. Even seemingly small, ordinary interactions carried significant relational weight, as reflected in the remark, *“He played Lego with me. Now he’s cool.”* These moments fostered familiarity and emotional safety, allowing children to reassess their perceptions of stepparents over time.

Existing research aligns closely with these findings, demonstrating that responsive caregiving, emotional presence, and predictable behaviour are central to the development of emotional security and relational trust in children (Lobo et al., 2025; Ratajczak, 2025). Participants further noted that fair and consistent treatment particularly in discipline and rule enforcement—helped reduce perceptions of bias or threat. Such practices communicated dependability and respect, enabling children to gradually reinterpret stepparents not only as trustworthy caregivers but also as legitimate and safe authority figures within the blended family system.

Sub-theme 2.3: Evolving Roles and Identity Shifts Over Time

Participants’ narratives revealed that stepparenting roles are not static but evolve gradually over time. Many stepparents described an initial sense of being “outsiders,” characterised by uncertainty, limited authority, and emotional distance. Through sustained communication, patience, and a willingness to adapt to existing family dynamics, these roles shifted toward greater acceptance and legitimacy. This progression was captured vividly in participants’ reflections, such as *“From ‘outside’ to co-parent. Now we vibe,”* and *“Trust developed gradually,”* highlighting how relational closeness and mutual understanding were built incrementally rather than instantaneously.

Social Learning Theory provides a useful lens for understanding this process. As children consistently observed stepparents’ supportive, predictable, and respectful behaviours over time, they began to internalise these interactions, leading to revised perceptions of the stepparents’ role, authority, and trustworthiness (Jensen, 2025). These evolving identities underscore the iterative and relational nature of stepfamily integration, where legitimacy and belonging are co-constructed through everyday interactions, rather than conferred automatically by family structure alone.

Sub-theme 2.4: Loyalty Conflicts and Power Dynamics in Authority Negotiation

Children's loyalty to biological parents significantly shaped how authority was negotiated. *Participants recalled wishing for protection, "Sometimes I wished he saved me,"* illustrating how parental alliances influence children's perceptions of fairness and safety. Rather than viewing authority as isolated disciplinary acts, participants experienced it through the emotional bonds and power relationships within the family. Research in family systems highlights that children interpret authority in the context of attachment and trust; where a child feels closer to one caregiver, they may resist or reinterpret the authority of another (Bosmans & Kerns, 2015). Secure attachment to a primary caregiver supports a child's sense of safety and makes authority from multiple adults easier to accept, whereas loyalty conflicts can create tension and selective compliance (Forslund & Duschinsky, 2021).

Power dynamics also influenced how children judged fairness and protection. When one caregiver was perceived as dominant and another as a source of emotional support, children negotiated authority not just based on rules but on relational safety. This aligns with recent work showing that children's responses to adults depend on perceived legitimacy and fairness grounded in established relational bonds (Engelmann & Tomasello, 2019). Thus, authority negotiation was shaped by both emotional loyalty and the balance of power among caregivers, suggesting that children's compliance and resistance are deeply embedded in family relationships rather than isolated to single interactions.

Major Theme 3: Behavioural and Relational Conditions Facilitating or Hindering Stepparent Integration

This theme highlights how specific behavioural and relational factors such as role modelling, reinforcement strategies, and parental support either facilitate or impede the successful integration of stepparents into blended family systems. The findings suggest that stepparent authority and relational acceptance are not solely determined by formal roles but are actively negotiated through everyday interactions and shared parenting practices.

Sub-theme 3.1: Role Modelling and Reinforcement of Parenting Norms

Stepparents who demonstrated calm communication, emotional regulation, and fairness were more readily accepted by children, suggesting that consistent modelling of positive behaviour fosters trust and relational stability. When stepparents and biological parents aligned their approaches and reinforced shared parenting norms, children exhibited greater behavioural regulation and respect for boundaries. Conversely, inconsistencies whether in discipline, expectations, or emotional responses often weakened stepparent authority and created relational tension. These findings align with Bandura's social learning theory (1977), which emphasises that children learn and internalise behaviours through observation and reinforcement. They also underscore the importance of co-parental collaboration, where mutual support and consistent messaging enhance both relational cohesion and the stepparent's perceived legitimacy. Practically, this suggests that structured guidance and shared behavioural expectations can be instrumental in promoting smoother integration and reducing conflict within blended families.

Sub-theme 3.2: The Critical Role of Biological Parent Support

Biological parent support emerged as a pivotal factor in the stepparenting experience, shaping both confidence and authority in managing the family dynamic. Participants described feeling empowered and motivated when the biological parent reinforced their decisions, with one noting, "When bio parents back me up, I'm like 'let's do this!'" and another emphasising the importance of a "united front." In contrast, the absence of consistent support often led to hesitation, uncertainty, and a perceived weakening of disciplinary authority. These experiences highlight the crucial influence of parental alignment, corroborating research that underscores how shared strategies and mutual reinforcement between biological and stepparents are central to establishing cohesion, stability, and trust within stepfamilies (Ganong et al., 2022; Lin & Seltzer, 2023). Supportive collaboration not only strengthens stepparental confidence but also models consistency and fairness for children, reinforcing family unity and facilitating smoother relational interactions.

Sub-theme 3.3: Reflection, Learning, and Adaptive Stepparenting

Participants' advice, such as "*Patience, communication, and consistency are key,*" revealed a process of deep reflection and ongoing learning in navigating the complexities of stepfamily life. Stepparents described a journey of trial and error, recognising that successful integration into a blended family required more than immediate disciplinary authority; it involved building trust gradually, managing their own emotional responses, and engaging in deliberate, consistent communication with both their partners and stepchildren. Several participants highlighted the importance of monitoring their reactions, staying calm during conflicts, and using reflective practices to adjust their strategies over time. This adaptive approach aligns with contemporary research on stepfamily functioning, which emphasizes the dynamic nature of stepparent-child relationships and the necessity of emotional intelligence, flexibility, and sustained effort for long-term relational success (Braithwaite et al., 2025; Jensen, 2025). The findings suggest that stepparents who actively reflect on their experiences and integrate lessons learned are better able to foster trust, establish effective boundaries, and support a harmonious family environment, underscoring the role of reflexivity as a critical skill in stepfamily parenting.

Theory-Mapped Discussion Table

Major Theme	Key Processes Identified	Theoretical Lens	Illustrative Contribution
Negotiating Authority and Boundary-Setting	Role ambiguity, contested legitimacy, boundary testing, favouritism	Family Systems Theory	Authority emerges through interactional patterns and family subsystems rather than formal roles
Negotiating Trust and Authority	Respect-based authority, consistency, evolving roles, loyalty conflicts	Authoritative Parenting; Social Learning Theory	Children internalise authority through observed fairness, warmth, and consistency
Behavioural & Relational Conditions	Modelling, reinforcement, parental alignment, reflection	Social Learning Theory; Family Systems Theory	Stepparent integration is reinforced through modelling and systemic parental support

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study illustrate that stepparent–stepchild relationships are complex, negotiated, and highly relational, with authority and trust developing gradually rather than being assumed. Stepparents’ legitimacy is contested in the absence of biological ties, particularly when children test boundaries or perceive favouritism, while early resistance and fear shape initial interactions. Over time, consistent communication, emotional presence, fairness, and support from biological parents facilitate role integration, trust building, and cooperative discipline. Harsh or coercive discipline may achieve short-term compliance but undermines trust and emotional well-being, whereas respect-based authority, empathy, and collaborative parenting foster sustainable relational bonds. Participants’ reflections further highlight that patience, deliberate communication, and emotional regulation are critical for successful stepparenting, emphasizing that the development of mutual respect and trust is iterative and shaped by both relational practices and family system dynamics.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance stepfamily functioning, stepparents should adopt strategies that prioritize respect, fairness, and emotional attunement, including consistent engagement, active listening, and predictable routines that build trust and security. Biological parents should actively support stepparents’ authority and co-parenting efforts, ensuring clear, united approaches to discipline and role negotiation. Avoidance of harsh or coercive discipline is essential, with emphasis placed on reasoning, dialogue, and warmth to encourage long-term emotional adjustment. Additionally, patience, reflective practice, and gradual trust-building should guide new stepparents in navigating relational complexities, while professional guidance, counselling, or stepfamily education programs may provide further support in managing loyalty conflicts, boundary ambiguities, and perceptions of favouritism. Collectively, these approaches can foster resilient, cohesive stepfamilies where authority is earned through respect and collaboration rather than imposed through fear.

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INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD STATEMENT

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by University of Witwatersrand protocol number H24/01/23. The conduct of this study has been approved and given relative clearance(s) by the University of South Africa.

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