

## Family Tapestries Strengthening Family Bonds



### Fact Sheet

## The Wicked Stepmother Myth

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As we move into the twenty-first century, it is predicted that the stepfamily will be the family of the future. Today, one of every four children is a stepchild. Even though more and more research is being conducted on the stepfamily, there is little evidence which suggests the myth of the wicked stepmother is changing. Stepmothers in our culture are surrounded by myths. These myths make it difficult for the stepmother to “blend” into a new family and succeed in her new role. The two most prevalent myths are the evil stepmother and instant love.

### Myth 1: The Evil Stepmother

There are over 900 stories written about evil or wicked stepmothers. They are particularly common in fairy tales, which suggest that stepmothers are comparable to wild animals and supernatural beings that treat children wickedly. In the past, the stepmother’s role was to replace the child’s biological mother who had died. Many of these bad examples are seen in such stories as “Cinderella” and “Snow White” where children are portrayed as victims who hate their stepmothers.

### Myth 2: Instant Love

The myth of instant love claims that remarriage creates an instant family where stepmothers should (and will) automatically love their

stepchildren and the stepchildren should (and will) love her back. Hence, mothering should come naturally and easily to a stepmother. In reality, establishing relationships takes time and it won’t happen overnight; for some families, love never does happen. Still, many stepmothers are surprised and troubled when they don’t feel immediate love for their stepchildren.

### Effects of These Myths on Stepmothers

Stepmothers have the most difficult role in the stepfamily and research has shown that stepmothers have the most negative image of any family member. They were perceived as being less affectionate, good, fair, kind, loving, happy, and likeable and more cruel, hateful, unfair, and unloving. Stepmothers report these myths make it more difficult for them to be good stepparents and have caused them a lot of stress in adjusting to stepfamily life. What can be done to change these images?

### The Ground Rules

Here are some points to help stepmothers and stepfamilies deal with some of the problems these myths present.

- **Prepare for the stepmother role.** Gathering information about their new family before the marriage can help stepmothers with relation-

ships, family dynamics, and avoid problems later on.

- **Stepmothers should begin their new roles as they intend to live them.** From day one, stepmothers should insist on courtesy and respect. It's hard to make positive changes if these things don't happen at the beginning of a relationship with children and other family members.
- **Stepmothers are not and will never be the children's mother.** Stepmothers occupy a role that once belonged to someone else. Negativity is usually directed toward the new person, so stepmothers should try to not take these negative feelings personally. These negative feelings would be projected upon anyone who took the absent mother's place. But children should be assured that a stepmother plays a different role although she may have some "mothering" responsibilities.
- **There are no ideal role models for this job.** Every stepmother situation is unique and there is no "normal" way of doing things. Myths, fairy tales, and negative statistics about stepmoms should be ignored. The stepmother role should be based on what's comfortable for her, the children, and the family as a whole.
- **Stepmothers will always share their husband with his children for the rest of their married life.** A strong bond may exist between a husband and his children from a prior marriage. Jealousy can be avoided if stepmothers realize and accept this early in the relationship.
- **The marriage should be the priority.** If the couple doesn't work on their marriage, nothing the stepmother does will work. A united front—the husband and wife—must come first before relationships can be built with the rest

of the family. When couples have the support and love of one another, they can function at the most favorable levels to help the rest of the stepfamily members.

- **It's not unreasonable if stepmothers don't love their stepchildren or vice versa.** Stepmothers shouldn't feel guilty if they don't immediately feel love and affection for their stepchildren. It takes time to build relationships. Family members should treat each other with respect and fairness, remembering that it is possible to be caring and nurturing, even if there are not great feelings of mutual love.
- **Develop a working relationship with the stepchildren's mother.** Stepmothers can benefit from talking to and sharing with the other mother. The two mothers don't have to like each other, but it is helpful if they can work together for the welfare of the children.

The stepmother/stepchild relationship is one of the most difficult family relationships to develop and maintain. Families need to communicate and work together to dispel the myth of the wicked stepmother so their family relationships can begin to grow.

## References and Resources

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