

Lee: This is episode #178 of Staying Happily Married, being a parent, not a best friend.

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married.

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Your source for weekly updates and 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. Is your friendship with your child hurting your marriage? Only a few short years ago, or so it seems, we were all children ourselves, laughing and playing with our friends, disobeying our parents and tormenting the family pet.

Before we knew it we knew it we were adults who were getting married and having children of our own. When time seems to fly and get away from us we often forget that we ourselves are not children anymore. This can be especially hard when we're dealing with our own children and a parent's natural desire for acceptance and love. Sometimes it may seem that the easiest path is to be a friend rather than a parent but these actions could be harming your marriage.

Dr. Laura Green joins me today, Dr. Green specializes in child and family therapy and child evaluation at Wynns Family Psychology in Cary, North Carolina. Before joining Wynns Family Psychology Dr. Green received her bachelor's degree from the College of the Holy Cross in Massachusetts and her masters and doctoral degrees in psychology from Rutgers University in New Jersey.

She's worked in a variety of settings ranging from outpatient mental health centers to school systems. When Dr. Green isn't busy at work she enjoys spending her time with her husband and her two young sons. Welcome to the show Laura, I am so glad you could join us.

Laura: Well thanks for having me today.

Lee: Well this is a topic, I mean I have two kids, I've got a, well I say I've have two kids. My 17 year old just turned 18 so I have a sort of kid living here and I have a 14 year old. This topic is, I know it's important when you have little kids but it's really important too when you have big kids. When I look at the situation with parenting and all that it seems to me like maybe it's a great thing for a parent and their child to be friends and not just family. Why is that a problem?

Laura: That's a great question Lee. The problem is, it comes down to the boundaries between a parent and child getting seeded in [mesh 03:10] relationship. So while of course it is wonderful for a parent and child to be close, in a parent/child relationship a parent's primary role always has to be that of a parent and not a friend.

What we see happening sometimes in families when a parent and child become enmeshed and act more like best friends it's often at the expense of taking on that parental role. So a typical case might involve a parent and a teen who are very close and they talk to each other about everything, they share secrets and they really act like best friends rather than parent/child.

Another thing that's important to note here Lee, is that it can be any combination of the parent and teen, so it may be a mother/daughter or father/son, mother/son, father/daughter, any of those combinations are susceptible to this enmeshment that we're talking

about today.

Lee: Well how does it get started? How does the whole thing begin?

Laura: They often develop pretty gradually to be honest, and there's many reasons as to why it might happen. It may be family dynamics, for instance, one of the parents is traveling for work and is away a lot which leaves the two home together, an event may have occurred in the family that brings them closer together or it may just be that the parent and child have similar interests and personality and they've just always clicked with each other over time. It truly is different for every family.

Lee: Right. That makes a lot of sense. Do you see it sort of transforming from parent/child to this friend relationship at a particular age for the child?

Laura: I think what happens is, a relationship may have always been close but the enmeshment issue tends to become more noticeable and problematic as the child approaches adolescence and at that time appears more dependent on the parent than would be expected developmentally based on the adolescents age, so adolescence seems to be the time where it becomes more problematic than it may be for younger children.

Lee: Right. Right, yeah. That's very interesting because our 14 year old is a girl and I can see the friend thing happening and I can also see the enemy thing happening, it's an interesting mix.

Laura: Exactly and that's all part of the typical development which is part of what the adolescent needs to be doing at stage.

Lee: Right. Right. Wow. These programs are always interesting to me but when I can apply them to my house it literally hits home. Let me ask you this, what about the dynamics between the child and the friend parent and the other parent, like if my 14 year old is really the friend of mom but I'm the other one, how does that all play out?

Laura: it plays out often in terms of conflict at home, a lot of household conflict because what happens is, we'll call them the friend parent and the other parent, the friend parent and the teen may confront some conflict when there's a situation that needs discipline and now the parent who has been acting as the friend is put back into that parental role and can feel very conflicted about how to act and it can also be confusing to the teen who says. "A few hours ago we were laughing and joking and now my parent is not letting me do something or taking away my cell phone." And that creates a lot of anger and confusion for the teen.

And similarly to that it can also reduce the parents feeling of authority and their ability to act as a parent because they're trying to maintain this best friend relationship and to fulfill the parental responsibilities, which at times are in opposition to each other.

Lee: Right. Right, Yeah, I'll tell you the more you talk it's like, "Oh, I can see those issues." In my house I don't know that this is a particular problem bit I think to some extent it's a continuum, it's going on at every house at some level or another.

Laura: Exactly.

Lee: Yeah, that's very interesting.

Laura: The other thing that happens sometimes with the other parent then is that the friend parent will defer some of those responsibilities to the other parent and that creates even more distance then between the other parent and the teen because now all of a sudden that's the bad guy. That's the person who is always setting rules and taking things away and the best friend becomes more of the best friend again so it can really polarize the two parents as well.

Lee: Do you ever see situations where the child and the parent that's the friend become such a team that the other parent feels left out in the cold?

Laura: Exactly. That's when we tend to see it more coming to our office and families that are in need of wanting more help because that other parent does start to feel very excluded and begins to feel left out in his or her own family and that happens and as the friend pair becomes closer it does tend to often leave that other parent out even more and if the enmeshed parent is really fulfilling most of the teens needs the other parent has a feeling of not being needed, which may be a feeling and a perception, but there's also a truth to it as times because that best friend parent has taken on so much of the best friend's parenting duties.

Lee: Right. There's a lot of fallout from this, some of it, I guess, is something I would have expected but some of it is not really what I thought would go on in the marriage. What other side effects do you see coming from this situation where one parent is really too much of a friend and too little of a parent?

Laura: I think that's a great way to say it and when that happens there are some common problems that we see again and again in this very enmeshed parent/teen relationship. As I mentioned, that boundary gets blurred between parent and friend and that can really impact discipline.

So if there's a situation, for instance, where the child has confided something in the parent, say, about a risky behavior that a friend is engaging in and then at a later time asks permission to go out with that friend, the parent may feel conflicted about what to do because of this information that he or she has already gained from the teen at an earlier time as friends.

It puts them then into a bind of, "How do I set those boundaries, how do I discipline knowing the information that I know?" That can be a real problem for parents when they're in this situation. The other thing that happens that can really have a negative emotional side effect is that the friendship can become two-way and the parent will begin to disclose and share personal information with the teen.

The parent may, under the intent of wanting to provide insight and advice to the teen but may share some of the risk taking behaviors that the parent engaged in when he or she was a teen. The problem with that is, we know from research that parental attitudes and behavior are one of the indicators of teen behavior so it give the teen the attitude of, "Well my dad did it." or "My mom used to do it when she was my age and she's fine."

It's a fine line that has to be very carefully walked in terms of what you're disclosing to your teen as a friend. Another problem with that disclosure is at times a parent may share some of his or her own emotional struggles. I call these the grown up issues that the teens don't really need to know the intimate details about whether it's financial stress or health concerns and that oftentimes, really unknowingly, puts an emotional burden on the teen.

The teen, because he or she feels so close to the parent really develops a lot of worry and anxiety about that information and that emotional burden that the parent has inadvertently placed on them.

Lee: Wow. It's easy to see where it goes from being kind of a problem to being a really, I mean this becomes a huge problem in some peoples lives, obviously. I had never realized there would be so much fallout from this kind of behavior. What else does it do to the child? Are there other things that you worry about when you see a kid that's caught up in this?

Laura: I do. When it's getting so close that it becomes, it can start to impair the social functioning for the teen because needs are being met by the parent so there becomes less of a need at times for that teen to nurture the age appropriate relationship. A parent's love is often unconditional so a teen may respond in a certain way to conflict or disagreement, which will be accepted by the parent, but would not be socially acceptable to act that way in front of peers.

So the teen may be missing out on some critical social skills and some of the development of those social skills, of navigating the teen relationships, that really is a very integral part of developmental stage. Also at times we find that these teens may select to hang out and do more in terms of activities with that parent at a time when their real developmental task is to develop themselves out into the social world. They can end up missing out on some of those really important and critical social experiences with their same age peers.

Lee: Right. Right. So I'm seeing fallout for all of the players here.

Laura: Absolutely.

Lee: Big fallout. What do you see as the impact of all of this on the relationship between mom and dad, between the husband and the wife in the marriage?

Laura: There's often a lot of discord between them, I think what happens, and the thing that's important to remember about this is that it generally starts with good intentions. I think that's what you were discussing before about on the continuum, it's generally started out with good intentions and the desire to be close, it's just when it becomes extreme that we see some of this fallout.

But parents often experience a lot of discord in their marriage because the parent who is enmeshed with the teen often has this sense of competing loyalties and can start to feel very overwhelmed by trying to keep the peace at home while also preserving this best friend relationship and the relationship with the marital partner.

Meanwhile, the other parent may be feeling a lot of resentment about the situation and his or her feeling of left out of the family and really being excluded from the parent-child bond. It often creates a wedge in the marriage between the two partners because it's literally and figuratively, there's a third person in that marriage now.

The other problem that often happens, as I was speaking earlier about the emotional disclosure, the enmeshed parent at times may also be depending on the teen to fulfill some of their emotional needs that really are more appropriately met by the marital partner.

Lee: Right. Right. So when you see families that have tried to straighten this situation out, obviously some of them are coming to see you but I'm sure that they're trying things

before they come in and see a psychologist. What are they doing on their own to try and fix this problem? Is any of it working?

Laura: I think it really seems like a difficult issue for people to deal with once they've become, as we've talked about, pretty far along that continuum and very enmeshed. Part of the problem with this problem is exactly what you asked me upfront, why is this a problem? Doesn't it seem like a good thing to be close with our teen?

Often the enmeshed parent really feels that, feels appreciation for being so close with the teen, especially when they're out amongst the other parents who are complaining of the things their teens are doing or the distance they're feeling with their teen, the enmeshed parent can really feel a sense of appreciation for that relationship and a desire to hang on to that.

Oftentimes the detrimental impacts can be subtle and so it generally is something that is hard for families to address and to overcome. Many times we see families just continuing on the path with a very gradual and subtle division and damaged relationships along the way. Other times families will recognize the conflict and try to work out solutions on their own but there's often a lot of backlash of doing that because all of a sudden the teen is confused, "Well if you were my friend yesterday and you were letting me do these things and you weren't taking away my phone and now you're doing these." The teen often gets very angry and that sometimes is the presenting issue as well.

Lee: Yeah. I would think of all the problems we discussed this would be one of the ones that would be awfully hard to fix without getting an outside professional to help you with it. What do you do when they come to you, how do you get them back on track so that the family and the parenting and the marriage are all working the way that they should?

Laura: We work very closely to educate them and also an important piece of this is reestablishing the roles of the relationships, which have steered off course. First, communication is very important and I think there's always a need to communicate openly about what is going on and why the shifting of the roles in the relationships will ultimately be beneficial to family members.

The first thing I like to do is encourage the family members to identify the strengths of each relationship, so for instance, the mother/teen, the father/teen, the mother/father as well as what they're seeing as the weaknesses or the sources of conflict and then based upon what they perceive to be going on with the family, I encourage the family members to take on new roles with each other.

So let me give you an example, if the teen and the other parent complain that they fight about rules all the time I would encourage them and give them an assignment to go out and do something enjoyable together to increase their positive interactions with them. In addition, I would encourage the enmeshed parent take on some of the rule giving and rule enforcement that may have been deferred to the other parent during the course of this.

Lee: Right.

Laura: So that's one thing, I also encourage the family members to engage in activities identifying their beliefs about parent and teen roles and interestingly, what we find is families often have pretty traditional perspectives about the roles and they realize they steered away from those roles as they become more enmeshed with each other. This is even true for the teen.

The teens often have a perception of what a parent is supposed to do and until they're asked to identify that and be explicit about it's gotten blurred amongst the day to day benefits of some of this enmeshed relationship. It's really just calling attention to the family together to say, "Hey, what do you want, where are we in relation to what you want in terms of those roles?"

And then to address what you had been speaking about, the discord that happens between the marriage, oftentimes an adjunct therapy is recommended, marital counseling, just to reestablish the emotional connection between the partners that has often shifted during this time that the parent and teen have gotten closer.

Lee: Right. Who usually drives the, when somebody shows up in your office, who's driving that in most cases? Which parent is really pushing to get this problem solved?

Laura: It varies, a lot of what we see is what I was mentioning earlier, where the teen will be the one who is actually acting out in anger, the enmeshed parents are trying to take on the parental role so a lot of times the presenting issue is actually the child's behavior, we're seeing some of that anger.

Other times, it could be both parents, the other parent often has a lot of concerns once involved in the discussion but is not as likely to really identify it as an issue. A lot of times that other parent has just gotten discouraged by feeling left out and it's hard for them to really get motivated to try to look for change so oftentimes I would say actually the referrals come more based on the behavior of the child than on the parents.

Lee: Right. This is the 178th episode of Stay Happily Married and I have to say that in some way this strikes me as one of the most complicated issues that families have to deal with, am I right in thinking that?

Laura: Absolutely, because I think what happens is it's not all negative, there is that perception of something positive by being close with your teen, by having that open relationship so it's not as clear cut as some other situations that we know are negative.

Lee: Right.

Laura: It's not a gray area, this really has a much more gray area and there's different levels of it that are appropriate. Having a close parent/child relationship is a good thing but having an enmeshed best friend relationship between a parent and a child is where we see some of the fallout and some of the problems. I think the fact that it is such a gray area is really what makes it so complex.

Lee: You've given us a great sense of the problem and how you go about attacking it and solving it. What else do we need to know?

Laura: Just a few more things, in terms of why this is so important, when you asked earlier about when it emerges, is in terms of the adolescent and I think something that's important for the parent's to know is to be reminded of the developmental needs of adolescents. One of those primary needs is to become independent of their parents and they want to test the boundaries and limits in order to establish that independence.

If there's nothing to push it's very confusing and it's difficult for a teen to successfully navigate that stage if there aren't boundaries to be pushed. I know you had mentioned with your daughter seeing the friend/enemy sort of thing and that's very typical and healthy and part of the developmental stage.

Teens are also establishing their own identity independent of their parents so it's typical for them to challenge the views and the opinions of their parents and they need to start making some of their own decisions. It can be very challenging for the teen to identify his or her identity when it's so enmeshed with that of the parent.

These are teens who feel so close to and identify with that parent and other people will often say, "Oh, you're just like your mother or your father." And that makes it difficult for them to be them and to establish that identity. They need to also, in addition to that be free to develop and maintain those social relationships that we spoke about earlier. I think that's a really important reminder to parents as well.

Ultimately, it's about finding the balance again between the family members and helping the enmeshed parent to shift that role, to act more as a parent and encouraging the teen to resume the natural developmental tasks of adolescence. I want to encourage parents that it's wonderful to have a close parent teen relationships but that looks different than this best friend enmeshed relationship that we've been discussing today.

Lee: Right. Right. Fantastic advice on I think a really complicated topic. Laura, thank you so much for being with us today.

Laura: Thank you so much Lee, it was a pleasure.

Lee: If you're thinking that you'd like to learn more about being a parent and not a best friend and I think it's something we should probably all learn, here's how you can find out about Dr. Laura Green, you can visit the website, Wynns Family Psychology, that's wynnsfamilypsychology.com, that's W-Y-N-N-Sfamilypsychology.com or you can call their office at 919-467-7777, a lot of sevens there.

Thank you so much for listening in today, I really appreciate you joining us. If you have feedback or comments we'd love to hear from you. You can comment by calling our comment line at 919-256-3083 or you can email us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Lee Rosen, until next time, stay happily married.