

Lee: This is Episode Number 188 of Stay Happily Married: Fighting In Front Of The Children.

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. Do your marital fights psychologically damage your children? It's impossible not to fight with your spouse at some point in your marriage. It's life. But have you ever stopped to consider what the effects are for the people who unfortunately have to overhear your bickering, people like your kids?

Our guest today, Bethlyn Johnson, says that the effect of fighting can forever change your children's personal well-being and social interactions. Bethlyn Johnson is a counselor at Believe in Therapy in Raleigh, North Carolina. She's new to North Carolina. She recently moved here from Illinois where she received her bachelor's in Sociology and Psychology as well as her master's in clinical psychology.

Bethlyn has worked with individuals and couples of all sorts and types using her cognitive behavioral therapy approach. She also uses mindfulness and bio-feedback. We're going to talk about whether arguing is a negative in terms of the kids. Let's get into it. Welcome to the show, Bethlyn. I'm so glad you could join us.

Bethlyn: Thanks, Lee. It's great to be here.

Lee: OK. I really want to get into this because I'm no different from anyone else. We've had arguments in front of our kids, and my guess is there will be more to come. Let's start at the very beginning with this. What is it that the kids are seeing that is impacting them?

Bethlyn: Well, what children see when their parents are fighting is they see the tension that's going on between their parents, and they don't really understand why their parents are fighting. Usually, what kids internalize is that something is wrong with them and that's why their parents are fighting, that they can somehow control the situation. So, when parents are fighting in front of their kids, it's important for them to recognize that their kids are witnessing this and they're taking it all in.

Lee: Why is it that kids think it's about them? I've always heard that they think they're the cause of whatever is going on. Why does that happen?

Bethlyn: Well, this is a developmental stage that children go through. It's called egocentrism and basically children believe that the whole world revolves around them. So, anything that's going on in their life they feel like they have some sort of control over. So, when their parents are fighting in front of them, it's only natural for them to internalize it and think that they're somehow the cause of the fighting.

Lee: That's fascinating. My friends all tell me I'm an egocentric. But I think they have different intent [laughs]. But all kidding aside, I do have a hard time relating to what kids are thinking. That never would have occurred to me. I really didn't get that, and it's good to have a better understanding of that. What do they assume, when they assume it's about them? What's their emotional response to that?

Bethlyn: Their emotional response is usually a fear that they have. It's usually a fear of abandonment, that things are unstable in their world and they immediately resort to their survival instincts. And their survival instincts tell them that something is not right. And their worst fear is that fear of abandonment. The fear that one parent will leave because the fighting has gotten so difficult. It also can cause children to worry about the future. The uncertainty in their daily life makes children feel their world will continue to be unpredictable and they won't be able to control that.

Lee: Well, OK. That makes sense. I get that. So, let's say that you're a normal marriage, and there's going to be some fighting. Is the only way to go to just keep this away from the kids? Do you need to cut them off entirely from any awareness that there's a problem?

Bethlyn: No. I don't think that's healthy. I believe that children are very intuitive, and they know that something is going on, something is not right. The best thing to do is be open and honest with your children about your feelings. It's not to say that you need to let your children witness the argument or use them in the argument. But letting them know that they aren't the cause of the argument. Being open and honest with them about feelings, I think, is the most important thing. Parents usually shut down when they're in conflict with each other. They don't talk about their feelings, and this leads to children being uncertain and having a lot of fear.

Lee: So, OK, be open and honest. I have friends who, I feel like, sometimes they're too open and honest. They let the kids in on more than they ought to know about. They're kids. And sometimes, I feel like the parents are telling them about adult stuff. How do you deal with that? Where do you draw the line?

Bethlyn: Absolutely. And that's an individual decision that every parent has to make. There are topics that are inappropriate for children to be drawn into, like financial issues. Children don't need to be aware of the financial issues going on between their parents. Explaining to your child, "My spouse and I we're not"... I don't know how to say this [laughs]. We're going to have to redo that one.

Lee: OK. Well, why don't we just take it from the top on that little piece? So, how much should you let the kids in? How do you draw the line? I know that you're not supposed to tell your kids everything that an adult would hear, but how do you decide what's appropriate, what's not appropriate? Where do you draw the line on this stuff?

Bethlyn: Well, I think it's important to know where the children are at developmentally. If they're young children, exposing them to the problems in your marriage is not going to be helpful to them. If they're older children, it might be of assistance to the children to

know exactly what the argument is about. It's really an individual decision that every parent has to make. Just being aware of how the information is going to affect the child is the most important thing. Parents can always reach out for resources on what is appropriate and what is not appropriate.

Lee: Right. That makes sense. So, you talk about knowing how things are going to affect the child. Kids that are hearing arguments, I'm sure there are some short term effects. But as we introduced the program, I mentioned that you also believe there are some long-term effects. Give me a sense of what hearing arguments do to a kid short term and then what's the longer term effect of that, as well.

Bethlyn: Well, in the short term the effects on the child can be that worry and that uncertainty that's in their lives. In the long term, that can lead to anxiety, that can lead to depression, that can lead to just unhealthy communication styles that the children pick up from their parents and take on into their own relationships.

Lee: Right. OK. That makes a lot of sense. Now, so as I'm listening to you, I'm concluding, "OK, well, don't argue in front of your kids". But as I think about that, it's like, I already knew that. I'm like, yeah, you're not supposed to argue in front of your kids, at least, not most of the time. Yet we do it and we see other people doing it. Why is that? We sort of need to get at that a little bit, too. Why do parents, knowing they shouldn't be doing this, do it anyway?

Bethlyn: I think that most parents are not present with themselves when they're engaging in that conflict in front of their children. They're wrapped up in the emotion of it, and they're not thinking in the long term. Parents need to be more present with themselves and understand that what they're doing is going to have an impact on their children. And, yes, every couple fights. They have arguments. It's the way that you handle those arguments and the way that you communicate with your partner that's going to make all the difference in how your child views that conflict.

If they can see healthy conflict, in that there are measures taken to resolve the conflict, that actually is going to be a good modeling strategy for them for when they're in their own relationships. They can see that conflict is able to be resolved. We can do this without resorting to name calling, blaming and threatening.

Lee: Yeah, that sounds like good advice. If you're going to have conflict and you can do it right, then they can learn how to do it as well. But in marriages that are really unraveling, I think the last thing the parents are worrying about is doing conflict right. At that point, the marriage really is sort of going down the tubes, they're heading for the door. Do you think that there's any kind of difference in the terms of the way you handle it when, you'd like to be a role model about how to fight in a healthy relationship, but hey, you know this relationship is not healthy. It's a disaster. And you're just doing what you can to hold on until you can be done with it.

Bethlyn: Absolutely. And in that case, if you really feel there is no way to have healthy communication with your partner, then having a mediator present is very important. Not allowing the conflict to arise in front of the children is something that parents have to be very aware of. When parents are fighting because their marriage is heading towards divorce, the parents may try and use the child as a weapon against the other parent. They may try and use the children to get information about the other parent. And that can be very damaging to children.

They see what's going on. They understand that their parents are not happy and that they are trying to get that information. So, trying to keep the children out of the conflict is the most important part in that situation.

Lee: Yeah. No matter what's going on, whether this is just a little fight or this is World War III and this marriage is unraveling, what you're saying in terms of what the kids should or should not know really depends on the kids. Sometimes, I think people misjudge that. That they think of their kids as being more mature than they are. And I've seen people saying what I think are sort of inappropriate things to younger kids. Are we really in a decent position to make those judgments about what they should be told and what they shouldn't? Especially when we're so emotional?

Bethlyn: Absolutely, that's a very good point. When parents are so emotional in that conflict, it's important to get an outside perspective on what's appropriate for the children and what's not. Talk to a therapist. Talk to a counselor. Talk to a social worker. All these people can kind of help you navigate that difficult path of what's appropriate to talk to your children about and what's not.

Lee: Yeah. Especially if things are really coming off the rails, I think that's terrific advice. You've talked about being a better model. If you're going to have an argument in front of your kids, or they're going to witness it in some way or another, that you want to be a model. And I guess that's the way you should fight all the time. You should always be thinking that somebody is watching. What are the things that you ought to do if you want to be, I don't know, a healthy fighter, or however you, as a professional, would describe it? If you want to have good fights, what are the tips for doing that?

Bethlyn: Absolutely. Using healthy communication techniques is one of the most important things that you can do. That includes what we call our fighting fair rules. That means no yelling or screaming while you're having conflict. Maintain a calm tone of voice. Be mindful of your body language, how you're presenting to the other person. If kids see that their parents are very aggressive towards each other, they can pick up on that. So maintaining a calm sense about yourself even while you're in conflict is very important. Also, no blaming when you're fighting with somebody else.

Keeping the feelings on yourself is very important. Talk about what's going on for you. Don't try and assume that you know what's going on for the other person. Threatening the other person is another big no-no. Kids can really pick up on that, and they could actually start doing that in their own relationships. And also, if you're fighting about one specific

topic, don't bring up other topics from the past. That just creates more conflict, and it gets you away from the issue at hand. Try and use positive communication techniques, such as "I" statements, where you're stating your feelings and how you're reacting to something. Not blaming the other person for your feelings.

Lee: Right. I'm going to have to get you hooked up with my wife so you can remind her of that. Don't bring up other fights while you're on this fight. Yeah, I think she missed that one at the seminar.

Bethlyn: I think we all need to remember that one, sometimes.

Lee: Yeah. So, OK. Let's say, this is good advice and you're listening today, but hey, you've been fighting in front of your kids and probably doing some destructive things for some time. I mean, that's just inevitable if we didn't know this stuff. We can only do the best we can, and a lot of this is new to me and I'm sure new to some of our listeners. So, if you've already screwed up and you've had your kids watching this stuff, and you're worried because you're thinking, "I've already caused some problems for these kids", what can you do, is there anything you can do, to fix the impact of this on your kids?

Bethlyn: Yes, there's absolutely steps that you can take to remedy the situation with your children. The first step that I would take is sit down with them and explain to them that you've made mistakes. You're not a perfect person. You've done some things that you're not proud of but you're going to make a change. Things are going to be different. And then actually follow through with that commitment. When you make that promise to your children, let them know you're not going to be repeating those same behavior patterns over and over. You've learned some new skills and although you've made mistakes in the past, today is a fresh start and you're going to be doing things differently from now on.

Lee: Right. Good advice. Now, I'm curious, I'm about to mention your website, believeintherapy.com. I'm just curious, why is that the name of your practice, Believe in Therapy? What's the story on that? I like the name.

Bethlyn: Well, the story is basically that all the therapists that work at Believe, we really have a strong belief in therapy and the process of therapy and how it can help. We also believe in ourselves, and we believe in our clients. So, the name, Believe, really just came from that concept of believing in yourself, believing in change.

Lee: Right. Believing in change. I like that. Now, you've given us some good tips on how to fight in a healthy way, what to say to the kids, what not to do in front of the kids. I feel like you've given us awfully good pointers. What else, if anything, do we need to know in order to not do any more damage than we've probably already done?

Bethlynn: Know that it's never too late to change. It's never too late to learn healthy communication tips so that either in the relationship that you're in now or in a future relationship, that you can have that healthy communication.

Lee: Right. Terrific. Well, Bethlyn, I really appreciate you taking the time to be with us on the show and to share some good advice. Thank you so much.

Bethlyn: Well, thank you, Lee. It was great.

Lee: To find out more about Bethlyn Johnson, you can visit the website at believeintherapy.com. I'll put a link to that in the show notes. You can also reach her office at 919-755-0545. Thank you so much for joining us today. We're going to be back again next week. In the meantime, we'd really appreciate your feedback, your comments, criticisms, whatever you've got. We really appreciate your input. You can reach us on the 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.

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