

When Stepparents Divorce

How Many Kids Do You Have?

BY MARCI McPHEE

With no blood or clear legal connection, are my stepkids still my kids—even if their dad and I are now divorced? Do I want them to be? Perhaps most importantly: Would losing all connection with them feel like a loss, a relief or something in between?

For me, “How many kids do you have?” is a tricky question. A casual acquaintance doesn’t want or need to hear my whole story. Yet you, *StepMom* reader, deserve a thoughtful answer. Pour a cup of herbal tea, settle into your favorite couch or chair and let’s think this through together.

HIS, HERS & OURS

I met my second husband when he had custody of his son, then barely 3, and daughter, 6. I had custody of my own four children, then ages 6 to 11. In our marriage, there were only his and hers: for a total of six kids whom we then tried to make “ours.” We coordinated visitation with our respective exes so we’d have our kids the same evening each week and alternate weekends.

He and I dated for three years. We then got married and stayed married for a rocky 20 years, finally divorcing when all of the kids were grown and gone. I was a full-time stepmom during their growing-up years and until my stepkids were 26 and 29. I raised those kids. So, they’re *my* kids. Or are they? For my now ex-husband, the answer seemed easy.

His social media profile reverted almost immediately to “father of two.” (Um, not that I was tracking it, particularly.) I don’t know why he made that choice. It could’ve made him more marketable on the singles scene, I guess. Or maybe his kids had strong feelings about having their dad all to themselves again—at last!

To me, it stung a little. It was as if he’d discarded my four like they were old luggage. My kids appeared to be fine with his choice. I believe their exact reaction was, “Whatever.” But I’d invested 23 years of blood and guts in raising my stepkids, trying to love



them as my own. Their dad may have introduced us but we had our own relationships. And I still loved them.

WHO GETS TO DECIDE?

What difference does it make, as a twice-divorced parent, how I count my kids? None, unless I’m on a cruise ship that awards prizes for Most Kids & Grandkids! While nobody was busy quizzing me, it seemed like a big deal to my heart; this deciding what else I had to let go of now that I’d let go of their dad ... and half of our marital possessions. (You know how it goes.)

It nagged at me. Who gets to decide how many kids I have? Is it my ex—my former stepparenting cohort? Nope. My relationships are none of his business anymore. Is it the stepkids themselves who decide if they’re still in my lineup? That’s tricky, too. My stepdaughter and I are surprisingly comfortable with each other these days, I have to say.

She introduces me as her “original stepmom.”

Don't let anyone tell you you're wrong. The answer is in your heart. Go with what resonates inside versus thinking or should-ing your way to an answer.

Would I then call her my original stepdaughter? My former stepdaughter? Hardly. I divorced her dad. I didn't divorce her. The fact that her father and I couldn't get along has nothing to do with her. We met through him and took it from there. She's grown into an exquisite woman and I enjoy following her growth. I love her. Always have, always will.

On the other hand, my stepson wants nothing to do with me. Not now. Maybe not ever. Who knows? I still love him, too. I respect his choice so, as he requested, I keep my distance. Even some of my biological kids have distanced themselves from me for long periods. All I seem to get is dead silence from time to time. But they're always my kids, no matter what.

The word "disown" could apply, I guess, although none of us ever owns anyone else in the first place. Not a spouse, parent, biological kid or stepkid. What about a need to consider the feelings my own kids have on the matter? That could certainly be a factor. If they felt strongly one way or another, I would take that into consideration.

FINDING YOUR ANSWER

There is no *one* right answer to this. For some, letting go of the stepkids might be a relief. It could even lead to euphoria. As in, "No obligation here anymore!" The length of a marriage, the reciprocity of relationships, the amount of time spent with kids on a custodial or other basis—it all figures into how we think about this dilemma.

When it came to my own situation, I had to ask myself: What would it mean, to me, to let go of my stepkids? My stepgrandkids? And the son of my stepdaughter's ex? I suppose that'd make him my step-stepgrandson? But I can't be certain. It gets complicated very quickly. Do you have a headache yet? Drink some more herbal tea. It'll help.

For me, personally, it hurt to think about losing any of the kids I once loved. Just counting the number of relationships that would amount to hurt. When it was suggested that I cut those ties, I lobbed into full-blown

grief mode. I splashed around in that feeling awhile, re-grieving the end of the marriage and throwing a few other recent losses into the mix for good measure.

Then I made a choice. I was going to own this decision myself. I snapped out of my grief and mentally gathered those now-grown stepkids whom I'd continued to love back into my arms. I had six kids then? I have six kids now! Some people count biological kids separately from their stepkids. Some differentiate for kids but not for grandkids, opting to count all of the grandkids together rather than distinguish them in mouthfuls like "stepgranddaughter."

A similar thought process might be applied to former in-laws. Do I still want them in my life? Would they like me to remain in their lives? We can take the discussion of relationships in any direction we want to now. I have a clearer mental picture of my own family and who it includes. Each of the other family members has constructed their own picture, as well.

Sometimes the frames overlap, sometimes they don't. If you find yourself in this situation, do what feels right to you. Don't let anyone tell you you're wrong. The answer is in your heart. Go with what resonates inside versus thinking or should-ing your way to an answer. And avoid fielding judgment from anyone, including yourself. Simply do what's right for you! ■

[Editor's Note: See "What Happens When Stepouples Divorce? Custody and Visitation Rights for Stepparents," by Lara R. Badain, Esq., in the July 2015 back issue of *StepMom* available at StepMomMag.com.]



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