

Stephanie: This is Episode Number 175 for Stay Happily Married: The Stepmom Coach.

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Stephanie: I'm Stephanie Lockwood, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show.

Are you the outcast in your stepfamily? Dating and marriage is a process that is complicated enough on its own, never mind coming into a family that has already been established. Marrying someone with children from a previous marriage can be a delicate minefield that requires certain finesse to master.

Certified Master Stepfamily Coach Claudette Chenevert found herself in a similar situation over 20 years ago when she, a single mom to a 6-year-old boy, married her husband. She became a stepmom to two girls, and after several years of failures and successes, Claudette was able to determine what steps were needed to be taken to successfully integrate oneself into an established family and make it function on its own. From the constant presence of an ex, to taking on a parenting role overnight, Claudette knows how to handle it all.

Welcome to the show, Claudette. I'm glad you could join us.

Claudette: Thank you, Stephanie, for having me. I'm really glad to be here today.

Stephanie: You are the stepmom coach; you are the go-to source for everything we need to know about stepfamilies and integrating, so you've seen these people who are marrying into families who have already been established. What kind of problems are these people facing in this new situation?

Claudette: What I'm seeing is people trying to imagine themselves as if they were a first-time married couple. There's a lot of denial in thinking they're going to have problems, or they look at it as, "We're going to deal with it as it comes."

The adjustment time or the adjustment period for stepfamilies is very different from a first-time marrying couple. For example, when a couple comes together and there are no children in the mix, they get to adjust at a rate that is often faster because there are only two people. Once you start mixing in kids and ex-spouses, the adjustment is a lot longer and sometimes more complicated just because of the number of people in the relationship.

Another problem that I see is that there are a lot of unrealistic expectations that couples bring into the relationship. For example, thinking that the new parent is going to love the children the same way as a biological parent. It's not fair to anybody to bring in that kind of expectation.

Stephanie: Right. So we have different situations. We have people who have never had children before coming in and becoming stepparents. We have people who are like you, you had a son before you got married, and then had two daughters brought into the family. What's life like for men and women who are becoming stepparents? What is that adjustment process like?

Claudette: Depending on whether you've had children before on your own before coming into this relationship, or you are bringing children into the relationship, there are different ways of merging into this new family. If you're a single person marrying someone with children, that adjustment can be really difficult because there is a lot of uncertainty. "What is my role in this relationship? What are the boundaries?" Oftentimes, these people are questioning themselves as to what is the right thing to do and what isn't the right thing to do. "How involved should I be? How not involved?"

When you have children of your own, you have had some life experience with children. What happens in this situation is you have to allow another person to be a part of your children's life. That can be very difficult, especially if you're very protective of your children and you don't want to have certain responsibilities transferred to your new spouse. There needs to be a lot of communication, a lot of talking, about what is expected and what is it that you want out of this relationship.

Another thing I see often for men and women entering into a stepfamily relationship, whether you're a single person or you have brought children, is a feeling of being an outsider. What I mean by that is that you're coming into a ready-made, established family or a ready-made, established relationship, and you need to find where you fit in to all of this. Especially with the holidays coming, there are gatherings and family traditions, and you're wondering, "Okay, what am I supposed to do?" It gets really difficult to know what is the right thing and what is not. Communication between the parties, between the adults and the kids, is crucial

to making this transition easier and smooth.

Stephanie:When people are trying to fix these issues and intentions that occur when you are integrating a family, what do you find are the most common things that people are doing wrong or incorrectly?

Claudette:One thing I often see, as I mentioned earlier, is unrealistic expectations. The other thing I often see is moving too fast. What I mean is, depending on how long the separation or divorce was in the original family, if someone meets the love of their life and they are really excited, and they want to move forward with their relationship, because there are children in the mix, it's really important to think about the impact it's going to have on the kids.

Also, it's important to think about the age of the children. When the kids are little, it may not impact the relationship as much as if they are teenagers, or even adults for that matter. I've seen grown, adult children have issues with their parents remarrying. It's not just little kids or teenagers; it goes throughout the entire spectrum.

The other thing I also see is the stepparent trying too hard to be a parent figure or trying to raise these kids. For anybody coming into a new relationship where kids are involved, it's really important is to get to know the kids before trying to impose your values, your role, your house rules and things like this. I'm sure you may have heard before of the 'know, like and trust factor'. So this is really important for kids. We teach kids to be wary of strangers, and for kids, a stepparent is essentially a stranger. They don't know you, they don't understand your thought processes. "Why is it that you are asking me to do certain chores, when my own parent never did ask me anything?"

It's really important to start looking at the kids as individuals, instead of extensions of a parent. Next, look at the children and try to get to know them better. What are their likes and dislikes? What are their favorite things? What are their favorite colors? Once you start understanding who these kids are, they'll get to like you and trust you. Then you can become more of a parent figure or a role model figure.

Stephanie:Respectively, how long does it usually take to fully integrate yourself into a family and into the role of a stepparent?

Claudette:That depends a lot on different circumstances, but studies have shown that integrating into a stepfamily can take anywhere between four and seven years. Depending on the circumstances and the age of the children, it can take as long as 12 years.

Stephanie:Wow.

Claudette:Obviously, there are times when certain families will never integrate. That is a reality, so I think it's important for us to put that on the table and make people realize that there is a possibility that your stepkids may never like you. Then again, it can also take four years.

What I want to share here is what makes the integration move slower or faster. I think this is really important for anybody in a stepfamily relationship or thinking of becoming a stepparent to consider.

One of the things that has been shown as a factor in whether the cycle moves forward slower or faster is when people understand that there are phases or cycles in stepfamilies. Dr. Papernow is the one who really discovered this and talks extensively about stepfamily cycles. There are three of them, and I'd like to share a little about those three; the early cycle, middle cycle, and later cycle.

The early cycle, we call it getting started. This is where you get to learn and to know each other. I mentioned earlier the 'know, like and trust factor'. Think of this as the 'know factor'. Getting to understand everybody's quirks and what people like and don't like. You're assimilating and becoming aware of your differences, because there are differences. You both came from different families and you're coming together to create a new family.

The middle stage is where you start to loosen up about the structure and the boundaries, and start to see things differently than you would have in the middle. This is where conversations happen. You start to air out your differences. You express more what you want in a way that brings everyone together. You're starting to like each other, as I mentioned earlier about the 'know/like/trust factor'. This is a period where a lot of changes are being implemented. There's a lot of shifting of perspective.

In the last stage, the relationship is solidified. There is a lot more intimacy, there are traditions and routines,

and you're sharing stories from the past. You are able to share concerns and issues, and find resolutions to these problems.

Once people understand these stages, they can easily identify where they are and know it's not something where they are going to be there for a lifetime.

Stephanie:When you have these stepparents going into relationships, like you said, you're having to find what your boundaries are, but you always have this ex who is in the picture, this other biological parent. My question about this one is how does that affect the relationship that's formed between the new couple, with always having the ex in the picture, around the corner?

Claudette:That can be a challenge. What I see often is if a person feels insecure about their new relationship, and sees the ex as a threat, it will always be the thing that will divide the couple. It's really important to see yourself as a team rather than someone you married to live your life with. The concept of being a team, of working together to create a new family, a new relationship, is key.

When you look at the ex and see that person as either a threat or competition, or someone who is going to make your life miserable, that is exactly what you're going to get. Looking at this person with a different set of lenses, from a different perspective, really helps to transform that relationship. Oftentimes I tell people that when you look at the ex, it doesn't matter what that person thinks of you. You really need to think of yourself and what is it that you want to see in this relationship. You need to ask yourself some really hard questions. Is it true that the ex is a threat to my relationship? Is it true that the ex is trying to destroy whatever we are building?

Oftentimes, if you look really hard, you can see that this person is hurting and doesn't know how to express their hurt feelings. I see this more when it's a mom who has divorced and not remarried and is worried because their ex-husbands have remarried. This woman is feeling, "I have lost my identity as a wife. I'm afraid I'm going to lose my identity as a mother. Who am I going to be now?" Especially if this woman did not work outside of the home, this is her only identity.

Have conversations with your partner, with your husband or your wife, about what it is you want to build, and look at your ex as a parent, because that person will forever be a parent. They may be your ex-spouse, but they will never be an ex-parent. So find ways that you can collaborate together. Find anything, even the smallest detail, to merge the gap between seeing this person as your enemy or your competition, and try to find ways to bring this person into being an effective parent.

I know a lot of your readers or listeners ask about how to deal with jealousy. Again, I think when you start to see that there are a lot of hurt feelings, there's a sense of losing your identity, of losing, in that person's perspective, everything they ever had that, they tend to start having some compassion. That is my suggestion to a lot of couples.

I also see this when they are having issues with dealing with an ex and don't know how to handle the situation. I think this is a good time to seek help and get some coaching around what it is that you are wanting for your family. Oftentimes, people come to me and say, "The ex is a big issue in my relationship. I feel my relationship is falling apart." And once we start working together, they realize that a lot of the time it's not so much the ex that is the problem, but their perception and their interpretation of some of the actions, such as seeing this person as someone who is hurting, as someone who is losing their identity and their position in life, and wanting to fight to something back in life.

Stephanie:Claudette, I just have one final question for you today, and I feel this is a pretty big one. When stepparents are trying to discipline these stepchildren and trying to wield their authority over their stepchildren, obviously not without cause, what's the standard that you see? Are these children rebelling or maybe are not listening?

Claudette:The standard is that kids won't accept being disciplined by a stepparent, especially in the beginning, and most definitely when they are teenager. The reason is that they see this person as a stranger. They are asking themselves, "Who do you think you are to tell me what to do?"

It's really important for a biological parent to stay involved. Sometimes I see dads remarrying and handing over the responsibility of raising and disciplining kids to their new wife, the stepmom, which is really unfair for the woman, because that isn't her role, especially in the beginning. Communication and understanding what the kids are doing is necessary.

Of course, it depends on what's going on. If it's a life-threatening situation, I don't care who you are, you intervene immediately. But if it's something like, "You didn't do your chores," or homework assignments are not done, issues like this where it's a daily thing, it's really important for the biological parent to take over.

View yourself as a mentor rather than a parent with the kids. If you see yourself as either a teacher or a mentor, or even an aunt for these kids, then you can definitely slowly work yourself into being a disciplinarian. But right off the bat, the kids won't accept it and they will rebel, especially older kids. They just going to say, "Who do you think you are to discipline me?"

Stephanie:All right. Claudette, thank you so much for taking the time and being on the show with us today.

Claudette:Thank you so much, Stephanie, for having me.

Stephanie:To find out more about Claudette Chenevert or her approach for stepmoms, you can visit her website at www.stepmomcoach.com. We'll have a link to this in the show notes.

Thank you so much for joining us today and I hope you'll join us again next week. We always love hearing from you, so to comment on this or any other episode, you can call our listener comment line at 919-256-3083 or email us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

I'm Stephanie Lockwood and until next time, Stay Happily Married.

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