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Discipline with Love

This is Stay Happily Married #113, "Discipline with Love."

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

Today's episode of Stay Happily Married is brought to you by the Rosen Law Firm. For more information, visit us at Rosen.com.

Lee Rosen: I'm here by telephone with Dr. Tina Lepage. Tina has been with us, gosh, a whole bunch of times, and always does a great job. She's the founder of Lepage Associates in Durham, North Carolina where she specializes in personal and professional relationship issues, children, adolescents and family counseling.

And today we're going to be talking about discipline. And the title is "Discipline with Love." We'll see if we can keep the love in the discipline. I guess that would be important. We're going to find out.

Tina has done it all. She's worked with the U.S. military; with companies, corporations; but mostly with real people like you and me and helping marriages stay together. She's a veteran of the front lines. Tina Lepage, welcome back to the show.

Tina Lepage: Thanks, Lee. It's good to be back.

Lee Rosen: You know, I am excited to be talking about discipline, because as listeners of the show know, I have a 13-year-old -- it's probably too late -- a 13 and a 16. How old is your daughter?

Tina Lepage: My daughter is 5, and as she would say, 5 and three-quarters; almost 6.

Lee Rosen: Right, right. She's getting old. I was joking about you being on the front lines of marriages staying together, but you're living on the front lines of discipline and trying to do it in a loving way.

Let me ask you this about the kids that are coming to you and the families that are coming to you. Are there common behavior problems that you see in children that you're helping?

Tina Lepage: There are. And actually, I just want to jump in for a second and comment on the idea of discipline with love, since that's what we're sort of focusing on, versus just saying this is about discipline and what does that mean. I think that all parents want their discipline to be kind and effective. They don't want it to be where you're out of control and you're yelling, and all that doesn't feel good.

But part of the idea around the title is that the word "discipline" actually comes from the Latin root for teaching. And really, in our society it's become synonymous with punishment. And so I would like to get people back to thinking about it as it's not just a reactive thing, it's not just a punishment thing; that as a parent, the role of taking care of discipline is a teaching role and that we can do that in a very kind and loving way and still be effective.

And I have to say, in prepping for this when I first did this as a presentation a few years ago in looking up the roots of discipline and such and the definitions, in our modern dictionary -- in some of the dictionaries it actually lists the teaching as kind of like an old definition. It's kind of like, "Yeah, that really doesn't exist any more. It now means punishment." And I think that's hugely unfortunate because that's not what discipline needs to mean.

Lee Rosen: Well, and it doesn't really -- I mean, your definition, the old definition, is really where you're headed. I mean, what you want is to raise this kid so that the kid can behave in society and do well. And you really are trying to teach them how to do that.

Tina Lepage: Absolutely. So I say we stick with the root of the word and its true meaning.

Lee Rosen: Right. No, that makes perfect sense.

And the other thing you kind of said in passing there is that parents -- I know when you do end up screaming and you're having this meltdown over whatever is going on with the kid, you really do feel awful about that. All of us, I think, would love to -- we're dying to hear what you've got to say because you're absolutely right. We do want to discipline with love and we don't want to get into that

meltdown and we do want to teach them so that this doesn't happen to impact our lives or their lives going down the road.

Tina Lepage: Absolutely. So let me go ahead and answer your question, though. You had started off asking if there are common behavior problems in the children that we help. And I'd say just by age there are common behavior problems. For all kids, the sort of toddler and preschool you'd see the tantrums and the power struggles and whining and hitting and the battles over bedtime, and the general disobedience where they start saying no to everything you say. Sometimes even in preschool you might see them start lying or swearing if they've heard that elsewhere, so there's that kind of thing.

In elementary school you get into some of the defiance around homework and maybe misbehavior at school, fights with siblings. A lot of backtalk starts in the elementary school age, more serious than "no" where they're really talking back. And still some bedtime struggles. That can go right through high school. And maybe being careless and irresponsible in those years.

In middle school there's more arguing, so we get into the teenage years where they argue their point longer and deeper; start to be moody and the same things around homework come up and chores and that kind of thing. And they start to act out around independence; "I should be able to do this, I should be able to do that." And they're right, of course.

In high school that can just continue, the moodiness, the independence. And then other things come up, like they want to drive and what's going to happen with driving and dating. Those are some of the things that if the kids don't agree with what you're putting forth, they'll start to act out around those things.

Lee Rosen: Right. So you've got a long list of things that they do. And it's funny because I felt a little bit like you're a fly on the wall at my house. Those are all the things.

Tina Lepage: Any and all of these things.

Lee Rosen: Right. It's like all of them. Just check them off. What day is it, we're having that problem. We're now into the driving and dating. You're wearing me out with that list.

Tina Lepage: Sorry.

Lee Rosen: I'm going to need some coffee just to get back in the interview.

Okay. So it sounds to me like all of that is kind of the normal pattern that you as an expert as able to see. You can sort of have this 10,000-foot view of it. But at what point do you decide that whatever is going on is really, as a problem, worthy of getting help?

Tina Lepage: Yeah. Well, I think -- and maybe that's sort of best answered at the end -- but generally my answer would be to that, we're going to talk about a lot of things that parents can do to be effective with their discipline. And so it's kind of like if you've tried all of these different things and it's still not working, then it can be time to bring in a professional, because that person might be able to have a point of view or that sort of outside neutral perspective that can look at it and be able to help you -- sometimes help you just because it's a pattern or something that you've got into that's not working.

Sometimes I notice that there's something else going on with the kid. Because sometimes you have a kid, for example, who starts acting out at school because they have a learning disability and now they've moved into middle school, it wasn't as apparent in the younger grades because school wasn't as hard, and so kids sometimes act out behaviorally in response to different stresses or things that they might be experiencing.

So if they're sad or depressed about something, if they've got some social anxiety, if they're struggling academically -- if kids are experiencing those things they sometimes start to act out behaviorally. And then some of these interventions don't work because you're not really addressing the underlying problem. These things we're going to talk about today assume that the problem is just the normal child pressing these buttons and acting out in these ways, and that if you address that you're addressing the problem.

Lee Rosen: Right. You know, the whole point of our show is to help people figure out how to stay married. And so I'm going to ask you a question -- I already know the answer to this one because I'm living it; I want to kind of tie in back in. Do these discipline issues with kids impact the relationship between husband and wife?

Tina Lepage: Yeah. Absolutely. There's no way that they can't impact it, just in the simple sense that any stressor that you place on a marriage impacts it. So the question becomes how do you handle that? And if the parents have open communication, they talk about discipline, if they're on the same page about what they think they should be using as far as discipline techniques, and particularly if they're being consistent, then that's going to be even more effective with the children in terms of what they're doing.

So it does impact the marriage. If the marriage is a healthy, strong marriage and you sit down and sort of tackle it together, it doesn't have to be something that destroys the marriage or is horrible.

Now, on the flip side, it's a huge stressor if it doesn't get under control. And if the parents start to have disagreements about what should be done, then that can certainly be really difficult for the marriage.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, and these little devils know just how to divide and conquer. They'll split you apart. They are good at getting an opinion from mom and an opinion from dad and then pitting them. It's like they're excellent at this. It's like they were built to drive you crazy.

Tina Lepage: And parents can just not -- if you have a good way of dealing with that, the kids sort of get that that doesn't work. I mean, I think you can have a couple of things with what you're talking about, the splitting between parents. One is that you can just agree between the two of you that when you give answers to a child, you say, "Well, here's what I think. I'd like to talk to your mom, or I'd like to talk to your dad first because they might have a different opinion."

Kids can understand that you too have different opinions but you're still going to come together and talk and come up with one answer for them. And so if you kind of have that trust between you. I can think the other day, my daughter was bugging me about something and I was kind of saying, "Well, you could ask me a hundred times and my answer's still going to be no."

She said, "Well, fine. I'm going to go ask Daddy."

And I said, "Okay. Go ask him." And then she asked him and they soon came back into the room and he said, "She's asking me this and it seems like something that we might want to talk about."

Lee Rosen: Right. "Is it okay if I play with matches?" Right.

Tina Lepage: No.

Lee Rosen: Let me ask you this. Do you see a lot of parents who really have a different approach? I mean, mom's approach may be loving discipline and dad's approach is a loud snap of his belt or something; really sort of extremes. Do you see examples of that with people coming to see you?

Tina Lepage: We do. And when you talk about how discipline can impact a marriage, that's one of the more difficult things, is when parents are really on a different page about how to discipline their children. And some of the common things that might cause problems is one parent is much more conservative and over-protective and the other parent is a lot more laissez-faire or laid back. That causes a lot of problems because it's very stressful on both parents. They think they're sort of right about how they're approaching it and what will be best for their kids.

And certainly, if one parent sort of thinks that spanking is appropriate discipline and the other parent doesn't, that causes huge problems in marriages. So certainly if they don't have some agreement about what to do, it's very hard on them. And hard on the kids then, too, because they get really different messages.

Lee Rosen: Sure. I would assume that would be very confusing.

When families, when couples come into you and they're wanting help and they want you to look at their kids and tell them what's wrong with them or whatever, I assume that they have kind of tried to do everything that they can do and they're just coming to you when they're giving up. Is that a fair assessment?

Tina Lepage: I think it is, especially with this particular problem. And we're talking about kids who are acting out. Of course, it's just normal and natural. Parents, the child acts out, they try some intervention. They try, try, try. It's not the thing you immediately say, "I need to go to a psychologist for this, or I need to take my child to see somebody, or I need to go in for some parent coaching around this." And so I think parents are oftentimes very frustrated by the time they come in.

Now, we've always got the smaller subset of people who are sort of like the preventive medicine people. As soon as they start to feel ineffective at something they reach out for help, and that probably permeates much of their life in terms of an approach to things. And so we do see people who do come in earlier on.

But it's also a problem that coming in after it's been going on for a while still doesn't mean it's going to take forever to fix. Because sometimes it's just that the parents haven't chosen something that's effective. And so they've tried lots and lots of things. But once you give them an effective tool, it changes things.

Lee Rosen: Right. Okay. So effective tools. I know you have some ideas, guidelines about how you would approach the kids' behaviors and

discipline and all that. What's the Tina Lepage magic, secret weapon? What do we do to fix it? Tell me; how do you deal with these kids?

Tina Lepage: All right. Well, of course there are a number of things. One of the things that I'm going to start with is talking about sort of a more prevention type of thing, and that is back to the idea that discipline is not just all reactive. It's also trying to shape kids who don't act out as much so that you don't have to deal with it as often and they don't have to deal with it as often.

So one of the things that we work with parents around is make sure that you create an environment that leads to less acting out and to a better ability to react positively to discipline. And the things around that are things like taking care of yourself; trying to create a low-stress household; not having a household where things are rushed; where people get enough sleep, exercise, etc. Supervision for children -- children who are unsupervised and who will act out more. They have too much independence too soon.

In terms of prevention, we also look at role modeling. How do you behave when you're upset, stressed, whatever? Is there a happy marriage? Are you generally happy individuals in the household? Do you present a united front to your children in terms of your expectations and such? And also generally using positive language and not yelling and not hitting.

Lee Rosen: That whole role modeling thing's a real downer. You people are always telling us the children are watching you --

Tina Lepage: You know, I oftentimes joke since I became a parent. It's like, "Okay. No pressure. It's just you're their primary role model for turning out to be a decent human being. But you know" --

Lee Rosen: Yeah. It's too stressful. Can you lay off of that? Really.

Tina Lepage: No role modeling. Right.

Lee Rosen: Yeah.

Tina Lepage: And then the other thing is just the relationship; creating a good relationship in terms of with the kids, making sure that there's family time. I mean, that's one thing in our busy schedules that has oftentimes gone to the wayside. Making sure that you are positive with your directives to your kids. Making sure that you talk and listen on their level. Because otherwise, kids just don't feel connected to you.

And I think sometimes parents we forget what it was like to be a kid and we sort of talk for our own level. Like a kid complains about school or whatever, and we go into the, "Well, school's not so bad, blah, blah, blah, and you get to see your friends and you're learning." And they're just sitting there thinking, "Oh, my god. School is boring and you just don't get it." We forget that there were days when we were kids where we thought, yes, school is just awful.

So just sort of doing a lot of these things create that environment where your child is less likely to act out on a regular basis. That's the sort of thing.

And also, in terms of a parent escalating, making sure you don't escalate a situation. So de-escalating versus escalating. Because it's kind of like you described. If you find yourself standing there yelling, etc., doing this or that, that really you're just escalating the situation at that point, just like they're escalating the situation. And as a parent you want to be able to step back from that and not be brought into that.

I think that, not that it's ignoring children's bad behavior, but especially with younger children -- even older kids to some extent -- some parents are quickly reactive when kids whine about something, etc. I say the first thing, try to divert it. Change to a positive topic. Do something that entertains your child.

My child being young, she loves to race. So if I say it's time for bed and she starts, "I don't want to go to bed, nah, nah, nah," I say, "I'll beat you to your bedroom." And that's it. The whining's over, the race is on. So those kind of things can really help if you're thinking diversion before you think, okay, this is just going to keep getting worse and worse.

Lee Rosen: Right. And a lot of people -- I guess you hear a lot of families that are using different systems or approaches to discipline. They'll have reward systems or whatever it may be. Do you guys advocate that sort of approach to things?

Tina Lepage: Yeah. I definitely advocate -- the whole idea of rewards and consequences, that's been sort of played out in the research as being effective.

And a couple of things. One thing is that parents should know that spanking has never been shown to be more effective than rewards and consequences. And in fact, physical punishment has always found to be less effective because it also angers the child, it

diminishes the parent-child relationship, etc. So some parents will say, "Well, but it works. I spank my kid and don't do X again." But again, it doesn't work better overall than a system of rewards and consequences. And it really goes against if you're trying to create that sort of kind and effective discipline. Clearly, spanking is not going to be the way to go. But it's also just less effective than some of this other stuff.

One thing that I talk to parents about is that over the years at this point, it's been hundreds of kids that I've worked with. And I always ask them, "So why did you do it?" whatever it is. Like, why are you acting out? Why are you doing this kind of thing?

And I get lots of answers. And they all come down to basically three different reasons that kids act out. So if parents I think get three things you can really do a lot to stop the kids from acting out. So one of the big things is just the consequences. It's like they do a cost-benefit analysis. Is it worth it to try to do whatever they're going to do or not? And I can go into that a little bit more. But that's one of the things.

The other thing is lack of supervision. So nobody was around to prevent them from doing whatever they were going to do.

And the other thing is a poor relationship with their parents. So basically the kids who kind of don't care what their parents think about what they're doing act out more than the kids who are close to their parents and are worried that their parents would be upset.

Lee Rosen: Right. So what's the cost-benefit thing? Fill me in on that one.

Tina Lepage: Yeah. The cost-benefit thing is really the heart of a lot of what you can do to help your child to act out less. When kids decide they're going to do something, really all of us, we kind of make a cost-benefit analysis. Is this worth it? What's going to happen if we do this?

And so what parents have to keep in mind is that the benefit to the kids can often be higher than the parents even realize. Because if it's fun or if they look good in front of their peers or it makes them fit in or they're just relieved of their boredom, etc., there are a lot of things that kids sort of think, this is an immediate gratification benefit kind of thing.

And so if they know, because the parents have been consistent with laying out consequences -- if they know that there's going to be a consequence for that, then in their cost-benefit analysis they can

say, "Oh, well, if I do this, this'll be great fun, but this will happen." And it has to be consistent. They have to know that there's going to be a consequence on the other end. So that's really effective with kids.

And then of course, the other side of that is rewards for good behavior. And I do think rewards work great. You kind of talked about -- you just said something about giving them a token system or whatever it was you said, but the giving them something. I think rewards are great. I'd say before you go there, try to be doing things that are more relationship-based rewards.

Praise for kids is a great reward. There have been lots of studies that show that we say negative things to our kids somewhere between four to seven times more often than we say positive things to our kids. So it's kind of like if everything's going good we just don't notice it, and then when they act out we say, "Oh, you're doing that." But we know that kids really respond to praise. And so praising them when they do things that are good.

Relationship-based rewards can be stuff like an extra book at bedtime for a younger kid or maybe something fun that you take them to do for older kids. But stuff that connects them a little bit. Now, that doesn't mean that you shouldn't also have a token system because that can really work for some kids. And it doesn't mean that you can't have tangible rewards. And certainly parents for years and years have used allowance as a type of tangible reward. So rewards and consequences really do work for kids, but particularly when they're consistent so that the kids know -- that they absolutely know what's going to happen.

But they're not offered in excess. Because if you get rewards all the time or consequences all the time, then there's really no relationship to the kid's action. And kids will figure that out. So you praise your kids all the time, they don't really feel -- it's not as meaningful when you do praise them.

And then if you get mad at the drop of a hat, if you have an irritability issue and your kid gets yelled at or grounded for basically doing nothing, then they may as well act out because it doesn't matter what they do.

So making sure they're not offered in excess. And then the other thing is figuring out your kid's currency, because kids all have different currency. Sometimes parents will come in and say they've tried X, Y, and Z and it hasn't worked. We figure out what's

meaningful to their kid and make that a reward or a consequence and then the child's behavior improves.

Lee Rosen: Right. Makes sense, because kids do have weird currencies, especially at different ages. That's fascinating. That's very interesting.

So you've asked hundreds of kids why they did what they did, and it boils down to the cost-benefit -- it was better to do it than to not do it; or there was no supervision, so they just go for it; or the relationship with the parents is not such that they don't feel like it matters if they do it or not. Is that a fair summary?

Tina Lepage: Yes. Exactly.

Lee Rosen: And then your systems come into play. You work on fixing those three things. I guess the supervision is the easiest. If there's no supervision, you provide more. If the relationship's not good, you work on the relationship. And then all this reward and consistent consequences stuff relates to the cost-benefit decision.

Tina Lepage: Right.

Lee Rosen: You make it sound so easy.

Tina Lepage: Oh, it's a lot of work. Those three things are so much work. Because kids can't have constant supervision. I mean, constant supervision, especially as kids get older, is not the answer. So they have to have a reasonable amount of supervision. And so even that has its own nuances because we say, well, it's not that kids -- the older kids now, I'm talking about -- have 24/7 supervision kind of thing. But it's that they have flybys.

So they don't always know when they're going to be supervised. So that's a great thing when you start to leave a kid by themselves, that they're not 100 percent sure that you're going to be gone for three and a half hours or that you're going to be gone for five hours or two hours, but that they know you're going to be gone. I mean, they should know about when you're going to be gone. But coming home early, having a neighbor pop in to check on them, those types of things so that they don't just get a sense that, hey, I can do whatever.

Or parents that let their kids know that their room is their space and the parent will never go into their space. Well, I've had kids who are getting high in their room and their parents will come knock on the door, "Dinner's ready," and they don't enter the room.

So there are things, even that, we say it like it's so simplistic, but there are a lot of levels to it.

And certainly the relationship, there can be a lot of levels to that as well. I'll give you an example. We had this one family that came in. And this was such a quick case. Both of the kids, there was a boy and girl in high school and the father was not having a good relationship with the daughter. So the daughter was very upset with the dad and the dad was frustrated with the daughter because she basically didn't like to hang out with him and didn't listen to him at all and acted out around him all the time. And the father had a great relationship with the son.

So in talking to them, it came out that the father had this way of interacting where he liked to explain things. He was a very detailed explainer. And so if she asked for something or did something, he would go through these long explanations.

And her take on that was, "He thinks I'm stupid. He's talking down to me. And by the way, this is so boring." The son's take on that exact same behavior was, "Dad's interested in me. Dad wants to show me how to do this. And this is very interesting."

And so once we were able to parse that out, which was really only a couple of sessions, it was kind of a quick fix after that. We just worked on everybody respects that everybody's different. She gets that Dad's not treating her like she's stupid. But however, Dad also gets that this is boring to her; this is not her thing. So it was easy for them to fix, and that was just relational. That had nothing to do with consequences or supervision or any of that stuff.

Lee Rosen: Right. But you do give us a very good framework for sort of thinking these things through and I really appreciate that.

Tina, we've covered a lot of ground today. Is there anything else that folks should know about discipline with love? I guess there's lots to know. But is there anything we really need to communicate today?

Tina Lepage: Other than that we need a part two?

Lee Rosen: Right.

Tina Lepage: No. The only other thing I would say -- and I touched on this earlier -- is just reminding parents that oftentimes it is just the kid acting out and bad behavior and doing these things can help. But sometimes there's something else going on with the child. And so not just being dismissive that, "Oh, this is such a difficult child or

this is such a bad kid." We've had kids that we finally -- come in and they get tested in college and find out they have a learning disability and they say, "Oh, wow. I just always thought I was lazy and stupid, couldn't get it." And that just isn't true.

Again, or kids who can be going through something parents don't always know. Kids aren't always good communicators because they're not even in touch sometimes with their own internal experience yet or don't have a language to describe really well if they are anxious or depressed or worried about things and if that's impacting them acting out.

So I would just say just keeping that in mind; that if you tried a few things and it doesn't work, going and getting help -- sometimes it's just parent coaching and the kid doesn't come in at all, and other times a handful of meetings with the kid and the parents can really turn things around pretty quickly.

Lee Rosen: Right. Good advice. Tina, thank you so much for being with us today.

Tina Lepage: You're welcome.

Lee Rosen: I want to thank all of you for listening in today. And I want you to know how much I appreciate the feedback that we're getting from you - all the comments, the e-mails, the phone calls. And I'd like to ask you to me a favor if you have a few minutes, especially if we've never heard from you before.

We would love to hear your feedback about the shows. We love to hear what we're doing right; what we're doing wrong; ideas for topics; guest suggestions. If you have some of that feedback we would love to hear it. Two ways to get up with us. You can reach us on the comment line, (919) 256-3083. Or you can e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

You should also check out the website at Lepage Associates. It's LepageAssociates.com. They have a lot of great information there about Tina and her staff and the services that they offer. There are a bunch of articles and links to resources. It's a really good starting place if you're looking at figuring out some of these issues dealing with kids and keeping your marriage on track.

Thank you so much again for joining us. We will be back next week. I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, stay happily married.

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