

The Myth of the Evil Stepmother

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Popular culture tells us that stepmothers are mean, neglectful – even deadly. Yet there’s little evidence to support the myth. Why does it prevail?

The fictional world is rife with stepmothers who are highly unpleasant – or even murderous monsters. Think Snow White’s envy-ridden stepmother; the witch in Hansel and Gretel, who banishes her stepchildren to the woods. Both belong to a class of evil women with “voracious appetites for human fare, sometimes even for the flesh and blood or for the liver and heart of their own relatives”, wrote Maria Tatar, a professor of literature, folklore and mythology at Harvard University, in *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*.

At bare minimum, these villainous characters are painted as cold and unloving. In the 1950 Disney adaption of *Cinderella*, the vicious Lady Tremaine forces her stepdaughter into backbreaking labor, and encourages her biological children to shun their stepsister. The 1961 film *The Parent Trap* features two twins, unknowingly separated when their parents divorced; they join forces to overthrow their father’s horrible new fiancée and reunite their family. And in the comedy-horror *Wicked Stepmother*, which first showed in 1989, the character played by Bette Davis is not only a stepmother, but also a literal and figurative witch.

It’s no coincidence stepmothers today are thought of in a less favorable light than any other family figure. Thanks to more than 900 international stories written about nefarious

stepmothers throughout centuries – and the endless stream of on-screen adaptations from filmmakers – they’re frequently perceived as less affectionate, kind, happy and likeable, and more cruel, unfair and even hateful. The bias against them is woven into our language: ‘step’ evolved from the Old English ‘steop’, which captured a sense of loss and deprivation. Even colloquially, describing something as a metaphoric ‘stepchild’ of something else implies its inferiority.

Though stepfamilies of all kinds certainly face challenges and conflicts that could reinforce some elements of these stereotypes, there’s no real evidence supporting the wicked stepmother caricature. In fact, research shows that stepmothers can be uniquely beneficial to families, serving as the glue that holds members together after a separation, and providing extra support to grieving children.

Why, then, do these harsh perceptions persist? And as stepfamilies become increasingly common across the world, might these tropes one day fade into irrelevance?



(Credit: Alamy)

Snow White’s envy-ridden stepmother is one of the most famous evil stepmothers

The emergence of the evil stepmom

The stereotype of the wicked stepmother has existed in fairy tales and folklore around the world for millennia – with some stories dating back to Roman times. References can also be

found in the Bible: Sarah, the matriarch who birthed Abraham's son, cast his other children out to die so as not to dilute the inheritance pool.

Most of the popular characters that underpin modern film and literature took hold in 1812, however, when German brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm first published their collection, *Children's and Household Tales*, explains Tatar. The authors used fragments of existing oral stories and appropriated others into new narratives, the combination of which chronicled fairy tales such as Hansel and Gretel, Cinderella and Snow White.

Though fictional, the focus on stepmothers does reflect some truths about 19th Century society. "When these fairy tales were created, lifespans were extraordinarily low," says Lawrence Ganong, an emeritus professor of human development at the University of Missouri, US, who has studied stepfamilies for decades. Women often died in childbirth, leaving children in the care of fathers only. The evil stepmothers who appeared in the pages of fairy tales offered cautionary family advice: fathers should protect and support their children, and stepmothers should do the right thing by stepchildren – or bad things will happen.

The stories also offered readers safe, therapeutic outlets to process taboo feelings – like maternal rage and resentment, says Tatar. In the 1800s, fathers likely remarried younger women, who could be close in age to their stepdaughters. In those circumstances, all sorts of "strange, intense" feelings might arise – such as rivalry over the father's attention, intergenerational "beauty contests" like we see in *Snow White* and "a good deal of struggle, conflict and anger", says Tatar.

In the centuries since the Grimm brothers published their fairy tales, the wicked stepmother was transmuted from stories into real life. Even as divorce, re-marriage and the creation of stepfamilies became more common in the late 20th Century, various psychologists aided in the blurring of fact and fiction. Some believed that humans are biologically programmed to protect genetic children ahead of stepchildren, says Lisa Doodson, a UK-based psychologist specializing in stepfamily dynamics, which likely puts the latter camp at greater risk of mistreatment. In the 1970s, researchers came up with a name for instances of stepparent abuse: the Cinderella Effect. Studies have since uncovered that stepparents do harm

children at higher rates per capita than genetic parents, but it's important to note that virtually all instances of violence involve stepfathers – not stepmothers.

Other studies have – perhaps unintentionally – also helped to perpetuate the myths. Research from the 1980s showed that stepmothers report feeling closer to their biological children than to stepchildren, even when both share a biological father. And those who have had children of their own also report feeling less satisfied with their role as a stepmother. None of this means stepmothers are cruel, however.

Yet empirical evidence wasn't necessary for stereotypes about awful, neglectful stepmothers to live on. They continued to thrive for the same reasons they did centuries ago, says Ganong; culturally dominant ideals surrounding the all-important nuclear family and the sacred biological parent-child relationship.

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, riffs of Disney classics – such as the 1997 film *Snow White: A Tale of Terror* and the 1998 film *Ever After*, which is based on *Cinderella* – continued to damn the stepfamily. The idea, it seemed, was firmly stuck in the public psyche: stepmothers were negligent, second-rate caretakers at best – and heinous killers at worst.

'Wicked stepmothers don't show up in the data'

Despite the strength of these tropes, however, there's little evidence proving stepmothers behave like the heartless caricatures of popular culture – and plenty showing that they don't. "The majority of stepmothers get along well with their stepchildren," says Ganong, who has read nearly 3,000 research reports on the topic, and talked to more stepfamily members than he can count.

"Wicked stepmothers don't show up in the data," agrees Todd Jensen, a research assistant professor at the University of North Carolina, US, who studies relational patterns between stepparents and their stepchildren. In a 2021 survey of 295 stepchildren, Jensen found most had positive relationships with their stepmothers. Participants were asked about how close they felt to their stepmother, how much they thought their stepmother cared about them, whether she was warm and loving and how satisfied they were with communication

and the relationship overall. In this sample, the average score for stepmother-youth relationship quality was 3.91 out of 5.

These kinds of positive stepmother relationships can be hugely beneficial for a child. Compared to more negative relationships, Jensen found they're associated with lower levels of a child's psychological distress, anxiety, depression and loneliness caused by the stepfamily formation – along with better social and academic outcomes. Stepmothers can really “make a unique contribution to the wellbeing of a child”, he says.



The film Juno is among the media that is helping destabilize the myth (Credit: Alamy)

That's especially true after a divorce, says Cara Zaharychuk, a Canadian counsellor who's studied the role stepmothers play in a separation. By spending quality time with children after a divorce, Zaharychuk found that stepmothers can help them feel part of a family again. They “can also be an incredible support for young children who have suffered a bereavement”, says Doodson.

Research has also tied growing up with multiple adult relationships to various positive outcomes. One study of almost 1,000 ninth graders in the US showed that having good role models separate from biological parents built emotional resilience, boosted academic performance and neutralized the impacts of negative family dynamics. Stepmothers can offer the same sense of additional support for kids. “Having extra people who love and care for you is always positive,” says Doodson.

That doesn't mean stepfamilies don't face unique challenges — some of which can set the stage for those negative caricatures to percolate.

“Although immensely exaggerated, these stereotypes do speak to some of the common tensions that stepfamilies need to grapple with,” says Jensen. The main one: where do we put our time and energy? What many of the early fairy tales accentuated was a sort of battle for resources and attention between a stepmother and her stepchildren. Those are “very real challenges” that can result in feelings of jealousy, says Jensen.

In the Grimms’ era, most stepfamilies were formed after the death of a biological mother. These days, it’s more likely that a new stepparent enters the family after a divorce, says Jensen. With a mother still in the picture, a child might find themselves in a “loyalty bind”. They don’t want their biological parent “to feel replaced”, so they may resist connecting with their stepmother under actual or perceived instruction from their mother, says Jensen. This dynamic can be exacerbated if there’s conflict between the biological parents.

It's not only the children who may have trouble adjusting to their new family situation. Life can also be hard for stepmothers, who are constantly living in fear of being branded wicked or evil. One 2018 survey of 134 stepmothers living in New Zealand showed 22% actively altered their behavior so as not to be thought of negatively. This can have myriad consequences. “Stepmothers try too hard to become a super stepmom,” says Doodson – which is unsustainable, and might be off-putting for kids who resent being overly parented by a new adult figure.

Ultimately, research shows that stepmothers aren’t villainous, as books and films might have us believe. Though their perceived role in a family depends on many factors – such as the intimate culture they’re entering, the attitudes of an existing biological mother and what stepchildren might want or need in terms of care and supervision – existing data suggests they mostly have a positive impact on families.

“Stepfamily living is challenging, but many individuals do well in stepparent roles,” says Ganong. “It is too bad that they also have to manage these persistent myths about them.”

Signs of disruption?

Today, it seems that stepmothers still face somewhat dubious perceptions rooted in long-standing stereotypes.

Ganong often conducts a word association exercise with his college students. The term stepmother conjures adjectives such as “evil, or wicked or mean or uncaring”. Many stepmothers Ganong has spoken to during his decades of research are also reluctant to accept the label because of the stories they grew up with. “To me, that’s an indication that the stereotype still exists and is potentially harmful,” he says.

But the fact that stepfamilies are becoming more common may also be moving the needle. In the US, high divorce rates mean about 40% of people had at least one step relationship as of 2011. That same year in the UK, 10% of dependent children lived in a stepfamily – though Doodson suspects that’s a major underestimate. Canadian census data from 2016 paints a similar picture (though estimates don’t count children older than 14). As stepfamilies increasingly proliferate, there are signs negative stereotypes around stepmothers are being disrupted.

“I think there’s no question that real tangible stigma about stepfamilies has been decreasing, in large part because they are so common,” says Jensen. “If you told someone that you had a stepparent or you yourself were a stepparent, it’s going to be far less likely that someone will be shocked or take issue with that.”

Modern media also tells more varied tales of stepmothers now, from the nuanced 1998 film *Stepmom*; to the relaxed, happy relationship Gloria has with her two similarly aged stepchildren in the television series *Modern Family*; and the affectionate support a pregnant Juno receives from her stepmother in the eponymous 2007 film. Even Disney may one day get up to speed; it is increasingly featuring diverse, positive female relationships – think sisterly bonds in *Frozen* or the loving grandmother in *Moana*. And in 2020, a [change.org](https://www.change.org/p/disney-represent-stepmothers) petition lobbied Disney to finally feature a benevolent stepmother.

Going forward, Tatar hopes we can continue to rewrite the stepmother script in a way that reflects the realities of society today. She’s all for preserving historical accounts, but doesn’t think we should be reinforcing potentially harmful tropes. “The tale has evolved,” she says. “We should recognize that, because folklore is ours to recreate.”