

NOT WICKED: STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESSFUL STEPMOTHERING

By Kelly McQuillan

Being a stepmother is the most rewarding job I've ever had, and it is also the most difficult. It's not something we tend to talk about, but at times stepparenting can be an isolating, misunderstood and emotionally wringing experience.

Let's put the image of the "wicked stepmother" (thanks, fairy tales) out of our heads for a moment and look at what it really means to be a stepmom, besides being the partner of someone who already has children.

Like parents, stepmothers are responsible for the care and safety of children living or staying under their roof. The stepmother may even be one of two primary caregivers if her spouse has full custody. When the biological parent is not home, the stepmom is in charge of mealtimes, schoolwork, mediating sibling disputes, enforcing house rules and so on. But the many different stepfamily and blended family configurations, custody arrangements, visitation schedules, dynamics within households and varying levels of parental involvement make it extremely hard (I would argue impossible) to pin down the exact parameters of stepparenting.

Unfortunately, if the boundaries and expectations of your job are not clearly defined, it's hard to know if you're doing it well. It's even harder if those boundaries and expectations keep shifting. For stepparents, things can turn topsy-turvy overnight, and nothing can be assumed. Navigating the landscape of stepmother-

hood is akin to picking your way through an emotional minefield, or hopping on a roller coaster with no predetermined route. There will be exhilarating highs, devastating lows and times of utter confusion.

You may think I'm simply describing the experience of being a parent. And it's true: Even for biological parents, there is no rulebook, and raising kids is fraught with uncertainty and surprises. But when push comes to shove, stepparenting is not the same as parenting your own children. The children do not necessarily love you, respect you or even like you. They might still be processing conflicting or confusing feelings about their parents separating, and as the stepmom, you may find yourself a convenient target for their frustration. The children might see your attempts to meet your caregiver responsibilities as attempts to usurp the position of mother, and there may be resentment and accusations of overstepping.

But when the family dynamic is positive, it can be an immensely fulfilling experience. My husband's children, now 13 and 14, have lived with us full-time for the past four years. I have had the opportunity to forge relationships with two amazing young people and have enjoyed a front row seat to watch them grow and learn. I'm very proud of them for so many things, and they bring me joy in ways I'm sure they don't realize. But the journey continues, and the landscape is constantly changing. We have had, and will continue to have, our share of challenges. There are many things I wish I had known before I

leapt into this role that might have made for smoother sailing along the way. Here are a few things I've learned.

Roles and Household Expectations

Think long and hard about your assumptions and comfort zone regarding finances, discipline, school expectations, household chores, major decisions about the children, the other biological parent and so on. Have frank conversations with your spouse/spouse-to-be and know what the expectations are. Hammer out a framework you can both live with and know it can be opened up for negotiation as needed.

Sit down together regularly as a household and discuss roles and responsibilities: expectations for things like chores, screen time, homework, bedtime, showers and so on. Give the children opportunities for input. Each household situation is different and changeable, and these conversations need to be had more than once. We set ours up as a family meeting and start each one by sharing kudos — positive things we have noticed about other members of the household and things we are grateful to them for. Everyone has a safe place to share their voice, and the mutually agreed upon framework of expectations we construct reduces conflict later. Even if the children are only staying with you for short times, it's important everyone is clear on household expectations and has an investment in things functioning smoothly. It's not perfect, but the tone in our household is generally calm and conflict-free.

Communication

You and your spouse need to be on the same page, or at least in the same book. Set aside times when the two of you can discuss what's working well and what needs attention. Share your thoughts and feelings and truly listen to those of your spouse. I am so grateful that my husband makes an effort to understand the challenges of my situation, and I do my best to see where he is coming from; too, but it wasn't always that way. It took work and lots of introspection to get to this point. If your relationship is solid and respectful, you will be able to tackle the challenges of a stepfamily as a united force.

Relationship Building

Find opportunities to connect with your stepchildren and build relationships through shared positive experiences. Use areas of common interest as starting points. My stepson and I both love accents, so we watch British comedies together and mimic them when we talk to each other. Have fun and laugh together. When they do share, listen. Validate their feelings. Share your feelings. You can do all of these things without stepping into a mom or dad role, but instead the role of caring adult and supporter (note that I didn't say "friend").

Self-Care

No doubt about it, there will be times when you feel overwhelmed, misunderstood, underappreciated, and very alone in your experience as a stepmom. I didn't meet another person in my situation until last year, and it was so validating to speak to her. Finally, someone who really understood what it can be like! She recommended a great resource: *Stepmom Magazine* (stepmommag.com). I stayed up for hours that night reading back issues and exploring the online forums. Talk about a breath of fresh air! Knowing I wasn't alone in my feelings helped me deal with them and make some effective changes. Seek out a resource like this, or join a local support group for stepparents, but make sure you have a group of people who "get it" to lean on when things inevitably get interesting.

And remember those things you loved to do before becoming a stepparent? You know, those novels you loved to

read, the art you created or the sport you so enjoyed? Do them. Gift yourself the time to do what brings you life and joy, what feeds your soul. Treat yourself to a massage or a yoga class once in a while. At the very least, find an outlet into which you can pour any frustrations (a journal, exercise, etc.). You will feel more balanced, you will have more energy for "family stuff" and you will remind yourself that you are important, too.

Kudos to all of the stepparents out there. You have voluntarily taken on one of the most challenging yet potentially most rewarding jobs there is. Savour the amazing times, keep your chin up through the tough ones and know you are valued.

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