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# The Voice of the Adolescents in Stepfamilies

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## The Voice of the Adolescents in Stepfamilies

Niina van Zinderen  
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### The Voice of the Adolescents in Stepfamilies

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According to Statistics Finland (2013), about 10% of Finnish families live as a stepfamily. The amount has been increasing continuously from the beginning of the millennium while the amount of families with children has been decreasing from the 80's on. (Statistics Finland 2013 1&2.) There is no doubt that stepfamily, as a form of family needs to be recognized within the society in all fields of family services to be able to support the wellbeing of the children and families.

The purpose of this Master's thesis is to increase understanding of the adolescents living in stepfamilies by collecting new information. This understanding is needed in the Association of Stepfamilies in Finland to be able to design suitable services for the adolescents. The objective of this research is to study the experiences of adolescents, 12-18 years of age, living in stepfamilies. The research was conducted as a qualitative study and the methods used were individual and group interviews. The method of analysis in this study was thematic analysis.

The participants of this study had diverse backgrounds of how and when their stepfamily had been formed, how their living arrangements had been taken care of and how they experienced the stepfamily life overall. The experiences represented positive, negative and neutral aspects and there was not a clear emphasis on any of them when looking at the entity of the findings. This said, it must be emphasized that the experiences of the participants can be seen overall quite ordinary descriptions of family life despite what the family form is, since the main themes were largely dealt with issues concerning relationships between family members.

The findings formed four main themes. *Relationship between the adults* contains the adolescents' experiences on the relationships between the adults in their life and how the state of the relationship affects them. In the second theme, *Siblings*, the adolescents describe their experiences of the children of their stepparent and about the birth of a new baby in stepfamily. The theme *Stepparents* describes the adolescents' experiences of their stepparents and their relationship with their stepparent. Finally, the theme *Life in Stepfamily* contains experiences on everyday life factors such as rules, habits, and two homes.

Keywords: adolescent, stepfamily, experiences,

Niina van Zinderen

### Uusperheen nuorten ääni

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Suomen tilastokeskuksen mukaan noin 10% suomalaisista perheistä lukeutuu uusperheisiin. Uusperheiden määrä on ollut kasvussa vuosituhaten vaihteesta lähtien kun taas lapsiperheiden määrä on laskenut 80-luvulta tähän päivään. (Tilastokeskus 2013 1&2.) Jotta lasten ja perheiden hyvinvointia voidaan asianmukaisesti tukea, on yhteiskunnan eri perhepalveluissa huomioitava eri perhemuodot, myös uusperheet.

Tämän opinnäytetyön tarkoituksena on lisätä ymmärrystä koskien uusperheessä eläviä nuoria ja kerätä uutta tietoa. Suomen Uusperheiden liitto haluaa suunnitella kohdennettuja palveluita nuorille ja tämän tutkimuksen tuottamaa uutta tietoa voidaan hyödyntää palvelumuotoilun yhteydessä. Tutkimuksen tavoitteena on tutkia uusperheessä elävien, 12-18 -vuotiaiden nuorten kokemuksia. Tutkimus on luonteeltaan laadullinen ja tutkimusmetodeina käytettiin yksilö- ja ryhmähaastatteluja. Tutkimuksen data analysoitiin temaattista analyysia hyödyntäen.

Haastateltavien taustoissa oli eroavaisuuksia siinä kuinka heidän uusperheensä oli muodostunut, kuinka heidän asumisjärjestelynsä oli sovittu ja kuinka he kokivat uusperhe-elämän. Nuorten kertoivat niin positiivisista, negatiivista kuin neutraaleista kokemuksista eikä kokonaistuloksissa näkynyt selkeää painotusta mihinkään suuntaan. Joka tapauksessa on hyvä ottaa huomioon, että haastateltavien kokemukset voidaan nähdä tavanomaisina perhe-elämän kuvauksina, huolimatta missä perhemuodossa eletään, sillä pääteemat käsittelivät suurelta osin perheenjäsenten keskinäisiä suhteita.

Tulokset jakaantuivat neljään pääteemaan. *Aikuisten väliset suhteet* -teema pitää sisällään nuorten kuvailemia kokemuksia liittyen aikuisten välisiin suhteisiin ja siihen kuinka suhteiden laatu vaikuttaa heihin. *Sisarukset* -teema keskittyi myös ihmisten välisiin suhteisiin; vanhemman uuden puolison mukana tulleiden lasten ja uusperheeseen syntyneen vauvan mukana tuomia tunteita. Puolivanhemman ja nuoren välisiä suhteita käsitellään teeman *Puolivanhemmat* yhteydessä ja yleisiä arkipäivän aiheita, kuten säännöt, tavat ja kaksi kotia, käsitellään teeman *Uusperhe-elämä* alla.

Avainsanat: nuoret, uusperhe, kokemukset

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## 1 Introduction

According to Statistics Finland (2013), about 10% of Finnish families live as a stepfamily. The amount has been increasing continuously from the beginning of the millennium while the amount of families with children has been decreasing from the 80's on. (Statistics Finland 2013 1&2.) There is no doubt that stepfamilies, as a form of family needs to be recognized within the society in all fields of family services to be able to support the wellbeing of the children and families.

The Association of Stepfamilies in Finland (later Supli) provides family holidays every year. A small group of adolescents living in stepfamilies asked for services also for them after they participated in Supli's family holiday a few years ago. This was taken into account in Supli and the organization management is now planning a project called Step Up!, where children's participation and services are being brought to action.

A recent study by Väänänen (2013) states that children living in stepfamilies have a higher risk for psychological disorders than children living in a family with two biological parents. According to this study, children living in stepfamilies had more often behavioral problems and problems with forming friendship connections. (Väänänen 2013, 95-97.) With these findings and the reality of the growing number of stepfamilies, it is essential to take a look at the youth themselves, the age group that is going through one of the most sensitive development stages in human life, and to find out ways in which adults could support adolescents in stepfamilies better.

Literature review and discussions with experts of this area shows that there has been no research done in Finland where adolescents living in stepfamilies would have been interviewed to learn about their experiences. The closest study in Finland is done by Ritala-Koskinen who interviewed 15 children from the age of 6 to 16 in 1994-1995 as a part of her study. The researcher wanted to find out how the children define their family. (Ritala-Koskinen 2001)

An inquiring was sent to the National Stepfamily Resource Centre in the USA to find out whether they had recent research findings around the topic adolescents' experiences on stepfamily life. The reply indicates that they had no sources available concerning this issue. They mentioned the study by Higginbotham, Skogrand, and Torres (2010) where the researchers found that parents perceived that children benefit from participating in the Smart Steps program; a relationship education program comprised both adult and youth components. This was, however, the opinion of the parents. In this study the focus is on how youth themselves find stepfamily life.

The purpose of this Master's thesis is to increase understanding of the target group by collecting new information. This understanding is needed in the Association of Stepfamilies in Finland to be able to design suitable services for the adolescents. The objective of this research is to study the experiences of adolescents, 12-18 years of age, living in stepfamilies. The research was conducted as a qualitative study and the methods used were individual and group interviews.

## 2 Background

The interest in doing a development work or research in the field of stepfamily life arose from the personal interests of the researcher. The researcher contacted the Association of Stepfamilies in Finland in the autumn of 2013 and arranged a meeting in Turku on the 14<sup>th</sup> of November 2013. Ideas were shared on how to proceed with the co-operation, and the planning of the research was based on the first discussion.

The literature review took place in the winter of 2013-2014. The latest research findings in the field of stepfamily life were studied and since there was no research to be found where children or adolescents of stepfamilies would have been interviewed in Finland recently, the researcher contacted the National Stepfamily Resource Center in the the US in February 2014. The National Stepfamily Center in the US was not aware of similar studies and they were interested in hearing what the findings will be. Therefore this report will also be send to the National Stepfamily Center.

After the literature review the researcher and the working life partner, representatives from Supli, met for the second time officially concerning the study. The research plan was agreed on and the thesis contract was signed.

### 2.1 The Association of Stepfamilies in Finland "Supli"

The Association of Stepfamilies in Finland guides the rights and promotes the wellbeing of stepfamilies in Finland. From 1996 on, Supli has been the only national association for stepfamilies in Finland. Supli supports the cooperation and social interaction of the stepfamilies by providing guidance, courses and meetings for the families and couples. Supli also educates professionals in health and social care as well as in the educational field. (Supli 2014.)

The Association of Stepfamilies in Finland is politically and ideologically independent and its purpose is, as an umbrella organization to its members, to regulate the rights of the stepfamilies in the society. The association also aims to promote the development and wellbeing of the stepfamilies, to encourage the social interaction between them, and to encourage stepfamily members to do community work/volunteer work. (Supli 2014.)

To reach their objectives the association is, among other things, following how the status of stepfamily is developing in the society, helping the local chapters by advising and guiding them, taking part in events where family politics are discussed, and giving proposals to the authorities. The services provided by the association are concentrated on peer support groups and courses as well as therapy sessions for the couples and families. The peer support groups for the parents aim to support the parents in their relationship and parenthood and this way positively affect the wellbeing of the whole family. Association also arranges professional lectures on its own as well as in co-operation with other family associations in Finland. (Supli 2014.)

From 2002 on, Supli has been arranging Stepfamily Counselor education aimed at social and health care professionals who meet stepfamilies or stepfamily members through their work. (Jyllikoski 2013.) This way Supli is actively and indirectly improving the status of the stepfamilies in Finnish society.

The target group of the association is the parents of the stepfamilies in Finland and the health and social care professionals (Supli 2014). However, since the adolescents have been asking for services for the children as well, the association is now planning a Step Up! project concentrating on children and adolescents. The purpose of this study arose from the conversations with the association's representatives to ensure that the findings would be usable for the association's development work.

The upcoming project, Step Up!, in Supli aims to increase the wellbeing of the children and adolescents living in stepfamilies. To achieve this aim, the association plans to develop and design new methods to help and support the children and adolescents in stepfamilies. (Hankesuunnitelma Supli) In order to be able to start the service design, the association representatives wanted to find out what are the empowering and risk factors for the adolescents in stepfamilies according to the adolescents themselves. The findings of this research will be used as background research for the service development in the association.



### 3 Theoretical framework

#### 3.1 Terminology

For the same reason as Ganong and Coleman (2004, 1) the term *stepfamily* is used throughout the study when referring to a family where one or both parents have child(ren) from previous relationships; stepfamily as a term is the best-recognized and most widely used one. Other terms that are used in literature when referring to the kind of household mentioned above are for example blended family, reformed family and remarried family. (Ganong and Coleman 2004, 1).

*Adolescent* can be defined from many perspectives. Biologically adolescence is a development stage where human beings reach their sexual maturity. From a psychological point of view, adolescence is the time that is defined by psychosocial and psychodynamic development tasks, for example building our own identity. Legally adolescents can be defined from two perspectives: Finnish youth law states that everyone under the age of 29 is considered as youth. Juridical adolescence can also be seen as ending when you reach legal adulthood which in Finland is 18 years. From an institutional point of view adolescence is a period outside the family institution; when we disengage ourselves from our childhood family but do not have our adulthood family to attach to. (Finland 2006) (Nivala & Saastamoinen 2010, 11.)

The term adolescent in this study refers to the age group that has been interviewed. The age group was defined based on Supli's upcoming project where adolescent is defined as a person who is 12-18 years old.

#### 3.2 Stepfamily

As mentioned in the introduction, the number of stepfamilies has been increasing continuously, covering about 10% of Finnish families nowadays. According to Adler-Baeder (2007), a stepfamily is a household where there is an adult couple and at least one of them has child(ren) from a previous relationship.

However, there are many families that are left out of the statistics since these statistics are only based on the living and not the family bonds. When a child is, for example, living on a week to week basis with his/her divorced parents but is officially living in the mother's address, the father's household is not counted as a household with children. This means that if the father also has a new spouse but they do not have other children except for those that the father has from the previous relationship, this household is not counted as a stepfamily even though they are basically living as a stepfamily every other week. (STAT 2015.)

Castrén (2009) has studied the perceptions of divorced men and women about their family. Common knowledge seems to indicate that a stepfamily is seen as a starting point of a new life. According to Castrén's study, the aim is to restore the feeling of family instead of starting something new. High hopes to achieve a "normal" family life again, often leads to various challenges in stepfamily life. (Castrén 2009, 117.)

The paths through which people come to live in stepfamilies nowadays are very diverse. Stewart (2007) maps the changing landscape of stepfamilies in America and presents different forms of stepfamilies in her book *Brave New Stepfamilies*. In addition to the traditional forms of stepfamilies (stepfamilies created by divorce and remarriage), the author presents non-traditional forms like stepfamilies created by nonmarital childbearing, cohabiting stepfamilies and stepfamilies with gay or lesbian parents. (Stewart 2007, xiii,xv.)

The relationships, dynamics, and wellbeing of the stepfamily will be influenced by the particular way that the stepfamily was formed. Individuals will also bring their own experiences with them into the new family life and their gender, age, race, class and sexual identity have shaped these experiences. This means that there can be many different cultures within the family and this might even cause *culture shock* when the new family members come to live together. (Stewart 2007, xiii-xiv, 46-47.)

Even though the so-called traditional family is and has been going through changes during the past decades, it still keeps its status as a social institution. Since stepfamilies are an *incomplete institution* (there is no clear guidelines as to how family members should behave toward one another), stepfamily research often relates to the theme of uncertainty. This also affects the life of the stepfamily on a concrete level; the remarried couple might not have the tools to solve problems in the same way as couples in first marriages due to the lack of social norms to guide their behavior. (Allan, Crow & Hawker 2011, 22.) (Stewart 2007, 4, 39.)

Stewart (2007) presents some of the main theoretical tools in addition to the culture shock in stepfamilies and the incomplete institutionalization (both mentioned above), which have been used in describing and explaining stepfamilies. *Biosocial perspective* explains stepfamilies through biologically determined behavior and it claims that stepfamilies do not function as well as the traditional two-parent families because in stepfamilies there are not biological relations between all the family members. This idea includes the concept of humans favoring blood relatives over others because this is the way human beings have evolved over time. (Popenoe 2013.) (Stewart 2007, 28-51.)

The theories of *family stress* in a stepfamily context focus on the idea that stepfamily life is very stressful for its members. Stepfamilies undergo stress because of the amount of changes they are experiencing, possible changes in parenting quality, financial issues and the relationships between the family members and the ex-family members. (Stewart 2007, 28-51.)

Stepfamily life can also be understood by comparing it to other kinds of families, for example nuclear family. *The deficit-comparison approach* can be problematic because it can lead to negative images or stereotypes of the group that becomes worse in the comparison. However, the comparative studies are desired by government agencies that fund family research for their practical applications. One theory around stepfamilies concentrates on the stigmatization that non-traditional families still face in the modern society. This can be seen for example how in movies the stepparents are often portrayed negatively or how the phrase "Poor stepchild" is used in various connections. (Stewart 2007, 30-42.)

The more positive theories around stepfamilies are for example the *risk and resiliency* and *family processes* perspectives as well as the theories of *family systems, definitions and boundaries*. The risk and resiliency perspective emphasizes the fact that most stepfamilies are functional rather than dysfunctional. Supporters of this theory claim that the differences between the wellbeing of children of nuclear families and children of stepfamilies are exaggerated. The family processes have more influence on child's wellbeing than the family structure and the family should be defined through the primary relationships that the child has rather than biology or marriage. (Stewart 2007, 34-39.)

### 3.2.1 Stepfamily development stages by Malinen and Larkela

One of the theories around stepfamily life is *stepfamily cycle* that focuses on the development of stepfamilies through different stages. Malinen and Larkela (2011) presents the stepfamily development stages based on Papernow's stepfamily cycle. This model consists of three stages in which they have in total seven sub-stages. (Stewart 2007, 47.) (Malinen & Larkela 2011, 48-49.)

The first stage is the beginning that lasts 2-3 years. The family starts with the dream of a happy family where they openly welcome the stepchildren and hope to make the broken family up for them through the new family. Shortly after this there will be signs of big challenges and the fear of failing comes to mind. At the end of first stage the stepfamily is covered with emotions like disappointment and negativity. They become aware of the differences and the challenges there are in stepfamily life. (Malinen & Larkela, 2011.)

The second stage is the middle stage, which lasts 1-3 years. The emotions that were present at the end of the beginning stage still exist but the family starts to solve the problems. In this stage it is possible that the biological members of the family take the same side. At the end of the second stage, the family is making actual procedures to solve the problems and to find unity. (Malinen & Larkela, 2011.)

The third part is where the family starts to strengthen and the relationship of the parents has a solid foundation. The unity of the family can be sensed and the roles are clarified. Closeness increases within the family and the parents are working in co-operation. (Malinen & Larkela, 2011.)

### 3.3 Children in Stepfamilies

Children turn a remarriage into a stepfamily. The researcher came across the following phrase during the discussions with the experts in the stepfamily field: "In nuclear families children are the glue that keeps the family together in times of problems. In stepfamilies children are the separating factor." In stepfamilies there are often "my children", "your children" and "our children" which means that one or both parents of the stepfamily will bring one or more children with them to the new family and there might also be new children born to the new couple. (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano 2006, 223).

One major challenge that stepfamilies face compared to nuclear families is the issue of household order and discipline of the children. In stepfamilies there are many family cultures present when trying to combine, or should one say blend, the two families together. Relationships between the stepchild and -parent are influenced by the more complex considerations concerning the parenting. (Allan et. al. 2011, 7.)

The relationship between the stepparent and stepchild might be influenced by the lack of social and legal rights that the parent has over the stepchild. The stepparent might be the one taking care of the children's routines and wellbeing but they have no legal rights over the child. This might lead the stepparent to avoid too close a relationship with the stepchildren. It is important for the parents to agree on the roles to achieve better parenting satisfaction. (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano 2006, 224.)

The studies have shown several times how children of stepfamilies have a higher risk for behavioral and adjustment difficulties than children from nuclear families. However, Clarke-Stewart and Brentano (2006) points out that the differences are small. Most of the children who are members of a stepfamily do well in school and do not suffer, for example, behavior

problems. The similarities between the children of nuclear families and children of stepfamilies are greater than the differences. (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano 2006, 230.)

How well children adjust to the new family and the parents' remarriage depends on several factors. One of the main factors is the child's age, but the personality of the child and how the parents behave also affect the adjusting process. The gender of the child, however, seems to indicate different findings in different studies so there is no explicit answer whether boys or girls adjust better to stepfamily life. (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano 2006, 230-231.)

Broberg's (2010) research focuses on the resources of the stepfamily and wellbeing of the children. Broberg uses large data of questionnaires and interviewed mothers of stepfamilies. She acknowledges the fact that children in stepfamilies more than children living in nuclear families do tend to have more problems according to studies but her research findings show that stepfamily itself is not a risk to child's wellbeing. The resources of the family might change via stepfamily life and this might have effects on wellbeing. (Broberg 2010,

Väänänen (2013) studies children's psychic disorders and some family factors through questionnaires and meters answered by teachers, parents and children. One of the main findings, and also partly supporting Broberg's (2010) findings, is that children living in families where the family dynamics do not work have a higher risk of psychological disorders.

Ritala-Koskinen (2001) opens up different children's interpretations of family. Children face many changes in their social connections as well as in their physical environment when their parents divorce and when a stepfamily is formed. According to Ritala-Koskinen's findings, the children always had some feelings about the stepfamily formation and in most cases they had both positive and negative feelings about it. No matter what the comments were, it was clear that the divorce was followed by chain of changes in children's lives. (Ritala-Koskinen 2001, 98, 112-113.) (Ritala-Koskinen 2003, 121-139.)

#### 4 Study design

The objective of this research is to study the experiences of adolescents living in stepfamilies. To ensure the best possible source of information, the data was collected by interviewing adolescents. As the research focuses on meanings and how people understand things or on finding patterns of people's behavior, we are talking about qualitative research. However, an even more describing factor of qualitative research is its own special approach to data collection and analysis. In addition, the role of the researcher has to be recognized in the study

process. It can be said that qualitative data does not exist without the researcher who interprets and uses the data. (Denscombe 2003, 267-268.)

#### 4.1 Qualitative research

Qualitative research has been defined as “all research except quantitative”. Qualitative research uses words and sentences as the unit of data and it does not aim for generalization like quantitative research does. Qualitative research aims for a deep understanding of the phenomena and the research process can be seen as cyclical rather than linear. Especially the analysis stage of a qualitative study is cyclical and follows throughout the whole research process. (Kananen 2014, 18-20.)

Qualitative researchers recognize the context- and time-specific truth and they are in direct contact with the research participants. Qualitative research is distinguished from its counterpart quantitative research with the focus on the insider’s perspective of the phenomena in question. The researchers collect the data by interviewing or observing the participants in the field of the phenomena. The interest lies in how people experience and see the real world around them. (Kananen 2014, 18-20.) (Lapan, Quartaroli & Riemer 2012, 3-8.)

The basic features of qualitative research are for example that it favors people as a source of information, uses inductive analysis, favors data collection methods which are qualitative (interviews, observation..) and offers the possibility for the research plan to be specified or modified during the process. (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2009, 164. )

As mentioned earlier, this study has features of hermeneutic phenomenology. Phenomenology is an approach that focuses on how people experience their lives. It emphasizes subjectivity, description, interpretation and agency. Through our senses we experience things and we come to know different phenomena. However, these phenomena are not explained only by us sensing them, and this is where the phenomenological approach to research steps in. (Denscombe 2003, 96-97.)

The hermeneutic phenomenological method cannot be easily or unambiguously explained. It is an approach which forces the researcher to consider justification while new problems arise during the research process. The method is formed by all the different factors that influence the research in question, such as the uniqueness of the researcher, participants and the situation. In every hermeneutic phenomenological research it has to be considered how to achieve as authentic meanings of experiences and expressions of the participants as possible. (Laine 2010, 28-33.)

Phenomenological research is not so much concentrated on finding universal truth but rather understanding the world of meanings of some specific group of people. When people express their experiences to the researcher, and the researcher wants to understand and interpret the data they got from the participants, the hermeneutical aspect becomes present. One aim of hermeneutic research can be described as the will to bring something that is already known but easily considered self-evident into people's awareness. (Laine 2010, 31-33.)

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- 1. The critical reflection of the researchers own pre-understanding**  
(Continues throughout the whole process)
  - 2. Data collection**
    - For example open interview
  - 3. Reading the data, perceiving the entity**
  - 4. Description**
    - Raising up *the essential* of the data from the perspective of the research questions and describing it in its natural language
  - 5. Analysis**
    - Structuring *meaningful ensembles* from the data
    - Presenting the content of the meaningful ensembles in researcher's language
    - Analysis of the sentences or paragraphs that need *interpretation*
  - 6. Synthesis**
    - Exporting the meaningful ensembles together, General view of the connections of the meanings
    - Evaluating *the relations between the meaningful ensembles*
  - 7. Evaluation of the practical adaptations** of the new information, future challenges
- 

Figure 1. The Structure of Hermeneutic Phenomenological Research (translated from Laine 2010)

The phenomenological hermeneutical method requires the researcher to reflect the justifications in many stages of the research process. Justifications are needed in questions like the approach to human being or the approach to knowledge. (Laine 2010, 28) In this particular study the holistic approach to human being was guiding the research work. The researcher was observing the participants during the interviews to be able to make notes on non-verbal actions that might help in interpreting the experiences that the interviewees were talking about.

#### 4.2 Self Awareness of the Researcher

In qualitative research the researchers role is very central. The researcher can be described as a research instrument. The researcher decides on what to ask and from who, so lot is depending on the researchers consideration and decision-making. This is why the danger of subjectivity is considerable in qualitative research. (Kananen 2014, 25.)

Phenomenology is interested in people's experiences. The experiences, however, are modified by the meanings that we have learned from the society that we live in. The aspect of having meanings to terms is present also during the interviews. Since the researcher of this study and the adolescents as interviewees come from similar backgrounds, one can assume that certain terms have similar meanings for them. ( Laine 2010, 29-30.)

For this same reason, the researcher of this study can be considered as the insider researcher. The advantages of being experienced "insider" when conducting a research are for example the general background knowledge, which one has on the subject or field they are working on.

#### 4.3 Objective of the Study and Research Question

The objective of this research is to study the experiences of the adolescent, aged 12-18 years living in stepfamilies. The research was conducted as qualitative study and the used methods were individual and group interviews.

Since the interest of this study lies in people's experiences and in interpreting those experiences in data analysis stage, the approach for the study has features of hermeneutic phenomenology. Phenomenology studies the experiences; the person's own relationship with their own reality of life. These experiences need to be interpreted when conducting a research and therefor the hermeneutic aspect is also present. Hermeneutics can be defined as theory of understanding and interpreting. (van Manen 2011) ( Laine 2010, 29-30.)

Research question of this study is as follows:

1. What kind of experiences adolescents have about stepfamily life?



#### 4.4 Data Collection

When you want to know something you need to ask; this is a natural way also in every day social life when wanting to gain information( Ruusuvuori & Tiittula 2005, 9). It is also the best way to study and get information about person's views and experiences when interviewing them; interviewees are considered to have the privileged access to this information (Ten Have 2004, 56-57).

Data collection took place during the summer of 2014. 11 adolescents were interviewed, 5 of them as individual interviews and one group interview with 6 participants. However, the data gathered from one of the participants needed to be ignored in data analysis stage since the content did not fit into the research profile. The final data consisted experiences from 10 interviewees. The participants were from the age of 13 to 17. Average age of the interviewees was 15 years. Two of the participants were boys and 8 of them girls. They all had experienced stepfamily life for several years.

Allan et. al. (2011, 183) points out that not only for them but also other stepfamily researchers in UK, it was challenging to find participants notwithstanding for example the growth in social acceptance or the amount of stepfamilies. Researchers found the snowballing to be the most efficient way of gathering respondents. In this study the snowballing was started as soon as the plan for the research was ready. The information about the study was spread out through the researcher's own contacts, through Facebook and through Supli. Supli informed their members through their Facebook page and also all the participants of the two family summercamp arranged by Supli got a information letter about my study. One adolescent contacted the through email and all the others wanted to participate to the interview during their family camp.

Parents got written information about the research and in addition most of them got information directly from the researcher herself. Adolescents brought the informed consent, which their parent(s) had already signed with them to the interview situation. The adolescents also signed the informed consent form and they were given also the information in the beginning of the interview. The aim of the research was told to each participant and that there will be report written of the findings from this research. The confidentiality, anonymity and privacy was emphasized and the researcher told to the participants that they can stop in any point in case they feel like it. The participants were encouraged to contact the researcher after the interviews in case they have questions later on.

The plan was to conduct both group and individual interviews but after the first group interview it came clear that the adolescents were not very comfortable with the situation of group

interview and sensitive subject as this. The researcher came to the conclusion that the experiences might not be as authentic as they would be in individual interviews, and therefore decided to make only individual interviews later on during the research process.

In phenomenology the thematic interviews are not recommended but rather have the interview as open and natural as possible (Laine 2010, 37). Since the researcher was conducting the research interviews for the first time, she had some guiding questions and themes ready in case the discussion would be very poor. How much the ready questions were needed depended very much from the personality or behavior of the interviewee.

The interviews were all audio recorded and later on transcribed. After each interview notes were made in form of diary to help the researcher remember the observations later on.

It is important to remember to synchronize the data collection and analysis stage when conducting qualitative study to be able to see when the saturation point has been reached (Kananen 2014, 98). After the first three interviews (2 individual and 1 group interview) the patterns were forming. After the sixth interview, it was clear that the saturation was completed since the same subjects came up during the interviews. The data of this research was all in all 241 minutes of recorded conversation. As transcribed text it made 50 pages of data.

#### 4.5 Adolescents and Research

Children and adolescents often seem to be able to provide spontaneous and rich narrations of their lives in research situations and they also seem to be actively engaged in the research process itself. Even though Finland among other countries have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which emphasizes children's right to participation and to be heard, in research situations there are many ethical and methodological issues that need to be considered carefully. Many of them are similar to the ones that are present when conducting a research among adults but child participant brings also special kind of features for the researcher to consider. (UN) (Morrow 1999, 204-205.)

There are four additional considerations when doing a research with children according to Morrow (1999). Firstly, the competencies, perceptions and frameworks of reference may be different in different ages. The researcher must carefully consider what are the suitable data collection methods for the age group in question. Secondly, the vulnerability to exploitation has higher risk with children than with adults. Thirdly, when interpreting the findings the researcher is facing highly problematic situation with power relationships between adult researcher and child participant. Even when researcher aims for participatory research the analysis and interpretation requires special knowledge. Fourthly, access to children goes al-

ways through adult gate-keeper when preparing for research and getting the approval for participation. (Morrow 1999, 205.)

#### 4.6 Data Analysis

Like qualitative research often focuses in words rather than numbers as the unit of analysis, is associated with descriptions rather than analysis and with small-scale studies rather than large-scale studies and has holistic view on the research subject, so does this study (Denscombe 2003, 231-235). These facts also give special features for the data analysis stage of the study process.

The method of analysis in this study was thematic analysis. Thematic analysis might be poorly demarcated and rarely acknowledged but as Braun and Clarke (2006) argue it is a theoretically flexible approach to qualitative data analysis, which should be seen as a method in its own right. Thematic analysis should be the first method of analysis that researchers learn since it provides some core skills that are useful for conducting many other forms of qualitative analysis. (Braun & Clarke 2006, 77-78.)

Thematic analysis is widely used method, which helps the researcher(s) to identify, analyze and report the themes that can be found from the data. Thematic analysis can be recommended to those researchers, who are still inexperienced with research work, since the method does not require the detailed theoretical and technological knowledge of approaches. When reporting the experiences and the reality of the research participants, as is the case in this study, we are talking about realist method of thematic analysis. (Braun & Clarke 2006, 77-81.)

In thematic analysis the identification of the themes can be done either in an inductive way or theoretically driven way. When comparing these two approaches the inductive thematic analysis provides richer description of the data since the researcher is coding the data without trying to fit it into pre-defined frame. Even so it must be acknowledged that the researcher cannot free themselves from the commitments they have through theoretical and epistemological aspect. (Braun & Clarke 2006, 83-84.) The analysis of the data in this study was conducted by utilizing the inductive way of finding the themes within the data.

Braun and Clarke (2006, 86-92) provide a step-by-step guide on doing thematic analysis. The guide consists 6 phases, which helps the researcher to get an overview on the analysis process. When conducting the analysis the researcher will go back and forth between the 6 phases and not only following the stages linearly. The first step advises the researcher to *familiarizing themselves with the data*. In this study the researcher herself collected the data

and also analyzed the data alone, so there was some prior knowledge of the data when starting the thematic analysis. The transcription and reading through the written data took the researcher even deeper into the data. (Braun & Clarke 2006, 86-92.)

The researcher was noticing some initial patterns already during the data collection and in the second phase of the thematic analyze the researcher started *generating initial codes*. The data extracts are being coded and these codes identify a feature of the data. (Braun & Clarke 2006, 86-92.) This phase was actually done three times in this particular study. The first time the researcher conducted it by using highlighters on the transcribed text. The researcher highlighted all the comments about the stepfamily life, how the adolescent felt about the family and the stepfamily life and what kind of experiences they were talking about.

After this the researcher familiarized themselves with the NVivo, a computer program for research purposes. Even though these computer programs developed for research purposes might sometimes be referred as analysis programs it is a program that helps the researcher to manage and process the data. The researcher is the one doing the analysis. (Rantala 2010, 106-107.) The data of this research was coded with the help of NVivo. The earlier stages of the analysis had given ideas of different themes that came up from the interviews and this helped in forming the nodes in NVivo. New nodes, codes, were also formed when exploring the data further.

The researcher took some time away from the data at this point and was studying more about the theory of qualitative analysis and especially the steps of thematic analysis. The researcher noticed that some themes were being emphasized after the coding with NVivo. Researcher wanted to start over with clean transcriptions once again to make sure the right themes would be highlighted in the final study findings.

The third time the researcher coded the data by cutting the data extracts from the printed transcriptions and applied codes for them on the chalkboard. The coding and collating the data in visual way turned out to serve best the researchers own learning process. It also felt most natural way to organize the data extracts and also most reliable way of continuing the analysis process. (Figure 2)



Figure 2 Generating initial codes

In the phase 3 of thematic analysis the researcher starts to *find themes* by sorting codes into potential themes. In this stage it can be very useful to sort the codes by using visual representations, such as mind-maps or tables. Thematic map of the first stage is where the researcher is thinking about the relationships between codes and between themes (figure 3). At this point some of the initial codes might form the actual main themes and some codes might even be discarded. (Braun & Clarke 2006, 86-92.)



Figure 3 Initial thematic map

Next phase, where the researcher is *reviewing the themes*, will make it evident that some of the initial themes are not really themes and some of the initial themes can collapse into each other. The reviewing was done in two levels. The first level was where the researcher reads through all the collated extracts of each initial theme and checks if they are forming a coherent pattern. If not, the researcher needs to find a home for the extracts that do not work with the current themes or these extracts need to be discarded from the analysis. (figure 4) (Braun & Clarke 2006, 86-92.)

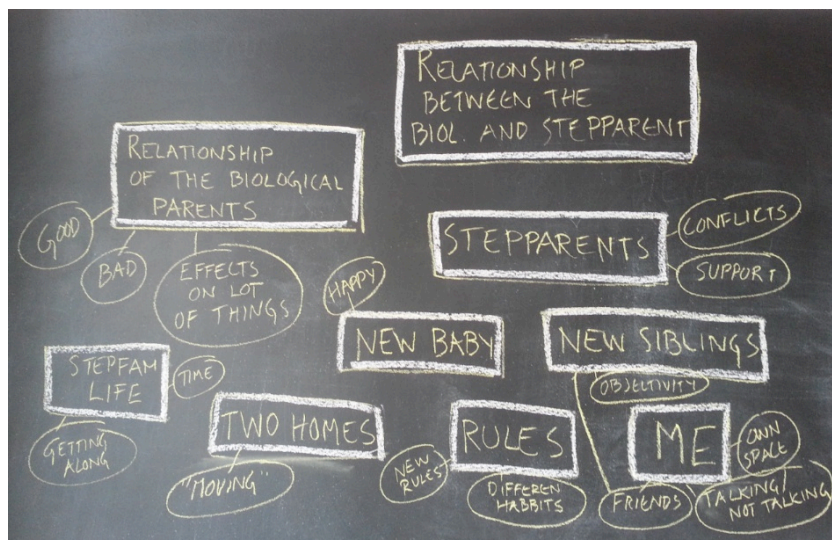


Figure 4 Developed thematic map

The second level of the phase 4 is for the researcher to consider the validity of individual themes in relation to the data set. Data set refers to all the data that the researcher has chosen to be used for the analysis from the whole data that was collected. In this point it is possible to consider whether there is additional data that needs to be coded which was missed during the earlier stages. However this stage could seem endless but the researcher needs to stop re-coding when they notice that the refinements are not adding anything substantial. (Braun & Clarke 2006, 86-92.)

Phase 5 is for *defining and naming the themes*. This phase starts with the final thematic map that was the result from the earlier phase (figure 5). At this point the themes should be looked in relation to the overall “story” that the researcher is telling about their data and how the themes are in relation to the research question. (Braun & Clarke 2006, 86-92.)

The four main themes seen in the figure 5 had working names of *Relationship between the adults* (adolescents experiences on the relationships between adults in their life and how they effect on them); *Stepparents* (adolescents experiences of their stepparents); *Siblings* (adolescents experiences about the children of their stepparent and about the new baby in stepfami-



ly) and *Life in Stepfamily* (adolescents experiences on everyday life factors such as rules, habits, two homes and their own coping methods).

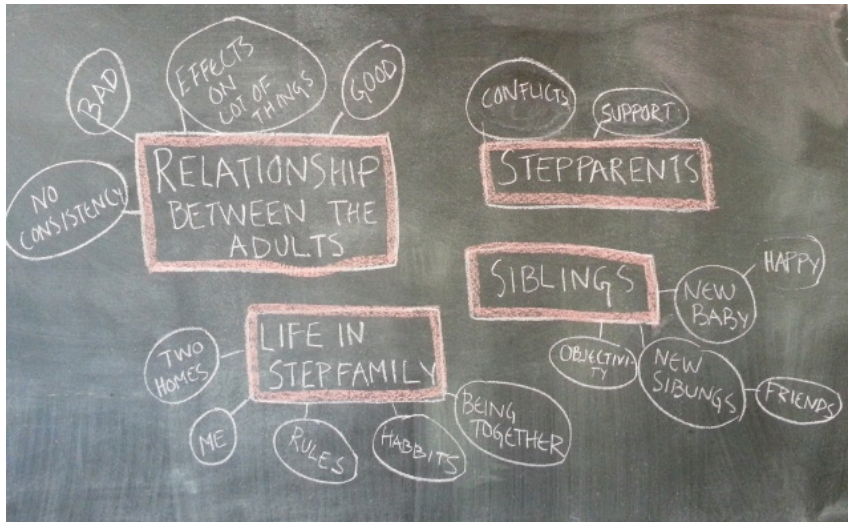


Figure 5 Final thematic map

The final phase of the thematic analysis is when the researcher is *producing the report*. The written report needs to convince the reader of the validity of the research analysis. It is good to include enough data extracts in the final report to demonstrate the prevalence of the themes. However the report is not only to provide data but to offer an analytic narrative of the data. (Braun & Clarke 2006, 86-92.)

Data extracts	Subthemes	Theme
<p>"Probably that dad and mom has such bad relationship and it effects like to the whole family. Like many ways."</p>	The relationship between the biological parents	Relationships <u>between</u> <u>the</u> <u>adults</u>
<p>"Maybe that they did not divorce at loggerheads."</p>		
<p>" I don't know... Maybe that mom and my real dad is rapport so it makes it lot easier"</p>		
<p>"Yeah, but sometimes like they have different opinions, she with my dad. Like stepmom forbids something but my dad lets me do it anyway."</p>	Relationship between the biological and stepparent	
<p>"I think it's nice... but... It's nice that he has someone and he can talk to someone (...) They support each other quite a lot"</p>		

Figure 6 Snapshot of the analysis



## 5 Findings

The objective of the study was to answer the question what kind of experiences adolescents have about stepfamily life. The adolescents had diverse backgrounds on how and when their stepfamily had been formed, how their living arrangements had been taken care of and how they experienced the stepfamily life overall. The experiences represented positive, negative and neutral aspects and there was not a clear emphasis on any of them when looking at the entity of the findings.

As stated earlier in the data analysis chapter there was 4 main themes as a result of the analysis. The final themes and subthemes are presented in the figure 7.

Themes	Subthemes
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ADULTS	RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE BIOLOGICAL PARENTS
	RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE BIOLOGICAL AND THE STEPPARENT
SIBLINGS	NEW BABY
	CHILDREN OF THE STEPPARENT
EVERYDAY LIFE IN STEPFAMILY	TWO HOMES
	RULES AND HABITS
	"ME"
STEPPARENTS	

Figure 7 Themes and subthemes

## 5.1 Relationship between the adults

The relationship between the adults was discussed in all of the interviews. The adolescents' had different kind of experiences on how their biological parents, the biological and the step-parent and the mother and stepmother / father and stepfather were getting along. However, the relationships between the adults in the adolescents life seem to play a big role when the adolescents were describing their experiences.

### 5.1.1 Relationship between the biological parents

As the interviewees were talking about what was the good thing about their stepfamily and in contrary what were the annoying issues in their life relation to stepfamily, 8 out of 10 adolescent mentioned the relationship of the biological parents in this context.

It seemed that the bad relationship between the biological parents was giving grief for the adolescent and they felt they were in between of their parents. The bad relationship could even push the adolescent in defending their parent to others.

*“Probably that dad and mom has such bad relationship and it effects like to the whole family. Like many ways.”*

*“Varmaan ku isällä ja äitillä on niin huonot välit nii sit se niinku vaikuttaa koko perheeseen. Niinku moninpuolin.”*

*“They are not even talking nowadays. So that is annoying. Then we are there like in the middle, then both parents tell us like different story..”*

*“Ku ne ei oo puheväleissäkää nykysin. Ni se on ärsyttävää. Sit ku me ollaan siin niinku välissä sitte molemmat vanhemmat kertoo meille niinku eri tavalla..”*

*“I got really angry that mom was calling dad names and diminishing dad. (...) It caused me fights really easily when I tried to start defending dad.”*

*“Mä suutuin tosi paljo siitä että äiti niinku haukku tai alenti iskää. (...) Mulle siit tuli tosi helposti riitoi ku mä yritin alkaa puolustelee iskää”*

Adolescents highly appreciated the good relations between their parents. The good relationship of the biological parents was even estimated as the success factor for the stepfamily by the adolescents. Even some short moments can play a big role in the eyes of the adolescent as can be seen from the following reference:

*“Mom and dad, in my opinion they have really good (relationship) (...) If mom (brings) our stuff to dad’s place or dad to mom’s, then they can be chatting to each other.”*

*”Äiti ja isä nii mun mielestä niillä on tosi hyvät (välit) (...) Jos äiti (tuo) meidän tavarat isälle tai isä äitille, nii sit ne juttelee siin jotain.”*

*“Maybe that mom and my real dad is rapport so it makes it lot easier”*

*“Ehkä se et niinku äitillä ja oikealla isällä on hyvät välit niin se helpottaa aika paljo sitä.”*

*“Maybe that they did not divorce at loggerheads.(...) They have really good relationship. (...) In my opinion mom and dad has to be rapport. It would be really difficult if they had bad relationship. You would, you could end up in the middle of the fighting”*

*“No varmaan et ne ei eronnu riidoissa. (...) Niillä on tosi hyvät välit. (...) Mun mielestä äidin ja isän pitää olla hyvis väleis. Se ois tosi vaikeeta jos ne olis huonois väleis. Joutuis, saattais joutuu riitojen keskellekin. “*

#### 5.1.2 Relationship between the biological and stepparent

The relationships between the spouses in the stepfamily and the relationship between mother and stepmother / father and stepfather were mentioned in 4 interviews.

Even though the participant behind the next reference mentioned, how it was weird seeing their biological parent being very close to the stepparent because that was not something that had happened between the biological parents, the participant described the relationship between the biological and stepparent with warmth:

*“It is nice that he has someone and that he can talk to someone. And they kind of support each other quite a lot. I can tell. And then she (stepmother) gives to my dad wisdom and stuff.”*

*“Kivaa et sillä on joku ja et se pystyy puhuu jonku kanssa (...) Ja sitte ne taval- laan tukee toisiinsa aika paljon. Sen on huomannu. Ja sitte taas se (äitipuoli) ni se tuo isälle kaikkee viisautta ja muuta.”*

When talking about the stepparent from parental aspect one adolescent was hesitating whether the stepparent was equal in parenting with their biological parent because the co-parenting was not consistent. The non-consistency between the parenting habits was mentioned few times in the interviews.

*“Yes but sometimes they (stepmother) have like different opinions with dad. Like first stepmother forbids something but dad let’s me do it. So the stepmom might get angry. So.. like.. I don’t really know. “*

*“..välil niinku niilä (äitipuolella) on iskän kans ihan eri mielipiteitä. Et iskä vaik että eka äp kieltää tehä jotain mut isä antaaki tehä. Niin äitipuoli saattaa suuttuu siitä. Nii...tota..en mä oikein tiä.”*

The relationship between the mother and stepmother or father and stepfather was also being talked about and described as both good and bad. The bad relationship between the biological parent and the other parent’s new spouse had had some effects on the situations that were important to the adolescent:

*“In the first place when mom did not really like stepmom, and we were suppose to go there, dad’s place (...) but it was really like that she (mother) would not let us go to the stepmom. “*

*“Alun perin sillon ku äiti ei oikeen niin tykänny äitipuolesta niin meijän piti mennä sinne, iskän luokse (...) mut sillonhan se oli silleen oikeesti että se ei antanu meijän mennä äitipuolen luokse. “*

*“Mom and stepmom didn’t have good relationship from the beginning, because it was like that mom got angry to stepmom for when she (mom) could not make it (event) so I asked that could stepmom come.”*

*“Äitillä ja äitipuolella ei ihan alusta asti ollu hyvät välit, koska se oli silleen että äiti suuttu kauheesti äitipuolelle siitä et ku se (äiti) ei päässyt (tilaisuus) nii sit mä pyysin et voisko äitipuoli tulla.”*

Good relationship between the adults was seen as a factor, which reduces the problems in the adolescent’s life.

*“Well they (father and stepfather) don’t meet a lot but like they are ok if they sometimes see each other (...) can talk to each other. (...) I like that everyone is in peace with each other (...) Like, it could disturb a little if there was a problem.”*

*“No ei ne nyt sillee hirveesti tapaa mut siis ihan hyvin jos niinku joskus näkee (...) voi jutella toistensa kanssa. (...) Et mä tykkään että kaikki on sovus (...) Et se sit saattasi häiritä vähän jos ois joku ongelma. “*

## 5.2 Siblings

Siblings -theme includes all the experiences where adolescents were talking about the children of their stepparent or the birth of the new baby in stepfamily. Siblings and the relationship of the adults were the most mentioned topics during the interviews.

### 5.2.1 New Baby

8 participants had got a new baby in their family and 6 out of 8 described the birth of a new baby in very positive manners. Mostly the new baby was very much welcomed because the older siblings liked babies and taking care of the babies in general. The birth of the new baby was experienced positively also because it seemed to bring the older children closer to each other when they had something so concrete in common.

*“That might be the thing that I look forward the most when I go there. That I get to hold the baby again and look after him. And I like him a lot.”*

*“Et se on ehkä se eniten mitä mä ootan ku mä meen sinne. Et mä saan taas ottaa sen syliin ja hoitaa sitä ja näi. Ja et mä tykkään siit tosi paljon.”*

*“Don’t know, maybe even made our relationship better coz they are like both of ours siblings..kind of..There was this thing that was connecting us. “*

*“Emmätiiä ehkä saatto jopa parantaa välejä ku ne on niinku meidän molempien sisarus.. tavallaan (...) Oli tavallaan joku asia mikä yhdisti meitäkin.”*

*“Well it has changed but.. not that much on my opinion. That I find it nicer when we have that little one coz I have always liked babies.”*

*“No on se muuttunu mutta.. ei niin paljon mun mielestä.. että mun mielestä on kivempää ku on se pikkunen ku mä oon aina tykänny vauvoista”*

*“I find it lovely that both of them were born”*

*“Musta se on ollu ihanaa ku ne on syntyneet molemmat.”*

Few participants mentioned that the birth of the baby had brought as a negative side effect some sleepless nights for the family. Mainly it was in the beginning or if the baby was sick. The older children had been taken into account by for example getting them earplugs to ensure a good night sleep.

*“First we were staying up during the nights and it was bit of bungling. But now it has calmed down when he (baby) has got bigger”*

“Eka yöt valvottii ja se oli vähän sellasta sähläämistä. Kyl se nyt ku (vauva) on kasvanu niin vähän rauhottunu.”

The jealousy only came up in two interviews. One participant was describing how the youngest one in the family had become jealous to the baby since she/he was no longer the youngest one and in this way the baby took their place in the family. The other participant mentioned that the baby did not raise any jealousy.

*“So she/he is kind of jealous to the baby because now the baby is the youngest one. So at the beginning she/he was like not wanting to even hold the baby.”*

“Nii sitte tavallaan se on mustasukkanen vauvalle ku nyt se onki se nuorin. Nii sitte se eka oli silleen että se ei niinku yhtää halunnu ottaa sitä edes syliin.”

*“No one was really even jealous”*

“Ei oikeestaa kukaan ollu ees mustasukkanen”

#### 5.2.2 Children of the Stepparent

The adolescents described the relationship between the children of the stepfamily mostly very positively. Especially in the beginning when the children were just getting to know each other it seemed to be a bit hard to find right terms for the children of the stepparent. Adolescents were mainly talking about the other children as friends but the used term was stepbrother or stepsister in most of the interviews when talking about the stepparents' children.

It seemed to be extremely positive if the children of the new stepparent were around the same age so it was easy to spend time with each other. In the other hand it also seemed to be liked if they were remarkably younger so one could nurse them.

*“I found it nice when they came. (...) They weren't like friends.. Basically they were like sisters and brothers but I didn't think that they were my sisters and brothers. Or maybe I sometimes thought that they were my half siblings. But I kind of didn't realize it. But it was just nice when there was two almost the same aged ones.”*

“Musta oli aina kiva kun ne tuli. (...) kuitenkin ne ei ollu silleen kavereita.. periaattees ne oli niinku siskoi ja veljii mut sit en mä aatellu et ne oli mun siskoi ja veljii. Tai ehkä mä välil aattelin et ne on mun puolveljii ja puolsisko. Mut en mä niinku tajunnu sitä. Mut sit se oli vaan kiva ku tuli tolleen kaks saman ikästä suunnilleen.”

*“And you kind of got like new friends (...) We are really close. A bit like they were my own sisters and brothers. “*

*“Ja tavallaa ku sai niinku uusia kavereita niistä (...) Me olla sillee tosi läheisii ja sillee. Vähän niinku ne ois omii siskoi ja veljii.”*

*“ Well she/he was my friend back then. Quite good relationship.”*

*“No se oli mun kavერი niinku sillon. Ihan hyvät välit”*

*“Well that is really nice that there is about the same aged (children) so one can do bigger children’s things. That the small ones are not always there. We can just hang outside. “*

*“Se on ainaki tosi kiva että on suunnilleen saman ikäsiä niin et voi tavallaan tehdä sellasia isojenki juttuja. Ettei oo koko ajan niitä pieniä. Voi vaik mennä uloski vaan hengaa.*

*“Maybe that there is lot of people .. Like getting new siblings (...) You won’t get bored.”*

*“Varmaan että on niin paljo porukkaa sillee.. just ku sai sisaruksii (...) Ei oo tylsää.”*

*“You can just spend time with them (...) During the weekends there is like lot to do because we are outside with them (children of the stepparent)”*

*“Voi vain viettää niitten kaa aikaa (...) viikonloppusin niinku paljo tekemistä ku me ollaan ulkona niitten (äiti-/isäpuolen lasten) kaa”*

The conflicts between the children were described as momentary and normal arguments between siblings. One participant mentioned that the different habits referring to their different family backgrounds were sometimes causes of the arguments.

*“Well just momentary ones. Like siblings have. But nothing big.”*

*“No sellasii hetkellisii vaa. Niinku sisaruksilla muutenki tulee. Muttei mitää isoo.”*

*“Well just like a basic sister. Sometimes annoying, (sometimes) nice”*

*“No tyyliin että ihan perus sisko. Välil ärsyttämistä, (välillä) kiva”*

*“I am the older one so I get to do lot more stuff with the baby. And she/he (child of the stepparent) finds it really unfair.”*

“Mä oon se vanhempi nii mä saan tehdä sen vauvan kanssa enemmän asioita, mitä se. Ja sen mielestä ne on kauheen epäreilua.”

*“Sometimes we had kind of a war where we had divided into two or three groups.”*

“Periaattees välil meillä oli sellanen sota et me oltii jakauduttu kahteen tai kolmeen porukkaan.”

“We don’t get along that well. Like, we get these things if I mention about something to her/him (...) She/He finds me annoying because I say, mention about things.”

“Me ei niin hyvin tulla toimeen. Et meille tulee semmosia et jos mä sanon sille jostain asiasta (...) sen mielestä mä oon ärsyttävä koska mä sanon, huomautan asioista.”

### 5.3 Everyday Life in Stepfamily

The adolescents described the everyday life in stepfamilies without any peculiarities. Household tasks were shared between the family members and the family time (holidays, shared hobbies, seeing grandparents) was represented with warmth.

*“What is the best thing about your family?”*

*“Maybe that we spend lot of time together”*

“Mikä on se paras juttu omassa perheessä?”

“Varmaan ku vietetään aikaa yhes paljo.”

*“How is your ordinary life?”*

*“Basic hassle”*

“Millaista teidän arki on?”

“Perus hässäkkää”

#### 5.3.1 Two Homes



Most of the participants were in practice living in two households. Going from one home to another home was raising only negative comments. It was not highly emphasized but the adolescents did mention how shifting to the other home was embarrassing or something they did not like because of the packing and travelling. However the two homes was also seen as a good thing since there was two places to choose from. One participant was also expressing their concern on their parents coping who needed to travel every other weekend to get the children from one home to another.

*“But when you have two homes, you always have to pack what you need with you and so on.. and move! And then one week and it somehow feels that you can not really settle down.”*

*“Mutta silleen ku on kaks kotii niin joutuu pakkaa aina mitä tarvii mukaan ja näin.. ja muuttaa! Ja sitte taas viikko ja jotenki tuntuu ettei ehdi niinku asettua.”*

*“It is a bit embarrassing sometimes that you have to pack everything for a week and go with suitcases..”*

*“On se välillä vähän noloa kun pitää pakata kaikki viikoks tavarat ja mennä matkalaukuilla..”*

*“I haven’t done this ever.. But if one would feel at moms place like I’m out of here, I don’t stand to be here, so one could go to dads place. I haven’t left ever but sometimes I have felt like doing it. But I guess that is also a good thing, that you can do like that.”*

*“Tai en oo ikinä tehny näin, mut jos äitillä olis silleen et mä nyt lähen, mä en jaksa nyt olla täällä, niin vois vaik lähtee iskälle. En mä koskaa oo lähteny mut joskus on kyllä tehny mieli. Mutta varmaan toi on kans hyvä juttu, että pystyy sillee.”*

### 5.3.2 Rules and Habits

Only two participants mainly talked about rules and habits in the stepfamily. However the quantity of the subject represented such a big amount of the whole interview that they seemed to be important subjects to some adolescents in stepfamilies. It also seemed that those who either had problems in their relationship with the stepparent or with the stepparents’ children were emphasizing the rules -subject during their interview. The new rules and different habits between the family members were mainly talked with negative tone or with dissatisfaction.

*“We were younger and our stepmom made these horrible rules to us. Like if you are outside for two hours then you can use the computer for one hour.”*

“Me oltii pienempi niin äitipuoli teki meille kauheet säännöt että jos on ulkona kaksi tuntia niin koneella saa olla tunnin.”

*“..and that has been a bit annoying every now and then that we got these new rules. Like from stepmoms side as well”*

“.. ja sitte tota se on ollu välillä vähän ärsyttävää ku sitte taas tuli uusia sääntöjä. Niinku äitipuolen puoleltakin!”

### 5.3.3 “Me”

The subtheme “Me” consists the experiences where the adolescents were talking about their own coping in stepfamily. Variability between needing to talk to someone or not needing was very individual. Some did not feel the need to talk about family issues at all, in fact one participant even described it “sickening” to talk about things. On the other hand there was also participants who had felt the need to talk to their friends, boyfriends, parents or stepparents or even to professionals.

*“I asked if I could go to the family counseling center. And then I went there to talk.”*

“Mä ite pyysin että saanko mä käydä perheneuvolassa. Ja sit mä kävin siellä juttelee.”

*“If I nowadays have something then I talk to my boyfriend.”*

“Jos mulla nykyää on jotain niin mä puhun poikaystävälle.”

One of the older ones from the participants was describing the coping between the parents who had bad relationship between each other by choosing what she/he wants to hear. It seemed to be one way of protecting themselves.

*“I don’t manage to listen to any of them. I decide what I want to hear and what I believe. (...) I don’t really even care.”*

Emmä jaksa kuunnella kumpaakaan. Minä ite oon silleen et mitä mä haluan kuulla ja mitä mä uskon.(...) Eikä minua kiinnostakaa sillee oikee”

## 5.4 Stepparents

Half of the participants were talking about stepparents clearly more than the other half. Out of the five who were talking more about the stepparents one was talking very negatively about their stepparent and two with very positive attitude.

What seemed to effect negatively to the adolescents regarding their stepparents was the fact that the stepparent could set boundaries and rules for the adolescent. The reasons why the adolescents found it annoying that the stepparents could tell them what to do, were mainly described through blood kinship, age of the stepparent or it was just something they could not explain.

*“Maybe just if stepdad says something so it starts to annoy me. Because he isn’t my own dad.”*

“Varmaan just jos se puoliskä sanoo jotain niin alkaa ärsyttään. Ku ei se oo oma iskä.”

*“Maybe sometimes the stepdad because.. well.. because he isn’t per se relative so it annoys me every now and then that he can tell me what to do.”*

“Ehkä välillä se isäpuoli ku siis.. no.. ku se ei sinänsä oo mitään sukua niin se välillä ärsyttää ku se voi komennella”

*“I am with her/him kind of like cross swords. You would get along if you want to. But can not be bothered when you are annoyed.”*

“Mä oon sen kaa vähä sillee sukset ristissä välillä. Kyllähän sitä sitte toimeen tulee jos niinku haluaa. Mutta ku ei jotenki jaksa ku ärsyttää.”

Stepparents were also seen as an extra adult who the adolescent could trust and to whom it was easy to talk to. Sometimes even easier than to the biological parents as can be read from the following extracts:

*“ And stepdad.. I might tell him more stuff than to mom and dad (...) well I feel that the stepdad hasn’t ever been like (...) kind of like father figure to us (...) Stepdad is kind of like a friend. Even though he is my stepdad and I call him my stepdad.”*

“Ja sit isäpuoli.. mä saatan kertoo sille enemmän juttui ku äitille tai iskälle. (...) no musta tuntuu että ip ei oo ikinä ollu sillee.(...) periaattees isähahmo meille (...) jotenki ip on jotenki semmonen kaveri. Vaikka on se mun isäpuoli ja mä sanon et se on mun isäpuoli.”

*“I talk a lot with my stepmom. Like, I talk more with her than with my own mom. Or with my own dad. “*

*“Sen mun äitipuolen kanssa mä puhun tosi paljon asioista. Et mä puhun sen kanssa enemmän ku mun oman äitin kanssa. Ja mun oman isän kanssa.”*

## 6 Discussion

When doing a literature review and studying the previous researches in Finland, UK and USA done in the field of stepfamily life I felt that most of them emphasizes the risks of stepfamily life for children and adolescents and tell what kind of challenges stepfamilies face. This in mind and realizing that the amount of stepfamilies has been growing during the past decades it felt almost depressing to draw the big picture. Luckily I was able to interview the adolescents who live in stepfamilies and hear the experiences they have. The overall experiences of these adolescents were not at all as depressing or negative as the literature review was indicating.

One explanation to this might be that the stepfamily research and literature I was reading about was mainly from the 1980-2000. The stepfamilies today are not the same stepfamilies that were few decades ago and the stepfamilies today have better support and guidance available. Stepfamilies nowadays form from many different pathways as Stewart (2007) presented in her book. This means that the children in stepfamilies have very different backgrounds and basis than the children in stepfamilies in the 1980-1990. After listening to these adolescents I feel there are many things we adults need to hear and pay attention to. But the situation is not, I dare to claim, at all as bad as it might seem when having a look on previous studies.

The main issues that the participants talked about were the relationships between the family members and how the state of the relationships affects on the adolescents and the whole family. The participants mainly talked about the relationships between their biological parents, the relationships between the other adults in their lives, relationships between the children in the stepfamily and the relationship between the adolescent themselves and the parents (both biological and stepparents).

Adolescents from very diverse family background could probably raise same themes up that were discussed during the interviews in this study. The relationship between the adults of the family, the consistency in parenting habits, relationships between the siblings, the effects of the birth of the new baby in the family, all these seems like topics that can be important for example to the adolescent living in nuclear family.

As mentioned earlier in this report, this study took features from hermeneutic phenomenology that is interested also on unique features brought up in research and not only trying to find general regularities. Phenomenology is aiming to understand the world and its meanings for some particular group of people in some specific era. The aim of the study could be phrased by making something we already know into something we recognize. This kind of knowledge is for example the self-evident knowledge that people tend to forget. (Laine 2010 30-33.) Many of the findings of this study are important facts to be brought up to the parents' knowledge. I dare to claim that parents do know how important it is for adults to stay in good relationship with each other and how that relationship effects to children. Still, many children experience the side effects from the bad relationship between their parents as was seen also in this particular study.

Emse-project (Jyväskylän yliopisto) in 2010-2013 was studying children's emotional security in multiple family relations and the head of the Emse-project, professor Kimmo Jokinen has stated in his interviews that the family relations are very important for the wellbeing of the children and adults. Whether the family is small family, stepfamily, single parent-family or any other form of family does not play a big role in a sentence that the atmosphere in the family needs to be good and supportive for the child to feel safe and secure. For the wellbeing of the children all the relations between the family members and the occurrences in family life are important factors. (Suomen Akatemia 2012.) (Deski 2012.)

Another study supports the findings of Emse-project. The study on single parent-families and stepfamilies in relation to children's behavior problems is reporting on findings which states that the way the family members (also the parent who is not living with the child anymore) define the family situation and what kind of relationship the adults have with each other and with the child plays a bigger role for the child's wellbeing than the family form. (Taanila 1999, 17-30.)

Allan et. al. (2011) studied the development and changes of relationships in stepfamilies across different life phases. They found out that the adolescence as a period brought strains into the stepfamily more evidently. The adolescent who was going through the puberty was more unwilling to follow the house rules and the possible conflicts happened to have an impact to all relationships within the household. (Allan et.al. 2011, 176.) One of the interviewees brought this up very clearly. The participant said that as a younger child she/he had taken more part to the household tasks but as she/he got older it was harder to take orders from the stepparent and this seemed to raise conflicts between the household members.

One interesting aspect that I found was that those 2 adolescents who were describing their relationship with their stepparent very negatively were also talking about how their biological parent and stepparent (those in relationship with each other) had some non-consistency in their parenting habits. So in other words the stepfamily parents' relationship and co-parenting might have an effect on how the children and stepparent get along. To support this finding the adolescent who was describing their relationship with their stepparent very positively was also talking about their biological parent's and stepparent's relationship with terms "support each other", "gives wisdom" and "kissing each other".

Stewart (2007) states that one should be skeptical of studies based on clinical populations since the ones who are already seeking help tend to have more problems than the general population. (Stewart 2007, 47). Since the participants of my study were collected through the contacts of Supli it might be that the participants were children of such families who are conscious about stepfamily life and who are looking preventive support for their family. It is possibly that this way the participants were from families that are functioning better than average stepfamily and that might be the reason for the study findings to be overall quite positively interpreted.

## 7 Ethical consideration and trustworthiness

The ethical consideration in research starts already when choosing the topic and follows throughout the whole process. Researcher needs to ask themselves the basic questions of right and wrong, good and bad. It is on researchers own responsibility to know the basic principles of research ethics. (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2009, 23.)

According to Ph.D. Juhani Pietarinen (1999) the basic task of the researcher is to produce trustworthy information about reality. By trustworthy he means that the information has to be justified critically. Critical aspect needs to be present in choosing the methods for collecting the data, analyzing the data and forming theory for example. (Pietarinen 1999)

Flick (2014, 49-50) is presenting the Schnell's and Heinritz's eight principles of research ethics. According to these principles researchers have to be able to justify the necessity of their thesis and to explain what is the aim of their research. Researchers need to be able to explain the details of the research for the participants also from the participants' point of view. (Flick 2014, 49-50.) The justification of the necessity of this thesis has been expressed in the beginning of this report. Since the participants were children, the study details were explained in the beginning of each interview and the possibility to participate and to have an

impact was already expressed in the first message where the participants were asked to take part in this study (Attachment 2). This was done to ensure that the adolescents would understand what the study is about.

These eight principles also say that researchers must be able to explain the methodology of their work and they have to be capable for ethical consideration concerning the whole research process. The risks for violations and damages need to be assessed and preventive actions must be taken. Finally, the usefulness of the results needs to be truthful and the data protection must follow the current regulations. (Flick 2014 49-50.) The ethical consideration has been done during the whole research process and in this report the ethical issues are also being reflected. The wellbeing of the adolescents was being kept in mind during the whole process and the actions were done to prevent possible harms to happen. The adolescents were being told many times that I will not tell their parents what they have said during the interviews. Also the parents were given guidance on what kind of questions would not be appropriate to ask after the interviews. I also tried to ensure that the interview rooms were quite and private. If the adolescent seemed distressed I took a pause and tried to talk about light subjects in between the interviews.

#### 7.1 Guidelines by Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity

Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity has guidelines to help the researchers in following the ethically acknowledged procedure. This includes first of all the integrity, meticulousness and accuracy in the research work. The chosen methods need to be ethically sustainable and publishing process need to be conducted in an open and responsible fashion. (TENK 2012.)

The researcher must respect the work of other researchers and take care of the permits that are needed to conduct the study (including the possible preliminary ethical review). Agreement about the researcher's rights, responsibilities and obligations, authorship principles and archiving and accessing the data must be done before starting the research. The planning, implementation and reporting of the research must be done within the standards that are set for the scientific knowledge. (TENK 2012.)

There needs to be transparency in source of financing, conflicts of interest or other commitments that are relevant to the conduct of the research both during the process and when publishing the results. Researcher must know when to refrain from situations that might have conflict of interest. Finally when following the guidelines of Finnish Advisory Board on Research the research organization must follow good personnel and financial administration practices. (TENK 2012.)

The interviewees of this study were collected through the Supli's connections but also by snowballing, starting from the families I personally know. In the informed consent form I asked the signatures from both the underage child and the guardian. In the beginning of every interview I also mentioned that the participation is 100% voluntary and that they can stop when ever they feel. I also said that if later on they would like to retreat from the study they can contact me and I will delete their interview and not use it in the analyses. With each and every interview I highlighted the fact that I will not tell their parents what their child has said during the interview. This I found important since some of the children knew that I knew their parents. I also said to the parents in the summer camps when presenting the research for them that I highly recommend not to ask too precise questions from the adolescents on how the interview was or what were the questions. This was, as I explained to the parents, for the reason that the adolescents would not have to face difficult situation where they feel pressure on telling their parents what they have said.

One ethical issue to be considered when interviewing the children of stepfamilies is the location of the interview. Children might have more than one household where they live and depending on which household they are at the moment might influence on the given answers as well. None of the interviews took place in the adolescents' homes. Since most of the interviews took place during the family summer camps the physical ground was neutral. But I do realize that the children took part on this family camp with either one of their parent and his/her new spouse and this might have an impact on how they consider the stepfamily questions.

In the quotations I decided not to show the participants sex or age. This is to ensure that the quotations cannot be associated to any particular participants even by their family members.

## 7.2 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative content analysis has been discussed by Elo, Kääriäinen, Kanste, Pölkki, Utriainen and Kyngäs (2014) in their article *Qualitative Content Analysis: A Focus on Trustworthiness*. The authors have gathered checklist for researchers who want to improve the trustworthiness of their content analysis study. The list has been created based on the authors' experience, previous studies and literature. The list has questions researcher should pay attention to in different stages of the study. The three stages are preparation phase, organization phase and reporting phase. I will be reflecting the trustworthiness of my study through these three phases and the often-used terms related to trustworthiness such as credibility, dependability, conformability, and transferability.



As a researcher I must carefully reflect my role as a researcher. My questions throughout the planning stage has been “Am I too close to the subject?” and “Will my biases effect to the interviews or analyzing the data?”. These questions are important to consider since I am a mother living in a stepfamily and have 2 biological children and 3 stepchildren in my family. However, knowing the field of my research very well and having the strong interest on the subject was a remarkable benefit for the whole process.

I noticed that the subjects of the interviews were also very personal to me. During the interviews I managed to keep my self not reflecting the subjects too personally or emotionally but I took time after each interview for my personal reflection. There for I decided to do the transcriptions later on and not straight after the interviews.

Since I conducted the interviews in Finnish but I am reporting the findings in English I needed to translate the quotations used in this report from Finnish to English. Therefor I want to show both the original quotes and the translations in order to reach better validity of the study. Showing the originals (meaning in the language used during the interviews despite what the publishing language is) will also increase the transparency and it puts the researcher in responsibility over the translation. (Nikander 2010, 436.)

To increase the trustworthiness I wanted to open up the study process in this report as well and as detailed as possible. According to Denscombe (2003, 233) it is necessary for the researcher to give detailed descriptions in order to provide the reader with enough information so they can judge themselves whether the interpretations are justifiable and relevant for other circumstances. (Denscombe 2003, 233.)

Being a mother of a stepfamily and having experience in child development through my work history it was challenging sometimes during the analysis to put those presumptions aside and really focus on what the data is telling. When ever I was hesitating whether I was not seeing the whole picture I talked about the issue to my tutor, fellow students or to my spouse in order to get my thoughts together. I took a little time away from the data before continuing the analysis. I also did the coding and collating 3 times in order to find what was relevant in the data.

Through my work experience I have had feedback about being able to create good atmosphere for discussions and I have gained the trust of the customers quickly. I was quite confident to my skills for conducting interviews before starting the data collection. However I found it surprisingly hard to be in a role of unbiased and not-too-sympathetic interviewer when the interviewee was a child.

It is essentially important to mention the confidentiality in the participation forms and also in the beginning of every interview to gain the participants and their families trust and to ensure as authentic experiences as possible. When starting this research project I told my family what I was about to do. Children expressed their opinions on how the adolescents would not believe that our discussions will be confidential and they would not tell me, “the stranger”, about their feelings. This coming from the children really made me think on how to win the trust of the interviewees quickly in the beginning of the interview. In most of the interviews I felt that it came naturally and I also emphasized the confidentiality during the interviews to remain the trust throughout the interview.

Although the research could not be repeated in its entity and I want to emphasize that it does present 10 individuals experiences, it still does give an overview on what issues are dominant in the adolescents’ talks. All themes were being talked about at least in 5 out of 6 interviews (there was 6 interviews in total from which one was a group interview and 5 was individual interviews.).

### 7.3 Future challenges

Family structures have considerably been changing during the past decades and especially the Nordic European countries have moved far from the so-called traditional family form. The return to nuclear family model is unlikely to happen even though the change towards more diverse family forms would slow down. (Uhlendorff, Rupp & Euteneuer 2011.) This means that there will be need for different forms of family research also in the future to be able to support families and individual family members better.

The findings of this study will be used in the Association of Stepfamilies in Finland when planning the future services for stepfamilies and the children in stepfamilies. The message that has come to the fore from the adolescents is important to bring up not only to the parents of the stepfamilies but also to the professionals working among stepfamilies. This have been planned to be done by lecturing about the findings of this study in different occasions run by the Association of Stepfamilies in Finland and by spreading the word especially in social media which is very effective information channel nowadays.

During the research process there was few aspects that would have been also interesting to study. It would be interesting to focus on how the divorce process and the after care effects on the children’s’ perception of stepfamily life. It would have been interesting also to have comparison group of adolescents living in nuclear families and analyze the experiences of the two groups.

As mentioned earlier those adolescents who had problems with their stepparents also were talking about the non-consistency in parenting habits between the adults of stepfamily. This would also be a interesting future study subject.

*Good and happy family?*

*Everyone likes each other. Happy. Cheerful. Positive. Sense of humor. And everyone likes each other. And there are no hate relations.*

*-Adolescent living in stepfamily-*

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Hankesuunnitelma. Suomen Uusperheiden Liitto ry.

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## Appendix 1: Informed consent

### SUOSTUMUS HAASTATTELUUN

Olen Niina van Zinderen ja opiskelen Laurea –ammattikorkeakoulussa sosionomi (YAMK) tutkintoa. Opinnäytetyöni teen yhteistyössä Suomen Uusperheellisten liiton kanssa ja tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on kartoittaa uusperheen nuorten kokemuksia ja tarpeita. Tutkimustuloksia on tarkoitus käyttää hyväksi myöhemmin suunniteltaessa Suomen Uusperheellisten liiton palveluita.

Tutkimusaineistoni tulee koostumaan 12-18 –vuotiaiden nuorten haastatteluista. Haastattelut nauhoitetaan, jotta aineisto on helpommin analysoitavissa.

Osallistuminen tutkimukseen on täysin vapaaehtoista. Tutkittavilla on tutkimuksen aikana oikeus kieltäytyä tutkimuksesta ja keskeyttää tutkimukseen osallistuminen missä vaiheessa tahansa ilman, että siitä aiheutuu heille mitään seuraamuksia. Tutkimuksen järjestelyt ja tulosten raportointi ovat luottamuksellisia. Tutkimuksesta saatavat tutkittavien henkilökohtaiset tiedot tulevat ainoastaan tutkittavan ja tutkijaryhmän käyttöön ja tulokset julkaistaan tutkimusraporteissa siten, ettei yksittäistä tutkittavaa voi tunnistaa. Tutkittavilla on oikeus saada lisätietoa tutkimuksesta tutkijaryhmän jäseniltä missä vaiheessa tahansa.

Alle 18-vuotiailta haastateltavilta lupa pyydetään myös huoltajalta. Huoltajat eivät kuitenkaan tule saamaan oman lapsensa haastatteluja kuultavakseen.

Suostun haastateltavaksi

\_\_\_\_\_  
Paikka ja aika

\_\_\_\_\_  
Allekirjoitus ja nimenselvennys

Suostun, että lastani \_\_\_\_\_ haastatellaan.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Paikka ja aika

\_\_\_\_\_  
Huoltajan allekirjoitus ja nimenselvennys

Appendix 2: Message in social media to gather participants

Hei uusperheen nuori,

Nyt Sinulla on mahdollisuus saada äänesi kuuluviin ja kertoa kokemuksesi uusperhe-elämästä. Teen opinnäytetyönäni tutkimusta uusperheen nuorten kokemuksista ja tarpeista ja etsin haastateltavaksi 12-18 -vuotiaita nuoria.

Tutkimuksen tuloksia on tarkoitus käyttää myöhemmin Suomen Uusperheiden liiton kehittämistyössä avuksi nuorille suunnattujen palveluiden suunnittelussa. Ioten haastattelun kautta pääset myös vaikuttamaan!

Haastattelut suoritan pääasiassa yksilöhaastatteluina, mutta myös pari- ja ryhmähaastattelut ovat mahdollisia. Eli jos haluatte tulla sisarustesi kanssa yhdessä niin se onnistuu. Aloitan haastattelut pääkaupunkiseudulta ja kesän aikana teen haastatteluja tarvittaessa mm. Turussa ja Oulussa.

Vanhemmat, jaattehan tietoa nuorisollenne!

Otathan yhteyttä joko puhelimitse [REDACTED] tai sähköpostitse [niinavz@live.com](mailto:niinavz@live.com) niin kerron lisää!

Terveisin,  
Niina van Zinderen