

His & Hers Duplex

The Side-by-Side Stepfamily

BY MARCI MCPHEE

Like every couple, we started out with the best of intentions. Yet, when we married, it felt like a superhuman task we were taking on. When George proposed, in fact, I kept him waiting two months for an answer and then replied: “Look, we really love each other. But can any two human beings make a marriage work under these circumstances?”

At the time, my four kids lived with me and his two kids lived with him. That is, outside of having visitation with their *other* biological parents roughly every Wednesday night and every other weekend. Was our relationship strong enough to take on day-to-day stepfamily life with a family that would be big like ours? Single parenting was difficult enough. Would stepparenting be even harder?

With equal parts head-over-heels love and cock-eyed optimism, when I was finally ready, in return I proposed to George. He grinned and said, “Yes.” We married three months later. He and his kids then moved into my, larger house. That adds up to six kids across a nine-year age range, eight people for dinner and a possibility for multiple explosion points.

We convinced our exes to synchronize visitation. (Phew, peace and quiet!) After three years, though, the stress of an oil-and-water style family merger was too much. Meshing two different family cultures, two different sets of holiday traditions, colliding parenting styles and adolescent hormones either raging or emerging? Well, that was a king-sized challenge.

My husband’s income from his small painting business and my part-time pay earned working at a local college were augmented by child support received from each of our exes. But it was never enough to cover ballet, soccer programs, summer camps and school-led field trips for all six kids. Financial stress threatened to boil over what was already a bubbling cauldron.

“You’re not my ‘real’ parent,” one child or another spat out from time to time. To which they would add (sigh), “I don’t have to do what you say.”

“But, dear child,” I’d remind myself more than



them, “I feel as if you *are* my ‘real’ child, regardless of whether or not I bore you. And I am here to guide you along your life’s path.”

Episodes of ordinary sibling rivalry flared, engulfing our entire family. We almost always took sides based on bloodline: His and hers. But his side was often outnumbered and outmaneuvered, particularly with the advantage my older boys wielded.

OUR “TEMPORARY” SPLIT

Once, when an ordinary spat between the kids brought him to the brink of violence, my husband took his kids to a motel overnight so we could all cool off. George knew he needed to get control of his anger before he did something he’d regret. It was crystal clear to both of us that I wouldn’t stand for his raising a hand to the kids after what I’d been through with my first husband.

That “overnight” turned into a few weeks’ motel stay. With no end in sight, he and his kids rented an apartment 2 miles from the house. The relief on both sides was palpable—but George and I missed each other. We continued to stay very married,

What Do You Think?

Do we chalk it up to serendipity or is this a hot topic? To our surprise, as we were prepping this edition for publication, a “living apart” user-initiated thread popped up on the *StepMom Magazine* private forum. (Access is FREE with your subscription.) Two contributors to that discussion offered up their comments for your consideration. Where a name is used, it is with permission.

Anonymous said: “You know, this option makes total sense to me. Honestly, it makes more sense to me than trying to mush a bunch of unrelated people together, who (may) hate each other, into one house! I would totally be onboard with this, even considering our biological kids. I guess the only problem would be cost—but it would be a small price to pay, in my opinion.”

Katie said: “When I first stepped into this gig, I found a Meetup stepmom group in my area and attended a few times. The reason I stopped going was (due to) a certain stepmom in the group who had her own place she would stay at when her stepkids were around. She had chosen this lifestyle purely based off of one comment from her stepson when he was a teen: ‘You’re not my mom!’

“(I’m) fully expecting to hear this from my stepkids one day and my answer back will be an emphatic, ‘Duh!’ (I disliked) how insistent she was that we *all* get spaces of our own. (It) was her only advice. (My therapist) brought this up a few months back ... so I do know it’s a viable option (that works) while waiting for stepkids to age-out of the house or while in a rough season.

“I will never discount how another stepmom gets through this dynamic; I just know it’s not for us. We are all or nothing. Though, some days, I sure do wish I still had my old apartment to run away to like I did when we were dating!”

mind you. We called each other often and read scriptures together every night, though by phone instead of pillow-to-pillow.

We kept up Date Night every Saturday, too, taking turns having sleepovers at each other’s homes afterward or at other, random, romantic times. We were matter-of-fact about discussing our situation with friends, who laughed about our novel stepfamily solution. However

unusual, sometimes stepfamily life calls for creativity. And this was an idea we were willing to try.

OUR DUPLEX YEARS

Two years later, we realized we were no closer to putting this family together than when George had first moved out. So, we sold the house and bought a duplex. He lived with his kids on one side; I lived with mine on the other. He even cut space for and installed a connecting door upstairs “for adults only” use.

They cooked dinner on their side and we cooked dinner on ours. Occasionally we held Stepfamily Meetings together, in his living room or mine, just for fun or to discuss family business. The kids celebrated holidays with our exes or with us, either together or separately. His kids shoveled snow off of their sidewalk. My kids shoveled snow off of ours. We even ran into each other in the grocery store from time to time.

This gave the cashiers something to laugh about, whenever my husband stole a kiss as we pushed our separate grocery carts. Friends visited us separately or together, depending on the intrafamily stress level of the day. I also became the envy of several friends, especially those who liked tidy kitchens. They wished, they said, they could occasionally send spouses of their own back to “their sides of the duplex” and allow them to keep their kitchens as messy as they wanted.

And there you have it. Despite our unusual solution, we were just your typical stepfamily! One-by-one our kids grew up and left our side-by-side nest. So, after four years of living apart, I moved into my husband’s half of the duplex where we aimed for happily ever after. George then patched over the connecting door and we rented out the other side.

It was well worth the wait, in our case. He was just crazy about me and I was just crazy about him—for a while. Eight years after the youngest left for college, our marriage ended in divorce. Yet, I have no regrets. We’d done all we could do to make it work. Differences of opinion simply got in our way, showing me that love (and creativity) are sometimes not enough. ■



MARCI MCPHEE is a writer, editor, mom of four and Grammy to, well, 12 or 13 children. A former stepmom of 20 years, an early version of her “His & Hers Duplex” essay for *StepMom* (October 2019) appeared in “Apple Pies and Promises” in 2005. Marci volunteers with migrant families and coordinates community service in San Antonio East for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Online at MarciMcPheeWriter.com.