Vetting and Letting: Cohabiting Stepfamily Formation Process

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IMPLICATIONS FOR COOPERATIVE EXTENSION:

With the rise in cohabiting stepfamilies, it is important to learn the processes through which parents with residential children cohabit. Questions parents may ask as they consider romantic partners is how and when to allow a romantic partner to live in the family home with you and your children. Extension educators can to understand and deliver this information to the clients in communities.

There are two common patterns of entering non-marital unions.
1. Sliding. Entering a non-marital union through gradual and non-deliberate method which grows over time between the adults and the child(ren) in the family unit.
2. Deciding. Another pattern is the deliberate approach where the couple “decides rather than slides” into the non-marital union. This is described as “vetting and letting.” In this case, parents often use various methods to “vet” their potential long-term partners with the overall goal of assuring the partner contribute to the well-being of the children.

Mothers in this study used four strategies to assure strong potential for a child well-being and safety that may be useful for parents considering entering a cohabiting stepfamily.
1. Determining if the partner shows interest in parenting.
2. Monitoring and nurturing the relationship between the partner and the child(ren).
3. Asking the child’s opinion of the partner.
4. Applying information gained from past relationships.

Cohabiting stepfamilies, or families with two unmarried partners at least one of whom has children, are common family structure in the US. One half of US children are expected to spend some time in a cohabitating family structure. Further, children who live in cohabitating stepfamilies may live with different stepparents over time. The outcomes for the children are more likely to resemble a single parent family.

Yet, the processes of forming a cohabitating stepfamily are not well-researched and are likely to vary among racial or ethnic groups. Among Black children, for example, about one-half are expected to live in cohabitating stepfamilies by age 12.

One concern about cohabiting couples is that partners may slide into the relationship instead of well-thought out decision to cohabit. Sliding happens when the couple gradually come to reside in the same household without reflecting on the consequences or having that discussion. Sliding unions have no formal mark to signify the beginning. Thus, through sliding couples might create cohabiting stepfamilies they would not have chosen if the decision involved more thought and discussion about the union. Thus, the authors conducted the present study to learn the processes through which Black parents residing in low-income neighborhoods for cohabiting stepfamilies.

Data was collected through interviews with 30 Black mothers of residential children ages 11 to 17 who lived with partners for five years or less who lived in low-income neighborhoods in New York. The authors coded the responses to questions and found themes emerged that they described as “vetting and letting” process in forming cohabiting stepfamilies.
The vetting process occurs as a mother reflects on whether the partner is a good parent and well-suited with the children. The letting process occurs when a mother agrees to the partner reside in the home. The vetting and letting portion of the cohabitating union focuses on the compatibility and incorporation of the new partner with the children. There were four strategies used by the mothers in the study. First, the mother determined if the partner showed interest in parenting. Second, the mother monitors and nurtures the relationship between the partner and the child. Third, the mother asks for the child’s opinion of the partner. Finally, the mother applied information gained through other past relationships.

The results show low-income Black mothers generally have their children’s well-being at heart when it comes to the new unions. Parents of adolescents who form cohabiting stepfamilies often have more challenges than those with younger children who are often more accepting of the cohabitation. Adolescents have more opinions on the new union because of past experiences with other relationships.

Also, the partners understood the process of vetting and letting since it was a family formation and not just the couple union. This may be the norm of understanding between a mother and her partner.

Although most of the family formations were consistent with sliding, most were consistent with very deliberative means. These unions were serious before cohabitation. This trend might not necessarily be for those who are middle class. Various needs or circumstances could determine who is living together and, conversely, those mothers who opt to stay apart because of their children.

Parents who have adolescent children are more apt to be careful about who they cohabit with because the children’s expressive opinions about the union. The working or middle class look at cohabitation as an extension of dating and cohabitation leads to the final commitment of the union. In low-income Black mothers, cohabiting stepfamilies are often seen as normative.