

Ellie Ball

2004158

Illustration

Independent project proposal

Delyth Lloyd-Evans

Word count 2389

Independent project proposal

Introduction

Next year for my independent project I would like to write and illustrate a narrative that focuses on blended families. "A blended family or stepfamily forms when you and your partner make a life together with the children from one or both of your previous relationships."

(<https://www.helpguide.org>, 2024) Essentially this can be children from different relationships coming together in one household, or the joining of a stepparent to an existing family, or families that include half siblings.

Blended families are one of the fastest-growing family types (Jensen et al., 2017). Around one in three children live with a stepparent or have been raised in a blended family before adulthood

(Jensen et al., 2017). Due to how many adults and children are living in these circumstances, you think there would be a varied amount of representation in children's media and picture books?

According to my research, there is a lack of representation of this and still, now the typical family is painted as Mum, Dad and two children, throughout our media (Mokrzycki, 2021). I would like to write a narrative that reflects light on these families and give them representation. "Books also assist children in breaking and questioning stereotypes and help broaden their cultural perspectives." (K.C, 2011)

To discuss my project more in depth I have chosen three keywords that I believe will reflect the work I want to create. These are change, relationships and representation. I will go through each keyword more in-depth throughout this proposal and look at existing examples illustrators have created work surrounding my keywords.

Change

“To exchange one thing for another thing, especially of a similar type” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). Change is something that we all go through. Some lifestyle changes can be much bigger than others, and especially for children big changes can be quite unsettling (Robinson, 2019). Adjusting to a new family dynamic is a big change in itself, but to follow can be more adjustments to a child’s life such as a move into home, or school, or sharing a room with new siblings, as well as accepting your new stepparent and getting used to the split of your nuclear family. If change is not discussed properly, it can be very bothering for a child. (The Children’s Trust, 2023) This is where the help of picture books can help. “Picture books play a pivotal role in the educational and emotional development of children.” (Mokrzycki, 2021). Parents can use picture books with related stories to what the child may be going through as a tool to help ease their worries and prevent anxiety from happening from all these big changes (nhs.uk, 2021). It also provides a safe space for conversation, where a child may want to ask questions, and answers can help relieve their worries.



(Clare Helen Welsh, 2022)

Everything Changes is a book that teaches a child that even though changes can be scary at first, they are completely normal and as human beings, we learn to adapt. This story focuses on parents separating and overcoming fears and anxieties that come with these adjustments. Asa Gilland's illustrations are drawn in a fun and friendly way. When a parent and child may be going through this book together that itself is not intimidating or overwhelming with information. The book keeps in mind that the intended purpose for reading may not be a positive time for the child period. They can follow the story, fun pictures and relatable characters whilst also taking in the information that helps them understand the new changes coming or have happened in their life.



(Clare Helen Welsh, 2022)

The illustrator uses visual metaphor throughout to convey what the child may be feeling when introduced to big changes that are going to start happening in their life. Above, you can see the illustrator has demonstrated this throughout the sandcastle that the family has built. It's a bright happy day and everyone is helping to build the sandcastle, which is very strong and doesn't look like

there is any sort of weakness or danger of crumbling or being destroyed. This shows the strength and confidence that the child feels in their family and home life.

In the second spread, after the child had received the news of a change to their family's structure, the illustrator shows the child's distress and anxiety through the sandcastle being washed away by the sea. This spread is very chaotic, the aggression of the water and birds flying around haphazardly illustrates the child's sense of anger and confusion about these changes. "Not knowing what is coming next can be unnerving for them, which can trigger strong emotions associated with the unknown." (The Children's Trust, 2023) The sandcastle being washed away, and the buckets and water cans being overturned show us the fear of what may be going through the character's head, and coming to the realisation that their home and everything that they've ever known will never be the same again.



(Clare Helen Welsh, 2022)

Change is explained very simply for a child in this book through experiences they've already had, such as the changing of seasons. The changing of the seasons is something a child would have already been familiar with. It's something that happens all the time and is completely normal. It is a

great example of how change is constantly happening around us all the time, sometimes even unnoticed, but change is something that we should not fear but learn to adapt to.

Relationships

Relationships are “how two things are connected” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). Sustaining relationships is important and demanding in any family, however transitioning into a blended family can bring more of its challenges and tensions (extension.umn.edu, n.d.). With the change, relationships are strained and some children do experience adjustment problems which will affect their relationships with their new family members (Jensen et al., 2017). But like anything over time relationships will start to form and grow.

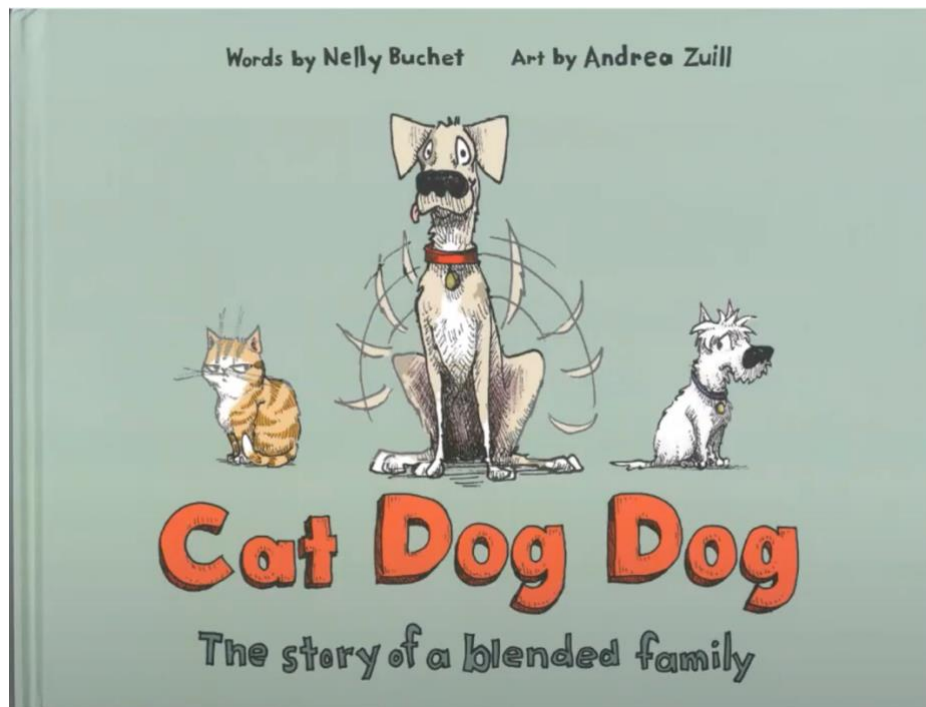
The relationships between stepparents and stepchildren in most children’s literature are written very negatively.

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, riffs of Disney classics – such as the 1997 film *Snow White: A Tale of Terror* and the 1998 film *Ever After*, which is based on *Cinderella* – continued to damn the stepfamily. The idea, it seemed, was firmly stuck in the public psyche: stepmothers were negligent, second-rate caretakers at best – and heinous killers at worst.

(Francis, 2022)

These images of a stepparent stepchild relationship being a negative one can be quite damaging as it could instil fear or unnecessary worry into children who are transitioning into this very common family structure. Gaining trust is essential to sustaining a blended family relationship (Robinson, 2019). However, establishing these initial relationships can pose their challenges.

Illustration is a great way to convey the complex emotion that a child can relate to when forming new relationships through the power of character design. With characters, you can display an array of complex emotions that are relatable and can sometimes be perceived as comical and entertaining for a child to look upon and relate to.

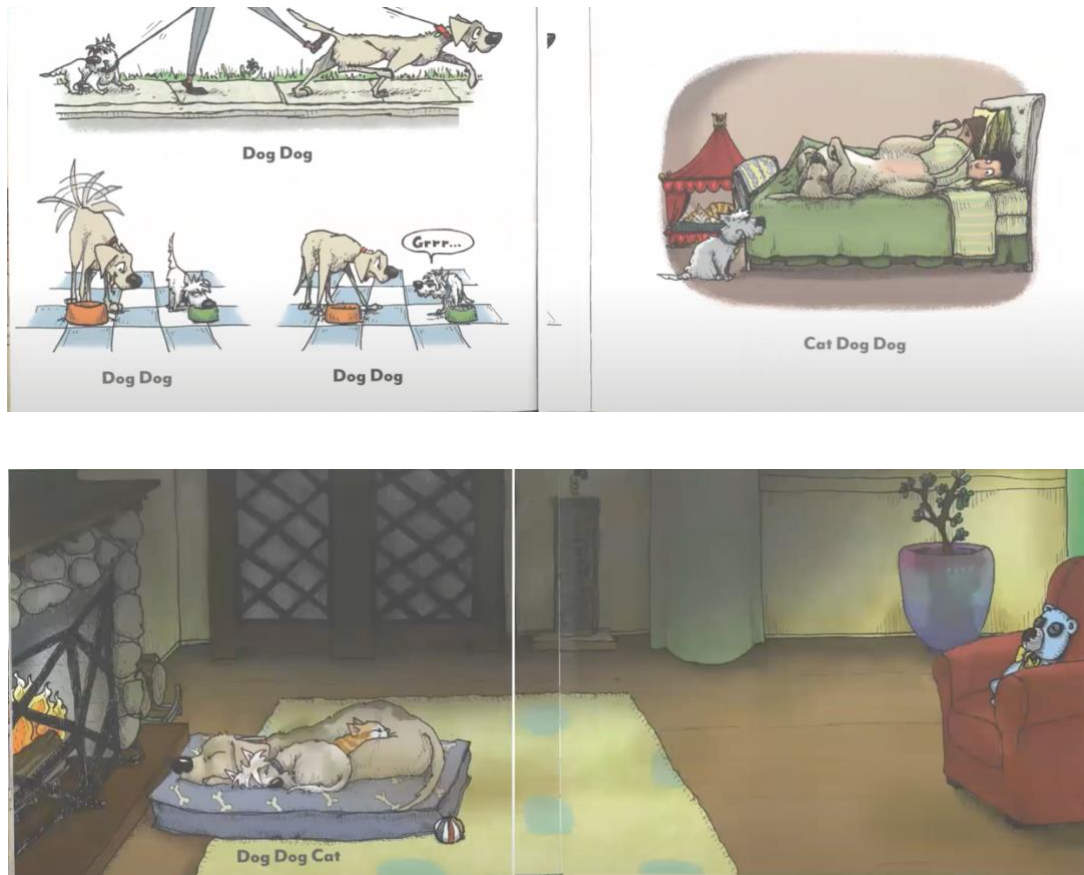


(Buchet and Zuill, 2020)



(Buchet and Zuill, 2020)

A great example illustrating how strained a relationship can be in the beginning of adjusting to a blended family is *Cat Dog Dog* (Buchet and Zuill, 2020). This book illustrates how children may adjust to a blended family by exploring how pets adjust to each other when moving into a new home together. At first, the relationships between the different animals are very nervous. They find it very hard to adjust to one another and their new human who is living in the house, like how a child would find it difficult at first to adjust to a new stepsibling and stepparent. (Jensen et al., 2017)



(Buchet and Zuill, 2020)

As you can see in the spreads above the relationships between the animals are very strained as they adjust to living with one another. Their daily routines have altered, not by choice. And they seem to be clashing on certain things, especially interests. Both pets want the same food and the same sleeping spaces and initially clash over these common interests. Throughout the book, their relationship develops and towards the end of the book they bond over their similarities. This is something I could explore when writing my narrative, how my characters eventually bond and become one family with love, support, and growth.

Representation

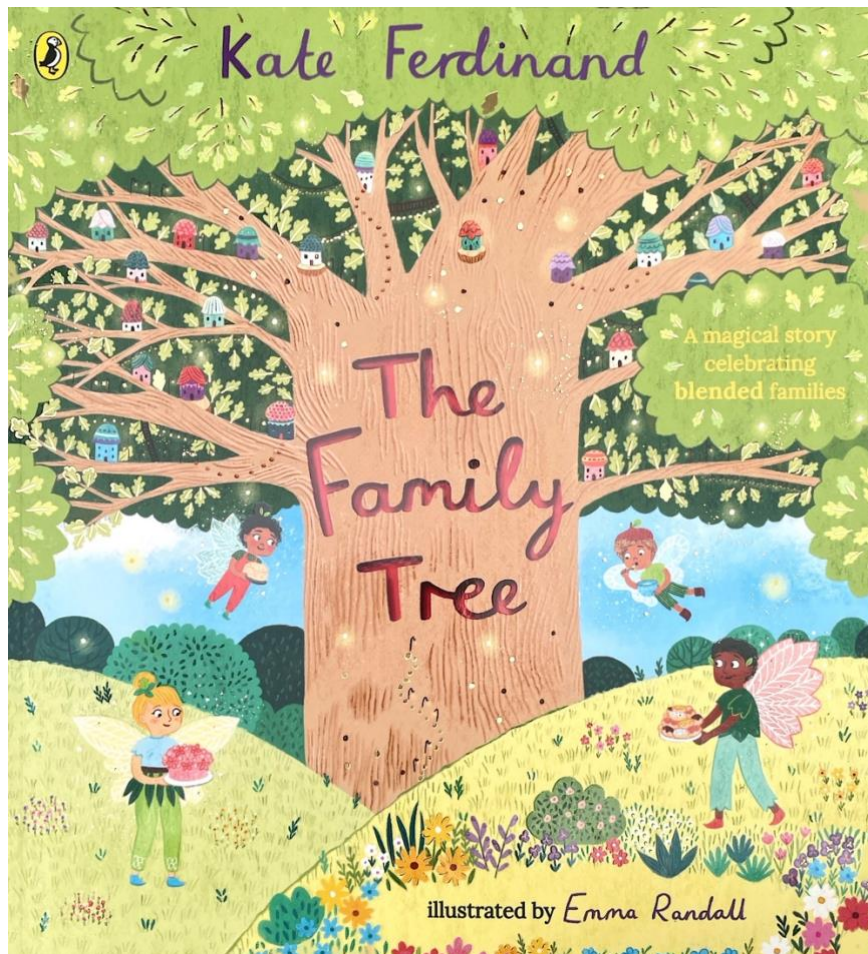
Representation is “a person or organization that speaks, acts, or is present officially for someone else” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). Representation is important, it’s how we see ourselves, calculate our future ambitions and hear our own stories feel heard and not feel alone. With the upwards of

divorce blended families are becoming more and more of a normalised occurrence in our everyday family structure (van Houdt, 2021). With one in three families being blended, you think there would be a considerable amount of representation in children's picture books and other media. "Picture books are written artefacts that convey cultural messages and values about society and help children learn about their world." (K.C, 2011)

Representation is important from an early age "children need to see themselves reflected in literature" (K.C, 2011). When researching books to study for my proposal, I found a limited representation of children in blended families' picture books and a good representation of stepparents. However, finding examples was very limited and the books that I did find had only been written and illustrated in recent years. This wasn't a mistake in research on my behalf "It is only in recent years that the lack of diversity in children's literature has started to be addressed by children's publishers and booksellers" (Mokrzycki, 2021).

Representation comes in a rainbow of forms. From representations of culture, and race, to sexuality, the list goes on. However, for my project, I specifically want to focus on the representation of blended families. So, I will be focusing on telling a story of children living in these family structures, and stepparents shedding a positive light on them, and the greatness of what bringing a stepparent into a family can be like.

Stepparents, particularly stepmothers have regularly throughout historical stories have been depicted as evil, wicked, uncaring, and mean (Francis, 2022). There have been more than 900 international stories written about stepparents negatively throughout the centuries and following negative on-screen perceptions by filmmakers (Francis, 2022). "The role of stepmother has been and still is stigmatized with an aura of wickedness, produced by folk and fairy tales as well as by the media." (María Alcantud Díaz, 2021) The negativity surrounding stepparents goes back to the origins of language. The word "step" in stepparent goes back in our language. "'step' evolved from the Old English 'steop', which is captured as a sense of loss and deprivation" (Francis, 2022)–.



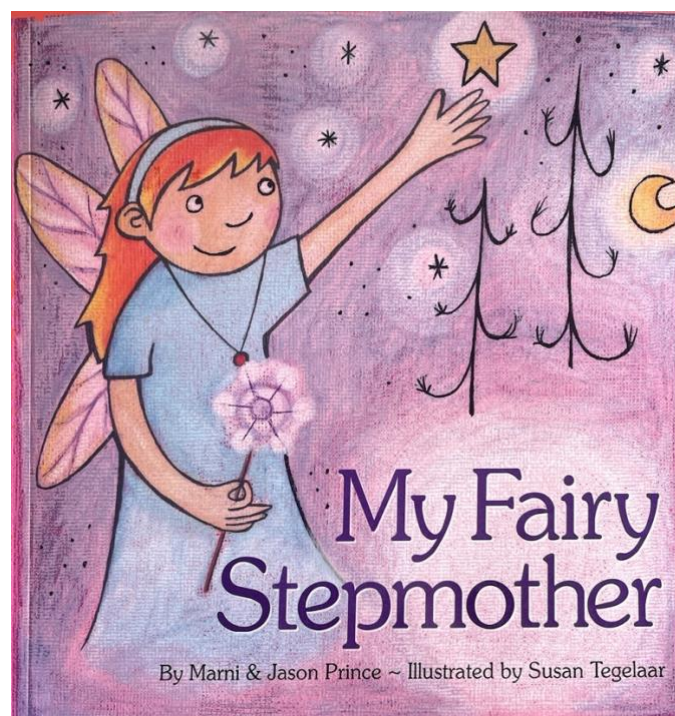
(Ferdinand, 2023)



(Ferdinand, 2023)

The Family Tree is a children's picture book that illustrates the representation of families living in a blended structure. The book explains a blended family like the growing of tree branches. This book also gives representation to mixed-race families, which is another area that is underrepresented throughout children's literature. (D. KOSS, 2015)

The illustrations throughout the book are reflected in a fun happy positive light. The dialogue provides positive reassurance to worries that children may be having when going into, or adjusting to a blended family, whilst also giving the stepparent figure a positive representation. The book illustrates the adjustments to this new life through spot illustrations. The first spot illustration symbolises something very wonky, or not quite right a mix-up in their usual family routine. Then follow to a more rounded spot illustration. This symbolises that, like anything changes new people in our lives can be strange but we learn to adjust. And this book provides children, and stepparents with the representation that they deserve.



(Prince, Prince and Tegelaar, 2013)



(Prince, Prince and Tegelaar, 2013)

The Fairy Stepmother is a book that I found that mainly focuses on the positivity that having a stepparent in your family can bring. The main character in this book discovers that her stepparent is a fairy, putting a big spin on what is usually told in children's tales that the stepmother is there to turn their world upside down and create misery. (Francis, 2022)

To summarise representation vital throughout children's picture books. It is valuable for children to find a representation of themselves and others in books and to encounter diverse characters. (Mokrzycki, 2021)

Conclusion

After researching my keywords, change, relationships and representation, I have concluded what I would like to do for my third-year independent project. I would like to write a narrative that explores

all these things and create a picture book around that. More specifically a story of a child figure transitioning into a new blended family life. The research that I have carried out has told me how important it is to provide diverse and relatable content for children to read. Particularly this topic is not very well represented throughout children's literature and media. The examples I have found have been written and illustrated in recent years.

There are many ways in which I can go about this. I have had ideas about exploring two step sibling's sides to adjusting to living with one another, or a single character's perspective, all of this will be explored during my story development. But something I do want to implement is giving children their voices and shedding positive light on what having a blended family can entail. I will be taking a lot of inspiration from my own experiences having grown up in a blended family and looking at other people's experiences too.

Before I start my development, I want to try and find more examples of how I can illustrate my keywords throughout my book, and examples of how to communicate and make characters relatable to children. I want to include messages throughout my art that may not be spoken throughout the text of how the character may be adjusting to the change that's happening.

To conclude my proposal, I will be writing and illustrating a narrative surrounding the theme of blended families. Which leads me to my essay question:

How have stepparents been historically portrayed in children's literature, and how can author-illustrators shift this narrative to provide positive representation for individuals in and transitioning into blended families?

Bibliography

Buchet, N. and Zuill, A. (2020). *Cat dog dog : the story of a blended family*. New York: Schwartz & Wade Books.

Cambridge Dictionary (2022). *Cambridge Dictionary | English Dictionary, Translations & Thesaurus*. [online] Cambridge.org. Available at: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org>.

Clare Helen Welsh (2022). *Everything Changes*.

D. KOSS, M. (2015). *Diversity in Contemporary Picturebooks: A Content Analysis*.

[https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/43515127/JCL_41-1_Koss-libre.pdf?1457464195=&response-content-disposition=inline%3B+filename%3DDiversity in Contemporary Picturebooks A.pdf&Expires=1711730145&Signature=XyPCkvIhDBFkO0FwSshH5AljqAaZHF-BB3J~r-pT-4Z-v2xZlzV9yibDHszb8lw7gHf-9eSe3uLZ3f5v~dFFEub7Gxyvr4899-40QUUbwOoUDnad1wQ-amgJnCAi00YIkn2qNFw7vMgnH4uW4gTlBVW~pSam39kKw9yY3F98I5wyKwCLT~6C9CapPZZLI6HfanJOSyg41z9u~dgN4le4pg0KFu4hMIA6iFOMvDXI7SnOGqaQ7Yo2wdsSyhgZEh1WHmi0xasSvfjKfx1rdvHT2hUHGledrp2lvjX5wSKrUhUfixTr3NLX0gACiig~s~Y4WWBPKMcHPd4iWZyCDR8b0w_&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA](https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/43515127/JCL_41-1_Koss-libre.pdf?1457464195=&response-content-disposition=inline%3B+filename%3DDiversity+in+Contemporary+Picturebooks+A.pdf&Expires=1711730145&Signature=XyPCkvIhDBFkO0FwSshH5AljqAaZHF-BB3J~r-pT-4Z-v2xZlzV9yibDHszb8lw7gHf-9eSe3uLZ3f5v~dFFEub7Gxyvr4899-40QUUbwOoUDnad1wQ-amgJnCAi00YIkn2qNFw7vMgnH4uW4gTlBVW~pSam39kKw9yY3F98I5wyKwCLT~6C9CapPZZLI6HfanJOSyg41z9u~dgN4le4pg0KFu4hMIA6iFOMvDXI7SnOGqaQ7Yo2wdsSyhgZEh1WHmi0xasSvfjKfx1rdvHT2hUHGledrp2lvjX5wSKrUhUfixTr3NLX0gACiig~s~Y4WWBPKMcHPd4iWZyCDR8b0w_&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA).

Earle, P. (2023). *Two Places to Call Home*. Ladybird.

extension.umn.edu. (n.d.). *How age affects children's adjustment to stepfamilies*. [online] Available at: <https://extension.umn.edu/divorce-and-other-family-transitions/how-age-affects-childrens-adjustment-stepfamilies#preteens%3A-ages-11-12-1763012>.

Ferdinand, K. (2023). *The Family Tree*. Random House.

Francis, A. (2022). The myth of the evil stepmother. *BBC*. [online] 22 Nov. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20221118-the-myth-of-the-evil-stepmother>.

<https://www.helpguide.org>. (n.d.). *Blended Family and Step-Parenting Tips - HelpGuide.org*.

[online] Available at: <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/parenting-family/step-parenting-blended-families.htm>. [Accessed 12 Mar. 2024].

Jensen, T.M., Lippold, M.A., Mills-Koonce, R. and Fosco, G.M. (2017). Stepfamily Relationship Quality and Children's Internalizing and Externalizing Problems. *Family Process*, 57(2), pp.477–495. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12284>.

K.C, P. (2011). Diversity in contemporary picturebooks: A content analysis. *Journal of Children's Literature*. 41, pp.32–42.

María Alcantud Díaz (2021). Deconstructing Stereotypes Through Reading Children's Literature as Intergenerational Play: The Case of the Stepmother. *Springer eBooks*, pp.211–223. doi:https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-67700-8_13.

Mokrzycki, S. (2021). *FAMILY DIVERSITY IN AUSTRALIAN PICTURE BOOKS The importance and benefits of exploring diverse family models*. [online] Available at: https://vuir.vu.edu.au/43127/1/MOKRZYCKI_Sarah-thesis.pdf.

nhs.uk. (2021). *Anxiety in children*. [online] Available at: <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/children-and-young-adults/advice-for-parents/anxiety-in-children>.

O'Leary, S. (2020). *A Family Is a Family Is a Family*. Groundwood Books Ltd.

Prince, M., Prince, J. and Tegelaar, S. (2013). *My fairy stepmother*. North Charleston, Sc: Createspace Independent Publishing Platform.

Salisbury, M. (2007). *Play pen : new children's book illustration*. London: Laurence King.

The Children's Trust. (n.d.). *The Children's Trust*. [online] Available at: <https://www.thechildrenstrust.org>.

van Houdt, K. (2021). Adult (step) parent-child relationships in complex families: a latent profile analysis. *Journal of Family Studies*, pp.1–23.

doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2021.1962730>.

