

Lee: This is Episode Number 165 of Stay Happily Married: Teacup Parenting.

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Lee: I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Are you doing things that are sabotaging your child and your spouse? Is that a possibility? Well, Dr. Mike Daniels is joining us today to discuss the new phenomenon called 'teacup parenting'.

We do our best to make sure we raise our children to be responsible young adults. We nurture and care for them the best that we know how. However, there is a fine line between parenting and obsession. It seems that there are parents today who have too active a role in their child's life and it's actually stunting the social, intellectual, and emotional growth of their child, not to mention sabotaging the romantic relationship between the husband and wife.

Dr. Mike Daniels completed his undergraduate education at the University of North Carolina. He then went on to spend 12 years working as a high school English teacher and a coach. He left all of that to go back to school and get his doctoral degree from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. He's now working at Wynns Family Psychology in Cary, North Carolina.

Mike and his wife are awfully busy. They have a 19-month-old son and three dogs on top of that. Mike, welcome to the show. I'm really glad you could be here with us.

Mike: I'm glad to join you, too.

Lee: OK. Teacup parenting. Let's get right to it. What in the world does that mean? What is teacup parenting?

Mike: It's really characterized by a belief system that both the world is this really harsh, unyielding, unforgiving place and that our children are really too delicate, too fragile to be able to handle what the world has in store for them. The result is a real pattern of over-protection, coddling, and trying to keep the child from experiencing any loss or disappointment that may lead to these kinds of expected long-term negative effects.

Lee: I've heard people talking about this. I have two teenagers and I feel like this over-protective thing is a topic now. What do you see as the characteristics of teacup parenting?

Mike: To use the teacup metaphor, think about some of the characteristics of the teacup. That really helps explain what a parent thinks about their child.

First, teacups break easily. There's this belief that children are fragile. They can't handle disappointments, and that there's going to be long-term or lasting negative impact for a child who loses at a game or makes a bad grade, or has a conflict with

one of their peers.

There's a belief that once it gets chipped, it feels ruined. So if you have this nice teacup collection and one of the cups gets chipped you feel like that one's got to be thrown out, it can't be useful anymore. There is a belief that a child's not resilient, that a child can't recover from disappointments.

Thirdly, there's a belief that you don't want the cup to leave the collection. If you have this collection, you want to keep it whole. So when a child reaches college age there's a lot of difficulty in letting go, of letting that child having the independence of moving on and moving forward with their lives.

Finally, there's this idea that you must be really delicate with it. You've got to take care of it. You've got to protect it. You've got to keep it cozy and snug and not allow any damage to happen to it.

Lee: That is a fantastic analogy. Now here's the thing. I see a lot of parents that are doing teacup parenting. I think you've nailed it. I see that over and over again. I don't think the teacup parents think they're teacup parents. What are some clear signs that would tell me or tell another parent that they really are a teacup parent, it's not just everybody else?

Mike: I think the way to help yourself identify if this pattern is happening is to look at your thoughts, your emotions, and your behaviors. In terms of thoughts, do you really think the world is harsh, that there are things out there that are going to break or damage your child and that children can't recover? Do you have a real belief system that if you're not protecting this child, something really bad is going to happen and it's going to affect them for the rest of their lives?

In terms of emotions, do you feel a lot of anxiety when you send your child off to school, off to camp or off to college? Is there a lot of anxiety about what's going to happen?

And then finally, behaviors. Do you notice yourself swooping in constantly? Do you notice yourself always talking to teachers or coaches or the parents of your children's peers about disappointments or things that didn't go right, and trying to correct those things yourself, as opposed to allowing your child to work through those disappointments themselves.

Lee: Right. Wow. That is very interesting. I do think that's tricky, though, because if you see the world as a bad place and you worry that bad things are going to happen to your child, you probably think that's reasonable. You would think that this is the way the world is. It isn't that I really think there are bad things. I just see it as reality.

Mike: I agree. I think that it really does take some effort on the part of the parent to deal with the anxiety. The anxiety is perfectly normal and natural. For our little guy at home, when he's toddling around the house I have this desire to put pillows down everywhere to make sure he doesn't fall and scrape himself up. That ability to recognize that bad things are going to happen and manage the anxiety, and be able to take a step back and say okay, there will be bumps in the road, but those are the

life lessons where a child learns to be resilient and learns to be more independent.

Lee: So I assume that a teacup parent is going to think and would argue that this is good. Everything in my kid's life works out perfectly because I manage it all so carefully. So what's the fallout for the kid? What's bad about having a teacup parent? It seems to me that your life would turn out pretty perfectly?

Mike: I think there's a real interesting phenomenon going on now that may speak to a little bit of this rise of teacup parenting and that is a delayed development of adulthood and independence. What we have seen is a trend of extended adolescence, with the generation of teens and early 20s coming back home when they're finishing college. There's a delay of starting an independent life. That delay of independence is one of the big, long-term effects where the child is so used to being protected, so used to not hitting any bumps in the road, that the first bump they hit in the road when they get out in the independent world drives them back into the herd.

The other, I think I mentioned already is the idea of resilience. I think people are naturally pretty resilient. The world does throw things at us, challenges and difficulties. What we need to develop is an understanding of how to get knocked down and get back up again. I think if parents are too protective, the child never understands how to get back up again, and they're constantly waiting for somebody to come in and pick them up.

Lee: That makes a lot of sense. I noticed a week or so ago there was an article in the New York Times about learning from your mistakes. It was the most emailed article for almost a week. I think parents are worrying about these issues that you're talking about.

When you have a kid that has been raised as this perfect little teacup and then they have to go away for the first time, whether it's a sleep-away camp or off to college, one of these things where the kid really has to leave mom and dad behind, how does that go for those kids?

Mike: I've talked about a lot of anxiety in the parents. I think that's where we start to see that transfer. I think for the child there's a lot of anxiety about facing things on their own. Whether it's calling every day, or calling and wanting to come back home, that really severe excessive homesickness beyond what you'd expect normally, you can see it really drawing at the child, a complete inability to handle a bump in the road. If it's college, what happens with that first conflict with a roommate or the first time a professor returns a grade that isn't the highest grade in the class that you're so used to getting? It's almost like an immediate paralyzing effect and a desire to go right back to the people who have always made things right for them, which is the parents.

Lee: Right. That is fascinating. Now we spend most of our time here at Stay Happily Married talking about staying happily married. What is the impact of teacup parenting on the relationship between mom and dad, the husband and wife? How does that play out?

Mike: You can have two different scenarios. I'm going to focus on what would most

times be more normal, which is if one of the parents falling into this teacup pattern. I think particularly, as we talk about children getting older and getting ready to move away to college, you can have a real expectation from one spouse that. "We're reaching this different phase, my child's moving away. This is going to give us a chance to reconnect." Instead, it's often the opposite effect. The parent who is the teacup parent is so riddled with anxiety that they really over-engage with their child. It's calling everyday, it's making surprise visits. Just not able to let go.

You get a lot of disappointment and even resentment from the other spouse. They were all excited about this time in their life when they were going to get to reconnect and sort of rekindle a relationship that existed prior to having children, only to find that their spouse actually puts more energy and more effort into not letting go of the child, as opposed to re-shifting it.

I think also there's a little bit of losing sight of values. When I work with clients, a lot of times I talk about values and the importance of being the person you want to be. I think what can happen is there's so much energy put into parenting values that the idea of marital values or the values of intimate relationships get lost. The scenario is that everything falls apart. The parents drift farther and farther away from each other.

Lee:Right. If you're a parent and you recognize that you are doing the teacup parenting, you're really worried about this kid getting broken, what do you do? How do you shift gears? What do you do to prepare your child for what's coming in life? How do you get out of that place you're stuck in?

Mike:There's two ways to think about it. One is all throughout their life, prior to that late adolescence shift into adulthood, early on in life there's some things you can do, like embracing your own weaknesses. When your child hits a disappointment, instead of trying to make that right for them immediately, talk about your own disappointments. Talk about the places where you've had to overcome difficulties in your life or where you lost or where you weren't the best. Don't always try to make yourself into Superman or Superwoman. Allow yourself to show your children that disappointment is a part of life. "I experienced it, and here's how I picked myself up and moved on."

The second, and sort of related, is don't always let your child avoid losses or disappointments. If it's family game night, allow there to be a winner. Don't change the rules so that nobody loses. Don't always swoop in and try to get teachers to change grades or make exceptions to rules so that it all works out for your child.

And then finally, always throughout their lives, encourage independence. Encourage them to be the one to go talk to their teacher if there's a problem in their class. If you're out at McDonald's, send them up to get their own sauce for their chicken nuggets, as opposed to doing everything for them. Each step along the way you can identify ways that you can encourage your child to be more independent and to talk more responsibility.

Lee:I'm glad to hear all of that. Now I don't have to feel guilty about beating my kids at all those games of Monopoly over the years. I've been doing something good and I didn't even know it. That's terrific.

Let me ask you this. What do you do if you're one of these teacup parents and you're heading for the empty nest? The kid is about to go off for college and hopefully not to come back. What do you do to prepare yourself for your child growing up and gaining that independence? How do you shift gears and get yourself ready for that?

Mike:I think when you get to that point, one thing to realize is there is going to be anxiety about it. That's a natural consequence of changing these life phases and your child moving out and becoming more independent. One is recognize that that is going to happen and be able to embrace it. Be able to allow yourself to feel that anxiety and not do what humans typically do, which is look for the quick fix. In other words, "I'm starting to feel anxious already, I'm going to call my child every night." Or, "Let's pack up the car and go for a surprise weekend visit." You really have to monitor. Allow yourself to be anxious and allow that to work itself out.

Secondly, be thoughtful about what you want. Who do you want your child to become, who do you want to be as a parent, and who do you want to be as a spouse? There is a little bit of reshuffling that occurs when adolescent children move out on their own. I think that reshuffling can be a good thing. It's about identifying the values in your marriage that you want to rekindle and also identifying your values as a parent in terms of encouraging independence and encouraging your child moving into this new phase that's going to usher them into adulthood.

Third, and kind of along that same line of identifying values in your relationship, is scheduling activities. Be very mindful and effortful in terms of doing things that you and your spouse have not had the opportunity to do together for a long time. Maybe that's vacations, maybe it's more chances to go out and have date night or couple's night. There's a whole lot of freedom that comes along with a child moving off to college and becoming more independent. Take advantage of that in scheduling activities that you and your spouse will enjoy and will allow you to reconnect.

And then finally, acknowledging the fact that you're going to be anxious and that you don't want to just cut your child loose. It's about being balanced and developing a plan for that. Schedule times with your child when you might call, or schedule visits on parent's weekend or holidays when the children are going to come home. It's really not about letting the child go and saying, "I'm cutting you off and you're done here." It's really more about saying, "I'll be here. I'll always be here when you need something, if you have a really major disappointment. If anything traumatic happens, you know we're going to be here for you." But encourage that child to tackle small things on their own.

Lee:That sounds like great advice, a plan on getting yourself ready to move away from that situation. Now here's where it gets tricky. What if you're married to someone who's a teacup parent? You're not a teacup parent. You're just a regular parent, but you've got this spouse that really is all in the child's business in all the ways you've described. How can that person coax their spouse into giving the child some independence and getting focused on the marriage rather than just on the child?

Mike:I think one of the big things is to validate how they're feeling. You've heard me

talk multiple times throughout the segment today about anxiety. I think that's what drives a lot of this. If you simply try to push your spouse into changing their behavior without validating the fact that they're struggling, then there's likely to be a lot of backlash and resentment. I think first and foremost is to make sure they know that you understand this is difficult, that you know how they feel.

Second, be willing to express your own feelings. Rather than label your spouse in any particular way based on their behaviors, try to acknowledge how you feel as a result. "Well, I'm feeling a little left out. I'm feeling a little disappointed because I thought when our child moved off to college, this was going to be a chance for us to reconnect and that's not happening."

Third, encourage small steps. A parent who has been a teacup parent throughout a child's life is not going to be able to suddenly make big changes when the child goes off to college. So it's more about encouraging longer breaks. Instead of calling every night, let's make it every other night, then see if we can switch that to once a week. It's about encouraging them, "Hey let's go take a weekend away. We're not going to call this weekend. We're just going to spend some time together." Small steps are important in the big picture of changing behaviors.

And then finally, recognize that if your encouragement and your efforts are not working, it's okay to ask for help. Going to a neutral party, going to someone who can help you and your spouse sort of navigate all this anxiety and frustration, all these emotions that go along with these changes, can be a great way to get things back on track.

Lee:Terrific. I love the way you're characterizing this and explaining teacup parenting because I feel like I've seen it and I've never been able to articulate it. You've really put the words in place that help to really explain and identify what's going on. You've offered good, solid solutions and I think that's fantastic. Any final words of wisdom before we go on dealing with this, either from the child's standpoint or from the marriage standpoint?

Mike:I think that one of the main points to remember is that we're values-driven by nature, so recognize and learn to balance your values as a parent, as a spouse, and as working citizens. Find that balance in life don't abandon your values. If your value is to try to do what's best for your child, which it is for most of us, we're not talking about abandoning those. It's simply learning how to do that in a way that looks out for the child but also looks out for their long-term best interests, and also doesn't alienate your spouse or sacrifice your marriage in an attempt to do a lot of over-protecting of your child.

Lee:Terrific. Mike, thank you so much for being with us today. I really appreciate you taking the time out of your schedule to walk us through teacup parenting. Thank you.

Mike:Thank you. I appreciated joining you.

Lee:If you'd like to find out more about Dr. Mike Daniels and his practice, you can do that by visiting Wynns Family Psychology's website. Wynns is W-Y-N-N-S, familypsychology.com. I'll put a link to that in the show notes so that you can find it.

Lot's of good practical information at the site and information about all of the experts there that can help you.

Thank you so much for joining us today and I hope that you will join us again next week. In the meantime, if you have feedback or comments we'd love to hear from you. Comment line is 919-256-3083. You can also email us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, Stay Happily Married.

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