

Podcast Script

The Cinderella Effect: More than a fairy tale.

Voice Over

(Still images of a Cinderella doll, cleaning supplies, sad child, child abuse)

Many of us are familiar with the Disney story of Cinderella; a young girl who is mistreated and neglected by her wicked stepmother and step sisters. She is overworked and unloved, unable to share in the privileges bestowed upon her step-sisters. Although Cinderella's specific tale is fictional, the underlying ideas of abuse and maltreatment are sobering realities that face numerous step children today. Research has shown that step children are at a significantly higher risk than biological children to experience neglect, physical and sexual abuse as well as fatalities at the hands of their step parents.

(Child abuse image)

What could be the cause of such dark realities? Are step-parents inherently evil? Are the types of people who become step parents just bad parents altogether? What scientists have termed the 'Cinderella effect' deserves deeper investigation.

(Image of money, graduation, newborn with mother)

The Cinderella effect builds upon the premise that children require a large parental investment. Parents are motivated to invest in their biological children with the hopes that their investment will pay off; their children will survive to reproduce, thus passing on the parent's genes. Research has found that step-parents invest their limited resources of time and money differently in step-children relative to birth children.

(Image montage of childhood rash, broken arm, tombstone, caskett)

So what kind of differences are we talking about? In 2001, researchers Anne Case and Christina Paxson found that step children were less likely to receive regular dental visits, or to have a place for usual health care. Serious discrepancies between the care of biological children and step children were found by Martin Daly and Margo Wilson. Their results show that step-children are more likely to experience non lethal accidental injuries, such as broken bones. They also found that step children are more likely to experience lethal accidental injuries. These results have been attributed to the fact that step children are not watched over and protected to the same extent as biological children. Most soberingly, in their 1996 paper, Daly and Wilson found that step-children are more likely to be sexually abused by their step-parents, and experience fatal abuse at an astonishing rate of 100 times higher than biological children.

(Evolution Image)

While these findings are quite horrifying, they do make sense in light of evolutionary theory. Children from a previous union are a liability, not an asset. From a step-parent's perspective, non-biological children are not a good investment; they do not carry the step parent's genes and take away resources from biological offspring.

(Engagement ring image)

Daly and Wilson state that becoming a step-parent may be a necessary sacrifice to gain access to a desired mate, but the level of investment in non-biological children is negotiable.

(Image of woman thinking)

There are several critiques of the 'Cinderella Effect'. Understandably so; many people are generally uncomfortable with findings that step children are disproportionately victimized by their step-parents. Instead of the results being a function of inclusive fitness, some have

wondered if other sociocultural factors are at work. Poverty, bad parenting skills, and substance abuse have all been considered as factors to replace the evolutionary explanation. However, cultural or learning explanations do not explain the consistent data as well as evolutionary theory does.

(Images of income, parenting skills, scientific research papers)

Research from Anne Case and Christina Paxson has dismissed income, family size, parental age, and parenting skills as confounding variables. Studies consistently show that there is a marked difference between how step-children are treated in comparison to biological children. The factor of most importance is whether or not the children you are caring for share your genes.

(Images of happy step-family, marital conflict, runaway child)

So what does it all mean? First of all, it is important to make it clear that not all step-parents abuse or neglect their step children. However, in 2007, researchers Daly and Wilson found that many blended families do experience marital conflict as a result of deciding resource allocation between biological and non-biological children. Many step-parent/step-child relationships also experience strain, and a disproportionate amount of step-children run away or leave their homes early in comparison to biological children.

(Image of 'take home message' on looseleaf paper)

The most important take home message is that while there may be an evolutionary psychology reason for why step-children are more likely to be maltreated, it does not mean that child abuse and neglect are in any way acceptable nor are they condoned by the theory.

References:

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- Daly M., Wilson, M. (2007) Is the “Cinderella effect” controversial? A case study of evolution minded research and critiques thereof. In C Crawford & D Krebs, eds., *Foundations of evolutionary psychology*. Mahwah NJ: Erlbaum.

Further Resources

- Daly M, Wilson M (2001) An assessment of some proposed exceptions to the phenomena of nepotistic discrimination against stepchildren. *Annales Zoologici Fennici* 38: 287-296.
- Daly M, Wilson M (2005) The ‘Cinderella Effect’ is no fairy tale. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 9, 507-508.
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- Zvoch, K. (1999) Family type and investment in education: A comparison of genetic and stepparent families. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 20, 453-464.