

...because even when it's good, **it's complicated!**

FEBRUARY 2020

StepMom

ONLINE MAGAZINE

Happy Marriages

**5 THINGS
REARRIED
COUPLES
NEED TO KNOW**

“I MARRIED AN OLDER MAN”

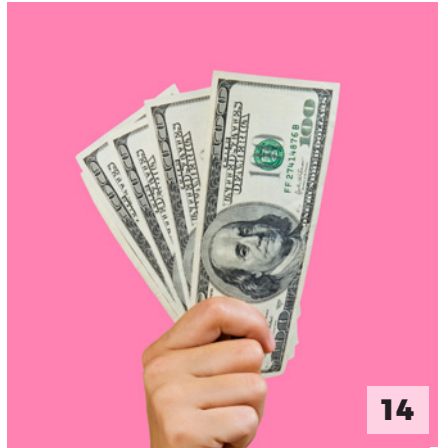
Does Age Matter?

**DO YOU
RESENT
ALIMONY
& CHILD
SUPPORT?**

Read This!

**Advice for
Stepmoms
Who Marry
Widowers**





FEATURES

11 Is Your Relationship in a Rut?

5 Ways to Navigate Rough Patches in Your Marriage

BY MARY T. KELLY, MA

14 Riding the Alimony Pony

Why I Don't Resent Spousal & Child Support Payments (Anymore!)

BY BRITTANY LYNCH, BSCN

17 Your Grieving Stepfamily (Part I of III)

Stepmothering When One Parent Has Passed

BY DIANE INGRAM FROMME

21 Get Back to Basics

10 Steps to Help Your Stepfamily When It's Struggling

BY CHRISTINA ROACH, LMHC

24 "I Married an Older Man"

The Truth About Stepmoms in May/December Relationships

BY CLAUDETTE CHENEVERT

IN EVERY ISSUE

4 **ON THE COVER**
Michelle Glogovac

5 **LETTER FROM THE PUBLISHER**

27 **SPOTLIGHT**

32 **WORDS TO INSPIRE**



DEPARTMENTS

- 6** THRIVING STEPMOMS
Setting Healthy Boundaries
4 Steps to Identify and Honor Your Limits
BY MEG BURTON TUDMAN

- 8** VANTAGE POINT
Falling in Love—Again!
One Stepmom's Story of Hope Reimagined
BY HEATHER HETCHLER, MA

- 28** VANTAGE POINT
Somewhere Between Love and Hate
Conflicting Emotions Are Common in Stepfamily Life
BY LAURA L. MACK

- 30** LIFE AFTER DIVORCE
How I Met Your Grandma
Kids of Divorce, Family Ties & Forget Me Nots
BY KRISTA L. GIOVARA





MEET FEBRUARY'S COVER GIRL

Michelle Glogovac

Michelle lives in San Jose, California, and has been following *StepMom* since pretty much its inception. She and her husband have been a couple for 12 years and married for six. Together they have one daughter, 3, and one son, 4. Michelle's stepdaughter and stepson are 17 and 21, respectively.

MICHELLE SAYS: "I was 26 when I started my stepmom journey. It was a struggle to find myself, as an adult, as well as to figure out how to navigate a relationship that involved an ex and two kids.

"Now, at 38 years of age, I've gone from Kindergarten to the college years. I wish I had known *much* more back then and that I'd taken things more lightly. At the time, however, there wasn't much available when it came to stepmom resources.

"Then I found *StepMom Magazine* and it was so wonderful to hear that I wasn't alone in my thoughts, feelings and experiences. I've been following along for over a decade now. So, I thought, maybe it's time to submit myself as a cover model!"

"Over the years, I've learned how to not take things so personally, especially when those things really aren't about me. I've also learned how to stand up for myself, when necessary, and how to disengage without it seeming like I'm angry or distancing myself from my family."

"Thank you, *StepMom Magazine*—and keep up the great work!"

Photo Credit: Lisa Schader

FEBRUARY 2020

FOUNDER AND PUBLISHER

Brenda Ockun

Publisher@StepMomMagazine.com

MANAGING EDITOR

Christine G. Adamo

Christine@WriteReviseEdit.com

DESIGNER

Jonelle Jones

Hello@JonelleJones.com

WEB DESIGNER/PROGRAMMER

Ken Bass

KBass@KenBassConsulting.com

FOR ADVERTISING INFORMATION:

Publisher@StepMomMagazine.com

Our mission is to:

EDUCATE, EMPOWER

and provide **EXPERT ADVICE**,
as well as **EMOTIONAL SUPPORT**
for women whose partners have
children from past relationships.

Our goal is to:

foster **SOLID** couples,
SUCCESSFUL stepfamilies
and **STRONG** women.



@StepMomMagazine

The information and content at StepMom Magazine's website, its monthly edition(s) and its online forum are not meant to take the place of advice or counsel obtained from a trained mental health professional, family counseling service or attorney. Please contact a trained professional to obtain specific advice with respect to your particular issue, problem or situation. By accessing the information and content provided by *StepMom Magazine*, you acknowledge that neither *StepMom Magazine* nor its contributing writers, staff, affiliates or forum members accept liability for any act or omission based upon any information or advice contained herein. The opinions expressed on or through this site are the opinions of the individual authors and may not reflect the opinions of the publisher, personnel or affiliates of *StepMom Magazine*.

StepMom Magazine™ and the graphic logo used in connection with the magazine and the related website are trademarks of Stepmom Enterprises.

LETTER FROM THE PUBLISHER

When all else fails, choose love!

Last month I had a good, old-fashioned meltdown. Maybe you know what I'm talking about? I'd been battling a chest cold for more than a week and wasn't getting much sleep. I'd fallen behind on work for the magazine, too, and the house was still a mess after a season of merrymaking. I'd set a bunch of goals and good intentions for 2020 but didn't have the energy to focus on those, either.

Even Gregg—my patient, loving and oh, so tolerant husband—could do no right. Not as far as I was concerned, anyway. (Brenda? Meet Rabbit Hole.) The more I coughed, the crankier I became. Until, finally, I snapped. I then took out all of my frustrations on my unsuspecting and undeserving husband.

I stood before him, red-nosed and teary-eyed, rattling off a mile-long list of things which were annoying me. The list included him. Lucky for me, Gregg's a pro when it comes to dealing with conflict. A seasoned sales exec who's one of the best in his field, he knows how to deal with cantankerous situations and customers (aka me). First, he let me vent.

When I was done, he simply said: "Look me in the eye right now and tell me two things you love about me." It was like taking a glass of ice cold water to the face. Still, I had to laugh. Partly because, in that moment, I realized what a crank-o-potamus I'd been and partly because making me consider why I *really* do love him was such a simple way to redirect my brain. My chest cold still weighed me down but my bad mood had lifted.

In good relationships, that's how it goes: You take turns lifting each other up. I'd guess that, like Gregg and me, you two are also playing the long game and want a happy life together. Well, that means accepting the good days and the crappy days. After 15 years of marriage—which, in a stepfamily, can feel like 30—Gregg and I have truly learned to live our vows: for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health.

This month's issue is for any stepmom who wants to do the same. 'Cause, let's face it, to get there you need to have a few tricks up your sleeve. Mary T. Kelly, MA, offers great advice for navigating the rough patches. Christina



Roach, LMHC, offers keen insights for hitting reset when your stepfamily is struggling. And Heather Hetchler, MA, shares a highly personal story of purposefully choosing to love again despite stepfamily stressors.

If you read my January letter, you know that my 2020 buzzword is joy. My year didn't start off all that joyful, but it's back on track now. Falling down is inevitable. While getting back up is optional, it is necessary—if you two are in it for the long haul.

When all else fails? Do what Gregg did. Choose love.

Brenda Ockun

Publisher@StepMomMagazine.com

Setting Healthy Boundaries

4 Steps to Identify and Honor Your Limits

BY MEG BURTON TUDMAN

Sometimes the bar for stepmoms seems to be set so high that it's forever elusive. Do you find yourself chasing that unattainable standard to the extent that you often feel annoyed, tired, frustrated, resentful or unfulfilled? If so, here's an opportunity for you to explore who you truly are and what you really need both in general and in relation to stepfamily life.

Just because you can do something doesn't mean you either have to or should. Just because you've always done something doesn't mean you have to or should. Just because someone expects you to do something doesn't mean that you have to ... or should. You have the right to say "yes" or "no" as you desire. Understanding your limits will help you determine what ultimately serves you—and doesn't.

WHAT ARE YOUR LIMITS?

Everyone has limits, so you're not mean or unworthy because there's a maximum to what you're willing or able to do and/or be. Limits can be physical, mental, emotional or spiritual. There's even an element of bio-individuality to them. We're each unique! The limits for one person will be different from the limits for another. This doesn't make one person better or worse, just different.

Setting, communicating and upholding *truly* personal boundaries is an excellent way to honor your own limits. Healthy boundaries are based on your needs, desires, beliefs, choices and feelings. Bio-individuality applies here, too, as your boundaries will likely differ from your partner's, your stepkids', the ex's and so on. Your boundaries may also vary situationally: What's OK for you at home may not be the same as what's acceptable for you at work.

Think of your boundaries as stop signs for others which allow your heart and soul to remain intact while keeping you from feeling as if you're run ragged. I invite you to nurture self-respect and augment your authenticity by opening yourself up via the four limit-setting steps here. As you work on developing healthy boundaries, by following them, root your intentions in love for yourself and a desire to improve your relationship health overall.



Like everyone else, you are worthy of positive relationships. Your boundaries are what will help you maintain a sense of positivity as you work to make all of your relationships healthier and happier, including the one you have with yourself.

1. GET TO KNOW YOU BETTER.

Make a list of the times you feel energized and empowered. Then make a second list of the times you feel stressed and anxious. Both lists are important because they'll help you understand your limits within a variety of contexts. Now consider any commonalities among the situations which appear on your two lists.

Do they involve the same people, times of day, internal dialogues, physical environments and/or types of emotions? Dig deep and draw parallels, identifying what's acceptable for you and what's not. Remain open-minded and open-hearted as you get to know yourself better. There's no judgment here. Your limits are unique to you—and you have the right to identify them.

2. LEARN TO BE EXPRESSIVE.

Knowing your limits and setting boundaries around them are one thing. Communicating them effectively is another. Allow a deep breathing practice to serve you as you prepare to state your boundaries

clearly and calmly for the benefit of your relationships. Boundaries are intended to show respect for your worth and to protect you from exceeding your personal limits. However, they are not intended to serve you at the expense of someone else.

When you set and communicate a boundary, refrain from slinging judgment or issuing threats. It may help to begin by writing down any new boundaries as “I” statements written in specific and courteous language. Then read them out loud to yourself, so you’ll get comfortable expressing them. For example: “I feel disrespected when you arrive late with the kids. Like you, I value my time, so what I need is a pick-up and drop-off schedule we’re both happy with.”

3. PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE.

Setting and upholding boundaries doesn’t come naturally to many of us. You can learn this skill, however, and become more comfortable with it through practice. Take small, consistent steps toward honoring your boundaries and toward then responding appropriately if one of them isn’t respected. There are a spectrum of responses available to you. When the disrespect is extreme, I suggest that you empower yourself to dispassionately disengage or walk away.

The more you practice being firm and disengaging with grace, the better you’ll get at determining how to honor your limits, communicate your needs and be clear about your expectations without giving up. Please show yourself compassion as you practice, especially if you fear rejection or feel guilty about putting your needs first. Give yourself permission to start small. Then work your way up to valuing boundaries which feel more significant to you.

4. STILL, REMAIN FLEXIBLE.

In relationships with others, some days you may give more than you take. Other days, it’ll be the opposite. It’s your right and responsibility to be sure that there’s balance and that your boundaries aren’t too porous—or too rigid. The more you prioritize taking care of yourself, the better able you’ll be to thrive despite any ebbs and flows which happen around you.

Please note, though, that being flexible doesn’t mean allowing people to either walk all over you or take advantage of you. Rather, it means extending others the benefit of the doubt when you feel it’s warranted or choosing to revisit a boundary violation at a time when you’re able to talk it through more effectively and the other party is able to hear your message.

While they may not like what you have to say and may not be entirely receptive, you need to be sure that they’re at least able to listen. As you continue on your journey of self-growth through limit setting, your early limits and boundaries may shift. If so, empower yourself to revise both so that you can maintain your newfound self-respect and more positive relationships.

From my heart to yours, I invite you to find a way to incorporate healthy boundaries into your daily life. You matter and your limits are valid. You have the right to take care of yourself and you are worthy of respect. So, please don’t give up on yourself. You have unique gifts to offer the world, your partner and your stepkids.

Everyone, including you, will benefit when you’re in an energized, authentic and empowered state. Self-knowledge, effective communication, well-defined limits and a bit of flexibility will get you there. ■

Work with Meg!

**Successful but stressed?
Reset your mindset! In your initial discovery session, Meg will outline ways to “spark empowerment, energy and confidence” so you feel more empowered and less exhausted. Offering 1:1, video and email support.**

MegBurtonTudman.com



MEG BURTON TUDMAN is a mindset health coach, author and speaker. Meg works with women who are successful, striving for more and yet exhausted. By mastering their mindsets with her help, they achieve inner and outer transformation. That level of empowerment allows them to live more authentically and to enjoy the lives they’ve created for themselves. Her “Reset Your Mindset Toolkit” is available as a FREE download at MegBurtonTudman.com.

Falling in Love—Again!

One Stepmom's Story of Hope Reimagined

BY HEATHER HETCHLER, MA

“So it’s not gonna be easy. It’s going to be really hard; we’re gonna have to work at this everyday, but I want to do that because I want you. I want all of you, forever, everyday. You and me... everyday.”

- [S/C] FROM “THE NOTEBOOK”
BY NICHOLAS SPARKS

Many stepmoms live in marriages weighed down by stepfamily dynamics and the complications that come with them. We move through each day trying to make sense of life and wondering about the states of our marriages and their futures. Will it ever get better? Will I ever feel love again? How did I end up here? Should I stay?

He wants out. What do I want? What do I do now? The relationship that existed before you said, “I do,” seems a distant memory. Meanwhile, mad *about* you has devolved into mad *at* you. Living under the crushing weight of a microscope manned by a toxic ex and/or disrespectful stepchildren has wreaked havoc on your remarriage.

We stepmoms can also become mentally, emotionally and physically exhausted—by being out of sync with our partners. The fun, vibrant woman who chose a man with kids is no longer the woman staring back from the mirror. We barely recognize ourselves. We want to make our marriages work, yet we slowly lose the belief that things can and will get better.

Instead, we believe it’ll take a miracle.

I BELIEVE

I believe in miracles. I believe because I’ve experienced them in my own marriage. I’ve lived through



many difficult seasons (no, not simply days or weeks) and, as a veteran stepmom, I’m here to encourage you. Things can and will get better. Love lost can return and your marriage can be better than you ever dreamed.

There have been many days when I just wanted the pain to stop. When I thought, “If we could get away from all of this stepkid ‘stuff’ ...” everything would be better. Today, five of our six kids have launched from our home and much of the drama has lessened. Still, while it can be true, the absence of kids isn’t the sole reason marriages experience love restored.

I’d say the biggest roadblock, for us, was our different approaches to parenting. While we shared the same goals for all of our kids, we had different thoughts about how to parent best. Those had a major impact on both our marriage and the love we felt for each other. I want to highlight feelings here, because they often stand in our way when it comes

Love is messy. It requires work, dedication, healthy boundaries—and lots and lots of grace and forgiveness.

to weathering the seasons.

I *felt* so in love with my husband on the day that we married! I never wanted that feeling to leave me. Ever. Yet, feelings of love began to fade as our parenting differences surfaced and the smallest of decisions rose up like huge mountains we then had to climb.

In overcoming them, it became painful for me to feel both love and suffering. Slowly, albeit subconsciously, I built a wall around my heart. While it protected me from pain, it prevented me from seeing and experiencing the love that remained. When good things *did* happen, I was afraid to trust they were real. I feared the positivity would disappear and I'd be disappointed—again.

Before moving on, I must be clear about something. This article speaks to challenges typical of remarriage with kids. It does not advocate abusive relationships nor suggest that they and related issues will resolve themselves. If you experience abuse, seek safety first. Relationship damage may sometimes be repairable. Often, though, that requires the help of a qualified professional.

A MOUNTAIN OF HURT

While I was hurting, so was my husband.

In reality, our stepfamily amounted to a group of eight all hurting and living under one roof. How could we not be hurting? When two families become one, there's a mix of love and grief. And, where there is grief, there must be grieving. Stepfamilies are created on a bedrock of loss: There's no way for a stepfamily to form unless a death, divorce or unpartnering occurs.

When my husband and I married each other, hearts full of hope and love, we piled both of those onto our own foundation of loss. Yet, we didn't realize it until we were years in and all of our unhealed parts slid down a mountain of hurt like an avalanche, collided and pulled us apart.

During those difficult times, I clung to my faith, my commitment to husband (and family) and my hope for better tomorrows. I began utilizing the

communication skills I taught my own clients, creating and enforcing boundaries with my husband, my in-laws and the kids. And I saw results! Some good, some not. I adjusted, holding tight to my faith that we were “meant to be.”

I also cultivated a tribe of women I felt close to. Women who wanted my marriage to succeed and who wanted all of our children to thrive. In the midst of it all, I decided that our marriage could either be a place where hurt and pain festered or where healing began. Instead of focusing on the source of my pain, I chose to focus on healing my hurt over it and on growing stronger.

I then realized that, just because my husband didn't verbalize his, he was also feeling great pain. Rather than come on like a wrecking ball, I decided to create a space in which my words were a healing balm. I was determined to do what I could to return to being that bubbly, passionate woman who once said, “I do!” to a man with kids.

CHOOSING CHANGE

I had allowed our stepfamily dynamics to break me down. I was the one who'd built up walls around my heart, as a result. Now? I was going to choose to look at my husband with eyes that shone bright with love. A funny thing happened. As I began to respond differently to my husband, he slowly began to respond differently to me.

He'd also built up protective walls but he was willing to let them come tumbling down. Grace and tenderness, you see, aren't signs of weakness. In fact, they can be the strongest tools available for melting hardened hearts: our own and those of others. I wish I could tell you the moment I felt love return. I wish I could share with you a secret formula. But I can't.

Love is messy. It requires work, dedication, healthy boundaries—and lots and lots of grace and forgiveness. What I can tell you is that one day I looked at my husband, my eyes filled with tears, and was overwhelmed with love and gratitude for both him and our marriage. I was blissfully grateful that we'd worked through the difficult stuff.



I am in love with him. He is in love with me. All that time I spent looking to *feel* love, it was right there. It was there in the choosing to stay, work at it, grow stronger and be closer. Yet, it took choosing to act on love before I began to feel it again. I'd stayed in my marriage and worked on things because I love my husband and my family, promising to do so before God.

He'd stayed in our marriage and worked on things because he loves me and our family, equally committed to his vows. Honoring each other now lets us paint a love story that's far more beautiful than butterflies in my stomach ever felt. Our love is stronger because it weathered the storms. It blossomed out of darkness, letting us walk ahead free to love without letting anyone or anything stop us.

I don't have the marriage I dreamed of 13 years ago. I have a better one! I have a marriage in which love and trust bless us daily. We are aware of the pain in our situation, but we choose not to let it direct our feelings or behaviors toward one another. We choose each other every single day without overthinking every decision. Honestly, we feel like teenagers in love and are embracing each other with laughter and gratitude. It's a true miracle!

We've faced hard times marked by grief, hurting stepkids, challenging in-laws, job changes, breast cancer and more. We're currently navigating, hand-in-hand, a challenging season with my husband's oldest child. And we're sure to face hard times in

the future. Still, we choose love every day. May I encourage you to do the same? Choose to see the good in your partner. Choose to give thanks for your efforts. Choose to learn together, grow together and pursue a healthier partnership together.

Understand that, while you may not *feel* the love, your relationship isn't void of it. Look for it in places other than your feelings. In a remarriage with kids, the honeymoon happens when you two decide it does. Stop waiting for the kids to move out before you exhale the drama and breathe in the love all around you. You'll withstand the challenges—and grow stronger—through them. ■



HEATHER HETCHLER, MA, has a passion for equipping stepmoms to thrive. She is the founder of CafeSMom.com, which brings positive resources, encouragement and support to stepmothers. She speaks about divorce recovery and stepfamily issues and is the co-author of "Unwrapping the Gift of Stepfamily Peace."

As a stepmom coach, her passion is to help stepmothers define their own positive paths to success. As a full-time mom and stepmom, Heather resides in Cleveland with her husband, four children and two stepchildren.



Is Your Relationship in a Rut?

5 WAYS TO NAVIGATE ROUGH PATCHES IN YOUR MARRIAGE

BY MARY T. KELLY, MA

It's that time of year when hopeless romantics come out in droves to remind you (and yours) of eternal and everlasting love. I'm talking about the commercial marketers, the florists, the card companies—all who seem destined to make you feel as if something is wrong with you and your partner if you aren't feeling the same gushy, lost-in-love feelings you did when you first met.

Valentine's Day? Is such a racket!

Don't get me wrong. Despite all reason and rationale, I'm a hopeless romantic. Here's the reality, though. The pathway to deep and abiding love isn't paved with a dozen roses, flowery poetry or promises of undying embers. The road to a type of love that truly deserves to be recognized and celebrated comes by way of the ruts, the valleys, the doubts, the fears, the challenges, the hurts and even the repulsions which naturally crop up when you're partnered.

On top of that, you're with someone who has kids. Let's admit it right now: That's a potential libido killer right off the bat. Well, outside of your initial meeting when you thought, "Oh, great. He's a father. That's sooo sexy!" Not. Still, any couple in a first marriage or a subsequent relationship that involves kids is inevitably going to hit the gray, dull ruts which threaten to overturn all long-term relationships.

Leverage Your Relationship Ruts

As much as you may hate the *idea* of hitting rough patches, you don't need to. They're there to teach you both important lessons, so you can build the kind of love Hallmark can only dream of describing accurately. What follows are five ways to navigate the potholes which will make taking the long and winding road together easier. And, dare I say it? More enjoyable!

1. Normalize your ruts.

There's a reason for the expression, "The honeymoon is over." That's because no one could, physically or emotionally, sustain the seemingly never-ending level of over-the-moon feelings you experience when love is truly blind and any flaws either of you have seem minor or even appealing. It's common to wake up one morning, look at your partner and silently groan to yourself a simple, "Ugh," or, "I can't do this anymore."

While it's true that some of your partner's adorable habits may have become incredibly annoying with time,

it's only because you first met his representative self—not the person you're actually living with now. In that way, he's just like you. Yet, when relationship ruts bring you down, they also give you the potential to develop the kind of love that sustains during the hardest and sometimes dullest of times.

2. Respect one another.

You may be in a rut because you've lost some respect for your partner. You don't agree with his parenting decisions. He's too permissive. He doesn't give consequences. He caves to his ex, et cetera. It's one thing to disagree, however, but a whole other thing to be disrespectful toward your partner because of it. By the way, respecting him *doesn't* mean you agree with him.

You could probably argue pretty logically that he's made some big-time mistakes, just like every parent has in the history of time. To get out of the judgmental rut, ask yourself if your partner is trying to do the best he can, given the realities of his situation. When it comes to his kids, look at his heart and his intentions. Then respect his desire to be the best parent he can be.

3. Toss judgment aside.

If you find yourselves in a rut, bring humility and compassion into the picture and toss judgment aside. Life isn't an

... when relationship ruts bring you down, they also give you the potential to develop the kind of love that sustains during the hardest and sometimes dullest of times.

easy thing for any of us to master. Look at your partner with fresh eyes. What is he trying to do well, despite the fact that he's going to fail time and time again because (again, just like you) he's human? Being critical and judgmental will only deepen and reinforce the rut you're in. Instead, embrace the opportunity to grow—which ruts so graciously bring our way.

4. Stop the comparisons.

Stop comparing your partner or your relationship to everyone else's. Comparison is a surefire way to dig your heels into a deeper rut. In fact, neuroscience tells us that one of the main reasons for depression is the human tendency to size ourselves up using an "other" measuring stick. Yet, you're probably not being objective when you do this.

Your friends' and relatives' husbands are so great, aren't they? They do *this* right and *that* extremely well. Know what? No, they don't! They get into ruts, too, but they may not want to admit it. I have a pair of close friends who've been married for 40 years. When I first met them, I was enamored with their seemingly blissful marriage and sense of unity.

I told them I thought it was so awesome that, at the time, they'd been married for 30-plus years. The wife looked at me and said, straight-faced, "Yeah, well. It's been more like avoiding divorce 10 times over!" She said this with no reservation. They were actually happy about all they'd learned by stumbling along and had accepted that they would surely face future challenges.

5. Go on friggin' Date Night!

I've said this to 1,000s of couples so many times over the years that it feels trite. But it's not. Bona fide Date Night is a sacred time that's been committed to, by the two of you, preferably weekly or bi-weekly. It's when the two of you spend time together and avoid any subject resembling reality: his kids, the ex, the bills, etc.

It's a time to look across the table and truly *see* your person. This is the one you committed to navigate sometimes crazy and sometimes satisfying stepfamily life with. This is the one who, like you, is both flawed and imperfect. This is the one who has chosen you, just as you have chosen them. The whole thing is pretty cool, when you think about it.

You've been put on notice. Valentine's Day is just around the corner. If you're in a rut, that's perfect! Use the next

couple of weeks to reframe, redirect, re-appreciate and revise your own contributions to those once dreaded ruts. Accept them as building blocks for cementing deep and abiding love that isn't dependent on someone else's idea of perfection.

There's beauty hidden there, in both your flaws and theirs. And now you know why roses have thorns. Let's see them acknowledge that on a Hallmark card! ■

Work with Mary!

Approach stepfamily life with "eyes wide open" is Mary's philosophy. She's helped 1,000s of stepcouples and stepwomen clarify household roles, rules and responsibilities for better results. Mary offers online, phone and in-person coaching sessions.

RealStepfamilies.com
(303) 594-5240



MARY T. KELLY, MA, is a family therapist of more than 18 years who specializes in working with stepmoms, stepcouples and stepfamilies. From her private practice in Boulder, Colorado, Mary provides coaching by phone or via Skype, Facetime and Veer. She also offers in-person therapy and leads 1- to 2-day intensives both online and face-to-face. Visit RealStepfamilies.com for tips, resources and more info.

Riding the Alimony Pony

Why I Don't Resent Spousal & Child Support Payments (Anymore!)

BY BRITTANY LYNCH, BSCN



Maybe you've said or thought, "My partner pays his ex way too much in support. And it's not fair!" If you have, my friend, you are so not alone. I know, personally and professionally, that support payments generally land on the list of Top 5 stepmom concerns. And it's no secret that, even for nuclear families, finances are a common challenge.

In stepfamilies, though—once the separation dust settles, the lawyers have been paid, the house has been sold and new homes have been bought or rented—the fallout can be costly and not just in dollars. I'll be the first to admit there was a time on my own stepmom journey when I decided to (Plop!) heap my own insecurities on the financial agreement my husband had made with his ex following their separation.

Since their agreement isn't mine to speak of, what follows is insight into the mindset shifts I made after initially believing I was somehow a victim of injustice because a chunk of my partner's money went out the door to support someone else. It's my hope that, by sharing my revelations, you'll be privy to an alternative lens for viewing financial entanglements between parents who are no longer partners.

As Jeannette Lofas, PhD, LCSW, has taught me: There are no such things as ex-parents, only ex-partners. Once I adjusted my thinking around this topic, my sanity and my own bank account thanked me profusely. Still, no two stepfamily situations are alike. Weigh yours and be choosy about any financial advice you accept.

I'm Responsible for Me

In my early stepmom days, I often felt victimized. It was as if steplife was happening to me. I obsessed over trivial details which had nothing to do with me. I then lamented over how difficult my life was. I was an expert at creating drama everywhere I went, blaming everyone else for said drama. What can I say? I got an early start! In Grade 2, I played the lead in "The Owl & the Pussy-Cat." One area in which I was particularly good at doing this was in the world of money.

My husband's ex would go on vacations and I'd bubble up like a boiling kettle of anger and resentment: How dare she? (Gasp!)—as if this newly single woman had no right to enjoy her life. How dare she go on vacations or buy herself clothing? She needs a better job! If she got a better job, then I could go on vacations ... and I could get new clothes, instead!

One thing I've come to realize is that, as an able-bodied, able-minded and ambitious woman: My bank account balance, my ability to travel and my ability to

Pussy said to the Owl, "You elegant fowl!
How charmingly sweet you sing!
O let us be married! too long we have tarried:
But what shall we do for a ring?"

EXCERPT FROM "THE OWL & THE PUSSY-CAT"
BY EDWARD LEAR

create a comfortable and abundant life for myself is my responsibility. If I was unable or unwilling to take responsibility for my own financial situation, then I had zero right to pass judgment on the ex. The irony in all this has not been lost on me. Need a leading lady, anyone?

In their divorce guidebook "Should I Keep Trying to Work It Out?" Alan Hawkins, PhD, and Tamara Fackrell, JD, cited that about 1-in-5 women fall into poverty post-divorce. They also found that a staggering 75 percent of divorced moms don't receive child support payments in full. Why is this important? And what does it have to do with my (or your) personal finances?

The truth of the matter is that, in hindsight, I'm proud I married a man who didn't allow his ex (the mother of his firstborn son) to fall into poverty. I'm also proud I married a man who didn't allow her to become a statistic: one of the 3-in-4 women who doesn't receive child support in full. And I'm proud to be married to a man who honors his commitments and places the needs and comfort of his son ahead of my grown-lady desire to sip piña coladas poolside.

I've always been perfectly capable of generating my own income, so: When I made this one shift and stopped making my husband feel responsible for my financial comfort, I was able to step out of insecurity and into my own power. Society may be quick to villainize the woman who receives child support and/or alimony but we stepmoms don't have to be. There's a deeper problem at the root of it all. We'll explore that next.

Own it: I'm solely responsible for my financial well-being.

Lo, the Inequities!

Instead of wasting time demonizing the woman who's entitled to child support and perhaps alimony, too, let's talk about that big old elephant in the room. Overall, society seems to be generally unsupportive of women

When I was able to both detach from and depersonalize the *meaning* behind the money my husband paid out each month, I was able to recognize that society still has a long way to go toward providing mothers with equal earning opportunities.

(including mothers) who take on high-earning or high-powered positions. Let's talk about that!

Instead of hopping on the low-vibe bandwagon and bashing moms who may receive monthly income supplements, I invite you to consider these findings from the National Bureau of Economic Research. Henrik Kleven, PhD, Camille Landais, PhD, and Jakob Egholt Sogaard, PhD, analyzed Danish administrative data from 1980 to 2013. Their findings were profound.

Despite a culture that supports mothers in the workplace, the economists said the *largest* contributor to the Danish gender pay gap was becoming a mother. They coined the term "child penalties" to sum up the fact that women everywhere earn substantially less post-childbirth. Maybe more disturbing was their finding that gender-based earnings inequity sat at about 40 percent in the 1980s and that, by 2013, the average wage gap skyrocketed to 80 percent.

This is a multifaceted discussion I could spend hours having with you over a nice, hot cup of coffee. The deep-rooted, systemic and intergenerational cycles which perpetuate the gender pay gap, though, are beyond the scope of what I'm writing about here. I invite you, however, to do your own research and then decide what stance you'll take on empowering mothers to become equal earners in today's marketplace.

Face it: The fact is, mothers are becoming unequal earners at alarming rates.

Let's circle back to our initial topic and to what this has to do with my opinions on child support and alimony. When I was able to both detach from and depersonalize the *meaning* behind the money my husband paid out each month, I was able to recognize that society still has a long way to go toward providing mothers with equal earning opportunities.

After these realizations, alimony and child support no longer weighed on me. I became a stepmom who stopped playing the victim and, instead, took my own skill set to the marketplace so I could generate my own abundance. I

relieved my husband of my negativity and relieved myself of a damsel-in-distress mindset.

Best of all, I was able to go to sleep each night satisfied that I was leaving the world a better place than it was when I woke up. That, to me, is what defines a leading lady. ■

Work with Brittany!

You're a queen, so come claim your crown. A premium stepmom coach, Brittany uses her trademark Queen of the Castle coaching method to help others achieve passionate, abundant transformation.

StepQueen.com



BRITTANY LYNCH, BSCN, lives in Canada and is on a mission to help stepmoms worldwide create fulfilled, purposeful lives through her signature Queen of the Castle coaching method. Helping others find their voices and step into their power matters to Brittany, who believes that stepmotherhood gives us a professional edge and that stepmoms can live passionately and abundantly. Visit StepQueen.com or connect with her on Instagram @TheStepQueen.

Stepmothering When One Parent Has Passed



Your Grieving Stepfamily Part I of III

BY DIANE INGRAM FROMME

Part I of III

What follows is the first in a three-part series which provides real-life insights and practical guidance for stepmoms whose partners have lost a loved one and whose stepchildren have lost a parent. Part I is primarily couples-focused, shedding light on the layers of complexity which color the early experience of stepmoms and their widowed partners when children are involved.

Look for Parts II and III in upcoming editions of *StepMom*. Part II is family-focused and of special value to full-time stepmoms, complete with tips for creating magical moments despite our stepfamilies' grief experiences. Part III is self-focused and addresses concerns raised by stepmoms partnered with widowers—including how to honor a deceased parent's memory.

Part I: The Beginning

Even when you find yourself in love with someone whose previous partner died, the giddiness of blossoming love and a deepening romantic or marital commitment still offer fairy tale moments. The rush of love hormones and the journey of growing closer produce sparks of magic. When the relationship feels right and you feel special, who wouldn't want to cultivate "new" family life?

During the enchanting parts of fairy tales, we're swept away by the marvels and wonders they contain. During the scary parts, we tell ourselves: "It's not real." In love relationships, we are similarly tempted to make decisions amidst a whirlwind of good feelings while being unwittingly blinded to hidden pitfalls.

Complex Layers

The stepmom/widower relationship contains more rich layers of complexity than meet the eye, especially when children are involved and they are entrenched in your shared home full-time. Yet, stepmoms in relationships where a partner died can often become surprised by the number of "sneaky gotchas" which can catch us off guard:

- ▶ **Your partner enjoys playing a jazz song on the piano. You then learn he wrote it for his late wife.**
- ▶ **Your stepkids delight in playing that game their mom loved, though you don't understand or even like it.**

- ▶ **The youngest has an outburst when you fail to make a peanut butter sandwich the "right way"—the way mom did.**
- ▶ **You discover a Valentine's Day card from years ago, addressed to your partner, wedged at the back of a nightstand drawer.**
- ▶ **Extended family tag your significant other in social media posts when they honor the late wife on her birthday or death anniversary.**

After an initial optimistic or, at least, blindly blissful start in your grieving family, you'll be taken aback by some version of the realization: "Wait! Why isn't everyone else as happy as I am?" or "Why do I feel as if my stepfamily is stuck and not moving forward?" That's when the fairy tale ends and your quest to build an informed, truth-based story begins.

Your Stepfamily's Story

Many people who have lost a partner to death eventually reembrace hope, find new love and grow their families with committed companions by their sides. As the newest character in your grieving stepfamily's story, you'll need to know how the losses related to grieving a death differ from those felt after a divorce.

The losses in one situation or the other are neither better nor worse, yet they *are* different. When a parent has died, there will be no direct co-parenting battle to consume your partner's time and energy. You won't be haggling over who gets the children on the biggest holidays, either, and none of their children will be packing suitcases every other weekend.

Your stepchildren either do or will live with you full-time. You may even see an opportunity to grow and heal your family along with your partner, in ways you both agree upon. If you're a stepmom with no children of your own, you may feel as if being a "new mom" to them is your way to give back and to "have kids," too. The situation might even seem ideal.

5 Ways It Differs

Being written into a grieving family's story differs from the typical stepmom experience in a number of other ways, too. Consider what the world you're stepping into looks like through your partner's eyes—and through your stepkids' eyes. The death of a wife and a mom changes family dynamics drastically. It does that in at least five ways.

The doorway to creating a balanced family story is built on a foundation of communication and alignment with your partner

1. DUALITY.

Your partner, who's now a widower, is forever caught in the duality of loving more than one partner during his lifetime. Death of a partner was thrust upon our widowers, while divorce occurs by choice. The late partner's presence will fade to the background, eventually, but over time.

2. CONTINUED HISTORY.

When a parent divorces or disappears from their kids' lives, they're still a part of the children's history. A parent who dies is still a part of their history, as well, yet those kids are relying on prior memories and stories to keep that piece of themselves vibrant. Children of divorce are often in regular contact with both parents, yet widowers and their stepparent partners have to work at keeping the children's history with the deceased parent alive.

3. THEY'LL NEED REASSURANCE.

After the death of a parent, children of all ages typically need constant reassurance that the one parent they have left still loves them. There are no weeks or weekends "off" in your home, during which they can get that need fulfilled by the other parent. Your partner and, perhaps, you will be their go-tos.

4. SAINTHOOD.

Children tend to idolize a dead parent with intense feelings of loyalty, even raising them to the level of sainthood. So, know that a widower's kids may not easily give themselves permission to bond with even the most supportive stepmom. By contrast, kids of divorce who alternate their time between biological parents witness their parents' strengths and faux pas firsthand. They view them as real people, not as angels or saints.

5. LOSS OF PERMANENCE.

Widowers' young children are stripped of the fantasy of permanence before they're developmentally ready, while they're still rooted in concrete thinking. Depending on their ages or the circumstances of their loss, this state of mind may frighten them to the point of invading their daily thoughts. They may then wonder when the next loved one will die or disappear. Older children of widowers, while well into abstract thinking, may become more cynical and jaded about death.

Now aware of these dynamics: What can you do to help your grieving family and to care for yourself? The doorway to creating a balanced family story is built on a foundation of communication and alignment with your partner—who has his own special tale to tell.

Pushmi, Pullyu

Picture a mythical, llama-like creature with a head on each end of its body: the mythical pushmi-pullyu from Hugh Lofting's classic "Dr. Doolittle." The pushmi-pullyu is a great visual for the situation widowed parents experience while bringing new loves into the fold. One head yearns to devote energy to the couple, while the other wants and needs to stay engaged with the children. Perhaps there's even a third head peering over at the late partner's family.

The widowed parent's dilemma deepens when you come into the relationship without your own children to care for. When both partners bring children along, their energy tends to be naturally split between couple's issues and kids' issues. Childless or childfree stepmoms who have more energy to devote to their relationships may hope or expect that their spouses respond in kind.

The widower may then feel guilty no matter which way he turns his many heads. With all of these competing needs for attention, you can imagine that your significant other may not address his own grief in a timely way.

Take a gentle but direct approach to discussing what each of you wants from your relationship ...

Widowers are truly caught in the middle, dealing with a variety of feelings—from sadness to hope and everything in between.

Justin M. Yopp, PhD, a clinical psychologist with the University of North Carolina Widowed Parent Program, says: “It is understandably difficult for widowers to begin dating again. Some may be looking for intimacy while others are interested in a committed relationship. I suggest having an honest conversation on the front end so both parties are clear on the intentions of the other. This is also good practice for establishing open avenues of communication in your relationship.”

If your widower invited this romance and relationship, you may be asking: “Doesn’t that mean he’s *ready* to move forward?” The answer to this question becomes clear on a case-by-case basis with time and patience. The great news is that you can certainly support your pushmi-pullyu in his efforts to get clear about what he wants and how you can get there together. Here’s how!

- ▶ **Offer time and space.** While you can’t “do” or dictate someone else’s grief work, you can allow them time and space for it. Encourage your widowed partner to take time alone to reflect and to grieve.
- ▶ **Relax together.** Carve out regular, un-frenzied alone time *with* your partner, too. Make sure you’re able to settle in and truly talk. Relaxed blocks of time with no prescribed entertainment or activities built in are best.
- ▶ **Be honest.** Initiate honest conversation about your partner’s intentions, feelings and attitudes. Be ready and willing to share what’s in your own heart, too, through low-intensity conversation that encourages connection.

- ▶ **Be direct.** Take a gentle but direct approach to discussing what each of you wants from your relationship: intimacy, companionship, a lasting partnership, a shared parenting experience. Specifically, explore *why* you’re coupling.
- ▶ **Reflect.** Sense and assess your own states of mind with the goal of being 110-percent honest. If either of you isn’t ready to step into a committed relationship or to become a family right now, it doesn’t mean you’ll never be.
- ▶ **Move forward.** As it applies for you, discuss your mutual readiness to move forward with a bigger commitment or to continue on with what you’ve begun. Being partnered doesn’t require you to live together, get married or co-parent.

By supporting your significant other in confidently committing to new love, you help the two of you gain greater clarity around your strengths as a couple. Let your partnership rest at the core of your grieving family’s story. Hold onto it, like a talisman, when your fairy tale picture of stepfamily life begins to look unwieldy or fuzzy. ■

[*Editor’s Note:* Look for Parts II and III of this special series on navigating grief within a stepfamily in upcoming editions of *StepMom Magazine*.]

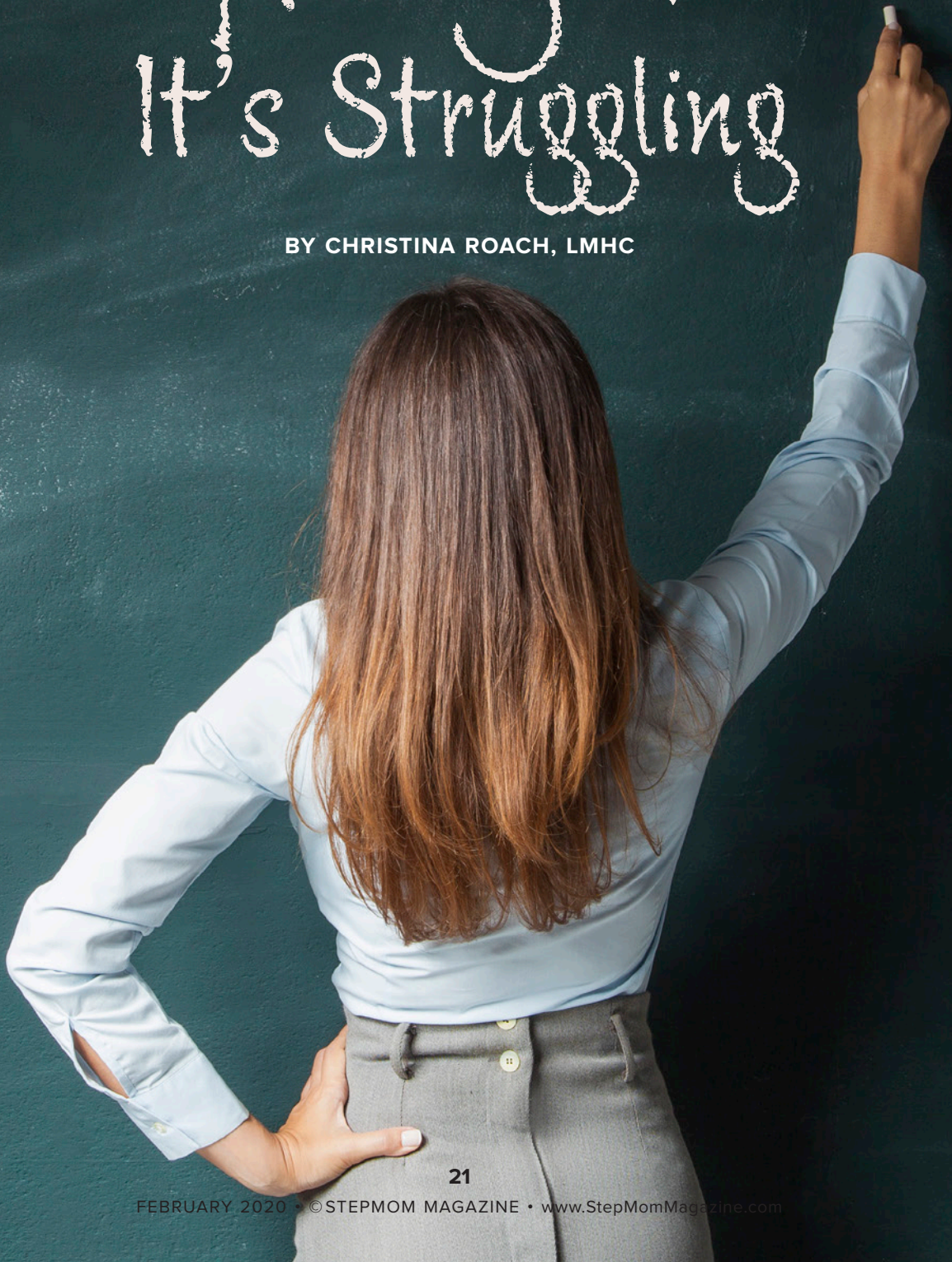


DIANE INGRAM FROMME is a grief author, a stepmom mentor and an experienced stepmom of 25 years married to a widower with children. She’s also the author of “Stepparenting the Grieving Child,” an award-winning guidebook for (step-)parents exploring life with children who have lost a parent. While guiding stepmoms and their stepfamilies through loss and hope, Diane offers them real-life advice and encouraging tips. Learn more at DianeFromme.com.

Get Back to Basics

10 Steps to Help Your Stepfamily When It's Struggling

BY CHRISTINA ROACH, LMHC



We've all done it—pulled the inconspicuous, single thread that pokes out from our favorite piece of clothing. What could it hurt, right? The next thing we know the fabric starts to unravel. What once seemed relatively insignificant now reaches catastrophic proportions. Unfortunately, stepfamily life can feel the same way.

If you've been a stepmom for some time or even if you haven't, the urge to tug at the threads of negativity which surround you can be overwhelming. Yet, if your stepfamily is struggling, hope does exist. Together with your partner, you can hit the restart button so that everything doesn't go to pieces. While the process won't always be easy, it is doable.

By going back to basics and committing yourselves to implementing the 10 steps presented here, you might just find yourselves pleasantly surprised at your ability to stitch things together in the nick of time.

Step #1: Plan Ahead.

Identify where you and your partner are butting heads, especially if it's due to a lack of planning. Then, instead of arguing, take 2 to 3 min. to discuss what each of you expects should happen. Build upon what you have in common and compromise to come up with a plan that works for you both. And, if your plans don't go according "to plan," that's OK. The goal is to get you both operating on the same, basic pattern.

Step #2: Be Appreciative.

The decision to form a stepfamily is made by adults—not by children. Compound this with the fact that there's no shared history between children and stepparents and it's no surprise that stepmom/stepchild relations can feel frigid. Saying, "Hello!" when one of you walks in a room or sharing a smile are tokens of appreciation.

Small acts like these do have a BIG impact. Remember, however, that stepfamily relationships take time to develop. Too, your tokens of appreciation may not be reciprocated. As the adults, though, you should lead by example and give the behaviors you wish to receive in return. Just avoid overdoing it.

Step #3: Communicate.

Research has found that, when discussing topics on which they disagree, stepcouples are less positive and withdraw at higher rates than their first-marriage counterparts. In other words, as partners, we validate each other less and find it harder to clarify what the actual problem is.

Add in higher levels of withdrawal and you've got a double-whammy, with neither strategy working to the benefit of your relationship. To remedy this, stepfamily couples need to have the courage to face their differences

head-on: Let one another know what things you truly appreciate and tackle areas in need of mending as a team.

Step #4: Find Your Norms.

It's the couple which determines the norms for the stepfamily. It's also the couple which determines any expectations for behavior within that stepfamily. Whether task-orientated (i.e., household chores) or relational (i.e., interpersonal communication between family members), established norms let everyone know what's acceptable and what's not.

While each stepfamily is unique, the parent will always be the parent and the stepmom will be just that: the stepmom—not a replacement mom. When your parenting styles differ, it can be difficult to present as a unified front. Regardless, it's important that the parent remain the primary disciplinarian and that, as the stepmom, you assume a supportive role.

Leading Stepfamily Researcher Patricia L. Papernow, EdD, reiterated this in her April 2016 interview with *StepMom*. (You can find that back issue at StepMomMag.com.) She stressed "connection before correction." This isn't to say a stepmom should remain silent when behaviors need to be addressed, especially if things are unraveling in your partner's absence.

It merely emphasizes the need to focus on finding ways to connect with the kids rather than on keeping them in line. If you decide not to connect with them, that's fine. Just remember that your choice of behavior models what you'd like to receive from them in return.

Step #5: Manners, Everyone!

Regardless of what feelings exist between stepfamily members, well-intentioned manners do a lot to ease tensions. It's amazing what "please" and "thank you" can do to bridge the distance felt between stepmoms and their stepkids. Manners also extend to exes whom are to be treated respectfully—especially in front of the children. Bad-mouthing on either end is a definite no-no. If tensions are high, limit your exposure and focus your communication solely on kid-related issues.

Step #6: Encourage Parenting.

It's been said that there are no ex-parents, just ex-partners. So, regardless of who's with whom: Once a parent? Always a parent. Even in cases of partial visitation, *parenting* must remain a focus while spending time with one's child. Notice the word "parenting," not entertaining. Parenting is much more than discipline; it also involves offering guidance, support and love. What better environment for children and stepchildren to learn the dos and don'ts of life than in a nurturing home?

There will be bumps in the road ... but giving focus to those little things which bring you joy will help soften some of the blows you'll encounter.

Step #7: Cool the Jets!

Exes need to behave in civil ways toward each other, particularly in front of their children. Rude behavior or trash talk are disrespectful and communicate to children that you don't respect a part of *them*. Remember: They're half Mom, half Dad. Treating either disparagingly is belittling to the child, as well. If boundaries are necessary between your partner and the ex, be sure they're set. Already have ones established—but they aren't being adhered to? Sit down with your partner and redefine them to safeguard both your relationship and your stepfamily.

Step #8: Engage Everyone.

Each member of your household has a part to play. Simply put, everyone helps out because everyone is important. Collective involvement in the simplest of tasks, such as setting the table or unloading the dishwasher, is important to conveying this message. Whether big or small, having adults and children plan and implement said tasks together communicates that each person in your home is a valuable component of the stepfamily. While children are included, however, they don't have veto power. All final decisions are made by the couple.

Step #9: Take Time Alone.

Be sure to carve out some Me Time in your schedule. Go out with friends, keep up with your hobbies. Do things other than be a stepmom. While you're at it, advocate for your partner to spend one-on-one time alone with their child(-ren). Also, have an area in the home that's strictly yours and off-limits to others. Whether it's a room or a corner, make it your own. Everyone needs and is entitled to a degree of privacy. That includes you.

Step #10: Laugh!

Between the choice of crying or laughing, aim for the latter. And, while it may seem impossible, don't allow all that's wrong to overshadow what's actually working. There will be bumps in the road—maybe even a few landmines—but giving focus to those little things which bring you joy will help soften some of the blows you'll encounter.

Don't forget what brought you together in the first place, either. In "The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work," relationship Researcher John M. Gottman, PhD, walks couples through the process of building love maps. Love maps aim to improve a couple's emotional intelligence, thus strengthening their marriage. Read a copy or learn more at Gottman.com.

The 10 steps outlined here are meant to get you back on track. As you do, allow your partner to be your trusted copilot. You're not in this alone! You both got into it and you both contribute to making any necessary changes for the better. Stitch together a life, in step, you can cherish! ■

Work with Christina!

Are you nearing the end of your rope, stepmom? Add in kids and an ex of your own and there's even less wiggle room! Ask Christina about her coaching services for life "in step."

SuccessForSteps.com



CHRISTINA ROACH, LMHC, is founder of Success for Steps® and a fellow stepmom. A certified Stepfamily Foundation Master Counselor and stepfamily professional recognized by the Nat'l. Stepfamily Resource Center, Christina offers phone and web coaching via SuccessforSteps.com.

She also sees clients in her Tampa-based private practice, as a licensed psychotherapist, and is a Nat'l. Certified Counselor and Distance Credentialed Counselor. Christina resides in Florida with her husband and their two children.

“I Married an Older Man”

.....

The Truth About Stepmoms in May/December Relationships

BY CLAUDETTE CHENEVERT



Somewhere around our third date, Bernard blurted out, “You’re so much younger than me!” I was like, “What?! Is this a problem?” Having previously cohabitated with a man 14 years older, I didn’t think twice about dating a guy eight years my senior. I thought of it as normal. I’d often found men my age to be immature and boring or too busy with their cars.

I wanted a stable relationship with someone I could depend on to be supportive and to respect me for who I was. That person also had to want to engage in meaningful conversations. So, when my son began dating a girl 10 years his junior, I didn’t think much of it. That is, not until his ex said she didn’t believe his new girlfriend was old enough to handle a tween stepdaughter.

With barely a 10 year difference in age between Sebastien’s then girlfriend and his daughter, did I need to think twice?

Who He’s Marrying

The age gap isn’t new. It’s been historically common for men to marry younger women. Major world wars killed or maimed young men, leaving mostly older men available to women. Those men then wanted to partner with young, healthy women who could bear many children.

Yet, what about today? While a wage, or earnings, gap is still prevalent between men and women, the status of the age gap is less clear. Society suggests that women seek out older partners looking for financial stability and security. Even if their partner’s kids are full-functioning adults, that’s a faulty assumption. So, who are men marrying? The PEW Research Center found that when it comes to *remarried* men:

- ▶ 20% have wives 10+ yrs. younger
- ▶ 18% have wives 6-9 yrs. younger
- ▶ 57% have wives < 5 yrs. younger

PEW also found that when it comes to newlywed men in *first* marriages:

- ▶ 5% have wives 10+ yrs. younger
- ▶ 10% have wives 6-9 yrs. younger
- ▶ 80% have wives < 5 yrs. younger

Too, more women are focusing on career and delaying childbirth—but men still want to be dads, some hoping for a second chance at fatherhood if they hadn’t taken part in their other children’s lives full-time. Marrying younger gives those men the opportunity to be more

involved alongside their new partners.

Interestingly, I found little prior research on the May/December dynamic. Most findings were opinion-based: What is or isn’t acceptable when it comes to marrying younger? I got an icky feeling just reading them, the insinuation being that those relationships are wrong or based in exploitation.

Emili’s Story

Emili Wadkins runs The Unapologetic Stepmom Facebook group.

I asked about her and her husband’s experience. Emili met Jack when she turned 23 and he was 40. He’d been divorced a few years, was ready to meet someone and wanted to be happy. At the time, Jack’s children were 7 and 9. Emili shared that, although her and her stepkids’ age differences were sizeable, she never considered herself a stepmom to Jack’s kids.

“I’m closer to my stepdaughter and have more of a stepmom role with her,” she explained. “But, my stepson? He refers to me as Dad’s wife. And I’m OK with that. Plus, the kids already had a mom.”

It was important, for Emili, to have children one day. It would’ve been a deal breaker if Jack hadn’t wanted more kids. Luckily, he did. She said her biggest challenge was dealing with age gap chatter, like comments such as “gold digger” and “Jack’s Teen Bride.” Still, she didn’t let it bother her or stop her from having a life with Jack that included children together.

Their Ages & Yours

Being called a stepmom by stepkids within 15 years of your own age may feel awkward. The reality is that relationships you build with them may differ from those other stepmoms have with their stepkids. The closer you are in age, the less likely they’ll view you as filling a parental role and the more likely they’ll view you as Dad’s wife.

You may also have less input on their behavior, at least outside of your home. A great way to foster relationships with your partner’s kids is to be yourself, since trying too hard to connect will only leave you feeling depleted. And, just like for other stepmoms, potential rifts will be more apparent if loyalty binds are an issue.

Your partner’s adult or other children may even begin to feel more loyal toward their moms if they believe their father’s relationship with you is the result of a midlife crisis. Always remember, though, that these “kids” are your partner’s responsibility and not yours. Whatever their ages and yours, your role is to support your spouse.

Some of our partners' kids will react awkwardly and others will be okay with it. Still, as a couple, set firm boundaries around how you're treated. Clarify and communicate what your specific role will be. Establish healthy expectations, for everyone, going forward. You may not interact as stepmom and stepchild, but respect is a must.

C'mon, Seriously?!

Stepmoms who are significantly younger than their partners may find it difficult to be taken seriously. Many folks seem to have and aren't afraid to voice their opinions—in public, in private or on social media—about age-discrepant versus age-congruent relationships:

- ▶ Heck, *she's* barely an adult!
- ▶ What do they have in common?
- ▶ She's just after his "money," etc.
- ▶ I don't want her watching *my* kids.
- ▶ He's going thru a phase. It won't last.

Just as Sebastien's ex once believed his now wife was too young to care for her daughter, Emili said her family was shocked by her and Jack's relationship. Her dad wasn't thrilled with the idea of his daughter being with a man 17 years her senior; it wasn't what he'd imagined for her. Emili drove home that age didn't matter as much as maturity did.

"I was ready for him and he was ready for me," she said. "When you know yourself—your personality, needs and wants—age isn't a factor. What's important is mutual respect." When I asked if she had any concerns about marrying older, she replied: "It's a double-loss feeling, you know? He's lived a lot I feel like I missed out on a lot of experiences I didn't get to live *with* him. I know that, if we look at the natural progression of life, he's likely to die before me."

... as a couple, set firm boundaries around how you're treated. Clarify and communicate what your specific role will be. Establish healthy expectations, for everyone, going forward.

.....

As he ages, you age and life without him looms larger. Other issues which can crop up involve money and inheritance. Younger stepmoms and their older partners have to address these topics, in advance, getting expert help to identify best practices and avoid major blowups later on. No matter what your age or stepfamily life stage, though, it's always complex.

If your relationship is a May/December one, make it less complex. Clearly define your role early on, have each other's backs and set healthy boundaries. Doing that will make blocking out any age-gap chatter easier. ■



CLAUDETTE CHENEVERT, aka The Stepmom Coach, works with women as they struggle to create a cohesive family life. As a speaker, author and stepfamily professional, Claudette mentors and guides stepmoms through the process of establishing a harmonious and thriving home life for their families. Her newest title, "The Stepmom's Book of Boundaries," is now available on Amazon.com and elsewhere. Learn about her coaching practice and self-study program for stepmoms at StepmomCoach.com.

FEBRUARY

Spotlight



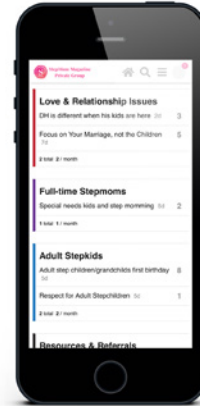
2019 Back Issues

The Complete Collection of 2019 back issues is now available online at: StepMomMag.com/subscribe-shop
Download all 12 months for only \$29.99 or single editions for \$5 each.

Private Group Forum New & Improved!

Our subscriber-only community has a brand new look and lots of new features to make chatting with other stepmoms fun and easy. Features include: Private Messaging, emojis, advanced search tools, mobile responsiveness, and more! Having a strong support system can make your life as a stepmom a lot easier. Log in and chat with other stepmoms. Private, confidential conversations with other women who get it are just a click away—and it's *free* with your subscription.

StepMomMag.com/support-group-forum

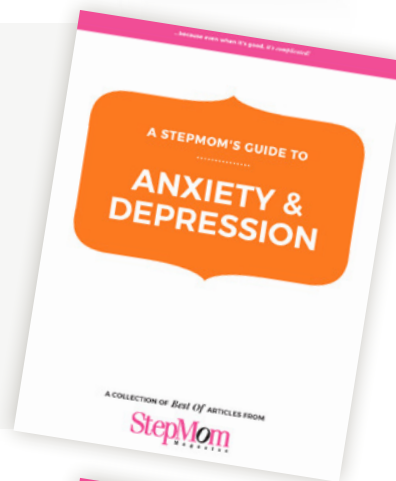


NOW AVAILABLE ONLINE

A Stepmom's Guide to Anxiety & Depression

You feel sad, angry, tense. Anxiety may as well be your new best friend. Sound familiar? In this *StepMom* "Best Of" you'll get tips, strategies and advice for dealing with—and bouncing back from—the emotional fallout of stepfamily life.

Available at: StepMomMag.com/subscribe-shop/

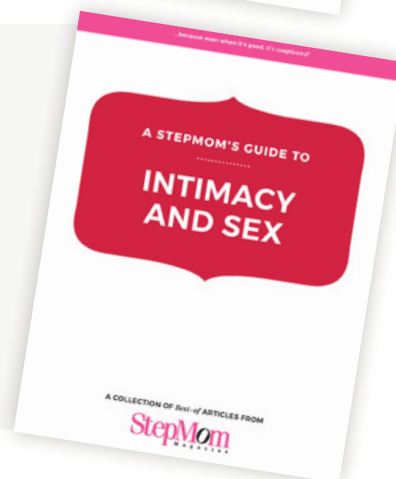


IN TIME FOR VALENTINE'S DAY

A Stepmom's Guide to Intimacy and Sex

Keep stepfamily stressors from derailing your love life. This *StepMom* "Best Of" collection features fun, informative articles on everything from garter belts and love making to lasting intimacy. It's a must-read for all stepcouples.

Available at: StepMomMag.com/subscribe-shop/



Somewhere Between Love and Hate

Conflicting Emotions Are Common in Stepfamily Life

BY LAURA L. MACK

Pat Benatar sang that “Love Is a Battlefield.” It’s a great song—one of her best performances, in my opinion. Holly Knight and Mike Chapman wrote the lyrics for it. But, if I had to pick a song that best describes stepfamily life and its complicated thoughts and feelings, it wouldn’t be that one. I think the Persuaders got it right, in 1971, with this little gem:

It’s a thin line between love and hate

**The sweetest woman in the world
Can be the meanest woman in the world
If you make her that way—you keep on hurting her
She keeps being quiet
She might be holding something inside
That really, really hurt you one day**

I don’t know about you but this song resonates with me. Rather than a battlefield, I see our relationships as playing out on a tennis court. Our emotions are the fuzzy, yellow ball that’s hit back and forth between love, hate and everything in between. Think about it: Some days things are great! You and your stepkids are hitting it off. No one is upset or fighting. The ex hasn’t called all week.

If you close your eyes, it almost feels as if your stepfamily has molded together into something you can embrace without caution. Then, without warning, it all falls apart. Either the ex is causing issues, the kids are mad-hot disrespecting you, your husband doesn’t understand why you can’t just love them as your own—or it’s a combination of all of it.

The love you felt for a split second has now been hurled over into another plane filled with anger, disappointment or even hatred. Sound familiar, girl? I’ve heard countless stories from stepmoms who say that they feel like their stepchildren’s moods change the way chameleons’ colors do. They might



be fine for one week. Or, if they have a long span of parenting time with your partner, they might settle into stepfamily life and bond with you while they’re there.

But it never lasts long. Once they leave your home? Their perspectives, loyalties and attitudes change. And it’s not always for the better. Yet, are we any different? Don’t we change, too, stepmoms? Do we feel more relaxed, less on edge and often relieved when our stepchildren go back to their mothers’ homes, especially if we don’t have good relationships with the kids?

We’re sometimes on Cloud Nine when we find out we have a free weekend, since the kids are staying at their mom’s. Do we love them yet want space, once in a while, because of the complications stepfamily life can bring? You don’t have to answer but I’ll confess that I’ve been in this awkward spot more than once.

At the end of the day, girl, you control your peace.

I remember feeling conflicted every time my stepdaughter went back to her mother's. My husband was always sad to see her go, yet I was often happy to have a few days to spend with him alone. I remember having trouble living with the guilt of knowing I should feel just as sad as he was but didn't. Or that I didn't feel that way all the time.

My stepdaughter used to run after the car and wave goodbye when we dropped her off. This is a memory that's difficult for everyone in our stepfamily to think about or to discuss at length. Sometimes we'd have to pull over down the road for a few minutes because my husband couldn't stop crying. It broke my heart. It also enraged me.

How unfair, I thought, that he couldn't have her all the time. I was like that tennis ball: bouncing, flying back and forth across the court, trapped in a juxtaposition of love and hate with nothing but blurry lines in between. The veneer that separates these two, intense emotions gets stripped away quickly at times like those. And I was often left to sort out the pile that was left behind after the winds had blown.

Lots of stepmoms I know have been accused of hating their stepkids, when it simply isn't true. My husband never used those exact words on me. He said things like, "You just resent my daughter." The truth was I resented *him*, because I didn't agree with his parenting style. Yet, even when resentment was present, I still loved him and his daughter.

Love can be complicated and difficult to navigate. I think it's harder in stepfamilies because of all of the dynamics involved. Not everyone gets along or wants to. People thrown into the mix through subsequent marriages don't always have the same values or goals. That's OK. Over the years, I've learned that I don't have to be threatened by different ideas and points of view.

Sometimes those are the things which help us learn the most about the people we love. They can even help us see that line "between love and hate" more clearly. In other relationships, that line is almost always visible and it's clear to us where we want to stand on the court. With the ex, it can be easier to give into hatred—especially if she has

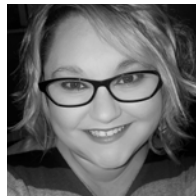
caused or is causing trouble in your home.

That was certainly the case for us. My husband and I had a high-conflict situation. As a result, no one was interested in co-parenting and my husband didn't have a say or even knowledge about important decisions related to my stepdaughter. He was the noncustodial parent who paid child support for six years. It was frustrating, hurtful and caused me to harbor more resentment and hatred than I wanted to admit for a *long* time. Admitting it, though, helped me to deal with it.

At the end of the day, girl, you control your peace. You control who you let into your headspace. Even though she might be difficult, the only place his ex has in your home and your heart is the place you give her. I still have to remind myself of this, especially now that my stepdaughter is a grown woman and sometimes tells us about her relationship with her mother.

I sometimes like to volley the tennis ball around in moments like those, particularly when I see my stepdaughter is hurting. It's hard, maybe harder than when she was a little girl, to be quiet and choose my words carefully. Sometimes? I want to come to her aid. But it's not my fight anymore. Maybe it never was and never should have been.

The blurred lines between love and hate often mean only one thing: We're unfocused because of our conflicting emotions. It's important to find balance, deal with your feelings, move forward and learn from your experiences. That way, next time, you can be the racquet instead of the ball! ■



LAURA L. MACK graduated from Ball State University with a BA in journalism in 2003 and specializes in writing contemporary romance fiction for a Christian audience. Her self-published books are available through Amazon, Kindle and Barnes & Noble online. Titles include "Full Circle," "Leather-Bound" and "Skin Deep." Laura, 38, has been married for 14 years and is a childless stepmother of one.

How I Met Your Grandma

Kids of Divorce, Family Ties & Forget Me Nots

BY KRISTA L. GIOVARA

My youngest daughter once asked me, “Do you know my Nana and Papa?” I was shocked but also had to hold back a laugh. Her dad—my ex—and I had been married 13 years, together 17. We’d had four children and had spent countless holidays and vacations with her grandparents before we divorced. How could she not remember?

Have you ever experienced this? The answer was, “Yes.” I did know her Nana and Papa. Her Grandma and Grandpa, you might say. That she felt a need to ask made me realize how *little* children, step or otherwise, remember about their childhoods. Some of it had to do with the fact that, most likely, she hadn’t seen a photo of all of us together in years.

I think it’s typical for divorced parents to scale back on the family photos once they aren’t technically a family anymore. (Not a first family, anyway.) It’s probably also common for an ex-spouse to spend less or no time at all with her former in-laws after a divorce. Therefore, having a photo of you and your ex-in-laws in the stepfamily home would be rare.

A THOUSAND WORDS

My ex and I had agreed that we’d keep at least one photo of each other of in our kids’ respective rooms. It didn’t ever cross my mind to include a photo of the grandparents, too, or a photo of all of us together pre-divorce. I’m pretty sure that was true for him, too. It wasn’t intentional, yet it makes sense of why my youngest would ask me that question.

It made me think about what kids deal with when we throw divorce their way. In an article for VeryWellFamily.com, Amy Morin, LCSW, wrote: “... research has found that kids struggle the most during the first year or two after the divorce. Kids are likely to experience distress, anger, anxiety and disbelief. But many kids seem to bounce back. They get used to changes in their daily routines and they grow comfortable with their living arrangements.”

When it came to grandparents, I was unable to



find any info about the separation between a parent and his or her former in-laws. Or how that might affect my kids or stepkids. There’s a great deal written about grandparents’ rights and their feeling cut off from their grandchildren, but ...

What I wanted to know was: How many parents, like me, had lost contact with their in-laws following their divorces? I wanted to know how to handle things now, so another kid—one of my and my current husband’s combined seven—didn’t wonder about something similar. Still, it’s not uncommon to distance yourself or grow apart from the kids’ grandparents regardless of whether or not you like them. Is it?

Terri Orbuch, PhD, a psychologist at University of Michigan, is often quoted about her study on in-laws and spouses. Regarding that relationship dynamic, she conducted a 26-year, longitudinal study of 373 couples who married in 1986. It included how close the couples felt to their in-laws throughout their marriages. Follow-up data was collected over decades.

When new husbands reported being close to their in-laws at the start of their marriages, those couples' rates of divorce were 20 percent *lower* than for the group overall. Interestingly, when it came to the wives, how close they were to their mothers-in-law had the opposite effect. Those couples' risk of divorce *increased* by 20 percent.

HAPPINESS IS? A SHORT MEMORY.

I asked each of my own kids what they remembered about life before the divorce. While I wasn't surprised by how little my younger two recalled, I was shocked by how few memories my older kids had. My kids were 9, 8, 4 and 3 when we divorced—yet, even the older two could barely remember when their dad and I were together.

A science correspondent for the “N.Y. Times,” Sandra Blakeslee, conducted a study to assess the mindsets of young children post-divorce. She found that after 10 years the youngest remembered almost nothing: “Most said they had no memory of family life before the divorce. Things remembered were fragmentary and not vivid. No child mentioned having been frightened, although that was their dominant response at the time (it occurred).”

What about your and my relationships with our ex-in-laws after divorce? I'm sure our experiences vary. I have friends who never speak to their former in-laws again, while others remain close or cordial. One friend got to know her husband's previous in-laws because they kept in touch with him, yet they told my friend she couldn't tell their daughter about it.

I also have a friend whose mother is closer to the ex-husband than she is to her own daughter. Wait—*what?! That said, it isn't surprising that kids' early memories are few and far between. My kids remembered a few holidays, a few vacations, one or two pets and that was pretty much it. All those positive family memories their dad and I tried to create for them were just pictures in an album.*

On a positive note, they also don't (consciously) recall the tense times he and I had. I'm smart enough to know that means nothing, in the long run, as to how they were affected. However, it's an interesting observation given my daughter's question.

TAKE MY ADVICE—I'M NOT USING IT

When my second husband and I got married and set up the bedrooms for our combined seven kids, I found a picture of my stepson and his mother hidden in a

drawer next to this boy's bed. I'd seen it on his nightstand, initially, but now it was shoved to the back of his drawer. I remember feeling a little sad that maybe he'd put it there because of me.

In a perfect world, we would have talked about this and maybe had an incredible bonding experience. Instead, being the new stepmom, I was fearful to overstep and simply put the picture back on his nightstand. That picture still sits there nine years later.

Some of the best advice I ever read was from Alice Marlowe, PhD, RN, at WeHaveKids.com: “By incorporating the ex-wife into the everyday conversations you have with the children—and I do not mean literally speak about her every day; I mean speak about her naturally, the way you would any person in the child's life—you give the children the opportunity to relax in their own home. (Letting them) speak about the other parent, who they love, is the decent human thing to do.”

When I reflect on that, I realize the same thing could be said for ex-in-laws. Keeping them in the general conversation is not only good karma; it could be really positive for the kids. A photo certainly couldn't hurt, either. If I'd done that early on, I would have avoided a somewhat awkward conversation with my daughter about whether or not I'd ever met her grandparents.

Give me a break, right? It's just one more thing we stepmoms have to worry about. We wouldn't be reading *StepMom Magazine* if we weren't already trying to do the best we can. Still, if you want to keep the ex-in-laws in your life? You should. If you think it's a good idea to put out a photo of them? Do it. If not, don't beat yourself up.

I'm pretty sure nobody will notice! ■



KRISTA L. GIOVARA is a blogger, a mom of four, a stepmom of three, an open-heart surgery survivor and a former *StepMom* cover girl. She hopes to reframe the way people view stepfamily life and prove that some problems can't be solved in 30

min. with her soon to be published book “Where the Hell Is Alice? Surviving (and Thriving) in a Real-Life Blended Family.” Krista, her husband and their kids live in Northern California. Visit KristaGiovara.com or connect with her on Instagram @DoubleTheFamily.

Good things
take time.
Trust the
process.

— BRENDA OCKUN
StepMomMagazine.com