

BREAKING THE *Stepmother* STEREOTYPE

Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairy-tale villain we love to hate most of all? Turns out, it's the wicked stepmother. But how does that affect modern-day stepmums, and can it be overcome? Angela Boshoff-Hundal finds out...



I WAS A SHY AND SENSITIVE SIX-YEAR-OLD THE FIRST TIME I MET MY STEPMOTHER. My parents had just been through a nasty separation and I was staying at Caroline's house – well, my father's new house, although I wasn't ready to call it that yet – so I could spend some time with my dad. The only thing I thought I knew about stepmums at the time – thanks to an impressive collection of fairy tales on my bookshelf – was that they were wicked, so I was all tummy knots and butterflies when my dad and I climbed out of the car in the driveway. Needless to say, my guard was up... But when she handed me a bowl of cheesy popcorn and led me to her bedroom to watch (ironically) *Cinderella* from the safety of her very large and comfortable bed, I soon began to realise her house was more Narnia than Mordor.

After that first weekend I began to look forward to spending time with her. In the summer, the swimming pool was our main rendezvous point, and Caroline was the person who first taught me how to dive. In the winter we'd drink real hot chocolate and cuddle up in bed reading Roald Dahl or, when she was cooking, I'd sit on the kitchen steps singing as she chopped and stirred and sliced.

But out of everything we did together, the thing I loved the most was playing Scrabble, Trivial Pursuit and made-up word games – all of which she always let me think I was winning. Caroline, an ex-TV and radio presenter, copywriter and avid reader, adored anything to do with words, and while I may not have inherited any of her physical traits, she certainly passed on her love of locution. My passion for writing – something that kicked off at about the time I met her – was something she took great joy in. She would gently correct my spelling and grammar, encouraging me to 'just imagine'. Looking back now, at 32, I realise she's really the reason I studied journalism. She's really the reason I'm writing this article today.

Negative connotations

So, as you can tell, Caroline wasn't wicked at all. Most stepmothers aren't, but research shows that many of them are having a pretty tough time when it comes to integrating into new families – much more so than stepfathers anyway. One of the culprits is the very thing that made six-year-old me

think Caroline might be evil in the first place – fairy tales. Let's face it, if there's one villain society loves to hate it's the wicked stepmother. A staple of fairy-tale tradition, you'll find her lurking on the pages of everything from *Snow White* to *Cinderella* and *Hansel and Gretel*. Type the words 'wicked stepmother' into your search engine today and you'll be met with a slew of stories advising women on how to banish the stereotype.

But it's not just fairy tales that are making it tough for stepmothers. Multiple global studies reveal that they are under more pressure and get much less support than other stepfamily roles. This, paired with the social expectation that women are meant to be more nurturing and better with kids than men, sets many up for failure from the get-go.

"Stepmums have significantly less support [than those in other stepfamily roles], particularly from wider family and friends," says Dr Lisa Doodson, author of *How to Be a Happy Stepmum*. "While support from partners is generally good, grandparents often want to maintain their relationship with their grandchildren, so they keep a good relationship going with the ex-wife, often leaving the stepmother feeling isolated and second best.

"It's believed that stepmothers also struggle more due to the demands placed on them by society, and themselves. The role of the mother is clear and stepmothers are often expected to play the same part for their

stepchildren. Stepfathers, in comparison, are expected to be the provider, which has less of an emotional impact."

Dr Thoraiya Kanafani, clinical psychologist and director of clinical services at Dubai's Human Relations Institute and Clinics believes that no matter the sex of the parties involved, step-parenting can be taxing. "Being a step-parent can be complicated and it's common for one to feel lost and confused during the initial phase of integration," she says. "Sometimes step-parents jump into the parental role too soon, unintentionally creating conflict, or they may try to discipline the children too soon, failing to develop individual relationships and not setting clear rules and routines."

A bonus not a replacement

One of the ways stepmums can improve the chances of a good relationship with their stepchildren is by forming an alliance »

"The lack of support, plus the expectation that women are meant to be more nurturing than men, can set stepmums up for failure."

with the biological mother. Dr Kanafani says that – putting all emotional complications aside – it’s really important for the birth parents to understand that the new union creates loss, as well as a loyalty struggle. “Children experiencing the loss of a biological parent may feel as though they’re betraying them if they accept the step-parent,” she explains. “No matter how tough it may be, it’s absolutely vital for the biological parent and the step-parent to open a line of clear communication between the kids and the new couple, so everyone can express themselves. At times it may even be necessary for the biological parents to check in with the children, to make sure they understand that the step-parents aren’t going to break the bond between them. They need to create the idea that a step-parent is a bonus, not a replacement.”

Impact on the children

As much as it might make sense to play happy families between biological and step-parents, surely that’s easier said than done – especially in the case of a divorce, where people’s emotions tend to get heated?

“When things go south it’s vital to remember that the children are the focus and that keeping their best interests at heart is the main priority,” Dr Kanafani says. “Unfortunately some biological parents will try to undermine the step-parent, but this really isn’t the right approach. One of the ways adults can ensure the new set-up is working for everyone is by making sure that each person’s roles are clear and that the guidelines the family will follow are established before implementing them for the children. They should create a working alliance that is clear to the children.”

Indeed, in all the chaos of the breakdown of old relationships and the forging of new ones, it’s easy to forget that the children are going through a rough time too.

“It’s hard to pinpoint what the most difficult thing is for a child to deal with in this type of situation, because each age differs in terms of adjustment and development,” Dr Kanafani says.

“Usually children under the age of 10 adjust more easily, since they flourish in cohesive relationships and would prefer that the new one thrive, while children between 10 and 14 may find it most difficult to adjust



“The children have experienced a family breakdown and are grieving. A ‘replacement’ won’t be accepted quickly”

to a step-parent, as they tend to need more time to accept the new situation and are sometimes more sensitive to family dynamics. Teenagers from age 15 and up don’t seem to involve themselves much with the family as they are forming their own identities. Whatever the case, most children who are facing the addition of a new step-parent experience a fear of losing, forgetting, or betraying their birth parent.”

A smooth transition

So what’s the best way of making sure the transition is as smooth as possible for everyone? Dr Kanafani says that communication is the only way forward when building a healthy family unit.

“It’s up to the biological parent to empower the step-parent by communicating to the children that they expect them to show the new addition the respect they deserve,” she says. “If the parent doesn’t agree with the step-parent’s approach or behaviour,

it is important to maintain a united front in front of the kids and then discuss the matter behind closed doors later. If the children are being disrespectful, the parent should speak up in a way that’s firm but still indicates that they’re open to listening to their views.”

Doodson agrees, advising that step-parents take things slowly and build respect and shared experiences in the family. “The children have experienced a family breakdown and are still grieving for the family they’ve lost. Accepting a ‘replacement’ is not going to happen quickly, particularly for older kids.”

She adds that no matter the situation, establishing a healthy stepfamily takes time.

“It can be several years before everyone is totally comfortable and secure in the new family unit. I think it’s important for step-parents to take time to get to know their stepchildren, and for the children to get to know them. There are no rules in this kind of situation so adults need to talk about how the new family will operate; for example, will the stepmum help in the day-to-day care of the children? Will she help with bedtime for younger children? Will she be involved in school activities?”

Lisa says that while there is no definitive answer, the grown-ups need to work together and remember the bigger picture to avoid ongoing conflict.

“For step-parents, being consistent in the treatment of their stepchildren is really important, as is working with Mum and Dad to make sure they share their views and agree on family rules and responsibilities. In the early phase of the relationship it’s vital that the biological parent support the step-parent in their interactions with the stepchildren so that they can build their confidence and self-esteem.”

A big bowl of cheesy popcorn and videos on repeat probably won’t do any harm either. **AQ**

7 tips for step-parents

Clinical psychologist and director of clinical services at Dubai’s Human Relations Institute and Clinics, Dr Thoraiya Kanafani, says these steps will help biological parents and step-parents make the transition into a blended family much easier for everyone

1 Acknowledge that there has been a loss in the family.

2 Communicate openly and often.

3 Build the new family unit one step at a time and

make sure to keep having one-on-one time with the children.

4 Talk about the discipline roles and be consistent

with what everyone decides. I recommend that

the biological parents take care of the discipline in the beginning.

5 Be sure to maintain a united front.

6 Create new traditions while still honouring

old ones, especially if one of the parents has passed away.

7 Keep your marriage healthy by making sure you spend quality time with each other.

STEPMUM STORIES

When it doesn’t work out

Sally Joseph* believes that jumping into the role of stepmother too quickly is what led to the breakdown of her marriage. “Julie, my ex-husband’s daughter, was 23 when we got married,” she says. “When Julie lost her job I suggested that she come and live with us, much to my ex’s surprise. I know it sounds crazy, but I was secretly pleased she wasn’t working. I was a housewife and I thought that if she came to live with us, we could bond. I pictured girls’ nights out, spa days and shared family dinners. But it didn’t really turn out that way.”

Sally and Julie’s frequent screaming matches resulted in silent feuds that lasted days. Julie’s father became a shadow of his former self, skulking on the outskirts of the dark female territory Sally and Julie had claimed.

“He would tiptoe around the house as we sat – often in opposite ends of the house – hating each other,” Sally says. “I felt awful for him but I knew there was nothing I could do to make him feel better, at least not while Julie was living with us, which was entirely my fault to begin with. I began to resent him for not stepping in and standing up for me. In the end, his fatherly love won out and he told me that he needed to be with someone who could love his daughter as much as he did. We divorced a year later.”

Looking back, Sally says she thinks that becoming a stepmother later in life – without having had any children of her own – pushed her into putting added pressure on herself to be the perfect stepmum straight off. “I think I overwhelmed Julie with attention and, when I realised what I’d done, backed off from enforcing much-needed boundaries for fear of seeming too harsh,” she says. “If I ever marry someone with children again, I’ll definitely go slower when it comes to building a relationship.”

When it goes well

For other women, making the transition to becoming a stepmum is a lot easier. Cynthia Bartholomew officially became one to her stepdaughter Maddy (12) four years ago when she got married to Maddy’s father, although she says she feels she really became “her second mum or guardian” when Maddy was about four years old.

“Maddy and I clicked almost instantly, but bonding was something that she and I worked on through the years,” Cynthia says. “She is the most loving girl I know. While adjusting to the situation was difficult, she was so easy to get along with, which made things a lot easier for me.”

Having her own baby somewhat changed things for the family though. “There were a few tense moments after I gave birth to her brother. I was suffering from postnatal depression and while everybody was affected, Maddy was especially so. She was very excited about having a little brother but her dad and I weren’t really there to share that moment. It’s been two years since then but I know that it’s left a scar on Maddy’s heart, which I regret, big time. My relationship with her is good, but we all have to try really hard to get it back to the one we had before I had my baby.”