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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Poortman, A.-R. (2024). Stepgrandparent-stepgrandchild contact in diverse family contexts: Stepfamily structure and existing family relationships. *JFR - Journal of Family Research*, 36, 192-210. <https://doi.org/10.20377/jfr-881>

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Stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact in diverse family contexts: Stepfamily structure and existing family relationships

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Abstract

Objective: To describe stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact and examine how contact varies across stepfamily structures and with the strength of family relationships existing prior to stepfamily formation.

Background: Stepgrandparenthood is on the rise. Little is known, however, about how stepgrandparents enact their likely ambiguous role and how this depends on the opportunities associated with and provided by the broader family context.

Method: Using Dutch survey data, descriptive information about stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact was presented. Random intercept multilevel models were used to analyze 2,261 stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild dyads nested in 1,373 children to assess the role of stepfamily structure and existing family relationships.

Results: Stepgrandparents saw their stepgrandchildren on average several times a year. When the child and/or the stepparent coresided with the biological parent and in the case of half-siblings, contact levels were higher. When the stepparent had biological children living outside the stepfamily's household, stepgrandparents had less contact with stepgrandchildren. Contact was also lower when the divorced biological parents of the child had a nonconflictual relationship.

Conclusion: Overall, the frequency of stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact is low. Coresidence is critical for a higher contact frequency, indicating the importance of contact opportunities and strong within-stepfamily relationships. Strong ties of the stepfamily to a former family may compete with stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild relationships.

Key words: divorce, postdivorce families, intergenerational contact, stepfamily relationships



1. Introduction

The rise in divorce over the past decades has led to an increase in the number of children growing up in stepfamilies (Guzzo, 2017; Van Gaalen & Van Roon, 2020). In addition, contemporary stepfamilies are diverse, and increasingly so, because of the rise in joint physical custody and nonmarital unions among repartnered couples (Meyer et al., 2022; Poortman & Van Gaalen, 2017). These sociodemographic changes have led to a burgeoning research field about stepfamilies (Raley & Sweeney, 2020). Most of this research has focused on the stepfamily itself and the relationships between (step)parents and (step)children (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Kin relationships beyond the stepfamily household have received relatively little attention. However, when parents repartner and stepfamilies are formed, step kin is also brought into the equation. The lack of research on the strength of step kin relationships is unfortunate because such family ties can provide welcome resources to stepfamilies. Stepgrandparents are perhaps the most important step kin in this respect. Grandparents have been argued to be an important source of support for their grandchildren and vice versa, especially in divorced families (Bengtson, 2001). Although findings mostly relate to support exchanges with biological grandparents (e.g., Muller & Litwin, 2011; Ruiz & Silverstein, 2007), research suggests that stepgrandparents and stepgrandchildren may also be important for each other (Chapman et al., 2016; Sanner et al., 2019). Furthermore, stepgrandparents can be important for the (step)parents, i.e., the middle generation, as the older generation often assists them with child care.

Despite their potential importance for stepfamily functioning, it may be difficult for stepgrandparents to realize this potential. The grandparent role, in general, has been argued to be ambiguous because there are few social norms on how to be a grandparent. As a consequence, the role of grandparents may range from hardly being involved to being daily caregivers (Dunifon et al., 2018; Gauthier, 2002; Silverstein & Marengo, 2001). Stepgrandparents in particular may be uncertain about the grandparent role. Stepfamily interactions lack clear legal and social normative guidelines (Cherlin, 1978), and step relationships may be difficult to navigate in the context of existing (biological) family relationships (Sweeney, 2010). The complexity of step relationships adds to the already ambiguous nature of grandparenthood, and expectations about grandparenthood may be difficult to reconcile with expectations about being step kin (Sanner et al., 2019). The role of stepgrandparents may thus be even more complex and diverse.

The first aim of this study is to gain insight into the strength of stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild relationships. Although stepgrandparenthood is no longer a marginal phenomenon (Yahirun et al., 2018), remarkably little descriptive data exist about the strength of these relationships. Besides qualitative research offering an in-depth view of stepgrandparenthood (e.g., Chapman et al., 2016, 2017; Sanner et al., 2019), there is limited large-scale research quantifying the strength of stepgrandchild–stepgrandparent relationships. Studies often employ small samples and have focused on differences between biological and stepgrandparents (e.g., Christensen & Smith, 2002; Coal et al., 2014; Daly & Perry, 2021; Gray & Brogdon, 2017; Pettay et al., 2024; Tanskanen et al., 2020) rather than on the diversity among stepgrandparents. This study uses a larger sample than prior research to describe the frequency of stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact. Note that the data used do not include information on subjective aspects of the relationship, such as emotional closeness, or on support exchanges between stepgrandparents and stepgrandchildren. Although it is not a perfect proxy, contact frequency is often found to be positively associated with emotional closeness and support between generations (e.g., Dykstra & Fokkema, 2011; Steinbach & Silverstein, 2020).

The second aim is to gain insight into the sources of variation in stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact. The limited research thus far has typically compared different types of stepgrandparents based on the pathway to stepgrandparenthood (i.e., by repartnering in the generation of the grandparents or that of the parents) and the duration or timing of stepgrandparenthood (e.g., long-term stepgrandparents versus those who entered stepgrandchildren’s life at a later moment; Chapman et al., 2018; Pashos et al., 2016; Pettay et al., 2024; Steinbach & Silverstein, 2020). We shift the focus to the family context in which stepgrandparents enact their role. Stepgrandparents often engage in ‘role-taking’, meaning that the enactment of their role depends not so much on their own preferences and norms but rather on the expectations and behavior of other family members, such as the middle-generation parents (Chapman et al., 2017, p. 1149-1150). In other words, the role of stepgrandparents likely depends on the opportunities associated with and provided by the broader family context. We examine stepgrandparenthood as a result of divorce and repartnering in the parental middle generation during the past five years. For these so-called ‘inherited’ stepgrandparents (Ganong & Coleman, 2017), the family context may be even more important. Because inherited stepgrandparents became

stepgrandparents by virtue of their child's choices rather than their own, they may be more inclined to 'role-taking', especially when stepfamilies are recent.

We examine two aspects of the family context: (i) the structure of the middle generation stepfamily household and (ii) the presence and strength of existing (biological) family ties outside the stepfamily household. Stepfamily structure is defined by (a) the type of relationship of the biological parent and the stepparent (married, cohabiting, living-apart-together (LAT)); (b) whether the parent has sole, joint or no physical custody of the child; and (c) the presence of stepsiblings and half-siblings. These aspects of stepfamily structure capture the diversity of contemporary stepfamilies and give rise to different opportunities for contact. Because (step)grandchildren and (step)grandparents typically meet each other in the company of the parents, random contact opportunities may be greater when, for example, the stepparent lives in the same household as the stepchild. The strength of within-stepfamily relationships also varies across stepfamily structures, and strong relationships may lead stepfamily members to integrate step kin more into the family network. Contact levels also depend on existing family relationships. Stepgrandparents must establish their position alongside already existing biological grandparent–grandchild relationships and in the context of a possibly tenuous relationship between the divorced biological parents. These relationships may shape the stepgrandparent's role. Biological grandparents may, for instance, act as gatekeepers (Chapman et al., 2017).

The study is located in the Netherlands. This country is no exception to international trends in family dissolution and stepfamily living. The Netherlands witnessed a sharp increase in divorce in the 1970s and 1980s but now has an intermediate divorce rate from an international perspective (OECD, 2022). Additionally, an increasing number of Dutch children live in stepfamilies (Van Gaalen & Van Roon, 2020), suggesting that stepgrandparenthood is not a rare phenomenon in the Netherlands. Furthermore, figures suggest that Dutch stepfamilies have become increasingly diverse, as is, for instance, demonstrated by the rise in joint physical custody and general trends in unmarried cohabitation in the Netherlands (Poortman & Van Gaalen, 2017; Statistics Netherlands, 2023). This makes the country a suitable context for studying the role of structural features in stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact. To our knowledge, there are no comparisons of the Netherlands with other countries regarding the strength of intergenerational ties in a divorced context. However, cross-national studies about intergenerational ties in general show that Dutch parents rank among the highest in Europe in regard to contact between parents and their adult children (Hank, 2007), and the same holds true for Dutch (biological) grandparents providing childcare for their grandchildren (Zanasi et al., 2023). It is difficult to say whether this also holds for stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact because strong biological intergenerational ties may also hinder the development of strong ties between stepgrandparents and stepgrandchildren.

We use data from the second wave of the survey 'New Families in the Netherlands' (NFN; Poortman et al., 2018), held among divorced and separated parents in 2015/2016. These data were gathered for the purpose of examining the complexity of stepfamily relationships and are unique in that they include information about the ties of a focal child to both biological grandparents and stepgrandparents. Furthermore, NFN is large-scale, yielding a total of 2,261 stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild relationships to be analyzed. The data include many types of stepfamilies, including emerging ones such as those with joint physical custody arrangements or with cohabiting or LAT (step)parental relationships. NFN thus allows for a statistically powerful examination of stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild relationships in a wide range of stepfamilies.

In the following, theoretical arguments and hypotheses about the role of stepfamily structure and existing family relationships are presented. After a description of the data and methods, we present descriptive figures about how much contact stepgrandchildren have with their stepgrandparents and test our hypotheses about the role of family structure and existing family relationships. Based on these findings, we end by arriving at three main conclusions about stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact in diverse family contexts and discuss the limitations and broader implications of this study.

2. Stepfamily structure and stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact

2.1 *Type of partner relationship*

Contact opportunities are greater when the stepparent coresides with the biological parent; when stepgrandparents visit their child, the (random) chance that they will then also meet his/her stepchildren (i.e.,

their stepgrandchildren) is greater in the case of coresidence. In addition, living together is often the next step in a relationship, indicating that a couple is sure of the relationship and committed to each other (Liefbroer et al., 2015). Uncertainty and low commitment may lead to fewer investments in family relationships because of the risk of losing such investments in the case of a break-up (Brines & Joyner, 1999). As middle generation (step)parents are often intermediates in the relationships between the oldest and youngest generations (Chapman et al., 2017; Oppelaar & Dykstra, 2004), the uncertainty in LAT relationships may prevent (step)parents from facilitating contact. Parents may, for instance, be cautious about introducing their children to the parents of their LAT partner to protect them from short-lived attachments.

Coresident stepparents are also more involved in the stepchild's life (Gibson-Davis, 2008), implying stronger ties between the stepparent and the stepchild. When the stepparent is hardly involved, (s)he may feel little need to establish (strong) relationships between the stepchild and his/her parents. In the case of strong ties, stepparents may want to share this part of their life with their parents, and parents may find it important to introduce the children to the parents of the new parental figure. Stepgrandchildren's accounts of how close relationships with their inherited stepgrandparents were built indeed suggest that a strong relationship with the stepparent is important: when their relationship with the stepparent was close, their relationships with the parents of this stepparent were 'by extension' also close (Sanner et al., 2019, p. 489).

As a corollary, marriage is expected to lead to more contact between stepgrandparents and stepgrandchildren than cohabitation. Marriage implies greater commitment than cohabitation (Brines & Joyner, 1999), and married stepparents have been found to be more involved in parenting than cohabiting stepparents (Berger et al., 2008; Ivanova, 2017). Married (step)parents may thus encourage stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact to a greater extent. Stepgrandchildren and stepgrandparents may also prefer more contact because of the likely stronger ties between the stepchild and the stepparent in the case of marriage. An alternative argument relates to selective entry into marriage: family-oriented couples may be more likely to marry, implying more stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact. Research on biological grandparenthood—although often indirect by focusing on ties between parents and grandparents—offers modest to weak support for intergenerational ties being stronger if parents are married (Hogerbrugge & Dykstra, 2009; Meggiolaro, 2018; Nazio & Saraceno, 2013). We hypothesize *that stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact is lowest in the case of a LAT relationship between the (step)parents and highest in the case of marriage, with cohabitation falling in between (H1)*.

2.2 Physical custody arrangements

The physical custody arrangement of the stepgrandchild determines the amount of time that the child spends in the stepfamily's home. Most of the time is spent in the stepfamily home in the case of sole custody and least in the case of a nonresident parent, while joint physical custody, which is a part-time residence arrangement, falls between these extremes. The more time children spend in the stepfamily's home, the more likely it is that children will meet the stepgrandparents if meeting opportunities are random.

Stepparent–stepchild relationships are also likely to be stronger if the child spends more time at the (step)parent's home. A child's coresidence, full-time or part-time, has been found to be associated with stronger parent–child ties, including those between stepparents and stepchildren (Bastais & Mortelmans, 2017; Gibson-Davis, 2008; Hawkins et al., 2006). As elaborated in the previous section, stepparents (and parents) will be more keen on establishing (strong) relationships with the stepgrandparents if the children figure more prominently in their lives. For similar reasons, stepgrandparents and stepgrandchildren themselves may want to become a larger part of each other's lives when the stepparent–stepchild relationship is stronger.

Another reason for more contact may be the limited possibilities for gatekeeping of the other parent (the ex-partner), although it is questionable whether the ex-partner is actually able to restrict contact in someone else's household. Nevertheless, assuming that the ex-partner's interest in strong ties between his or her children and the parents of the new partner of his/her ex-partner may not be that strong, the extent to which the ex-partner is able to restrict contact will be less when the children are living (part-time or full-time) with the other parent—implying greater opportunities for stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact. Previous research on biological grandparenthood indeed shows that residence arrangements are important determinants of grandparent–grandchild contact (Jappens & Van Bavel, 2016; Westphal et al., 2015). We expect *that stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact is highest when parents have sole physical custody and lowest when parents are nonresident parents, with joint physical custody falling in between (H2)*.

2.3 *The presence of step- and half-siblings*

A shared biological child of the divorced parent and the stepparent (i.e., half-sibling of the stepgrandchild) or the presence of biological children of the stepparent (i.e., stepsiblings) may increase stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact. This increased contact may be a byproduct of the biological relationship between the half-siblings and/or stepsiblings and the stepgrandparents, creating more (random) opportunities for contact. When people have children, relationships with their parents (i.e., biological grandparents) often intensify. For example, grandparents are typically the ones who offer the greater support and help needed in taking care of the (young) children (Glaser et al., 2010; Tanskanen, 2017). Stepgrandparents are thus more likely to visit the stepfamily if their biological grandchildren (i.e., step/half-siblings) also live there, leading to more opportunities for contact between stepgrandchildren and stepgrandparents.

It is questionable whether stepsiblings and half-siblings lead to more stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact via stronger within-stepfamily ties. Step- or half-siblings imply more bridging ties within the stepfamily. In particular, a half-sibling may represent a strong bridging tie, as it constitutes a biological and thus evolutionarily and socially stronger (Kalmijn, 2013) relationship with the stepgrandchild and the parent. Although such ties could be argued to be integrative forces leading (step)parents to (further) include stepgrandparents in the family network, an opposite effect may also occur. Research on the effect of step- or half-siblings on relationships within the stepfamily has found no effects on the strength of such relationships or on family belonging or negative effects (see review by Sanner et al., 2018). These findings imply no difference or even less contact with stepgrandparents when there are step- or half-siblings compared to no step/half-siblings present in the household.

The arguments thus far differentiate between stepfamilies with step- and half-siblings in the household and those without, but the latter group is heterogeneous. It includes both stepfamilies in which the stepparent has no (mutual) children and stepfamilies in which the stepparent has children (i.e., stepsiblings) living elsewhere. Previously divorced stepparents, in particular, may have children who live with their ex-partner. These nonresident stepsiblings constitute longstanding, biological ties for stepgrandparents. As these stepsiblings are not part of the stepfamily's household, their impact on stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild ties will be elaborated upon in the next section. We now focus on the comparison with having no step- or half-siblings. The above arguments about these differences were contradictory, predicting either positive or negative implications of having half/stepsiblings living in the household for stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact. To our knowledge, there is no previous research about the association between having step/half-siblings in the household and stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact. The absence of empirical evidence makes it difficult to predict a priori which effect (positive or negative) is more plausible. We therefore have two opposing hypotheses: *compared to having no step- or half-siblings, stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact is greater when step- or half-siblings live in the household (H3a), or stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact is lower in the presence of step- or half-siblings (H3b).*

3. Existing (biological) family relationships and stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact

3.1 *Biological grandparent–grandchild relationships*

Nonresident stepsiblings of stepgrandchildren are biological grandchildren of stepgrandparents, and these biological relationships may compete with stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild relationships (Steinbach & Silverstein, 2020). This may simply be the result of time competition: time spent visiting biological grandchildren elsewhere cannot be spent visiting stepgrandchildren. More subtle processes may also be at play, at least in the common case of stepsiblings living with the ex-partner of the stepparent. Grandparents and grandchildren who are biologically related via the nonresident parent have less contact than those related via part-time or full-time resident parents (Westphal et al., 2015). Because of this limited contact on the biological side, much contact between stepgrandchildren and stepgrandparents may foster feelings of guilt in both stepparents and stepgrandparents (Kalmijn, 2020). Such feelings are likely not at play when there are no biological grandchildren or when these grandchildren live in the same household as the stepgrandchildren. Compared to no stepsiblings or resident stepsiblings, stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact would thus be less frequent in the case of nonresident stepsiblings. Alternatively, frequent

stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild relationships may compensate for little contact on the biological side (Chapman et al., 2017; Van Houdt et al., 2020). It is questionable, however, whether such substitution effects imply that contact with the stepgrandchild is even more frequent than when there are no stepsiblings or resident stepsiblings. We thus expect that *compared to having no stepsiblings or resident stepsiblings, stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact is less frequent in the case of nonresident stepsiblings (H4)*.

Relationships of the stepgrandchild to his or her biological grandparents may either compete with or strengthen ties to stepgrandparents. The grandparents can be related to the stepgrandchild via the parent in the stepfamily or via the ex-partner. In the former case, both the biological grandparents and stepgrandparents have direct links to the stepfamily, which is not the case for the latter type of grandparent. For biological grandparent–grandchild relationships linked to the stepfamily, strong relationships may be associated with stronger stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild relationships because these relationships indicate family-oriented values and habits in the stepfamily. If (step)family members strongly endorse relationships with grandparents or are used to frequent visits or family meetings, this may spill over to step kin, leading to more stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact. Note that this argument does not hold for the grandparents along the other side (via the ex-partner). Another argument for a positive association is the aforementioned feelings of guilt (Kalmijn, 2020), which may arise when there is little contact with biological grandparents, leading to limited contact with stepgrandparents.

Strong ties of the stepgrandchild with his or her biological grandparents may also decrease contact with the stepgrandparents. Qualitative research suggests that stepgrandparents may feel that there is little room left for them because biological grandparents are already highly involved or even discourage stepgrandparents' involvement (Chapman et al., 2017). Seen from the other side, when biological grandparents are hardly involved, both stepgrandparents and stepgrandchildren feel that stepgrandparents can step in and somehow substitute for this lack of (frequent) contact (Chapman et al., 2017; Sanner et al., 2019). Given the competing arguments and the absence of previous findings supporting either argument, we propose two opposing hypotheses: *stronger ties between the stepgrandchild and his or her biological grandparents are associated with greater stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact (H5a) or with reduced stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact (H5b)*.

3.2 Relationships between the ex-partners

A poor relationship between the biological parent and his or her ex-partner may lead to less contact with stepgrandparents. The (step)parents—and perhaps also the stepgrandparents and stepgrandchildren themselves—might not want to strain the relationship with the ex-partner any further by strengthening ties with the stepgrandparents. A less troubled relationship might make stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact easier, as such strong intergenerational ties to the newly formed stepfamily jeopardize ties to the ex-partner to a lesser extent. To the extent that the ex-partner is able to do so, (s)he may also be less keen on gatekeeping and restricting contact with stepgrandparents in the case of good relationships with his/her ex-partner. Good relationships between the ex-partners may thus lead to more stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact.

Studies about (step)parent–(step)child relationships, however, suggest the opposite. A strained relationship between the parent and his/her ex-partner has been found to be associated with stronger stepparent–stepchild ties, for example, because the parent favors the stepparent's involvement over the other biological parent's involvement and encourages strong stepparent–stepchild ties (Fang et al., 2022; Hornstra et al., 2020). Such facilitative behavior is less likely in the case of a good relationship, leaving less room for the stepparent. Because stepparents may thus be more involved with their stepchildren in the case of a poor relationship between ex-partners, this also suggests more contact with stepgrandparents: the stronger stepparent–stepchild ties are, the more likely it is that (step)parents encourage contact and the more interest stepgrandparents and stepgrandchildren have in establishing strong relationships. In addition, the tendency to facilitate step relationships when the relationship with the ex-partner is strained may not only hold for parent–child relationships but may also extend to other family relationships. Regardless of the stepparent's relationship with the stepchild, such a tendency would also imply more stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact in the case of a weak relationship between ex-partners. Because the empirical evidence—be it about parent–child relationships—suggests negative effects, we hypothesize that *the stronger the relationship between the biological parent and his/her ex-partner is, the less frequent stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact will be (H6)*.

4. Method

Data from the second wave of the Dutch survey ‘New Families in the Netherlands’ (NFN; Poortman & Van Gaalen, 2019) were used, as this wave included questions about contact between stepgrandchildren and stepgrandparents. The data were gathered in 2015-2016 as a follow-up of the first wave in 2012-2013. The main sample of NFN was parents of minor child(ren) who divorced or separated from a cohabiting union in 2010. The sample was drawn by Statistics Netherlands (CBS). At the start of NFN, both parents of a former household were invited to participate in an online survey, with the final reminder containing a paper-and-pencil questionnaire. The response rate was 39% at the individual level and 58% at the household level (Poortman et al., 2014), yielding a total of 4,481 respondents in wave 1. When respondents had indicated that they did not object to being approached again, they were invited to participate in wave 2. In total, 2,544 respondents participated, yielding a response rate of 63% at the person level and 69% at the household level. In addition, a refreshment sample was invited to participate in wave 2 to compensate for panel attrition. This sample was drawn from the same population as the original sample, with response rates of 32% (person level) and 52% (household level). In total, 920 people in the refreshment sample responded. Combined with the original sample, 3,464 people participated in wave 2. Patterns of over- and underrepresentation in wave 2, be it the original or refreshment sample, mirrored those in wave 1—the most important being that formerly cohabiting parents, men, younger people, those from non-Western descent, people with low incomes and those on welfare were underrepresented. Panel attrition between waves 1 and 2 was found to be more likely among people with lower socioeconomic status (in terms of education and employment), men, younger respondents and those who were less satisfied with their lives in wave 1 (Poortman et al., 2018).

Given our focus on stepfamilies, we selected respondents who indicated that they had a partner in wave 2 ($N = 2,157$). Repartnered respondents were asked to report about contact with stepgrandparents (i.e., parents of their current partner) for a focal child. This child was selected in wave 1: if all children with the ex-partner were younger than 10, respondents reported about the oldest child; if one or more children with the ex-partner were older than 10, they reported about the youngest child. In wave 2, respondents reported about the same focal child. For the refreshment sample, a similar procedure was applied, with a cutoff age of 13 years, as wave 2 took place three years later. This focal child is the stepgrandchild in our analyses. Because contact with the stepgrandparents was asked for both the stepgrandmother and the stepgrandfather, we transformed the data into a long format, so that each stepgrandparent (be it the stepgrandmother and/or stepgrandfather) contributed a case to the dataset. Only respondents who had valid information about whether stepgrandparents were deceased and who had surviving stepgrandparents were included because, otherwise, contact frequency was not asked for, yielding 1,791 respondents reporting about 2,927 stepgrandparents. We furthermore excluded respondents who indicated that the focal child had an ‘other’ resident arrangement than the child living most of the time with them, their ex-partner or with both an equal amount of time, leaving 1,671 respondents reporting about 2,741 stepgrandparents. Similarly, we excluded respondents who indicated an ‘other’ resident arrangement for the children of their current partner (i.e., stepsiblings of focal child), leaving 1,591 cases reporting about 2,613 stepgrandparents. Additionally, we excluded the few respondents reporting that their current partner had the same gender as they had, leaving 1,564 respondents reporting about 2,569 stepgrandparents. Finally, we applied listwise deletion of missing data on the variables in the analyses, resulting in 2,261 observations on stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild dyads reported by 1,373 parents.

4.1. Measures

Stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact. When respondents indicated that the mother and/or the father of their current partner were still alive, they reported how often the focal child had seen that stepgrandparent in the past year. In addition to the option ‘Don’t know’, which was coded as a missing value, the answer options ranged from 1 ‘Daily’ to 8 ‘Less than once a year’. These answer options were reverse coded so that high scores indicated frequent contact. We then recoded the categories to the (approximate) number of yearly contact moments: daily = 365; several times a week = 104; once a week = 52; several times a month = 24; once a month = 12; several times a year = 6; once per year = 1 and less than once a year = 0. This recoding allows for regression analysis. Because of the skew to the right and to avoid too much influence from the extremes, we transformed the variable by taking the natural log ($\ln(y+1)$); for a similar procedure, see Westphal et al.,

2015). An advantage is that the regression parameters can be interpreted as the percentage change in contact by using the following formula: $100*(e^{bX}-1)$ or $100*(1- e^{bX})$.

Structure stepfamily. The *type of relationship* between the stepparent and the parent was measured by asking whether respondents were married to their current partner, were in an unmarried cohabiting relationship, or had a steady relationship (LAT relationship). Dummy variables were constructed for each of these three options. The *postdivorce residence arrangement* was measured by respondents' reports about where the focal child lived most of the time: 1 'With me', 2 'With my ex-partner', or 3 'With both about an equal amount of time' (the 'Other' category was excluded; see the data section). Three dummy variables were constructed to represent these different arrangements. The sibling structure was first measured by whether the respondent and his/her partner had biological/adopted children together. If so, they scored 1 on the dummy variable for whether or not a *half-sibling* was present in the household. Second, if the respondent's partner had children from a prior relationship, respondents were asked with whom these children lived most of the time: 1 'With their partner', 2 'With the ex-partner of their partner', 3 'With both their partner and his/her ex-partner about equally', or 4 'All children live on their own' (the 'Other' category was excluded). Options 1 and 3 indicate full- and part-time resident stepchildren in the stepparent's household, and if respondents gave these answers, they scored 1 on the dummy variable for *having resident stepsiblings*. Note that part-time and full-time residences are combined here, but preliminary analyses revealed no statistically significant difference in stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact between these groups. Because—as will be elaborated below—options 2 and 4 were used to construct a measure for nonresident stepsiblings, the reference group is 'Having no stepsiblings'. Note that the variable for resident stepsiblings refers to the stepparent's household. Stepsiblings thus do not necessarily live in the household of the stepgrandchild (the focal child) in the case of a LAT relationship between the parent and stepparent or in the case where the focal child resides with the ex-partner. We, however, also consider these structural characteristics, and it would imply combinations (thus interactions) of these separate structural aspects to measure the extent to which stepsiblings actually live with the focal child. This not only results in extensive and difficult-to-interpret categories but also leads to less power, as some combinations are relatively rare (e.g., the combination of a nonresident focal child, a resident stepsibling and a LAT relationship holds for 78 cases).

Existing family relationships. As explained above, respondents reported with whom the child(ren) of their current partner (i.e., stepsiblings of the focal child) lived most of the time. A dummy variable was created for *having nonresident stepsiblings*, scoring a 1 if these stepsiblings lived with the ex-partner of their current partner or if all stepsiblings lived on their own (reference: no stepsiblings). Most nonresident stepsiblings lived with the ex-partner of the stepparent ($N = 420$) rather than on their own ($N = 117$). Additional analyses distinguishing between these two groups showed that the regression coefficients were quite similar, although only the coefficient for living with the ex-partner was statistically significant (likely because of the higher N). The strength of the relationships of the focal child with his/her biological grandparents was first assessed by asking respondents how often the focal child saw their mother and/or their father—i.e., *contact with the biological grandparents via the respondent*—in case their parent(s) were alive. Answering categories ranged from 1 'Daily' to 8 'Less than once a year', with an additional option 'Don't know', which was coded missing. Answers were reverse coded, and when both the grandmother and the grandfather were alive, the maximum score was calculated because the correlation between contact with the grandmother and contact with the grandfather was too high ($r = .75$) to include separate indicators for the grandmother and grandfather. Because of its categorical nature, we constructed dummy variables for each category. The two highest (i.e., Daily; Several times a week) and the two lowest categories (i.e., Once a year; Less than once a year) were combined because the 'Daily' and 'Once a year' categories contained only a few cases (< 40). The use of dummy variables also allows for nonlinear patterns (see Analytical strategy). When both biological grandparents were deceased, the most common score was assigned, and we controlled for whether one or both grandparents were deceased. Second, a similar procedure was used to construct measures for *contact with the biological grandparents via the ex-partner*, based on questions about how often the focal child saw the mother and father of the respondent's ex-partner. Because a Wald test of whether all estimates for the dummy variables was not statistically significant (see Appendix, Table A1), we chose to include a more parsimonious measure. Similar to the dependent variable, we recoded the categories to the yearly number of contacts and took the natural logarithm. Note that NFN does not contain information about subjective aspects of the relationships with grandparents, such as their quality. For the relationship between the respondent and his/her ex-partner, we first used the question of how often respondents had *contact with their ex-partner* with contact being seeing each other, telephoning, e-mailing, etc. Answers ranged from 0 'Daily' to 8 'Never'. The

variable was reverse coded so that high scores represented frequent contact. To examine nonlinearity (see Analytical strategy), we first constructed dummy variables for each category, in which the categories 'Once year' and 'Less than once a year' were combined ($N < 50$). Because the Wald test for all estimates being zero was not statistically significant (see Appendix, Table A1), a linear measure similar to the dependent variable was used instead (i.e., recoding the categories to a yearly number of contacts and taking the natural logarithm). Second, we used a variable indicating the amount of *conflict with the ex-partner*. Respondents reported how often there were currently tensions or conflicts between them and their ex-partner, ranging from 1 'Almost never' to 4 'Very often'. This categorical variable was included by constructing dummy variables for each category. Third, we used an indicator of the *quality of the relationship between former partners*. The respondents were asked to describe their relationship with their ex-partner on a scale from 1 'Very bad' to 10 'Absolutely perfect'. A similar question has been used in the NSFH wave 2 (Bumpass & Sweet, 2018). This scale can be regarded as continuous, but we also estimated models with dummy variables for each category (see Appendix, Table A1). These analyses showed no statistically significant relationship with stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact, and we therefore included a continuous specification (ranging from 1 to 10). The correlations between this variable and the other two indicators (measured as continuous variables) were quite high: $r = -.61$ for relationship quality and conflict and $r = .55$ for relationship quality and contact. We therefore estimated separate models (see Analytical strategy). Note that the correlation between contact and conflict was unproblematic ($r = -.19$).

Control variables. We controlled for the gender of the stepgrandparent, the stepgrandchild (i.e., the focal child) and the parent (i.e., the respondent): 1 = female; 0 = male. In addition, the age of the stepgrandchild was controlled for, as was the age of stepsiblings and/or half-siblings. If the respondent had child(ren) with their current partner, they were asked to report the age of the oldest child. When their current partner had children from a previous relationship, the respondents reported the age of the youngest stepsibling of the focal child. If there were both half-siblings and stepsiblings, the minimum of the two ages was taken, and the average was imputed if there were no half-siblings or stepsiblings. Note that there was a large age difference between half-siblings and stepsiblings/focal child: the average age of half-siblings was three years old, while the average was 13 for stepsiblings/focal child. Furthermore, the level of education of the respondent and of the stepparent were included. Education ranged from 1 'Elementary school not completed' to 10 'Postacademic'. These levels were recoded to three levels of the ISCED classification (low: ISCED 0-2; medium: ISCED 3-4; high: ISCED 5-8) and were included as dummy variables. In addition, we control for the weekly working hours in paid employment of the respondent and of the stepparent. If the parent/stepparent was not employed, zero hours were assigned, and those who indicated working more than 80 hours per week were set to 80 hours. Correlations between the parents' and the stepparents' educational level (measured as continuous variables) or their working hours were well below $r = .50$. We also controlled for the number of children the respondent had with his/her ex-partner and whether the respondent was part of the refreshment sample (1 = yes). When respondents lived together with their current partner (whether married or unmarried), they indicated when they started living together. This information was used to construct a variable indicating the duration of the coresidential relationship (in years). The average was assigned for those who were in a LAT relationship. Given the sampling population of parents who divorced/separated in 2010, we recoded a few extreme, impossible values (11 years or more, $N = 10$) to missing values, and these were excluded from the analyses. Finally, we controlled for whether one or both of the biological grandparents via the respondent and via the ex-partner were deceased. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of all the variables.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the variables in the analyses (N = 2,261)

	Mean and proportion	SD
Stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact (ln)	1.977	1.192
LAT	.354	
Cohabitation	.408	
Marriage	.238	
Nonresident child	.275	
Parttime resident child	.319	
Fulltime resident child	.406	
Having a half-sibling	.192	
No stepsiblings	.444	
Resident stepsiblings	.318	
Nonresident stepsiblings	.238	
Contact biological grandparents (respondent) ^a		
Once a year or less	.048	
Several times a year	.184	
Once a month	.168	
Several times a month	.262	
Once a week	.141	
Several times a week or daily	.197	
Contact biological grandparents (ex-partner; ln) ^b	2.884	1.216
Conflict ex-partners		
Almost never	.485	
Sometimes	.326	
Often	.123	
Very often	.067	
Contact ex-partners (ln)	3.574	1.450
Relationship quality ex-partners	5.308	2.437
Stepgrandparent is female	.552	
Stepgrandchild is female	.492	
Parent is female	.554	
Age stepgrandchild	12.735	3.662
Age step-/half-siblings ^c	10.563	6.755
Education parent ISCED low	.148	
Education parent ISCED medium	.402	
Education parent ISCED high	.450	
Education stepparent ISCED low	.182	
Education stepparent ISCED medium	.372	
Education stepparent ISCED high	.446	
Working hours parent	29.526	13.745
Working hours stepparent	33.344	12.330
Number of biological siblings of stepgrandchild	1.864	.745
Duration residence stepfamily ^d	3.452	1.932
Refreshment sample	.278	
Both biological grandparents alive (respondent)	.670	
One biological grandparent deceased (respondent)	.255	
Both biological grandparents deceased (respondent)	.075	
Both biological grandparents alive (ex-partner)	.601	
One biological grandparent deceased (ex-partner)	.284	
Both biological grandparents deceased (ex-partner)	.115	

Note: SDs are only presented for continuous variables, not for dichotomous variables.

^a Based on N = 2,092 (one or both biological grandparents via respondent alive)

^b Based on N = 2,000 (one or both biological grandparents via ex-partner alive)

^c Based on N = 1,604 (there is a stepsibling or half-sibling present)

^d Based on N = 1,460 (in a coresidential relationship, be it married or cohabiting)

4.2. Analytical strategy

First, descriptive information about the amount of contact between stepgrandparents and stepgrandchildren is presented. To put the figures in perspective, information about contact between the stepgrandchild and his/her biological grandparents is also presented. Contact with the biological grandparents refers here to the grandparents who are related to the stepgrandchild via the parent in the stepfamily (i.e., parents of the respondent). Figures about contact with these grandparents will likely be more accurate than the proxy reports of the respondent about contact with the grandparents via the ex-partner and are more comparable with stepgrandparents' contact, as they relate to the same middle-generation stepfamily.

Second, random intercept multilevel models were estimated to test the hypotheses (command 'mixed' in STATA 18, with robust standard errors 'vce(robust)'). As explained, respondents reported about contact of the child with the stepgrandmother and the stepgrandfather (if alive), and the data were transformed so that each stepgrandparent contributed a case to the dataset. Multilevel models take into account that the observations on stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild dyads are nested within respondents. In addition, NFN originally invited both divorced parents to participate in the survey. In wave 2, 18% of the participating former households of the main sample and 24% of the refreshment sample referred to instances where both former partners participated. The analyses also account for the nesting of observations in former households to adjust for any resulting dependencies ($N = 1,261$ former households).

Two models were estimated that include all variables (i.e., control variables, indicators for stepfamily structure and existing relationships) but differ in the indicators for the relationship between the respondent and the ex-partner. Model 1 includes contact and conflict between the ex-partners, and Model 2 includes the quality of the relationship between the ex-partners. This was done because relationship quality was highly correlated with both conflict and contact between ex-partners. We tested whether associations were nonlinear in the case of non-dichotomous categorical variables and contradictory theoretical arguments, as both lines of reasoning could be valid but apply to different ranges of the variables. Nonlinear relationships were thus estimated for the frequency of contact with biological grandparents and for the indicators of the relationship between former partners. We did so by including dummy variables for the categories of these categorical variables (also see the Measures section) and testing whether the estimates were simultaneously zero by means of Wald tests. The results can be found in the [Appendix, Table A1](#). Only the associations with contact with the biological grandparents via the respondent and conflict between the ex-partners were found to be statistically significant, and these variables are included as dummy variables in Models 1 and 2.

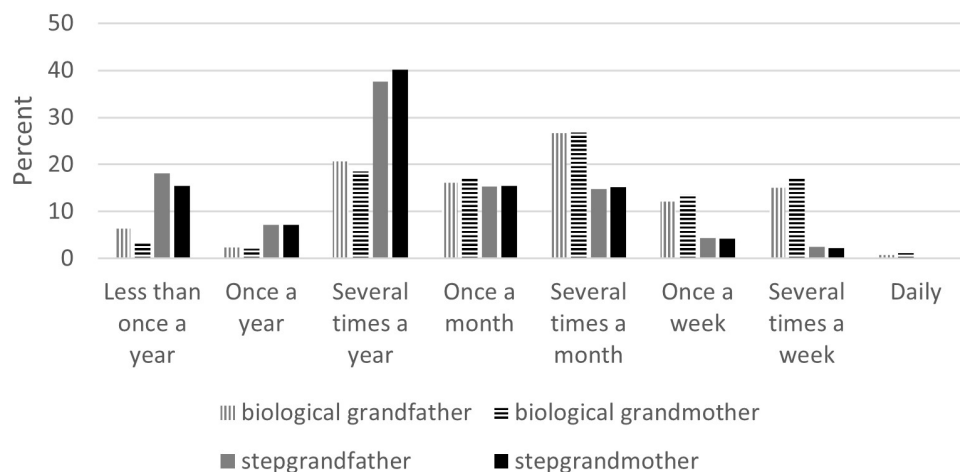
5. Results

Figure 1 shows the distributions of the frequency of contact of the child with both his or her biological grandparents and stepgrandparents. The striped bars refer to biological grandparents, and the bars without a pattern refer to stepgrandparents. A distinction is also made between (step)grandmothers and (step)grandfathers using a different pattern or color.

Although the differences based on gender were small, there were marked differences between stepgrandparents and biological grandparents. The percentages of children who saw their stepgrandparents several times a year or less were greater than the percentages of children who saw their biological grandparents this often, and the reverse held true for the more frequent contact categories. Note also the relatively high percentages of children who saw their stepgrandparents less than once a year (16% for stepgrandmothers, 18% for stepgrandfathers). The median values mirror these patterns, with the median being three ('Several times a year') for stepgrandmothers/fathers and five ('Several times a month') for biological grandmothers/fathers. If we treat the contact variables as continuous variables for simplicity, T-tests also show that mean contact is significantly lower for stepgrandmothers than for grandmothers ($M_{\text{step}} = 3.30$; $M_{\text{bio}} = 4.79$; $t = -23.82$; $p < .001$), and the same holds when comparing stepgrandfathers and grandfathers ($M_{\text{step}} = 3.26$; $M_{\text{bio}} = 4.54$; $t = -17.98$; $p < .001$). These differences may be explained by an evolutionary or normatively driven preference for investing in biological ties (Kalmijn, 2013), but also by the relatively short period in which stepgrandparents have figured in their stepgrandchildren's life. In the NFN-sample, the divorce took place only approximately five years ago, with new relationships typically being established after a while. Note further the more pronounced mode for contact with stepgrandparents. The most common

contact frequency for stepgrandparents was several times a year, with approximately 40% (38% for stepgrandfathers; 40% for stepgrandmothers) of stepgrandparents falling in this category. The mode for biological grandparents was several times a month, but only slightly more than a quarter (27%) fell into this category, and the distribution was more even across contact categories.

Figure 1: Distribution (step)grandparent–(step)grandchild contact: %



Source: New Families in the Netherlands, wave 2

Table 2 shows the results of the multilevel models. Starting with stepfamily structure, both models (M1 and M2) show that children in cohabiting or married stepfamilies saw their stepgrandparents more often than those in LAT stepfamilies (as was hypothesized; see H1). For example, M1 shows that contact is about 97% greater ($= 100 \times (e^{.677} - 1)$) in cohabiting stepfamilies than in LAT stepfamilies, and this difference amounts to 133% for married stepfamilies. Additionally, the effect sizes in terms of standard deviations (i.e., Cohen's d) point to substantial differences: $.57 (= .677/1.192 (= SD(Y)))$ to $.71 (= .847/1.192)$. Contact was also (statistically) significantly greater in married stepfamilies than in cohabiting stepfamilies, but these differences were smaller than the differences between coresidential stepfamilies and nonresidential stepfamilies. Child physical custody also mattered in the models, although the estimates were somewhat smaller than those for the type of relationship of the (step)parents. As expected (see H2), nonresident children had the least contact with their stepgrandparents, followed by part-time (joint custody) and full-time (sole custody) resident children, respectively. To give an idea of the differences, contact levels were approximately 80% higher for full-time resident children than for nonresident children. Although statistically significant, the differences between part-time and full-time residence of the child were smaller than the differences between these categories and nonresident children. Having step- or half-siblings living in the household was found only to be related to contact with stepgrandparents in the case of half-siblings, with contact being greater in the case where half-siblings had been born (see H3a). Compared to the estimates for the other structural aspects, the differences were modest, with contact being about 23% greater when the child had half-siblings.

The findings for existing family relationships show that, aligning with H4, children with stepsiblings living outside the (step)parents' household had less contact with their stepgrandparents than did those without stepsiblings. This difference amounted to approximately 20% less contact in the case of nonresident stepsiblings, which corresponds to a modest effect size of $.19$. Contact with the biological grandparents via the parent in the stepfamily—but not with the biological grandparents via the ex-partner—was associated with stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact. Wald tests of whether the estimates for the dummy variables measuring contact with the biological grandparents via the parent were zero were statistically significant for both models: $\text{Chi}^2 = 69.29$; $p < .001$ in M1 and $\text{Chi}^2 = 74.11$; $p < .001$ in M2.

The estimated parameters for the dummy variables suggest a positive association overall but in a nonlinear fashion. Stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact increased when there was more contact with biological grandparents, but this increase decreased and even became negligible when contact with the biological grandparents was already high (i.e., more than once a month).

Table 2: Multilevel regression of stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact on stepfamily structure, existing family relationships and control variables: Unstandardized coefficients

	M1	M2
<i>Stepfamily structure</i>		
Cohabitation (vs. LAT)	.677***	.666***
Marriage	.847*** ^a	.832*** ^a
Parttime residence child (vs. nonresident)	.391***	.402***
Fulltime residence child (vs. nonresident)	.588*** ^b	.580*** ^b
Half-sibling (vs. no half-sibling)	.205*	.206*
Resident stepsiblings (vs. no stepsiblings)	.056	.051
<i>Existing family relationships</i>		
Nonresident stepsiblings (vs. no stepsiblings)	-.222*** ^c	-.220*** ^c
Contact biological grandparents (respondent)		
Several times a year (vs. once a year of less)	.581***	.627***
Once a month	.796*** ^d	.849*** ^d
Several times a month	.981*** ^{de}	1.032*** ^{de}
Once a week	1.041*** ^{de}	1.090*** ^{de}
Several times a week or daily	1.028*** ^{de}	1.069*** ^{de}
Contact biological grandparents (ex-partner, ln)	.021	.025
Conflict ex-partners		
Sometimes (vs. almost never)	.082	
Often	.209*	
Very often	.106	
Contact ex-partners (ln)	.018	
Relationship quality ex-partners		-.015
<i>Control variables</i>		
Stepgrandparent is female	.086***	.086***
Stepgrandchild is female	.034	.034
Parent is female	-.021	-.020
Age stepgrandchild	-.043***	-.049***
Age step-/half-siblings	-.004	-.004
Education parent (respondent)		
ISCED medium (vs. low)	-.026	-.011
ISCED high (vs. low)	-.086	-.071
Education stepparent		
ISCED medium (vs. low)	.159*	.153~
ISCED high (vs. low)	-.007 ^f	-.007 ^f
Working hours parent	-.001	-.001
Working hours stepparent	.004	.004
Number of biological siblings	-.082*	-.075~
Duration residence stepfamily	.026	.024
Refreshment sample	-.023	-.019
One grandparent deceased (respondent)	.091	.095
Both grandparents deceased (respondent)	-.117	-.128
One grandparent deceased (ex-partner)	-.076	-.075
Both grandparents deceased (ex-partner)	-.043	-.057
Variance (person level)	.665	.651
Variance (former household level)	.155	.173
N dyads	2261	2261
N persons	1373	1373
N former households	1261	1261
Wald Chi2	716***	711***

Note: ~ p < .10 * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001 (two-sided)

^a Difference between cohabitation and marriage statistically significant at the conventional significance level (i.e., .05)

^b Difference between full-time and part-time residence children is significant at the conventional significance level

^c Difference between resident and nonresident stepsiblings significant at the conventional significance level

^d Difference with 'several times a year' significant at the conventional significance level

^e Difference with 'once a month' significant at the conventional significance level

^f Difference between high and medium ISCED of stepparents significant at the conventional significance level

In regard to the relationship between the parent and his/her ex-partner, only conflict mattered. The Wald test of the dummy variables for conflict suggested a weak association (Chi2 = 6.49; p = .090). The regression

parameters indicate that having conflict—be it sometimes or (very) often—is associated with more contact with stepgrandparents than almost never having conflict, but only the difference between often having conflict and almost never having conflict reaches statistical significance. The difference between these two categories amounts to 23% more contact when ex-partners often have conflict. Reformulating this finding in terms of the strength of the relationship of ex-partners, the results are in line with our hypothesis (H6).

Finally, few control variables were statistically significant: Contact was greater for stepgrandmothers than for stepgrandfathers and for younger stepgrandchildren. Furthermore, contact was lower when the child had more biological siblings, and a medium level of education of the stepparent was associated with more contact compared to other educational levels.

6. Discussion

Stepgrandparenthood has become increasingly common (Yahirun et al., 2018). Little is known about stepgrandparent–stepgrandchildren relationships, despite such relationships being potentially beneficial to stepfamily members and stepgrandparents. This study aimed to gain insight into the strength of stepgrandparent–stepgrandchildren relationships. The focus was on stepgrandparenthood as a result of divorce in the middle generation, and we examined the role of the family context. How stepgrandparents fulfill their role is often influenced by the opportunities associated with and provided by the family context, such as those associated with the parental middle generation (Chapman et al., 2017). Using Dutch data on little over 2200 stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild dyads, we specifically examined how contact between stepgrandparents and stepgrandchildren was associated with the structure of the middle generation stepfamily and existing (biological) family relationships beyond the stepfamily household.

A first conclusion is that the amount of contact between stepgrandparents and stepgrandchildren is low overall. The contact frequency was markedly lower not only than the contact frequency with the biological grandparents in the stepfamily—as has been found in previous research (e.g., Steinbach & Silverstein, 2020)—but also in absolute terms. Most stepgrandchildren saw their stepgrandparents several times a year. A sizeable minority of approximately one in six stepgrandparents saw their stepgrandchildren even less than once a year. In contrast, the most common contact level for biological grandparents was several times a month. These low figures suggest that stepgrandparents mostly see their stepgrandchildren during family events, such as birthdays. Note though that the data include only stepfamilies that were formed a relatively short time ago. Our estimates may thus be conservative, as contact may increase in the longer run (Chapman et al., 2018).

A second conclusion is that coresidence is pivotal for stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact. Of all the studied associations, the strongest associations were found for child custody arrangements and whether the stepparent lived with the parent. When the child lived at least half of the time in the stepfamily household (i.e., joint/sole physical custody), contact between the child and the stepgrandparents was greater than in a nonresident situation. Similarly, when the stepparent coresided with the parent (whether married or unmarried), contact was also greater than when the stepparent lived apart. Coresidence thus appears to be a decisive factor, more so than whether the (step)parents are married or cohabiting. One reason may be the stronger relationships in the middle generation stepfamily as a result of spending more time together when living together (Gibson-Davis, 2008). In turn, relationships with stepgrandparents may strengthen (Sanner et al., 2019). Another reason may be the greater contact opportunities in the case of coresidence: there is simply a greater chance to run into the (step)grandchildren when the stepgrandparents come to visit. The greater contact in the case of half-siblings underscores the role of random contact opportunities. The evidence on whether within-stepfamily ties are stronger when a shared child is born is mixed (Sanner et al., 2018), but the oldest generation has been found to visit more often after grandchildren are born, particularly when they are young (Dunifon et al., 2018). Although we controlled for children's ages, age differences may have been too large to effectively control for the much younger age of half-siblings. The frequent visits of grandparents to their newborn (biological) grandchildren in the stepfamily's home imply greater contact opportunities, and may thus explain the greater stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact.

A third conclusion is that existing family relationships beyond the stepfamily compete with stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild relationships. Stepgrandparents who had biological grandchildren living elsewhere saw their stepgrandchildren less often, suggesting that time spent on biological grandchildren comes at the expense of time spent on their stepgrandchildren. Additionally, stepgrandparents may feel guilty

when they visit their stepgrandchildren more often than their biological grandchildren (Kalmijn, 2020). The strength of the ex-partners's relationship was also negatively associated with stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact. Contact was somewhat lower in the case of a nonconflictual relationship between the divorced biological parents. The smaller role of stepgrandparents when divorced parents have little conflict is in line with previous studies on stepparents (Hornstra et al., 2020), suggesting more generally that stepfamily (be they stepparents or stepgrandparents) has more room to step in when the ex-partners' relationship is weak. Although speculative, competition between biological ties and step ties may also be a reason why there was no further increase in stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact when contact with the biological grandparents was already high. At lower levels of involvement of the biological grandparents, associations were positive, suggesting family-level-driven effects of, e.g., (step)parents endorsing strong family values. When grandparents are more involved, stepgrandparents may not profit from such family values because biological grandparents take precedence—as has been found in qualitative research in which stepgrandmothers reported feeling little room to become involved because of the already high involvement of biological grandparents (Chapman et al., 2017).

Importantly, our study focused on contact frequency. Structural stepfamily characteristics that are indicative of random contact opportunities (e.g., child custody arrangements) may be less important for subjective aspects of the stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild relationship, such as relationship quality. Future research may examine whether the family context is differently associated with these subjective aspects. Additionally, the data do not include information about the quality of relationships within the stepfamily, most notably the child–stepparent relationship. Theoretical mechanisms often emphasized the strength of within-stepfamily relationships. To gain more theoretical insight, future research should ideally also include measures for the quality of relationships between stepfamily household members. Although the data contain a wealth of information about stepfamilies, NFN is not completely representative, as e.g. respondents with lower socioeconomic status or an immigrant background were underrepresented. The sample may also be selective on unmeasured characteristics, such that, for instance, respondents with complicated family relationships were less likely to participate. It is difficult to say whether these patterns of under- and overrepresentation have led to an over- or underestimation of stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact, and the same holds for the associations between contact and the indicators for stepfamily structure and existing relationships. Furthermore, the data include only stepfamilies that were recently formed. Not only may contact levels be higher for stepfamilies with a longer duration, but the role of the family context may also be less important when stepfamilies are more established. Although not so much a limitation of this research—just being a focus on a certain type of stepgrandparent, i.e., inherited stepgrandparents—we encourage research to study how the family context matters for stepgrandparenthood as a result of repartnering in the generation of grandparents. The extent to which the role of stepgrandparents is shaped by the family context may differ, because stepgrandparenthood is the result of stepgrandparents' own choices rather than those of the middle generation.

Our study has shown that stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild contact is low overall but varies across different family contexts. The extent to which the stepparent and stepchild coreside seems most important in fostering contact between stepgrandparents and stepgrandchildren. This once again shows that residence patterns shape postdivorce family relationships—as has also been shown for ties to biological grandparents and stepparents (e.g., Jappens & Van Bavel, 2016). This is an important finding considering that residence patterns have diversified in recent years: joint physical custody has increased, and LAT relationships have become particularly popular among divorced people (Poortman & Van Gaalen, 2017; Liefbroer et al., 2015). Going beyond mere structural features of the family context, our study highlights the importance of a feature unique to stepfamilies following divorce: new step relationships are built in the context of existing relationships related to the former household(s) (Sweeney, 2010). Stepgrandparent–stepgrandchild relationships are no exception. Their strength depends on the stepfamily's ties to former families that compete with new step relationships, be it ties to biological children living elsewhere, ties to biological grandparents or ties between former partners.

Acknowledgments

NFN data were collected by Utrecht University in collaboration with Statistics Netherlands (CBS) and were funded by grant 480-10-015 from the Medium Investments Fund of the Dutch Research Council (NWO) and

by Utrecht University. This work was supported by the Dutch Research Council (NWO) (grant number VI.C.181.024). This research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Utrecht University (FETC20-089).

Data availability statement

For the purposes of scientific research, the New Families in the Netherlands (NFN) data are available at the DANS Data Station Social Sciences and Humanities:

Poortman, A. & Van Gaalen, R. (2019). New Families in the Netherlands (NFN): Wave 2. DANS Data Station Social Sciences and Humanities, V2. <https://doi.org/10.17026/dans-24y-n8s4>

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Information in German

Deutscher Titel

Stiefgroßeltern-Stiefenkel-Kontakt in diversen Familienkontexten: Stieffamilienstruktur und bestehende Familienbeziehungen

Zusammenfassung

Fragestellung: Beschreibung des Kontakts zwischen Stiefgroßeltern und Stiefenkeln sowie eine Untersuchung, inwieweit der Kontakt in verschiedenen Stieffamilienstrukturen und mit der Stärke der bestehenden Familienbeziehungen vor Gründung der Stieffamilie variiert.

Hintergrund: Das Phänomen von Stiefgroßeltern wird immer verbreiteter. Jedoch ist wenig bekannt darüber, wie Stiefgroßeltern ihre vermutlich uneindeutige Rolle ausleben und inwieweit dies vom breiteren Familienkontext und den hier geschaffenen Möglichkeiten abhängt.

Methode: Mit Hilfe von niederländischen Surveydaten wurde der Kontakts zwischen Stiefgroßeltern und Stiefenkeln erfasst. Random-Intercept-Mehrebenenmodelle wurden verwendet um 2.261 Stiefgroßeltern-Stiefenkel-Dyaden mit 1.373 Kindern zu analysieren und Einblicke in die Rolle von Stieffamilienstrukturen und bestehenden Familienbeziehungen zu gewinnen.

Ergebnisse: Im Durchschnitt hatten Stiefgroßeltern und Stiefenkeln mehrfach jährlich Kontakt. In Fällen in denen das Kind und/oder der Stiefelternteil mit dem leiblichen Elternteil zusammenlebte, sowie bei Halbgeschwistern, war die Kontakthäufigkeit höher. Wenn Stiefeltern biologische Kinder hatte, die jedoch nicht im Haushalt der Stieffamilie lebten, hatten die Stiefgroßeltern weniger Kontakt zu den Stiefenkeln. Außerdem war die Kontakthäufigkeit geringer, wenn die geschiedenen biologischen Eltern des Kindes eine konfliktarme Beziehung hatten.

Schlussfolgerung: Im Allgemeinen haben Stiefgroßeltern und Stiefenkel wenig Kontakt. Ein gemeinsamer Wohnsitz ist entscheidend für eine höhere Kontakthäufigkeit, was auf die Bedeutung von Kontaktmöglichkeiten und starken Beziehungen innerhalb der Stieffamilie hinweist. Starke Bindungen der Stieffamilie zur früheren Familie können mit den Beziehungen zwischen Stiefgroßeltern und Stiefenkeln konkurrieren.

Schlagwörter: Scheidung, Familien nach der Scheidung, Intergenerationaler Kontakt, Stieffamilienbeziehungen

JFR – Journal of Family Research, 2024, vol. 36, pp. 192–210.

doi: <https://doi.org/10.20377/jfr-881>

Submitted: September 30, 2022

Accepted: July 3, 2024

Published online: July 15, 2024

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