Identifying the Development of Trust in Step-Parent–Child Relationships

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A r t i c l e   I n f o

A B S T R A C T

Objective: This study aimed to identify and describe the lived experiences, relational mechanisms, and developmental trajectories involved in the formation of trust between step-parents and children in Georgian stepfamilies.
Methods and Materials: A qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach was employed to explore participants' subjective experiences of trust development. The study involved 20 participants from various regions of Georgia, including 10 step-parents and 10 step-children who had lived together for at least one year. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and analyzed thematically using NVivo 14 software. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework for thematic analysis, with member checking and peer debriefing used to enhance credibility.
Findings: The analysis revealed three overarching themes: (1) Foundations of Trust Formation, encompassing emotional availability, communication openness, and behavioral consistency; (2) Challenges and Barriers to Trust, including divided loyalty, miscommunication, role ambiguity, and cultural stigma; and (3) Pathways Toward Mutual Trust, characterized by gradual emotional disclosure, reciprocity, forgiveness, and respect for individuality. Trust development was found to be a gradual, non-linear process shaped by both personal histories and sociocultural context. Participants emphasized that consistent empathy, reliability, and shared activities were critical to transforming emotional distance into mutual confidence.
Conclusion: Trust in step-parent–child relationships emerges through a dynamic interplay of emotional, communicative, and contextual factors. While challenges such as loyalty conflicts and role confusion initially hinder relationship growth, open communication, patience, and mutual respect enable families to reconstruct a sense of belonging and stability. The findings highlight the necessity of therapeutic and educational interventions that support empathy, emotional literacy, and boundary clarity in stepfamilies.
Keywords: Trust development; stepfamilies; qualitative research; emotional disclosure; communication; Georgia; family relationships

1. Introduction

The process of building trust within step-parent–child relationships has increasingly drawn scholarly attention, particularly as family structures continue to diversify worldwide. The transition from biological to blended family systems entails complex emotional, relational, and social adjustments for both parents and children (Zhang, 2025). Trust, as a foundational element of familial cohesion, plays a pivotal role in mediating these transitions by shaping emotional security, communication, and adaptive functioning within stepfamilies. The reorganization of family life after divorce or remarriage frequently challenges children's perceptions of safety and belonging, while step-parents often navigate delicate boundaries between authority and acceptance (Arat et al., 2024). Consequently, the development of trust in such relationships is not an automatic outcome of cohabitation but rather a gradual and negotiated process influenced by individual histories, family dynamics, and broader social expectations.

Recent empirical findings highlight the critical role of parental involvement in promoting children's well-being within stepfamilies, underscoring the importance of biological relatedness, gender, and parental engagement styles (Arat et al., 2024). These dimensions directly affect how trust is built or eroded, especially during the initial years of cohabitation. For children, early exposure to divorce or reconstituted families often shapes attachment patterns, influencing how they perceive emotional safety and relational dependability (Arganaraz & Limb, 2025). This is particularly evident among adolescents, who may experience conflicting loyalties between biological and step-parents. Emotional ambivalence, as documented in studies on attachment and identity reconstruction, can impede open communication and delay the establishment of trust (Ferrari et al., 2025). Therefore, understanding how trust evolves in step-parent–child relationships requires examining both individual and systemic factors, including communication patterns, emotional expression, and perceived fairness in parenting roles.

Trust formation within families extends beyond dyadic bonds and is embedded within broader social interactions. Research on early childhood socialization indicates that interpersonal trust develops through consistent emotional availability and reciprocal communication, laying the groundwork for later social competence (Coman, 2025). Similarly, studies on parental trust in educational and care settings emphasize that trust is closely linked to perceived reliability, respect, and shared goals (Buha & Jelić, 2025). Within stepfamilies, these relational mechanisms are often disrupted or redefined, as family members must rebuild confidence in one another following experiences of loss, separation, or previous betrayal. Scholars argue that the absence of predictable and consistent behavior can perpetuate insecurity and emotional withdrawal, especially among children who have witnessed prior parental conflict (Carlsson et al., 2022).

Stepfamily systems represent a unique context where trust operates on multiple levels—between step-parents and children, between biological parents and their new partners, and across extended family networks (H.Ganong et al., 2021). The quality of these interconnected relationships strongly predicts children's psychological adjustment, self-esteem, and long-term emotional health. Research conducted in diverse cultural settings, including Sweden and Italy, has demonstrated that children raised in stepfamilies may experience distinctive trajectories of educational and emotional development, often mediated by the presence or absence of trust and open communication (Ferrari et al., 2025; Helgertz & Tegunimataka, 2023). In Swedish longitudinal analyses, for instance, educational attainment among children in stepfamilies was positively associated with cohesive parental relationships and consistent emotional support (Helgertz & Tegunimataka, 2023). Conversely, inconsistent parenting practices and fragmented communication were found to reinforce patterns of detachment and resistance.

From a social developmental perspective, trust functions as an adaptive mechanism that facilitates cooperation, emotional regulation, and resilience in family interactions (Schröer & Kok, 2025). When parental honesty and transparency are compromised—through inconsistent behavior or perceived deception—children often interpret these experiences as violations of moral expectations, weakening their willingness to engage in future emotional exchanges. This process aligns with the findings of (Perry & Rogers, 2025), who observed that parental trust and communication significantly predict children's behavioral engagement and attendance outcomes in educational contexts. The same relational principle applies within stepfamilies: when trust is nurtured through empathy and dependability, it serves as a stabilizing force that buffers the psychological consequences of structural change.

The restructuring of family roles following remarriage also generates new dynamics of authority and belonging.

Research on family social capital suggests that trustful relationships within stepfamilies depend on mutual recognition and renegotiation of traditional roles (Ferrari et al., 2025). Young adults raised in stepfamilies often reinterpret familial loyalty, reframe parental authority, and construct hybrid identities that blend biological and non-biological attachments. This transformation highlights the fluidity of modern family systems, where affection and care are increasingly understood as relational achievements rather than inherited bonds (Wagner et al., 2024). Similarly, (Lin et al., 2024) demonstrated that even in adulthood, patterns of trust and time exchange between biological and step-children differ significantly, reflecting long-term implications of early relationship dynamics.

Trust development is also intertwined with emotional resilience and coping mechanisms. In blended families, parents and children must navigate complex transitions marked by loss, reattachment, and shifting expectations (Oliver-Blackburn, 2023). Emotional resilience allows individuals to reinterpret these transitions not as disruptions but as opportunities for growth and renewed connection. Studies exploring children's perspectives on parental behavior emphasize the importance of consistent care, empathy, and moral integrity as predictors of enduring trust (Schröer & Kok, 2025). Furthermore, interventions grounded in cognitive-behavioral approaches have demonstrated that trust can be actively cultivated through open dialogue and mutual acknowledgment of vulnerability (Bandoro & Aprilia, 2024).

Cross-cultural research has revealed that family trust formation processes are context-dependent, influenced by social norms, economic pressures, and collective expectations. For example, in collectivist societies, parental trust and emotional intimacy are often shaped by extended family dynamics and cultural narratives surrounding loyalty and respect (Terrefe, 2024). Conversely, in individualistic contexts, trust tends to emerge from negotiated autonomy and mutual understanding between family members. The presence of structural inequalities and cultural stigmas surrounding remarriage can further complicate these dynamics, leading to heightened emotional resistance, particularly among adolescents. (Ramlan et al., 2023) noted that hierarchical family systems may inadvertently perpetuate emotional distance, making it more challenging for trust to take root across generational lines.

In this regard, parental behavior and communication styles serve as both mediators and indicators of trust. Open, empathic communication allows family members to express emotions safely, while inconsistent or authoritarian communication erodes mutual respect (Gao et al., 2024). Trust is strengthened when step-parents demonstrate transparency and reliability, reducing children's uncertainty about expectations and boundaries. Conversely, when step-parents fail to clarify their roles, children may perceive interactions as intrusive or insincere, thereby reinforcing emotional withdrawal (Landon et al., 2021). This highlights the necessity of relational clarity as a foundation for trust formation within restructured family systems.

Evidence from developmental and lifespan research indicates that the quality of parent–child communication and emotional trust established during childhood continues to influence relationships well into adulthood (LaPata et al., 2024). Adult children of divorced or remarried parents often report differing levels of emotional closeness and caregiving reciprocity toward biological versus step-parents (Schoeni et al., 2022). Trust, therefore, is not merely an immediate affective state but a relational trajectory that shapes family functioning across generations. Furthermore, (Smith-Etxeberria & Eceiza, 2021) found that the quality of mother–child and father–child relationships in emerging adulthood was significantly moderated by parental separation experiences, reinforcing the long-term importance of secure emotional attachments.

The psychological and moral dimensions of trust have also been explored in studies examining perceptions of parental lying and moral consistency. (Schröer & Kok, 2025) observed that children's trust is influenced not only by parental behavior but also by perceived alignment between values and actions. When step-parents model integrity, reliability, and respect, they cultivate an environment conducive to emotional openness and reciprocal care. Conversely, perceived inconsistency may provoke suspicion and defensiveness, undermining the family's emotional equilibrium. Similarly, (Han, 2023) highlighted that the family's structural and emotional environment significantly determines children's well-being, with trust functioning as a mediator between parental behavior and positive developmental outcomes.

Scholars have also linked parental trust and communication to broader measures of family health and psychological stability. According to (Dewan et al., 2024), parental trust in healthcare contexts parallels familial trust processes, where transparency, empathy, and reliability predict satisfaction and cooperation. This analogy underscores that trust is a relational construct extending across domains of family life. Likewise, (Sanner et al., 2022)

and (H.Ganong et al., 2021) emphasize that effective parenting in stepfamilies involves consistent warmth, clear expectations, and adaptive communication—elements that align closely with the emotional dynamics identified in qualitative studies of step-parent–child relationships.

Finally, comparative studies across cultures reveal that trust building within stepfamilies follows a gradual, iterative trajectory characterized by negotiation, testing, and reconciliation. In line with (Schacht et al., 2021), who investigated differential survival outcomes among stepchildren and their half-siblings, the absence of trust can have profound long-term psychosocial consequences, influencing both emotional security and physical well-being. At the same time, emerging research on blended family resilience underscores that trust can be rebuilt through forgiveness, empathy, and sustained emotional investment (Arganaraz & Limb, 2025; Helgertz & Tegunimataka, 2023).

Taken together, the literature reveals that trust within step-parent–child relationships is a multifaceted construct shaped by emotional, communicative, and contextual factors. It evolves through cycles of vulnerability, testing, and reinforcement, requiring sustained effort and reciprocal understanding. However, despite the growing recognition of its importance, limited qualitative research has explored how individuals subjectively experience and describe the process of trust development in blended family contexts, particularly in non-Western cultural environments. Therefore, the present study aims to identify and describe the lived meanings, relational mechanisms, and developmental trajectories of trust in step-parent–child relationships in Georgia.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design with an interpretive phenomenological approach to explore the development of trust in step-parent–child relationships. The purpose of this design was to capture the lived experiences, meanings, and evolving dynamics that participants attribute to trust formation within blended family contexts. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure diverse representation in terms of age, gender, and duration of cohabitation in step-families.

A total of 20 participants from various regions of Georgia took part in the study, including both step-parents and step-children who had lived together for at least one year.

Inclusion criteria required that participants were willing to share personal experiences about their family relationships and had sufficient emotional readiness to discuss potentially sensitive issues. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved—when no new themes or insights emerged from additional interviews. All participants provided informed consent, and the study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for qualitative research.

2.2. Measures

Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to elicit participants' perceptions and experiences regarding trust formation and maintenance in step-parent–child relationships. The interview guide included open-ended questions focusing on initial expectations, communication patterns, emotional closeness, perceived barriers to trust, and strategies that facilitated relationship growth.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in quiet, private settings chosen by participants to ensure comfort and confidentiality. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' permission. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations. To ensure depth and accuracy, all interviews were transcribed verbatim immediately after completion.

2.3. Data Analysis

The transcribed data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). NVivo 14 software was used to organize, code, and manage qualitative data systematically. Initially, transcripts were read multiple times to achieve immersion in the data. Meaningful units of text were identified and coded inductively to reflect participants' perspectives.

Codes with conceptual similarities were clustered into sub-themes, and these sub-themes were integrated into broader thematic categories that represented the key dimensions of trust development in step-parent–child relationships. The constant comparative method was employed throughout the analysis to refine categories and ensure consistency.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, several validation strategies were applied, including member checking (by returning preliminary findings to participants for feedback), peer debriefing, and

maintaining a detailed audit trail. Reflexive journaling was also used to monitor researcher biases and ensure that interpretations were grounded in participants' narratives.

3. Findings and Results

The participants in this qualitative study consisted of 20 individuals from various regions of Georgia, including both step-parents (n = 10) and step-children (n = 10). Among the participants, 12 were female (60%) and 8 were male (40%). The age range of participants varied between 14 and 56 years, with step-children averaging 17.8 years and step-parents averaging 44.2 years. In terms of marital duration within the blended family, 6 participants (30%) reported living together for 1–3 years, 8 participants (40%) for 4–6 years, and 6 participants (30%) for more than 6 years. Regarding educational background, 5 participants (25%) held a university degree, 9 participants (45%) had completed secondary education, and 6 participants (30%) were still attending school. Most families resided in urban areas (n = 13; 65%), while the remaining 7 participants (35%) lived in rural communities. The diversity in demographic characteristics allowed the study to capture a wide range of perspectives on the emotional, cultural, and relational aspects of trust development within Georgian step-families.

Table 1

Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts of Trust Development in Step-Parent–Child Relationships

Main Categories (Themes)	Subcategories	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Foundations of Trust Formation	1.1 Early Perceptions of the Step-Parent	Initial hesitation, emotional distance, cautious observation, comparison with biological parent, first impressions
	1.2 Communication Openness	Honest dialogue, active listening, expressing emotions, reducing misunderstandings, shared conversations, clarity in expectations
	1.3 Consistency and Reliability	Keeping promises, stable routines, predictable behavior, responsibility in actions, reliability over time
	1.4 Emotional Availability	Empathic responses, warmth in interactions, showing concern, emotional attunement, non-judgmental acceptance
	1.5 Shared Time and Activities	Family rituals, shared hobbies, mealtime conversations, joint decision-making, informal bonding moments
2. Challenges and Barriers to Trust	2.1 Residual Loyalty to Biological Parent	Guilt over affection, divided loyalty, fear of betraying biological parent, avoidance of emotional closeness
	2.2 Past Family Conflicts	Exposure to prior marital conflicts, emotional scars, distrust generalized to adults, fear of repetition
	2.3 Miscommunication and Misinterpretation	Misread intentions, emotional withdrawal, lack of openness, defensive communication, tone sensitivity
	2.4 Role Ambiguity and Boundary Confusion	Unclear parental authority, disciplinary inconsistency, overstepping roles, confusion between friendship and authority
	2.5 Cultural and Social Expectations	Community stigma, extended family interference, traditional norms, societal labeling, comparison to ideal families
	2.6 Emotional Resistance of Adolescents	Rebellion, mistrust of authority, need for autonomy, testing limits, emotional walls
3. Pathways Toward Mutual Trust	3.1 Gradual Emotional Disclosure	Stepwise self-disclosure, expressing vulnerabilities, increasing emotional transparency, mutual reassurance
	3.2 Reciprocity and Mutual Support	Mutual empathy, cooperation in daily tasks, supportive listening, problem-solving together, validating experiences
	3.3 Conflict Resolution and Forgiveness	Apologizing after conflict, perspective-taking, compromise, emotional repair, letting go of resentment
	3.4 Recognition and Respect of Individual Identity	Respecting privacy, acknowledging differences, supporting autonomy, valuing opinions, avoiding comparison
	3.5 Building Shared Family Identity	Developing "our story," creating family rituals, shared symbols, mutual belonging, using inclusive language
	3.6 Parental Mediation and Step-Family Integration	Co-parenting coordination, alignment of parenting styles, biological parent's role in bridging, family discussions
	3.7 Trust as an Evolving Emotional Process	Fluctuations in closeness, patience in rebuilding, resilience after disappointments, long-term commitment

The thematic analysis of interviews with step-parents and step-children revealed three overarching themes that captured the multifaceted nature of trust development in step-parent–child relationships: *foundations of trust formation*, *challenges and barriers to trust*, and *pathways toward mutual trust*. Each theme represents a dynamic stage

in the relational journey, reflecting how trust emerges, is tested, and ultimately consolidated within the unique emotional landscape of blended families in Georgia.

The first theme, *foundations of trust formation*, encompassed the early experiences and interpersonal factors that initiated the development of trust between step-parents and children. Participants described the initial stage as a period marked by observation and cautious emotional investment. Early perceptions of the step-parent were shaped by comparisons to biological parents, as one adolescent participant explained: *"At first, I kept thinking, 'He's not my real dad; why should I listen to him?' But then, I started noticing he was always there when I needed help."* Communication openness emerged as a crucial element, with participants emphasizing honest dialogue, active listening, and shared conversations that built emotional bridges. One step-mother noted, *"When I stopped trying to act like a teacher and just listened, she started opening up to me."* Consistency and reliability—demonstrated through keeping promises, maintaining stable routines, and showing predictable behavior—were also cited as essential trust indicators. Emotional availability was frequently mentioned, as step-parents' warmth, empathy, and nonjudgmental attitudes fostered a sense of safety. Participants highlighted shared activities such as family meals, leisure outings, and collaborative decision-making as vital moments of connection. These foundational elements collectively created the groundwork upon which mutual trust could grow and stabilize.

The second theme, *challenges and barriers to trust*, represented the emotional and contextual obstacles that hindered the natural progression of trust. A dominant subtheme was residual loyalty to biological parents, with step-children describing feelings of guilt or conflict when forming closeness with a step-parent. One participant confessed, *"It felt like I was betraying my mother whenever I smiled at my step-mom."* Past family conflicts also cast long shadows over new relationships, creating emotional scars and expectations of disappointment. Several participants recalled memories of tension from previous marriages that shaped their reluctance to trust again. Miscommunication and misinterpretation further complicated interactions, as differences in tone or intent often led to emotional withdrawal. A teenage participant reflected, *"Sometimes I misunderstood his advice as criticism, and then I just stopped talking to him."* Role ambiguity emerged as a central tension point, where unclear boundaries regarding authority, friendship, and parental responsibility caused confusion. One step-father explained, *"I didn't know if I should discipline him or just be his friend—either way, it seemed wrong."* Cultural and social expectations, including community stigma and extended family interference, amplified these difficulties, particularly in more traditional households. Emotional resistance, especially among adolescents, was another recurrent challenge; as one youth shared, *"I didn't want another adult telling me what to do—I wanted to see if he'd earn my trust first."* Together, these barriers illustrated the fragile and often ambivalent path toward relational security within step-families.

The third theme, *pathways toward mutual trust*, illuminated the strategies and emotional processes that facilitated the repair and strengthening of step-family bonds. Participants consistently emphasized that trust did not emerge suddenly but evolved through gradual emotional disclosure. As one step-daughter put it, *"We started talking about small things, like school or cooking, and then one day I found myself telling her about my fears."* Reciprocity and mutual support were described as the backbone of trust restoration—through acts of empathy, shared responsibilities, and emotional validation. Instances of conflict were reframed as opportunities for understanding and forgiveness. A step-parent recalled, *"When I apologized for yelling, he looked surprised. That was when he started trusting me more."* Respecting individual identity also emerged as critical, as both step-parents and children underscored the need for autonomy, privacy, and personal space. Recognition of differences—rather than attempts to erase them—strengthened mutual respect. Several families described building a shared identity through rituals, traditions, and inclusive language, creating a sense of "us" that transcended biological ties. One participant shared, *"We started calling ourselves 'Team G,' and it made us feel like a real family."* Parental mediation and alignment between biological and step-parents played a facilitative role in integrating the family system, while the ongoing evolution of trust was recognized as a long-term emotional journey requiring patience and resilience. As one step-father poignantly concluded, *"Trust isn't something you get once— it's something you build every day, little by little."*

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this qualitative study on the development of trust in step-parent–child relationships in Georgia revealed a complex, evolving process shaped by emotional

experiences, communication dynamics, and social contexts. Three major themes emerged from participants' narratives: the *foundations of trust formation*, *challenges and barriers to trust*, and *pathways toward mutual trust*. These themes illustrate how stepfamily members construct, test, and sustain trust through consistent emotional engagement, openness, and mutual respect. The results indicate that trust is neither immediate nor automatic; rather, it develops gradually as family members engage in emotional negotiation and relational repair following previous family disruptions.

The first theme—*foundations of trust formation*—highlighted the central role of consistent communication, reliability, and emotional availability in building initial bonds between step-parents and children. Participants repeatedly emphasized that honesty, active listening, and stable behavior created a sense of predictability and emotional safety. These findings align with (Sanner et al., 2022) and (H.Ganong et al., 2021), who found that effective step-parenting involves clear communication, warmth, and behavioral consistency. Similarly, (Perry & Rogers, 2025) reported that parental trust and cooperation significantly enhance children's engagement and reduce behavioral withdrawal, underscoring the relational value of transparency and responsiveness. In this study, participants described that emotional trust began to form when step-parents demonstrated empathy and respected children's boundaries—an observation consistent with (Buha & Jelić, 2025), who emphasized that mutual trust between adults and children arises from perceived emotional safety and recognition of individual differences.

Furthermore, participants' narratives reflected how consistent routines and shared family activities—such as communal meals, collaborative decision-making, and leisure time—functioned as practical frameworks for establishing trust. These findings correspond to (Coman, 2025), who noted that cooperative interaction and shared experiences are key predictors of social trust in early relationships. The relational environment created by these everyday interactions supports the theoretical view that trust emerges from repeated positive exchanges, reinforcing both cognitive and affective dimensions of family attachment (Carlsson et al., 2022). In this sense, the Georgian participants' experiences exemplified how simple, consistent, and emotionally grounded behaviors nurture trust and belonging in stepfamilies.

The second theme—*challenges and barriers to trust*—captured the emotional and contextual difficulties that inhibit the growth of trust in blended family settings. The most salient challenge was residual loyalty to the biological parent. Many step-children felt emotional conflict and guilt when forming closeness with a step-parent, echoing the findings of (Arganaraz & Limb, 2025), who observed similar patterns of divided attachment and identity tension among emerging adults from stepfamily backgrounds. This ambivalence often delayed emotional openness, reinforcing emotional distance and uncertainty. The results also revealed that unhealed memories of parental conflict or divorce continued to shape children's perceptions of adults' reliability, confirming (Han, 2023), who argued that family transitions generate lingering emotional vulnerabilities that can obstruct positive adaptation.

Role ambiguity and boundary confusion were also significant obstacles in this study. Step-parents expressed uncertainty about how to balance authority with friendship, while children questioned the legitimacy of step-parents' discipline. This tension has been documented in prior research: (H.Ganong et al., 2021) and (Landon et al., 2021) both reported that undefined parental roles are a core source of stepfamily conflict, leading to confusion and emotional detachment. In the Georgian context, cultural expectations regarding parental authority amplified this challenge, as traditional family hierarchies often restrict emotional reciprocity. (Terrefe, 2024) similarly found that hierarchical structures in family interactions can hinder transitions from distrust to collaboration, particularly when authority is perceived as coercive rather than empathetic.

Miscommunication and misinterpretation further complicated trust-building processes. Participants described how simple misunderstandings could escalate into emotional withdrawal, a pattern consistent with (Gao et al., 2024), who demonstrated that poor parent–child communication predicts elevated emotional tension and anxiety. The tendency to read tone or expression as criticism led to relational shutdowns, especially among adolescents. (Bandoro & Aprilia, 2024) emphasized that trust restoration in parental contexts requires reframing interactions through empathy and cognitive reappraisal—strategies that help transform defensiveness into openness. In addition, extended family interference and societal stigma toward remarriage, as noted by participants, resonate with the findings of (Wagner et al., 2024), who observed that social perceptions of stepfamilies influence internal family cohesion and children's sense of belonging. These external pressures often prevent families from consolidating their identity as a cohesive unit.

The third theme—*pathways toward mutual trust*—shed light on the strategies and emotional transitions that enable stepfamilies to overcome challenges and build enduring relationships. Participants described trust as a gradual, circular process characterized by emotional testing, forgiveness, and redefinition of roles. Gradual emotional disclosure emerged as a key mechanism for deepening connection: when both children and step-parents began sharing vulnerabilities, the relational distance decreased. This finding supports (Oliver-Blackburn, 2023), who identified resilience and self-disclosure as central factors in the maintenance of stepfamily relationships. Similarly, (Ferrari et al., 2025) found that family social capital and emotional reciprocity significantly contribute to trust in young adult children from stepfamilies, suggesting that mutual openness fosters relational stability and perceived fairness.

Reciprocity and mutual support were additional pathways through which participants rebuilt trust. Shared problem-solving, supportive listening, and validation of emotions enhanced cooperation and emotional connection. These findings echo (Dewan et al., 2024), who showed that trust in interpersonal relationships—whether familial or institutional—relies heavily on perceived empathy, transparency, and relational consistency. Conflict resolution and forgiveness were recurring motifs in participants' stories, highlighting the human capacity to rebuild trust after rupture. (Helgertz & Tegunimataka, 2023) similarly reported that stepfamilies that develop adaptive emotional communication exhibit improved academic and social outcomes among children, reflecting a broader relational resilience.

Respect for individuality and the creation of a shared family identity also emerged as essential components of sustained trust. Participants emphasized that trust was strengthened when their autonomy and uniqueness were respected rather than suppressed. This aligns with (Schröer & Kok, 2025), who demonstrated that children's perceptions of moral and emotional integrity directly affect their trust in parents. Moreover, by creating shared rituals and collective narratives, families in this study redefined belonging beyond biological boundaries—a process consistent with (LaPata et al., 2024) and (Schoeni et al., 2022), who found that adult children's sense of attachment and caregiving reciprocity toward step-parents depends on perceived inclusion and emotional legitimacy. In this way, trust becomes a generative force that transforms the structural complexity of stepfamilies into emotional continuity.

The study's findings also contribute to cross-cultural understandings of stepfamily functioning. The experiences of Georgian participants reflect patterns observed in both collectivist and individualist societies. While loyalty and authority were strong structural forces shaping relational expectations, emotional openness and equality were identified as modernizing elements of trust formation. This duality parallels the conclusions of (Ramlan et al., 2023), who emphasized that hierarchical family systems often reinforce emotional distance, but adaptive communication and empathy can mitigate this effect. Likewise, (Lin et al., 2024) and (Schacht et al., 2021) revealed that even in adulthood, long-term relational patterns of trust and care between biological and step-family members reflect early emotional foundations.

Comparatively, the notion of trust as a "living process" that evolves through uncertainty resonates with the theoretical work of (Zhang, 2025), who conceptualized family health as a dynamic state shaped by emotional adaptation and relational interdependence. In this light, trust serves not merely as an emotional sentiment but as an indicator of systemic family well-being. The transition from guarded coexistence to emotional reciprocity documented in this study mirrors (Arat et al., 2024)'s argument that parental involvement and gendered emotional roles determine the pace and depth of trust development in stepfamilies. Finally, the narrative of participants who described trust as being "rebuilt daily" supports (Schoeni et al., 2022) and (Carlsson et al., 2022), who linked trust to consistent relational investments rather than singular events of bonding.

Overall, the findings suggest that trust in step-parent–child relationships develops through a reciprocal process involving emotional honesty, patience, and shared experiences. Challenges such as divided loyalty and role ambiguity persist, but when addressed through empathy, forgiveness, and authentic communication, they become opportunities for relational growth. This qualitative evidence reinforces the theoretical position that trust in blended families is an emergent phenomenon grounded in lived experience, negotiated meanings, and cultural context.

5. Suggestions and Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the qualitative design, while providing rich and nuanced insights, limits the generalizability of results beyond the Georgian cultural context. The sample size of 20

participants, although sufficient for theoretical saturation, may not capture the full diversity of stepfamily experiences, particularly in rural or ethnically diverse communities. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data introduces potential bias, as participants may have selectively recalled or reinterpreted past experiences. The absence of triangulation through other data sources, such as observational or longitudinal methods, restricts the ability to trace changes in trust development over time. Furthermore, cultural norms surrounding family privacy and hierarchy in Georgia may have influenced participants' willingness to discuss sensitive emotional topics openly.

Future research should adopt longitudinal and mixed-method approaches to better capture the evolving nature of trust in step-parent–child relationships. Quantitative studies could complement qualitative findings by identifying measurable predictors of trust, such as communication frequency, emotional intelligence, or co-parenting cooperation. Comparative cross-cultural research would also be valuable for understanding how cultural expectations and societal structures shape the process of trust formation. Moreover, exploring the perspectives of other family members—such as biological parents, siblings, and grandparents—could provide a more systemic understanding of stepfamily trust dynamics. Including adolescent participants across different developmental stages might also reveal age-specific mechanisms of emotional negotiation and adaptation.

From a practical perspective, the findings underscore the importance of promoting emotional literacy, empathy, and communication skills in stepfamilies. Family therapists, counselors, and social workers should focus on facilitating open dialogue and helping families establish clear but flexible role boundaries. Psychoeducational programs aimed at both parents and children can support the development of realistic expectations and reduce guilt associated with loyalty conflicts. Interventions that promote shared family activities and rituals may further enhance relational cohesion and strengthen emotional bonds. At a policy level, public awareness campaigns and support services should address the stigmas associated with remarriage, emphasizing that trust in blended families is a developmental process achievable through mutual understanding and consistent care.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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