



Diane Darling, M.S., M.A.

Stepmotherhood: An Emotional and Economic Investment
Feminist Parenthood Column

by Diane Darling
Clinical Psychology PhD Student, Fielding Graduate University

I vividly remember the first time my now-husband referred to me as my stepson's "stepmom." My stepson bristled at what felt like a jarring shift of my role in our new family. However, my partner took this opportunity to enumerate the myriad ways I supported my stepson, including enrolling him in school, ensuring his medical needs were met, and sharing living expenses. Despite the almost transactional nature of this list, the gravity of my financial contributions seemed to be what legitimized my role as a parent in my stepson's eyes. He took to casually referring to me as his stepmom from this moment on. I realized then that becoming a stepmother wasn't just about the emotional investment. Sometimes, it was about the tangible and economic ways that I showed up in his life.

The Pew Research Center (2020) puts forth a telling statistic: over 40% of adults in the U.S. are a part of blended families. As a member of this statistic, I found the unique challenges of melding pre-established familial norms with my developing parenting instincts particularly daunting. I entered the family with a wealth of ideas that I was eager to introduce, but was met with the resilient inertia of already established family values and behaviors.

As a stepmother and clinical psychology PhD student, I find myself continually confronting societal stereotypes about stepfamily dynamics, many of which are rooted in family finances. Literature, even academic literature, is rife with the portrayal of stepmothers as evil or opportunistic, an archetype perhaps acquired from concern that a new female family member might derive children of economic resources (Willführ & Gagnon, 2013). Stepmothers might

further be expected to prioritize their own biological children, or else have societal expectations of unreasonable selflessness toward their stepchildren (Martin, 2015). These black-and-white categorizations obviously do not capture the nuances and complexities of family economics in blended families, leaving me wanting to better understand the financial nature of non-nuclear families like mine.

The existing research on finances in families of all types offers an intriguing concept: family finances are intertwined with the psychological wellness of the family's individuals and that of the family unit (Archuleta, 2013). The way blended families, and perhaps all families, negotiate finances is not just about money; it's about power, respect, identity, values, and recognition. In essence, financial decisions are deeply psychological and serve as touchstones for belonging, identity, and validation within a newly developed blended family unit.

I endeavor to better understand the lived experiences of families like mine, and am fortunate to continue my learning through my academic and clinical pursuits. I ultimately hope to help in providing a fresh perspective on family finance research, rich with the nuances of contemporary stepfamily dynamics. Through this lens, I aim to elevate the voices and experiences of stepparents like myself, and to contribute to a more enriched, empathetic, and holistic understanding of modern blended families.

Note: The Feminist Parenthood Column is edited by the Feminist Parenthood Committee. If you would like to submit, please email Lauren Mizock, PhD at lmizock@fielding.edu.

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