

You Bet We Are!

We think our stepmom situation is more difficult than most.

'This is a frank discussion of this topic. It may seem negative. It's not meant to be. There are many wonderful aspects to being a stepmom. Many of us have wonderful, loving stepchildren. They aren't perfect, but neither are we. They are cute, sometimes sweet and we enjoy many wonderful family times with them. This is a discussion of what is different about being a Childless Stepmom, different than being a biological mother and different than a stepmother who also has her own biological or adopted children. Much of the uniqueness of our situation is difficult because it isn't researched, it isn't taught to therapists and it isn't talked about or recognized. As a result, the information below is anecdotal, based on my own experiences and those shared with me by the wonderful Childless Stepmoms in our online community.' If you are a Childless Stepmom, I hope it helps you feel less alone. If you are the partner of a Childless Stepmom or you care about a Childless Stepmom, I hope it helps you understand why she sometimes sees the situation differently than you do. Christina Chopin, Founder Childless Stepmoms.

We are special. We are generous, giving women who no matter how we feel about these children in our lives; give a part of ourselves to them when we could choose to walk away. Sometimes we do more than their biological mothers. Unlike a stepmother with her own children, we do this without expecting the same from our husbands. This one-sidedness is one of the key components of what makes a Childless Stepmom family different from stepfamilies with two remarried parents. We're different also from the family with a childless step father. Our husbands generally expect us, as women, to have a more active role and involvement in the care-taking of our stepchildren.

We are likely to be giving up some of our premarital standard of living as we accept at least some of the responsibility for our partner's children or even his ex-wife. Divorced biological moms tend to increase their standard of living when they marry.

We don't have the barometer of our own children or sometimes any previous experience to measure by. When our stepchild lies to us about what s/he was doing in the living room we can't say to ourselves, 'Oh, Josh did the same thing at that age, s/he'll outgrow this. It's probably a stage'. One can argue that all new mothers face this, but they usually have time to learn about children gradually as they mature. They also have a wealth of resources and support available to them. Resources for step moms without biological children are very limited. We're lucky if we are mentioned as an aside in some article about stepmothers.

In contrast, when Ashley screams 'I hate you' to her mother, Bio Mom knows that although she might at hate her at the moment, the two of them have a bond that will probably never be broken. A step mom with biological children may think to herself in anger, 'Who cares? My own kids love me.' She also is likely more confident when she thinks to herself, 'She doesn't mean it', knowing that children often hurl these remarks before they've learned to control their anger. A Childless Stepmom may not be sure what to think.

Stepmoms with biological children are used to sacrificing for their children, knowing that plans are out the window when a child is sick, money you plan on may not be there and your life is not your own. When you have your own child you get nine months to psychologically adjust to the fact. You have well over a year to just deal with the responsibility of the child before it starts talking back or arguing in any way. This is in stark contrast to instantly dealing with a 15 year old that doesn't want you in their life, is sullen, smart-mouthed and uncooperative. Oh, and don't forget you may be dealing with that 15 year old while her or his mother, your husband, your in-laws and your husbands' friends (who are also friends of his ex-wife) are all watching and evaluating how well you are doing it.

We give up more privacy, more free time and have more boundaries violated. If you are a mom, you know that your time is not your own, you can be interrupted at any time, your belonging are not off-limits, that a closed drawer does not mean it won't be opened, that your best shot at privacy may be in the bathroom (but not guaranteed), that your most expensive perfume may be used without permission by 5 girls who 10 minutes ago were playing soccer in a muddy field. Your discretionary time to spend as you please as a biological mother may be reduced from minutes to seconds when you become a stepmother. A childless stepmom's may go from many hours a day to a few minutes. It's a bigger adjustment to not only large issues but many, many small ones.

We may be younger, or older, than our counterparts. It's no secret that men sometimes marry younger women when they remarry. We may find ourselves to be much younger than the biological mother of our stepchildren. The biological mother's anger about feeling replaced by a younger woman may be acted out by her being condescending to us about our parental role or insisting that we can't be trusted around her children because of our lack of experience. We may be perfectly able to take care of her children but now feel self-conscious and inadequate. She may share this with the children who then look for our mistakes and point them out. They may also now realize that Mom likes to hear about what we did wrong. We're left reluctant to talk about being overwhelmed or ask for help.

The children may be impressed by our youth, careers and non-motherly persona. Their enthusiasm can make the

biological mother feel threatened by the relationship driving a further wedge between us. Conversely, we may come into step motherhood, experiencing children in a parental role for the first time just when some of our peers are becoming grandparents. Being older and more established can make the adjustment of having kids amidst our routines and a lifetime of treasured possessions more challenging. As one Childless Stepmom said to me horrified, "they break things";.

I think we know these things about motherhood intellectually, but we may not have realized the feelings we would have when we experienced them. We may not realize the degree of change it will be compared to life before these step children. It may not have dawned on us how violated we will feel by their lack of boundaries or how overwhelmed by the constancy of the demands, and the immediacy with which they both will happen - with children we are not necessarily bonded to. A mother has a more permeable boundary with her child, no matter the child's age, than a childless woman has for another woman's children.

If we complain about the kids we are instantly put in the wicked-stepmother category, not only by people who don't know us but sometimes by our own friends and family who say 'you knew he had kids when you married him'. Well, of course we knew. When these same friends and family complain about their husbands or cars, do we respond with 'you knew he was a man when you married him' or you knew that car might need repairs some day when you bought it'? What they don't know is that there is usually a honeymoon with the man and with his children that may not last. We may not get the opportunity to see them in a realistic light during courtship when they may accompany us to play miniature golf or attend a family celebration. It can be very different from when they later ruin your only vacation for the year by being sullen, whiny and uncooperative the whole time. Incidentally, you probably paid for the vacation. Their father can't afford it because he's paying child support and even if he has custody, the biological mother is likely to be paying a token amount or none at all. Also, sometimes these men seem to be active, involved fathers when we are dating them. After we become their wife, they have a tendency to try and abdicate all things child-related to our realm.

We have the whole childlessness issue to deal with:

Some of us want children but can't have them. Perhaps we have a physical problem or we waited too long and our biological clock ran out, we never met the right man or it never was the right time and now it's too late. Grieving childlessness happens throughout a lifetime for women who want to have children and can't. Many of us have to do it over and over, peeling off another layer of the onion at each milestone in our lives or sometimes unexpectedly when a relative announces her pregnancy or the women at work start exchanging childbirth stories. Doing this while parenting someone else's children doesn't make it easier. For many of us, it can be extremely painful and may feel like a cruel twist of fate.

Sometimes we think we are past it until we fall in love with this man with children. We see the way he looks with pride at his children's accomplishments or how he's torn to shreds by an ex-wife who uses the children as a way to punish him for past transgressions - real or imaginary, and the longing for a child comes back. It can be difficult knowing that we can never give this man we love what is so very special to him. It can be more difficult doing it while dealing with the pain of failed infertility treatments or at any time the hope of childbirth in our future transitions to an impossibility. Sometimes out of spite or jealousy the ex-wife will make a point of rubbing in our faces the fact that she has children and we cannot.

Sometimes our husband is unwilling. It seems to be especially difficult when we marry a father who doesn't want any more and refuses to have any more. Or perhaps he would be willing, but he had a vasectomy at a time when he didn't anticipate being in his present circumstances. Sometimes husbands claim they'd be willing to have another bio child but they don't want to adopt, try artificial insemination, in-vitro fertilization or try to have the vasectomy reversed.

Sometimes we know this before the marriage and think it is ok, but over time the longing starts in or the biological clock kicks in or we just change our minds. It happens. Our husbands may react with anger, feeling betrayed that we changed the rules. We may respond in kind, wondering how a man who claims to love us could deny us something that so painfully seems to be necessary to our identity and fulfillment. Sometimes we feel betrayed by the husband who said he was willing to have children with us prior to the marriage, but now that he has experienced the stress of stepfamily life emotionally and financially, he has changed his mind.

Many people think step parenting should satisfy our maternal longings. In our experience it usually doesn't, any more than being an aunt does. It's just not the same.

Some of us are childless by choice. We're made to feel like there is something wrong with us. It's presumed we hate children or are selfish. Some of us never felt the maternal drive we feel is necessary to be a good mother and so we chose not to be. Or, we had other priorities in life: a career, businesses, desires to see and do things in life that are not congruent with the needs of a child. In our experience that doesn't suddenly change when we marry a man who has children. Reconciling that we've lost some significant portions of the advantages we gave up motherhood for, may even change our minds about having given it up. In other words, "if I have to deal with this anyway, I may as well have my own."

In any case, we may have to live with the fact that we either cannot or will not give our husbands' a very substantial gift that another woman has, which ties her to him and to us, for possibly a lifetime.

However, there is good news! We have a lot going for us. We have each other. If you've just found us, I implore you to join our online community. The women in it are absolutely the best. We are resourceful (you found your way here, didn't you?) smart, energetic, confident, mature and willing to work very hard at this. We are determined to beat the odds and make these marriages and families work.