

Update To How We Are Different: How To Survive

Contributed by Christina

I wrote the original "How a Childless Stepmom is Different" early in 2003 when I created Childless StepMoms. Since that time I have talked to thousands of you. I still feel "How a Childless Stepmom is Different" is as valid and true now as it was when I wrote it. I do have additional insight now about why I believe it is different.

Women are nearly all socialized to believe we will be mothers some day. We play house with dolls. There is a mommy and a daddy. We grow up and baby-sit, help out with younger siblings or otherwise have some experience in the care of children. We learn the skills of relationship building. We become adults and we may come to realize that motherhood is not in our future for a variety of reasons - but we retain that early imprinting that tells us that a big part of what it means to be a woman, is to be a mother. We find other outlets for our nurturing through our roles as big sisters, aunts, godmothers, and "my mom's friend's";. We clearly know the difference between these roles and being a mother. We may talk openly about such differences as the luxury of giving the children back to their parents, not having twenty four hour responsibility and not having to be the disciplinarian. What I think escapes our consciousness in these pseudo-mom situations though, is this key difference: we do not have a romantic relationship with the father of these children. We don't even think about that being one of the differences but it is an important one. The lack of having a love interest in Dad keeps us out of the quagmire of what we will come to experience as a Childless Stepmom (CSM). In a CSM family there is a man we love, children and us.

Consciously, we know very well that we are not the Mom and many of us don't want to be. Unconsciously, I think we do put ourselves in the role of "Mom". Underneath the surface, at some basic, primal level in our psyche I think we are back playing house with the roles defined as a man and woman who love each other, and their children: Dad, Mom and child. If we are not the Dad, if we are not the Child, then the only role left is that of Mom, so that must be who we are. This may even work for us temporarily.

When we enter these childless stepmom situations there is often a honeymoon period when everything works very well. The children are accepting and their biological mother may not yet feel threatened. The role of Mom may even creep into our consciousness. We may compare our parenting skills to that of the biological mother. At a minimum, we're likely to be pleased if the children can have some fun with us. Partly that pleases us because it is important to our partner. More basically, I believe that it also affirms to ourselves, our ability to fulfill all of the unspoken and spoken messages we received throughout our lives, that it is through motherhood that we realize the culmination of what it means to be a woman.

Perhaps things are difficult right from the beginning or the honeymoon with the stepkids inevitably ends. The children do something we experience as rejection. We take it very personally. I believe we do that because at some level our "mother" role is being rejected. This role is such an integral and consistent part of our identity it is impossible for us not to take it personally. To be rejected in our role of "mother" means having a core part of our identity as women rejected. It's the emotional equivalent of a mastectomy. It threatens a core component of what we've been socialized to believe a woman is: mother. How could we not take it personally? Yet, instead of therapists and others recognizing this and helping us through understanding what is really going on, we are left floundering in our feelings of inadequacy and belief that somehow if we had just done something better the situation either wouldn't have happened or would have been easily resolved. "Don't take it personally" is empty advice. It is personal and of course it hurts. What is more personal to us than our identity as women? Our feelings are very valid. If we realize that this is what is going on beneath the surface, then we can get it in the light and examine it. If those helping us shame us or don't deal with our hurt, they can be ineffective and even harmful.

Is this CSM thing a fair test of our ability to mother? No, of course it is not. It may look like the mother role. We love and live with their father. We may take care of the children. We may make their lunch, drive them to practice, buy presents, make sure they don't terrorize the neighborhood and feel wonderful if we get a big hug or a home-made card. But regardless of the similarities, we are not the mother. There already is a mother and she is either still in the picture or the ghost of her abandonment looms on. Another big difference for a CSM is that the children involved are wounded and they have been wounded by another woman - their biological mother. If for no other reason, they are wounded in that their mother played some part in Dad no longer living with them. He now lives with us. How could these children not have some underlying and confusing feelings about us? Perhaps they are angry with their biological mother and that anger is so confusing and guilt-ridden it is focused at us instead. To expect these children, the victims of these adult decisions and happenings, to be able to understand all of their feelings and reactions and respond to us fairly is totally unrealistic. Most of us would not be able to do it and we are adults.

The children also have anger and conflicting feelings about Dad. He has left the household. They must have some underlying level of fear that he may leave altogether. Can they risk being angry at him? Or, would it be easier and safer

to displace that anger and confusion onto this other target, the CSM? Or might they be difficult and demanding with Dad too, testing to see if he will abandon them completely?

Then there is the biological mother, who may feel at some level that she has 'failed' at her marriage, regardless of why it ended. Our happy presence may speak to her insecurities and say, 'I'm successful with this man, what's wrong with you?' If her children love us then she may be afraid that she'll be replaced. If they hate us, she may feel validated that she is 'the most loved' or concerned that we have done something to earn their hate.

Then there is our partner. He is likely guilt-ridden either for leaving or somehow not being 'good enough' to keep the biological mother in the relationship. He feels especially bad about not being there for his children. His identity as a man may be tied up in being a good provider and he is likely to have great difficulty in setting boundaries with the biological mother and children if it involves what he considers to be his 'responsibility'. All of these wounded parties come together in the CSM 'family'.

Perhaps your situation is different. Perhaps the wounds are different. I believe this is at least a subset of them and if not these, then others that are just as complicating. How can it not be a difficult situation? How can it help but be one of the three out of four second marriages that end in divorce?

Many of us have proven that it is not hopeless! These are some of the things that I have learned from other CSMs that help with coping and improve the chance of success: The more 'emotionally together' the adults involved are, the better off everyone will be. CSM, Dad and Mom should all have a good understanding of their own insecurities and how they may play out in the relationships. A therapist can be helpful for any or all of the parties.

Leaving a marriage is wounding no matter what the circumstances. If there are unhealed issues for the biological parents those issues will be aggravated by the co-parenting circumstances that inevitably will arise. This does not mean they are still in love with each other, it just means that the hurt likely repeated some childhood hurt and they continue to carry it around, dealing with it in a variety of unconscious or illogical ways.

The CSM needs a life of her own and a strong support system. We may not realize that we are playing out the 'mother role' as discussed above. If we are getting some needs met from it we may throw ourselves into it, abandoning our friends and interests. Just as we women can lose ourselves in partner relationships, this 'family' presents even more opportunities to lose our connections to the activities and people that make our lives our own. The danger in this is that it leaves us with nowhere to go when the honeymoon ends. We have lost our anchor and the constant affirmation and support of our girlfriends. Keep your friends and outside interests. Find a support group. The CSM online community is a wonderful one that can be a tremendous virtual resource and reality check from women who truly understand what you are living through. It helps to have a real person nearby though that can give a hug and wipe away a tear.

Have 'a room of your own'. Some space of yours where the children are not allowed is very helpful. You need a place that you can escape to when you are overwhelmed. If that's not feasible then plan other places that you go. The reading room of the library, an internet café – almost any place can be a safe retreat. Use it when you are overwhelmed or need a break.

- Talk, talk, and talk to your support group. Try out what you will say to your partner.

- Be open and honest about what you need and expect from your partner. Decide ahead of time what you will do to resolve issues and disagreements. Use the materials on this site to suggest discussions. Make sure the two of you are on the same page.