

TOP 10 REASONS WHY BECOMING A STEPMOM *is More Difficult* THAN BECOMING A MOM (Particularly if You Become Them in That Order)

by KATE HARDY

I have been a stepmom to my husband's boys, now 6 and 10 years old, for four years. Last year, my husband and I decided to add a baby to our family. As a new mom to my infant daughter, I began to do all the new mom things, including Mommy and Me Yoga classes. There I met other new moms and listened to them talk about all that they were struggling with—lack of sleep, round-the-clock nursing, healing from labor and delivery, adjusting to being not just a couple but a young family and so on. Before having my baby, I had been juggling a full-time job, the

busy schedules of my stepsons' school and activities, my pregnancy and my marriage. Once I was on maternity leave, it was pure heaven to have nothing to do every morning but take care of myself and my beautiful new baby while my husband was at work and the stepkids were at school. But I felt I couldn't tell any of the Mommy and Me moms that or I would be a jerk for bragging that it was all so easy for me. I realized that if you have already adjusted to life as a stepmom, becoming a new mom is, comparably, a piece of cake.

Here are 10 reasons why:

10

Understanding your newborn kid is less complicated.

Depending on how old your stepkids are when you first meet, developing your relationship with them is a process of trial and error and may take years to solidify. When they are upset, you try to ascertain what's wrong and how you can help them. Is it something their father said? Is it something that happened at school? Is it trouble with a girlfriend? Is it that they are still dealing with a myriad of emotions related to their parents' divorce? Is it you? Is it the challenges related to adjusting to a new stepmom or stepdad? Or is it just normal growing pains? Trying to decipher and respond to the needs of stepkids can be more difficult than brokering peace in the Middle East. Communicating with and understanding the needs of a newborn is comparably simple. When they cry, they are hungry, tired or bored. That's it. So you feed them, help them sleep or entertain them, and the problem is solved. And you know what to feed them because all they consume is milk. Trying to figure out what to feed your stepkids that is healthy and that they will actually eat ... not so simple.



9 When you're a mom, no one questions your role.

Ladies, we all know that one of the hardest things about being a stepmom is the uphill struggle to be taken seriously as a parent by the rest of the world. From friends to colleagues to your stepkids' teachers and their friends' parents, you can't get away from the occasional, "But you're not the parent." Never mind that you spent the day washing the sheets that your 4-year-old stepson peed on overnight, registering your stepkids for summer camp, taking a stepdaughter to the get her first driver's license or making the whole family dinner. You still face people in the community who occasionally question the legitimacy of your role in your stepkids' life. Not to mention the voice from your stepkids' other home that will often try to undermine the rules and expectations established in your house. When you're a mom, no one ever asks, "Why are you doing all this for those kids?" Everyone expects your job as a parent to involve a ton of time, attention and energy. People generally respect and support you as a parent, which can make the job a lot easier.

8 Transitioning from a childless life to a life with children is the hardest part.

Before I married my husband, my time was all mine. The space in my home was all mine. Once married with stepkids, I had to deal with the reality that I can't just up and go out whenever I want. And I had to adjust to sharing my home with a man, two children, a cat and a dog. Let's just say there were a few nights in the beginning of our married life that I spent at a hotel—not because I didn't love my husband, stepkids and their pets dearly, but I just craved an evening of being alone. My husband didn't take to well to this habit, though, and eventually I grew out of it and adjusted to sharing my time and space with my family. For new moms who have never been stepmoms, they are making this adjustment at the same time they are welcoming their newborn into the world. For me, I was already used to a life with kids by the time my newborn came along. The transition was much easier.

7

There are no surprises about your husband's parenting style.

About a month after my daughter was born, I attended a friend's baby shower where everyone laughed and teased my friend about how her husband was going to react to fatherhood. "Do you think he'll be able to handle the poop diapers?" "You'll be doing playtime at the park while Jimmy's watching his Sunday football!" The advantage of marrying a man with kids is that you already know what kind of father he is going to be. They say don't buy a car without taking it for a test drive, right? Since my husband had been a single dad to toddlers before I met him, I knew what kind of a daddy car I was buying. When our daughter was born, it was my husband who taught me how to handle poop diapers!



6

You get nine months to prepare.

Hello! How many of us felt like we had our life completely turned upside down without warning once we became stepmoms? It can leave you feeling like someone just plopped you in a foreign land without a road map! When you become a mom, it can turn your life upside down, too, but at least you have nine months to get used to the idea.

5

Hormones help you bond.

Let's face it, ladies. You don't always love your stepkids right off the bat. And they don't always love you. Sometimes you never grow affectionate for one another and the best you can hope for is mutual respect. In other cases, you do grow to love each other as if they were your kids. Well, when you give birth to a child your body produces bonding hormones like there's no tomorrow. Except in rare cases, it is physically impossible not to fall in love with the child you have created. The chemicals generated in your body ensure you feel connected. You love your kids no matter how discombobulated they may become later in life. With your stepkids, Mother Nature leaves you high and dry to figure out how to bond on your own.



4

Role models abound.

As a new mom, you have an infinite array of role models from which to choose. Everyone has a mom. If you don't think your own mom is a good role model for parenthood, you can choose your mother-in-law. Or your best friend's mom. Or your 11th-grade teacher who raised three boys of her own. Or your neighbor's grandmother. But not everyone has a stepmom. And not everyone knows a veteran stepmom. You may find yourself becoming a stepmom without any role model to help you along the way. Becoming a mom and becoming a stepmom are each two of life's greatest challenges. But the stepmoms have it even harder because they often find themselves desperate for the guidance of a role model, without anyone to turn to.

3

There are 1,563,496 books full of advice.

OK, so maybe there really aren't quite that many versions of *What to Expect When You're Expecting* on the shelves, but it sure seems like it. Where is the *What to Expect* series for becoming a stepmom? Or a stepdad? Stepchildren do not come with an instruction manual, and Barnes & Noble sure isn't providing one either. Becoming a stepmom and becoming a mom both involve having tons and tons of questions along the way. But the books only provide answers for the moms.



2

You get a shower and a registry.

What a luxury! How much easier would it be to become a stepmom if your girlfriends and family ritually got together to celebrate this new transition and flooded you with useful gifts!



1

You get maternity leave.

When I became a stepmom, my to do list looked like this: 1. Figure out what the hell a stepmom is and what kind of stepmom I want to be, 2. Adjust to new married life, 3. Learn how to prioritize 1,000 new family responsibilities and 4. Remember to fit your full-time job into all of this. The Family and Medical Leave Act gives people time off from work when they adopt a child and when they find themselves with the new responsibilities of caring for a sick loved one. It would have been really nice to have some leave from work to adjust to becoming a new custodial stepmom. It sure was a lot to juggle there at first. When I became a new mom, I got three months off from work, and adjusting to the newborn was all I had to do during that time. Society gave me a free pass from all my other responsibilities and it was quite a blessing.

In sum, making the transition from single gal to married woman is big, and making the transition from a childless lifestyle to raising children is even bigger. As all stepmoms know, when you marry a man with kids you are hit with both transitions at once, and it takes an immense amount of spiritual strength and personal conviction to weather this double whammy with grace. Once a stepmom has made her way in the fallout of these major lifestyle shifts, becoming a mom and adding a newborn to your household is no biggie.

The other week I was out with my 1-year-old and my two stepsons and we bumped into one of the moms from the old Mommy and Me yoga class. She was there with her 1-year-old, too, and said, "Wow, you're out and handling three kids!" There was a touch of awe in her voice and you better believe I felt like a bad ass. Yep, those ladies who are only moms don't know how easy they have it. Stepmomms, pat yourselves on the back. You're the hardest working "moms" out there! ■