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Keeping the Connection after Parenthood

This is Stay Happily Married #145, "Keeping the Connection after Parenthood."

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Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. When you have a child, everything changes. But does that mean your marriage can't be what it was before? Does it feel like you and your spouse are both connected to the kids but not really connected to one another?

Rhona Berens joins us on the show today to talk about how things change in a marriage after the birth of a child, and about what you can do to make sure that you stay connected to one another.

Rhona is a relationship coach and the founder of Parent Alliance, which provides advice and resources to new parents who want to strengthen their relationship with each other. She has a blog on parenting issues and I'd suggest while you're listening, take a look at it. It's at ParentAlliance.com. She also offers workshops on really getting the most out of your relationship now that you're parents.

Rhona, welcome to the program.

Rhona Berens: Thank you so much, Lee. It's a pleasure to be here.

Lee Rosen: I'm excited to have you. Let me ask you right off the bat, I assume – I'm just guessing, but did you get focused on this, did you get interested in this, because of things that were going on in your own life?

Rhona Berens: Good and perceptive question. You know, I would say this is a combination of both my own experience becoming a mom and the stresses on my marriage as a result, and also – I'd say three factors: that; watching what happened to friends and the stresses on their relationships; and also just studying relationship coaching and relationship dynamics, and increasingly understanding that it makes perfect sense that having kids would be a major stress on relationships. And yet I think in our society we don't really spend much time or attention focused on that.

We're so focused on being good parents and much less focused on sustaining and nurturing our relationship in the service of our satisfaction – the service, actually, of being good parents.

Lee Rosen: Right. So what do you think? How come it is that – these little bundles of joy are supposed to make us happy and everything is going to be magical when we have the kids. How common is it for new parents to be less happy with the marriage than they were before the child came?

Rhona Berens: It's actually incredibly common. And I think the more I work with expecting couples and then new parents, and the more I understand about fairly extensive research that's been done, I will say that I still am kind of shocked at the statistics.

So I'll just say first there's some moving parts here that vary, like socioeconomics, like how old we are when we get married, and also things like our romance levels before we have kids. But all that sort of being equal, the data suggests that 9 out of 10 couples report a decrease in their relationship happiness after their first child.

And depending on the study you look at – these studies have dealt with – a lot of them have dealt with many, many hundreds, sometimes thousands of couples. The data suggests that anywhere from 66 to 90 percent of couples report a significant drop in relationship satisfaction.

Lee Rosen: Wow.

Rhona Berens: I mean, significant, right?

Lee Rosen: Well, I have a 17-year-old and a 13-year-old. And thinking back, I mean, I do remember, you're so stressed out, you're so busy, you have so much responsibility that I don't think you ever really imagined before you have the kids. I mean, it's hard to imagine that your relationship wouldn't suffer a little bit in the environment that you're suddenly living in.

Rhona Berens: You're right. You're absolutely right.

Lee Rosen: What kinds of things are you seeing happening in the marriages after the birth of the child? What are the scenarios that you're hearing about from folks that you're working with?

Rhona Berens: Well, I think in sort of broad strokes what we tend to see is relationship conflicts increase significantly after the birth of the baby. And this is especially after the birth of a first child.

And one of the other broad strokes things that we see is that, you know those relationship issues – and anyone who has been in a relationship for any length of time has them – those relationship issues where we have those conversations, sometimes arguments, disagreements, that we just keep having the same one over and over again. You know those?

Lee Rosen: Right. I understand. I can easily imagine a couple of those. Yeah.

Rhona Berens: Yes. I mean, most, if not all, of us can. So those actually rear their ugly heads much more insistently after the birth of a child. So they're what I call kind of persistent relationship issues, the ones that are recurrent.

So we have an increase in conflict. We have an increase in recurrent issues. And sometimes the specifics vary from couple to couple. I mean, very common you hear a lot of couples talking about disagreeing and having conflict around differing levels of desire around sex and intimacy; that's a really common one.

Another really common one, certainly as the first year of a child's life progresses, and certainly in the first three years, a lot more disagreement among many, many couples around roles and responsibilities around child care and the change in household duties. Because along with a child, suddenly there are many more tasks and a much broader range of tasks that need to be fulfilled; and that's a very, very common area of conflict for couples as well.

Lee Rosen: Right. So how do you see couples trying to deal with this transition and what are the challenges that they're facing?

Rhona Berens: Well, I think actually, to be quite blunt, I think most couples don't really try to deal with the transition to parenthood until they hit a really critical level around conflict or relationship dissatisfaction. And I think there are a number of really good reasons that that doesn't happen, the most prominent being that I think prior to having a child, when we're an expecting couple, our focus is on birth and baby prep. Whether that's prepping a nursery or going to birthing classes, where

the focus really is on the baby and in some cases on the mom – at least the mom around the birth scenario – but there's really no emphasis on our relationships.

And I think very often we have – I think anecdotally people will say, "Oh, look at what happened to our friends over here and looked what happened to their marriage after they had a child." But I think there's a kind of – I don't know if it's a denial mechanism or what it is. Many of us say, "Well, that'll never happen to us." And so there isn't that kind of conscious awareness around, huh, maybe this will be a major stressor. Maybe we can prepare for this.

Lee Rosen:

Yeah. You're just not thinking about it, I guess. You're so busy. And I remember a conversation I had with my wife in the months before our first child was born. We were sitting on the couch in the living room watching TV and I said to her, "So what do you think it'll be like once the baby arrives?"

And she's like, "Oh, we'll just be here watching TV and the baby will be on the blanket in front of us." And it's like, oh, we had no idea what was coming.

And so yeah, you're right. I mean, things like worrying about our relationship were just not on the agenda. We had no way to imagine what was coming. So I guess that shouldn't surprise me at all.

I was looking at your website at ParentAlliance.com and I know that you have an observation that I found interesting about family portraits that you see in people's homes, and some of the homes I think of people that you've worked with, and what they say about the connections between everyone in that family. What are you thinking about all that? Tell us about that.

Rhona Berens:

Well, it was interesting to me. I started looking for images of parents with a child or children with a baby and was looking for images where it was visible that the connection between the parents was something that we could sort of physically sense, either that they were looking at each other or touching each other, that there was a connection between the parents. And I realized, oh, this is actually hard to find.

So if we think about it – and I encourage parents listening to this to actually look at their own photo albums. When we look at our photo albums and we look at sort of when we first become a couple or a time before kids, a lot of the photos we're physically connected. We're hand-holding, we've got our arms around each other, sometimes we're looking at each other, sometimes we're kissing each other. You look at photos when we're expecting and there's often physical connection;

there's an embrace, there's an embracing of the baby bump, there's a real physical closeness.

And you start to look at photos once we have kids – and it makes a lot of sense, right? We suddenly have these other beings, other people in our lives, and suddenly either we find a lot of our photos – in a lot of our photos parents are physically separated from each other because they surround their child or children; they're often looking at the child or children, not at each other; or looking at the camera. We also find that there are a lot of these photos where only one parent is in the photo because, of course, the other one is taking the photo.

And for me, these images are a kind of visual mapping of what happens to the connection between parents after we have kids, so that it's literally our children separate us. And while I wouldn't – it's not like noticing that means that I now advocate that whenever you're now taking a family portrait or taking pictures that you suddenly "pay attention," "look at your spouse, don't look at your children." It's not that.

I don't mean to suggest a kind of awkward restructuring of how we organize our photos. But more to use this as a way of increasing our awareness of the ways in which having kids and parenting intentionally sometimes, when our kids get older, or certainly unintentionally when they're babies and young, to literally pull us away from our marriage, pull us away from each other.

Lee Rosen:

Right. Now that you say it, it's like it's sort of depressing to think that I'll go look at my pictures. Because I'm sure you're exactly right; those are the sorts of things that you will see. And I'm sure they do sort of run along in parallel with what's going on in the relationship. The photos are the best evidence of sort of what's happening.

So, okay. I buy what you're saying, that most people who are having children are just not focused on these issues. This is not on the radar screen. They're not worrying about it. So if we can get their ears and give them some ideas about preventative steps so that before the child is born they can make sure that their relationship is not going to get off track as soon as that baby arrives, what do you advise them? What are the preventative steps that they can take to not end up in the situation you're describing?

Rhona Berens:

Yeah. It's a really good and really important question and I really wish I had a short answer to it, because I think there are lots of things that can be done. So I think maybe I'll just sort of touch upon some of the things that couples can try to do.

You know, one of the first things that I say to couples – expecting couples – when I start working with them is that when we are expecting a child, we are now on the cusp of being engaged in two really important life roles: being spouses and being parents. That we're not really taught how to do or taught how to do well, except perhaps by example; and if we're lucky, it's a positive example. And even then, we're not really taught what the skills are that we need in order to ensure that our relationships thrive, in order to be good parents.

And so one of the first things I ask couples to do is to start to really talk to each other about their assumptions about what it looks like to co-parent with someone. And I ask them to look back at their own histories of their own parents' relationships – or their parent and a step-parent's relationship, if that was their own experience – and to really look at what they really liked about those relationships, what they didn't like; what they'd love to import into their relationship with their spouse; what they appreciated about the parenting they received when they were kids; what they didn't appreciate; again, what they'd like to have become part of their own parenting.

And I really encourage expecting couples to really dig deep in thinking about this information and then start to share it with each other. And talk to each other about what it might look like for them to craft a philosophy of what they want their relationship to be like and what they want their co-parenting together, their teamwork together, to look like.

And I ask them to do it less because we can fully predict what it's going to be like once we have kids – because of course, as you mentioned, and any of us who have kids understand that that's actually impossible to predict. So less with that in mind and more to really get them into a place where they feel comfortable talking about what their vision is, what they want, so that they can work together to create that vision or change the plan once the child is here, if that needs to happen. But with a view to really working together and focused on what they want.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Rhona Berens: So that's the first thing I have them do. I would say also a quick answer, one of my favorite books on preparing for parenthood and preparing a relationship for parenthood is by this psychologist named John Gottman and his wife Julie. And it's called *And Baby Makes Three*.

And it's a really, I think, thoughtful and easy-to-read book, with lots of great exercises for couples to really get to know who they are as a

relationship now, what are the ingredients for their relationship to continue thriving, what are the ways in which they can fan the flames of what Gottman calls "positivity" in their relationship, which is so important to our relationships continuing to thrive.

What are the components of our relationship together that enhances friendship? And how do we, again, really reinforce those friendship aspects of our relationship? Because it's those aspects of our relationship that are going to really be put to the test after we have a baby. And if we can figure out the best ways to really reinforce and improve and enhance those aspects of a relationship, then we can really focus on that if we start to face challenges.

Lee Rosen: Right. Great advice. It just makes a lot of sense and I hope that folks are thinking about these issues. Sometimes you worry when somebody's listening to this program; they're already worried about things. But gosh, if they're worried about their relationship already and now they're going to have kids, we're going to make it really tough. So I think that's –

Rhona Berens: You're so right.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Excellent, excellent advice. You know, this might be sort of an obvious question but I think we ought to kind of end by sort of bringing it full circle. Why does it matter? Why is it so important to work on the relationship and to not sort of have this new addition to the family disrupt and damage the relationship? Where are we going with all – what's the objective?

Rhona Berens: Well, I think it also would depend on who we are as individuals and who we are as a couple. But I think for me and for many of the couples that I work with, I think there are three primary areas that really help inspire couples to really focus on ensuring that their relationships thrive after they have kids.

One is that they want to model what a good relationship looks like for their kids, so that when their kids get older, we as parents are hopeful that our children have healthy relationships, have fulfilling relationships. And really, again, because we're not taught how to do great relationships other than by example, I think most of us as parents want to really set a good example for our kids.

Another reason is our own sense of personal satisfaction in life. If we believe that part of our personal satisfaction and part of what's important to us individually is having a good, fulfilling relationship, then devoting the time, even when we're incredibly busy, even if we're really tired, to giving some attention to nurturing our relationship with

our spouse, that actually ends up paying off in many, many ways for many, many years.

And finally, and perhaps most importantly, research – and I'd say common sense too – really tells us that developmentally babies do better when their parents' relationships are strong and satisfying. So literally, if we as parents have a fulfilling relationship with each other, it really literally contributes to the health and happiness of our kids. So if we're thriving with our spouses, our kids are likelier to thrive under our care. And to me, that's an especially compelling reason for us to really devote time and energy to sustaining our joy and satisfaction and fulfillment in our marriage.

Lee Rosen: If those three points don't inspire you to work on your relationship before you have kids and early in that process, I don't know what would. Great points. I appreciate you bringing them up.

Rhona, thank you so much for being with us here today. I really appreciate you taking the time to talk with us.

Rhona Berens: Thank you. It's been such a pleasure, Lee.

Lee Rosen: You should check out ParentAlliance.com. I'll put a link to it in the show notes. Rhona has all sorts of great resources to help out new and expecting parents. Good stuff there. So ParentAlliance.com.

Thank you so much for being with us today and spending some time with us. If you have any feedback about this episode or any of the Stay Happily Married episodes, we love to hear from you.

Couple of ways that you can connect with us. One is via e-mail. We can get your e-mails at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. Also, we have a listener comment line where you can leave a voice mail at (919) 256-3083. Really appreciate the feedback and would love to hear from you.

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

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