



# FACT SHEET

## Family and Consumer Sciences

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# The Stepmother's Role in a Blended Family

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**S**tepfamilies today make up a large portion of our population. More people today live in stepfamilies than live in nuclear families. Fifteen percent of children (more than 10.6 million) lived in a stepfamily and about half of these children lived with at least one step-parent (Kreider & Fields). The stepmother role typically tends to be more difficult than the stepfather role mainly because of the contradictions in expectations for stepmothers. On one hand, a woman is supposed to take on a motherly role—taking care of children and housework—but the stepmother role expects that she remain more distant. This can be a real dilemma for a stepfamily because a stepmother can't be close and distant at the same time.

### **Myths about Stepmothers**

Stepmothers in our culture are surrounded by myths. These myths make it difficult for the stepmother to blend into her new family and succeed in her new role. The two most prevalent myths are the evil stepmother and instant love.

### ***The Evil Stepmother***

There are more than 900 stories written about evil or wicked stepmothers. They are particularly common in fairy tales, such as “Cinderella” and “Snow White,” in which children are portrayed as victims who hate their stepmothers.

Many stepfamilies are subjected to conditions and situations that can easily create negative feelings in a new stepfamily. Many children resent their stepmothers simply because she is someone who is a threat and is taking their mother's place. Children can be obsessive about their father while jealously guarding the memory of their mother. In addition, if the parents don't agree on the roles of disciplinarian and the biological father fails to take responsibility for disciplining the children, this sets the stage for the stepmother to become the “evil” stepmother.

### ***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 won't happen overnight; it takes many years for a blended family to mesh. For some families, love never does happen. Still, many stepmothers are surprised and troubled when they don't feel immediate love for their stepchildren.

Another thing to consider is the fact that for stepmothers, their new husband comes with children. There is no honeymoon period to ease into the ideas of having a child together. The child also has no choice and may be struggling with his or her own feelings about a “new mother.” When stepmothers try to reach out to their stepchildren, they may be stonewalled with “You're not my mother.” A stepmother may also struggle with feelings of jealousy and insecurity about her husband's involvement with his children. These feelings can lead to destructive co-parenting and cause a breach between the stepmother and the stepchildren.

## Ground Rules

What can be done to help change these myths? Here are some points to help stepmothers and stepfathers 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 relationships, 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. The new couple should communicate and back each other up in making this work. 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 and 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 and 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 children 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 new stepmother will face many challenges, but if her husband supports and includes her, if her marriage is strong, and she has the capacity to endure in the face of rejection, the family relationship can grow and strengthen over time.

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