

Lee: This is Episode Number 186 of Stay Happily Married: To Have Children Or Not.

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 you ready to have children but your spouse isn't on board? Having children is a pretty important part of any relationship. This kind of commitment is exhilarating for some people, but it's terrifying for others. Some people get so used to living only for themselves that the idea of children seems impossible.

The real problem arises when one spouse is ready to make this life change while the other partner isn't ready. What can be done when a couple gets stuck in this impasse?

Our guest today has the answer to that question. Dr. Gina LaFrazza is a psychologist at Lepage Associates in Durham, North Carolina, where she provides counseling and evaluation services for individuals of all ages. She works with a variety of issues, like transitioning to parenthood, infertility, managing boundaries with extended family, jealousy issues, trust issues as well as increasing sexual and emotional intimacy.

Dr. LaFrazza holds a doctorate and a master's in Clinical Psychology, has a second master's in educational psychology. Welcome to the show, Gina. I'm really excited to have you here.

Gina: Thank you, Lee. It's great to be here.

Lee: OK. So, to have children or not, that is a tough question. Tell me about the situation that you're finding couples in. What's going on exactly?

Gina: Absolutely. It is a tough conversation, and it's not uncommon for couples these days to disagree on either when to have kids, how many to have, whether to have them at all, and while we always say, agreeing to disagree can be a healthy habit for a couple in general, when it comes to this topic, it typically doesn't work so well.

So, this is really a tough one because all those good strategies for coming to a compromise seemingly don't work with this topic. So, what often we see happening is a stalemate of sorts where couples don't know how to work through the disagreement that can often, to them, seem very black and white. So, invariably communication gets hindered and people end up feeling unheard or pushed into a decision which they're not comfortable with.

So, it's not uncommon, also, for relationships to end because people don't know how to work through this particular issue, so it's a big one.

Lee: Is this a bigger issue today than it was in the past? Is something going on that's making this harder to figure out for people?

Gina: Mm-hmm. I think it's fairly common these days for a variety of reasons. I think some couples simply just don't have the conversation before getting married or making a long-term commitment to one another. So, of course, in this case there can be surprises down the road.

But, it's probably more common, I think, for couples to initially agree in the early stages of their relationship but as their lives evolve, they find that their opinions on this topic change. So, for example, many couples marry in the early stages of their career development and they'll put off having children until they're better established work-wise. But partners may advance in their work at different paces or have different career progress in a way that they didn't expect, that changes their view on how kids might fit into their lives.

Lee: Interesting. So, what is it, I have kids, I have an 18 year old and a 14 year old, and I could spend all kinds of time telling you why not to have children. [laughter]

But we won't go there and I'm sure they'll grow out of it, but what are the reasons, what are people worried about? Why are they...having kids is sort of the, get married, have kids, that was sort of the path. What are people worrying about today?

Gina: Well, first, I think there are a lot of legitimate reasons for deciding to not have children or to want to put them off until later in life. Often, like I say, one partner may feel more strongly about that or worry about that more than the other partner.

But some of the big reasons that come up are certainly career, like I mentioned, partners may have different expectations for who's going to be the primary care provider. How long parental leave should be? What role extended family should play in care giving? And just generally, how to balance career with the role of care giver for children.

And then, some partners believe that kids are too much responsibility or too constricting for their lifestyle. Couples considering their first child, this kind of doubt is very common. A couple may differ on whether they're willing to give up things like happy hour, dinners out, the ease of traveling whenever they want. The first child, in particular, is a big change to the lifestyle that they may be accustomed to.

And, then, another thing I hear a lot from couples is worry about how a child will limit their ability to socialize with their friends, particularly friends who don't have children.

Lee: Yeah. Yeah.

Gina: So, it's a reality that not only does a child change a couple's relationship, but relationships with those in their social circle are also going to change.

Lee: Right. They're worrying about all the right things, it sounds like.

Gina: Money is a big one, no doubt about it. As I'm sure you know, kids are expensive, especially you're starting to think about college. Often, one partner worries about cost more than the other one. So, this is often the partner who manages the finances or maybe, the one who is just more pragmatic in general. So, couples who don't have any children or are considering their first one, often don't know what to expect when it comes to finances. So it can be kind of a fear of the unknown.

And those who are considering more children are probably focused more on the reality such as planning for college and tuition and things like that.

Lee: Right. Right. Well, those are all legitimate concerns. You can't argue with worrying about all those things, but let me ask you, aren't you supposed to talk about this before you get married and figure it out? Are they doing that, or are they changing their minds after they get married? What's the back story here?

Gina: Right, and again I think this can happen both ways and ideally it is a good thing to discuss before you get married, but things can change, like I said, throughout as life happens. And you have to remember that the average age for people for their first marriage in the United States is the mid- to late-20s.

So, it's almost certain people will change in many ways as they get older, into their 30s or 40s. This, of course, you couple with the trend for more and more couples to put children off until later in life, as I said, there are career reasons for this and etc. So, putting off the children allows just more time for views to evolve and change.

Lee: Well, that, you're seeing it and I hadn't really thought of it in that way, but absolutely that makes sense. When you see couples that are having some conflict about whether to go forward with having a baby, what is each side feeling? What's the sort of, I'm for it side feeling and what's the I'm against it side of it feeling?

Gina: Well, I think the partner who is generally in favor of having children, what we see a lot is feelings of anger, impatience, or maybe being resentful of their partner who has some doubts or who says they don't want children. It's not uncommon for someone who wants kids to feel like it's a necessity for them in life, to be fulfilled. So, if their partner's not on board with this, they can feel like they're being denied something really important to them.

Some partners can feel impatient, especially, we talked about the trend to put off having children so age and health-related concerns often come up. So, putting off a decision because their partner's not ready can sometimes feel unfeasible to them, and they can feel pretty impatient. So, it's not uncommon for these folks to feel a sense of urgency.

So, on the flip side of course, you have the partner who is against having kids, and that can be either a long-term stance or just at the present time, just not be ready. The folks who fall into this group often feel trapped or like they're being pushed into a decision

they're not comfortable with or ready for, and this is the partner we see typically using a lot of logical arguments for why kids are not a good idea at the time.

They can be more pragmatic in the way they're approaching the issue and a lot of times, this can be interpreted by their partner as just being overly analytical and not supportive of their emotional needs.

Lee: Right.

Gina: Overall, I think both partners, whether they're for or against, likely feel like they're just not being heard.

Lee: Right. It's so funny that no one mentions the fact that your children will destroy your cabinets and your hardwood floors and you'll have to replace them. [laughter]

Gina: Absolutely.

Lee: They should call me. Yes, I will explain the reality of this decision.

So, okay, I will say, the for argument and the against argument, there's a lot of emotion on both sides of that. And the kid decision is in a way, only a piece of the relationship. Does this damage the larger relationship when you get stuck in this, in trying to figure out the answer to this one question? Does everything else, sort of, fall apart?

Gina: Mm-hmm. I think any time people feel like they're not being heard or understood, the communication in the relationship is going to be hindered regardless of the issue. So certainly, resentment can build when this happens, the partner who wants kids is feeling that their needs are not being attended to and the partner who doesn't want kids, feeling continually pulled into the discussion perhaps or pressured. It's a reality, that if this issue is not resolved in some way, where both parties can feel comfortable, relationships do end over this.

Lee: Yeah. I can easily see it reaching that point, and this one issue just ends up taking over the whole relationship. What do you see people doing as they try to resolve this? What is the relationship like as they're working through this issue? How are they trying to get it resolved on their own?

Gina: Right. I think a lot of times what we see is that stalemate that I mentioned and that couples, what they're doing on their own, is fighting, and their goal is usually to try to convince the other partner of their point of view. So, of course, this is unhealthy because either it goes nowhere, or one partner ends up giving in without being fully heard.

So, again, what we see a lot of is just the trying to convince one another in terms of getting them on board with their own decision.

Lee: Do they ever use you? Do they ever come in to your office trying to use you to convince the other spouse that hey, this is really the right thing to do?

Gina: A lot of times that will happen and in therapy, it's a good setting to kind of slow the communication down and allow each partner some more room to better articulate their feelings around the issue.

So, the more pragmatic person who might be against children for the pragmatic types of reasons can get some help in expressing the feelings behind why they're perhaps worried about their career or they're afraid that it'll affect their relationship and things like this. And that can sometimes be better understood by the partner on that level.

Lee: So you've got an issue here, with a couple that it has to be resolved. You can't agree to disagree on this one indefinitely. You've got to deal with it because the clock is, in fact, ticking at some level. So, if you're going to make this decision, you got to make it. They show up in your office, what you're saying is, they're fighting a lot. By the time they get to you, this has become a constant argument with each side trying to convince the other. What are you doing for these people? How are you getting this issue fixed so they can get on with their lives?

Gina: Well, I think the best thing to do and the place to start is to work on the communication, the way the two are communicating. It's often, as you said, helpful to have a third party involved in this because it can get pretty heated and it can feel like a stalemate.

So, when trying to communicate better, it's important for each party to explore their expectations and beliefs around what another child would mean. Like, I think I said already, the partner who doesn't want kids or more kids to really be able to express the emotional side of their arguments. So, this means expressing fears whether related to the relationship or career, feeling perhaps constricted, etc. And it's likely the feelings will be heard more clearly by the partner who wants kids than the logical arguments would be.

It's also useful for the partner who's in favor of the kids to spend some time thinking through the practical matters so perhaps they're the ones that should think through a budget, things like that. In all cases, it's critical to try to eliminate outside influences. One of the things we didn't talk about, are perhaps, parents who may want grandchildren and how that is influencing the decision.

And lastly, I think it's always helpful if both partners can agree to revisit the situation again at another time. I think the response "I don't want kids right now" is very different from "I don't want kids period". Agreeing to revisit the discussion allows both people to feel like they've been heard and respected and just allows room to come back to it again at a later time, when perhaps circumstances are different.

Lee: Right. Although I'm sure that's tricky, because the person who's being told to wait is worried that... it's powerful stuff, and I can certainly see where you have your work cut out for you when you have a couple in conflict about this issue.

What else do we need to know about this because this is, I can easily imagine, fighting about money is a big deal, fighting about sex is a big deal, but it seems like those issues really can go on the back burner at some point. This issue really does feel like, you've got to get it worked out, because some people feel like they've got to start over on a new relationship if they're ever going to have kids. Biological issues? What else do we need to know that we haven't covered?

Gina: Right. I just think the main take-home message really is the importance of clear communication and understanding where your partner is coming from. So, if someone doesn't understand their partner's point of view or feels like they're not accurately being understood, that means both partners need more information and they should continue the conversation.

That can be on their own or with the help of a therapist until they feel like they can fully understand one another. This often gives couples a much greater sense of clarity and whether that clarity leads to further commitment in that relationship or having to do something different for the two individuals, it gives a clearer sense of direction. And oftentimes, just a greater sense of closeness in the relationship when each partner can understand one another and their point of view.

Lee: Good advice. Gina, you have your hands full over there with couples coming to you with this topic. This is a tough one. I appreciate you taking the time today to walk us through the topic. It's really very helpful, and I feel like we have a much better understanding of it. Thank you so much.

Gina: You're welcome, Lee. It was great talking with you.

Lee: To find out more about Dr. Gina LaFrazza, you can visit the website for Lepage Associates, that's Lepage, L-E-P-A-G-E associates.com or you can reach their office at 919-572-0000.

Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope that you will join us again next week. We would love to hear from you in the meantime. If you have feedback, whether it's comments, suggestions, criticisms, ideas for guests, let us know. You can reach us on our comment line at 919-256-3083 or you can email us at [comments@stayhappilymarried.com](mailto:comments@stayhappilymarried.com).

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

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