



STAY
happily married
.com

Advocating for Your Child in the School System

This is Stay Happily Married #114, "Advocating for Your Child in the School System."

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 Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. We've got something different today, something interesting. You know, lots of us have kids that in one way or another have issues at school and we end up in maybe the teacher's conference or the principal's office -- I hope not, but I can tell you: been there, done that. And it creates a lot of stress in a marriage. It brings a whole element into the marriage that I think a lot of us weren't prepared for and didn't expect.

So I went out and I found a psychologist with the perfect background for this topic. First of all, she's married; she's been married for 10 years and she's got three children. And I always think that's a great credential for talking about staying happily married.

But more importantly, she has a Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the field of school psychology. She knows the ins and outs of how you deal with the school system when you're having issues with your kid. Her name is Jaclyn Starritt and I am so pleased that she could be with us today and talk with about how we can advocate for our kids in the school system and hopefully stay married through the process.

Welcome to the show, Jaclyn.

Jaclyn Starritt:

Thanks for having me.

Lee Rosen: Well, I'm really, really pleased that you could be here. And I think -- I'm guessing, but you tell me. In your practice do you find that having issues with kids in school really does put a lot of stress on marriage?

Jaclyn Starritt: Absolutely. A lot of the time parents are not always on the same page in terms of what they expect from the school system, from what they want their child's future to look like. And a lot of times they don't really understand what's going on with their child, which often creates that added stress.

Lee Rosen: Well, I guess we don't understand it from both the psychological standpoint and we don't always know very much about what the school system is up to and why they're doing -- I mean, I sometimes feel like I get a lot of e-mails from the schools but I really don't know what the big picture plan is. It is a little mysterious, I think.

Jaclyn Starritt: Right. There's a process. And it's important for parents to realize that it is a process and it is a long process. Often times they'll have a kid in school, behavior problems, learning problems, something's not right. They'll get referred to a student support team and then they try a bunch of interventions or try to figure out what's going on. And if that doesn't work, then they decide to do an evaluation. And at that point, that process is at least 90 days.

Lee Rosen: Don't you find -- when you find out that your kid is being evaluated or there's some problem, that parents -- is it just me or is it fairly normal to parents start to point fingers at one another, get angry with one another? I mean, it creates more division than it does kind of cooperation.

Jaclyn Starritt: Absolutely. Your first thought is, "Uh-oh. What did I do wrong or what did you do wrong?"

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah.

Jaclyn Starritt: "What's wrong with our child and why? What could we have done differently?"

Lee Rosen: I usually think, "Why did my wife do whatever she did wrong?" Because it couldn't have been me.

Jaclyn Starritt: Of course not.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. I'm the first to point the finger. What happens in a house as all this goes on? What is going on between the couple, typically?

Jaclyn Starritt: I think a lot of argument, initially. A lot of blame, pointing fingers, like you said. And a lot of confusion, anger, frustration, depending on the severity of what's going on with the child. They don't understand what they need to do for the child, and instead of working together to help the child, they're too busy worried about what they did wrong. They're internalizing it and making it more about them than about the child. And when they're arguing back and forth, I think sometimes the child and what the child needs gets pushed to the side a little bit.

Lee Rosen: Right. You know, I have a friend who I really think when things go wrong at school, he reacts -- it's like he cannot stand the idea of his kids being anything other than perfect. I accepted a long time ago mine are definitely not perfect. But I mean, seriously.

And I think it's like his self-concept or something is wound up in the idea that they're going to be perfect kids. And so it's not only is he not dealing with the kid stuff, it's like he's so distracted by his own stuff that it makes it impossible. Is that common or is that just the weird friends I have?

Jaclyn Starritt: No, that's common. No one likes their child to get a label. And I think a lot of times that puts that added pressure on. What are they going to be labeled as? What are people going to think's wrong with them? What if everyone knows my child has ADHD? And it's really important for them to realize they're not alone; there's plenty of kids with issues. No child is perfect. And I think there's a lot of things that come with that.

Even when -- I know with my child, he's in first grade and I'll get a phone call from his teacher, "Hey, we'd like to meet with you about your son." And you panic, "Why? What did he do?" Maybe he's not behaving. Maybe he's this. Maybe he's that. And sometimes it's nothing. But I think that definitely plays a role.

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, you're talking about kids where the issues are bigger than just little "Johnny slapped me" or whatever. You're talking about kids who really are introduced to this system and this process that you're talking about that can take quite a bit of time. Do the parents generally kind of know what's coming and have a feel for how the process is going to work, or is it like this black box process that you don't get told much about?

Jaclyn Starritt: I think that part of that responsibility falls to the parents and that's where that advocacy part really comes to play. The schools are forthcoming with information, but sometimes you have to ask for

help. You have to be willing to find out what's going on and go a little further. Don't wait for the teacher or the principal to call you. If you know something's going on with your child, then you need to advocate for them. You need to take the first step.

Lee Rosen: In your experience in the school systems and with your background, did you find that -- are the school people open to hearing from parents and are they open to answering questions? Or are you almost causing your kid more trouble by being too involved or something?

Jaclyn Starritt: There's no such thing as being too involved. It's your child. You are the best advocate. You know what your child needs. I've found in my experience that teachers, administrators, they're very open to hearing your concerns. Often times they have concerns as well. They're the next best advocates for your child than you are. They know your child just as well as you do. They spend just as much time with them as you do during the school year.

Lee Rosen: Right. What do parents do? What did you see parents do and what do you know -- parents you've seen in your practice, what are they doing when they're trying to be advocates for their kid that they're doing wrong? What mistakes are they making, I guess is what I'm asking you?

Jaclyn Starritt: One of the biggest mistakes I've seen parents make is to get defensive, get hostile, almost. So instead of creating an open line of communication with teachers, they're almost sounding like they're blaming the teacher for what's going on. And that's not the case. Most of the time the parents don't feel the teacher is to blame, but it's not coming across clear to the teacher and they're feeling like they're being criticized. That's going to make the teacher pull away.

It's really important that parents make the teacher know, "We don't think this is your fault. We really do want your help. We're just upset about what's going on with our child."

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, what about -- so that is really good advice because I think it is -- there's just so much going on here. There's so many layers at which I think we react to trouble with kids.

What about, is there a strategy that parents ought to have? Is there an approach they ought to have? And how do they work together instead of this finger-pointing, blaming thing you're talking about, and how do you work all that out?

Jaclyn Starritt: Communication. I think that is the most --

Lee Rosen: Oh, that keeps coming up. You psychologists. It's like every show I have to hear about communication. It's like, can't I just watch TV?

But seriously. Okay. Communication. Where are you going with that?

Jaclyn Starritt: Right. You have to be on the same page. Obviously, when you're married there's always differences of opinion about how you raise your kids, how you discipline your kids. This is no different than those kinds of conversations. You need to sit down. You both need to understand what is going on with your child. You both need to understand what your rights are in the school system. You need to both understand what's available for your child and you need to be on the same page in terms of what kind of things do you want in place for your child?

Being in a school meeting and suddenly realizing that you have a difference of opinion, not a good time for that. You need to keep the line of communication open. And it's really important to be able to express frustration to each other. "I'm angry that my child has a learning disability and can't do well in school right now." Or, "I'm very frustrated that this is going on with them."

It's really important that you discuss those things so when you go into a school meeting you're coming across as a cohesive unit. "We're together on this. This is what we want for our child and we're on the same page."

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, you say something and I agree with you that we ought to all be going to these meetings, Mom and Dad. But realistically, in the world today it's tough for Mom and Dad to leave work and to both be there. How do you deal with that, when really you can't -- I assume you can do these meetings without having both parents there, right? I mean, the school system will deal with reality.

Jaclyn Starritt: Oh, of course. Yes. Yes.

Lee Rosen: But how would you approach that if only one of them can realistically be there?

Jaclyn Starritt: Right. And that happens a lot. I would say to be consistent. You're kind of assigning roles, if that's the case. And obviously in today's world where everyone's so busy and multi-tasking, you both can't be there all the time. I always recommend that you kind of have a role that you play. So maybe Mom is the one doing the meetings and

Dad's the one working with the child at home in terms of homework or projects. So you're both still being involved.

And it's important for whichever parent is the one at the meetings, when they come home, we go back to that communication thing again where they're talking to the other parent who wasn't present, letting them know exactly what happened at the meeting, what the goals are, what the expectations are, so again we're on the same page.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. At least for me, I would have to take a lot of notes if I was going to have to come home and report this stuff because it does kind of go -- there's so much information. I can easily see -- you get home and your spouse says, "Well, did you say this? Did you say that?" And you're thinking, "Well, no, I didn't think to say that." I mean, that's got to be tough.

But I guess if you're doing the stuff you're talking about with communicating in advance, you really are sort of getting all this well-prepared before you walk into the room.

Jaclyn Starritt: Right. And I would recommend if you know Mom's going to the meeting, Dad can't make it, before the meeting starts we're going to sit down and maybe make a few bullet points of things; questions that Dad has about the process to make sure he gets his answers as well, even though he can't physically be present. That's really important.

Lee Rosen: Right. What are the other issues -- what other things do you feel like parents should be doing? I want to ask you both about advocating -- what other things they ought to be doing to advocate for the kids -- but also what other things should they be doing to keep the marriage on track as they go through this?

I guess starting with advocating, are there other big things that they ought to be focusing on?

Jaclyn Starritt: In order to advocate well, you need to know what your rights are. You need to know your rights and your child's rights. It's really important to know what is available for you. There are all sorts of accommodations and interventions that the school can put into place and you need to know what they are before you go into the meeting. So nothing's coming at you as a surprise or you don't know -- you didn't realize the process takes 90 days. You need to be prepared for those things.

It's also really important when you're advocating for your child that you understand why they need these interventions or accommodations, that you understand their diagnosis and you can speak about their diagnosis with confidence. So it's really important that you know just as much about it as the teachers and the school psychologist and the principal, so you can speak with confidence about what you know your child needs. So that's very important.

Lee Rosen: Okay. That makes sense. What about on the -- from the marriage standpoint? Aside from communicating, are there other things you really ought to be focusing on in order to make sure this whole thing doesn't drive the two of you apart?

Jaclyn Starritt: The biggest piece of advice I can give to you there is this cannot be your only focus in your marriage. You cannot be so focused on getting your child help that you've neglected all the other interpersonal issues in your life that are going on. Life is not going to stop because your child has autism or ADHD or a learning disability. There's still going to be all those other stresses you were dealing with before you even knew this. It's really important to continue to deal with those issues as they come. You can't put everything on the back burner to focus on your child.

The other thing that's really important is to continue to make time for each other where you're still having your date nights and you're still going out and you're not going to be talking about this issue.

Lee Rosen: Right. Got to focus on something else. Do you find this is harder for families where they have an only child rather than multiple kids? I would think it would be even more challenging. I don't know.

Jaclyn Starritt: I think that can go either way. Sometimes if it's an only child I think a diagnosis like this is more devastating, causes more stress and anxiety. But then on the flipside, if you have multiple children sometimes you're juggling so much. Now you have one child who has special needs; well, what about all the other needs of the other children? So I think it can go either way.

Lee Rosen: You know, I've seen cases where people who have issues with the school system, it really does escalate sometimes and I know lawsuits get filed, that these things get dragged out for a very long time. Do you find that -- should people be focusing on just negotiating something with the school system and being done with it? Are they risking their marriage, I guess is what I'm really asking, if they let this become World War III with the school system?

Jaclyn Starritt: I think most of the time -- I think those are rare instances. I think most of the time the schools are going to listen to you if you really are putting forth the effort. They're not going to be as receptive if you're not there, if they're not seeing your face every day or every week or you're not at every meeting or involved in your child's education. And I think a lot of the times one parent seems to maybe take charge or take the lead.

And occasionally you do see where one parent has become so obsessed about making sure the schools are listening to everything that they're saying that it's definitely going to impact the marriage because the other spouse may be like, "Whoa, back off a little bit. You're a little too high strung here." And then that's going to create a whole other argument.

Lee Rosen: Right. I can certainly see -- you get the school system, you fight like crazy, you get them to do exactly what you want. And the next thing you know, Mom and Dad are getting a divorce and I don't know that the kid is really better off in the grand scheme of things. I mean, obviously you want the kid to have parents that are able to be together and be happy together and get all the services they want from the school system.

What else do we need to know about advocating for your child and staying happily married at the same time?

Jaclyn Starritt: I think it's really important to ask for help when you need help. If something you're trying is not working in the school system, if you're finding that the teachers and the administrators are not open, they're not listening, you're getting frustrated, ask for help.

You can always come to people like us who, we sit there, we do consultation for you, we test for you, we can go to meetings with you. A lot of times if you have a professional outside of the school system backing you up, that sometimes speeds up things and can kind of help put a little bit more credence behind what you're saying.

Lee Rosen: I hadn't thought of that. But you're bringing your own expert into the process, not just relying on the school system. I guess you're going to spend some money, but that would certainly help you to head things in the direction you want them to go, I guess.

Jaclyn Starritt: Well, it's better than fighting nonstop with your spouse about it.

Lee Rosen: Right. That's true. You know, every time we try to put a price tag on these things, it's like whatever I've got to spend to not end up with my marriage falling apart, it's a good investment.

Jaclyn Starritt: Right. Absolutely.

Lee Rosen: That makes a lot of sense. Well, Jaclyn, thank you so much for being with us today. I really appreciate you taking the time to talk.

Jaclyn Starritt: No problem.

Lee Rosen: Let me tell you all two things before we go. You should check out the website. Jaclyn's website is at WynnsFamilyPsychology.com. And I'm going to spell that one and I'm going to put a link to it in the show notes because it's a tricky spelling. Wynns is W-Y-N-N-S Family Psychology dot com, so visit the site. You'll find a lot more about Jaclyn's family counseling services and you'll find some links to great resources.

You can also reach her office at (919) 805-0182.

The other thing is that I want to thank you once again for all of the great feedback that we're getting from you. The comments and the suggestions for upcoming shows are fantastic. I hope you will keep in touch and give us more feedback. It really does help us to deliver the very best shows that we can for you.

Two ways to reach us: One is that you can e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com; the other way is to call our comment line and leave a voice mail at (919) 256-3083.

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.