

Stay Happily Married

A resource for married couples.

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The Effects of Marital Conflict on Your Kids

This is Episode number 23 of Stay Happily Married, "The Effects of Marital Conflict on Your Kids."

Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

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Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I'm here in the studio with Dr. Kristen Wynns, a licensed psychologist practicing in Durham, North Carolina. Dr. Wynns holds both a master's degree and a doctorate in clinical psychology from UNC Greensboro and has been in private practice for four years.

But I think probably what's most important today is not just that she has a doctorate in psychology but that she's been married for 10 years and has two young children of her own. Welcome to the show, Dr. Wynns.

Kristen Wynns: Thank you.

Lee Rosen: How are you today?

Kristen Wynns: I'm great.

Lee Rosen: Well, I am really glad you could be here. Now, you've been married for 10 years, you have two kids. How old are your kids?

Kristen Wynns: An almost 5-year-old -- 17 days and counting -- and two-and-a-half year old.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So you are getting a firsthand experience with young kids at home and learning a lot, I'll bet. Does it illuminate your practice to deal with your own kids?

Kristen Wynns: Definitely. I think when I was in graduate school everything seemed to black and white and so formulated, "If you do this, then this will happen." Once you have kids of your own you realize that there are about a thousand shades of gray that are in there and it's really an experiment on a day-to-day basis with using your knowledge and seeing how to customize it to fit your own kids.

Lee Rosen: Well, don't you feel a little bit better equipped than a lot of us? I mean, I had no -- I felt like, where's the owner's manual for this kid? You at least have had some training and education about all this. Doesn't that help?

Kristen Wynns: It does help. It might sometimes be a curse, too. Sometimes when you know too much there's so much information that it's overwhelming. So I think there are pros and cons.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, I wish I had someone like you sort of trailing around behind me all the time. I have a 14-year-old son and an 11-year-old daughter and I feel like it's just a never-ending science experiment. Oh, my goodness.

So the topic today about the effects of marital conflict on your kids, in your practice I assume you're seeing a lot of people where there's a fair amount of conflict, yes?

Kristen Wynns: Yes.

Lee Rosen: Yes. If my wife and I have an argument -- not that we ever do -- but when we have a discussion I think generally we're fairly conscious of keeping our kids out of it, although usually it involves them. But we try to keep them out of it. Do you feel that parents work at doing that, or does that just kind of break down in the midst of the conflict?

Kristen Wynns: I think a lot of parents are really conscious of trying not to engage in the yelling and screaming and really harsh conflict in front of their kids. I think most parents know not to do that, but I think where it breaks down is that there are a lot more subtle forms of conflict that kids are exposed to that are still harmful and parents aren't as aware of the effects of those types of conflict.

Lee Rosen: So when you say "subtle conflict," what do you mean? What's going on in most people's homes?

Kristen Wynns: Well, a lot of parents develop bad habits over time where they develop a really sarcastic way of speaking to each other. They might engage in some non-verbals like silent treatment where they just stop speaking when they're angry. They might do the eye-rolling. And those kinds of things children to pick up on but parents may not be as aware of when they're engaging in those types of behaviors.

Lee Rosen: Right. We do the silent treatment -- no, we don't ever do the silent treatment. We do the sarcasm with a lawyer and my wife is a literature person. So there's a lot of talking but very little silence, but we do definitely know about the sarcasm. So you think kids are getting that there's that tension between the parents, even when there's not the straight up yelling, screaming, and throwing things.

Kristen Wynns: Exactly. It just adds to the emotional climate in the family. So those things still cause there to be a negative feel in the family, even if they're not engaging in those harsh behaviors.

Lee Rosen: Well, I assume that the people that are coming to you, they don't like that. I mean, they recognize that things are not going well for their kids living in this situation. I'm guessing they're coming to you not only because of the kids but to help with their own situation, trying to work out the marriage too. Am I right?

Kristen Wynns: You're right, but it's really interesting. A lot of parents bring in their kids for depression or anxiety or behavior problems and we discover that marital conflict in the home is contributing to these problems. Not necessarily the only cause of them, but a lot of times when I begin working with a family we'll discover that the kid is really distressed by the parents fighting and that that's adding to their depression or anxiety.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, that makes sense. So do the parents generally even know ahead of time that what's going on in the marriage is causing issues for the kids, or they just assume it's all about whatever symptom has come up?

Kristen Wynns: It's really both. Sometimes parents are savvy enough to know that their relationship is struggling and that kids are picking up on that stress, and they know -- that's one of my niches is to focus on marital conflict and those kinds of issues. But half the time it's the other scenario where they just think, "My kid is staying up late. They can't fall asleep. They're stressed out in school. What's going on?" And then we discover that the conflict in the home is a part of their children's problems.

Lee Rosen: Right. So am I right that at least some arguing between parents -- especially parents; not just married people, but people with kids -- and that's pretty normal, right? There's going to be some conflict, true?

Kristen Wynns: Definitely. I think that you would be lying if you were a married couple and said that you never had any kind of conflicts. It's just a matter of how the conflict is handled. And a lot of parents go to the other extreme where they try to shield their child from any conflict and that can be just as harmful because children need to see healthy conflict resolution strategies played out in front of them. Parents are the best role model for how to deal with conflict. So shielding the child from all conflict is just as harmful. There needs to be a balance between handling the conflict effectively where the child actually comes away with a lesson and how to deal with it.

Lee Rosen: Right. So they've got to learn not only what not to do but what to do because they're going to get married at some point and they're going to have to resolve these very same issues and deal with these things in their lives.

Kristen Wynns: Right.

Lee Rosen: Fascinating. So when we talk about conflict and that turns out to be the source of a lot of these kids' problems, what are the things that you're seeing -- I'm really curious about this. What I'm hearing from you is this conflict pops out of the kid in totally unexpected ways. Give me some ideas of what we're looking at. You gave me sort of some labels of things, but what does that look like at home?

Kristen Wynns: Well, from the parents' perspective they may be doing things that involve the child without really realizing how harmful that is. So you might see parents either directly or subtly pulling their children into the conflict and having the child choose sides. So you might see that when parents are fighting one child pipes up and says, "Yeah, Mom's right. You're always telling us what to do." And the mom might subtly accept that and smile and put her arm around the child. So those kinds of subtle or direct pushing the child to take a side.

Sometimes you'll see the parents using the kids as messengers when they're fighting and one parent says, "Go tell your mom that we're not going out because she's been ridiculous today and we can't risk going out and having a fight." So they might use the kid as a messenger. So those kinds of things are obviously more directly pulling the child into the conflict, which are harmful.

But even subtle things where parents name call or criticize the other parent, kids take a hit to their self-esteem when they even hear those things because, as we know, kids see themselves as half mom/half dad. So if Mom is constantly name calling Dad or criticizing him, the kid feels in an indirect way that they themselves are being criticized or critiqued.

Lee Rosen: Right. So if you've got a kid in there and you start realizing this has to do with conflict and the family, the first thing is, is that coming from the kid? Are you surmising that this is conflict -- that it's rooted in parental conflict -- or are you hearing it as the kid is saying, "My mom and dad are arguing all the time and it's driving me crazy"?

Kristen Wynns: It's amazing. For the most part it comes directly from the child. Once they come in to see me and they feel like this a safe place and I'm somebody who's going to help them, it's amazing. Even pretty young kids can come out and talk about that they don't like it when their parents fight; that they have to go in another room, take care of their little sister when they're fighting. So a lot of it comes directly from the child once they've established that rapport with me and they're comfortable in opening up. And then it's my job to try to figure out a way to share that information with the parents in a way where the parents don't feel judged but that, "Hey, this would be great. This is something you guys can do on your end to help with the problem."

Lee Rosen: Right. I bet that's got to be the trickiest and toughest part of this is how do you say -- Mom and Dad are convinced this kid maybe has some physiological organic problem that's causing them to be anxious or depressed or whatever, and really it turns out that it's because Mom and Dad are fighting at home all the time. How do you do that? I mean, you sit them down and just be straight with them or what?

Kristen Wynns: Right. It's a really delicate balance and obviously you try and play on the family's strengths to compliment the parents for recognizing there's a problem, for being willing to take the time to address it, for being willing to come in and work on things from the parents' perspective. So it's a delicate balance but I find that a lot of parents, if you play up the strengths and really praise them for doing something about it, that they're eager to take on some of the responsibility for resolving the problem.

Lee Rosen: So you get people pretty warm to the idea. You don't end up with World War III erupting in your office between the parents?

Kristen Wynns: It's not always an easy, one-time kind of session. But even if parents are resistant, if they're willing to come back and keep seeing me I find that over time they can even try really subtle things and simple steps to be more effective in how they deal with conflict within their marriage.

Lee Rosen: Now, can people deal with this kind of conflict without spending the next 10 years coming to see you? Are they able to take steps now that really are effective and do it on their own?

Kristen Wynns: Definitely. I think if parents are committed to recognizing that they're a part of the problem -- that the kid has his or her responsibility for what he or she needs to work on, but that the parents have their part too and they're willing to do the work -- I find that it doesn't have to be an intensive process at all. They just come in for a few sessions, get the skills, try them out at home, we fine tune them as needed, and then they're off on their own.

Lee Rosen: So what do you tell folks? What's the advice that you give people so that they can begin reducing conflict? I would assume they're really highly motivated. They've brought their kid in, they're really worried about the kid. It's great that they're kind of unified around that project and helping this child that they love, but what do you tell them to do? What are the steps?

Kristen Wynns: It's really a matter of teaching them to substitute the constructive conflict resolution skills versus the destructive ones that they've adapted. So it's really just substituting the negotiation techniques, compromise, problem solving skills, and really even engaging in sort of Communication 101 that we would use with co-workers. So many times with our spouses we use such ruder forms of communication where you're interrupting, you have that harsh tone of voice, and it's really just teaching them to have that respectful communication so that they're, again, teaching their children the right way to do it.

And some of the research that I find most fascinating is that children benefit from their parents' resolution of conflict even if it doesn't occur directly in front of them. So let's say you and your wife are having a discussion over dinner and it becomes heated and you say, "Let's talk about this later." After dinner you send the kids off into the living room to play. You go in your bedroom and you resolve the conflict. Well, children still benefit from that even if they didn't watch you do it.

So that's what really fascinating is parents can have such a positive effect on their kids if their goal is just "let's resolve as much conflict as possible," even if it's not a complete resolution where both sides are completely happy. But just to engage in those kinds of resolution behaviors are just so critical.

Lee Rosen: Does it make much difference when -- with a teenager in my house, what I'm wondering is does it make much difference when you're dealing with conflict that's rooted in -- it's about the kid. The reality is, at least at our little home, a lot of the stress in our house is related to this 14-year-old and growing up and hormones and whatever the heck is going on with teenagers. And I'm wondering of the parents are having discussions, conflict about this kid, does that need to be handled differently?

Kristen Wynns: Yes, definitely. The research shows that conflict about children is more sensitive for the child and that children really can feel a lot of shame and depression and anxiety of they're hearing conflict about them. So I always tell parents if you're discussing issues related to the children you need to be extra-sensitive. And a lot of those conversations are probably best handled when the child -- or teenager -- is at school or asleep because it just has such potential of the child to interpret it in a negative way.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, yeah, that sounds like good advice. Now, you talked earlier about sort of fighting in -- that there was going to be conflict and it could be in a positive or a good way and not in a bad way. So how do you have conflict that's good and not bad? It seems to me, it just feels like the word "conflict" means something that's not good. So how do you have good conflict?

Kristen Wynns: Right. It's again that the conflict has the ultimate goal of hearing both partners' perspectives -- so hearing both parents' perspectives -- really being respectful that you're going to see a lot of situations differently, that you're going to see your children differently, and just being respectful to give each other time to explain your perspective, to understand that the truth may be somewhere in the middle, and just engaging in those problem-solving techniques instead of it just being a yelling match or being focused on why you're right and your partner is wrong, that it's more collaborative where you're saying, "All right. We're on the same team. We've got a difference of opinion here. Let's see how we can problem solve and negotiate and compromise to come to some sort of resolution."

Lee Rosen: And do you find that with this kind of advice that most of the couples that you're dealing with are able to work things through and

make things -- are they able to reduce the conflict? Is it just a lack of trying or a lack of understanding, or what is it?

Kristen Wynns: Yes. I just think a lot of couples and families get into ruts and they just have handled things in a certain way for so many years. And sometimes all it takes is someone from the outside saying, "When you do this one thing where you're saying really insulting things to the child's parent in front of them, that's really stressing the kid out." Sometimes all it takes is someone from the outside to point things out to make a difference.

And I've definitely seen success and it's really one of the most rewarding parts of my job is to see kids come in and say, "Yes, the fighting is much better. They're not doing it in front of us. It's not as loud. It's not as negative." And you see them come in more relaxed and more happy and doing better in school. It's really great to see when you have that full circle like that.

Lee Rosen: Do you have a sense -- I know you see a lot of people, but I wonder when you're dealing with children how often it seems that the parents' conflict is really the source of the problem versus all the other things that I guess aren't conflict-related, the depression and anxiety and everything else. Is a large percentage of this rooted in family's conflict?

Kristen Wynns: Well, you know, I work with a lot of divorced families too, and even in divorced families there's still ongoing conflict between parents. So of course it's hard to say. They're always specific disorders where people come in to see me, for ADHD, something like that that's fairly specific where we're just focusing on those problems. But I have to say if there were one theme that sort of runs among all of my child and teenager clients, that conflict between parents -- either who are married or who are divorced -- is a big influence on a lot of the kids that are in my office.

Lee Rosen: So now when you are at home and you and your husband are having a dispute about something and you pull out one of your techniques, and you're not yelling, you're talking calmly; and you're using certain language, does that just drive him crazy?

Kristen Wynns: Yeah. I'm sure he's sick of me playing the expert card sometimes. I do that more when it comes to parenting, "Hey, I'm the child psychologist here. I've got the expertise." But I think even child psychologists or psychologists fall prey to these same things we're talking about. No one's perfect all the time, so I think that he's pretty good for a graphic designer for being able to use these

techniques too and to realize that the way we handle conflict is affecting our kids.

Even little kids, like my kids' age, are affected by conflict. I think they've done research even to find that 1-year-olds show distress and anger when they're confronted with marital conflict. So it's never too early to start being aware of those issues in your home.

Lee Rosen: To me it just makes sense. I mean, everything you're saying makes sense and it feels like if we know every couple is going to argue -- and I don't think any of us really know how to do it right -- that coming and seeing you and getting a tune-up, just like here are the lessons on how to do this, doesn't have to be a major undertaking, a major commitment in your life but it helps you to get on track. And, wow, what a difference that can make for your kids. That just sounds like a wonderful thing to do.

Kristen Wynns: Exactly. Of course I'm biased, but I think that every couple, especially if you've been married for a while, benefits from talking to someone who has expertise about relationships because, like you said, no one gets a manual for marriage or for parenting. So everybody can use a tune-up and a fresh perspective. And sometimes, again, the longer you've been married the more engrained you get in certain positions. And sometimes just seeing someone for a few sessions who's objective and outside of the family can really be helpful because your eyes are opened to the broader picture and not just digging in your heels with the same position you've taken for the past five years.

Lee Rosen: Well, thank you, Kristen. I appreciate you being with us today and giving us some good advice. I really appreciate you taking the time to fill us in and help us to figure out ways to stay happily married, so thank you.

Kristen Wynns: My pleasure.

Lee Rosen: If you would like to learn more about Dr. Wynns practice, she has a website, KristenWynns.com. Her office is in Durham, North Carolina. Her phone number at the office is (919) 805-0182 and I'm sure you can get some good information by catching up with her.

I appreciate you joining us today. I hope that you have learned something. I feel like I know a little bit more about dealing with conflict at our house, a never-ending issue for most of us that are married and all of us are working together to stay happily married and so this I think will be helpful to us.

If you have feedback about this show or any of our shows we have a listener comment line at (919) 256-3083. I would love to hear from you, have received some great comments in the last few weeks with lots of good ideas about future shows. So we would very much appreciate your input as we move forward through this journey. We have an e-mail box set up for you as well for comments; it's comments@stayhappilymarried.com. Any input you have we would very much appreciate.

I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, stay happily married.

Thank you for joining us today on Stay Happily Married. If you'd like more information, please visit us on the Web at stayhappilymarried.com. We would love to hear your feedback or comments. Please e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com or call us at (919) 256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.