

# **Modelling patchwork families: Service processes of guardianship offices<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Nowadays patchwork families mean newer and newer challenges in different areas of life. It also presents some difficulties for guardianship offices to solve the complex and diversified issues of patchwork families by time. In this paper I present the conduct of contact affairs by mentioning the fact that during the procedure no difference is made between the various types of families. This fact induces great challenge for those working in public service since the same amount of time is ensured for the procedure of each family type. However, patchwork families are more complex than traditional families, thus dealing with their problems is also more complex. In my study I illustrate the types of patchwork families, and then I demonstrate the specifics of the guardianship's procedure in case of this family type.

**Keywords: guardianship office, patchwork family, contact affairs, optimisation**

## **Introduction**

A measure of the successfulness of services is the customers' satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The successfulness of good governance and the pertaining offices is shown by how satisfied the clients are after they have administered their cases. Satisfaction is a complex issue. Nobody likes administering office affairs therefore such services must be fast, sensitive and definitely successful. It is important for clients that they could administer cases preferably in one place or at least with little physical leg-work. Different conducts of business take place in district offices. Among these there are so-called typical cases which affect the majority of the clients and such ones which affect only a narrow target group. Among such narrow target groups we can find patchwork families which are the government offices' specific groups that are affected in many cases. Patchwork families are complex families Neither the literature considers them to be homogeneous (see its types).

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<sup>1</sup> The accurate naming of guardianship office: county government's district office acting on child protection and guardianship affairs, 9§ of the 331/2006. (XII.23.) Governmental Decree on the roles and responsibilities in child protection and guardianship affairs and on the authority and jurisdiction of guardianship offices.

Patchwork families mean several challenges in different areas of life. On the one hand, the organisation and the operation of reorganised families as well as preserving the psychic health of its members are interesting areas for family psychologists. For sociologists the appearance of new types of families, and the resulting social changes and challenges are important. Marketing professionals see them as potential target market which also buys products and product portfolios different from the traditional ones based on special purchase buying-decision mechanisms. Due to the complex family model, workers living in patchwork families require more empathy, attention and more flexible working hours from the HR departments of corporate sphere (Bencsik).

### **Theoretical background**

Professionals from diverse disciplines have been dealing with the sociological and psychological analysis of stepfamilies' lifestyle (Cheal, 2002). The actuality of the topic is proved by the fact that the rise in the number of stepfamilies is a world-wide phenomenon. Whilst it is acknowledged that 83 per cent of children in step-parent families live with their natural mother, there appears to be little recognition of the difference between "intact" and "blended" families (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). In the Christchurch Health and Development Study, nearly one in five children had experienced three or more family situations by the age of nine (Fergusson, Horwood, et al 1984). In the United States, 12 year olds who had experienced more than two family changes were more likely than those who had experienced none to show disruptive behavior in school (Kurdek, Fine, et al 1995).

The United States Census Bureau (2003) reported 16 percent of all families with children living at home were classified as stepfamilies. In Hungary every sixth child lives in stepfamily (Spéder, 2003). Besides the rising international publicity (Ahuja-Capella-Taylor, 1998; Felker-Fromme-Arnaut-Stoll, 2002; Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Fisher-Leve-O'Leary-Leve, 2003) several research programs were started in this topic (Corfman-Ehmann, 1987; Foxman-Tansuhaj-Ekstrom, 1989): Schumaker Dyke, 2005).

Before introducing the literature background it is inevitable to define what stepfamily means. (1.) A stepfamily, also known as a blended family or reconstituted family, is a family in which one or both members of the couple have children from a previous relationship. The member of the couple to whom the child is not biologically related is the stepparent, specifically the stepmother or stepfather (Mintel, 2005). (2.) Blended family: A family that is formed when separate families are united by marriage or other circumstance. (Barker, 2003, p. 46). (3.) Reconstituted family: A reconstituted family (also known as a blended family) is the sociological term for the joining of two adults via marriage, cohabitation or civil partnership, who have children from previous relationships. (4.) A new family made up from the remnants of divorced families (Biblarz and Gottainer, 2000).

In Germany stepfamilies were first mentioned in 1984 (Sager, CJ, Brown, HS, et al 1983). Earlier such families were founded by the remarriage of widows with children, but with the large-scale rise in the number of divorces the most frequent stepfamily was formed (Clarke-Joshi, 2005). According to Sager (1983) stepfamily is formed by the marriage (or cohabitation) of two partners from which at least one had already been married. Visher and Visher (1995) define stepfamily as a symbiosis where at least one adult has the role of stepparent. The stepfamily from a system approach point of view and drew up a family map where he constructed the nuclear family from a couple or a parent subsystem and from a child-sibling subsystem. Those parents who don't live together with the family after the divorce play an important role in the life of the new family as well (Allan-Crow, 2001). McGoldrick and Gerson (1987) completed the family map with

a genogram. Seen from outside the stepfamily doesn't really differ from the nuclear family, however seen from nearer there is a significant difference between these two (Hetherington, 1999).

When analyzing stepfamilies borders, positions, hierarchy and the connecting subsystems are of special importance. The most important comprehensive typology was made by Sager (1983) who made a distinction between 24 types of stepfamilies. Papernow (1980) denoted two types (a) simple stepfamily-system (one parent-child system and a stepparent) (b) complex family (two parents-child subsystem). According to the opinion of Burgoyne and Clark (1981) more differentiated categories are necessary and stepfamilies where there is one or more common child require a diverse definition.

Verena Krähenbühl and her colleagues elaborated a typology which distinguishes whether a stepfather or a stepmother joined to the system: (1) Family with stepmother (2) Family with stepfather (3) Complex stepfamily (4) Stepfamily with common child or children (5) Part-time stepfamily. Stepfamilies are less solidary than other families and they have to face several conflicts due to the differences between each family member (Bien-Hartl-Teubner, 2002; Clingempeel-Brand-Clingempeel, 2004; Tinson-Nancarraw, 2007). Children have less voice in each decision since the family members don't want the situation to be more complex (Tinson et al., 2008). Their common thinking is family-centered that's why it is often observed that they try to frame their lifestyle into that of normal families and they deny the differences (Bray-Berger, 1993). For the members of stepfamilies one resource of difficulties is that it is not clear what role is required from them (Fischer, 2005). These families have no common history, therefore conflicts can occur regarding child-bringing and decision-making in connection with everyday tasks (Lawton-Sanders, 1994). More researches prove that problems like poverty, psychic and behavioral problems, difficulties in studying and health problems occur more often among children (Cockett and Tripp 1994). One of the conflicts that are the most hard to resolve is caused by the material clash. Money is very important in our life. Although their household and their savings are common, they also have the claim to decide alone about certain things (they have separate bank accounts) (Lansford-Ceballo-Abbey-Stewart, 2001). They have to be more foreseeing than nuclear families, that's why estate-planning and marriage articles can be of great importance for them (Clark, 2008). However, the family type affects their buying decision-making process and the characteristics of the process itself as well (Rogers-Rose, 2002, Brown, 2004).

### **Topic:**

The question may arise whether public services, district offices or the sub-departments of these face with the problems of patchwork families and those of its members. The answer is simple: yes. Primarily it is the guardianship office where employees know much about patchwork families. The workers of guardianship offices every day face with such cases the subjects of which are members of patchwork families. The cases typically affecting patchwork families too are the followings:

1. cases related to the advancement of alimony by the state,
2. contact affairs,
3. open adoption matters.

In the literature review of the research we see it important to highlight the law-based regulation of the conduct of business of the analysed contact affairs as well as the directions related to the conduction of the conducts of business. According to the 9 § of the 331/2006. (XII.23.) Governmental Decree on the roles and responsibilities in child protection and guardianship affairs and on the authority and jurisdiction of guardianship

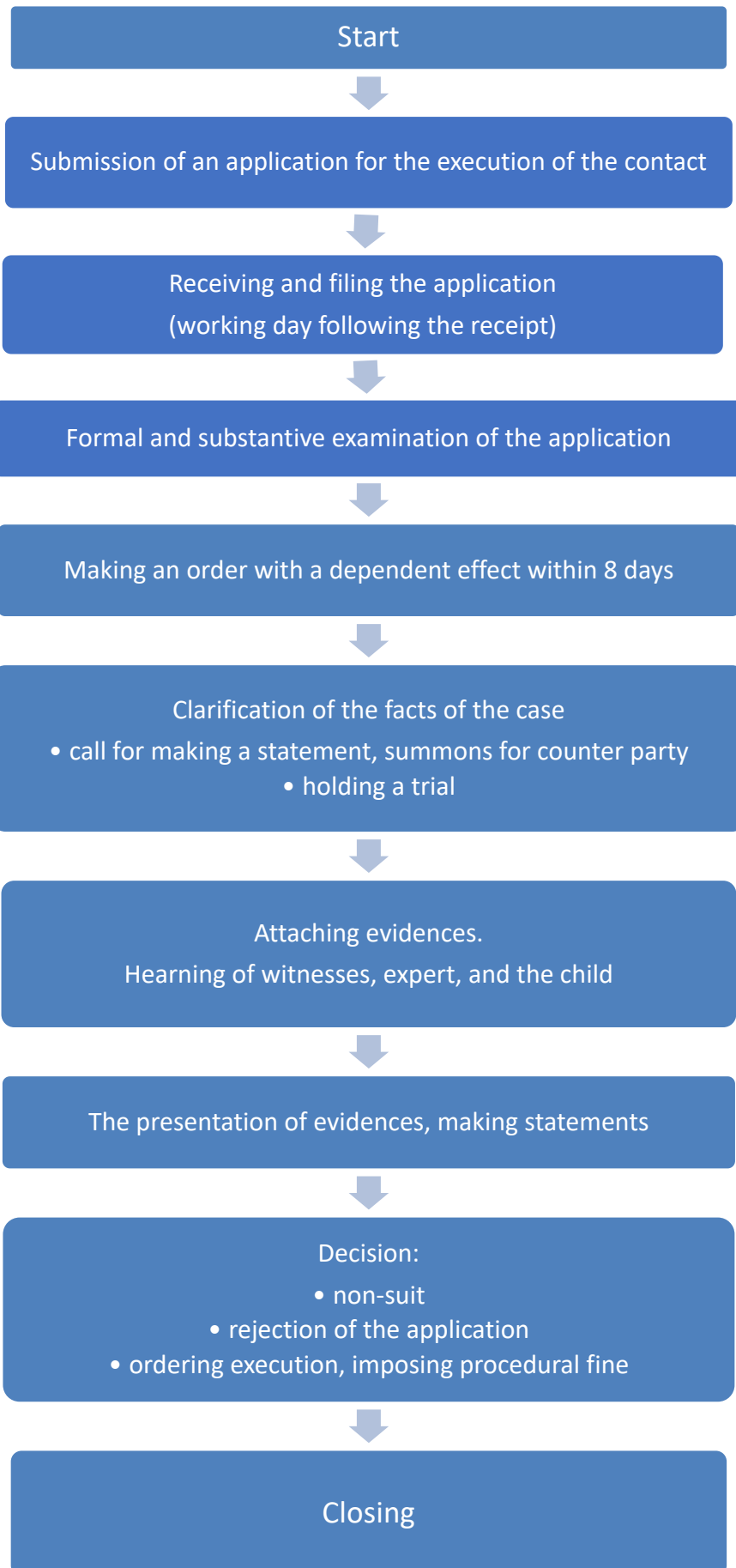
offices, the county government's district office acting on child protection and guardianship affairs (henceforth guardianship office):

- a) decides about the communications between the child and the parent, or other person in charge of contact, orders monitored contact in justified cases, and in contact affairs also orders the mandatory child protection mediation procedure or the use of mandatory supported procedure,
- b) disposes of the enforcement of the court's or the guardianship office's regulation on communications.

In case of the guardianship office and within this in case of the cases of communications the following laws are normative and determine the conduct of business:

- a) The 4:178 § - 4:185 § provisions of Chapter XVIII on exercising parental supervision of the Fourth Book (Family Law) of Act V of 2013 on the Civil Code pertain to communications.
- b) Article 4 (27§-33/B§) of 149/1997. (IX. 10.) Governmental Decree on the guardianship offices and on the proceedings of child protection and guardianship cases deals with contact affairs.
- c) Act CL of 2016 on general administrative order which entered into force in 1 January 2018 disposes of the rights and obligations of the clients, of the general administrative deadline and of the rules of conducting administrative procedure. Act XXXI of 1997 on child protection and on guardianship administration disposes of the rights and obligations of the child and the parent, and on the main rules of child protection and guardianship administration.
- d) We consider the above acts and the Chapter XVI of the 2<sup>nd</sup> volume of Polgári jog kommentár [Commentary on civil law] edited by Dr. Ferenc Petrik as "literature".
- e) County government office judges the requests for legal remedy handed in against the decisions of the official procedure of the first instance, the office also states its own professional case regarding unique decisions, and according to a determined plan, they execute the control of the authority of the first instance and the target examination of each field, and doing so it has a supervision over the authorities of the first instance.

The basics for my research are provided by the model below which is the basic model of the guardianship office for contact affair procedures. This model illustrates the above-mentioned procedure's process for which the law ensures 60 days for the administrator. We currently see the procedure as a 'production process', and as a continuation of the research we wonder whether this model in its current form is applicable in case of patchwork families, so if the 60 days are enough in case of a procedure in which patchwork families are the participants.



In the current phase of my research I conducted 7 expert in-depth interviews with the head and the colleagues of the Guardianship Office of Győr District Office. By analysing the above model it immediately rises to view that the so important time factor of the procedure is not indicated at all, furthermore, those procedural elements which may repeat or induce further delay in the procedure are also not indicated. For example, we do not see that the different parties have to be summoned during the procedure, which may take a long time due to the complexity of posting and notification. It may increase the duration of the procedure by two weeks.

The hearing of the experts (doctor, psychologist, teacher, and kindergarten-teacher) also takes a long time and slows the entire procedure by making the closing on time impossible. During the procedure it would be often necessary to apply mediator. Each affected party can ask for a mediator, but the administrator can also offer it. However, the administrators often do not use this option as they are sure that the procedure cannot be closed within 60 days in case of applying a mediator.

What can the administrator do? Do they comply with the rules and make a decision on time? But in this case the quality is compromised, and we must admit that these procedures are about people and faiths. Or do they exceed the time frame and concentrate on the quality? However, in this case they surely do not meet the time limit (especially if it is about patchwork families), and they have to pay a fine of 10.000 HUF.

I can assure that none of the solutions is good. In this situation neither the administrator, nor the affected parties will be satisfied. The objective is obviously not this.

The table below illustrates the complexity of the contact affairs of the Győr-Moson-Sopron County Guardianship Office in 2017. Each case is divided to sub-numbers, which means that newer and newer actions were submitted by the parties during the procedures. Obviously, the higher the sub-numbers are, the more complex the case is, and the more the case fags out the participants, what's more, it increases the duration as well as the complexity of the procedure. It is a vicious circle from which it is hard to back off.

*Table 1 – Contact affairs Győr-Moson-Sopron County Guardianship Office in 2017*

Main number	Sub-number 1-10	Sub-number 11-30	Sub-number 31-50	Sub-number 51-100	Sub-number above 100
153	112	27	8	4	2

The table below we can see cases with sub-numbers in which patchwork families are/were the participants. By sorted in descending order, it clearly appears that cases of patchwork families are more difficult, there are more files, they use the administrator in a greater extent, and there is little chance to close the case on time.

Table 2 – Contact affairs in patchwork families in Győr-Moson-Sopron County Guardianship Office in 2017

Sub-number	Patchwork families
133	M7
112	M13
109	M1
95	M5
81	M2
58	M6
48	M4
37	M8
28	M3
14	M9
11	M11
10	M12
6	M14
6	M16
5	M15
2	M10

## Conclusion

We could see that contact affairs are very complex and lengthy processes. The law gets the administrators of the guardian office to strictly keep the time frame for the administration, however, it does not take into consideration either the complexity of the cases or the different family types.

This study presents the initial steps of my research. The further aim of the research is to describe the procedure of contact affairs with the help of a model that includes all elements of the procedure, and considers time factor as well as the possible risks of the procedure. After the model has been created, my aim is to introduce the actual time needed for the procedure with the help of a simulation, and to discuss the optimal time frame of the procedure in case of patchwork families. My long-term goal is to call the attention of the decision-makers to optimise the procedure deadline as this way the satisfaction of both the parties and the administrators will highly increase.

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