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StepMom
M a g a z i n e



Stuck in the Middle...With You.

She's pals with her husband's ex.

How does she do it? *Should* she?

And is it healthy?

By Erin Hallstrom-Erickson

I have been straddling the rails in Blended-Familiesville for as long as I can remember.

From the age of 13, I've been a stepkid to my incredibly amazing stepfather. I didn't always think of him that way, but with maturity came respect and now I couldn't imagine my life without him.

My stepdad became particularly important to me when I became a stepparent myself. In fact, to this day, not a visit goes by with him where I don't give him a huge hug, say "I love you" and give him a kiss on the cheek. I've known him for 20 years and only recently, when I discovered how difficult it can be to raise teenagers who aren't your own, did it dawn on me that I should show him how grateful I am that he didn't ship me off to boarding school.

Being a stepkid has been one of the best things about my stepmotherhood. Both my husband and his ex-wife grew up in nuclear families and didn't have to do the 'Christmas Shuffle', the dual-house hold birthday parties, or the 'Which house are my favorite pants at?' cries. I've given the kids and their bio parents some advice over the years and installed a few gadgets and reminders to keep them moving right along. It stands to reason, if I wanted to, I could use my advising as a resume talking point: *dual-household process improvement expert* at Casa Erickson North and South.

I'm in a good position to offer advice not only because of my multi-step monikers but also because I'm friends with everyone in the family. When I say everyone, I do mean everyone – even the kids' mom.

She and I became fairly good friends this year if anything because we needed each other. My husband (her ex) was working 2,000 miles away during one of the most trying times of our family's life. We quickly figured out that it was better to befriend each other than to hate each other. And so a friendship was born.

We're now at a point where we host parties together at my house and talk to each other every day even if it's just to check in and say hi. To outsiders, it's incredibly confusing, but to us, it's natural.

The kids seem to be okay with it. They might be a little confused as to why it seems like mom and stepmom are always chatting more than mom and dad, but it doesn't appear to be having any detrimental effects on their self-esteem.

Like my dual stephood, being friends with the "The Ex" can have its perks. She rarely checks with my husband about logistics anymore because she knows he'll forget. She comes straight to me and we get things sorted out that much quicker. She's also one of the best people to talk to when I'm mad about things he's done. After all, she knows better than anyone what his flaws are. Because we're friends, she gives me honest advice about how she handled situations similar to mine.

It's a strange dynamic to have, but it works for us. The only downside to it being when my husband and my friend (the aforementioned ex) are arguing I'm never sure whose side to take. I can see her side and his side. What they also don't realize is that they're usually both emailing me to vent their frustrations about the same thing. Not only do I get both sides of the story, but I also get a giant headache trying to keep the peace.

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*-Jennifer Newcomb Marine
Author of No One's The Bitch*

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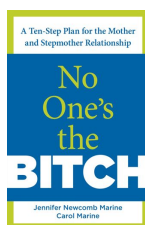
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And if there's anything I've learned after 20 years of Steptitude it's that keeping the peace is what it's all about.

Sometimes you'll be right; sometimes you'll be wrong; sometimes you'll really make someone mad; and sometimes you'll do something incredible, surprisingly well.

What the experts think...

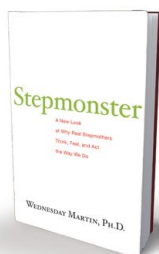
StepMom Magazine asked experts **Wednesday Martin**, author of *Stepmonster* and **Jennifer Newcomb-Marine**, co-author of *No One's the Bitch* to give us some thoughts and perspectives on both Erin's situation and on stepmom and ex-wife relationships in general:



Jennifer Says:

Erin's collaborative experience with her husband's ex is a perfect illustration of how stepmoms and moms can actually do a great job co-parenting together, sometimes even better than the two exes. For starters, the stepmom is probably already up to her ears in the minutiae of daily parenting anyway, so it's only natural for the two job-sharing "colleagues" to have lots in common. Where are the only magical blue socks that Jacob is willing to wear these days? And what will Emma begrudgingly eat since declaring herself a semi-vegetarian, along with the rest of her freshman posse? Ask the dad these questions and you may get a blank stare and a shrug. Ask one of the women and they're likely to hand you the item before you even finish your sentence. Gender-wise, it may be easier for the mom and stepmom to use a certain kind of relationship "shorthand" to effectively discuss parenting worries and concerns, in part because they're free of the historical baggage that hinders communication between the exes.

And while some stepmothers now feel as if they're under even more pressure to be suffocatingly chummy with their husband's ex, the emphasis here is really about being cooperative *family managers* who freely share relevant information between households and problem-solve together, as needed. Speaking of shared information, Erin's story also highlights one of the dangers of befriending both the stepmom and the ex-husband: *triangulation*, which, aptly enough, rhymes with *strangulation*. It can be tricky getting caught in the middle of dueling priorities, but both the listener and the venting party must keep a clear vision of familial priorities in mind, which in this case means... preserving the second marriage and not contributing to a second divorce! Just as in a traditional extended family, healthy boundaries between members maintain privacy, dignity, and *sanity*. Once stepmoms and moms stop operating from a spirit of competition with each other, this kind of cooperative relationship can work out surprisingly well.



Wednesday Says: For some of us, a "friendship" of some sort with our partner's ex might work, even appeal. For others, it's the last thing we want or need. And we should all have the freedom to decide if having that relationship is something we want, or not, without judgment.

However, recently we've seen "you should be friends with his ex" become the expectation *du jour* heaped on the stepmother's already overfilled plate of responsibilities and obligations (which usually include marital therapist and family counselor—Constance Ahrons found women read twice as many books about remarriage with children compared to their husbands).

What are the facts about befriending your husband's ex? Let's look at context, and why attempting to "fix it" with her husband's ex, beyond shooting for civility and politeness, is often *not* advisable for a stepmom:

Ample research shows that stepmother is among the most depleting, challenging and

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misunderstood roles in our society. And remarriages with children are twice as likely to fail as those without. Given these realities, assigning yourself a potentially draining task such as befriending or smoothing the way with your husband's ex (however rewarding you believe it might ultimately be) may mean siphoning energy away from self-care and your partnership. Can you afford that?

In their representative longitudinal studies, Drs. Constance Ahrons and Mavis Hetherington both found that ex-wives are angrier than ex-husbands and hold onto their anger and resentment for longer. Thankfully, there are exceptions—but this is one of the facts of stepmother reality, and important information for you to have as you consider the lay of the land.

Women, with our relational tendencies, may seek approval and feel the need to be liked by many people for reasons that are not necessarily healthy. Ask yourself: Are you looking for approval—from society, friends, your husband, or her? Could you achieve just as much effective “co-parenting” with politeness and civility?

If your husband's ex has a substance abuse problem, suffers from mental illness, has a personality disorder, or is just generally undermining and angry, you are likely the last person who can or should try to “help” or improve the situation. She needs therapy, and you are not a therapist (and if you are, you are a therapist married to her ex, which means she can't be your client—for good reason!)

Have you been lured by an offer of friendship by your husband's ex before, only to see it blow up in your face? Many women have described this situation to me and other researchers. If your husband's ex is unpredictable or unstable in this regard in your estimation, trust your judgment. A polite distance can be fine.

For some, an ex-wife-wife friendship will work, even feel natural. Generally, it takes an extraordinary and committed ex wife to make it work, not just a stepmom who wants to bring it about. A potentially sanity-saving reminder, then: as with most things pertaining to stepmothers and stepmothering, **your good intentions alone are not enough here!**

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*-Wednesday Martin
Author of Stepmonster*

In instances where a friendship is do-able, we might do well to **consider potential snags**. For example, Erin, in a relatively successful and smooth relationship with her husband's ex, writes that her husband and her husband's ex triangulate her, and she finds herself in situations where she “mediates” their arguments. “They're often both emailing me to vent their frustrations.” Many of us might find such a situation unappealing and inappropriate, preferring firmer and clearer boundaries. A partnership, especially a remarriage with children, is vulnerable. There is room for two people in it. Your partner and his ex are exes for a reason. You will do well to tread lightly and let your husband know if you intend to go beyond a civilized working relation with his ex.

While there is research that confirms beyond a doubt that high conflict relationships between ex-spouses post-divorce are detrimental for kids (no surprise there), experts including Francesca Adler-Baeder, coordinator of the National Stepfamily Resource Center, cite findings that highly cooperative, friendly relations between spouses post-divorce are confusing for kids and can be detrimental to the marriage or partnership. There is no research yet on highly cooperative, highly friendly relationships between ex wives and wives, so there is certainly **no reason to presume that being best pals or even pals with your husband's ex is “better” for the step/children**. Such friendships may actually, like highly friendly relations between ex-spouses, confuse children and harm

marriages, depending on the temperaments and preferences of the individual players. Time, research, and lived experience will tell. Meanwhile, do what feels right for you, without fear of judgment. And if you tread into the friendship arena, do so carefully, knowing that there are no guarantees, and no obligations.

You may even decide you want your husband to be the more-or-less sole point person between your household and his ex. If so, know that doing what is right for you emotionally is key to keeping you, your partnership, and your relationship with your stepkids as healthy, happy, and on-track as possible.



Erin Hallstrom-Erickson, both a stepdaughter and a stepmother, is the creator of Stepchicks, an online community for stepmoms. She is also the author of the personal blog, The Erin Experiment <http://www.erinexperiment.com> as well as the co-creator of the Stepfamily Letter Project. She can be reached at erin@erinexperiment.com