



Instant Families

"You're not my REAL mum! You can't tell me what to do!" 12 year-old Kelly shouted. The door slammed as the words pierced her stepmother's heart.

Such screams echo in thousands of homes everyday, including — more and more often — Christian homes, splintering relationships and shattering dreams of blissful family life.

By 1990, one in every six children in the United States was living in a reconstituted or "blended" family. If the trend continues, within a few years families with stepchildren will outnumber families raising their own children.

As in nearly all families, the bulk of the child rearing falls upon the stepmother. "If anybody had told me it would be this difficult, I never would have gotten into it," Kelly's stepmother said with a sigh.

While not all relationships include such stormy scenes, the role of stepmother is draining and demanding. As one Christian stepmother said, "Being a stepmum is harder than biological parenting, and the delights are fewer."

So how does a Christian stepmother cope?

When I first joined the ranks of stepmothers several years ago (I married a widower with a five-year-old daughter), nothing had prepared me for the daily realities of being a stepmother. I learned in a hurry.

Like Nehemiah of the Old Testament, I "*consulted with myself*", searched Scripture, interviewed pastors and family counsellors, and compared experiences with dozens of others raising their spouse's child. Here are 10 practical guidelines that apply the grace of Jesus Christ to the hard work of step-parenting.

First, keep a close, open relationship with your spouse.

While it's true that marriage and children arrive at the same time for a blended family, the marriage is still the primary relationship and therefore must be nurtured. The failure rate for second — and third — marriages tops the divorce rate for first marriages. Often the strain of raising children is too much for a remarried couple.

"It was the children — not my husband — that I wanted to divorce," one Christian step-mum told me. "They continually drove a wedge between us at home and nearly destroyed our marriage and each other."

Seek counselling, if necessary, to build skills in communicating feelings. Clarify and deal with issues before they become full-blown problems. Make decisions together.

Second, lower your expectations.

Dreams of "one big happy family" often set up stepmothers for a big downfall, resulting in bitterness, jealousy and guilt. It takes from two to five years for a stepfamily to begin to emerge. Be patient. Start out by trying to establish a friendship based on trust. As respect for you grows, your authority will become an earned privilege, rather than an instant right, as it is in biological parenting.

Third, agree on a plan of discipline.

Alone with your mate, develop a plan, then present a united front to the children. At least initially, the major part of discipline should be administered by the natural parent, who must clarify to the children that the step-parent possesses authority to discipline in his or her absence.

In the case of divorce, children suffer greatly by bouncing between households where standards of behaviour differ. When co-parenting with the “ex”, try hard to maintain consistency and avoid an emotional tug-of-war.

Discipline in a blended family includes combating an almost universal phenomenon: the “poor little thing” syndrome. This occurs when children are not held accountable for their behaviour in an attempt to “make up” for the painful realities of life.

As one Christian stepmum relates: “At a large family gathering soon after our marriage, my husband was criticised by a relative for landing a well deserved slap on the hand of his misbehaving child. That same relative later told me it seemed harsh — even cruel — to discipline a child who had ‘been through so much’.” If left unchecked, such an attitude guarantees the creation of a spoiled youngster.

Fourth, accept your children and the reality of your situation.

A difficult aspect of step-parenting is accepting a child’s looks, personality, habits, manners, behaviour, style of dress, speech, choice of friends and feelings — all of which you had nothing to do with. You might not even like these children, who may resent and reject you. But you have accepted some degree of responsibility for their care.

“When I first dealt with unacceptable behaviour in my stepchild, I caught myself thinking, ‘If I had reared him from birth, I wouldn’t have allowed this in the first place,’” one stepmum recalled. “But I discovered only resentment and a ‘poor me’ attitude result from that kind of thinking.”

Another stepmum advised, “Don’t expect to ‘live happily ever after’. No family does. Time spent wishing you were in a ‘normal’ situation, or that your family were like the Brady Bunch, is wasted.”

Fifth, let an attitude of love — not merely feelings — direct your behaviour.

“I thought I should be able to love my husband’s children just because they were his children,” one Christian stepmum told me. “It relieved me of so much guilt to realise it wasn’t my feelings so much as my actions and attitudes toward them that mattered.”

An intense feeling of love for step children may never come. That’s okay. Keeping a child’s best interest at heart and acting in loving ways represents the best of parenting.

Sixth, view your role of stepmother as a ministry.

Motherhood in any dimension can be the purest form of discipleship — nurturing and guiding a young life in your own home.

Jesus said, “*Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me*” (Matt. 18:5). When loving is hard, treat the child as though Jesus Himself stood before you. Imagine Christ asking you to love this child for Him. “I’ll do this for You, Lord” has helped many a stepmother over a rough spot.

It also helps to find something to admire in each child daily. Tell him or her about it, too. “Some days I was reduced to commending my stepson for his colour choice in clothing” one stepmum said with a smile, “but I always found something positive to say.”

Seventh, practise forgiveness.

You will have to learn to forgive your stepchildren, your husband, the other influential adults in your blended family, any interfering in-laws, those who gossip about and criticise you, yourself, and — in short — everybody.

Yet forgiveness does not keep you from stopping continued disruption of your family. Confrontation may be necessary.

“At one point we were forced to tell my husband’s parents that we could not allow them to continue to question our calls from the side-line,” one stepmum said. Stage such a confrontation with love and respect, acknowledging the contributions made to the child’s life up to this point, but insisting that the future relationship will be determined by their fitting into your family.

Realise that all the responsibility for the success of your blended family does not rest on you alone. Every problem your stepchild faces does not stem from the fact that he is a stepchild. “Don’t take all the credit; don’t take all the blame,” a wise mother once said.

Sometimes, no matter how hard you try, a relationship between a stepmum and a child will go sour. Be assured that you gave it your best effort before God and leave the result to Him.

Eighth, take time for yourself.

Your life involves more than your role as a stepmum. The pressing needs of a blended family can sap you physically, emotionally and spiritually. Refresh yourself in time alone with God, with special friends and with a hobby or sport you enjoy.

To increase your confidence and broaden perspectives, take a class, read all the books by a favourite author, volunteer at a hospital or start a stamp collection. Choose a relaxing activity that will reduce stress in your life. Balance is your goal.

Ninth, seek support.

Pastors and counsellors agree: “It’s a tough ball game; it’s going to be hard. Expect a struggle.”

You will need support, someone in whom you can confide, someone who will listen non-judgmentally and accept you unconditionally. Step parenting can be a lonely job. A support group will help fulfil Paul’s admonition in Galatians 6:2 to bear one another’s burdens. “I have an ongoing support group of four women that hold me accountable and love me through the tough times” one stepmum confided.

Tenth, build a strong relationship with God and other believers.

Saturate yourself in Bible study and prayer. Ask God to fill in the gaps for you. He alone understands all your feelings, triumphs and defeats. He alone guides you over those rocky spots. And He alone keeps your secrets.

Involvement with other believers helps in a practical way. If you’re part of a loving Christian community, helping to meet the needs of others, it will be more natural to take responsibility for the nurturing and care of children other than your own.

One stepmum quoted her favourite Scripture: “And it came to pass” — not stay! Time passes, children grow up, circumstances change.

My husband asked me the other day if, knowing what I know now, I would do it all over again. I know some people, like Kelly’s stepmum, who would not.

I thought about it just long enough to scare him, then answered with great certainty, “Oh, yes!”

Then a flood of memories hit me: some of the questions about my stepdaughter’s early childhood that I couldn’t answer; the close scrutiny of our relationship by curious, sometimes judgmental observers; and the odd sensation of being both bride and instant mother. But I have also learned that life in a blended family can be just the instrument God uses to make you a “real” mum, in every sense of the word.

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