

Caring for Stepparents in Later Life¹

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Most people agree with the idea that families have a responsibility to care for older family members. Yet some changes in family life have brought up new questions about caring for the elderly. What happens when a parent divorces and then remarries later in life? Should adult children care for the stepparent as well as the parent? These questions are becoming more and more important as individuals live longer and growing numbers of older adults divorce and remarry.

Researchers from the University of Missouri sampled over 1000 men and women from across the U.S. to find out how adults viewed responsibilities to parents and stepparents. In telephone interviews, researchers presented stories describing a family dilemma and asked how much help the younger adult should give to the parent *or* stepparent. For example, the parent remarries after being a widower, and after a few years dies very suddenly. Should his son help the stepmother with things around the house, even though they have never gotten along? What if the stepmother has more serious health problems: Should the son help care for her? What if the older adult is a parent? Should the son provide this care? (Gonong & Coleman, 2006).

Results showed that adult children were expected to help parents more than stepparents, out of a sense of obligation and to repay parents for past help. Stepparents who came into families later in life generally were not seen as family members, and, as a result, were not automatically entitled to caregiving aid. However, the quality of the relationship also influenced the duty to help both parents and stepparents. When the relationship was good,

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respondents were more likely to think that help should be given. This research suggests stepparents of all ages have to *earn* family bonds by building a history and developing positive emotional ties with stepchildren (Gonong & Coleman, 2006).

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To listen to the radio broadcast:

http://www.radiosource.net/radio_stories/514.mp3

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References

Gonong, L., and Coleman, M. (2006). Obligations to stepparents acquired in later life: Relationship quality and acuity of needs. *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* 61, S80-S88.