

YOU, HIM, HIS CHILDREN

How You Can Become One Family

Americans are in love with marriage. Today, about 80 percent of divorced and widowed men remarry, so a woman's chances of wedding one who's already walked down the aisle are much greater than they were 15 years ago. More and more, these brides and grooms gain not only a new spouse, but also that spouse's children from a previous marriage. How common is this? According to the U.S. Census Bureau (1980), six and a half million youngsters were part of stepfamilies. I added myself to the stepmother ranks in April 1977, when I married Michael, a 37-year-old with daughters, ages six and seven. When I first met Jenny and Shannon in 1976, I was 23. Michael and I lived in Philadelphia then (he'd been divorced for three years), while the girls lived with their mother in Montreal. Every woman (or man) marrying a person with children may share the same concerns I had at that time: How will the children influence life with my new mate? How will I relate to the children? How can I minimize some of the inherent conflicts in becoming a stepparent?

STEPPING INTO THE RELATIONSHIP

Unlike some "blended" families, the girls would live with Michael and me only during summer vacation and at Christmas. But even before the wedding, I wondered how it would feel sharing my new husband with two little girls who craved his time and attention. I knew I'd have to accept the reality that I wouldn't always be first in his life. A loss of privacy is inevitable with children in your

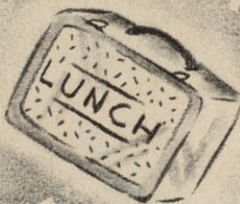
life. I think one finds ways to adapt to this. Stepparents need time alone together, stresses Dr. Selma Miller, Ed.D., national board member of the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists. If a new stepmother sacrifices private time with her husband in order to please her stepchildren, she may feel like an outsider in her own home. After the marriage, I found I experienced this whenever the girls would nab Michael to play cards the minute he returned from a long day at the office. Our solution: Sometimes Michael spent time alone with the girls, but when possible, he and I found a quiet 30 minutes together—sharing a drink, reviewing the day, and talking privately without two little voices chiming in.

Another adjustment the stepmother experiences is being the second wife, one who sees her husband's children as a symbol of his former love for another woman. Dr. Miller explains that as the new couple build their own life together, this jealousy usually subsides. But in the beginning, a stepparent sometimes feels like a "fifth wheel." Other family members may reminisce about fun times they shared. I often felt like a long-distance observer when Michael or the girls would mention a great experience they'd all been through, like camping in Canada. Now that I've traveled with the girls, I feel we've built our own separate mental scrapbook.

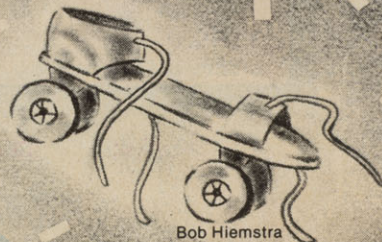
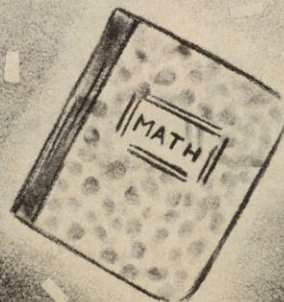
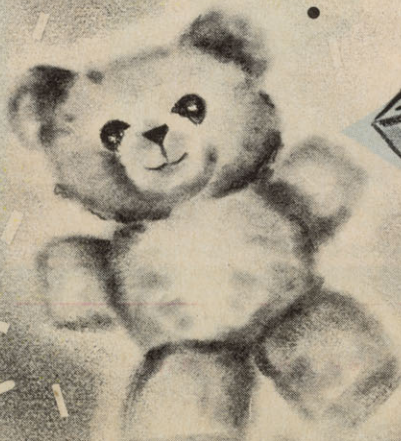
My concern about sharing my husband began long before I met his daughters—and it was resolved. But there were issues I hadn't anticipated that emerged once I became acquainted with the girls—and certainly after we married. As a newlywed, however, my love for Michael was so strong I believed that together we could do anything. Romantic as it is, this belief is still paramount in building both one's confidence as a stepparent and a rapport with your stepchildren.

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

Michael prepared the girls for our first meeting by telling them they were having dinner with a friend of Daddy's. "Kids are used to meeting all kinds of people," says Jeannette Lofas, founder of the Stepfamily Foundation (Continued on page 104)



by Betsy Storm



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