

Practical Steps
to Help You

THRIVE!

The
Smart
Stepmom



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Chapter 1

Can You Hear Me Now?

I (Laura) turned on my home computer and headed to the kitchen for a cup of coffee as I attempted to wake up. Steaming cup in hand and now resting in the comfortable chair, my eyes tried to focus on the flurry of activity on the screen. My inbox was going into cardiac arrest! Now fully awake, I watched the arriving messages pour in—thirty, forty, fifty, and still climbing. There was no end in sight. What in the world was happening? Glancing at the subject line I noticed a recurring word—Stepmom!

Stepmothers from everywhere were sending me their thoughts in response to a few sentences that my coauthor, Ron, had posted on his stepfamily e-magazine. I was seeking the top five issues facing today's stepmothers, and he had listed my email address for feedback. Hence the tidal wave of responses.

After reading each letter, a resounding message came through loud and clear. The stepmoms who wrote to me were deeply hurting. They felt isolated and didn't know where to find help. Many of them attended churches that offer information on marriage, but the topics typically focused on gender differences, communication skills, and marital intimacy. Although those were helpful, they didn't

address the extreme pain, frustration, or unique issues associated with stepfamilies.

I've been a stepmom since 1985, and I understand the loneliness and confusion I read in their notes. After a very painful divorce I met my present husband, Steve, who had been single for eight years. His two sons from his first marriage were eleven and thirteen when we married, and they didn't want or need a stepmother. My husband and I were clueless about dealing with the whole situation.

During my childhood and adult years I had had two stepmothers myself. My dad remarried twice after he was divorced from my mother. I foolishly assumed this experience prepared me for *becoming* a stepmother. I was wrong.

In the letters I received, a number of the marriages were on the verge of divorce. None of the women desired for their marriages to end, but the relationships were dying. Some of the most prevalent reasons included verbally and physically abusive stepkids, a manipulative former wife, intolerant in-laws, cruelty to her own biological children by stepsiblings or the stepdad, increasing debt, and husbands who wouldn't take steps toward helping the marriage survive, much less thrive.

Ron and I understand that in order to provide relief for stepmoms, we must be realistic. We can't tackle the complex issues associated with being a stepmom if we sugarcoat the problems. To quote TV psychologist Dr. Phil McGraw, "You can't change what you won't acknowledge." The Bible says it this way: "The prudent [or wise] see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty" (Proverbs 22:3 TNIV).

So let's begin by taking an honest look at the challenges. Consider these statements from fellow stepmoms:

I didn't realize that a second marriage would cause me to give up the dream of a perfect or whole family. Everyone's illusions change after marriage, but it's particularly difficult when children and a former spouse are involved.

Even though the role of being a mother hasn't been easy, being a stepmom has been a thousand times more difficult and painful.

There aren't a lot of positives associated with being second. Society says second place, second best—secondhand isn't good enough.

In the early days of my marriage I believed my husband when he said his former wife was unloving and a bad mom. But now I've realized that he has played a role in the problems.

Even fairy tales portray the second wife as the villain; she is always the "wicked stepmother."

Neither my husband nor his former wife is willing to give up the dance of bitterness and revenge.

How am I to believe that my husband loves me when he refuses to stand up to his children when they treat me with disrespect? I am his wife.

I wouldn't wish this experience on anyone. It's extremely hard for the children and the new wife.

Is there any hope? Absolutely. Listen to Lynn's story—a journey to victory—submitted on Ron's Web page.

Lynn and her husband combined six children—ages three, four, five, six, eight, and ten—who lived with them full time because her ex-husband was an alcoholic and his ex-wife abandoned her children. She faced typical challenges when her stepchildren minimized

her authority (“You’re not our mom!”) and remained loyal to a biological mother they didn’t know. When her stepchildren reached adolescence, their mother reappeared and instantly turned them further against Lynn. Despite the fact that the biological mom had been absent for many years, she still had the power to tear apart everything that Lynn had built with her stepkids. Disrespect and conflict became a daily occurrence in Lynn’s home, and her husband didn’t handle his children well. Their marriage was in turmoil to the point that Lynn wanted a divorce. But she didn’t file. The dream of growing old together kept her from leaving and eventually produced fruit she never imagined.

When her second-oldest stepson was about to enter the Iraq War, he used his allotted two hours of phone time not to call his biological mother or father, but his stepmother, Lynn. He apologized to her for his prior behavior and thanked her for offering discipline and guidance throughout his life. He especially thanked her for raising him to know the Lord. “After that call,” she wrote, “I knew that every minute of being a stepmom was worth it. We’ve now survived fifteen years of marriage, five high school graduations, one college graduation, three USMC boot camp graduations, and two weddings, and now we have two granddaughters. So, to all stepmoms out there, hang in there. You’ll survive too.” And we think you can thrive!

Learning to thrive begins by acknowledging and understanding the complex issues associated with stepfamilies and then applying smart stepfamily solutions.

A Smart Stepmom:

- doesn’t pretend that a second marriage is the same as a first, and she doesn’t expect everyone to be happy.
- acknowledges that it’s normal to love stepchildren differently than biological kids.

- discovers the things she can control and releases the things she can't.
- understands the vast difference between enabling and mercy. She knows that healthy boundaries are often necessary to create stability.
- has educated herself about normal stepfamily development and uses that understanding to make sense of her current relationships and circumstances.
- takes the time to understand children who are coping with loss and loyalty conflicts. Her goal is to ease the grief whenever possible rather than create more chaos.
- recognizes that children often feel disloyal to the biological mom if they treat their stepmom kindly.
- doesn't step hastily into her husband's parenting role, even when he refuses to do so.
- respectfully discusses issues about the children privately with her husband.
- learns when and how to address conflict in her marriage and with her stepchildren and her extended stepfamily.
- is constantly growing and learning about wise stepparenting and parenting strategies.
- is prepared. She isn't naïve or ambushed by complex stepfamily issues and is flexible to cope with matters that she didn't see coming.
- has a strong support system with other women who share her values.
- tries to be at peace with the biological mom and asks God to help her see things from the biological mom's viewpoint.
- does not try to become a replacement mother to children who already have one, nor does she insist that the children call her Mom.
- recognizes that there are limits to her contribution to decision-making regarding her stepchildren's lives (examples could include

choice of physician, educational environment, or wedding planning, etc.).

- accepts that sometimes being a stepmother is going to be unfair and lonely.
- uses God's standards as her guidelines for life.
- knows that God can and will give her a supernatural love for her husband's children if she sincerely asks.
- acknowledges that she may not see the fruit of her sacrifices until the children become adults.
- resists the negative label associated with being a stepmother.
- believes her value is determined by the price Jesus paid for her and that she is precious in God's eyes. This awareness offers her enduring peace even in challenging circumstances.

If you are like most women, while reading this list you graded yourself by checking off which descriptions you currently portray and which you do not. Don't be discouraged. These points—and others throughout the book—represent direction for you as a stepmom, and the quotes throughout the chapters are reminders that you are not alone. This list of Smart Stepmom qualities represents hope for the future. With confidence you can learn solutions that strengthen a marriage and bring peace to your spirit. This process takes time and patience. Moving from surviving to thriving doesn't happen overnight, but it can be done.

A Personal Prescription

Every stepfamily is different. It would be impossible for us to address each individual circumstance. But throughout this book we attempt to address as many different stepmom circumstances as possible. Occasionally you will note a sidebar that addresses a specific issue such as dating a man with children, part-time stepmoms, situations where the biological mother is deceased, or stepmothers

with adult stepchildren. Be sure to read the sidebars that apply most to you.

SMART STEPS (FOR STEPMOMS)

While every stepmom situation is different, there are some foundational principles of successful stepfamily living that Smart Stepmomms embrace. In Ron's book *The Smart Stepfamily*, he discusses crucial steps necessary to building a strong stepfamily. These key steps lay a foundation for the remainder of this book; therefore, we are reviewing them here. If you read that book, don't skip this section, as this review is written from a stepmom's perspective and highlights how each step specifically relates to her place in the home.

How to Cook a Stepfamily

Perhaps you enjoy cooking. In the kitchen of your stepfamily's heart there are a number of ingredients (that is, people). Some have a tough exterior, some are soft; some are spicy, and some are relatively bland. The "cooking method" you use to combine the ingredients of your home is very important. The wrong cooking method can result in a mess; the best cooking method makes an enjoyable meal possible.

Stepmomms who use the *blender* cooking method often ruin the family meal. A classic example is the stepmom who insists her stepkids instantly call her Mom. She has good intentions, but trying to force "a good blend" of ingredients can inadvertently cause friction.

Smart stepmomms know the wisest way to cook a stepfamily is with a Crockpot. Slow cookers, as they are sometimes called, utilize *time* and *low heat* in the cooking process, instead of the high friction of a blender. Imagine you are cooking stew for dinner. You throw beef, carrots, potatoes, tomatoes, celery, and onions into the

Crockpot, and place the lid on. It takes quite a while for the low heat to begin generating enough warmth to soften all the ingredients. Serving the stew after just thirty minutes is not wise. The carrots and potatoes aren't soft, the juices of the ingredients haven't begun to mix, and the undercooked beef is dangerous for consumption. But wait six or seven hours, and the ingredients have softened and combined into something really delicious.

The natural cooking time of stepfamilies is slow, and it may take many years before ingredients soften. So while you're waiting for your family to fully cook, discover the normal process of development and be patient with the results.

Step Down Your Expectations

Crockpot cooking means letting go of expectations, especially those that are oriented around time and the depth of the relationship with your stepchildren. Understand that you will never become *the real mom* to your stepchildren. As a stepmom you may hold a unique and special place in their hearts, but you will never be Mom. There is only one God-given mother in each of our lives. Give yourself a break. You cannot take her place, so don't go crazy trying.

Relaxing about your performance as a stepmother is a challenge. This is largely due to the societal pressure placed on women to be the focal point for family closeness, emotional connection, and socialization of the children. One writer calls this the motherhood mandate.¹ It assumes that women should define themselves in light of family relationships and will, therefore, care for family members to the best of their ability. Without even realizing it, women often organize their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors around the role of motherhood.

Stepmothers are often asked to carry a similar weight of responsibility for their stepchildren. Frequently they are asked by their husbands and society to be responsible for the quality of relationships

within the home and the well-being of the children. A stepmother who accepts this responsibility often judges herself a “good mother,” which is rewarding, or a “bad mother,” which leads to guilt. Further, stepmothers who more closely identify with their spousal role than parental role (*mothering but not a mother*) may fear being judged uncaring or wicked by friends, neighbors, or family members.²

All of this pressure to perform—what we might call the *stepmother mandate*—creates tremendous stress and guilt for some stepmoms. Stepmothers often fail to recognize that they don’t have the same emotional attachment, influence, or power within the home to bring about “good mothering.” You aren’t *the* mother, so how can you successfully mother?

Whether stemming from your own internal pressure, family members, friends, or society in general, combating the stepmother mandate begins with understanding that cooking a stepfamily is not entirely your responsibility, nor do you possess enough influence to make it happen exactly as you desire. Crockpot cooking is a process that is influenced by every family member and the dynamics between them. Instead of taking on the burden of being the focal point for the relationships within your family, only accept responsibility for your part. Allow others to accept theirs.

Two Step—Make Your Marriage a Priority

Making your marriage a priority means developing a healthy marital relationship. Not long ago Dr. David Olson and I (Ron) conducted the largest qualitative study of couples creating stepfamilies to discover the qualities of a healthy stepfamily marriage. Our findings are published in a book called *The Remarriage Checkup*. In brief, we discovered that the top five predictors of healthy, vibrant stepfamily marriages are:

1. *Personality Compatibility*—Healthy couples are comprised of healthy individuals who are not controlling, jealous, angry,

Step Money

How many checking or savings accounts couples put money into does not seem to make a significant difference in couple satisfaction with money management.³ What does matter is that the couple agrees to the solution and shares values about spending, saving, and giving, and how money is used to care for family members.

moody, or overly critical. In addition we found that the presence of fear (e.g., of another relationship breakup) was extremely defeating to the marriage, while confidence and trust increased marital intimacy.

2. *Healthy Communication*—Like oil in an engine, good communication skills ensure that the working parts of your marriage don't encounter too much friction. Every couple occasionally miscommunicates, but healthy couples really work at talking, listening, and understanding each other.
3. *Conflict Resolution*—Disagreements can create a fire that destroys your marriage, or they can help your marriage grow by burning up the unwanted parts of your relationship. The goal should be to manage conflict in a healthy manner.
4. *Leisure Time Together*—What we sometimes called the “fun factor” of a great remarriage, this quality speaks to whether you and your husband have regular, frequent leisurely time together. Notice that this isn't about each of you having individual leisure time, rather fun time spent together. Enjoying a nightly walk or occasional date out on the town, playing cards or tennis, or any other activity that is shared contributes to a satisfying marriage.
5. *Couple Flexibility*—This describes your ability to adapt and change to life's circumstances. Couples with rigid attitudes often find themselves stuck, not knowing how to resolve stepfamily dilemmas. In addition, they are at odds with each other much more frequently than those who work together to manage the family's schedule, time demands, and decisions.

Building these qualities in your marriage should be a priority for you and your husband. Together they alone predict with over

98 percent accuracy whether a remarried couple will have a strong marriage or a poor one.⁴ Commit to working on these areas, and your family will benefit.

Step in Line With the Parenting Team

Stepfamily parenting has two key aspects: parenting with the adults in the other home and parenting as a father-stepmother team. Those with children moving between two (or more) homes know how challenging cooperation with ex-spouses can be. Healthy co-parenting focuses on putting aside the differences you have with an ex-spouse (or husband's ex-spouse) and cooperating on matters regarding the children's well-being. This is always easier said than done.

We like to say that your husband's ex-wife is your ex-wife-in-law. You never chose her as a relative, but she is one. To parent effectively you have to establish a workable relationship with her (whether she deserves it or not). We'll devote an entire chapter to this matter later in the book, but for now, realize that your relationship with her has a great impact on your family.

Working together as a father-stepmother team is also important. Several chapters in this book outline how you and your husband can accomplish this as well as offer guidance for empty-nest stepmothers, but one critical principle to mention here is that authority is based on relationship. Wise stepmothers build a warm, trusting relationship with stepchildren before trying to become a parental authority. The road to being labeled *wicked* is paved with demanding obedience from children who don't know or trust your heart. Once they know that you care, then and only then have you earned the right to lead and discipline.

Get a Relationship Checkup

Invite your boyfriend or husband to take the online Couple Checkup with you at www.SuccessfulStepfamilies.com (for dating, engaged, and married couples). An objective scientific analysis helps motivate men to work on their relationship.

When Mom Is Deceased

Expect your stepchildren to have a measure of loyalty to how their mother did and might have parented them. One eleven-year-old told his father, "If you get married to her and she changes the rules, I'll follow Mom's rules instead."

- Try to know what kind of parent their mother was and what she valued. Since you stand in her shadow, this will help you understand how your stepchildren experience you.
- Compliment their mother's values and parenting when you can. She is not your enemy.
- Some children feel confused about embracing your love. Letting you in may make them feel like they're losing Mom again. Be patient with what appear to be hot/cold responses, and think of it as confusion instead.

REAL-LIFE WISDOM

This book is drawn in part from our years of experience in training individuals and families, conducting stepfamily coaching and therapy, and conducting solid social research on healthy stepfamily living. In addition, we want you to know that we are Christians and speak from our faith perspective. Because our faith and research converge in a powerful way, we believe the principles in this resource apply to anyone searching for insight on becoming a Smart Stepmom. You don't have to share our faith to gain practical strength from this book.

Finally, to assist you with practical implementation, we have concluded each chapter with questions. These can be used individually, in discussion with your husband, or as part of a stepmoms support group. We strongly encourage you to connect with other stepmoms to share your journey. There *is* strength in numbers. Because we know stepmoms often need encouragement, we have also included thoughtful prayers and relevant

Bible passages at the close of each chapter as a source of comfort and strength.

So grab a cup of coffee, chai tea, or a Coke, and let's move forward.

PRAYER

Lord, the desire of my heart is to become a Smart Stepmom. The Bible tells me that you are the way and the truth and the meaning of all life. And that you came to give me an abundant life filled with your goodness. Thank you that I can bring my weariness and heavy burdens to you, and that you promise to replace them with peace and rest for my soul.

I want to finish this life with confidence that I have done my part in seeking your wisdom and insight every step of the way. Help me to keep my emotions or misguided thinking in check. I love you, Lord. And I seek your face. Open my heart that I might see and hear you more clearly. Your guidance makes my eyes light up and brings joy into my life.

PRAYER REFERENCES

John 3:16

2 Corinthians 1:12

John 10:10

Proverbs 14:12

Matthew 11:28–30

Psalms 19:8

Smart Stepmom Discussion Questions

1. How long have you been a stepmom, or where are you in the process right now?
2. What has surprised you the most about becoming a stepmom?
3. What was your reaction to the quotes from other stepmoms? Is there one that sounds like you?
4. What are the best parts/worst parts of being a stepmom for you?
5. What is your relationship with your stepchildren at this point? If you could improve in one area, what would it be?
6. Reviewing the Smart Stepmom list, what are the top three areas you feel need the most attention?
7. Does knowing that your feelings and frustrations are common among stepmoms help with the anger, loneliness, or isolation?
8. What is discouraging and what is a relief about learning that step-families often take a number of years to “cook”?
9. Which of the following best describes how far along your family is in the Crockpot?
 - Ingredients still separated (before the wedding)
 - Just put the lid on (newlyweds)
 - Beginning to warm (the early years)
 - Some softening (indications of developing emotional connection)
 - Juices are sharing (combining of two or more ingredients to different degrees)
 - Stew! (tastes good for the most part)
10. What significant outcome would you like to see as a result of reading this book?