

SOMETHING NEW

YOU, HIM, HIS CHILDREN

How You Can Become One Family

Americans are in love with marriage. Today, about 80 percent of divorced and widowed men marry, so a woman's chances of wedding one who's already walked down the aisle are much greater than they were 15 years ago. More and more, these brides and grooms gain not only a new spouse, but also that spouse's children from a previous marriage. How common is this? According to the U.S. Census Bureau (1980), six and a half million youngsters were part of stepfamilies. I added myself to the stepmother ranks in April 1977, when I married Michael, a 37-year-old with daughters, ages six and seven. When I first met Jenny and Shannon in 1976, I was 23. Michael and I lived in Philadelphia then (he'd been divorced for three years), while the girls lived with their mother in Montreal. Every woman (or man) marrying a person with children may share the same concerns I had at that time: How will the children influence life with my new mate? How will I relate to the children? How can I minimize some of the inherent conflicts in becoming a stepparent?

STEPPING INTO THE RELATIONSHIP

Unlike some "blended" families, the girls would live with Michael and me only during summer vacation and at Christmas. But even before the wedding, I wondered how it would feel sharing my time and attention. I knew I'd have to accept the reality that I wouldn't always be first in his life. A loss of privacy is inevitable with children in your

by Betsy Storm

life. I think one finds ways to adapt to this. Stepparents need time alone together, stresses Dr. Selma Miller, Ed.D., national board member of the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists. If a new stepmother sacrifices private time with her husband in order to please her stepchildren, she may feel like an outsider in her own home. After the marriage, I found I experienced this whenever the girls would nab Michael to play cards the minute he returned from a long day at the office. Our solution: Sometimes Michael spent time alone with the girls, but when possible, he and I found a quiet 30 minutes together—sharing a drink, reviewing the day, and talking privately without two little voices chiming in.

Another adjustment the stepmother experiences is being the second wife, one who sees her husband's children as a symbol of his former love for another woman. Dr. Miller explains that as the new couple build their own life together, this jealousy usually subsides. But in the beginning, a stepparent sometimes feels like a "fifth wheel." Other family members may reminisce about fun times they shared. I often felt like a long-distance observer when Michael or the girls would mention a great experience they'd all been through, like camping in Canada. Now that I've traveled with the girls, I feel we've built our own separate mental scrapbook.

My concern about sharing my husband began long before I met his daughters—and it was resolved. But there were issues I hadn't anticipated that emerged once I became acquainted with the girls—and certainly after we married. As a newlywed, however, my love for Michael was so strong I believed that together we could do anything. Romantic as it is, this belief is still paramount in building both one's confidence as a stepparent and a rapport with your stepchildren.

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

Michael prepared the girls for our first meeting by telling them they were having dinner with a friend of Daddy's. "Kids are used to meeting all kinds of people," says Jeannette Lofas, founder of the Stepparent Foundation (Continued on page 104)



Bob Hiemstra



Continued from page 88

in Manhattan. "They're comfortable with the word 'friend'. It's not good to burden a child with a heavy introduction like, 'Here's my girlfriend, Mary. She's going to be your new stepmother.'" The children weren't the least bit nervous about meeting me. I, on the other hand, behaved as if preparing for the Inaugural Ball! Three outfits were rejected before I settled on a casual look. My hair was washed, conditioned, brushed and combed for an hour, until I decided it looked properly "natural." Twenty minutes before the trio arrived, I ran to the deli to buy 7-up, in case the cola in the refrigerator wasn't the preferred soft drink of Michael or the girls.

Much to my surprise, the girls were friendly and relaxed. However, a stepmother friend of mine, whom I'll call Claudia, wasn't so fortunate. After meeting her fiancé's three stepsons, she was barely treated to a single hello. While Claudia was hurt by their coolness, her good sense alerted her to the first law of becoming a new stepparent: Don't rush it and don't push. As Ms. Lofas says: "The classic tendency is to overdo because people want to be liked. It's much better to sit back, relax, and just be with the child. Remember that he might be nervous, too."

During the girls' visits, Michael and I observed each other's parenting styles. As the natural parent, his style dominates—and it should. I appreciated the respect he gave my opinions though. For example, I'm an admitted *Dallas* fan, but believe the show is strictly adult fare. When the girls wanted to watch it, claiming "we always do it at home," I told Michael privately that I didn't think it was a good idea. While Michael didn't mind if the girls saw the show, he understood my objection and told the girls they

should involve themselves in another activity while the program was aired.

Michael and I decided that he alone should tell the girls about our wedding. To my delight, Jenny and Shannon were excited. Michael called from Montreal to report on their reaction, and the girls picked up the telephone to offer congratulations. Then, as planned, we asked them to be our ring bearers. I'm convinced that this, more than any other action, helped them feel excited about their role in this new family.

The success of a blended family's relationship depends on the attitude and personality of the child's natural parent, says Dr. Miller. Happily, Michael and his ex-wife, who hasn't remarried, had an amicable divorce. She was glad to help with travel plans and other details. If she had deprived the children of participating in their father's wedding, she would have only ended up hurting them, and forcing them to choose between their parents.

THOSE INEVITABLE JEALOUSIES

On the big day, the little ones did some scene-stealing, met family and friends, and helped cut the cake. Afterwards, the girls headed home to Montreal, warmed by the feeling of a shared experience. But months later, when reunited under day-to-day circumstances, I wondered if they would feel the undercurrents of jealousy that are part of many steprelationships.

The resentment is normal. First, a stepmother is someone with whom they must share their father's love. Second, the children may be confused by another mother figure. "It's difficult," says Dr. Miller, "but the stepparent should try to accept these feelings and not force closeness with the children. Don't try to make them love you. These jealousies usually work themselves out, but it takes time."

My own experience shows Dr. Miller's advice to

be true: When the girls first began visiting, it was important for them to spend plenty of time alone with their dad. How did we form our bond? In simple ways: talking, taking day trips, and working on crafts and cooking projects, such as a special Father's Day dinner.

Of course, everything isn't always idyllic. Once the girls tried to convince Michael and me that sleeping would be more fun if we all piled into our queen size bed! Jenny and Shannon were used to sleeping with Michael when they spent weekends with him. When this awkward situation arose, Michael, a fast thinker, gently explained to the girls that it would be uncomfortable (in more ways than one), but invited them to join us in the morning. A perfect solution, and Dr. Miller agrees: "I'd say to the child, 'It sounds like you want a snuggle time. I think it's a good idea, but we'll have to find a convenient time. How about Friday night, while we're all watching TV?'"

Along with the rivalry, a child's anger intensifies if the stepmother attempts to fill the natural mother's role. My friend Claudia solved the conflict this way: "I let them know, in an unspoken way, that I understood their mother was a special person to them. Certainly, I perform some 'motherly' duties, like cooking and the laundry, but I'm not maternal." Claudia has since built a stronger rapport with the boys.

When stepchildren approach their teens, the parent is on good chronological ground to act as sister/aunt/confidante. Jenny and Shannon are 11 and 12 now. They're curious about their changing bodies, interests, and personalities, and love hearing about my "firsts"—parties, dates, feelings on becoming a woman.

Based on Dr. Miller's experience, "Younger children usually accept a stepparent easily because they like anyone who is friendly and

(Continued on page 120)

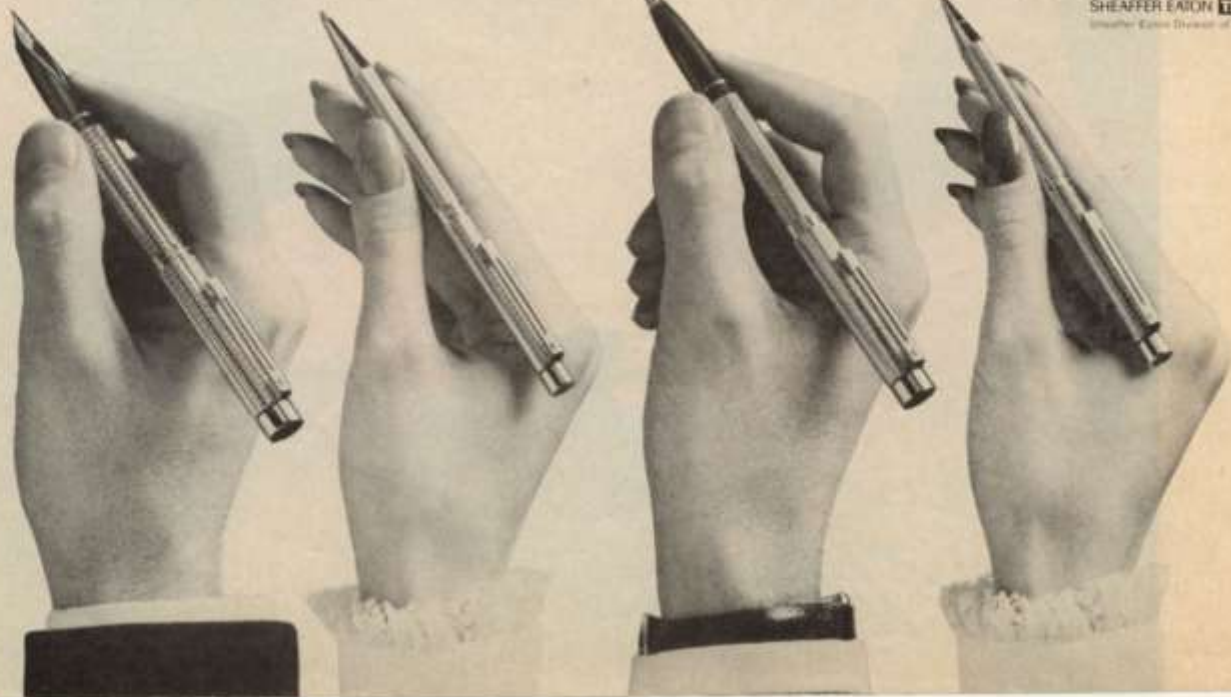
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cares for them. Adolescents often see a stepparent as an intruder. They're used to having their parent to themselves, and are going through so many changes."

Don't dwell on the problems you have with a child. Instead, put yourself in his shoes for a minute and think about qualities possessed by an adult you admire. According to Dr. Miller, building a good rapport requires that the stepparent take a cue from the child's personality and style. If the child is very social and has lots of friends, don't force her into spending a lot of time with you. In other words, respect a child as you would like her to respect you.

HANGING IN THERE

Regardless of a child's age, discipline presents one of the major problems in a stepfamily. It's important for the natural and the stepparent to be united regarding "the rules of the house." In simple terms, discipline often centers on what Ms. Lofas calls "jerk work"—that endless trail of dirty dishes, puzzle pieces, and discarded shoes. It's the rare and saintly stepmom who's willing to act like a maid.

Although very young children can't contribute much to daily housekeeping, I still have nothing but respect for a document called the Stepfamily Constitution, one of Ms. Lofas's innovations. A written agreement drawn up by all family members, it details roles, household responsibilities, even acceptable behavior. "It sounds like an unnatural concept, and it is," Ms. Lofas explains. "Natural families have years to evolve. But with a stepfamily, everything is instant. There's a blank slate that must be written on. The good news is, a stepfamily who is willing

to work on solutions can write a slate that's effective for all its members."

However, Dr. Miller, who counsels many stepfamilies, has mixed feelings about the Stepfamily Constitution. "It's great for families who try to cooperate. But where there's a lot of anger, the document could become just one more vehicle to fight over," she says.

Instead, Dr. Miller recommends minimal discipline, at least in the beginning of a step relationship. She suggests dealing with only essential problems, like those where danger might be involved—when a child is playing near traffic. Why does she advocate a laissez-faire approach? "There's enough tension in trying to establish a good rapport without hassling over cleaning up a bedroom," says Dr. Miller. "If you encounter a problem, talk to your husband about it. Begin by mentioning all of the child's good qualities, thereby assuring your mate you're not out to 'get' his child." By talking it out, you're involving him and working as a team. Finally, there is the terminology. Experts agree that stepfamily names should be based on what makes everyone most comfortable. Often, a stepparent is called by her first name so there's no confusion with the real mother. Another option is special nicknames invented by the children. Children are often bothered by the fact that their dad's new wife carries the same surname as their mother. You can avoid this dilemma by keeping your maiden name, as I did. And, when you introduce a child as your stepson, keep the tone of your voice upbeat.

As the question of what names to use illustrates, a strong dose of sensitivity to one another's feelings is essential in most step relationships. Michael and I recently learned that we'd hurt the girls, unintentionally, by not seating them with us at the wedding reception. This is a classic stepparent case of "You can't win

them all." After more than four years as a stepmother, I still experience the frustration that whatever I do, it's never quite enough. It's comforting to remember that biological parents experience these same feelings.

As a long-distance stepparent, I maintain my ties with Jenny and Shannon by talking on the telephone, writing letters, and sending photographs and newspaper clips that might be of interest. And I'd be less than honest if I didn't admit there are times when I just close my bedroom door and fume. But it's worth it. Through my husband's children, I've discovered new aspects of Michael, dimensions only children bring to life. Jenny and Shannon will again spend the summer at our suburban New York home. For the third consecutive summer, they'll also enjoy our daughter—their new sister. They care for her like a natural sister, and in a wonderful way, the birth of Katherine Storm Bartlett has made our stepfamily become even more of a "real" family. ♥

HELPFUL SOURCES

The Stepfamily Foundation, 333 West End Ave., New York, NY 10023, Phone: 212-877-3244.
The Successful Stepparent, by Helen Thompson (Harper & Row Publishers).
Making it as a Stepparent, by Clair Berman (Doubleday & Company).
Instant Parent, by Suzy Katter (A&W Publishers, Inc.).

Betsy Storm is a freelance writer living in Mt. Vernon, New York. She is a wife, mother, and stepmother. This is her first article for BRIDE'S.

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