

Lee: This is Episode number 160 of Stay Happily Married: Balancing Children and Your Marriage.

Announcer: 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: I'm Lee Rosen, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I've had children for, well, 17 years, because I've got a 17-year-old. And I remember the days pre-kid, only vaguely do I remember them, when my wife and I could go out for dinner and do adult things by ourselves. But all of that sort of went by the wayside 17 years ago when our first child was born.

And boy, it really went by the wayside when our second one was born 14 years ago. We just weren't able to find time for ourselves. We were busy doing kid stuff, and I think that's something that plagues lots of us. It's not at all uncommon to lose time for the marriage, and when that happens, the romance changes, the whole marriage really feels very different, but I am told that it doesn't have to be that way.

I have with us on the show today, Dr. Julia Jacobs. She is an expert on this topic. She has a doctorate in clinical psychology. She practices with Lepage Associates in Durham, North Carolina, and she's worked with couples, with individuals, with groups. She has experience to talk about how to deal with this issue of balancing your children and your marriage so that you can stay happy and keep having a great marriage. Julia is no stranger to this program. She's been with us before. Julia, welcome back to the show.

Julia: Thank you, thanks so much for having me.

Lee: I felt better when I saw these studies that say that there's a negative correlation between marital happiness and having children, because I certainly feel like kids do make it hard to be happy in your marriage. What's that all about? Why is that?

Julia: Yeah, that's funny that you said it made you feel better, but I can actually hopefully shed a little bit of light. I guess there's a piece of empathy there that you're definitely not alone and that this is a typical finding for a lot of parents. I think there are a couple things going on. Specifically, I think with the negative correlation between the marital happiness and having kids, it depends on a couple things.

One, it depends on how old the child is, and we can talk about this in a little bit. It depends on, when your child's a newborn and then an adolescent. Those are definitely times of higher stress versus other times during your child's life.

However, though also what really comes up in those studies is that a lot of times these variables get grouped together and then we go on to say that hey, this is kind of an all bad thing or an all good thing, when there's lot of specifics that can be teased apart to help you figure out what really is putting the burden on you or putting the stress when you have kids.

A lot of those things come down to financial resources, division of labor, marital satisfaction pre-kids, and readiness and desire for children, and finally the motivation to improve the relationship when things aren't as satisfactory.

Lee: Right, right, I hear you. So, when you're looking at. . . you mention a number of things that probably cause stress in the relationship, that sort of arise out of having kids. I hate to be one of those "blame the kids" people, and I guess we're not, but what are the main things that you see that come from having kids that really do put stress on the relationship? What are the key ones that you're hearing about in your practice?

Julia: Yeah, I think it really comes down to financial resources and division of labor, and that definitely doesn't mean to say that if you're struggling with finances that you're never going to be happy with the kids, or that your kids are going to be causing you misery for the rest of your life. But I think it more specifically means to be planning ahead before you have the kids, but then also to be planning along the way. And to supplement that is the piece about the division of labor.

Unfortunately, as a woman, we still see a lot of studies that show when women are working full time or just as much as their partner, they actually are taking on more of the household and child-raising responsibilities, even though they might be working just as much.

And so it seems that when couples are able to have those conversations about, again, splitting the division of labor equally, or at least picking and choosing hey, I'm going to do this with the kids, can you do that, or if I do this can you do that, there seems to be a lot more satisfaction and both people feel kind of heard and empathized with and understood. And that really seems to go such a long way for couples.

Lee: You act like the woman doing most of the labor is a bad thing. I'm just kidding, Julia.

Julia: I guess it depends who you're talking to.

Lee: Right, exactly. How do you feel like the average couple is coping with the stress of all this? What is that like for them?

Julia: Yeah, I think unfortunately what's really easy to do is to just kind of dig in, put your head down, kind of focus on taking care of the kids, meeting their needs, kind of working hard. Kind of getting into this routine almost with your partner where you put love and romance and time for yourselves, like dates, on the back burner.

And it makes sense, kind of, from an evolutionary standpoint. We know that kids take a lot of work, and we want to raise them so they can become productive members of society and all that stuff, and so with that in mind it's really easy to ignore what seems like a luxury or my own needs. And I think that's the piece that really eventually kind of builds up and people get this sense of overwhelmedness, or kind of burnout for a while.

Lee: Right, yeah, I can certainly relate to that. Are there times in the process or in the cycle of having children where you see that there's more trouble in the marriage because of the stage that the kids are in at that point?

Julia: Yeah, that's an interesting point. I don't know if there are actual studies where there's more trouble in the marriage, but you hit it head-on in terms of stages in the kid's life, what I was referring to earlier. Parental stress levels kind of go through the roof we know at two times during the kid's life.

One is when the kid is very young, so an infant or a toddler, and then adolescence, that seems to be another kind of, at least chronically for a couple years your kids are just going to be giving you a hard time. And that really is what seems to get parents is during those two periods, again, it's this ongoing high level of stress.

Lee: What's the definition of adolescence? What's the age that we're specifically talking about there?

Julia: You know, I think theoretically it's probably 13 to 18, but oftentimes what you see is it starts a little bit sooner, so maybe 11 or 12. And then kids who are, by their senior year of high school, going off to college, they seem to kind of regroup. They're ready to go off, they're ready to kind of develop into their own adult, this sense of autonomy, so kids start pulling it together, I think, giving their parents a little bit less run for their money, maybe by the time they get to late 16, 17.

Lee: Sweet. My first one is 17, so maybe we're on the edge.

Julia: You're on the home stretch.

Lee: Light at the end of the tunnel.

Julia: Yeah.

Lee: What do you suggest for parents that really want help with dealing with all of this? What can they do that's going to help them deal with the issues that are coming out of having these kids?

Julia: There's actually a ton of things that you can do, and not to make any of them sound too simplistic or too cliché, but I think that at the end of the day it's really remembering to make your partner a priority. And so, even if that means just taking five minutes at the end of each night to kind of check in, see where each other's at, that we find really goes a long way.

And that could be that the two of you are so tired that in five minutes you are just going to give each other a quick back rub, or a smile, or just acknowledge where each other's at, so that's one really easy step. But also, I think the reason we say it can be too simplistic is that it gets overlooked so much because again, people are just kind of going through the routine. So I think that's one piece.

I think the other piece is, a lot of times, especially like I was saying with women, they question their roles. They think that they're kind of supposed to be super-mom, super-wife, and super-employee or super-employer, and so it's this idea of being able to ask for help. And then if you're not a woman, or if you're on the receiving end of that, is to be willing or at least asking yourself, what am I willing to help with?

So you have this more, again, egalitarian role for the division of labor. So you guys are just having conversations about that, so people are feeling like it's not all one-sided, I think that's another great option. And then, this is kind of a small tidbit, we talk about going to bed together, going to bed at the same time. I know my partner, he likes to go to bed probably at 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning, where I'm fast asleep by 10:00 or 11:00 p.m., and so we've really had to shift our pattern so that we're both getting into bed at the same time.

That really, like I said, seems to go a long way, even if both of us are reading, or he might be on his phone while I'm reading a book or I'm going to bed. There's something kind of bonding about that experience of turning out the lights together, kind of ending your day together.

Lee: Right.

Julia: And then finally, I think the thing to hit is just practicing parenting from a team approach, and that kind of feeds off the division of labor piece. It's just presenting a unified front to your kids, because probably as you know, so often kids can do a great job at splitting up and saying well, mom said this or dad said this, so anything you guys can do to kind of present as a team.

Lee: Right. Good advice, those make a lot of sense. That sounds like good stuff. Let me ask you this. You got me thinking about this. Do you find that men and

women come at this parenting thing differently? Does that have much to do with the difficulties that couples experience, because they're approaching it based on their own gender?

Julia: Yes and no. I definitely think that things are changing, but I think historically maybe again mom might have taken more of the caretaking role, more of the provider. Where dad, a lot of times when I see couples, dads are great but they're more of a playmate, or more of a pal, or they'll sometimes come in to the rescue, or they'll be more of the disciplinarian, so where mom might be dealing with the day-to-day stuff, dad needs to kind of set his foot down if something's really going on. It's kind of that he can take on that role.

So I think again, it's just parents acknowledging that, and if that works for people, that's great. If a mom wants to take on the primary care responsibilities, if mom feels like she can work full time and do all that stuff, that is great if somebody has enough energy. It's more just that you and your partner are on the same page about that.

Lee: Right, yeah. It doesn't matter what gender you are, this is too much to do alone.

Julia: Yeah, that is definitely true, I think, yeah.

Lee: What about the romantic element of the relationship? You know, it feels like that takes a hit in the kid-rearing years. I mean, I assume I'm on target with that, and what do you see happening?

Julia: Yeah, I think that goes back to that piece that people often put romance on the back burner because it's like, well, we know we love each other, we really need to focus on these things that are kind of a high priority each day. We know our relationship's solid, so we don't have time for that. And so again, it's incorporating those very, very small gestures. If you like large gestures, hey, that's great too, but at a very minimum, it could be sharing tea or coffee together after dinner.

Oftentimes what we say with little kids is they like routine, so incorporate into the routine that mommy and daddy, or mommy and mommy or daddy and daddy, like their own time together. So that might be that the kids get to have 15 minutes of TV time after dinner so the adults can talk, or do anything like that, if it's take a walk around the block and the kids are in a stroller or something like that.

So anything where you guys are able to kind of incorporate this together time, where you're not necessarily talking about all the responsibilities of the day or things that are coming up, where it's more of just enjoying the company of one another. Or, oftentimes we'll say, really try to talk about what you're passionate about, maybe what you really enjoyed studying in college or a hobby or something, and try and share that with your partner.

Lee: Right. That's terrific, very practical suggestions that I really do think make a big difference. I know with my wife, when we're paying attention to those things, it really does make a big difference. It's hard to always remember to stay on track with all of that, but when we do it, you can see the impact almost immediately.

We've covered a lot of good advice for folks. Is there anything else that you think we ought to know about how to balance children and make sure the marriage keeps rolling right along?

Julia: I think that we did cover it. The only thing I would mention that I kind of skipped over a little bit was with that team approach, a lot of times we'll find kids kind of trying to insert themselves into the parent relationship. We'll often call it triangulation. So that might be if a little kid often gangs up and takes dad's side, so dad and kid are kind of presenting as a unified front against mom. And that stuff can happen in any relationship at any time, you know, kids are really good at picking up mommy's side and daddy's side and then they can often, based on their own preferences, pick a side for that particular argument.

So we often try in therapy to help parents recognize when they might be doing triangulation, that process of incorporating the kid, and so letting parents again go back to presenting as a unified front, and where they can often say to the kid, you know, this is an adult topic, this is something we need to figure out. So the kid feels heard, but also isn't becoming involved in adult issues.

Lee: Right. Boy, those little kids are smart.

Julia: Yeah, too smart sometimes.

Lee: That's exactly right, they figure it out and they know which buttons to push. It's amazing. Julia, I really appreciate you taking the time to talk with us today. Thank you so much.

Julia: No problem, thanks for having me.

Lee: You can check out Julia's website at Lepage Associates, that's lepageassociates.com, and they have lots of great information there. It's really worth your while to go and visit lepageassociates.com. You can also reach Julia's office at 919-572-0000.

Thank you so much for listening in today, we're really glad you could be with us. If you have feedback, we'd love to hear it. If you have suggestions, input of any sort, it really helps us to do a better job for you in producing our shows as we move along. A couple of ways you can reach us, you can reach us through our comment line at 919-256-3083. We can also receive emails at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, stay happily married.

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