

## **WHEN IT'S TIME TO MOVE ON** **by Perdita Kirkness Norwood**

Although you're not involved in the marriage stakes right now, there may come a time when you'll consider trying again. A little older and certainly wiser, this time you'll want to make sure it's for keeps. But the second time around can be more complicated, providing a totally new experience - that of becoming a stepparent, a role for which you are most likely unprepared.

While researching my book "The Enlightened Stepmother; Revolutionizing the Role" the one thought I heard from every woman I talked with was "I didn't know it would be like this," or "I didn't know it would be this hard." These women met Mr. Right, fell in love, and married without taking into account the effect that children from previous marriages (his and hers) would have on their new union. In the rosy glow of love, they had unrealistic expectations of what lay ahead, assuming their love would resolve any problems that appeared. The same scenario takes place with men; they too are unaware there are prerequisites other than love.

It is far more effective to prevent, rather than find cures, for the inevitable difficulties that arise during the formation of a stepfamily. Before taking on the role, it is vital to become informed about the dynamics of step relationships, and the issues they create on all levels, emotional, practical, legal and financial. While this may seem a little too businesslike for some, time spent researching, planning and organizing in the early stages can help form a stronger family unit down the line.

First you need to understand that building a stepfamily takes time, sometimes many years. Each stepfamily works its way through identified stages, which cannot be rushed. The marital relationship must be given priority, must be nurtured. Love for your new partner is your reason for marrying again, and if the relationship fails, the stepfamily fails with it, resulting in trauma and stress for all involved.

Research your new family. Find out about the skeletons in their closet, their lifestyle, traditions and rituals, including religious ones. Check out "difficult" family members, find out who's "boss" of the extended family. What may initially seem a minor issue, such as eating on the run when you're used to family sit-down meals, has been known to ruin a relationship. Be open and honest with your new partner when he/she wants to know more about your family.

Observe how your new family members relate to each other; are they courteous, are emotions displayed publicly? Does this gel with your own family's behavior? You may avoid repeated embarrassment, if you're not used to holding hands in public, by adjusting early on to a stepfamily which casually hugs and kisses hello and goodbye.

Don't expect to love your stepchildren immediately. Nor should you expect that they will love you. It is unreasonable. It's quite normal that sometimes you won't even like each other. Aim for an easy going friendship to start with. Love takes time to grow.

Forget the guilt; it has no place in a stepfamily. Almost everything you consider negative in the early stages is caused by a misunderstanding. Be willing to talk about what seems strange, let others do the same. Recognize your difficulties are circumstantial, not personal.

Accept the fact that you are not your stepchildren's mother or father. They have (in the case of divorce) or had (in the case of death) a perfectly good mother or father, and except in the most unusual circumstances, don't want or need a replacement. Be a friend, mentor, guide, confidante, whatever feels comfortable. You will need to perform parenting duties, particularly with small children, but under another title. It bears repeating - you are not their parent. Let them call you by your first name.

Form a working relationship with the previous spouse (the one you are replacing) if he/she is still alive. You don't need to like each other, but for the sake of the children involved and peace in your home, you must be able to discuss arrangements concerning the children with their biological parent. Anger over a messy divorce can be put aside if you stick with one subject - the kids. Discuss money only with your own ex-spouse and never in front of the children.

Treat all the children in your care alike. Your feelings for your biological and stepchildren will differ, but in your home fairness and equality is important. Take your place immediately as one of the two heads of your new household. Do not hold back or keep quiet because the kids are not yours. Once you take second place in your own home, it is hard to make a comeback. As stepparent, you have a right to opinions concerning how your home operates and the behavior of those living or visiting it.

Discuss in detail, ideally prior to marriage or moving in together, every aspect of your new life and partnership. Together decide what is required of the children, involving them when appropriate to their age. If they are part of decisions they are more likely to be cooperative. Review your joint financial situation; set up budgets, decide who pays for what, plan ahead for debt repayment, taxes, children's education, health plans, savings, etc. Do the same with legal matters - custody and visitation schedules, life insurance, wills. Both partners must be familiar with all issues specific to their circumstances. Get professional help if needed. With planning and openness you will avoid future shocks; for example, when it's college time for your partner's three children and there's insufficient money available.

Remember this is YOUR new life. Your happiness and security are as important as everyone else's. Make sure your partner feels the same way. Plan, plan, plan. Discuss, discuss, discuss. It's impossible to do too much of either. Only when you are both

comfortable as partners and stepparents can you create an atmosphere in which you and your children can thrive to your full potential.

Yes, it is complicated. But those who succeed report the stepfamily can be an incredibly satisfying and rewarding experience. And that's the bottom line, the reason you are considering remarriage.