

Anna: Don't be a step-monster. This is Stay Happily Married Episode Number 243.

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

Anna: I'm Anna Riley and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Is there a way to gain respect from your stepchildren without turning into an evil step-monster? We've all heard the famous stepmom horror stories, like that of the workings of Lady Tremaine, Cinderella's wicked stepmother, and they don't turn out well, for the stepmoms, that is. Luckily, it doesn't have to be that way in real life. You can, in fact, have wonderful relationships with your stepchildren without overstepping your boundaries but also while maintaining a level of respect and admiration.

In many situations, couples who are married for the second time or even the third time, find themselves bringing children into the mix and wondering how to raise and guide the children when there's more than two parents involved. Oftentimes, there are many unrealistic expectations placed on stepfamilies that can lead to a chaotic family life and destruction of the relationship between husband and wife. Today we're talking with Claudette Chenevert, author of "Words of Hope, Inspiration and Wisdom for Stepfamilies" and "31 Days to Better Communication for Stepfamilies". Also known as the "Stepmom Coach", Claudette is a master certified Stepfamily Foundation coach, helping families and stepmoms gain a better understanding of how to manage stepfamily life.

Welcome to the show, Claudette. I'm so glad you could join me today.

Claudette: Hi, Anna. I'm really happy to be here.

Anna: So with the divorce rate being so high, it seems kind of like that stepfamilies are becoming increasingly prevalent. Do you find that to be the case?

Claudette: Oh, yes, definitely. And the funny thing about all of this is that although the divorce rate is sort of growing or in some studies, if you look at some studies it'll be stable, when it comes to second marriages and third marriages, those are pretty high. They're in the 66% to 70% area. The other thing, though, that we don't often talk about is that today a lot of couples opt to live together rather than get married. And so we don't have an accurate statistics for that, meaning that we have no idea how many stepfamilies really are out there and how many break up after a certain amount of years.

Anna: OK, right. So you're saying without ever actually getting married, they just may be a man and a woman are dating, kind of, and they date for a while and they kind of bring their families together but they never actually get married?

Claudette: Exactly, exactly, and there are quite a few of those types of family dynamics where couples decide to live together rather than formally get married and they're still considered a stepfamily.

Anna: Right, OK, that makes sense, yeah. All right, so what are some of the issues that come up frequently with stepfamily life and it seems like adjustment would play a big part. Does that have a big effect on the families?

Claudette: Definitely, definitely. This is a kind of family that's really different from your nuclear or your traditional kind of family. First of all, if you're talking about adjustment, the adjustment period is extremely different for stepfamilies compared to traditional families when there's no honeymoon period, meaning that it's an instant family that's coming together, we don't have the time. You know, when a couple comes together, they either live together or get married, there's an adjustment period for the husband and the wife.

In the stepfamily, they don't have that adjustment period. You have to get into the role of parenting right away, meaning you haven't had the time to, in most cases, talk about how we're going to deal with the kids, how we're going to discipline, what are our house rules, our home values, our family values. Those haven't been discussed. There's a lot of in the moment decision-making, where in a traditional family, you have the time to have those kinds of conversations in a traditional family when you're planning your family. There's a planning stage, where in a stepfamily, that planning stage is often the day they move in together and they start disciplining the kids as soon as everybody's in there.

Anna: Right, yeah, I see. So then aside from the adjustments that they have to deal with with entering into stepfamily life, what are some of the big issues that come up a lot when they're doing that?

Claudette: Well, as I mentioned, the fact that there's no honeymoon phase, that means that there's a lot of instant parenting that has to happen, meaning that oftentimes the roles have not

been defined clearly so there's a lot of ambiguity around who is supposed to do what. Another issue that comes together is that there's a lot of unrealistic expectations, as I just mentioned, but there's also another parent involved in how this family's going to function. Whether that parent is close by or far away, there's the influence of another third party that is involved in raising these children. So that makes it really challenging and difficult.

Anna: Right. I can totally see that, yeah, for sure. OK, so before we go into how they effectively deal with parenting with more than one parent, I'm kind of curious about the stepmom thing and I'm wondering about how, if there are differences that you see with stepmoms that enter into stepfamily life that don't have their own children versus stepmoms who get into the stepfamily life who already have their own children. What are the kind of differences that happen there? I just kind of thought of that, a sort of interesting dynamic. It might be a little different for that.

Claudette: Yeah, and those are great questions, Anna, because sometimes people don't realize that not all stepmoms are created equally, especially when it comes to those kinds of situations. So if you're talking about a woman who's never had children of her own who is coming in to becoming an instant mom, several things happen. First, she hasn't had the opportunity to raise children of her own, and it doesn't mean she doesn't know what's going on. It's just that it will take her awhile or a lot longer to get adapted or to catch up to where the kids are in their development phase. Depending if the kids are very young or they're teenagers or they're adults, there are issues with each phase of their children.

I was talking with a lady yesterday. Her dad remarried. She's about my age. She's in her late 40's, early 50's. Her dad remarried and she can't stand her stepmom because her stepmom keeps telling the grown, adult children what to do and this woman never had kids of her own. So that's a challenge because, like this adult person is saying, "Who is this person to tell us what to do? I mean, she's never been in our lives before and here she is telling us what to do." The fact is that when it's a single woman coming into a relationship, she often has a harder time to just be an observer and try to understand how this family functions. She will often feel like an outsider looking inside. She won't always know how to integrate herself so that she can feel included because it's a totally different dynamic.

Now, if it's a woman who has children of her own, like in my situation, I had a son. I brought him into the relationship with my husband and his two daughters so what happens is then we compare our parenting styles. Oftentimes, they may not always be similar. So here the mother looks and says, "Well, that's not how I raised my son or my daughter." Then the dad says, "Well, that's not how I raise my son or daughter," and so there's a comparing scenario that occurs and that's challenging on its own. So what happens, then you have to come together and try to figure out how can we parent together without letting our values go away or changing who we are as individuals, also.

Anna: Right. So then if we're moving onto kind of like how children feel in the mix of this, do you think that there's a difference with how children react to a stepmom based on whether or not she has her own children?

Claudette: Yes, because what will happen is that children will see this as, "Oh, of course, your mom is going to take your side because she loves you more than she does us." So children who happen to have stepsiblings that are coming in with more family members, children feel like, "Wow, you know, this isn't fair. This isn't equal." Even children can sometimes feel like they're an outsider in their own home and, again, it depends a lot on if the kids stay there full-time. Do the kids come over only every other weekend? Do they come over only in the summer? There are a lot of variables that are involved here.

So children who live together, stepkids or stepsiblings that live together, learn to create a sense of community or a sense of family over time. And that's the key word. It's the amount of time they spend together as a family that will make it better over time and not the number of years. Sometimes, people will say, "Well, it can take two to four years." If those kids only see each other every other weekend or over the summer, there's no way there's going to be bonding between the kids or the stepparents for that matter.

Anna: Yeah, so it doesn't necessarily mean that's exactly your point. It's not about the number of years, like you're saying, it's definitely about spending time together, going out to dinner, going to the park, going to the movies, having family game night, stuff like that, right?

Claudette: Exactly, exactly. So it's the quality of the time spent together rather than just the number of years. As you mentioned, the game night and the activities is quality time. Because sometimes I'll see people say, "Oh, yeah, we spend time together. We're in the same house," but no one's speaking to one another and so that's not quality time. I find that in a stepfamily situation, quality time is probably even more crucial because there's sense of insecurity within the children because they've lived through a loss, they've lived through a sense of a family that

has broken down or is no longer together and therefore it challenges their identity as to who they are as individuals.

Sometimes what happens, let's say preteens or teens, what happens is they will feel as if, "Well, is this stepparent going to leave us like my mom or dad left us? Are they going to stick around? I don't want to invest my personal emotions or time with this person in case he leaves." So there's a lot of insecurities that go around.

Anna: Yeah. So do you think that sometimes if there's children coming in from both sides, I guess a key like you were saying, would be the bonding but in the initial stages, do you see oftentimes that maybe the children kind of have animosity sort of towards each other and the other person that just came into the family because to them it's like this is not my "real family", this is not how it's supposed to be?

Claudette: Definitely and you're very right, Anna. Children will see this as you're preventing my real parents from getting together. When a man and woman come together and create a family or when a couple comes together to create a family, what happens is the children see this as, "Oh, wow, this is for real. My mom and dad are not coming back together." This just solidified the divorce or the separation or whatever. So what happens is that children see this as you're the intruder, you're the one who's preventing me from being happy.

I want to just share also that when the parents get a divorce or separate, the way they separate, the way they engage after the divorce impacts how the children will welcome or engage with a new partner and new stepparent, meaning that if the divorcing couple have a lot of animosity between each other, the children will definitely feel this and they will act out in that kind of way. So it's so important for the adults that are getting divorced to realize that how you behave, you're actually teaching your children to behave, according to the way you're behaving. Then you're teaching these kids that later on in their future, that kind of relationship they might engage in when they become old enough to have a partner in their lives.

Anna: Right. So that's interesting. I can see that though, feeding off of how your parents are reacting to this situation and if they're very tense with each other then I'm sure that will lead to animosity and resisting the new family unit and all of that. So if there are children that are in a stepfamily and they are very resistant to the whole idea of the new stepfamily and maybe their stepmom or their stepdad, what are your recommendations for the parents to do in that kind of a situation when children are really resistant and maybe over the top, how they can be and sometimes it's understandable, sometimes it's a little crazy, I suppose, but if they're really angry about it, upset, resistant to the idea, what do you say to that?

Claudette: So the first thing to do is for the biological parent, whether it's mom or dad of these kids is to sit down with them and have a conversation about why they are no longer with mom or dad and to make sure that the kids don't feel that it's their fault because sometimes some children will feel like, "Well, if I would have been nicer, if I had better grades, if I didn't fight so much with my brother or sister, maybe mom or dad would have stayed together." So really make sure that the children understand that the divorce has nothing to do with them, so first of all that.

Second of all, always tell your child that they are the most important part of your life. It doesn't mean that you are putting them first. What it means is that you will do everything in your power to make sure that they're taken care of, you have time with them, they are an important part of your life and that will never change, meaning that you will always be their parent no matter what happens. Then you tell these children that part of being an adult is also fulfilling your needs as an adult and having a partner. So the children, that's not their role.

Their role is not to replace the adult in the life because sometimes I often see where, in my case, I was a single mom for almost four years. I could see my son wanting to take over the role of being the man of the house and then when that happened, I also realized that he was very defensive, he was overprotective. That's not a good role for a child. So sitting down and saying, "This is my role. This is my job and you can't be doing this." Sitting down, having that conversation with them and then letting them know what do they see is going on in the family.

Ask them. Being open and honest, ask the kids, "What do you think about this whole family situation?" Sometimes, they'll say to you, "This sucks. I hate this. I really don't want another person telling me what to do." At that moment, what you do is you have a conversation with the stepparent and the child and you establish some ground rules. OK, what is acceptable for you as my role in this family, and what is it you would like for me to do so we can come together and not be on opposing teams?

Anna: Right, right, I totally got that, yeah. So then what do you recommend for couples and families that are just now starting or just embarking on the stepfamily journey?

Claudette: Well, there are several things that people can do. First of all, educate yourself. Understand that this kind of relationship is so different from a traditional marriage. If you've never been in a stepfamily relationship, if you've not grown in a stepfamily, find some good information. There's plenty out there. I have on my website some articles, some recordings, some interviews I've done with a lot of people, so that's a place where people can actually start to find some information.

Second of all, sit down and have an honest talk about what it is you want this family to look like. Oftentimes, we just go through the motion and think this will happen all by itself. It doesn't. You have to plan it. You have to create it and you have to put some actions behind those ideas in order to make it happen. So one of the things that I do and I've been very successful is I have a 12-session program where we go through a curriculum during that 12 sessions where we look at what it is you want this family to look like. Sometimes, people think, well, that's sort of normal but to put it down in words and to really describe it is not as easy as people think it is.

Then what we do is we break down those steps in order to make some action items. So how are you going to deal with the issues around discipline? What are your strategies to talk about house rules? How are you going to engage this third parent in the disciplining and the raising of the kids? How can you become a better couple in this relationship where kids are already involved in the relationship? So we look at these areas during these 12 sessions so that people get a really good, strong, solid foundation to get their stepfamily to stay together and to bond.

Anna: Right. Well, that's great, that's great, and I'm glad that you've had such great success and that you've been able to help so many people out with that. That's really great.

Claudette: Well, and the thing is with stepfamilies getting more and more divorced, there's a reason for it and so sometimes it's a matter of not realizing just how challenging and difficult it is. So people will give up because it's overwhelming and they have no idea what to do anymore. Or in other cases, it's bringing back some of the same problems from the past relationships into the current relationship and nothing's changing. So oftentimes those are the two reasons why stepfamilies don't succeed as well as first-time married couples and families.

Anna: Right. Well, Claudette, is there anything else that we should know?

Claudette: Well, one other thing that I just want people to know is that there is hope for stepfamilies. There are a lot of wonderful, strong, healthy stepfamilies that exist there and it's not all doom and gloom. It's not easy. It's a different kind of path than a traditional, nuclear family but there are a lot of success stories out there. It's just a question of understanding what makes you different and how you can make this family a success because a lot of kids depend on strong, healthy families so that they, in turn, can have strong, healthy relationships in the future.

Anna: Absolutely. Well, Claudette, thank you so much for talking with me and being on the show today. I really appreciate it.

Claudette: Well, thank you for having me, Anna. I really enjoyed it.

Anna: Of course. To find out more about Claudette and her books, as well as her stepfamily coaching activities, you can visit her website at [www.stepmomcoach.com](http://www.stepmomcoach.com) and I'll be sure to put links to everything in the show notes so all of you guys can have access to that. Thank you so much for joining us today and I hope you'll join us again next week. For more information about this show and future episodes, visit us at [www.stayhappilymarried.com](http://www.stayhappilymarried.com). I'm Anna Riley. Until next time, Stay Happily Married.

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