



Esther
Kuku

STEPPING UP

A devotional for
stepfamilies

Praise for Stepping Up

Stepping Up is a deeply important book that applies biblical principles to the reality of 21st-century family life. Esther draws on scripture, case studies, and her own experience of becoming a stepparent, helping readers to navigate the complex web of emotions and boundaries and find joy within blended families. Refreshingly honest, realistic, and full of warmth and wisdom, this is a book that can help all family relationships.'

Kate Nicholas, author, speaker, and preacher

Stepping Up is a gentle and honest companion for those navigating the complexities of stepfamily life. Drawing on lived experience and faith, Esther Kuku offers encouragement for the journey, holding space for both the challenges and the hope.'

Chine McDonald, writer, broadcaster, and author of *Unmaking Mary: Shattering the myth of perfect motherhood*



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EU Authorised Representative: Easy Access System Europe –
Mustamäe tee 50, 10621 Tallinn, Estonia, gpsr.requests@easproject.com

ISBN 978 1 80039 424 7
First published 2026
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0
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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY.

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To my wonderful family – I love you all so much.

Thank you to my husband for your unwavering support.

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Introduction

No one dreams of being a stepparent, but that is where the adventure begins. For me personally, and in all likelihood for you as well if you are part of a stepfamily, it has been a roller-coaster ride. My husband and I are more in love than ever before, but it has not always been easy, and I am certain there are further challenges ahead.

People in stepfamilies often feel that they're alone. You are not. It's been 14 years since I started my stepparent journey, and I did feel very alone for the first few years. Faith rarely understands where it's being led, but it trusts the one who is leading. I got married when I was 40 and immediately became a bonus mum to two beautiful little people who were six and eight. Today they are young adults, thriving in life and finding their way, and we all love each other very much.

In this book you will find practical guidance and biblical pointers I've learnt through my own personal experience as both a stepmum and bio-mum. I've also enlisted the help of other stepparents and children who have stepparents, who share their tips and experiences. We are all in this together. Community and learning from one another is key to our success.

Stepping Up: A devotional for stepfamilies is a book packed with pearls of wisdom and encouragement, as well as a good dose of reality aimed at leading you towards peace and fulfilment. Pick it up and read it whenever you need to, and you'll be strengthened and empowered to embrace the beautiful gift of family that God has entrusted to you.

Statistics and stepfamilies

In recent years, the landscape of family structures in the United Kingdom has undergone significant change. Stepfamilies are now one of the fastest-growing family types. According to the latest data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), in 2021 there were approximately 781,000 stepfamilies in England and Wales. Of these, 547,000 (70%) contained dependent children. This represents a notable shift from previous decades, reflecting broader societal changes and evolving family dynamics.

Stepfamilies now account for a significant portion of households with dependent children. In 2021, 8.8% (1.1 million) of dependent children lived in stepfamilies, a slight decrease from 9.7% (1.2 million) in 2011. Despite this decrease, the presence of stepfamilies remains substantial, highlighting the importance of understanding and supporting our unique family units.

The formation of stepfamilies is primarily driven by the dissolution of previous relationships, such as divorce or separation, followed by the formation of new partnerships. The increasing rate of divorce and separation in the UK has contributed to the rise in stepfamilies. According to the ONS, the divorce rate in England and Wales was 8.9 per 1,000 married men and women in 2021. This trend underscores the need for resources and support systems tailored to the specific challenges faced by our stepfamilies.

Stepfamilies often navigate complex dynamics, including blending children from previous relationships, establishing new family roles, and managing relationships with non-resident parents. These challenges can be compounded by societal expectations and the emotional adjustments required by all family members. However, with the right support and guidance, stepfamilies can thrive and create nurturing, loving environments for all involved.

As we delve into the intricacies of stepfamily life, it is essential to recognise the unique strengths and opportunities that our families bring. Through open communication, mutual respect, and a strong foundation of faith, stepfamilies can overcome obstacles and build harmonious, resilient households. *Stepping Up: A devotional for stepfamilies* aims to provide practical, faith-based guidance to help stepfamilies navigate their journey with grace and confidence.

How to use this book

This book is for stepparents and their spouse or partner. It's designed to be practical and flexible; you don't need to read it in order or follow a strict plan. Instead, it can be opened at any page at any time, allowing God to meet you right where you are.

Stepping Up: A devotional for stepfamilies is divided into 60 reflections that cover a wide range of subjects, each chosen to reflect the real challenges and blessings of stepfamily life. Woven within the devotions are first-person stepfamily stories. Whether you are navigating relationships between children and stepparents, seeking peace in your marriage, or simply needing strength for the day ahead, you can navigate to the section that speaks to your situation and find insight, encouragement, and prayer.

Every devotion is short enough to fit into busy schedules, yet deep enough to provide lasting impact. Each one also includes a 'Stepping stones' section, which contains nuggets of truth to carry into your day.

This book is meant to be a friend on the journey, a resource you can return to again and again. As you invite God into your daily life through these devotions, you will find renewed strength, fresh perspective, and the assurance that he is building something eternal through your stepfamily.

Nick and Gill's story

Nick and Gill have been together since 2017 and got married in 2020. Nick had one daughter prior to their marriage. Nick says:

Being part of a blended family has been a deeply rewarding experience. Gill has stepped into her role with compassion, patience, and a strong desire to nurture, forming a meaningful bond with my daughter that has grown through shared moments and mutual respect. She brings a fresh perspective and often plays a key role in creating a warm and stable home environment. Her efforts to support, guide, and care for my daughter are rooted in love and not obligation, which makes her role uniquely heartfelt. The presence of Gill in our lives has enriched our lives, providing additional emotional support and encouragement. She has helped to strengthen the family unit by promoting harmony, understanding, and open communication. Through dedication and kindness, we have both helped build a sense of belonging, making our family not just functional but connected and thriving.

Gill says:

Becoming a stepmother later in life has not been without its challenges, however, it is a very rewarding experience, and with communication and respect we work together as a family to address any problems that may arise.

Nick and Gill's top tips

- Communication is important
- Don't be too hard on yourself when you make mistakes
- Respect boundaries



The journey

1

Embracing brokenness

He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.'

REVELATION 21:5

In the art of kintsugi, Japanese crafters repair broken pottery with paint mixed with powdered gold, silver, or platinum. This technique highlights the cracks and imperfections rather than hiding them, creating a unique and beautiful piece of art that embraces the history of its breakage. Kintsugi teaches us that brokenness and restoration are part of an object's history, adding to its beauty and worth.

The philosophy behind the technique is built on the concept of embracing our flaws and imperfections.

As stepfamilies, you may face challenges that make you feel like your family is fragmented or imperfect. However, just like the art of kintsugi, our brokenness can be transformed into something beautiful. The Bible reminds us in 2 Corinthians 12:9: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Through faith, we can find strength in our vulnerabilities and imperfections.

When we accept and acknowledge the cracks in our family dynamics, we open ourselves to God's healing power. He can fill our broken places with his grace, mercy, and love, creating a masterpiece that reflects his glory.

Just as kintsugi emphasises the beauty in repaired pottery and the transformation that follows, we should celebrate the uniqueness of our families. Each member brings their own experiences, strengths, and perspectives, contributing to the richness of our family tapestry.



Stepping stones

- **We can trust in God's promise to make all things new** and allow his love to shine through the cracks in our lives.

2

Is this love?

**The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
and provide for those who grieve in Zion –
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of joy
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the Lord
for the display of his splendour.**

ISAIAH 61:1-3

I remember the morning after my wedding like it was yesterday. The plan was that my stepchildren were supposed to stay with family so my new husband and I could have a blissful first morning together as newlyweds in our honeymoon suite. Unfortunately, someone either dropped the ball or didn't get the memo; there was a loud knock on our door, and two excitable small people were presented to us.

They headed straight for the hydra bath and giggled infectiously while turning on taps. I held back the tears and smiled at my husband. We couldn't possibly have an argument on day one.

Thirteen years on, I can laugh as we look back over what God has done in our lives. He has given us beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness. Our marriage is the planting of the Lord that he might be glorified.

There is a tightrope of hurt feelings that you will encounter many times over as a stepfamily. You must determine that you are in it for the long haul. Always remember this is what you prayed for; you love each other. Prioritise your marriage and demonstrate to your children that your relationship comes first. This is very important. If you were in a traditional marriage or relationship, you would have had time to get to know one another prior to children coming along.

Build a network of supportive people around you and agree with each other who you will talk to about your relationship. No marriage is easy, so you need to find your trusted tribe. Give each other space to get it wrong. And – this is a tough one – in the early years defer to the biological parent when it comes to their children. This will not be the right approach forever, but in the initial stages of blending your family it is.



Stepping stones

- Our destiny in life is not due to anything we have done, but because the Spirit of the Lord is upon us. **He has anointed us for good works.** It is not about us; it is all about him.
- The phrase 'blended family' is a huge misnomer. When two families come together for the first time, you are far from blended. Rather, you are a 'merging' family, and this can and will be challenging. **With time and prayer, all hearts will unite** and the God who makes everything beautiful in his time will be glorified.

Emily's story

Emily was 20 when her stepdad entered her life. Following a turbulent marriage, her mum left her father. As a newly formed single-parent family, Emily, her sister, and her mother were all very close. However, six months later, her mum met someone and it was not long after that she remarried. The quickness was a challenge; it felt too soon for Emily and her sister, who was 17. Their new stepdad was in his 50s and had never had children himself or been married before. They were young adults and didn't need his input. Emily, now 34, says:

I was doing my A levels and about to go university. I would have preferred it if he did have a family of his own, because it just felt like he was uncomfortable around us – he preferred his own company, as he'd done so much life alone. I mentioned this to my mum, and she rightly said that then we would have had stepsiblings, and our new normal would have been even more complex to navigate. He tried to parent us, but we were resistant. For so many years our mum had been both mum and dad; she was everything to us.

It's taken 14 years to figure out what the relationship looks like, and honestly we're still figuring it out now. In the early days it did feel like someone was coming in and taking Mum's time and attention. Today, we have found a rhythm whereby he doesn't try to parent us, and he comes to big social events, but we don't see him that much. We have established a routine and are getting better at sharing Mum. Though it's still a process, our situation has improved significantly. We know that she is cared for and looked after, and we can still do life with her, but it just looks a bit different.

It's been a journey. I've had therapy and lots of prayer. My sister and I are very close, and we've supported each other throughout but, even though years have gone by, it still feels quite hard. Now I'm a mum myself, I have a bit more understanding of the importance of her happiness. I appreciate that life has seasons, and my mum deserves to have someone to take care of her. My stepdad can do that. So, although there was definitely jealousy right at the beginning, it has eased. Now my sister and I are both married and have our own homes. It does become easier with time.

Having a neutral sounding board and someone to talk to in terms of therapy was invaluable. For example, we've had high expectations of our mum that sometimes she can't meet, and we've been learning to understand what the reasons are. It's been useful, via counselling, to talk through boundaries and expectations. Everyone should go to therapy, whether you feel that you need it or not, to get perspective and have that neutral person to help you untangle things. It's a constant journey; I've learnt to be honest and vulnerable and put God first. He will be with us as we work through the new seasons, even when you're clinging on with your fingernails.

Emily's top tips

- **Talk about how you're feeling** as much as you possibly can, instead of stewing in worry.
- **Try to find interests that you can all do together.** In our lives, the only thing that connects us is Mum, so we will go for a walk and a pub lunch. Even if you're very young, or adults, find things you can do together even if it's a movie night.
- **Journalling can be good** to brain dump and pour out your feelings.

- **Find a way to keep God front and centre** as he is the one that will restore and redeem and bring you through the good and the bad.
- **It's important to remember that we've never been stepchildren before**, and they've never been stepparents before. Everyone is trying to work out what the new seasons looks like.
- **Our earthly parents or stepparents may not get everything right**, but God's love is perfect.
- **Remember every family has dysfunction** when you look a bit closer beneath the surface. Every one of us is going through something and there is always so much to bond over. Ask God to help you to find like-minded people.



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No one dreams of being a stepparent – and that is where the adventure begins.

Through practical guidance and biblical pointers, stepmum and bio-mum Esther Kuku leads you towards peace and fulfilment in your day-to-day family life. Packed with wisdom and encouragement, as well as a good dose of reality, this devotional will strengthen and empower you to embrace the beautiful gift of family that God has entrusted to you.



Esther Kuku is mother to two and stepmum to two beautiful children. Currently director of communications for a leading health charity, she worked as a national and regional broadcast journalist and is a former producer and presenter for Premier Gospel Radio. She enjoys being part of the worship ministry in her local church and writing for *Keep The Faith* magazine, the leading gospel magazine for the black community.



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