

# Social Adjustment of Adolescents Living with Stepparent Families in Pakistan

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**Abstract:** This study focused on the crucial role of family in adolescents' adjustment in stepfamilies in Pakistan. The family, as the primary social institution, plays a central role in socialization and training, contributing to the social, personal, and academic adjustment of adolescents within both the family and society. The main objective of this study was to examine the challenges adolescents face when living in a stepfamily setup after a parental marital transition due to the death or divorce of one biological parent. Adolescents in stepparent families encounter multiple challenges that impact their social adjustment and personal lives, which may also impact their academic performance. Two key objectives were investigated: parental capital and parenting practices, and their influence on adolescents' adjustment in stepfamilies. The qualitative research conducted in this study was based on interviews with adolescents aged 13 to 19 years attending college. Data collected was analyzed using NVIVO software, and thematic analysis was conducted. The findings highlight the essential role of parental capital and parenting practices in the social adjustment of adolescents in stepparent families. This study recommends practical measures for the government to establish coaching and counselling centers to support adolescents, promote their wellbeing, and enhance their adjustment in their personal, family, social, and educational lives.

**Keywords:** adolescents, academic life, parental capital, parental practices, social adjustment

## Introduction

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage marked by rapid psychological, emotional, and social changes (Santrock, 2016; Steinberg, 2001). It is a vital transition period in a person's life due to these biological, psychological, and emotional shifts. During this time, adolescents face various challenges as they adjust to their personal, family, academic, and social lives. The family, as the most important primary institution, plays a key role in supporting individuals' adjustment across all areas of life (Amato, 2010). The traditional family system in Pakistan is undergoing rapid changes, and the rising number of divorces has led to the formation of stepfamilies. The family environment significantly influences adolescents' adjustment outcomes. Adolescents in stepfamilies encounter unique challenges in family and social adaptation, influenced by factors such as parental social and educational support, parenting practices, and parental involvement (Reiss, 2012; Amato, 2010). Social adjustment refers to an individual's ability to adapt to the social environment, build relationships, and maintain personal well-being (Santrock, 2016). This study explores social adjustment as it relates to the daily lives of adolescents in stepparent families in Pakistan. It emphasizes the main challenges adolescents face in integrating with society and their families. The objectives include examining how parental resources and parenting practices impact the social adjustment of adolescents living in stepfamilies, which often have less social support and cultural acceptance.

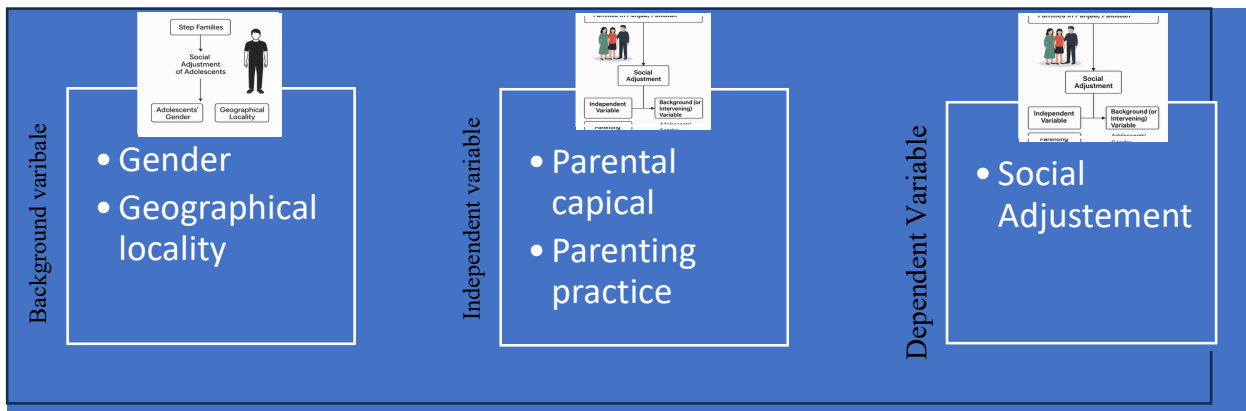
## Literature Review

Usoroh et al. (2014) stated in a comparative study on adolescents living in different family systems that adolescents in single-parent or step-parent families do not necessarily have trouble and lead stressful, unhappy, and challenging lives. At the same time, living in an

intact family does not guarantee a successful, happy life. Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan (2002) also described the general situation of adolescents in single and intact families and said that individuals in single or step-parent families do not have an ideal model or identification to follow; they lack parental support both emotionally and financially, which creates more adjustment problems for adolescents living in step-parent and single-parent families.

Afifi & Schrod (2003) stated that there is an increase in stepfamilies and single-parent families, where children often face many challenges that affect their mental abilities and psychological health more than those living with their biological parents. Attar-Schwartz et al. (2009) documented that low socioeconomic status of parents, especially mothers after divorce and being a single parent, conflict within the family and among parents, poor mental health of parents, less support provided to mothers as family heads, lack of parental attention, frequent changes in family situations, and family mobility are key reasons for poor adjustment and low confidence among adolescents.

### Conceptual Framework



The conceptual framework is based on two independent and two background variables. Independent variables consist of parental capital and parenting practices. Parental capital refers to the social, cultural, and economic capital of parents as explained by Bourdieu (1986) in the theory of capital. Parenting practices refer to the behaviors and styles that parents use in day-to-day life with their children, encompassing daily affairs, socialization, and child training.

**Theoretical underpinnings of the Study:** Parental capital refers to the social, cultural, and economic capital of parents as explained by Bourdieu (1986) in the theory of capital. In Pakistan, there is a system known as the Baradari. After parental divorce, adolescents often lose the support of their extended family because a single-parent family as a result of divorce is not widely accepted and socially recognized, as there is a significant role of baradari and kinship in social connection, support, and identity of family members. Parental divorce results in the exclusion of one parent due to cultural and religious norms. Social capital works as a channel or platform providing opportunities and responsibilities for adolescents. In single-parent and step-parent families, parental capital works as a key factor in the social adjustment of adolescents and academic success.

### Methodology

This study focused on a qualitative approach to explore the experiences of adolescents in stepparent families. A semi-structured interview guide was used as a tool for data collection.

Interviews were conducted with adolescents aged 13 to 19 years who were studying at schools and colleges in Punjab, Pakistan. Both male and female students participated in interviews.

These participants were approached through purposive sampling to ensure age, gender, and diversity of respondents from urban and rural backgrounds. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity in gender, age, and urban-rural background. Interview recordings were transcribed, and then thematic analysis was applied using NVIVO software, which identified the repeated pattern in the data about parental capital, parenting style, and parental involvement, and parental social support (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Adolescent Participants by Age Group, Gender, and Geographic Division (N = 32)

Age Group	Gender	Respondents	Rural	Urban
13-16	Male	6	3	3
	Female	6	2	4
17-19	Male	9	4	5
	Female	11	6	5

## Findings and Discussion

### *Parenting Practices and Adjustment*

Authoritarian and neglectful parenting styles are more common in stepfamilies, especially in stepfather families (Baumrind, 1991; Reiss, 2012). Adolescents in these environments face limited autonomy, isolation, and emotional detachment. At the same time, students report weak discipline at home and favouritism among relatives when there is a stepmother present. Positive adjustment and better academic outcomes are linked to families where parents practice authoritative parenting. Parents in such families communicate openly with adolescents, show warmth, and establish certain rules and controls. Adolescents living in these families demonstrate better academic engagement, positive social interactions with peers, and emotional stability (Steinberg, 2001). However, these positive outcomes are rarely observed in the research.

### *Parental Capital and Social Navigation*

Parental capital played a crucial role in helping individuals adjust to stepfamilies, as parents with more economic resources could afford better schooling and tuition for their children. Parents with higher educational levels and strong social networks were more likely to provide their children with social, academic, and emotional guidance. They were better equipped to offer academic and career counselling (Coleman, 1988). Conversely, families with limited economic capital and lower educational backgrounds of the stepfather faced different adjustment challenges for adolescents, including financial constraints, less academic support, poor guidance, and limited social support. All of these factors even contributed to risky behavior and lower emotional confidence among adolescents (Riaz, 2022).

### *Kinship Networks and Belonging*

There is a Biradari or rishtadari system in Punjab, Pakistan. Kinship networks play a significant role in how adolescents adjust within stepfamilies because these biradari and rishtadari systems

provide support and a sense of belonging among individuals (Baloch, 2022). However, these kinship networks can also negatively affect adjustment, as respondents explained, because marriage often happens outside the family, and stepfathers usually have no prior relationship with that family before marriage. Adolescents who are not accepted by their stepmother or stepfather's kin face obstacles and difficulties in adjusting to family life and culture. These adolescents often feel alienated, excluded, and less confident due to reduced social and moral support from their father's kin. A few adolescents reported better adjustment in families where the stepfather was a paternal uncle or close relative of their biological father because they were already part of that extended family, which helped ease integration and adjustment. Similar and consistent results with my study were found in a study conducted by King, Boyd, and Thorsen (2015), which found that adolescents in stepfamilies feel a weaker sense of belonging to their family compared to those in two-biological-parent families.

### ***Gendered Experiences of Adjustment***

Gender also played a key role in adolescents' adjustment in stepfamilies. Male and female adolescents' adjustment varied depending on the structure and nature of the stepfamilies, especially in families where the father served as the stepfather. Boys' and girls' experiences of adjustment differed in terms of freedom, economic support, parenting styles, social support, and neglect within the families. Culturally, girls were suppressed and expected to be more obedient and to follow societal norms, as family respect and honor are more closely linked to girls in society. Girls had less permission and support in their educational and social mobility, which further increased the challenges they faced, limiting their social mobility and educational aspirations. The study conducted by Gul, Fatima and Akhtar (2025) also confirmed a similar pattern of gender disparity in education and social support.

### **Conclusion**

This study highlighted the complicated dynamics of adjustment of adolescents in stepparent families in Pakistan. Parental social, economic, and cultural capital played a key role in the social, academic, and emotional adjustment of adolescents (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). Another key factor that affected adolescents' integration experiences in family and society is parenting practices (Baumrind, 1991). The study's findings highlighted the need for and importance of counselling services for parents and adolescents in schools and colleges. Parents should undergo premarital counseling sessions organized by the government's social welfare institution. Educational institutions should have a proper counselling and support system for such adolescents to guide, encourage, and motivate them, enabling them to make better progress and achieve academic integration. Policymakers should consider the key challenges faced by adolescents in stepfamilies and society, and develop inclusive policies to support their welfare and development .

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