

**Stepmothers: Why so much stress?  
A Review of the Literature  
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**More information on this topic can be found in Dr. Nielsen's book:**

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In our country alone roughly 13 million women are stepmothers. Only 8% of these stepmothers actually live with their stepchildren year round; and then it is usually because the mother is either dead or has serious problems such as drug abuse or psychological disorders (Cherlin & Furstenberg. 1994}. Yet even though so few stepmothers share a home with their stepchildren, most find their situation stressful - often more than stepfathers who live year round with their stepchildren (Beer. 1992; Booth & Dunn. 1994; Blau. 1994; Cherlin & Furstenberg. 1994; Dainton. 1993; Einstein. 1994; Fine & Schwebel. 1992; Hobart. 1991; Jones & Schiller. 1992; Kelley. 1995; Maglin & Schneidewind. 1989; Papernow. 1993; Quick, McKenry, & Newman. 1994; Smith. 1990; Turner. 1990; White. 1994; Whitsett & Land. 1992).

So why is being a stepmother usually so stressful - and why more than being a stepfather? Or what is it that makes some stepmothers' experiences so much more enjoyable than others'? Before a woman becomes a stepmother, are there any ways she might predict how stressful or how pleasurable her situation is probably going to be? Or what might a woman, her therapist, or her husband explore in hopes of making the stepmother's situation easier? The answers to such questions seem to lie in four areas: (1) our society's attitudes about mothers and motherhood (2) the mother's and the stepmother's personalities, attitudes, and circumstances (3) the father's attitudes and his relationship with the mother and (4) the stepchildren's gender and mental health.

**Society's attitudes about motherhood**

Let's begin by examining how our society's attitudes about mothers and motherhood contribute to many of the difficulties many stepmothers encounter.

**Motherhood and Possessiveness** Unfortunately for many stepmothers, white middle and upper class culture tends to encourage possessive, jealous, restrictive attitudes about mothering. Compared to women from lower income backgrounds or from other racial groups, white women with middle or upper class backgrounds are often less likely to believe that "it takes a whole village to raise one child." In other words, these mothers tend to be more possessive and more threatened when it comes to their children's having a close relationship with another adult. And as we'll see later, these mothers' children often feel disloyal, guilty, and uncomfortable about having a friendship with their stepmother. Of course a woman's attitudes about motherhood are influenced by factors other than her race and income. And of course there are overly possessive mothers in every race and income group. But the fact remains that many white mothers from upper and middle class backgrounds are more possessive and more uncooperative than other mothers when it comes to "sharing" their children given what they have been taught to believe about motherhood (Ahrons. 1994; Bell-Scott. 1991; Blankenhorn. 1994; Brown & Gilligan. 1992; Collins. 1991; Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis. 1993; Debold, Wilson, & Malave. 1992; Hays. 1996; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan. 1997).

By looking at a few examples we can more fully appreciate the impact that a woman's particular culture has on her attitudes and her behavior as a mother. Among traditional Hawaiians, parents commonly had their children live with friends or relatives in order to expand the children's bonds with other adults. Although these children were still loved by and bonded to their biological parents, their *hanai* relationships with other adults were considered the models which parents should try to measure up to. Even today young Hawaiians who were raised as *hanai* children are very comfortable expecting and asking for special support from adults other than their parents, often addressing these adults with honorary family terms such as "auntie". Likewise, Caribbean children often live in several different households, forming close bonds to many adults without feeling disloyal to their biological parents. Children's having close, loving relationships with many adults is also a longstanding tradition in the West Indies, Polynesia, Ghana, and among Pueblo, Navajo, and African American cultures in the United States (Coontz. 1997).

**Idealizing Mothers and Motherhood** The stepmother is also up against the belief that a biological mother is always vastly superior to all other adults when it comes to loving, nurturing, and doing what is best for children. More insulting yet to stepmothers and to fathers, many people still assume that only the biological mother has an "instinct"

for nurturing children and that only she has a “natural” expertise in child-rearing. First, these beliefs ignore the fact that among humans, other mammals, and fish, there are mothers who do not nurture or show “love” for their offspring - leaving the childcare to the father. Second, both male and female humans must be *taught* how to take care of their young because instincts do not endow us with these skills. And third, in many cultures - including our own - many children are happily and successfully raised by people other than their biological mother (Allport. 1997; Coontz. 1997; Griswold. 1993; Parke. 1996; Redican. 1976; Thurer. 1994; Whiting & Edwards. 1988).

We might wonder then: Where do our idealized or erroneous beliefs about motherhood come from? One source is the media. We might indeed ask ourselves why television, movies and magazines so rarely depict or discuss such realities as these: Most fathers resent having to spend so much time at work because they want more time with their children (Barnett & Rivers. 1996; Coltrane. 1996; Gerson. 1993; Griswold. 1993; Larson. 1993; Levant & Kopecky. 1995; Osherson. 1995; Pleck. 1997). When both parents have full-time jobs, the father often does as much childcare as the mother (Deutsch. 1993; Pleck. 1997). Throughout most of our country’s history, fathers were considered better than mothers at guiding and advising children (Griswold. 1993; Parke. 1996; Pleck & Pleck. 1997). Mothers do sometimes abuse, desert, resent, and fail to bond with their children (Allport. 1997; Eyer. 1994; Parker. 1996; Thurer. 1994). Even in children’s books, animal and human mothers are almost always shown to be superior to any other members of their species when it comes to caring for the young (Harshaw. 1997). In short, our media generally do not generally reflect the reality that many people other than biological mothers can and are doing an excellent job nurturing and raising children.

Another way of idealizing motherhood that can be disheartening to stepmothers is the belief that a biological mother is always far more unselfish and far more virtuous than any other adult in a child’s life. Compared to fathers or stepmothers, mothers are usually portrayed as far more virtuous, truthful, faithful, loyal, and unselfish (Ackerman. 1996; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan. 1997; Miller. 1994; Parke. 1996; Parker. 1996; Thurer. 1994). Indeed, motherhood is often portrayed as the most perfect, the most intense, and the most ideal love that any adult can have for a child. And as many stepmothers have probably noted, our idealized notions about mothers and motherhood contribute to the difficulty many fathers have in trying to maintain a close relationship with their children after a divorce (Barnett & Rivers. 1996; Caplan. 1989; Debold, Wilson, & Malave. 1992; Eyer. 1996; Parker. 1996; Thurer. 1994; Warshak. 1992).

Stepmothers can also be negatively affected by the idealized notion that mothers are too uninterested in sex, too self-controlled, or too devoted to their families to commit adultery or to leave their marriage for someone else. When it come to sexual matters, mothers are often portrayed as morally superior to fathers and to other women - a misrepresentation that makes it easier for many children to believe that their stepmother or their father is the “bad guy” or the guilty party when it comes to sexual betrayal or promiscuity (Blankenhorn. 1994; Debold, Wilson, & Malave. 1992; Mens-Verhulst, Schreurs, & Woertman. 1993; Thurer. 1994; Tolman. 1991). Likewise, many of us are more likely to forgive or to rationalize a woman’s adultery by perceiving her as a sensitive or misunderstood wife who “couldn’t help” falling in love with someone who was her “soul-mate”. In contrast, when a man cheats, we tend to condemn him for being a selfish, insensitive cad - driven merely by physical lust, not by love, or by profound loneliness, or by years of emotional abuse from his wife (Roiphe. 1997). In reality, women in our country are now just about as likely as men to commit adultery and are *more likely* than men to end a marriage because they have fallen in love with someone else (Adler. 1996; Guttman. 1993; Pittman. 1990; Reibstein & Richards. 1993; Ripps. 1994). But little good these realities do those stepmothers whose stepchildren blame their father or her for their parents’ divorce because they refuse to accept that it was their mother who committed adultery or who left the marriage for another man (Bassoff. 1994; Debold, Wilson, & Malave. 1992; Flaake. 1993; Flynn & Hutchinson. 1993; Thurer. 1994; Tolman. 1991).

Perhaps our idealized beliefs about motherhood might also help stepmothers understand why some children are so reluctant to recognize their mother’s shortcomings but so ready to recognize their father’s after the parents divorce. For example, even as teenagers or young adults, there are children who refuse to accept the fact that their mother committed adultery or that she divorced their father for another man (Berman. 1992; Black. 1993). And many divorced fathers say that their children refuse to hold their mother responsible for her mistakes and shortcomings while readily holding the father responsible for his (Ahrns. 1994; Cohen. 1994; Cooney & Uhlenberg. 1990; Depner & Bray. 1993; Dudley. 1991; Farrell. 1994). Sadly then, a stepmother can be stressed because her stepchildren end up having little or no relationship with their father and because these children often end up with serious psychological or emotional problems in part because they have such idealized beliefs about mothers and motherhood (Ackerman. 1996; Ahrns. 1994; Bassoff. 1994; Baumrind. 1991; Berman. 1992; Block. 1996; Gottlieb. 1995; Lerner. 1993; Marcia.

1994; Miller. 1994; Minuchin & Nichols. 1994; Parker. 1996; Scarf. 1995).

**Negative Portrayals of Stepmothers** While idealizing mothers and motherhood, our media, our literature, and our folklore also tend to present stepmothers in a very negative light. In stark contrast to mothers, stepmothers are typically portrayed as sexual, vain, selfish, greedy, vengeful, deceitful, unloving, untrustworthy, manipulative, all-powerful, and fearsome (Dainton. 1993; Noy. 1991; Salwen. 1990; Schectman. 1991; Warner. 1996).

Consider, for example, the fairytales that most children grow up with. Instead of depicting mothers and stepmothers as having both good and bad traits, the mother is always portrayed as good and loving. Often the mother is dead - a situation which encourages us to pity her and which does away with the problem of having to think of mothers as sometimes cranky, short-tempered, selfish, or unloving human beings. On the other hand, fairytale stepmothers are very much alive and are never presented in ways that make us feel the least sympathy or compassion for them. Unlike mothers, the stepmothers are downright evil women. Without a maternalistic bone in her body, the stepmother *always* mistreats her stepchildren - stealing their father's affection away from them, cheating them out of his money, locking them up, enslaving them in dirty cellars. Alas, Snow White's stepmom is so vain, so jealous, and so insecure that she arranges to have her stepdaughter murdered because she cannot live with the fact that the young woman is prettier than she is. And what about stepfathers in fairytales? Are there any? Why is it that only stepmothers are presented as bad stepparents? Because, like so many other aspects of our culture, our fairytales idealize mothers and motherhood. So rather than reflecting the reality that mothers are not perfect, our fairytales ascribe every bad trait that mothers can and do have to stepmothers - or occasionally to another adult female - the evil witch (Bettelheim. 1976; Bottigheimer. 1987; Schectman. 1991; Warner. 1996; Zipes. 1994).

This isn't to say that fairytales or the media *cause* children to dislike their stepmothers; or to say it is wrong to portray mothers as loving or unselfish. The point is that we seem to have gone overboard in portraying mothers and motherhood in such positive, idealized ways *without* offering equally favorable information or equally positive images of stepmothers - or of fathers. Just as our society has tried to present more balanced, more realistic views of racial minorities, the physically handicapped, and gay people, we could be making more efforts to represent stepmothers more fairly, more realistically, and more compassionately. Leaving aside how hurt and discouraged a stepmother might feel, continually portraying any group of people in a negative way - especially while comparing them to another group whose virtues are being glorified and exaggerated - does affect how we think, feel, and behave. We generally tend to be on the lookout for and to remember those characteristics that we have been taught to believe are representative of given groups. So whether we're talking about a mother, a stepmother, or a used car dealer, we generally seek out "evidence", invent "facts" and remember the incidents that support whatever beliefs we had about each group to begin with (Bingham. 1995; Gilovich. 1991; Howard. 1991; Nisbett & Ross. 1991; Schacter. 1996). It is fortunate, therefore, that some children's books are now portraying stepmothers as loving and lovable people (Leach. 1993; Martin. 1994; Steiner. 1991; Zakhoders. 1992).

### **The Mother's Personality, Attitudes and Circumstances**

Of course how much pain or pleasure a stepmother experiences is influenced by more than just our society's beliefs and portrayals of mothers and stepmothers. In fact, the single most influential factor seems to be how the mother feels about motherhood and about the children's having a relationship with their stepmother. Then too, the stepmother's stress is often affected by the mother's style of parenting, the way she manages her household, her marital status, her mental health, and her feelings about financial matters.

**Mother's attitudes about motherhood** As already mentioned, some mothers are much more possessive and more jealous than others when it comes to their children. Partly because of this jealousy and possessiveness, a stepmother usually has the hardest time getting close to her stepchildren if their mother was or still is mainly a housewife. Housewives also tend to be the most opposed to letting the children have a close relationship or live part-time with their father and the most upset emotionally and financially after a divorce (Ahrons. 1994; Ambert. 1989; Blau. 1994; Cohen. 1994; Furstenberg & Cherlin. 1991; Maccoby & Mnookin. 1994; Morrison. 1995; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman. 1994; Warshak. 1992). In part this seems to happen because housewives usually derive much more pleasure, self-esteem, and identity from parenting than do mothers who are employed full time. Then too, housewives tend to be more clinically depressed, more dependent on their children, and less self-confident than employed mothers (Barnett & Rivers. 1996; Chira. 1998; Coontz. 1997; Crosby. 1993; Lerner & Galambos. 1991; Peters. 1998; Rubenstein. 1998; Thurer. 1994).

A stepmother might also find it easier to get close to her stepchildren when their mother has always worked outside the home because these children tend to be more self-reliant, more socially mature, and less overly dependent on their mother than housewives' children (Barnett & Rivers. 1996; Chira. 1998; Crosby. 1993; Lerner & Galambos.

1991; Peters. 1998; Rubenstein. 1998). Then too, the stepmother might benefit because her husband often has a closer relationship with his children when their mother worked full-time outside the home during most of their marriage (Barnett & Rivers. 1996; Cowan & Cowan. 1992; Crosby. 1993; Gilbert. 1993; Lerner & Galambos. 1991; Steinberg & Steinberg. 1994).

The mother's feelings about sharing her children with their stepmother can also be related to the kind of relationship she had with her own parents. Regardless of how well-educated or how financially well-off she is, the mother who was not close to or securely loved by her own parents tends to be more possessive and more dependent on her children than other mothers. In trying to give what she did not get from her own parents emotionally, a mother too often binds herself to her children and binds them to her in ways that make it difficult, if not impossible, for any other adult to get close to the children - even their own father. So it is usually in the stepmother's best interests if the mother had a close, loving relationship with both of her own parents (Ainsworth & Eichberg. 1991; Caplan. 1989; Main. 1993; Miller. 1994; Minuchin. 1995; Pianta, Egeland, & Stroufe. 1990; Sameroff & Emde. 1989; Scarf. 1995; Silverstein & Rashbaum. 1994; Todorski. 1995).

But contrary to what a stepmother might expect, how the mother feels about sharing her children is *not* usually related to how well educated she is. In fact, college-educated, white mothers can be very jealous, uncooperative, and possessive in regard to their children after a divorce (Ahrons. 1994; Debold, Wilson, & Malave. 1992; Furstenberg & Cherlin. 1991; Maine. 1993; Miller. 1994; Minuchin & Nichols. 1994; Wallerstein & Blakeslee. 1989). As already discussed, well educated white women come from a culture that tends to promote overly possessive mothering. A well-educated woman is also the most likely to marry a well-educated man who earns enough money to allow her to stay home full time - which in turn can promote even more possessive attitudes in many mothers. Sadly for stepmothers and their husbands, college educated mothers who were, or still are, mainly homemakers too often have overly dependent, overly possessive relationships with their children (Ainsworth & Eichberg. 1991; Harder. 1992; Karen. 1994; Maine. 1993; Miller. 1994; Minuchin & Nichols. 1994; Scarf. 1995). Finally, well-educated women can often be the angriest about financial matters after their divorce which creates additional stress for the stepmother, as we will soon see. For many reasons then, the stepmother often discovers that the well-educated mother is hostile, jealous, and uncooperative when it comes to "sharing" the children (Bell-Scott. 1991; Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis. 1993; Miller. 1994; Minuchin & Nichols. 1994; Scarf. 1995; Wallerstein & Blakeslee. 1989; Warshak. 1992).

In short, unless the mother wholeheartedly approves of the children liking or loving their father's wife, the stepmother usually ends up stressed and hurt. Why? First, the children usually feel too disloyal or too guilty to let themselves like or enjoy their stepmother - let alone to love her. So no matter how hard the stepmother tries, the stepchildren reject her, keep their distance, or view her with suspicion. Because most stepmothers so desperately want their husband's children to like them, they end up hurt, frustrated, and dejected. Sadly too, even when the children do allow their stepmother to befriend them or do come to love her, their mutual affection often has to be kept hidden from the mother. So while the stepmother is personally gratified, she still doesn't receive any public recognition - and may still continually be hurt by being treated as an intruder or being excluded from important occasions and happenings in her stepchild's life. Second, if the mother doesn't want her children to be close to their stepmother, she often works against the children's relationship with their father as well. Such situations often leave the stepmother feeling sad or frustrated because she feels "if it hadn't been for me, my husband would have a better relationship with his kids". More stressful still, the stepmother is often blamed for whatever problems the mother or children are having. And ironically, the stepmother who tries the hardest and who is doing a good job as a stepparent often gets criticized the most. As two mothers put it: "When their stepmother Ann, who is extremely concerned about the welfare of my children, suggests something for their benefit, my immediate reaction is to get angry and accuse her of "intruding". The truth is that I feel jealous and guilty that I, the real mother, didn't think of it first" (Maglin & Schneidewind, 1989, p. 313). "I kept hoping my daughter's stepmother would lose her temper or do something to make Janie like her less. I felt I was competing for my daughter's love" (Crytser, 1990, p. 27). So the bottom line is that even the most loving stepmother seldom gets very far with her husband's children unless she has their mother's wholehearted approval - which unfortunately is rare (Ahrons. 1994; Artlip, Artlip, & Saltzman. 1993; Beer. 1992; Berman. 1992; Blau. 1994; Crytser. 1990; Einstein. 1994; Jones & Schiller. 1992; Keenan. 1992; Maglin & Schneidewind. 1989; Martin & Martin. 1992; Papernow. 1993; Smith. 1990).

Fortunately for some stepmothers, however, there are mothers who are not especially threatened, jealous, or possessive when it comes to their children. As one such mother says: "It really isn't worth it to program my kids to hate their stepmother or for me to be angry and defensive when she seems to be out-parenting me" (Crytser, 1990, p.

61). And there are mothers who welcome and openly compliment the stepmother for the love and support she gives the children (Blau. 1994; Jones & Schiller. 1992; Maglin & Schneidewind. 1989). Unfortunately though, very few stepmothers end up in such welcoming situations.

**The mother's parenting style and household management** How much stress a stepmother experiences can also be related to the mother's style of parenting. The good news for stepmothers is that most children are as well-behaved, as socially mature, as well-adjusted, and as self-disciplined as their peers when their divorced mother consistently supervises and disciplines them, sets and enforces rules and limits, and refuses to tolerate infantile behavior. But the bad news is that single mothers too often allow their children to have the upper hand and do not provide adequate supervision, discipline, or guidance - especially if the child is a boy or a teenager. As a result, many children living with an unmarried mother are less socially mature, less self-reliant, less self-disciplined, less successful academically and vocationally, and less psychologically well-adjusted than children living with a married parent - a situation which no doubt saddens and stresses their stepmothers and their fathers (Blau. 1994; Brooks-Gunn. 1994; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch. 1997; Caron. 1995; Depner & Bray. 1993; Emery. 1994; Furstenberg & Cherlin. 1991; Guttman. 1993; Hetherington & Mekos. 1997; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan. 1997; Maccoby & Mnookin. 1994; McLanahan & Sandefur. 1994; Parke. 1996; Pasley, Ihinger-Tallman, & Lofquist. 1994; Patterson, Reid, & Dishion. 1992; Pittman. 1993; Silverstein & Rashbaum. 1994; Steinberg & others. 1991; Wallerstein. 1991; Warshak. 1992; Weiss. 1994).

Many stepmothers and stepchildren may also have trouble getting along when the mother has not created an orderly, well-managed home with clearly established, dependable routines and schedules. Unfortunately children from such homes often end up with less self-discipline, less self-motivation, and less respect for authority than other children their age. And even well educated mothers with middle or upper class lifestyles too often do not create orderly, well-run, well-supervised households as single parents (Ahrns. 1994; McLanahan & Sandefur. 1994). Not only does the stepmother end up looking too uptight, inflexible, or bossy compared to an indulgent, disorganized mother, she and her husband can also be hurt because children usually prefer to be around the parent who has the most disorderly, unsupervised, undisciplined, "do whatever you want" household - especially as teenagers (Beer. 1992; Brooks-Gunn. 1994; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch. 1997; Depner & Bray. 1993; Hetherington. 1991; McLanahan & Sandefur. 1994; Parke. 1996; Pasley, Ihinger-Tallman, & Lofquist. 1994; Pianta, Egeland, & Stroufe. 1990; Pipher. 1994; Todorski. 1995; Wallerstein. 1991).

This isn't to say that the single mother is always more indulgent or always has a more poorly run household than the stepmother or the single father. And this isn't to say that a stepmother can't be stressed mainly because her husband continually allows his children to rule the roost and to over-run the adults. In fact, after a divorce, whichever parent feels extremely guilty is usually the one who gives children the upper hand and who continually excuses the children's bad behavior (Ahrns. 1994; Berman. 1992; Chapman, Price, & Serovich. 1995; Gottlieb. 1995; Warshak. 1992). And the guilt-ridden parent often goes to great lengths to deny or to hide the fact that a deeply troubled child has serious problems (Ambert. 1996; Brockner, Wiesenfeld, & Raskas. 1993; Dreman & Aldor. 1994; Harder. 1992; Lerner. 1993; Minuchin & Nichols. 1994; Warshak. 1992). So when a woman marries a guilt-ridden father, part of her stress as a stepmother may indeed come from his being too indulgent or from his continually denying that his children have any shortcomings or any serious problems. Nevertheless, the fact remains that many divorced mothers who have not remarried do not create an orderly, well-managed home or provide adequate supervision, discipline, and guidance for the children.

**The Mother's Marital Status** Aside from how the single mother often relates to her children or manages her household, there are other reasons why a stepmother should hope that her husband's ex-wife has remarried - for her own sake, as well as for her husband's and the children's (Ahrns. 1994; Beer. 1992; Berman. 1992; Blau. 1994; Buehler & Ryan. 1994; Crytser. 1990; Depner & Bray. 1993; Furstenberg & Cherlin. 1991; Jones & Schiller. 1992; Keenan. 1992; Maglin & Schneidewind. 1989; Martin & Martin. 1992; Visher & Visher. 1996).

First, the mother and children are almost always better off financially after she remarries since her standard of living usually jumps at least to where it would have been if she had never been divorced (Furstenberg & Cherlin. 1991; Maccoby & Mnookin. 1994; McLanahan & Sandefur. 1994). As a result, she and the children are not as worried or as upset over financial matters which, in turn, usually reduces the resentment and jealousy directed at the stepmother or the father. In contrast, when the mother is still single, the father and his wife too often get blamed for the mother's financial problems, as exemplified by the stepmother who laments: "My stepkids blame me for every problem their mother has. Supposedly I even prevent their dad from giving her more money" (Jones & Schiller, 1992, p. 109). And when their stepmother's financial situation is so much better than their mother's, children often feel

such pity for their single mother that they are continually defending her or taking care of her in ways that hurt or upset their stepmother and their father.

Second, stepmothers might enjoy being around their stepchildren more when the mother has remarried because many children become better behaved once a stepfather enters the picture - especially sons. Then too, if a child's behavior improves, the relationships among the adults might become less strained. This is not to say that those children who have serious behavioral or psychological problems usually get better when their mother remarries - most do not. But when changes do occur after a mother remarries, it is usually for the best in terms of children's grades, graduation rates, drug and alcohol abuse, teenage pregnancy, social maturity, and peer relationships. In fact, in these areas there is often little or no difference between children whose parents have never divorced and children who have lived most of their childhood with their parent and stepparent (Amato. 1994; Booth & Dunn. 1994; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch. 1997; Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan. 1995; Marsh. 1990; Nielsen. 1993; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman. 1994; Studer. 1993; Zimiles & Lee. 1991).

Third, mothers who have not remarried are often the most possessive and most dependent on their children which makes the stepmother's situation more difficult. Too often the single mother treats her children like counselors, best friends, or confidantes - unintentionally encouraging them to pity her and to feel responsible for making her happy. As many adult children put it: "Even years later when my mother finally remarried, she portrayed men in a very negative fashion and made me her confidant. Finally before my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, I got up the courage to tell her to turn to her husband with her problems and to stop being married to me" (Berman, 1992, p. 130). "I'd been invested in listening to and sympathizing with mom and filled with fantasies about when she would be in another marriage. It was almost as if I'd been her loving parent and dreaming of a glorious time when she would be grown up, married, and living happily ever after" (Scarf, 1995, p. 299). "I felt guilty all the time - guilty because I was angry with mom for needing me so much - guilty for wanting more time with my dad" (Maine, 1993, p. 116). In other words, children are often friendlier to their stepmother when their mother is happily remarried because they don't pity their mother as much or feel as guilty and disloyal for enjoying their stepmother or their father. It's also worth noting that many of the white mothers who have not remarried are college educated women who did not work full-time outside the home before their divorce (Ambert. 1996; Bassoff. 1994; Berman. 1992; Emery. 1994; Guttman. 1993; Hetherington. 1991; Maine. 1993; Minuchin & Nichols. 1994; Mo-ye. 1995; Pittman. 1993; Scarf. 1995; Silverstein & Rashbaum. 1994; Wallerstein & Blakeslee. 1989; Warshak. 1992).

Fourth, the mother who has not remarried too often relates to her children in ways that discourage them from growing up and that contribute to serious social and psychological problems. For example, among women who still had not remarried seven years after their divorce, most refused to admit that any of their children had serious social or psychological problems, as many did in fact have. Most of these unmarried mothers also over-estimated how good a job they were doing when it came to monitoring and attending to their children's needs (Dreman & Aldor. 1994). Likewise, in two of the most well-known longitudinal studies of divorced families, the mothers who had not remarried within a few years had the most socially and psychologically disturbed children - mainly, their sons. And the single mothers were far more depressed than those divorced mothers who had remarried (Hetherington. 1991; Wallerstein & Blakeslee. 1989). In short, when the mother has not remarried, the stepmother often has to watch helplessly as her stepchild's social and psychological problems grow worse year after year - which most often happens when the child is male (Emery. 1994; Guttman. 1993; Hetherington. 1991; Mo-ye. 1995; Silverstein & Rashbaum. 1994; Wallerstein & Blakeslee. 1989; Warshak. 1992).

Fifth, when their mother has not remarried, the stepmother can be frustrated by the children's lack of understanding about what a married couple is entitled to and how a husband and wife feel and behave. Too often these children resent their stepmother for setting certain limits and for having certain attitudes that stem from her needs as a married woman. For example, the stepchildren might say their stepmother is "selfish" because, unlike their unmarried mother, she will not let them come into her bedroom whenever they want. Or the children might accuse their stepmother of "not wanting us around" because she snuggles up to their father on the sofa while everybody is watching television together. Even as teenagers, some children still do not understand that their stepmother has different attitudes and different household rules than their mother because she is a married woman. Of course some stepchildren do appreciate what they learned about marriage from their stepmother, as evidenced by the stepson who said: "I can't recall ever seeing my parents kiss or hug when they were married. So I couldn't help notice the way dad and Peggy were around each other. I doubt I would have been able to make a good marriage myself had there not been my father's remarriage to show me the way" (Berman, 1992, p. 179). Nevertheless, it is usually easiest on the stepmother when her stepchildren are already accustomed to living with a mother and stepfather before she and their

father get married.

Sixth, when the divorced mother has not remarried, she is more likely to create pain and stress for the stepmother by behaving as if she and her former husband were still married: phoning him for advice on personal matters, asking to borrow things from him, wanting him to celebrate special events like Thanksgiving with her and the children, discussing minor details of the children's lives with him on an almost daily basis, dropping in uninvited to visit when the children are with him, etc. As one divorced father explained, until his ex-wife remarried, she would literally walk right into his house when she came to pick the kids up, even when he wasn't home, help herself to a cold drink, use the bathroom, and make phone calls (Visher & Visher, 1996). In such cases the stepmother not only experiences a lot of pain, stress, and frustration before getting married, but sometimes years into her marriage as well. For example, even years after the divorce, the unmarried mother can still be angry at the stepmother because "My ex-husband won't do what I want him to do like he used to before she came along" (Ahrns, 1994, p. 220). Not only does such behavior hurt the stepmother's feelings as a wife, it often causes the stepchildren to view her as the intruder - the "bad" woman who is hurting their mother by not wanting the parents to behave as if they were still married. For example, the children's mother might actually say such damaging things as: "Until your dad married her, he was nice to me." "She changed your father into a very selfish person." "Your dad just doesn't put you kids first anymore since she's come along." In contrast, the married mother is less likely to intrude on the stepmother's marriage or to undermine her relationship with the stepchildren in these ways.

Unfortunately some stepmothers naively assume that if the mother is the one who wanted the divorce, then she will not be upset by her ex-husband's getting remarried. In fact though, even when she divorced him for another man, the ex-wife is often upset when her ex-husband remarries. Consequently the stepmother often encounters stressful situations such as these: "I kept wishing my former husband and his wife would have a disaster. If his marriage fails, then I'll know I was right to leave him". "My ex wife hit the roof when I remarried and pretty much stayed there for the next 3 years. But now that she's remarried, she seems happier and is more willing to let the kids spend time at my place" (Ahrns, 1994, p. 58 & 220). Unfortunately for the stepmother, until the mother remarries, she too often resents any other woman in her husband's life even when she did not want to stay married to him herself (Ahrns, 1994; Beer, 1992; Cohen, 1994; Depner & Bray, 1993; Martin & Martin, 1992).

But what if the mother has a long-term boyfriend? Doesn't this make life easier for the stepmother? Not necessarily. To begin with, even as teenagers, children often feel confused or unsettled when their mother has a boyfriend for many years without marrying him. Very few children see this long-term boyfriend as the equivalent of a stepfather - and many distrust or dislike him (Ahrns, 1994; Blankenhorn, 1994; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1997; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). For example, teenagers disapprove more of their mother having a live-in boyfriend than of their father having a live-in girlfriend (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1994). On the other hand, if the mother is joyfully in love with her boyfriend, then she probably is less hostile towards the stepmother and her ex-husband (Beer, 1992; Guttman, 1993). Unfortunately though, when the mother has had a boyfriend for some time but still isn't married to him, often she is either still emotionally attached to her former husband or she is overly dependent on and overly involved with her children - neither of which is good for the stepmother for reasons we have already discussed (Beer, 1992; Blau, 1994; Dozier, 1993; Johnston & Campbell, 1989).

Given the importance of the mother's being married, the good news for stepmothers is that 80% of all white women do remarry within three to four years after their divorce. The situation is almost reversed, however, for black stepmothers because only about 30% of divorced black women remarry. But as we have already discussed, there is usually a less possessive, more communal attitude towards children in the black community which might make stepmothers feel more welcomed and more appreciated. Regardless of race though, a man generally remarries before his ex-wife does which means that most stepmothers have the misfortune of entering the picture when the mother is still single (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994).

**Mother's mental and emotional health** Regardless of whether or not the mother has remarried though, the stepmother should hope that her husband's ex-wife is a relatively happy, well-adjusted person because a depressed, or chronically unhappy mother can have a negative impact on the stepmother in at least three important ways.

First, a depressed mother is often too lax as a parent - granting the children too much authority and control over her, excusing and reinforcing their infantile or aggressive behavior, and providing far too little supervision, order, and discipline (Ahrns, 1994; Chapman, Price, & Serovich, 1995; Cummings & O'Reilly, 1997; Downey & Coyne, 1990; Hetherington, 1991; Hops & Biglan, 1990; Rubin, Lemare, & Lollis, 1990; Silverstein & Rashbaum, 1994). A depressed mother is also more likely than other parents to ignore, excuse, tolerate, or deny the serious

psychological or social problems of a troubled child (Ambert. 1996; Downey & Coyne. 1990; Dreman & Aldor. 1994; Pittman. 1993; Radke-Yarrow. 1991; Scarf. 1995; Silverstein & Rashbaum. 1994). Needless to say, these outcomes are stressful and painful for the stepmother and her husband.

Second, the depressed or persistently unhappy mother too often alienates the children from their father and his wife by unintentionally encouraging them to pity her and to feel responsible for making her happier. As several adult children explain: "As soon as I came home to mother, I would feel an enormous tiredness take me over. I'd look at mom's longing face and know she wanted something from me. I felt too awful to leave my mother" (Bassoff, 1994, p. 36). "I felt a special responsibility for my mother because she didn't want me to grow up and leave her" (Pittman, 1993, p. 150). The reviews of the research show that "there is something uniquely depressing about the parenting of a depressed person - specifically a depressed mother" (Downey & Coyne, 1990, p. 60) And because a depressed mother tends to be more overly dependent on her children than other mothers, she often relates to them in ways that interfere with their being able to separate from her, to become self-reliant, and to have close relationships with their father or stepmother (Ahrns. 1994; Bassoff. 1994; Gottlieb. 1995; Harrington. 1994; Hetherington. 1991; Miller. 1994; Pittman. 1993; Scarf. 1995; Wallerstein & Blakeslee. 1989). The depressed mother also tends to be less willing than other mothers to "share" the children with their father after a divorce (Ambert. 1996; Downey & Coyne. 1990; Pelham. 1993; Radke-Yarrow. 1991; Todorski. 1995). Finally, the depressed mother is the least likely to remarry - which, as we have already discussed, is not good news for the stepmother (Ambert. 1996; Chapman, Price, & Serovich. 1995; Dreman & Aldor. 1994; Emery. 1994; Garvin, Kalter, & Hansell. 1993; Hetherington. 1991; Wallerstein & Blakeslee. 1989).

Third, when their mother is clinically depressed, the odds are that at least one of the children will also become depressed. The depressed mother's parenting style and a genetic predisposition for depression from her side of the family increase the odds that at least one of her children will become depressed. Although having a depressed father also has a negative impact on children, clinical depression is much more closely linked to the mother's depression than to the father's (Downey & Coyne. 1990; Harrington. 1994; Hops & Biglan. 1990; Karen. 1994; Parke & Ladd. 1992; Phares. 1997; Radke-Yarrow. 1991; Rubin, Lemare, & Lollis. 1990; Waxler & others. 1992).

**The mother's feelings about financial matters** As important as anything mentioned up to this point is how the mother *feels* about financial matters. Note that the important word is *feels*. What matters is not how much money the mother herself earns or how much she receives from the father in child support, but how she feels about her financial situation. In other words, just because the mother is still able to enjoy a middle or upper class lifestyle after divorce does not mean that the stepmother will necessarily be spared the mother's resentment or jealousy over financial matters. Even when the mother has been well treated financially in the divorce agreement and even when she is well educated with a good income of her own, children can still receive such damaging messages as: If it weren't for your stepmother, your dad would be sending more money. Your stepmother and her kids are getting more than you are. Your dad and his wife are richer so they ought to pay for everything for you kids (Ahrns. 1994; Beer. 1992; Berman. 1992; Blau. 1994; Depner & Bray. 1993; Furstenberg & Cherlin. 1991; Jones & Schiller. 1992; Keenan. 1992; Maglin & Schneidewind. 1989; Martin & Martin. 1992; Papernow. 1993; Smith. 1990).

And even when the stepmother is not attacked directly, she can be deeply upset by the way the children or their mother treat the father when it comes to money. For example, most fathers who spend extra money for things that are legally supposed to be paid for by the mother from the child support money are not thanked by the mother or the children for being so generous and unselfish (Cohen. 1994; Teachman. 1991). And when the father continually caves in to demands for extra money, the stepmother can become upset because she feels that her husband is allowing himself to be exploited and manipulated. As two stepmothers explain: "They kick sand in his face and then he lets them dance all over him financially." "I don't think my husband's kids deserve a penny from us after the way they've treated us. I see no reason to reward them for what they've done" "If my stepkids are part of our family enough to get tuition, they should be part of it enough to visit, communicate and be responsible to other members of the family" (Jones & Schiller, 1992, p. 168). Some stepmothers might even agree with certain researchers that one of the reasons why children have more contact with their father after a divorce when he has a good income than when he has little or no money might be because he gives them money for things like college, cars, and weddings (Cooney & Uhlenberg. 1990). Given the sacrifices being made to send money to his children, the stepmother can also feel stressed because her husband is rarely if ever given any voice in how his money is being spent, yet is so often criticized because "Mom says you don't send her enough money for us". In any event, many stepmothers and their husbands end up feeling hurt and exploited because his children seem to want money more than love or friendship, leaving the couple to wonder: How much would the kids have to do with us if it weren't for the money? Why is it that no matter how

much we do for them financially, they never think it's enough and they seldom thank us? Why don't they expect much from their mother financially when they expect so much from us (Ahrns. 1994; Artlip, Artlip, & Saltzman. 1993; Bender & Brannon. 1994; Berman. 1992; Blankenhorn. 1994; Blau. 1994; Depner & Bray. 1993; Ganong & Coleman. 1994b; Maccoby & Mnookin. 1994; Mandell. 1995; Seltzer & Brandreth. 1994)?

Although we might assume that once her stepchildren reach 18, the stepmother will be free from stress related to such financial matters, this is not necessarily so. Not only do many young adult children expect their father to help pay for expenses such as college, cars, and weddings, some even ask him to pay when they have refused to have much to do with him since their parents' divorce. So for example, a 19 year old college student who has refused to have anything to do with her father for years can still be angry at him for not continuing to pay her health insurance now that he is no longer legally required to do so. Many of us would be appalled if children asked or expected their mother to help pay for such things if they had refused to have a relationship with her. Yet this is what too many stepmothers watch their husbands endure (Ambert. 1996; Beer. 1992; Bender & Brannon. 1994; Einstein. 1994; Jones & Schiller. 1992; Waldman. 1992; White. 1994). And even after his children have grown up, a stepmother sometimes has to put up with the accusations that she or her husband have financially mistreated the mother. For example, the mother might still make sad or snide comments about not being able to afford nice clothes, or vacations, or a nice home like their father and his wife can. In many way then, stress over financial matters often continues long after her husband's children have become adults (Berman. 1992; Blau. 1994; Cohen. 1994; Einstein. 1994; Jones & Schiller. 1992; Martin & Martin. 1992).

This doesn't mean that there are not divorced mothers who help the children appreciate how much their father or their stepmother does for them financially. There are even mothers who refuse to take child support from their ex-husbands even when they are legally entitled to do so (Blakely. 1994; Crosby. 1993; Glickman. 1993). And rather than criticizing the father for not sending enough money, some divorced mothers regret having to be so financially dependent on him: "I could have avoided much of my anger and what I put the kids through if I had chosen to be more financially self-sufficient throughout the years of my marriage" (Crytser, 1990, p. 104). Nevertheless, most stepmothers find that financial matters involving their husband's ex-wife and his children create more tension and pain than respect and gratitude.

**The Mother's Educational Level** Finally it is worth noting that a well-educated mother does *not* necessarily make things easier for the stepmother than does a less educated mother. In fact, well-educated mothers often make the situation *more* stressful for the stepmother, the children and the father. Why? First, as already noted, well-educated white women tend to have the most possessive, most jealous attitudes about mothering. Second, a well-educated mother is often angrier and more resentful than a less educated woman after her divorce because her standard of living generally takes a greater plunge and because she is often forced into working full-time outside the home (Cohen. 1994; Folberg. 1991; Furstenberg & Cherlin. 1991; Hetherington. 1991; Wagner. 1993). Third, just because a mother is well-educated does not mean that she will not have a negative impact on the stepmother by being clinically depressed or chronically unhappy (Ahrns. 1994; Karen. 1994; Minuchin & Nichols. 1994; Radke-Yarrow. 1991), by relating to her children in damaging ways in part because of her poor relationship with her own parents (Ainsworth & Eichberg. 1991; Main. 1993; Miller. 1994; Sameroff & Emde. 1989; Scarf. 1995; Todorski. 1995), or by being too disorganized, permissive, or indulgent as a parent (Debold, Wilson, & Malave. 1992; Furstenberg & Cherlin. 1991; Guttman. 1993; McLanahan & Sandefur. 1994; Wallerstein & Blakeslee. 1989).

#### **The Stepmother's personality, attitudes, and circumstances**

Of course the stepmother's attitudes, personality, and circumstances also have an impact on how much stress she experiences as a stepparent.

**Attitudes towards marriage and step-parenting** Contrary to the belief that stepmothers are hard hearted and self-centered, much of their stress comes from being *too* unselfish and *too* soft-hearted. Since the woman is usually so concerned about winning her stepchildren's approval, she usually starts out focusing too much on what the children want and too little on what is good for her or for her marriage. Perhaps it's not surprising then that stepmothers seek far more advice and read far more books about how to be a good stepparent than do stepfathers who live with their stepchildren year round (Ahrns. 1994). Sadly though, the stepmother too often creates stress for herself by trying too hard to please her husband's children - ending up tense, on guard, and exhausted. Especially if her husband wants her to "be like a second mother" to his children, the stepmother can wind up letting them run all over her, wreck havoc in her home, and control her behavior. Ironically the stepmother is less stressed and less disheartened when she eventually adopts the attitude: My *main* goal and my *main* focus is to build an intimate, fulfilling relationship with my husband and to take better care of my own needs, not to bond with or win the approval

of my stepchildren. But in order for the stepmother to reach this point, her husband has to be committed to creating a marriage around which his children revolve rather than a marriage that revolves around his children. Especially when his children dislike their stepmother, the father has to make clear that the kids will not be handed the power or given precedence over his marriage. clear. As two fathers put it: “You have to come right out and lock hands and let the kids know they’re not splitting you up even if that means the kids want to leave.” “Things didn’t improve until I let my daughter know that, even though I loved her, my ultimate loyalty was to my wife” (Cissna, Cox & Bochner, p. 265). Of course this doesn’t mean that the stepmother and the father never put the children’s needs first or never sacrifice and compromise for the children. But it does mean that the stepmother’s mental and physical health, her marriage, and her relationship with the stepchildren benefit most when she focuses primarily on her marriage, when she doesn’t try to be “like a second mother”, and when she doesn’t continually indulge or acquiesce to her stepchildren (Beer. 1992; Cherlin & Furstenberg. 1994; Cissna, Cox, & Bochner. 1994; Crytser. 1990; Einstein. 1994; Gold, Bubbenzer, & West. 1993; Jones & Schiller. 1992; Keenan. 1992; Kelley.1995; Maglin & Schneidewind. 1989; Martin & Martin. 1992; Minuchin & Nichols. 1994; Papernow. 1993; Smith. 1990; Visher & Visher. 1996).

Along the same lines, stepmothers usually feel least stressed when they leave it up to the father to set policies for and discipline his children. This does not mean that the stepmother should never set limits or reprimand her stepchildren. But it does mean that when it comes to establishing guidelines and punishing stepchildren for such things as not doing homework or breaking curfews, the stepmother is less stressed if she leaves these responsibilities to their father (Fine & Kurdek. 1994; Jones & Schiller. 1992; Keenan. 1992; Papernow. 1993).

**Having Children of Her Own** On another front, does having children of her own help or hurt a stepmother in terms of stress or relationships with her stepchildren? On the one hand, some stepchildren and their mothers resent the stepmother most when she has children with the father or when she already has children of her own. And when step-siblings actually live together in the same home, everyone is usually more stressed than when the stepmother is child-free herself. On other hand, step-siblings can form strong bonds and some mothers and stepchildren feel less threatened by stepmothers who have children of their own from a former marriage (Bernstein. 1991; Crytser. 1990; Einstein. 1994). But to confuse matters further, any stepmother who chooses not to be a mother is usually subjected to the same kinds of criticism and suspicion as other non-mothers: Something is wrong with her or somehow she is inferior to her stepchildren’s mother because she didn’t choose to have children. Surely this stepmother’s decision proves that she is more selfish and more vain, less nurturing and less loving than her stepchildren’s mother (Bartlett. 1995; Lisle. 1996; May. 1995; Morell. 1994)? In short, it really isn’t clear how having or not having children of her own affects a woman’s situation as a stepmother.

**The Stepmother’s Financial Situation** As you might expect though, the stepmother’s financial situation does have an impact on her stress and on her relationships with her stepchildren. Those stepmothers who don’t have to rely on their husband’s income to take care of themselves or their children from a former marriage are often the least stressed. Not only can these stepmothers avoid many of the arguments over whose money is being spent for what, they are not likely to be accused of “being after our dad’s money” or “spending our dad’s money on herself and her kids” (Jacobson. 1993; Jones & Schiller. 1992; Lown & Dolan. 1994; Quick, McKenry, & Newman. 1994). It’s also worth noting that some children actually expect their stepmother to give them money and other material things while they expect very little materially from their mother. In such cases it appears that the mother is allowed to give love, while the stepmother is expected to give both love and money (Pruett, Calsyn, & Jensen. 1993; Quick, McKenry, & Newman. 1994). More painful still, some stepmothers who give a lot to their stepchildren financially are accused of trying to bribe them or trying to buy their love (Jones & Schiller. 1992). But since most stepmothers do rely on their husband’s money, most of the stress generally comes from disagreeing over how much of his, her, and their money should be spent on whom and from everyone’s trying to get their “fair share” of the father’s money - even after his death. As the old adage goes: When people claim it’s *not* the money, it’s the *principle* of the thing, it *is* the money.

#### **The Father’s Relationship With His Ex-wife**

A stepmother’s stress is also affected by the kind of relationship her husband has with his ex-wife. Not only can she be stressed because her husband’s relationship with his ex-wife is so hostile, she can also be stressed because either her husband or his ex-wife are still behaving in certain ways as if they were still married. For example, the father might still allow his ex-wife to discuss her personal problems with him or might help her with her yard work. Of course as the children become teenagers and young adults, the contact between the father and his ex-wife generally decreases because he and the children can arrange to get together without having to involve their mother. Yet even when his children are grown, the father is usually involved to some extent with his ex-wife for such events as

children's college graduations or weddings. But whatever the circumstances, the stepmother is least stressed when she and everyone else knows that whatever contact the father and mother have is strictly business. The most relaxed stepmother has been reassured that she need not compete in any way with her husband's ex-wife for his love or attention (Ambert. 1989; Beer. 1992; Keenan. 1992; Kelley. 1995; Jones & Schiller. 1992; Maglin & Schneidewind. 1989; Quick, McKenry, & Newman. 1994; Smith. 1990).

### **The Stepchildren's Personalities and Attitudes**

Finally, a stepmother's stress is affected by her stepchildren's personalities and attitudes. And two factors that are often linked to the way a stepchild reacts to the stepmother are the child's gender and his or her mental health.

**Stepsons versus Stepdaughters** For many stepmothers it is easier to get along and to become close friends with their stepdaughters than with their stepsons (Ganong & Coleman. 1994a; Maglin & Schneidewind. 1989; Quick, McKenry, & Newman. 1994; Verner. 1989). In part this might be because boys have more psychological and emotional problems than girls - and male disorders involve the most aggression, defiance, and rage directed at other people. For example, a clinically depressed girl is likely to be extremely quiet and withdrawn, but a clinically depressed boy is likely to be outwardly angry and hostile in ways that hurt other people (Ebata, Petersen, & Conger. 1990; Robins & Rutter. 1990; Rolf & others. 1993; Seligman. 1991). Many boys' emotional or psychological problems are also related to their being too close and too dependent on their mothers which can make the stepmother's situation especially difficult (Biller. 1993; Corneau. 1991; Ebata, Petersen, & Conger. 1990; Guttman. 1993; Pittman. 1993; Pianta, Egeland, & Stroufe. 1990; Pittman. 1993; Parke. 1996).

But even when they do not have serious psychological or emotional problems, sons generally do not adapt as well as daughters to their parents' divorce. Why? First, divorced parents are more likely to involve a son than a daughter in their adult conflicts (Capaldi, Forgatch, & Crosby. 1994; Colten, Gore, & Aseltine. 1991; Emery. 1994; Hetherington & Jodl. 1994; Pianta, Egeland, & Stroufe. 1990; Robins & Rutter. 1990}. Second, a divorced mother is more likely to say derogatory, hateful things about the father to her son than to her daughter (Depner & Bray. 1993; Greene & Leslie. 1989; Thomas & Forehand. 1993; Wallerstein. 1991; Warshak. 1992). As two such sons recall: "I wish there hadn't been so many negative statements about my father when I was living with my mother. I wish she had allowed me to like my dad without guilt" (Berman, 1992, p. 102). "I remember I hurt my dad over and over again. I think I did it because mom filled me with so many ideas that he was a bad person. I feel so sorry about that now" (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989, p. 193). Moreover, as a nationally renowned expert on boys with divorced parents summarizes the research: "A mother's negative opinion of her former spouse, if conveyed to her son, can do more harm to his gender identification and his self esteem than can the lack of contact with his father. Rarely does a boy hold a negative opinion of his father without holding the same opinion of himself" (Warshak, 1992, p. 163 & 167). In turning the son against his father, the mother increases the odds that the son will develop serious social, sexual, emotional or psychological problems (Emery. 1994; Furstenberg & Cherlin. 1991; Kalter. 1990; McLanahan & Sandefur. 1994; Parke. 1996; Pittman. 1993; Silverstein & Rashbaum. 1994; Wallerstein. 1991).

Third, the divorced mother too often treats her son like her adult confidant, her protector, and her help-mate, especially if she has not remarried - a situation which makes it difficult for the father or the stepmother to have a close relationship with the son (Guttman. 1993; Hetherington & Jodl. 1994; Kalter. 1990; Parke. 1996; Pittman. 1993; Silverstein & Rashbaum. 1994; Wallerstein. 1991; Warshak. 1992). And fourth, sons seem to be damaged more than daughters by living with an unmarried mother in terms of their social maturity, academic and vocational achievements, peer relationships, sexuality, dating, substance abuse, and mental health (Biller. 1993; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch. 1997; Booth & Dunn. 1994; Emery. 1994; Furstenberg & Cherlin. 1991; Kalter. 1990; Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan. 1995; McLanahan & Sandefur. 1994; Parke. 1996; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman. 1994; Wallerstein. 1991; Warshak. 1992).

**The Stepchildren's Psychological Health** A stepmother's situation is also especially stressful if any of her stepchildren have serious psychological or emotional problems. First is the sadness and frustration of coming to understand that stepparents rarely make things any better for a deeply troubled stepchild, no matter how hard they try. In fact, those children with serious, longstanding problems often get worse when either parent remarries. Then there is the pain of being used as a scapegoat. In some cases the stepmother is accused of actually causing the child's problems; and in others, she is blamed for the child's not overcoming his or her debilitating condition. Either way, the basis messages are cruel ones: My child was doing fine until you came into his father's life. Or, my child would have gotten better eventually if it hadn't been for you. As one stepmother with a suicidal stepson explains: "No matter what we do to try to help him, my stepson is determined to prove that his father and I have ruined his life" (Jones & Schiller, 1992, p. 56). Perhaps stepmothers might be consoled if they understood that those children who have

serious, ongoing problems after their parents divorce or remarry almost always had similar problems throughout their childhood. In other words, divorcing or remarrying often does exacerbate a troubled child's problems; but neither is the *cause* of that child's problems (Emery. 1994; Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan. 1995; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman. 1994; Zill. 1994).

## CONCLUSION

All in all then, the stepmother would probably be less stressed if everyone - especially herself- saw her as someone who *might* eventually get to be good friends with her husband's children, but not as someone who is supposed to be like an extra parent. And the stepmother would probably feel less disheartened if she accepted from the outset that the kind of relationship she develops with her husband's children is usually going to depend largely on factors beyond her control. Indeed, one of the main reasons why a stepmother's situation is usually so much more stressful than a stepfather's is because she is the target of more jealousy, more competition, and more hostility from the mother than he is from the father. Unlike stepmothers, stepfathers usually have the stage pretty much all to themselves because most children have very little or no contact with their father after their parents divorce (Beer. 1992; Bray, Berger, & Boethel. 1994; Brooks-Gunn. 1994; Cherlin & Furstenberg. 1994; Hetherington & Henderson. 1997; Martin & Martin. 1992; Skopin, Newman, & McKenry. 1993; Visher & Visher. 1996; White. 1994; Whitsett & Land. 1992).

Given what most stepmothers undergo, it's surprising that so many stepchildren and stepmothers say they end up getting along pretty well (Fluitt & Paradise. 1991; Furstenberg & Cherlin. 1991; Ganong & Coleman. 1994a; Hetherington & Jodl. 1994; Jones & Schiller. 1992; Keenan. 1992; Maglin & Schneidewind. 1989; McGuire. 1989; Rosenberg. 1989; Quick, McKenry, & Newman. 1994). Still, being a stepmother is usually stressful and generally falls short of what most stepmothers initially hoped for. And our society could be offering stepmothers far more support and understanding. In this spirit, each of us could be working harder in our own individual ways to combat negative stereotypes and to sensitize others to the situations that create stress for the millions of stepmothers in our society.

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