

Lee: This is number 176 of Stay Happily Married, Overcoming the Divide: Helping Couples Unite as Parents.

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Lee: I'm Lee Rosen, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Are your diverse parenting styles breaking apart your marriage? Being part of a couple and getting married can be a very difficult process. You have two people from different backgrounds and lifestyles coming together to start their life together.

Their differences in opinion and lifestyle can be a relationship hot spot for conflict. Things tend to get even more complicated when children are brought into the picture. Although we love our children, all parents have different ideas for how they want to raise and discipline the children. Whether our preferences came from personal experience or gained knowledge, each parent may have a different idea for what it means to bring up their children. Dr. Kristen Wynns believes that it is not about how you raise your children but that you do it together as a team.

Dr. Wynns is a child and adolescent psychologist who owns a specialty practice in Cary, North Carolina, called Wynns Family Psychology. She has a PhD and a Master's in clinical psychology from UNC Greensboro. Dr. Wynns recently debuted a new parenting website called NoWimpyParenting.com with services available to help parents struggling with behavior and discipline problems at home.

Dr. Wynns is frequently sought out as a local expert on child psychology and parenting issues for radio programs, magazines like Carolina Parent and Redbook as well as TV shows like Carolina Today and Daytime. Dr. Wynns says she is doubly qualified to give marriage and parenting advice because she's not only a child psychologist, but she has two young children of her own, and she's been married for 12 years.

Kristen, welcome to the show. I'm so glad you could join us today.

Kristen: Thank you.

Lee: It seems to me and, of course, what do I know, but I would like that, maybe, it's a good thing to have two parents with two different kinds of parenting styles or discipline styles. That way you'd have an approach for every problem that comes along. Am I wrong about that?

Kristen: I'm afraid so.

Lee: Oh well.

Kristen: I do see that there is a benefit to having a couple of different tricks in your bag, but unfortunately with parenting if we're talking about the fundamental discipline techniques or parenting styles, it tends to cause more problems than help when parents are coming at it from completely different angles.

Lee: Like what? What kind of problems are you talking about?

Kristen: A very common one is just parenting style. It seems that the longer you have your children and you're married, the more polarized your parenting styles become. For example, maybe initially one parent was a little bit more permissive relaxed one, and the other one

was a bit more of the disciplinarian.

What happens is over time those styles become more polarized, and the permissive one becomes even more permissive and lets way too much go. The strict one becomes even stricter, maybe becomes too harsh and strict, so unfortunately parents tend to feed off of each other and try to compensate for the other one, what they perceive as weaknesses. That causes problems as they end up on completely opposite extremes

Lee: I can see where this creates a problem for the kids, having these two different approaches coming from two different parents, but does it cause a problem between the parents?

Kristen: Definitely. It really leads to a lot of arguments and fights actually ranks in top common topics that parent fight over. Money, sex, kids is really the topics. I think it can cause a lot of ongoing arguments and conflict between the parents. It leads to a lot of anger and resentment because one parent [inaudible 04:45] the other parent isn't handling things right and they feel guilty [inaudible 04:49] about the kids.

So it can cause a lot of emotional issues, and it also leads to a lack of intimacy because ultimately the parents are feeling like they're two individual parents, trying to navigate through life with their kids instead of feeling unified, like co-parents.

Lee: Right. I hear you. Yeah. I can really see that conflict causing a lot of damage in the relationship because it is, it's such an important issue to both of you. What other fallout do you see for the kids?

Kristen: Kids, even though they would never admit it, kids really, really like predictability and consistency, and they like to know where the boundaries are. For kids, it just can cause them to feel confused and anxious, and really it can actually lead them to feel a lack of trust for their parents because if they're sending subtle or overt messages, if their parents don't believe in each other.

A subtle one would be if a parent says, "Did daddy really say no TV for the rest of the night? Wow!" Kind of implying that's crazy or if the dad says something more overt, "Well, mommy's wrong. She shouldn't have let you stay up late like this. It's not good. Go to bed". Those kind of messages over time really leads kids to feel, "Well, I don't know who to trust because both of you are undermining the other one" and it can lead to stress because they just want to know what the rules are, where the boundaries are, what the consequences are.

Lee: Right. That's very interesting. I'm just sitting here as you're talking thinking about scenarios like this. I guess, even when you have a fairly similar parenting style, some of these examples you've given are things that I can think of have happened at my house. And I don't think we're even that different, but sometimes we probably each stray off of the path in one direction or another. I guess that's, to some extent, a little bit inevitable even if you're in alignment on this stuff.

Kristen: Yes. And something else I know from being a parent myself, sometimes one parent comes into the situation, and they've missed the first 90% of what happened. They're coming into it, and they see their kid crying. You ask what happened, and the kid says, "I'm grounded. I can't watch TV or go to the party", and the other parent, who has no clue what's going on, comes in and says, "Gosh, she's grounded? Really? Was it that bad?"

Sometimes, it's not even having different styles, but parents are busy. You're coming in

sometimes without having all of the information, and you just go based on what you're seeing in front of you. You might jump to conclusions or make judgments without really knowing the full story.

Lee: Right. Right. I'm guessing a lot of parents, you can't help but know this is going on. It's not one of those subtle problems. You can tell when the kids are hearing different things from different parents because they're throwing it back at each of you in their own way.

Kristen: Yes.

Lee: What do you see couples doing to repair this situation on their own? Do they have approaches that they're trying?

Kristen: Yes. I'd say a common one is when parents are arguing and fighting, then they will try to come up with what I call a pseudo compromise, meaning that the more permissive parent will say, "Okay. Fine. I'll be better at putting him in time-out" or "I'll be better at disciplining".

The strict one might say, "Okay. I'll really try to work on not yelling as much and not getting as angry". They'll try to work forwards the other one's side, which can work in the short-term, but ultimately if they haven't resolved fundamental differences in the way they view parenting or haven't set up explicit, clear rules about their expectations for their children, then they tend to drift back to their old habits.

They tend to get frustrated again because they feel like, gosh, I'm keeping up with my end of the bargain. I put him in time-out three times today, but then you're still yelling, and then the fights pick up again. That tactic seems to have short-term results but doesn't really result in the longer term change of parents feeling more unified, like they're on the same page.

Lee: Right. I don't want to get off on a tangent here, but where does this all come from? Where do we get these styles, this whole approach to parenting?

Kristen: It's interesting. I think most parents know that a lot of their parenting, whether they like it or not, comes from what their parents did. It's interesting. I see it really from both perspectives. Some parents just do with their parents did because it seemed to work okay. And so, why change something that's not broken?

And the other thing I see is the exact opposite where parents vow that what their parents did was horrible, and they never ever want their kids to go through what they had to go through. Maybe, they had a yelling harsh, strict parent, and they've said to themselves, "Well, I'm never going to do that. I'm going to be my kid's best friend. I'm going to let them have freedom". It can definitely tie into your own childhood experiences for good or bad that tends to influence your own parenting quite a bit.

Lee: Right. That makes sense. You talked about the short-term solution that people are trying and how that doesn't really stick. What is the long-term solution? If you really want to get on the same page and you want to come at this from a united front so you don't create problems in your marriage, how do you do that?

Kristen: I'm a big fan of, first of all, establishing the three consistencies. There are three types of consistency that go a long way in unifying parents. The first is consistency of rules. If you and your spouse sit down and really just spell out very clear

rules about, okay, when this kid curses or says bad words, this is going to be the consequence. When this kid doesn't turn in his homework, we're always going to have him do x, y and z.

If you've spelled out some of the rules, it takes some of the guesswork out of it, and you don't have to just go in the moment, based on how you're feeling, but you and your spouse have agreed to these things. It makes it more like following a formula. That's the first consistency.

The second one is just consistency between parents. Again, parents need to make time to sit down and talk on a regular basis about their rules, how they want to discipline. Do we believe in spanking or not? What's a fair consequence, given this kid's age? Parents need to have that consistency between them so that a kid who acts up with one parent, knows that they're going to have time-out or grounding, for example, and it keeps things more unified between the parents. That's the second one.

The third is just consistent routines. Again, kids, even older kids, tend to like routines, to have things follow a predictable pattern. What I think is extremely helpful about routines is, again, it takes the conflict out of parenting. If you've set up a routine that bedtime on a school night is 8:30 and bedtime on the weekend is 10:00, then the parent who always wants to let the kids stay up late on the school night just says, "Hey, I know we've set the routine to 8:30, so time for bed",

The parent who is always the strict one, who really wants kids to have sleep, knows that that parent has to lighten up on the weekends because you've agreed the routine is 10:00 on weekend nights. That tends to really reduce the conflict and have parents on the same page because you've established these rules and routines and expectations in advance.

Lee: That makes sense. Now, I don't want to give you a hard time, but consistency, consistency, consistency, I can see that. It's the cover of your next book or something. In theory, it sounds terrific, and it makes a lot of sense, and it's easy to remember the word.

Kristen: Yes.

Lee: When it comes down to like, you're in that war zone at home, and you've got to make these ideas stick. You've got to get away from theory and into practice. How do you really do it?

Kristen: Right. Again, I think one idea is to establish ground rules verbally and even in writing between the parents. This is, again, a conversation that doesn't occur in front of the kids, but I think to establish ground rules, like we will never question each other's parenting in front of the kids. If you just set that, and that means no matter what, even if you walk in and it looks like your spouse has completely messed up, you just say "We will never question each other in front of the kids", that you'll pull that spouse aside and say "Hey, can we go into the other room for a minute and talk?"

I think that ground rules like that or ground rules about no sabotaging punishments I see where one parent will say, "Okay, no TV and video games for the rest of the night". Then, the other parent comes in and sees that the kid has been really sweet with his brother and says, "Hey, you've been so good. Why don't you go and have some video game time?" The other parent is frustrated because you've just come in and sabotaged the parenting.

Those type of ground rules are extremely important to say, "Hey, we're agreeing to this.

No bad talking, no sabotaging, no subtle messages about the other one's parenting". That's extremely helpful. The other one I like is to individually or as a couple resolve any kind of ambivalence you might have about parenting.

Spanking is a really common one that I see parents are ambivalent, and they might, on some days, think, gosh, it's the only thing that works. We have to use spanking, but then they feel guilty about it, and they have this nagging feeling that it's really not effective. Then again, they're giving that mixed message to the kid and fighting about it because it changes on a daily basis. That's the kind of thing seeking outside help can be helpful if you and your spouse really just can't come up with effective parenting techniques, or you don't know if spanking is helpful.

Go see a marriage therapist or child psychologist to say, "Hey, we want to get unified. We want to have some effective techniques. Help us. Then, you've got something established by a professional, and you know you can trust that expertise.

Lee: Right. It does make sense, I think, to have that neutral person providing you with information you can rely on. That's very helpful. That kind of leads me . . . I don't think there's a faster way to lose a friend than to make a comment about their parenting. What about your spouse though? If you have, let's call it feedback instead of criticism, but if you have feedback about your spouse's parenting, aren't you stepping into a land mine, an area filled with land mines?

Kristen: You can. That's why you really have to be able to deliver that feedback at the right time and place and say it appropriately. You're right. I think that's one of the most touchy subjects for anybody is to feel like their parenting is being questioned. It's really about how you deliver that message: can we talk about what happened earlier with Susie. It seemed like you were really upset.

Can we talk about your punishment that you grounded her for the next two years? That seems extreme, but I want to hear where you're coming from, you know what I mean? You have to approach it in a collaborative manner. Can we talk about this? My sense is that seemed extreme, but I know you had your own perspective. I think parents or spouses can take it in a lot better manner if it's presented that way versus: are you crazy grounding her for two years? You know you're not going to keep up with that.

Lee: Right.

Kristen: That kind of message, of course, would have a much different impact.

Lee: I keep getting the sense that this grounding for two years is, maybe not such a good idea. I should probably stop that.

Kristen: It's a really popular one when you're mad or no cell phones; you lose your cell phone. And then, the parents realize, oh, you need your cell phone to communicate with me, and you regret having the big extreme punishments. It's interesting from my standpoint. I see the conflict in this underlying parents happen in much smaller ways.

I had a client recently, a family who . . . a simple thing. They went out to breakfast, and the dad bought the kid a sweet breakfast item, and the mom came up and said, "Oh, no, no, no. She can't have that before school. It'll make her hyper. We have to get her something else". That's the kind of thing I see happening a lot.

Again, it may not be obvious to bystanders that that's undermining parenting, but if that

kind of thing happens on a daily basis, it is going to cause problems. It is going to lead to conflict and feeling like you're two parents, in your own ship instead of being co-captains of the same ship.

Lee: I really like the way you modeled the conversation between mom and dad and not stepping on land mines, but you tell me if I'm wrong. I'm guessing that sometimes one of the parents just really isn't open to it; they're not interested; they're not willing to compromise; they don't want to talk about it. A) does that happen and B) if it does, what do you do about it?

Kristen: It happens with that kind of situation. That's when it's helpful to have some other resource to point to so it's not just you as the spouse saying, "This is a problem". Even having a parenting book or website that you found, that can eliminate some of the issues and the strategies that you want to try to start using.

Something like that can oftentimes open the door to change over time, instead of just jumping right into, "This is a problem. We need to fix it" to say, "Hey, look at this interesting chapter in this book. What do you think about that?" That can sometimes be a lot more palatable to the individual to have it approached that way.

Lee: Right. Now, in your practice you have built this website, NoWimpyParenting.com, which I think is terrific, A) I love the name, and B) it's such a terrific resource. Is that the sort of thing that somebody could refer to get advice on these issues and share it with their spouse to try and get away from the rant about the two year?

Kristen: Of course. Yes. That's exactly what it's there for. It's sort of in easy to digest bites of information. The website has short blogs or articles or videos that I've made to help parents, and it's all taken from this very collaborative empowering approach that, hey, we're all in this together. All parents struggle with this. We all need to work on this together, and it just is meant to inspire and empower parents to feel like, hey, these are some easy steps I can start to follow right now and get some help.

Of course, there's also the option of doing consultations through Skype or in the office, if parents really want a more customized approach to their struggles. I can always help them out that way, too.

Lee: Right. Great. Well, that's terrific to have a resource like that to help resolve these disputes and keep the marriage on track.

Kristen: Right.

Lee: Kristen, we've covered a lot of ground today. Is there anything else that we need to know on this topic?

Kristen: I'd say my only last parting words are to just remember, for spouses to remind themselves that they are a team and that it's going to be rough. It's going to be difficult at times, but at the end of the day when your kids are out of the house and it's just the two of you, you guys are the foundation of the family. And I think for parents to remind themselves of that and give themselves that pep talk in their own minds at the start of the day.

It's an important message to cut through some of the frustration and tension that builds up, that really at the end of the day you're the team and you guys have to be united in your mission to raise happy, confident, healthy kids.

Lee: Right. That is terrific advice, and I will tell you for my wife and I, that is very much the way we look at it. We're always joking that we're bigger than them; we're smarter than them. Together, we can beat them.

Kristen: Exactly.

Lee: We can win this war. Kristen, thank you so much for being with us today. I really appreciate it.

Kristen: Sure thing. I enjoyed it.

Lee: To find out more about Dr. Kristen Wynns, you can visit her website at [WynnsFamilyPsychology.com](http://WynnsFamilyPsychology.com). That's W-Y-N-N-S, or you can call their office at 919-467-7777.

Thank you so much for listening in today. I really appreciate you being with us. If you have feedback, we'd love to hear it. You can reach us either on our comment line at 919-256-3083, or you can e-mail us at [comments@stayhappilymarried.com](mailto:comments@stayhappilymarried.com). I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, Stay Happily Married.

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