

MAY 2012

StepMom

Magazine

**Don't Let
Drama Dampen
the Mood**

**FOOD FOR THOUGHT:
Stepmoms,
Role Models and
Mother's Day**

**Conversation
Tools to Bring Your
Stepfamily Closer**

Getting along with a
HIGH-CONFLICT EX
How to know when it's
TIME TO LET GO!

PLUS

Embracing Change

**The Legal
Definition of an
"Unfit" Parent**

**Why You Should
Take Outsider
Opinions with a
Grain of Salt**

Recipes

Crafts for Kids

Fitness Tips

**The Stylish
Stepmom**



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**The Mission of
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Our mission is to

EDUCATE
EMPOWER and provide
EXPERT ADVICE and
EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

to women whose partners
have children from a previous
relationship.

Our goal is to foster

SOLID couples,
SUCCESSFUL families and
STRONG women.



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May Features

12 What Kind of Stepmother Are You?

by WEDNESDAY MARTIN, Ph.D.

There is not a single way to be a stepmother. Nor, it turns out, is there a "right" one.

16 The Blessing of Stepmom

by HEATHER HETCHLER

A poem to celebrate the blessing that a stepmom is to her family and the world around her.

18 Let's Talk About Sex ... and Stepouples!

by MARY T. KELLY, M.A.

Making time for intimacy is especially important in a stepfamily system. Don't let your relationship get overshadowed by the needs and demands of all the kids, exes, finances and work.

21 Changes Ahead: Flexibility in Stepfamily Life is the Key to Success

by SUSAN WIDSOM, M.A.

Whether you're new to stepcoupling and stepparenting or have been working at it for years, you're likely to know that it's nothing if not a rollercoaster ride.

24 Shared Values: Simple Steps to Help You Find Common Ground to Bring Your Family Closer

by EMILY BOUCHARD

Establishing values together will provide you with a firm family foundation.



OUR MAY COVER GIRL Meet Ali!

Ali Wilke from Oklahoma is a stepmom to her husband's 9-year-old daughter. She and her husband have been together for six years and recently celebrated their third wedding anniversary.

She says: "I knew that when I married my wonderful husband and gained my fantastic stepdaughter, life would bring many challenges in regard to being a stepmom. Fortunately, my husband is incredibly loyal to making our marriage a success, and we have come up with creative ways to deal with the stresses of co-parenting and the effects it can have on us as a couple. Even though my husband is very supportive and sensitive, there are still situations that can surface in which only other stepmoms can fully understand. I don't feel like my husband or our relationship should be burdened with these circumstances. I also had no idea how alone and isolated I would feel at times. For these reasons, *StepMom Magazine* has been such a blessing. I know that I am not alone in my struggles and that there are thousands of women out there that are going through the exact same thing I am. The love and support I have found through this community has been a godsend. Thank you, *StepMom Magazine*!!"



StepMom

M a g a z i n e

May Departments

- 4 Brenda's Corner**
Letter from the publisher.
- 5 Mailbox**
Readers respond to last month's issue.
- 6 Urban Stepmom**
Lisa Bagshaw wants you to R.E.S.P.E.C.T. yourself!
- 8 The Ex Factor**
Jenna Korf on knowing when it's time to give up on getting along with a high-conflict ex.
- 10 Legal Matters**
Lara Badain, Esq., provides the definition of an "unfit" parent.
- 27 Life on the Tipping Point**
Ms. Taken explains why it's better when kids don't have to try so hard.
- 30 The Inside Scoop**
Laura Petherbridge shares why outsider opinions should be taken with a grain of salt.
- 32 Fitness Zone**
Valerie Waldron Hedlund declares May Healthy Stepmom Month!
- 33 Advice from the Experts**
Our panel of stepmom experts answer your questions.
- 36 From the Kitchen**
Elizabeth Guerra's recipes to relish.
- 38 Stylish Stepmom**
Heidi Ducato on confidence-boosting colors.
- 39 Crafts with Your Stepkids**
Wendy L. Deppe with steps for homemade bath bombs.
- 41 My Journal**
- 42 Words of Wisdom**



Brenda's Corner



“I LOVE THE IDEA OF BEING A ROLE MODEL. What if all stepmoms worried less about the maternal implications of the word ‘stepmom’ and let the term ‘role model’ guide their actions and their relationships instead?”

I had an aha moment last month. It was something my husband already knew but took me a little longer to see. It wasn't because I wasn't looking, and it wasn't because I didn't read the signs. It was because I didn't always let myself *believe* what I thought I saw.

Stepmoms often build walls around their hearts. We sometimes ignore invitations to “come in” because we know the risks. We know there is always a chance that our stepkids might someday reject us. We know that if they were forced to choose, we might not make the cut. We worry that without a biological connection, we may never receive a return on the emotional investment we make. Being a stepmother is a giant leap of faith.

What I finally acknowledged last month is that my stepdaughter really does like me. She wants me to be a part of her life. She appreciates the things I bring to the table in our relationship. She doesn't see me as a replacement or a competitor or an interloper. In fact, she sees me as a strong, steady force she can count on. A female adult in her life—a *role model*, as she explained to someone.

I love the idea of being a role model. What if all stepmoms worried less about the maternal implications of the word “stepmom” and let the term “role model” guide their actions and their relationships instead? How much easier would it be to navigate almost any stepfamily situation if we felt that our primary responsibility was to be a role model instead of an ambiguously defined stepmother? Aha.

As you will read in Wednesday Martin's article on Page 12, there are many stepmother types. There is no single formula to success when it comes to being a stepmom. But the idea of being a role model is one that we can all universally embrace, regardless of our individual situation. Page 41 contains journal exercises, and Page 42 lists inspirational quotes about role models.

Mother's Day is May 13. It will mean different things to each of us. You might be a mom and a stepmom, or you might be childless or childfree. You might be custodial, or you might not see your stepkids very often. You might be struggling and feeling like an outsider, or you might have found a comfortable rhythm as a stepmom. Whatever the day means to you, I hope you consider giving yourself a new title. Because while most kids will never say they want a stepmom, all kids need a role model.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Brenda Ockun'. The signature is fluid and cursive.

Brenda Ockun
Publisher and Founder

StepMom
M a g a z i n e

Mailbox



I am new to *StepMom Magazine*. I came across it while looking for resources on one of those days where I just felt like I was about to lose it! Just last weekend, I was talking to a friend about how lonely I was feeling, but reading the magazine and forums has already made me feel less crazy!

—FROM THE STEPMOM
MAGAZINE FORUM

When I read Lisa Bagshaw's article ("Celebrity Stepmom") in the April issue about being childless, I had an "alleluia" moment. I am not the only one! Her article perked me up and reminded me that I am of value to my blended family. More importantly, the article gave me the courage to discuss my feelings with my boyfriend, and he had some enlightened words for me as well. He said, "We are carving our own path and it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks as long as we are happy." *Thanks, StepMom Magazine!*

—FROM THE STEPMOM
MAGAZINE FORUM

I loved Brenda Ockun's Letter from the Publisher last month and how she compared spring weather to being a stepmom. And I want to give a big shout out to Lisa Bagshaw for her article about childless stepmoms! I, too, am a childless stepmom. This past weekend was opening day of my stepson's baseball season. No one there ever talks to my husband or me, and it is a rather lonely experience. But we choose to focus on the kiddo and make due. Thanks to all who contribute, blog, write and participate in the forum!

—FROM THE STEPMOM
MAGAZINE FORUM

I was a little disappointed in last month's article "Teaching Young Adults to Choose Wisely." It seemed to be only aimed at mothers, not stepmothers. As a child-free stepmom, I still want to know how to help my stepchildren make good life decisions! I felt a bit disenfranchised by that article. I would like to suggest that you start a regular column containing child-raising advice (maybe with different sections for different age kids). I need help, but I feel embarrassed reading *Parenting* magazine or even books on parenting since I don't have any kids. I love *StepMom Magazine*, but this article sort of made me feel bad, so I thought I would let you know.

— DEBRA, SUBSCRIBER

EDITORS NOTE: We appreciate Debra's honest feedback and agree with her that more advice relating to developmental stages and stepparenting would be helpful for our readers. We're looking for qualified, interested writers to fit this need. If you know of someone, please direct them to e-mail us at publisher@StepMomMagazine.com.

I just subscribed, and it may take a while to catch up on all the back issues! I LOVE that there is a place for us stepmoms to get perspective! Thank you for publishing this!

—MAMYME, FACEBOOK FAN

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR should be emailed to publisher@StepMomMagazine.com. Letters may be edited for space or clarity. If you wish to remain anonymous, please let us know in your submission.

Urban Stepmom

(SELF) R.E.S.P.E.C.T.

Stepmoms: You've gotta have it before you'll get it!

by LISA BAGSHAW

I've learned many life lessons in this stepmom boot camp, not the least of which is the absolute importance of self-respect. A self-respecting stepmom is a powerful one. She is in charge of herself. She feels emotionally strong, and she creates joy for herself and her family. A self-respecting stepmom has the ability to assess situations, consider everyone's needs and make mature decisions. She knows that her opinion is valuable. She understands that sometimes it is best if she steps back from situations and she accepts that there are many aspects of her life that she cannot change.

Above all, a self-respecting stepmom loves herself and knows her worth.

I didn't always feel this strong as a stepmom. It is a lesson I had to learn the long, hard way. There was a time when my emotions were at the mercy of the antics of the kids, the moods of the ex or the burden of my man. I spent a lot of time trying hard to control everything and everyone, which left me angry, frustrated and depleted.

I put on weight, stopped exercising and was drinking way too much chardonnay, even for a stepmom. All my family relationships seemed in turmoil. I was consumed with



negative thoughts, and life seemed bleak.

I'm not sure what snapped me out of this dark fog (it might have been my favorite jeans not fitting), but I came to the stark conclusion that I would either have to end this relationship or get myself together. I wasn't ready to quit on this brood, so I decided to get healthy.

I started running again. I hired a trainer. I ate more fruit and vegetables. I drank more water. I clipped out magazine images of strong, healthy women and put them on my wall in my home office. I read a lot of motivational, inspiring books. I committed to exercise six days a week. I got up early and went to bed early. I said no to my drinking friends and yes to my hiking friends (not always, let's be real). I wasn't sure if working out and taking care of myself would lead to making this stepmom gig work, but I figured it couldn't hurt.

As I focused more on taking care of myself, I felt my self-respect begin to come back. As my body started to feel stronger, so did my sense of self. And that meant I was better equipped to manage any turmoil, conflict or discord that was going on in my home. I didn't take things as personally, I opted out of conversations that I felt did not serve me, and I regained dignity.

Right about the time I was getting myself physically healthy again and starting to feel strong inside and out, I came across a post on Pinterest.

Set goals

Exercise

Love yourself

Focus on fitness

Rest and relax

Eat right

Smile

Portray positive

Enjoy life

Care for others

Tell yourself you can do this

It didn't matter if it was a stepmom issue or a workout issue. **I HAD TO BELIEVE IN MYSELF.** And when I accomplished something I didn't think I could do, I felt even stronger.

Based on this list, I experimented with smiling more. Smiling is infectious, and it burns calories. Then I focused on thinking and speaking positively, which also is infectious. To help myself, I would write morning lists of positive thoughts about my life, and at night before I went to sleep I would tell myself 10 things I was grateful for.

One negative thought I had to get rid of was, "I can't do this." Every time this thought came up, I forced myself to say, "I can do this." It didn't matter if it was a stepmom issue or a workout issue. I had to believe in myself. And when I accomplished something I didn't think I could do, I felt even stronger.

The inner strength that self-respect brings allows me to be a rock for my husband, a nurturer for the kids and a lover of life.

If you feel powerless and depleted, print this list and put it somewhere you can see it every day. Do what it says, every day. Self-respect leads to happiness for you and your family. Take care of yourself. Be strong. Be loving. Be positive. Rest. Eat right. Exercise. Care for others. Tell yourself you can do it. And above all, enjoy life.



LISA BAGSHAW is an Urban Stepmom (successful, childless career woman who meets a man with kids later in life) who married for the first time at 43. She balances a demanding career in media and life with her husband, twin 10-year-old stepsons, a dog and two cats in Vancouver, BC. Catch her lessons learned at blog www.urbanstepmom.com or on Twitter at @urbanstepmom. She is currently writing a book, *A Survival Guide for the Urban Stepmom* and is open to any and all tips.

The Ex Factor

Getting Along with a High-Conflict Ex

How to Know When it's Time to Let Go!

by JENNA KORF

If you're like many stepmoms, your biggest stepfamily stress stems from your relationship, or lack thereof, with the mother of your stepchildren.

For those of you who find yourselves on the extremely difficult end of the divorced mom/stepmom relationship continuum, it can be maddening.

Why does it have to be so damn hard?

Because not everyone is capable of working through conflict in a mature manner. There are some people in the world who hold on to anger, which is usually just a

cover for some emotion that's too painful to acknowledge. They never learned how to channel their feelings in an effective way; they lack coping skills. They're aggressive when faced with stressful situations. Some of those people were bound to get married, have children and get divorced. And, by luck of the draw, *you* fell in love with their ex-husband.

When forced to interact with someone with a high-conflict personality in such an intimate situation, you're often left feeling hopeless about things ever changing. And with good reason.

When something goes wrong, you keep trying to explain yourself, keep trying to be respectful of her wishes, but it's never enough. There's always something *else* she's upset about. Her reactions seem out of proportion to the situation. She won't hear you out when you try to explain, and she won't accept your apology. She makes assumptions about your intentions and actions and doesn't seek to hear your side. She believes her truth is the *only* truth, and you end up going around in circles trying to pacify her. In extreme cases, she may overtly attempt to sabotage your professional and/or personal life.

You see, when someone perceives you as the devil, everything you do is perceived as devilish. That can leave you feeling pretty powerless.

To make it worse, as women, we often judge our own worth by how others view us. That's why we can barely stand it when someone is mad at us. Everyone must like and accept us! We must let go of this mindset if we ever want to find peace in our stepfamilies.

So understand this: You're not the reason she's behaving the way she is. She'll say that you are. She'll make you responsible for her feelings and actions. But the reality is that the problem is hers alone. Whether it's her *perception* of you or what you *represent* to her, or



The Ex Factor

her own beliefs about what's right and wrong, it's on her and there's nothing you can do about it.

You'll find that trying to change yourself in order to get along with her is like trying to fix a dead car by changing the tires. It won't work because that's not the problem.

So, why, after all this, do many stepmoms *still* try to forge a relationship with the other woman? The answer lies in the false beliefs we hold about ourselves and our families. Some common beliefs are:

- ▶ The kids will be ruined if we don't get along.
- ▶ I'll feel like such a failure if I can't make this work.
- ▶ I'm not cut out to be a stepmom.
- ▶ If she doesn't like me, there must be something wrong with me.
- ▶ I have to prove to everyone that I can do this.

Sound familiar?

So what are your options? Well, you can continue doing what you're doing: spinning your wheels spending every last bit of blood, sweat and tears trying to change the way she sees you, or you can stop taking responsibility for her feelings.

When you give up taking responsibility for another's feelings, you also let go of having to control that person. Can you imagine the relief?

Since you can't control how others view you, you'll drive yourself mad trying. The best you can do is to behave to the best of your ability, in accordance with your beliefs and values.

Once you put the responsibility of her feelings back on her



Since you can't control how others view you, you'll drive yourself mad trying. The best you can do is to **BEHAVE TO THE BEST OF YOUR ABILITY**, in accordance with your beliefs and values.

shoulders, you'll be less likely to keep obsessing about her and wasting your time wishing she were different.

There are two steps to accomplishing this. First, it's important to get to the bottom of the false beliefs you hold about getting along with her. Then, release them. There's absolutely nothing wrong with stepping away from your relationship with her. Refusing to participate in a high-conflict relationship is better for everyone involved, including the kids.

Second, when you catch yourself thinking about the past and

all her past offenses, notice it, and say, "I'm wasting precious time taking responsibility for another's behavior/feelings/emotions. I only have control over myself." And then replace the negative thought with something positive that's going on in your life right now. You want to retrain your brain to think about her less and think about the positive things in your life more.

This takes some practice, so don't get down on yourself when you falter. Forgive yourself, and try again next time. Once you release yourself from being responsible for her feelings about you, you'll feel more in control of your life and you'll find yourself living a much more peaceful existence. Now who wouldn't benefit from that? ■



JENNA KORF lives in the San Francisco Bay area and is a certified relationship and Stepfamily Foundation coach at www.stepmomhelp.com. She's a kick-ass wife to the man who makes it all worth it, a pretty awesome stepmom to two teenage boys and a mom to one lovable pup named Astro. Jenna teaches various workshops to stepmoms and offers classes on stepfamily dynamics to mental health professionals. Workshops are available via teleconference and home-study programs.

In addition, Jenna also works with couples to help them work through their stepfamily challenges and strengthen their marriages. For more information about Jenna's workshops or coaching, visit www.stepmomhelp.com

Legal Matters

Question

What is the definition of an “unfit” parent?

Answer There are situations where a party's actions are so egregious (either abusive or neglectful) that the State (or County) will intervene to remove children from their parent(s) and place them in foster care because the child's interests are better served out of the care and custody of their parent. In that instance, it could be said that the parent has been deemed “unfit.” However, that does not mean that the parent cannot later petition to have their child returned to them if/when the circumstances change.

What generally happens is someone (often the ex-spouse) files a complaint with the local bureau for Child Protective Services. This will generally trigger an investigation and, if the allegations are found to be true, then the State (or County) will step in to ensure the child's safety. However, it is not always the ex-spouse who files the complaint with CPS. Certain people are designated “mandatory reporters” (ie. health care providers, teachers) and if they suspect there is abuse or neglect happening, they are legally required to report it.

However, what is a more common scenario, and what I think would be more appli-

cable for readers, is the situation where a parent engages in “questionable” behavior such that a reasonable person might question their ability to effectively parent a child, or that their conduct places a child in danger. For example, a parent who is an alcoholic or drug addict, a parent who carelessly and frequently uses inappropriate language around children, a parent who exposes the child to numerous short-term romantic relationships, a parent who keeps firearms in the home, or, a common complaint, a parent who is cohabiting with (or dating) a person who has a questionable past that includes criminal convictions, drug use, etc.

These examples present something of a gray area because courts generally do not want to tell people how to live their lives. Each case is evaluated based on the facts and circumstances presented. Courts always try to ensure the best interests of the child. Most often, it is the ex-spouse who will bring the “bad behavior” to the court's attention. Sadly, however, unless it can be shown that the child's best interests are being compromised, the court will not likely intervene. Courts simply are not equipped to be the



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The views or opinions expressed in this column are not intended as legal advice to be relied upon by the reader. It is highly recommended that readers consult with their own legal counsel in their state of residency for specific legal advice. *StepMom Magazine* is not an attorney referral service nor does it make any recommendations or endorsements of the use of any attorney's services.

Legal Matters

morality police for families.

Of course, if an alcoholic parent is driving around drunk with the child in the car, the court will certainly take action. But even then, there is not much a court can do but impose, for example, supervised visits. Or, if a parent keeps weapons in the home, the court may require that the weapons be removed or secured during visits. Or, in the case of a parent who is cohabiting with, for example, a convicted felon or a known drug dealer, courts can restrict that parent's visitation to require that their time with the children occur outside the presence of the boyfriend/girlfriend/paramour.

In order for the court to impose such restrictions, the degree of questionable behavior or danger to which the children are exposed must be relatively severe. And if in the future the danger is no longer present or is otherwise no longer an issue, it is likely that the restrictions can be lifted.

In sum, there is "unfit" in the objective sense where the authorities deem a parent's behavior so abusive or neglectful as to warrant removal of the child from the home. Then there is "unfit" in the eyes of the other parent. That requires a more subjective analysis and may result in certain restrictions being placed on visitation depending on the severity of the behavior.

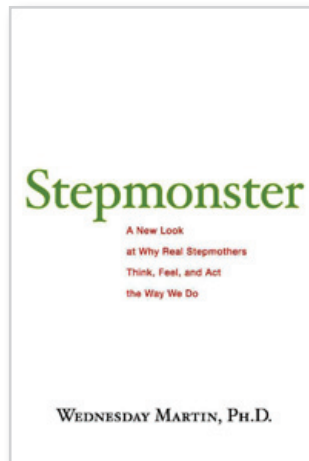
As always, I would recommend keeping careful logs/journals/records of whatever you deem to be inappropriate and/or dangerous behavior by the other parent and then consult with an attorney in your jurisdiction to discuss whether the conduct warrants court intervention.

Most often, it is the ex-spouse who will bring the "bad behavior" to the court's attention. Sadly, however, unless it can be shown that the child's best interests are being compromised, the court will not likely intervene.





What Kind of **STEPMOTHER** Are You?



EXCERPTED AND ADAPTED
FROM *STEPMONSTER*,

by WEDNESDAY MARTIN, Ph.D.

There is not a single way to be a stepmother. Nor, it turns out, is there a “right” one. Some women embrace the role, throwing their entire being into forging a relationship with their husband’s kids; other women, like Laynie, a woman I interviewed for my book *Stepmonster*, think of stepmothering as a “not-me experience, something I want to get right out of a sense of duty to my husband and his son, but it’s not central to who I am.” And often, a woman’s experience of stepmothering, and of herself as a stepmother, will change over the years. “Things were easy when they were little. But now they’re stormy pre-teens. So I’m

trying to strike a balance between being kind of a mommy and a reliable friend,” Ella, another woman I interviewed, told me.

The simple fact that there are many ways to be a stepmother may seem pretty extraordinary to those of us who have had it drummed into our heads for years that there is a “best” way to be a stepmother.

One Size Does Not Fit All

Soon after I married, I told a friend over the phone that my “daughter” was with us for the weekend, feeling that my use of the term “stepdaughter” might strike her as unfriendly. My friend was completely flummoxed—had I suddenly had a child?—and my



stepdaughter and I both cringed the moment I said it. She, I imagine, at my presumption, and I at my own hypocrisy. That model of stepmothering—the one where the line between mother and stepmother merged—was not for us. My younger stepdaughter, on the other hand, sometimes refers to me and her father as “my parents”; other times we are “my dad and my stepmom” or just “Dad and Wednesday.” Different kids, different days, different stages, different roles; nothing about being a stepmother, it seems, is written in stone.

One-size-fits all expectations of what’s right only exacerbate the tensions in a stepfamily, fueling feelings of inadequacy and resentment with every perceived “failure” to do things “right” or make the family just like a “real” (first) family. As it turns out, there are actually some half dozen “ways to be” in a marriage to a man with children. Some presage better outcomes. Some are not so much stepmothering styles as reactions to the specifics of our circumstances and experiences. But in general, researchers on the topic seem to have discovered that who we are, who his kids are, and the other players in the remarriage scenario all help determine whether and how we will stepmother.

For this reason, we can’t simply “choose” a stepmothering style from a menu, any more than we can choose our own eye color, or that of his kids. But getting a sense of what kind of stepmother you feel like—anywhere at all along the spectrum that extends from “not a stepmother at all” to “just like another mom”—is a good way to get oriented when we’re feeling lost or overwhelmed. A few studies provide a loose stepmothering map of sorts.

The Orchard/Solberg Study

When psychologists Ann Orchard and Kenneth Solberg asked 265 women how they would characterize their relationship with their stepchildren, 25 percent chose “respectful/polite.” Almost the same number described it as “friendly/caring”; and just slightly fewer women characterized the relationship as “distant.” The answers were not mutually exclusive; many women chose more than one, or even all three descriptions, to sum up how they felt things went between them and his kid/s.

Their answer to the next question, “How would you describe your role?” showed just how creative we can be in the absence of clear guidelines about what being a stepmother means and entails. Thirty-three percent thought of their role as “another parent/mother-like.” Another 31% described their role as “a friend/supportive adult,” while half that number felt their role was “Dad’s wife/support to Dad.” Sadly, 13% thought of their role as “outsider,” while just over ten percent chose the truly alienated-sounding descriptor, “household organizer.”

Like other researchers, Orchard and Solberg found that the “friendship style”—characterized more, it seems, by non-interference and the absence of conflict or getting involved in parenting than by an actual reciprocal friendliness—was the “most functional” and successful model. As Linda told me of her relationship with her husband’s now young-adult daughters, “I wanted an aunt type of role. Supportive, a plus to have in your life, someone you could turn to. Not the disciplinarian.” And crucially, not the mom.



The Erera-Weatherly Study

Another study—of 32 Israeli couples by Erera-Weatherley—found stepmothering styles including the super-good stepmom; the detached stepmom; the uncertain stepmom; and the friendship style.

The super-good stepmoms were reacting to a stereotype. Petrified by the spectre of the wicked stepmother, they bent over backwards to prove themselves kind, were rebuffed nonetheless, and tended to feel unappreciated by husbands, stepchildren and in-laws as well. It is not hard to imagine these women deciding their efforts aren't worth it and withdrawing, angry and defeated, from their "families" and marriages. This was exactly the direction I saw upbeat, sunny Kendra moving in when I interviewed her. She had thrown herself entirely into the task of mothering the two teen stepdaughters she lived with, and after years of rejection, she told me she was ready to throw in the towel. "I don't think anybody realizes how hard I've tried," she told me. "In fact, I don't think they even notice."

Dr. Erera-Weatherley found that the detached stepparents were minimally involved in their stepchildren's lives; this style tended to be something of a default mode, one the stepparents adopted after feeling rebuffed and rejected in their friendly or parental overtures toward a spouse's child. "I'm just done with this," several long-term stepmothers told me during our interviews, "done with trying and not getting any warmth back. So I'm not putting myself out so much anymore."

Meanwhile, stepparents with the "uncertain" style expressed doubt, uncertainly, and distress. They felt confused and many of them, like me, had no experience

of parenting before becoming a stepparent. One woman said, "I feel like I'm alone. I don't know exactly what I am supposed to do. Should I react [to my stepchild doing something provocative]? Should I not react?" These stepparents felt very apprehensive about criticizing, confronting and quarreling with the stepchildren, and it is not hard to see how their stepkids would eventually become very empowered and, as stepfamily expert Dr. James Bray puts it, "end up calling the shots on the emotional trajectory of stepfamily life."

The last style, the "friendship style," was pointedly "nonparental," yet characterized by conveying a sense of caring and being available. With the adoption of this style, Erera-Weatherley noted, stepparents seemed to accept their stepchildren without necessarily expecting themselves to love them or be loved in return: "We developed friendly contact. He hugs me...[but] there is no real love between us. I don't act like a natural mother, but I take care of [my stepchild]. I care about him, and I try to help my husband in his relationship with his son."

The Circumstances and the Family Matter, Too

Researchers have found that, while the "friendship style" seemed to be the most rewarding and successful of the styles, a stepparent cannot simply "choose" it in an effort to improve stepfamily relations. For while the stepparent's own attitudes about parenting and stepparenting played a role in determining which style he or she would adopt, the expectations and behaviors of the stepchild, the nonresidential parent, and the residential parent were all just as important in determining how things would go and which of



the roles outlined above the step-parent would have to play.

For example, the mother of Dana's stepdaughter, Tania, moved across the country when the girl was nine, tacitly ceding all mothering duties to Dana. Not long after, Tania's father and Dana broke up. Not surprisingly, Dana describes herself as Tania's "mommy," a sentiment Tania reciprocates. More typically, Gabby found herself cast into the role of villain by her husband's ex-wife, who communicated both implicitly and explicitly to her children that to befriend Gabby would be a betrayal. Gabby's good intentions were hobbled by other circumstances over which she had no control.

Stepmothering does not happen in a vacuum but rather within a forcefield of other relationships. A stepmother's own preferences and efforts are only one piece of a larger puzzle of determining factors, probably the least important of all. Knowing this, perhaps we will begin to give ourselves permission to feel less responsible for outcomes with his children.

Many Ways to Succeed

In the end, we can make decisions about our stepmothering style based on what feels right given the ever-shifting situation on the ground, and what we know from the research tends to work best. Hard as it may be to resist overstepping

or overreaching, and strong as the desire may be to be a "replacement mom," especially when it is what her husband and his kids seem to want, the woman with stepkids will do well to know that such a situation is the rarest, and should not be considered the gold standard or marker of success.

There are as many ways to succeed in a marriage to a man with kids as there are remarriages or repartnerships with children. ■

Citations/ Further Reading

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The Blessing of Stepmom



by HEATHER HETCHLER

On May 13, mothers will be celebrated across the U.S. Regardless of whether the words biological, foster, adoptive or step comes before the word mom, we should all be recognized for the roles we play in the lives of the children in our care. Sadly, this day can be difficult for many stepmoms who feel overlooked.

The poem on the following page was written to celebrate the blessing that a stepmom is to her family and the world around her. May we all take a moment this month to celebrate ourselves and the mothers in our lives. As girlfriends, we have the power to support, encourage and lift each other up. Happy Mother's Day, and never forget the blessing that you are!



HEATHER HETCHLER helps stepmoms thrive in their role as the heart of their blended family. She is the Founder of www.CafeSmom.com where she brings positive resources, inspiration and support to stepmothers. CafeSmom offers the only e-shop with products designed exclusively for the stepmom. As a stepmom coach, her passion is to help stepmothers define their own positive path to success. Heather is the host of Stepmom Connection on www.MomTV.com. She resides in Cleveland with her husband and four children and two stepchildren.

A Stepmom is a Blessing

By Heather Hetchler

*A tender heart,
A gentle spirit,
Unselfish acts of kindness.
These are just some words that describe a stepmom.*

*She joins a family by choice not chance,
She embraces another woman's children,
pledging to love and nurture them.
She seeks not to replace their mother,
but be a positive role model in their lives.*

*She celebrates her stepchildren's
successes and
her heart aches when they are hurting.
She is her partner's biggest cheerleader,
supporting him through the easy and
the difficult times.*

*She is the heart of her home,
even when her heart is breaking.
She stands strong during the storms of life,
holding onto the truths she knows,
even when lies are raining down on her.*

*She does much for her family,
many times without a thank you or
acknowledgment.
She is often overlooked for the love and care
she gives
and the positive impact that she makes.
She presses through those challenging times,
committed to doing what is right.*

*She is stronger than she thinks,
wiser than she knows,
and more precious than she often realizes.*

*She is sustained on a diet of faith and hope.
She makes peace with her past,
embraces her present and plans for her future.*

*She models a healthy relationship with
her partner for the children,
a gift more precious than gold and silver.
She breathes light, love and peace into her home,
even when dark forces from the outside fight to get in.*



*She loves with abandon.
She lives passionately and purposefully.
Some call her stepmom, bonus mom, smom,
regardless of the title the world gives her.*

*She is love.
She is light.
She is precious.
She is truth.
She is beauty.
She is compassion.
She is selfless.
She is self-control.
She is committed to her partner and her family.
She is a blessing!*

Let's Talk About **SEX**...and Stepcouples!



by MARY T. KELLY, M.A.

Sex in the stepfamily system? Sex? “What is *that*?,” many of you might be asking. Or, some of you may be saying, “Sex? Well, fuhget about that! Who has the time, opportunity or desire?” As every seasoned stepcouple knows, their relationship often gets overshadowed by the needs and demands of all the kids, exes,

finances and work. Time becomes a precious commodity, and for some mysterious reason, sex is one of the first things to go.

For so many stepcouples (maybe you are one of these couples), way too much time is spent dealing with conflict around the children and relationships with your ex-spouses. Talk about a libido killer.

Couples in remarriage don't have the luxury of hoping and waiting for the day they can truly focus on one another. They have to **IMPLANT THE PRIORITY OF THEIR RELATIONSHIP INTO THE CORE OF THEIR LIVES** from the moment they say, "I do."

As stepcouples are legitimately tussling over the realities of stepfamily life, the bloom falls quickly off the rose of love (and sex) that brought the two of you together in the first place.

Survival mode kicks in, and couples find themselves in a marital rut as soon as the honeymoon ends and the realities of the complicated lives of stepfamilies begin.

The first thing to go is date night, and, to be honest, not maintaining your date night is a potential deathblow to your marriage and sex life.

Date night is one of the most common recommendations any marriage and family therapist makes. It may sound like a cliché, but it's not.

Given that 70 percent of second marriages in which both partners bring kids from

previous relationships into the home end in divorce, according to E. Mavis Hetherington's 30-year Virginia Longitudinal Study, it is critical that couples give their marriage top billing. As an astute client of mine once said, "We need to make our children our top responsibility, but we need to make our marriage our top priority."

Couples in remarriage don't have the luxury of hoping and waiting for the day they can truly focus on one another. They have to implant the priority of their relationship into the core of their lives from the moment they say, "I do."

As gimmicky as it may sound, couples in remarriages must build one-on-one time into their routines to reconnect after a busy day. They need to make date night a weekly priority. If need be, sex needs to be scheduled



into the day. An essential rule for date night or before having sex: no talk of children, ex-spouses, finances or any other realities that could take away that loving feeling.

Now let's talk about sex. If the priority isn't on the marriage, date night or finding

time to be alone together, then sex usually falls along the wayside, too. Sex, especially for men, can be the great connector. Sex can make you feel loved and valued. Sex can make you feel good. Sex can make all the other craziness, the disturbances and the distractions go away. Remember how great sex was when you first got together? Remember the passion, the love and how you couldn't get enough of one another? You know how when you do have sex, you say to one another, "Why don't we do this more often?"

Find the time to have sex, whether it's an evening alone for passion or lovemaking or those "quickie" moments at odd times during the day that remind you, for at least those small windows, no one else exists in the world but the two of you.

Do you have five minutes? Do you have some oil? Do you have a hand, a mouth, a body? Do you have a car? Is there a nearby Lovers Lane? Do you have some toys? Do you have an imagination? Get creative.

Don't let the kids and the exes and the dogs and the cats have the power to stop your passion and your love life. Remember, the goal is to get the damn kids out of the house and onto their own lives. The goal is that once the kids are gone there will still be a healthy, vibrant relationship between you and your partner and plenty of time to enjoy one another.

So, light the candles, turn on the music, slip into something more comfortable (preferably nothing), and, as the Nike ad so wisely encourages, "Just do it." ■

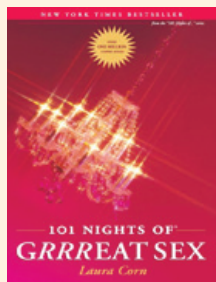
NEXT MONTH: How to Survive the Dog Days of Summer



MARY T. KELLY, M.A., specializes in working with stepmoms, stepcouples and stepfamilies. She has a psychotherapy practice in Boulder, Colo., and has been practicing for 18 years. She offers phone, Skype and Facetime coaching for stepmoms and stepcouples, as well as "intensive" one- to two-day coaching/therapy sessions. She can be reached at: marriedwithbaggage@mac.com.

An essential rule for date night or before having sex: **NO TALK OF CHILDREN, EX-SPOUSES, FINANCES OR ANY OTHER REALITIES** that could take away that loving feeling.

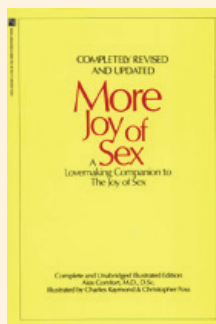
Additional Resources



► Intimate accessories and toys: www.goodvibes.com

► *The Mammoth Book of Best New Erotica*, edited by Maxim Jakubowski

► *101 Nights of Grrreat Sex: Secret Sealed Seductions for Fun-Loving Couples*, by Laura Corn



► *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Amazing Sex*, edited by Sari Locker

► *Erotic Massage: The Tantic Touch of Love*, by Kenneth Ray Stubbs, Ph.D. with Louise-Andree Saulnier



► *More Joy of Sex: A Love-making Companion to The Joy of Sex*, by Alex Comfort, M.D., D.Sc.

► *Guide to Getting It On!*, by Paul Joannides



Flexibility in Stepfamily Life is the Key to Success

by SUSAN WIDSOM, M.A.

Whether you're new to stepcoupling and step-parenting or have been working at it for years, you're likely to know that it's nothing if not a rollercoaster ride.

Circumstances and relationships can change quickly in stepfamilies, and you may often feel like you have little or no control. To succeed as a stepcouple and a family, you and your partner must learn how and when to be flexible. Like all aspects of parenting, this takes practice and the willingness to learn from your mistakes.

It's common to feel blindsided by changes you hadn't anticipated. In the beginning, you might feel like you really know your new stepchildren. You might think that you and your stepkids understand each other. You're touched by how much they love their dad. You've met his ex and she seems OK.

Change of any kind is difficult for most people. Because it's A FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENT WITHIN STEPFAMILIES, the key to managing it is learning to be flexible.



What you didn't—and couldn't—know is how your new family would change and evolve. A few of the possible changes in circumstances include:

- ▶ You and your husband thought everything was settled with his ex, and suddenly she's suing for more alimony.
- ▶ The kids' mom has decided to move to another state with her new boyfriend.
- ▶ The divorce decree is revised, and you and your partner now have sole custody of the children.
- ▶ You find yourself struggling to co-parent children who have started grieving, or who have become angry and frustrated.
- ▶ Someone in your family experiences a job loss, illness or life-changing event.

Even when the external circumstances remain the same, relationships can change. Here are a few common examples:

- ▶ Your once-sweet little stepdaughter grows into a sullen teenager and declares that you're her nemesis.
- ▶ Your stepson is rebelling and won't talk to you or your husband anymore. He only grunts when you ask him questions. He gets caught drinking in the park with his friends, and the school is calling to report bad news way too often. (Kids in stepfamilies often act out their anger, grief and confusion by misbehaving. They may experiment with alcohol and drugs, get bad grades, wreck the family car, get pregnant, lie, cheat, steal, get their hearts broken, make bad choices, cop bad attitudes and even occasionally run away. These things happen in all families, but as a stepparent, you may feel especially powerless.)
- ▶ A once collaborative ex may become cold, difficult or uncommunicative.
- ▶ You have a baby, and suddenly the dynamics within your stepfamily change. Your previously engaged stepchildren want little to do with the family and their new sibling. You begin to feel distant with your stepkids and protective of your newborn.

Regardless of whether the changes in your stepfamily are relationship-based or circumstantial, you must face them, deal with them and work through them as a stepcouple. When you address and manage change together as a team, you increase the probability that your stepfamily will succeed.

Change of any kind is difficult for most people. Because it's a fundamental element within stepfamilies, the key to managing it is learning to be flexible.

Be mentally prepared for change.

Appreciate the times when everything in your world feels stable, but know that it probably won't last. Remember, the

When being flexible isn't enough to change your outlook, IT'S IMPORTANT TO BE OPEN TO HELP AND RESOURCES that can assist you in managing major life changes.



only constant in life is change. This applies to everyone, not just stepfamilies. People who are better able to accept change as a normal part of life tend to be happier—and healthier.

Be open-minded, fair and creative.

There are lots of teachable moments when it comes to step-parenting. Learning to be flexible is something both adults—and kids—will benefit from. Rather than always telling kids what to do, be open-minded and listen to their ideas. Provide them with opportunities to make certain decisions and choices. This doesn't mean letting them off the hook. Hold them accountable for their actions, but look for opportunities that allow them to develop their own decision making and change-management skills.

Be prepared to adjust “the plan.”

It's easy to focus on “better days ahead” when daily step-family life feels tough. Stepmoms often think it will be easier once the kids are grown and go off to college or move out of the house. Be careful not to put too much stock in idealistic plans for the future. Reality sometimes gets in the way of the plans we create in our heads, and kids don't always move out the day after graduation! You may wonder if you'll ever have the blissful, stress-free life you imagined when you married the love of your life! Be patient, give it time and remember to keep your expectations in check because plans can always change.

Be open to counseling and other helpful resources.

Some changes are too big to handle on our own. Sometimes too many changes happen all at the same time. When being flexible isn't enough to change your outlook, it's important to be open to help and resources that can assist you in managing major life changes.

For more help on becoming a successful stepcouple, visit www.stepcoupling.com and learn about the 4C's:

- ▶ Connection
- ▶ Communication
- ▶ Co-parenting
- ▶ Clarity



SUSAN WISDOM, M.A., is the author of *Stepcoupling: Creating and Sustaining a Strong Marriage in Today's Blended Family*. Susan and her husband have raised 5 children in their successful stepfamily since 1976. She has a counseling practice helping stepcouples understand and deal with the issues common in stepfamilies. She believes that the stepcouple is the foundation and glue in the step-

family. Visit her website at www.stepcoupling.com

Shared Values



Simple Steps to Help You Find Common Ground to Bring Your Family Closer

BY EMILY BOUCHARD

Most stepfamilies are not blended at all, but are more like two separate family units having to navigate life together, usually despite your desire and intention as a couple. This disparity often leads to power struggles and conflict. Understanding how to incorporate your values into your family's experience gives you, as a couple, an effective approach to bring family members together in a unifying way.

There are some simple, key steps

to take that will make all the difference in how you go about introducing the concept of exploring values to your family. This article will focus on communication and a values clarification game—two important variables in creating a strong foundation for your stepfamily.

Start with Open Communication

One thing that will kill the best of intentions and have them fall apart

is to come across like you have an agenda or that there's a right (and, therefore, a wrong) way to go about interacting as a family. In order to begin in an effective way, consider starting with a mood of curiosity and creativity. The more open you are to discovering what matters most to *all* of the children in your life, the more you will begin to know each other and learn where there might be overlaps.

I recently observed a conversation between a well-meaning stepmother and her adult stepdaughter. I became concerned when I saw that each time the stepdaughter took a risk and revealed something about herself that really mattered to her, the stepmother, coming from her heart, began sharing about herself and how she had a similar experience and the attention suddenly turned to her and off of the stepdaughter. I watched the young woman get quiet and her body language became more guarded and she was less engaged or willing to share more. The conversation could have remained more open and connected had the stepmother responded with interest, curiosity, and a desire to know more, with questions like: "Could you tell me more about when you first started to be aware of this issue and why it matters to you?" Or, "I'd like to know more about what that means to you and how you've tried to make a difference."

Once the stepdaughter had a chance to more fully be heard and understood by her stepmother, she was much more open and able to listen to her stepmother and what mattered to her, too. It's a subtle but important distinction to be aware of. Start out by being interested and allow your stepchildren to reach out and ask about you as a way to invite you forward. And be OK if they don't do so right away.

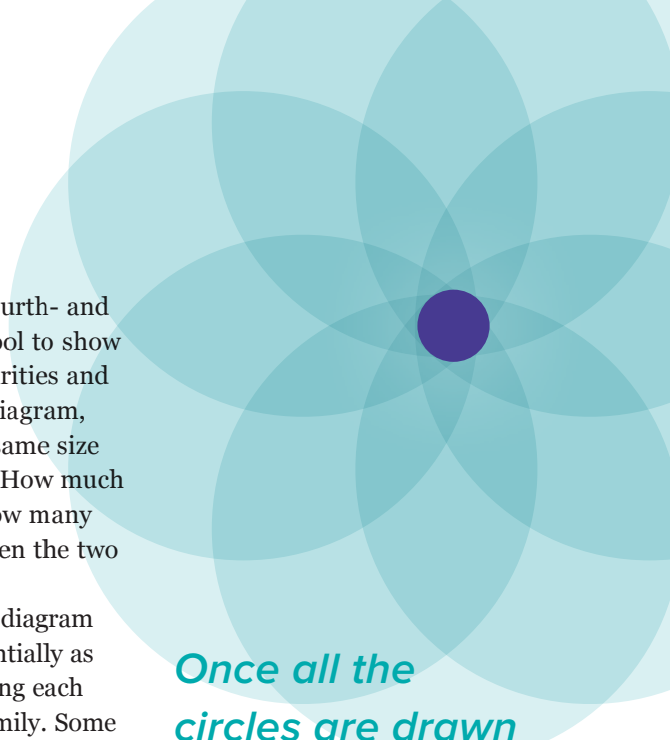
Find Shared Values

Years ago, when I taught fourth- and fifth-graders, my favorite tool to show when teaching about similarities and differences was the Venn Diagram, which is two circles of the same size that overlap in the middle. How much they overlap depends on how many similarities there are between the two separate circles.

In blended families, that diagram becomes multiplied exponentially as you draw a circle representing each member of your blended family. Some people also include the biological parents of their children as well. Once all the circles are drawn overlapping, consider the section in the middle where they all connect. That's the sweet spot of your blended family. Finding out what is contained in that spot can be a fun and interactive process.

You can craft the conversation as a game that is geared toward the ages of all the children. There are values cards you can purchase with words on them at <http://2164.net/store/tool/motivational-values-cards>; there are cards with phrases on them that are great conversation starters available at www.personallegacyadvisors.com/store/lifelegacy-cards-sets-of-10; and there are all sorts of creative ways you can get your family involved right from the start.

I encourage families to take a pile of index cards and to pass out five or six to each family member. If some are too young to write, they can still draw! Then, have each person write a value they hold on a card, with a question or sentence starter on the back that engages a conversation about that particular value. They do this for each index card they have. You can have markers, colored pencils, crayons, nice pens and even stickers to encourage creativity and engagement.



Once all the circles are drawn overlapping, consider the section in the middle where they all connect.

THAT'S THE SWEET SPOT OF YOUR BLENDED FAMILY.

Finding out what is contained in that spot can be a fun and interactive process.

Some great examples I've seen include:

VALUE: HONESTY

Share a time when you could have easily lied but chose to tell the truth because it was the right thing to do.

VALUE: FAMILY

What's your favorite thing to do as a family?

VALUE: GENEROSITY

Tell about a time when you gave something of yours to someone else and how you felt about it afterward.

VALUE: CLEANLINESS

How do you like the house to look and feel?

After the cards are created, take some time as a family to create your own values deck by combining them and shuffling them together. Then, have each person pick a card—either from the top or anywhere in the deck—and then go around and take turns reading a value and the question/starter. Give everyone ample opportunity to share and respond in their own ways. The key to having this be a successful experience is to listen with interest and without judgment about whether something is true, whether you like it or not, or whether you believe the way they do. Allow family members to “pass” if they don't want to respond and appreciate that they are there, listening and taking it all in, even if they appear not to be.

As you listen to each person, get a sense for where you are similar and where you are different. You can capture these in your own diagram if you want. Some families create a flower with many petals, with each petal representing a family member and the center being what everyone shares together. Or, you could just capture them all in a list.

As you go through the cards, you may discover that the same value keeps coming up. If so, put a star next

to it. And you may also notice that one person has a value that no one else has expressed. When this happens, you would be wise to respect the difference and use this as a great place to learn more about that person and what matters to him or her.

As you determine which values are the ones you can all agree on, capture them in a picture that you all make together. This will be your family's code of honor or code of arms. It's a great thing to have posted in the house. As you go about making decisions together as a family, or if conflicts arise, or if there's something that has you walking on eggshells, you can refer back to your family's code. You can check in about how you are all doing in terms of living from your values with each other as a family.

Establishing your uniting values together will provide you with a firm foundation and will clarify all aspects of your life as a family—relationships, communication, financial and estate planning, charitable and philanthropic giving, time allotted to work, kids, etc. You get the idea. By initiating interactions from your shared values, your family has a great place to connect and discuss its various perspectives with more of a sense of openness and receptivity to each others' approaches. Taking the time to work together immediately upon becoming a family will yield rewards for you throughout your years together. Investing up front can be exhausting at first but will actually save you time and headache down the road. Put the time in and have fun with it. You won't regret it. ■



EMILY BOUCHARD founded www.blended-families.com to provide tools to dramatically improve relationships in blended families. A leading expert in the field, Emily has been featured on numerous TV and Radio shows including The Today Show and NPR, and has been quoted in print around the world, in publications such as *Newsweek* and *The New York Times*. She is also a managing partner of www.wealthlegacygroup.net. PHOTO BY MELISSA MERMIN, WWW.MELISSAMERMIN.COM.

By initiating interactions from your shared values, YOUR FAMILY HAS A GREAT PLACE TO CONNECT and discuss its various perspectives with more of a sense of openness and receptivity to each others' approaches.

Life on the Tipping Point

Dancing for Mom

by MS. TAKEN

I'm cleaning the house and listening to my 3-year-old son and his buddy, Miles, play. They're kneeling in front of a box of train trains, deciding which pieces to use next. My son interrupts the train track conversation by placing his hand on Miles' back, putting on his most serious face and saying, "You know what? I yove four people in this whole world: You, Yuke and Yucas, and Wyatt." He's picked all friends, no one from his family. Darn, that's too stink'n

cute. I smile, put on my joking voice and say, "Hey, what about your old mom?!"

He shoots me an exasperated look and says, "Well, of course. And my brudder, too."

His buddy yells, "Nonsense!" and they go back to debating the finer points of the Island of Sodor.

I love that my son feels no

need to include me in his list of people he loves. That might be a strange thing for a mom to say, but I've spent six years now watching my stepkids struggle to ingratiate themselves with their mother, an act which rarely fails to sicken me.

Never is a strong word, but I would say that my stepkids have never failed to list their mother first when talking about people they love. I've even heard them assert that they only love their mother and her family. I'm sure they do love their mother's family, but the claim that they love only them is too silly to be credible.

They love their dad's family, too. Very much. And it's a very comfortable love that doesn't require obsessive notes or acrobatic gestures on my stepkids' part.

It's a spring day about three years ago. I've picked my stepson up from school, received my customary hug and reminded him it's the day of his sister's ballet class. The plan is to walk to the dance studio, where my stepson and I will hangout while my stepdaughter dances.

My stepdaughter walks out of class, skips the pleasantries and insists we stop by her mom's house to pick up her ballet notebook, headband and hair tie that she forgot there that morning. Her ballet teacher does get annoyed if a girl is missing these items, and my stepkids' mom only lives a block out of our way. All the same, I'm feeling



like the hired help but without the pay. “OK, OK, we can stop by your mom’s and get your things. I think your mom was headed out of town today, though. Can you still get in?”

“Yup,” both kids say, “Mommy always leaves the door unlocked, and besides even if she did lock it, we can get in through the cat door.”

I assumed that the stop at mom’s house would be quick. After all, it was only one block out of the way and their mom wasn’t going to be there, so there wouldn’t be any drawn out, teary goodbyes or conversations to make us late.

We walked to their mom’s house, where I stationed myself on the sidewalk and told my stepdaughter to hurry. Sure enough, the front door was unlocked.

Even though his mom’s car is gone, I can see my stepson is concerned his mom might really be home and only his sister will get to see her. He asks if he can go. I say sure and reminded him to hurry.

I wait.

My stepdaughter emerges first with her ballet journal, headband and hair tie. Perfect, I think. We’re done and we can get going. She asks me to hold the journal while she puts on her headband and then has me put her ponytail in while she holds the journal.

My stepson comes through the front door. “Mom’s not home,” he says as he hops down the steps.

“Yeah, I thought she was out of town. Are we ready?”

“I have my hair stuff, my journal and I left mommy a note,” my stepdaughter says.

“What?” my stepson yells at his sister, “What’d it say? No you didn’t!”

“Yes, I did. It says, “Dear

Each one bent on outdoing the other [and]
**NEEDING TO BE THE ONE MOMMY RECOGNIZES
AS HER FAVORITE OF THE DAY,** when she returns.

mommy, I got my ballet stuff. I lo-ove you.”

“No you didn’t! Where’d you leave it?!”

“In the kitchen.”

My stepson is up the stairs and through the door before I’ve figured out what’s happening. My stepdaughter takes off after him screaming, “You leave my note alone! Don’t you touch that!”

I wait.

I have no idea what to do. I’m feeling anxious. I imagine that this is how I would feel if I lost my stepkids in the airport. I run through all of the anger that I would incite by entering my husband’s ex-wife’s house. Nope. Not going in there. Not unless I hear pleas for help.

Oh, hell, they’re in the kitchen. I imagine everything they could be getting into. They must know where the cookies are kept. I know how big of a mess they’re capable of making. Anything they take out of a cupboard will stay out and it’s likely to look like it exploded. I can just about hear the angry phone call from my husband’s ex where she accuses me of encouraging the children to trash her home.

Then there are all of the dangerous things in the kitchen. ... My adrenaline is pumping. I’ve got to stop imagining horrible fights and screaming, blood and court orders. I feel like screaming at the sky, “I just wanted to pick up the ballet stuff!” Instead, I holler in the direction of the house, “Hey guys,

we’re going to be late.”

They run through the door and are headed down the stairs when my stepdaughter spots a flower blooming in the front yard. She runs to it, grabs it, yells tauntingly at her brother, “I’m going to give this to mommy!”

My stepson howls in furry. He runs for a flower, too.

“Your mom is going to be gone for a week. The flowers won’t even look good when she gets back.” It’s a reasonable argument, but my stepkids don’t seem to be operating within the realm of reason. They’re bundles of emotional distress. Each one bent on outdoing the other. Each one needing to be the one mommy recognizes as her favorite of the day, when she returns. Yes, she really has picked favorites for the day. I have no idea who’s out-bouqueting the other. The kids are a flurry of action, and I can’t keep track. When the yard is stripped of flowers, they start collecting shiny rocks.

The next time my stepdaughter emerges from the house, I say, “Your class just started. You’re late.” Finally, my pleas register. She disappears into the house and drags her brother out. They close the door.

“Shouldn’t we lock it?” I ask.

“No, mommy always leaves it open.”

I imagine being blamed for the robbery since the kids closed the door last while in my care. “Are you sure?”

Life on the Tipping Point

“Yeah,” my stepdaughter says, “Mommy might not even have a key and besides, I’m late for ballet!”

I sigh and think, “Tell me something I don’t know.”

We have the ballet studio in sight when my stepdaughter stops short. Her brother and I turn and look questioningly at her. “I left my ballet journal at mommy’s house! We have to go back!”

The most certain and assertive “No” that has ever crossed my lips escapes. My stepkids hear that there isn’t a snowball’s chance on a hot day that I’ll be standing on the sidewalk in front of their mom’s pleading with them ever again. My stepdaughter must read through my pupils and tone how uncomfortable and frustrating the last half hour has been for me because she gives the sidewalk one of her rare sad and embarrassed looks.

“You can use a piece of paper from my notebook and we can copy it into your journal later.” She knows that my notebook is one of my few things that no one is allowed to touch. It’s where I keep notes for articles and books and ideas for crazy house projects that make my husband groan. In short, it is sacred.

“From your notebook?” she squeaks.

I nod, and she looks excited and relieved.

That scene is one of many from my stepkids’ lives which shows the intense energy they’ll expend in the hopes of securing their mother’s love. Earning her love is something they’ll whip themselves into a frenzy over. Something that consumes their attention.

As adults, we are aware how short every day is. There are only so

My stepdaughter must read through my pupils and tone **HOW UNCOMFORTABLE AND FRUSTRATING THE LAST HALF HOUR HAS BEEN** for me because she gives the sidewalk one of her rare sad and embarrassed looks.

many hours to get things done.

If you are a child, there are only so many hours in each day to learn and grow. Both of my stepkids were labeled developmentally delayed. They were behind their peers because they were devoting so much energy tending to their mother and their relationship with her. As I said, it makes me feel sick.

I sure love getting the happened-upon flower, the snuggles, hugs and “I yove you’s from my son, but it’s my job to care for him. To make sure that he is so comfortable with the idea that I love him that he takes that relationship for granted. We’re on the, “Well, of course,” section of the “People I Love” list.

Likewise, my husband and his family have always been on my stepkids’ lists of people with whom the loving relationship is secure. So secure that they can neglect or abuse the people on it a bit by saying they only love their mom and their mom’s family. They know there’s no danger losing the love of their dad’s family.

I’m sure that Mother’s Day and

the weeks before will leave more than a few stepmoms feeling a little upset and confused by the attention their ex-wife-in-law is receiving on her special day. Chances are, the prep work and concern over Father’s Day seems small. (And let’s not even think about Stepmother’s Day; that’s too big of a topic.) Even if you don’t have a mentally ill ex-wife-in-law, it’s likely your stepkids view their mom as the emotionally weak parent, whose feelings they need to take care of.

I’m not excited to help my stepkids take care of their mom. It’s something I wish they wouldn’t do, but I can’t change the way they feel. What I can do is to help them prepare for this one day each year. I say, if you can do the kind thing of relieving your stepkids of some of their anxiety over what to get or make their mom on Mother’s Day by taking them to get supplies, do it. They’ll appreciate it! That kind of help is the sort of thing a good old fashioned taken-for-granted parent would do. At least that’s what I think. Then again, I could be Ms. Taken. ■



MS. TAKEN is a stepmom, mom, wife and writer. She has an overly fuzzy and utterly useless watchdog and small stack of restraining orders against the hubby’s ex. Ms. Taken devotes herself to increasing the space between—and decreasing the fury of—total breakdowns of order and decorum in her home. Her attempts can be further scrutinized at www.amothermstaken.blogspot.com.

The Inside Scoop

What's Normal?

WARNING: Comments and opinions from people with no stepfamily experience should be taken with a grain of salt!

by LAURA PETHERBRIDGE

As a professional speaker I spend a lot of time on the road. Traveling isn't as fun or glamorous as people think it is. However, one benefit is that I encounter a lot of different people.

Recently, I overheard two women discussing someone they know who is part of a stepfamily.

"The kids refuse to introduce Andy's sons as their brothers," Lady No. 1 stated. "They

insist on referring to them as stepbrothers."

"That's ridiculous," Lady No. 2 protested. "Andy and Jamie have been married for over five years. I could understand if the kids were adults when the remarriage took place. But they were young and grew up in the same house. Jamie's kids should be adjusted to all of this by now. And she should insist that they call Andy's kids their brothers."

"I know, but they won't. They absolutely



refuse,” Lady No. 1 replied.

“Well, that’s ridiculous. They are just being little brats.” Lady No. 2 huffed.

You need to understand, that it took every ounce of self-control that I possess to keep my mouth shut and not interject an opinion into their conversation. (I think a little applause is due me.)

What I wanted to do was to turn around and say, “I know if you aren’t involved with a stepfamily it seems odd that the kids would resist bonding. But it’s perfectly normal for children in a stepfamily to refuse to accept stepbrothers and stepsisters as their own siblings.”

I’ve learned the hard way to keep my mouth shut about stepfamily living, especially around people like these two women who think they already know everything. They are a classic example of people who don’t understand the complexities associated with stepfamilies. I’m often shocked at how unwilling some people are, and how angry they get, when I try to share a stepfamily perspective that contradicts their opinion.

This overheard conversation caused me to ponder, why do people think that after a death or divorce of a parent a child is going to automatically embrace “Andy’s children?” Why don’t they understand that kids in a stepfamily often view the “stepparent’s children” as intruders and interlopers—not brothers and sisters?

And why are these women blaming the children for the fear, anger, resentment and/or sorrow (the root causes of their reaction) in this stepsibling rejection?

One can only assume it is ignorance.

A lack of knowledge about things such as: why stepfamilies are so complicated, how children grieve, the length of time it takes for stepfamilies to bond, the intense loyalty a child feels toward a parent and the child’s transition from having a “family tree” to a “family forest,” are a few examples of unique issues people don’t understand.

And yet they make comments and form opinions about the situation as if they were experts. Baffling.

They are a classic example of **PEOPLE WHO DON’T UNDERSTAND** the complexities associated with stepfamilies.

If these women had asked for my opinion, (To be fair, they didn’t know they were sitting next to The Smart Stepmom), I would have said, “Let’s take a deeper look into why they refuse to view their stepbrothers as siblings. And why they might not like having stepbrothers.”

There are a plethora of reasons. A few popular ones include: They may view the stepdad as the person who took their mom away. If biological dad is absent, they may resent that Andy’s sons have an active, responsible dad. If biological dad is unstable or controlling, they may fear that accepting Andy’s sons as brothers will make him angry or sad. There is a whole host of possible reasons why they are refusing to accept the boys as brothers.

When kids or adults don’t want to embrace a stepfamily setting, the wise response from the parents, family members and friends should be to take a deeper look at underlying reasons. Finding resources that can help the kids learn why they feel the way they do is a great way to start. Two of my favorites are *DivorceCare for Kids* for children ages kindergarten through fifth-grade and *Life Hurts God Heals* for adolescents and teens. ■



LAURA PETHERBRIDGE is an international author and speaker who serves couples and single adults with topics on stepfamilies, relationships, divorce prevention and divorce recovery. She is the author of *When “I Do” Becomes “I Don’t”—Practical Steps for Healing During Separation and Divorce*, and *The Smart Stepmom*, co-authored with Ron Deal. Her website is www.TheSmartStepmom.com

Fitness Zone

May is Healthy Stepmom Month

by VALERIE WALDRON HEDLUND

As a stepmom, it's almost certain that your emotions will run the gamut around Mother's Day. Everything from, *I want to be acknowledged for what I do,* to *they're just getting me gifts because my husband is forcing them to,* to *why isn't there a day to celebrate the non-mom role I play?* The entire holiday often can create a lot of unnecessary drama. This year, let's find a way around it.

Instead of letting your emotions run the gamut, take control of your emotions by running yourself. (Not away, just a 5k!) A 5k race is perfect because it's short, you can run or walk and there's usually a good cause attached to it.

5k Preparation

Here are the steps you need to get you race ready in no time:

- **GET ONLINE** and find a 5k in your area: 6 to 8 weeks away is good.
- **SIGN UP:** This important step will help keep you motivated.
- **FIND A TRAINING PLAN** that's right for you on www.halhigdon.com.
- **START TRAINING:** There's no better day than today to start!
- **STICK TO THE PLAN:** The gradual increase in mileage is there for a reason. Stick to the plan and resist the urge to do more or skip days (whichever you're prone to do).

More May Challenges

If you're up for a challenge, make the entire month of May about



getting healthy. Along with your 5k, start fueling your body so you can look and feel your best with these three simple changes:

1. EAT PROTEIN AND FAT FOR BREAKFAST

- Dump your cereal and eat something that will keep you satiated all morning.
- Eat plain Greek yogurt, and add your own fresh berries.
- Another great option is two full eggs and one egg white.

2. CUT OUT THE FAKE FOODS

- Nothing non-fat.
- No fake sugars.
- Look at labels: If there are a lot of chemicals in the food, don't buy it! Ex: Ingredients in peanut butter should be peanuts. Maybe some salt. End of story.

3. WRITE DOWN WHAT YOU'RE EATING

- It's truly the one thing that is

consistent with any eating program that works.

► My favorite online program is www.myfitnesspal.com. It's free, and they have an app for your smart phone, too!

Have fun with it, and remember: A healthy stepmom is a happy stepmom, and a happy stepmom is better for everyone! ■



VALERIE WALDRON HEDLUND

married in 2010 and lives in Denver with her husband and his two children. She is the owner of Simple Strength & Fitness, a Kettlebell & Personal Training Studio. Valerie has 10 years experience as a Fitness Trainer, a B.S. in Health & Exercise Science, is a Russian Kettlebell Certified Instructor (RKC), a Certified Strength & Conditioning Specialist (CSCS) and has the Functional Movement Screen (FMS) certification. To find more helpful tips and get video tutorials, visit www.simplestrengthandfitness.com.

Advice from the Experts

Question My fiancé's ex-wife will not acknowledge my existence. She refuses to discuss anything about the kids with me and does not want me to attend my stepson's sporting events. My fiancé has asked her to include me in all communications, but despite repeated requests she will not. She also refuses to communicate with my fiancé by e-mail. She insists on meeting with him privately to discuss kid matters and cites that the custody agreement is between only him and her. Can she really exclude me like this? Once we are married, can she still refuse to communicate with me? Can she insist that I not attend my stepson's events? I am looking for input and suggestions on how best to handle this situation.

JENNA KORF: The quick and dirty answer is yes, she can refuse to communicate with you. First, know that this isn't personal. It's a common phenomenon, and it's really not about you, but who or what you represent to her.

Second, as hurtful as it is, she is your fiancé's ex, not yours. Asking her to copy you on all communications regarding the kids probably put her on the extreme defensive. In her mind, she's thinking that she didn't get to choose you and that her agreement is to co-parent with your fiancé, not you. You haven't gained any trust in her eyes. The fact that you're getting married to her ex doesn't, for her, equate to you being trustworthy or qualified to care for her kids. This can be an extremely painful realization for stepmoms.

As far as communications, I would let your fiancé continue to be the

one communicating with her and responsible for passing any pertinent information on to you. I would back off from trying to have a relationship with her until she seems a bit more open.

As far as you showing up for the kids' events, she can't legally tell you not to be there. As long as it's a public event, you have every right to be there, but be prepared for her to throw a fit. There will be some gray areas, like parent-teacher conferences. Your husband will need to talk to the school administration to see what the school's policy is.

You (or your fiancé) might want to think about letting her know you realize asking her to communicate with you about the kids was crossing the line in her eyes. Let her know you don't want to step on her toes and are willing to take things slowly. Sometimes when you appear to



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THIS CAN BE AN EXTREMELY PAINFUL REALIZATION for stepmoms.

Advice from the Experts

give the other person power they soften a bit. Also be prepared that some moms never warm up to the “new woman.” If that turns out to be the case, your best bet is to stop focusing on that relationship and focus on yourself, your marriage and your family. Best of luck!

MARY T. KELLY: Let’s get the bad news over with. Your husband’s ex is under no obligation ... legal, moral or otherwise, to communicate with you, *especially* as it relates to her children. Yes, once you are married, she can still refuse to communicate with you. Can she insist that you not attend your stepson’s events? Yes, she can.

Now for the good news: Your husband’s ex cannot prevent you from attending your stepson’s events assuming they are held in public places or private places that are not her home.

Now for the really good news: You are being invited into an opportunity that, should

you choose to accept the challenge, will empower and liberate you all at the same time. What the heck am I talking about? I’m talking about the freedom one experiences when they no longer care about what another person thinks about them. Having said that, this is no easy task, but it is the most important task any human being can learn to do, step-mother or not. There are all kinds of myths that surround stepfamily life, and getting along with the mother of your husband’s children is one of them. Some might even advocate a friendship. I, for one, don’t. For most, it’s mushy boundaries.

Women historically don’t do well sharing their men, and there’s something about being in the company of someone who not only was married to your husband but had children with them that can be especially gratifying. Stepmothers practically have to become Buddhists or saints, or a little of both, to adjust to

this. The good news is that it is not necessary. In fact, I don’t encourage stepmoms to attempt this almost impossible feat mainly because it’s not necessary. One has a better chance of being in a healthy marriage and a healthy stepfamily when they do not insist on inserting themselves in places they don’t need to be.

Let’s be honest here. You married your husband *despite* the fact that he has children. Your most important priority is your marriage and yourself. As far as your husband’s child is concerned, your greatest chance of success (and the research and clinical experience bear this out) is to be kind and courteous to him, or an ally if you want—and if he is receptive. There is no research that shows it is beneficial for stepchildren to have their stepparents present at school or sporting events. I know this may be hard to hear, but honestly it has nothing to do with *you* and everything to do with the fallout from divorce and from the natural loyalty binds children have toward their parents. There are many ways you can let your stepson know you care about him, and believe it or not, *not* going to some of these events is one way to show this. Research

shows that children feel more tension when their parents and stepparents are at the same events. This is why it is better to focus on shoulder-to-shoulder activities with your stepchild—one-on-one time—as opposed to larger events.

I think your husband’s ex is in a big-time power struggle with you (this is natural because she is a mother), and the best way to get out of a power struggle is to let go of your end of the rope. Your value and your worth are not dependent on being included in correspondence that is focused on two people and the children they had together (whether they are married or divorced).

I think your best bet would be to focus on your husband giving you the information you need to know as it pertains to you, your schedule and your life. It’s awful to be dependent on the approval or permission of someone who is clearly hostile toward you or someone who feels that you aren’t necessary in their children’s lives.

This is between you and your husband. I would encourage your husband to not to rely on his ex for information about his son. I’d encourage him to ask himself some questions: What door has he opened, has he allowed to be

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Advice from the Experts

opened, that gives his ex so much permission to give her opinion about you? I would encourage your husband to look at his own boundaries and to get his son's schedules from the school rather than from the ex. If not, this may turn into a major source of conflict between the two of you.

I am sorry that you are experiencing this. It sounds like you have a great heart and really good intentions. And it's one of the hardest parts of being a stepmom. There's a lot of rejection that no one knew was part of the job description. This is why I always advocate that when one is married to a man with children, one focuses on the marriage relationship and let the other stuff happen naturally. It takes six to eight years for stepfamilies to even somewhat kind of integrate. The less the struggle, the easier it will be.

LAURA PETHERBRIDGE:

I know numerous stepmoms that are in the same situation. One has been married for over 12 years and she is a stepmom to 3 children. The former spouse has never spoken to her, and they live in the same town.

You ask if the former spouse can exclude you even after you marry. Absolutely. Is that what is best for the kids? No,

but you cannot control the actions or choices of another person.

She can't force you to stay away from the child's events, but if she is making this much of a fuss I would advise that you do it for the sake of the child's peace of mind. It has to be about the child—not the adults. And if being there is going to put stress on your stepson, then love him enough to explain WHY you are not attending and stay away.

The issues relating to her insistence on meeting with her ex in person is a whole different issue. And only your fiancé can stop that from occurring.

Before you marry into this situation you must fully recognize, acknowledge and accept that this is the life *you are choosing*. Not having control over numerous issues, even those within your own home, is life in a stepfamily. The number one thing stepmoms say to me is, "I knew it would be complicated, but I didn't realize it would be this bad."

Most engaged women ask themselves, "Do I love him?" or "Is He the one for me?" But when you are dating a man with children what I highly encourage you to ask yourself instead is: "Is THIS the life and the future I want?" If you can accept this as your

I always advocate that when one is married to a man with children, **ONE FOCUSES ON THE MARRIAGE RELATIONSHIP** and let the other stuff happen naturally.

"new normal," than walk forward. But if you think you are going to change his ex, or insist that she communicate with you, or control the way your fiancé responds to her, I'd suggest you walk away. Because you are headed for frustration, fury, and a flood of tears.

PEGGY NOLAN: Unfortunately, your fiancé's ex-wife can exclude you. She has no legal or moral obligation to include you on any communication. She is not required to have a relationship with you just because you are marrying her ex-husband and will become stepmom to her kids. Would it be nice if she did? Absolutely.

But for now she doesn't want to. Instead of fighting her on this, it may be in better to be like water. Water does not fight the rocks in its way; it finds ways to flow around them. We cannot make someone change anymore than the stream can make the rocks move out of its way.

As for your fiancé's challenge to get his ex to communicate via e-mail, he will be met with resistance. He will have to remain steadfast in the boundaries he's establishing.

Congratulations on your engagement and upcoming wedding! Now's the time to be focused on your big day and your life together! ■

Stepmom Panel



MARY T. KELLY, M.A.: Stepmom/stepcouple coach and therapist,

www.MarriedWithBaggage.com



PEGGY NOLAN, M.A., RYT: Founder of The Stepmom's Toolbox,

www.TheStepmomsToolbox.com



JENNA KORF: is a relationship and Stepfamily Foundation coach,

www.StepmomHelp.com



LAURA PETHERBRIDGE: Author of *The Smart Stepmom*,

www.LauraPetherbridge.com

From the Kitchen



Pictured is our food editor, Elizabeth (left), with her stepdaughter, Vikki (right).

PHOTO BY SHANNA NYE PHOTOGRAPHY

Food for Graduation Fiestas

In honor of the graduation of my beautiful stepdaughter, Vikki, I would like to offer some great recipes for the May fiestas you might be hosting or helping to host. While we will attend the ceremony, my husband and I will be hosting a soiree a few weeks later so that we can really enjoy our time together and not be worried with the awkwardness that can occur in step-land during these times. And this way, her close friends can all come, too. I call that a big win all the way around.

Cheers, Vikki! I love you and can't wait to see all the fabulous things you're going to do next.



www.relishmiami.com

ELIZABETH GUERRA is the owner of Relish in Miami, Florida. She's a stepmom, an accomplished caterer, personal chef and a regular contributor to *StepMom Magazine*.

Mini Sliders

Makes about 56 mini burgers

Ingredients

- ▶ 3 (24 pack) sleeves of Martin's Mini Potato Rolls (with some left over)
- ▶ 3 pounds lean ground beef
- ▶ 1 pound breakfast pork sausage
- ▶ ½ onion, finely minced (or put through the food processor)
- ▶ 3 cloves garlic, minced with onion
- ▶ 2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce
- ▶ 2 tablespoons ketchup
- ▶ ⅓ cup milk (or buttermilk)
- ▶ ½ cup plain bread crumbs
- ▶ 2 eggs, lightly beaten

FOR THE BURGERS

- ▶ 24 slices of cheese, cut in half (optional)
- ▶ Ketchup
- ▶ Mustard
- ▶ Hamburger dill pickle slices

Directions

Combine the beef, pork and remaining ingredients until well mixed. Form meat into golf ball-sized rounds, then flatten to about 1/8-inch thickness. Heat a griddle on medium heat. With an electric griddle or cast iron griddle that fits over two stovetop burners, you can cook about 18 patties at a time. Place patties on sliced buns and garnish as desired. Yum!



Grilled Pork Loin Cuban Sandwiches

These are fantastic, and you can use half the loin for the sandwiches and the other half cubed for skewers. I'm always looking for recipes that let me use one ingredient in more than one way.

Ingredients

- ▶ 3 Packages Martin's Mini Potato Rolls (you can substitute King's Hawaiian's Mini Rolls)
- ▶ 1 whole pork loin, 6 to 7 pounds
- ▶ 2 pounds thinly sliced Virginia ham (not honey style)
- ▶ 36 slices Swiss cheese, cut in half (should yield 72 half slices)
- ▶ Yellow mustard
- ▶ Hamburger dill pickle slices

FOR THE PORK LOIN

- ▶ 1/3 cup kosher salt
- ▶ 1/3 cup ground black pepper
- ▶ 2 tablespoons chili powder
- ▶ 2 cups wood chips, soaked (or use wood pellets for a gas grill)

Directions

Cut pork loin in half if necessary for it to fit in your grill. Rub pork all over with the salt, pepper and chili powder. Light a grill for indirect heat (coals on one side of grill only). Place a drip pan under pork loin. Place pork on grill fat side up and put half the wood chips over the lit coals.

Cook pork loin for about 2½ hours. Check coals after first hour and add more lit coals as necessary.

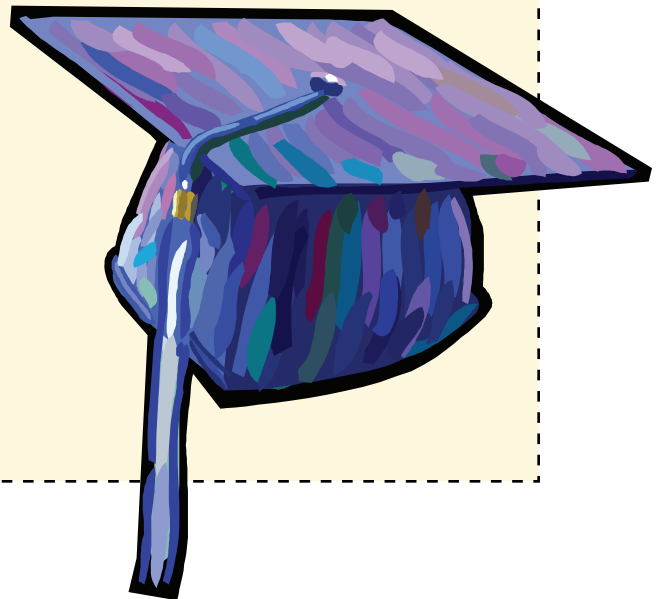
Remove pork from grill and let rest for about one hour. Slice the loin in half if you didn't to fit it on the grill. Take one half and cut it again in half lengthwise. Then slice each quarter into thin slices for the sandwiches.

ASSEMBLING THE SANDWICHES

Slice rolls in half. Put a small drizzle of mustard on one half of the bread, top with 1 to 2 pickles, 1 thin slice of ham, 1 slice of pork and 1 half slice of Swiss cheese.

PORK SKEWERS

Cut the remaining pork loin into 1½ cubes and thread 3 to 4 pieces on 6-inch bamboo skewers. Serve the skewers with your favorite barbecue or other dipping sauce (hoisin, mojo, etc). These also can be used as a taco filling at a make-your-own taco station.



Stylish Stepmom

Need to Boost Your Confidence? Wear Color!

When I think of color, I think of the words “BAM” and “POW!” Can you tell that I have a 7-year-old stepson under my roof? It’s all about super heroes, Transformers and every other character that has magic and power.

But in all seriousness, color is powerful. It creates confidence, it’s eye catching, and can stop traffic! Wouldn’t you want to stop traffic? Well, in a good way!

Color is a great way to break out of the norm. As women, we especially have a tendency to fall into the world of neutrals because it’s safe. It’s slimming and safe! (Yes, I wouldn’t have even had to say the word safe because, as women, we only hear the word slimming.) There is nothing wrong with the neutral world—it’s a basic canvas where we can infuse color.

If you are new to color, this is a perfect time of year to try it because color is everywhere. This spring season has exploded with varying shades from pretty pastels to the neon shades of the ’80s. So, pick your favorite and give it a try! I bought my first pair of colored denim—*turquoise*! Can’t wait to wear them! Spring has sprung with *color*!



HEIDI DUCATO is the Stylish Stepmom. Find her online at www.stylishstepmom.com, and email her at stylishstepmom@yahoo.com.

Twitter: @stylishstepmom;
Facebook: Heidi Schmidt Ducato

A Few Guidelines for Wearing Color:

- ▶ Don’t go head-to-toe in color, or more specific, one color and/or varying shades of that color.
- ▶ You can go all color by color blocking your outfit. Just make sure not to use more than three colors in your color blocking combination.
- ▶ Infuse color into your outfit/wardrobe where you are comfortable. It might be too much to infuse color into a dress. Instead, you could try a blouse, scarf or a fabulous pair of shoes as a way to ease into the color world.
- ▶ Make a statement with color. Don’t be afraid to pick the brightest and boldest shade of your favorite color. Be confident and proud.
- ▶ Avoid being too matchy-matchy with your accessories and your outfit. It’s OK to pull in the neutrals or balance one color with a complementary color.
- ▶ Have fun! Color is a confidence builder. It is guaranteed to put a little extra spring in your step when you look in the mirror and even make that smile a little bit bigger.



Crafts with Your Stepkids

April Crafts

Scented bath fizzies are always a big hit with kids. Did you know how easy it is to make your own? And these adorable bath bombs in an ice cream cone shape make great Mother's Day gifts for grandmas and moms.



WENDY L. DEPPE welcomes comments at stepmomscrapbook@gmail.com and invites you to read her blog at <http://stepinthetrenches.blogspot.com>. Check out her books on Amazon: *The Stepmom Scrap Book* and *Diary of a Stepkid!*

Ice Cream Cone Bath Bombs

Materials

- ▶ Kitchen utensils: mixing bowls and spoons
- ▶ Wax paper
- ▶ Spray bottle
- ▶ Food coloring
- ▶ Baking soda
- ▶ Powdered citric acid (look in the canning supplies aisle)
- ▶ Cornstarch
- ▶ Sugar ice cream cones in the pointy shape (not the flat-bottomed kind)
- ▶ Scented oil of your choice. You can find small bottles of liquid scents such as lavender in the soap-making aisle at your local crafts/hobby store. We used baby powder scent, and it was heavenly!
- ▶ Cone-shaped clear plastic bags (available in the candy making aisle at crafts stores)
- ▶ Twist ties (also available in the candy making aisle)
- ▶ Pretty ribbon in color of your choice
- ▶ Optional: shaped molds such as the bottom half of an Easter egg

Dough Recipe

- ▶ 1 and $\frac{3}{4}$ cups baking soda
- ▶ 1 cup citric acid
- ▶ 2 cups cornstarch



Crafts with Your Stepkids

Instructions

Begin by sifting together the baking soda, citric acid and cornstarch until there are no lumps and it is well mixed. Pour about a half-cup of water in your spray bottle and add 10 to 12 drops of yellow food coloring (using less water will make the color concentration stronger). Pour one cup of your dough mixture in a separate bowl—this will make three cone bottoms.

Pour in a few drops of your scented oil. Then slowly spritz with the colored water, stirring after every spritz. Do this carefully. If you spray too much too fast, your mixture will start fizzing! Continue stirring and spraying slowly, checking the consistency. You're looking for the same consistency that damp sand is when it's just right for making sand castles—firm enough to be molded but not too dry OR too wet. If it's too dry, it will crumble when you try to make a ball in your hand: Keep spraying.

If it's too wet, the dough will begin to foam and expand. You will know what is happening because it will expand hugely! Our first attempt went from a golf ball to the size of a small dinner plate in just a few minutes. You can salvage too-wet dough by quickly adding a couple pinches of dry mixture to it. If for some reason you can't get it shaped the way you want, just set it aside and allow it to dry. It will be a weird shape, but you can let the kids play with the mess ups in the bath!

Once it is just right for molding, take an empty ice cream cone and begin packing the yellow dough very firmly down into the cone. Make sure you pack it way down into the tip of the cone. Lay cones on wax paper to set for an hour.

Repeat this process with one more cup of dough mixture for another set of cone bottoms. (I found it easiest to work with one cup at a time).

Meanwhile, empty and rinse your spray bottle well and make another colored water. Repeat the process with one cup of dry dough mixture. This will make about five ice cream "balls." You can shape the balls with your hands, or use the round part of two Easter eggs as molds. (We decided that since in real life ice cream balls are not perfect spheres, we preferred the hand-shaped method). Once shaped the way you want them, set on wax paper to dry.

Repeat the process with another color of water. We also blended blue dough with pink dough to make a few pretty marbled balls. Allow all of your shapes to dry for about an hour.

Once dried, take the sugar cones off the yellow dough mixture. I found that the cones had absorbed some of the moisture from the dough and were very easy to just peel off all in one piece, but do it carefully so as not to damage your bath bomb. In a different climate, the cones may not be moist and as easy to peel, but you should be able to break off the cone if it is dry. Allow the yellow bath bomb cones to set again for another half hour or so.

Place your cones and ice cream balls in a cone-shaped plastic bag, tie at the top with a twist tie and add a pretty piece of ribbon. And now the best part—give as a gift or enjoy yourself in a hot bath!



BATH BOMB RECIPE CREDIT: MARTHA STEWART

My Journal

“Each person must live their life as a model for others.”

—ROSA PARKS

List the people who have served as role models to you in your life:

List all the qualities you admire about them or the things about them you try to emulate:

List the things you currently do to model positive behavior and good habits in front of your stepchild(ren):

List new or additional ways in which you could serve to be a positive role model in your stepchild(ren)’s life:

Imagine that you are your stepchild. Fill in the blanks below according to how you hope he or she might one day complete the paragraph:

My stepmom, _____, was a positive role model in my life because she _____, _____, and _____. She never _____ or _____ even though _____. I admire her because she _____. The impact she made in my life is apparent because I _____ thanks to her.

Words of Wisdom

Role Models

“You are in charge of your feelings, beliefs, and actions. And you teach others how to behave toward you. While you cannot change other people, you can influence them through your own behaviors and actions. By being a living role model of what you want to receive from others, you create more of what you want in your life.”

—ERIC ALLENBAUGH

“The most important role models in people’s lives, it seems, aren’t superstars or household names. They’re ‘everyday’ people who quietly set examples for you—coaches, teachers, parents. People about whom you say to yourself, perhaps not even consciously, ‘I want to be like that.’”

—TIM FOLEY

“Whether or not you have children yourself, you are a parent to the next generation. If we can only stop thinking of children as individual property and think of them as the next generation, then we can realize we all have a role to play.”

—CHARLOTTE DAVIS-KASL

