

You're Not a Parent and you're not



By: Katherine Maguid

I am a childless stepmother. It's not that I don't want to have biological children of my own; in fact, I hope to have children of my own one day. But add into this equation that I'm also a stepmother. For many of you stepmothers out there who fall into this category, you may find that this unique set of circumstances brings with it a certain prejudice that you experience with your stepchildren and, maybe more importantly, with your stepchildren's biological mother. I have personally experienced this painful reality, and one of the worst times occurred a few years ago.

The boys were visiting us in Kansas for their spring break. One morning, I needed to go grocery shopping and the boys eagerly volunteered to join me since it would give them an opportunity to beg me for new Yu-gi-oh playing cards. I decided to bring my dogs, Jett and Raiden, along for the ride. The boys were unusually quiet while they petted the dogs.

"So, guys," I asked. "What's new and exciting with you?"

"Nothing," said Rory.

"Connor? How about you?" I asked.

"Well," Connor said with reservation. "I don't know if I should tell you."

"Oh come on! We're pals! You can tell me anything, right?"

"OK. Katie, my mom says that your family isn't our family and your opinions don't count 'cause you're not a parent," he said quickly, as if getting all of the words out as fast as possible would make it easier for him to say it.

"Hmm, I'm not sure what your mom was driving at," I said.

"Well, she said that your sister and brothers aren't our uncles and aunt, and their kids aren't our cousins, and that your cousins aren't our cousins, and that your aunts and uncles aren't our aunts and uncles, and that we shouldn't call anyone in your family aunt and uncle. And since you're not a parent, we don't have to listen to you, I mean, besides what Dad says we have to, you know, listen to," Connor tried to explain.

"I see," I said quietly, trying to think of how to best volley this precarious – not to mention irritating – situation. I wanted to set a positive example for them and not to lower myself into making slurs against their mother, but God! – I was angry. *Did she purposely design these theories to be repeated and gnaw at me? Not this time,* I decided.

"Well guys, do you want to hear what I think about that?" I asked, taking a deep breath and trying to choose my words carefully because I knew that what I said would most certainly be repeated.

"Yeah, Katie, tell us," they both agreed.

"OK. Technically, your mother is correct. My family is not related to you through blood, but that doesn't matter. You see, my family loves you both and they consider you to be part of our family," I said, thinking that I had nailed it.

"But, my mom says that blood's all that matters," Connor tried again.



“Right,” I said. “Alright, here’s another way to look at it. I believe that you get to pick the people who you want to love and have in your family. So let’s take you guys – even though I’m not related to you by blood, I still consider you to be part of my family because I love you both very much. And, what about Jett and Raiden?” I asked, referring to my dogs. “I know that they’re just dogs, but I love them like crazy and they’re part of my family. Does that make sense?”

“So, I get to pick who’s in my family?” Rory asked.

“Yep, that’s what I think,” I said. “Connor, does that make sense to you?”

“Yeah, because I love you too Katie, and I love Jettie and Raiden, and I want them to be part of my family.”

“But Katie?” asked Rory. “Do we have to listen to you even though you’re not a for-real Mom?”

“Guys, when you’re in our house, you have to listen to everything that your dad and I *both* say. My opinions count just as much as your dad’s and your mom’s. Just because I’m not a ‘for-real Mom’ doesn’t mean that my opinion counts any less. I take care of you guys when you’re with us, right?” I asked.

“Yeah,” they answered tentatively.

“And I look out for you and your best interests – even when you’re not in our house, right?”

“That’s why you call us and help us!” Rory exclaimed.

“Exactly. Just because I don’t have babies doesn’t mean that I love you any less or that I have don’t have good things to say to you guys, OK?”

“So, we can have you be part of our family and listen to what you say even though you’re not a for-real Mom?” Connor asked.

“You bet. I promise I’ll always love you and that I’ll always be around for you guys, no matter what.” Now I knew I had gotten around Lucy’s landmine. And, I had done it in a positive way, which was even better.

Even though I had managed to work my way around this precarious situation, I was still hurt. *I’m not a parent and I’m not family - are you kidding me?* I’m married to their father; hence, I’m legally related to the boys. Do I wish their mother would be less small-minded and realize that blood relations aren’t a person’s only relations in life? Certainly. As much as the “you’re not blood” comment has maintained its clannish and petty aura over the years, it’s the part that because I don’t have children of my own and thus, not permitted to have thoughts and opinions on the raising of my stepchildren that rubs me the wrong way. I might be a childless stepmother, but I do everything that any ordinary parent does. In fact, I pretty much do exactly what my mother did with my siblings and me when I was young. I make them food, I watch them all day long while they’re with me and their dad is at work, I take them to the doctor, I buy them clothes, I discipline them, I get up with them in the middle of the night when they’re sick or if they’ve had a bad dream, and I bring them to sporting events and camps. Most importantly, though, I love them dearly and unconditionally. So what differentiates me from a parent, aside from the fact that I didn’t give birth to my stepsons? The act of giving birth to a child cannot be the sole definition of being a parent because look at adoptive parents – they do the same things I do. *So if I’m not a parent, then what exactly am I?*

Perhaps in their mother’s eyes, I’m nothing more than a glorified babysitter. When I was a teenager and babysat for money, I just made sure that the kids did whatever their parents required: I made sure that they ate their dinner, cleaned up after themselves, did their homework, got ready for bed, read the bedtime story or two, and put them to bed. Hmm, this *is* sounding a tad like being a stepmother. But here’s the crucial difference: I never loved the children I babysat. I didn’t worry if they were sick and rush them over to the medical clinic – I’d just call the number the parents left for me to call in case of emergency. I didn’t care if they got good or bad grades because no one ever discussed how to improve their school performance with me. I didn’t care about the mischief my wards would get into when I wasn’t around because their parents certainly never told me.



I didn't make sure that I made myself available to them to talk about the problems they were trying to resolve in their lives because the kids didn't see me as a respected authority figure in their lives. None of these things went along with the role of babysitter. The children I babysat were simply not family members.

My stepsons, on the other hand, are and always will be part of my family, and I have laid claim to them as family in my mind and my heart. The only difference between an adoptive mother and me is that my stepchildren don't live with me full time. Andrew Parker, a friend and fellow writer, once told me: "The human heart is the most elastic material in this life. It can be as small as one person's lust for causing pain in others, and it can be as large as a person's self-sacrifice for a better world." I couldn't agree more. I have chosen to make my heart large – large enough to sacrifice for the betterment of my stepsons, large enough to withstand the hurtful comments made by my stepsons' biological mother, and large enough to love two boys who are not related to me by flesh and blood because it will only serve to better the worlds that we each inhabit.

So how do I deal with the insults and prejudice?

First: I must admit, I don't always deal with them graciously – behind closed doors, that is. In front of my stepsons, I do what Muhammad Ali says, "Fake it until you make it." I put a smile and a flack jacket on and try to ignore the barbs. I try to turn them around if I can. But I always stick to my cardinal rule: never, ever insult my stepsons' biological mother. That's a guaranteed conversation shut down, and my goal is to keep the lines of conversation open and honest with the boys. Is it tough to do? Yes. Does it hurt? Yes. Will I change the way I handle these situations? No. I refuse to put my stepsons in the middle of some long distance insecurity and protective overdrive dilemma that their mother has been dealing with for the last seven years I have been with my husband.

Second: Figure out a way to remind yourself that you must do what's best for your stepchildren. Would it be better for them if you lashed out at the insults that their mother passes to them about you? No, because they would bear the brunt of your anger and you would be playing right into their biological mother's games.

Third: If you are a childless stepmother, never forget that you have something just as valuable to pass along to your stepchildren as a stepmother who has children of her own. Mine within yourself these gifts that you have to share with your stepchildren and learn to share them openly and freely with them. You are a woman of worth who is, under no circumstances, a second-class citizen just because you do not have biological children of your own.



Katherine Maguid is a freelance writer and writing instructor, and lives in Wichita, KS. For the last six years, she has been married to her amazing husband and a stepmother to her handsome and precocious stepsons.