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No Wimpy Parenting

This is Stay Happily Married #150, "No Wimpy Parenting."

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 and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Sometimes it can seem like instead of you and your partner running the house, the kids are the ones calling the shots. Are you giving in too often and too easily?

Well, today Dr. Kristen Wynns joins us on the show. She's back again to discuss the importance of holding onto parental control and the importance for the health of the family. That's the subject of her new website, NoWimpyParenting.com. I love the name.

She'll also share tips with us on how you can fix the distribution of power within your family – who's holding the cards.

Kristen is a psychologist with her own practice, Wynns Family Psychology, Cary, North Carolina. Now, she's been married for 11 years, she's got two daughters, and she is everywhere in the media. You see her on Carolina Parent, My Carolina Today, magazines, newspapers; you can't look anywhere without bumping into Kristen.

Kristen, welcome back to the program. Glad you could join us.

Kristen Wynns: Thank you.

Lee Rosen: I am totally interested in this NoWimpyParenting.com. That's a brand-new website, right?

Kristen Wynns: That's right.

Lee Rosen: Okay. And tell me, what's the point? What's the focus of NoWimpyParenting.com? I think I get the idea, but you tell me.

Kristen Wynns: Sure. It really comes from probably the topic that I'm most passionate about. It's an issue that I see in my practice all the time with parents who are struggling to maintain control in their homes and they're having a lack of respect from their kids.

And I don't think it would be an overstatement to say it's a bit of an epidemic in our country in general, where parents have slowly, piece by piece, given away their authority and power to their kids. So I'm very fired up about this topic.

And I had the idea to start a website that could be a resource for parents to have articles and podcasts and videocasts and other resources for parents to really give them a starting place. If they realize, hey, this is an issue with me but I don't know where to start, they can go to the website and get some help.

Lee Rosen: Well, I've got a 13- and a 17-year-old, and if it's not too late, I want my power back.

Kristen Wynns: It's not too late.

Lee Rosen: Let me ask you, when you talk about this and you talk about parents giving their power away, what do you mean exactly? What is that about?

Kristen Wynns: It's really subtle, sometimes small things that parents do on a daily basis that are giving their power to their kids. It's allowing children or teenagers to make decisions about things that they really shouldn't be making decisions about. It's allowing kids to control things and refuse to do things they're asked; or what I would call partial compliance, halfway do things parents ask but not really do it the way parents intended.

So it's really parents engaging in too much negotiation, arguments with their kids, instead of just saying, this is it; this is what needs to be done; now do it.

Lee Rosen: Right. Oh, I like you. Now, we talk about marriages all day long here at Stay Happily Married. And I'm guessing that wimpy parenting probably does a fair amount of damage to happiness in marriages.

Kristen Wynns: It really does. I see that a lot because parents who have these struggles with their kids and they recognize that their home is not running the way they want but they feel frustrated and overwhelmed with where to start, often times that frustration gets turned on the spouse and there's a lot of blaming. "Well, if you would just do this, the kids would be better." Or, "We never follow through."

And a lot of times parents take that frustration because they're worn down and exhausted and overwhelmed and they turn it against each other. So it can definitely take a toll on the marriage, as well as the overall climate of the family.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. I mean, I think most parents realize – they're living it. They know that the kids are just a huge impact on the happiness of the marriage. I just don't think there's any way around that. You've got people living in the house; they're going to impact how things are going.

And I – I'm just – boy, teenage children, whoa. I know yours are a little – yours are younger, but –

Kristen Wynns: That's right.

Lee Rosen: You better this thing – you better get your power back right now while you can.

Kristen Wynns: That's right. And that's a good point, because what happens is I see a lot of times parents struggle with little, cute, cuddly 2- and 3-year-olds. And when they're that cute and little and they're refusing to go pick up their toys or they're refusing to put on their shoes or eat their vegetables, they're so cute and you think, oh, well, they'll get better as they get older. And you see that cycle start when they're young.

And then when they're teenagers, it's a lot harder to change things. It's not impossible, but definitely you want to start these good practices as early as possible.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Cute and cuddly is one thing, 6-foot-2 athlete, that's a whole other –

Kristen Wynns: That's right.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. It's like, I'm going to the gym to build some more muscles, Dad. I'll be home and then you'll do what I tell you to. Yeah.

Kristen Wynns: That's right.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So seriously, how do you know? How can you tell if you're giving too much of your power as a parent away? What's kind of the test?

Kristen Wynns: There's some good warning signs to look for. Some of them are if you ask your child or teenager to do something and you frequently hear, no, because I've got to do this; or not right now because first I have to do this; or I can't because – if you hear a lot of that kind of response from kids, that they're really telling you no, they're not going to do it, that's one warning sign.

Another one is if you do find yourself constantly in that cycle of threatening, threatening, threatening, warning over and over again but it never goes anywhere, or maybe it always leads to you as the parent losing your temper and storming out of the room and saying, you kids just don't respect me. If you find yourself in that cycle, of doing a lot of threatening and warning but not really having a response from your kids, that's a warning sign.

Another one that I referenced before is kids making decisions about things. So once upon a time someone told us as parents that it's a good thing to let your kids make decisions and have a sense of control. And while that's true, parents have sort of taken that to an extreme and they say, well, yeah, our kids need to make decisions so if they don't want to go to church today, I can't make them. Or if they don't want to go to Boy Scouts, I can't make them. And the fact is, you can make your kids. You can pick up a 10-year-old and put him in the car if you have to. It's not pretty, but you can do it.

So sometimes there's this false notion that kids should be able to make decisions about everything. And the fact is, as parents it's okay to have some things that are non-negotiable, to say, we go to church every week; that's the deal. Or you go to baseball practice unless you're sick. It's fine for parents to make decisions.

But that's another warning sign if you're constantly having your kid say, no, I'm not going to go, or I don't want to go today. So those are some of the warning signs to look out for.

Lee Rosen: Right. I get the feeling that we sort of got to this place because we were all sort of collectively listening to advice. Is that kind of how we –

Kristen Wynns: Yes.

Lee Rosen: That's where this comes from, you think?

Kristen Wynns: Yes. It's definitely our generation, meaning even yours –

Lee Rosen: I'm old.

Kristen Wynns: I'm kidding. You don't have that many years on me. But parents of teenagers, kind of young adults even – college age – down to the current generation of parents raising toddlers, all of us – I think we're told it's good for kids' self-esteem to make decisions. You need to let kids have a sense of control.

So it's sort of hard to completely blame ourselves because if we were listening to all the advice out there, it's easy to get the wrong idea that this needs to be taken to an extreme. But we need to have those limits and boundaries on those issues, which that part I don't think a lot of us understood, that you have to have that counterbalance to the letting them make decisions and have control.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. It sounds like it's just sort of good advice but taken to the extreme.

Kristen Wynns: Yes.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Because it doesn't strike me – in just listening to you, it does seem like you do want kids to have some ability – learn to make decisions. But what you're suggesting is that we've basically applied that to every decision and not just to like the things that were in the sandbox where they could experiment. We've basically said, hey, you make the call on anything and we'll go with it.

Kristen Wynns: That's right.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. And I can see that. I mean, when I look back on the years that we've been doing it, I can definitely see where it's very tricky. And once you open that – once you start giving up that power, it then is a vicious – it does sort of cycle out of control. Because the logic applies to every decision, but you have to sort of arbitrarily decide, hey, this is for the parents; this is for the kids. This is your experiment, but this is when we've got to make real decisions that have got to be acted on.

Kristen Wynns: Exactly. And it's not about parents getting on some big ego trip, that we have to run the show because it makes us feel good. The fact is, this is good parenting. It's good for our kids to have that sense of boundaries and limits and that there is a sense of structure and that some things parents are charge of. All that is very comforting and

actually makes our kids and teenagers feel secure, even if they would never admit it.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Kristen Wynns: It's good for them. So it's not just about parents getting power because we need to run the world. It's good for our kids.

Lee Rosen: So if you were starting from scratch, which no one who's listening to this is, but I'm just curious – we'll talk about how to fix things that are already in kind of a chaotic state. But if you're starting from scratch, would your – what would you advice be with 2, 3, 4-year-old kids? How would you allocate the power? I do like the way you look at that. How would you deal with that?

Kristen Wynns: That's a good question. I would say when they are little that it's quite appropriate to give them choices with small things that really don't matter. That's good for them. Which shoes do you want to wear today, your rain boots or your Crocs? That kind of thing is great for them. Or do you want oranges or apples for lunch? So certainly to give them that sense of making choices and decisions with small things.

But when they're little, to start to show them that there's some things that parents control, that, okay, it's time to go to preschool now. So we always do this, getting ready for preschool. Or bedtime is always this time. And even if you kick and scream, you're not going to get to stay up later. That they really see that there is consistency with the rules and with how you enforce the rules. That if they do X, they're always going to get in time out. Or if they hit their sister, they're always going to have the toys taken away.

So really just having those good practices of being consistent and following through. Those are going to carry you all the way through adolescence if you start them at that young age.

Lee Rosen: Right. I'm just sitting here fast-forwarding. Your advice on this is going to catch fire and the website is going to explode. You're already –

Kristen Wynns: Yes.

Lee Rosen: Well, and you're already a media celebrity. And so I can just visualize you now, a year from now you're on *60 Minutes*, the camera crew is following you and your kids, you're at dinner at the Golden Corral and, boy, if they don't sit at that table and do what

they are told, it is not going to look good when Morley Safer is interviewing you. I can just – oh, boy.

Kristen Wynns: I love it. I love the way you think. And you know what? I actually have these same struggles. And I'm not perfect. But I'll give you a quick personal example of there are some things I call power-suckers, which are the small things kids and teenagers do on a daily basis that basically suck our power from us. And they're very kind of small, subtle things that you have to really be on the lookout for.

And we were recently in a fast food restaurant and I was telling my 7-year-old that for her side with the kid's meal she couldn't get fries today but that she could choose between coleslaw and carrots.

And she said, okay, well, I'll get that, but then I get the cookie too. And that's one of those negotiation things that kids are real sly and clever, one of my examples of a power-sucker.

So I said, no, no, no. No one's talking about cookies. I'm saying you get to choose between carrot sticks and coleslaw.

And you know, it's a very small example, but you have to be on the lookout for those clever little things they do, that if you're not paying attention you'll say, okay, fine; you get the cookie and what do you want? And there she's gotten a little bit of power.

So that would be quite hilarious for a camera crew to follow me and see –

Lee Rosen: Right. And it –

Kristen Wynns: – examples of how I'm in the same struggle as everybody else.

Lee Rosen: First it's a cookie and the next thing you know it's a sports car when they turn 16.

Kristen Wynns: That's right. That's right.

Lee Rosen: And how do you go about redistributing the power in your family? What do you do about it if it's already out of whack?

Kristen Wynns: A few things are the following through. A lot of times, even with teenagers, you probably have to remove privileges from your kids at some point. And something I see a lot is parents are good at giving the consequence – to say, okay, you lose your cell phone for a week – but what I see a lot is that after two days, when the kid is miserable and harassing the parent and chasing them through the

house saying, I've got to have my phone, then the parents say, fine, you get it back but straighten up.

So it's really important to follow through with consequences. And if you say, you've lost the phone for a week, keep it for a week. Otherwise they're kind of learning that your consequences or your authority are somewhat tenuous and not necessarily something they can count on.

So that's a big one if you just have that rule of thumb: Always give a consequence that you can see through.

Another one is the consistency, that if one week they're allowed to skip baseball practice and the next week you say, you have to go, they're not really going to respect you when you say you have to go. So just be consistent.

And you don't have to buckle down on everything, like I said before. If you want them to have a choice on which vegetable they eat or if they do homework first or piano, that's fine. But if there are things that are non-negotiable, just be consistent with that and every single time have the expectation that you're going to have the consistent expectation for what your child is going to do or not do.

So those are a few simple ones that any parent can start today, even if you've got teenagers that are out of control. You can start those things today, just saying, I'm going to start with those two things.

Lee Rosen: Right. Right. Right. That's great advice. It sounds like your life is working out when the choices are homework or piano. In our house it's can I watch TV or get into trouble before my homework or my piano?

Kristen Wynns: It definitely gets more complicated the older they get. I'll give you that.

Lee Rosen: Right. So okay. Now, this is where I think it really gets tricky. What if you and your spouse aren't – you know, you're not really on the same page when it comes to how you want to deal with all of this and deal with the power structure in your house? What if you have different ideas about that?

Kristen Wynns: And that's tricky, because parents can easily sabotage the other one's efforts to get back the power. Sometimes if one parent is trying to be more consistent and better about following through, but the other parent comes home and says, fine, you can have your phone until Mom gets home from work, then that's obviously going

to make your road a lot more difficult to having this kind of ideal of parents having the proper respect and authority.

So you definitely need to make sure you're not undermining each other's efforts, that you have open discussions about your goals for the kids and say, look, are we agreed that we're going to do better about following through and that we're not going to go behind each other and change consequences?

So it can be very difficult if parents are not on the same page. But just starting with the discussion and establishing a few simple ground rules, like, okay, we're going to make sure we follow through with consequences. We're both going to only say something twice and then give a consequence or walk away. We're not going to get sucked into long arguments with our kids.

So even saying, let's just start with these two simple ground rules that can help parents really have that united front that kids need to see.

Lee Rosen: Right. Makes a tremendous amount of sense. So it would be easy, I suspect, even if you have these discussions and work out some agreements between Mom and Dad, to – like, you're talking about follow through with the kids. It would be easy to slip on this and regress right back to where you were. How do you avoid kind of – just kind of this is the theme of the week; okay, we're going to try this. And then next week we're back to right where we started.

Kristen Wynns: Yes. And that's where spouses can be really good accountability partners for each other, to not just say it once, we need to buckle down and get the power back, and then everybody goes off and does their thing. But to say, at the end of each day let's regroup and take five minutes and see how we did today with this new plan.

How did we do with so-and-so being grounded from the computer? Okay, great. We followed through with that. How did we do when the son argued with us about baseball?

So really just to check in with each other and sort of hold each other accountable. Not in a blaming way, but just say, hey, I noticed earlier that this happened, that you got into a five-minute discussion with Susie about brushing her teeth. And remember, we're supposed to be trying to nip that in the bud. So that can be very helpful.

If your spouse can't do that or they're not quite ready for that, you can obviously get somebody else, your own parent or friend to say,

hey, I'm trying this new thing. I'm all fired up about no wimpy parenting; can I check in with you every day and just tell you how I'm doing?

Even if you don't have anyone to talk it over, just having a parenting log or journal where at the end of each day you take five minutes to document significant exchanges with your kids, the things that went well and the things that you need to work on. Just to make it a more conscious thing as parents and not just that you're kind of going through your day blindly, having the same issues pop up again and again but you're not making that conscious effort to think about them or think about how you can do things differently tomorrow.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. And I think the more – sort of pulling it all back to the idea of staying happily married, the more you're working together in dealing with the kids as a team, I think the stronger the marriage, that that really – it gives you – especially with teenagers. My wife and I are united as a team against these alien invaders that live in our house.

Kristen Wynns: Yes. And that's so important. It really helps strengthen the marriage to have that united front and to know that you've got each other's back. And that the kids know you may as well not go ask Dad. Because sometimes kids will try to do the divide and conquer. But if they know I'm not going to ask Dad because he's going to say, well, what did your mom say?

That's great for kids to see that role model of how marriages – and of course it's great for the marriage to have that respect for each other, that you're going to back each other up no matter what.

Lee Rosen: Right. Great advice. I am excited about the website, NoWimpyParenting.com.

Kristen Wynns, thank you so much for being with us today. I appreciate it.

Kristen Wynns: Thank you. I enjoyed it.

Lee Rosen: Go and check out NoWimpyParenting.com. You can always check out Kristen's website at WynnsFamilyPsychology.com. I'll put a link in the show notes at Stay Happily Married to the sites – both sites – so that you can find out more. And there's lots of information there about the counseling services offered by Wynns Family Psychology.

But more than that, it's really a resource site. Both of these sites are. There's lots of information, lots of articles, links to other resources. I mean, it's the place to go to get information about these issues.

Kristen's office can be reached at (919) 805-0182. That's in Cary, North Carolina.

Thank you so much for being with us today. I'm always glad that you can join us. If you have feedback, I am thrilled to hear it. You can reach me by email at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. You can also call the listener comment line at (919) 256-3083 and leave a voicemail. Really appreciate all the feedback we get from you.

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

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