

Anna: The importance of team parenting. This is Stay Happily Married, episode number 246.

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

Anna: I'm Anna Riley, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Are you and your partner on the same team when it comes to parenting? When two people get married, there are natural stressors that become apparent. When a child enters the picture, and there's now parenting involved, certain marriage stressors are intensified. Let's face it, there's no manual for parenting, and while raising happy, healthy, and confident children is the ultimate goal, there's a lot of pressure that comes with it. If a couple is frequently arguing about how to parent, much stress is added to the family unit, then everyone ends up being miserable. If there is constant bickering back and forth about logistics, there's no room to create an atmosphere of warmth and support. Instead, there becomes an antagonistic way of interacting that puts everyone on edge. Our guest today is Dr. Gabriella Johr, a licensed clinical psychologist, with Orenstein Solutions. Welcome to the show, Gabriella. I'm so glad you could join me today.

Gabriella: So glad to be here. Thanks for having me.

Anna: All right. Well, let's start with the couple first. How important is it for a couple to have a good understanding of each other and each other's ideals and values, before embarking on the parenting journey?

Gabriella: It's very important for the couple to be on the same page regarding various issues, in order for them to have a good basis for communication, and understanding between each other.

Anna: So what is one of the first things a couple can do between each other, when they first find out that they're expecting?

Gabriella: Well, the first thing can do is they can talk about the range of feelings that they might have, becoming new parents. I mean, it's definitely exciting, but it's also overwhelming and anxious, and it's normal to feel that way. And then they can talk about, what it means to them to become a parent, and ideally, how'd they'd like to be as a parent, their expectations that they have for themselves, their partner, and even their children. And then, finally, what kind of family environment they'd like to create.

Anna: I'm sure those are very important things to talk about, kind of get yourself prepared, get ready.

Gabriella: Sure, to think about it beforehand, absolutely.

Anna: Yeah, definitely. Sort of like a plan of action.

Gabriella: Yes. For sure.

Anna: Now, I'm sure it differs for all people, but what is usually the hardest stage of parenting for people? Where do a lot of couples start hitting a wall?

Gabriella: Well, it's hard to say. I mean, it definitely varies among couples, and some people struggle initially, and then some, when their children are in adolescence. So regardless of when, the why they hit the wall is usually when they stop working as a team to address important parenting issues, how to discipline their children, attitudes about school, and preferred ways of communication, for example.

Anna: So then what starts to happen to the family unit when there's not really any consistency with parenting, and maybe when parents are constantly arguing with each other about how to parent?

Gabriella: Well, this creates a lot of tension within the family, and the kids and the parents are either actively arguing, or they're just being antagonistic towards each other, and everyone is on edge. Or the other extreme is that your kids really avoid spending family time together, and can become isolated. And so little kids are more prone to becoming depressed and anxious, and then for teens, they're less likely to get advice from their parents. So you may not be in any extreme, or you're arguing all the time, or your family's avoiding each other, but let's say you're just kind of parenting in an inconsistent or unpredictable fashion. Sometimes parents can kind of contradict each other. Maybe they're not always leading by example. For instance, if you're telling your teen not to curse, but you're cursing, you sometimes follow through with consequences, but on other occasions you don't. Understandably, your children can become very confused about how to behave and what's really expected of them. So over time, this can create a lot of anxiety, self-doubt, and insecurity.

Anna: Right, I can see that. Do you think that kids, if they kind of see this arguing between their parents, about parenting specifically, do you think that some kids kind of take that to heart and blame themselves, maybe?

Gabriella: They can blame themselves, but also I think they take their parents less seriously, so they're just less likely to listen and to kind of have the respect their parents really deserve and need, to help the system run.

Anna: Right. Like, "Do as I say, not as I do?"

Gabriella: Exactly.

Anna: And then, what is the best way to go about it in certain situations, like when you were talking about how a parent says to their teen, no cursing, and they curse, but where do they draw the line? I mean, obviously it's important to set a good example, but there are some things that adults are allowed to do, technically, that teenagers and younger children aren't allowed to do. So how do they kind of establish that boundary?

Gabriella: I mean, I think teenagers have to feel, in general, that the parents are acting respectfully, the way they're asking their teenager to react, or act. So if they're here and there, cursing or doing things, and parents don't always have to be together, and have everything in line, but it's got to be a general vibe, where adolescents feel that they really have to model what their parents are doing. If the modelings not there, it's really hard to enforce anything.

Anna: So what do you see parents doing to correct the problem, if they are experiencing a lot of tension, and maybe some animosity and antagonistic behavior within their family? What do you see them doing to correct this?

Gabriella: Well, unfortunately, I mean, to manage the problem, they sometimes criticize their partner, whether it's behind closed doors or in front of their kids. And they blame their partner's parenting for whatever difficulties the child is having. So that's not helpful. But, you know, sometimes when, let's say the child is in adolescence, he or she gets blamed for acting disrespectfully, or not following the rules, when there's really been inconsistent or antagonistic parenting all along. So, blaming someone is probably not the best way to handle the issue, but everyone's so stressed out they kind of don't know what else to do.

Anna: Right. So, this is kind of a side note, but I think it's also something that we should definitely touch on. Is parenting a child with a disability, whether it's a mental disability or a physical disability, what kind of effect does that have on parenting, and how two parents create a dynamic that works within their household?

Gabriella: Well, it's definitely more stressful than usual if your child has either physical or mental disability, and it's really important to be working as a team, but with professional support. Professionals will educate the parents on the unique issues that will arise when your child has difficulties, and how to best handle them. So the team has to expand to include either a therapist, a psychiatrist, a pediatrician, or anyone that you find has an expertise on the issue.

Anna: But I think it seems like the main idea is that, everyone has to be on the same team, everyone has to be on the same page, whether or not, you're the parent, or the therapist, or the doctor. Everyone needs to have a collective plan for the child.

Gabriella: Well, one thing I find that's difficult and that comes up in my practice a lot, for example, the child is struggling with some psychological issues, is that one parent kind of buys into what's going on, and then the other parent may disagree. And then it's really hard to come up with a good treatment plan. So I would say that being on the same page and at least agreeing on what the problem is when your child is struggling with something, is really key.

Anna: And then whoever else you have to get involved, too.

Gabriella: Sure, sure.

Anna: I'm sure that you've seen situations where one parent agrees with the therapist, and one parent agrees with the doctor, and the other doesn't at all. And they have a different idea of that. But I guess it would just require some communication between the two parents, to kind of figure out what the best way to go is?

Gabriella: Yes. I'm also thinking about when a kid first gets diagnosed with ADHD, for example. One parent might really be more in touch with what's going on at school, they might be more in touch that these things are happening, and the other parent might kind of minimize it or think that it's just something they'll grow out of, and it does require some education, and some

dialogue and discussion. And over time, you can come up with some kind of compromise or greater understanding of what the problems are, and how to address them.

Anna: That's good. So what are some of them benefits of team parenting? And what is the best way for parents to come up with a game plan for that?

Gabriella: Well, parents who cooperate and communicate, get along better, and you're going to create a warmer and more supportive family environment, you're going to model positive behaviors to your children, and hopefully you'll feel more fulfilled in these relationships. Another benefit is, your children are going to have a clear sense of what's expected of them, and that's going to, hopefully, result in a greater sense of security, and ultimately help them kind of reach their potential. The way to go about doing it, to create a foundation, is to think about, first and foremost, how you were raised in your family, by your own parents, and then have a discussion with your partner about the things you want to replicate and the things you'd like to change. And hopefully, this type of discussion will help you shape the kind of family environment that you want to have, and make it so that it's consistent, if you kind of have these discussions beforehand.

Anna: Right. How important are parent roles in the family? And how do each parent's strengths and weaknesses come into play, within those roles?

Gabriella: Each parent does have strengths and weaknesses, and they do find themselves in certain roles in a parenting relationship. So it is important to have flexibility in your roles, and to play to your strengths, right? So no parent wants to always be the enforcer, while the other parent is like the "fun parent", and that's an example of kind of having rigid roles. If one parent is always in one position, and the other parent's in the other. This can cause a lot of strain, also to choose roles that, like I said, play to your strengths, but also compliment your partner, so that you have a well-rounded team. So part of doing this is, you have to really value what your partner brings to the table, and also, one parent can be more structured, and maybe the other parent is more laid back. But both have their value, and the key is really to not criticize your partner's way, but to either join them, or even switch places sometimes. For an example, a mom may be the one to get the morning routine into play, and get everyone out the door, but maybe in the evening, she can kind of be more laid back, and let the dad take over, orchestrating dinner, or the nighttime routine.

Anna: Right, right. So, just changing it up a little bit?

Gabriella: Exactly. Switching it up, and feeling like you could both play the different roles that you have to play.

Anna: Right. OK, Gabriella. Well, is there anything else that we should know?

Gabriella: I would say that, it's never too late to get some help. Obviously, creating a warm, supportive family environment is very important to parents. They're very invested in their kids, and helping them develop into the best people they can develop into, and if you're struggling in this area, even if your child is older, it's never too late to get some support.

Anna: Right, right. Support is always good, for sure. Well, Gabriella, thanks so much for talking with me and being on the show today. I really appreciate it.

Gabriella: Thank you. It was my pleasure. Thank you.

Anna: To find out more about Gabriella and her practice, Orenstein Solutions, you can visit their web site at www.orensteinsolutions.com, or you can call 919-428-2766 for an appointment. Thank you so much for joining us today, and I hope you'll join us again next week. For more information about this show, and future episodes, visit us at StayHappilyMarried.com. I'm Anna Riley, until next time, Stay Happily Married.

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