

FamilyLife Blended®

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Season 1, Episode 4: Caught Between Your Spouse and Your Family

Guests: Ronnie & Lamar Tyler

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Lamar: I would just pray to God and ask and just wonder, “Is this how a divorce starts?” Because I would always see the end of a divorce but I never knew what were the cracks that led to it along the way. It just would appear. A couple—you’d think they were perfect one day and they just show up like, “Yeah, things didn’t work out.” You’re like, “Hold—where did that come from?”

I remember there were literally times when I would just sit and think, “Is this the beginning path to how divorce starts?” It really was thoughts like that that made me say, “We have to do something about this.”

Ron: From the FamilyLife® Podcast Network this is FamilyLife Blended. I’m Ron Deal. This podcast brings together timeless wisdom, practical help and hope to blended families and those who love them.

Parents, have you ever felt stuck between your spouse and your extended family—maybe between your spouse and your kids? Have you ever felt like you had to choose one over the other and you knew whatever choice you made it was going to hurt somebody? Today, we’ll explore that tough moment and how you can protect your marriage and family in the process.

Lamar and Ronnie Tyler make up the husband and wife power pair behind BlackAndMarriedWithKids.com. In 2012, they were acknowledged by *Ebony’s* Power 100 list of the country’s most influential African Americans. They have a huge social media presence and serve on the advisory council of FamilyLife Blended, the ministry that produces this podcast.

Their website, BlackAndMarriedWithKids.com, is the largest independent African American marriage and parenting site on the web. They have four children between the two of them and live in Atlanta.

Imagine for a minute trying to produce a film with your spouse. I mean—which one of you is going to be the producer? Who’s going to be the director? How are you going to make decisions? How are you going to navigate those power issues?

Well with the goal of strengthening marriages and families, Ronnie and Lamar have produced five films together. One of them is called *Blended*, which is all about becoming

a healthy blended family. If you're a blended family, by the way, I've got to suggest that you get a copy of that film.

I asked them about the process of producing that film.

Lamar: You know it took the course of a few years. In the movie, we had to really reflect and look at our story. We were looking at the stories of other couples we had run into. We were bringing in experts such as yourself and Dr. Francesca Atlabater into the conversation and really just reflecting and asking, "What did the public need to see in this film?"

Because we knew it was a film that needed to be made and we knew it needed to touch couples in a certain way in order to first just give them hope. That's what we found a lot of times before—couples can get all of the tools that they need—they just need hope that things can change / that things can turn around / that the situation can be made better. Then once we give them hope, then we can connect them with the tools and resources that they need in order to right the ship and turn things around.

Ron: Yes, we all need that—absolutely, yes. You said you had to reflect on your own blended-family story. Do you mind telling us a little about that Ronnie? Tell us about your family.

Ronnie: Yes, so we have a blended family. We have four kids. I had two kids when I met Lamar. I had a boy and a girl. Then we quickly had two more kids. We were like, "Oh, okay, we already have kids." So after we got married we were like, "Let's just got for it." [Laughter]

I don't know if that was the smartest thing to do, but yes, we said, "Let's just go for it." We quickly had two more. We got married in 2005, and our first daughter was born in August 2006. I know a lot of people are doing the math, but it was good math. [Laughter]

Ron: It was good math. All right, so you've got four kids in total. You guys live in the Atlanta area. This film, *Blended*—I'm curious—as you're in the middle of producing this / telling other people's stories / trying to help bring some practical tools to viewers. Did you learn anything about your own life? Did it give you any perspective on your own family?

Lamar: It did. For me, what I definitely can say is that the more people we talked to, the more I realized that our stories were all similar. These are couples who—they may have come into a blended family different ways—they may be from different walks of life—they may be from different ethnicities—but some of the challenges and problems they were facing were the same things that we were dealing with. Here we were years ago thinking that there was something wrong with us.

Ron: “We’re the only ones.”

Lamar: Exactly, “We’re the only ones.” But it almost was like therapy finding out that, “Hey, these people are going through the same things we went through—and guess what—some of them were already able to come through these things.” It really just gave us again—like we talked about—that “H” word—hope—that if they did it, then we can do it too. If there’s hope on the other side / if there’s light on the other side the tunnel, then we can see that light in our own marriage and our own relationship. It’s really been a blessing that we’ve been able to experience some of those same things.

Ron: Was it therapy for you as well, Ronnie?

Ronnie: It was therapy for me. It just really opened my eyes because I found out that a lot of people just make a lot of assumptions when they go into becoming a blended family. I feel like all of them did. Some people—they thought, “Okay well, we did everything the right way,” —maybe “my spouse died”—or whatever—“and we came from previous marriages that were happy and we’re not going to have any issues going into it. Our kids are grown.” They just made some assumptions.

I made a lot of assumptions when I married Lamar and they didn’t turn out to be so right. It was comforting to see people go through problems. But then also—like Lamar said—just to see them come out of it and to see this is not going to last forever.

Ron: Yes. What were some of those assumptions that you made. Let’s back up even further then. Where’d you guys meet?

Ronnie: We met through a mutual friend. She grew up with me. I knew her from elementary school through high school. We’re very close friends. I was visiting her. She was having a get together at her home. Lamar was her coworker, so he was there at her home—so yes, we met.

Ron: Love at first sight?

Lamar: For Ronnie, yes. [Laughter] I got it. That’s a game we always play. We try to see who can say it first.

Ronnie: He said it first this time.

Ron: He did.

Lamar: I got you this time.

Ron: And it’s on tape.

Lamar: I'll watch my back for the next occurrence. But you know, it was funny because Ronnie said, we had a mutual friend. We met and I was traveling at that time. I had a traveling job so probably 90% of the time I was on the road. Ronnie lived in the Tidewater area of Virginia. I knew I was coming to Norfolk maybe in about two months after we met. I said, "Okay, when I come to Norfolk, I would love to take you out to dinner for us to meet / talk some more." I held my word, right, Ronnie?

Ronnie: He did but it was really weird because he didn't call me between then. It was like—he asked me out and I didn't hear from him for *two* months. Then he called and he was like, "Hey, remember me?" [Laughter]

Lamar: Ron, I said that in two months when I got to Norfolk—

Ronnie: He didn't lie.

Lamar: — I would call. I didn't say anything—

Ronnie: Isn't that weird? [Laughter]

Lamar: I didn't say, "We'll talk weekly leading up to then." I said, "Hey, in two months I'll be in Norfolk. I'll give you a call."

Ron: Yes, that sounds like a stereotypical male / female conversation, right? "I said I would do it and I did it. I fulfilled that." And she's over there going, "Yes, but isn't there some connection in between? Is that all there's going to be? What does this mean to me?"

So you said yes and you went.

Ronnie: Yes, I said yes and I went. I met him. We just had a really nice time just talking and connecting. He already knew I had kids because he didn't tell you—the first time we met, I brought my baby with me to the party, so—

Ron: —so that cat was already out of the bag.

Ronnie: Yes, I was like, "No need to even talk about that." It was long distance—our relationship was long distance because I actually lived two and a half hours from him. We talked a lot on the phone. I think that was really good because you talk a lot more than just having that physical attraction that you have and the butterflies. But you're talking into the wee hours.

We always tease married couples, "Can you remember staying up all night and falling asleep on the phone?" and things like that. But we actually had that because we had a long-distance relationship. It was really nice because it allowed us to really connect a lot more.

Ron: Okay, I'm chasing the assumptions at this point. What were your early assumptions about dating and about the future of this relationship / the potential / the involvement of children?

Ronnie: I really didn't make any assumptions. I just liked him. He was really refreshing—just nice / respectful / got along with my parents. Lamar never made me feel like he needed to be anywhere else. I had two kids, and he did everything I did. If I had to take my kids to basketball practice, or if I had to do something for my parents, he was just right there and not rushing.

He's a little younger than I am and just not interested in wanting to go off and take me off and date me or whatever. He was really patient with me and felt right at home with my parents. Even as we were dating, my father started a church and he would come down and help me with the AV or just help with everything as far as that was concerned. It was really refreshing to have someone that was not only focused on me but also my family.

Ron: So he was attentive. He was engaged.

Ronnie: —very attentive—very engaged.

Ron: He was attuned to what was going on in your world—in your life—not just flying in and flying out—but he was there—

Ronnie: Yes.

Ron: —present.

Lamar: If I could say—I think I definitely had some assumptions. Because coming into the situation, I definitely had some assumptions that Ronnie's kids would take a liking to me and keep a liking to me. I think that the first part—they took a liking to me—I don't think they necessarily kept a liking to me.

Immediately, in the short term—I was definitely thinking that I would be able to step in—not necessarily—I didn't want to replace their dad. But I was thinking that I could be a father-like figure for them—like a strong male role model for them and a strong father figure for them to pick up the slack in any areas that they needed.

I thought they would be receptive to that. What I can say is I also thought that our friends and family—because I think everyone respected me—I thought they would respect my role in Ronnie's life and our relationship—if I can say that. Those are all the things I came into it thinking would happen and they didn't necessarily fall out / play out that way.

Ron: Even as he shares those, Ronnie, can you identify an assumption that you had about how your kids would get along with him? What was your side of that?

Ronnie: To be honest, I just assumed everybody was going to get along. I just assumed—

Ron: —why not?

Ronnie: Yes—why not? And I never stopped to think any differently.

Ron: Did they get along well in the beginning?

Ronnie: Yes, I think they got along well in the beginning.

Ron: They took to him.

Ronnie: Yes.

Ron: That feeds, of course, the assumption that that's just going to continue to go forward. It started off well. Why would it not?

Lamar: It definitely does. I think a lot of times—what I was thinking—I think what a lot of people think is, “Okay, based off that first impression and the first impression is good. Okay, we're good.” The first month is good, the first year's good, “Hey, we're through the weeds,” and if we can get all the way through the wedding and everything is still fine, I think that, “Okay—” we feel like “Okay, we got this thing under control. We're making all the right moves / doing all the right things” only to find out that may not be the case.

Ron: I'm reflecting on your comment about when you were making the film, *Blended*, discovering that lots of people have a very similar journey. Of course, not all the details are exactly the same, but there's a similar flow to it. What you just said is a very common experience, I think, for couples in blended families.

Things started off pretty good. The kids were open and we get along. We kind of hang out. You're spending time with her kids and that seemed to go well. With little bit of time, you just feel like, “Okay we've got momentum. All those stories we hear about other people—that's not going to be us.” But it did turn a corner somewhere.

Lamar: It definitely did. One of the things I'll often think about with stepfamily situations and with the stepparent is that everyone—the children to the family and everyone around—always wants you to love the child as if they were your own—but they only want the good part of love. That means take them to Disney / hug them / kiss them—

Ron: —buy them stuff.

Lamar: Exactly—buy them stuff / tuck them in at night. But I don't feel like they want the stern parts of love—the correction—if they're not doing the right things correcting them, putting them on the right path, the discipline parts of love, and those other pieces like that.

I think once we were living together all under one roof and we were married, then maybe with our son—he would do something that I may deem as disrespectful or Ronnie may tell him, “Hey, do x, y, and z” and he didn't do all of those things, and I would step in—I think that's when we initially began to butt heads.

Ron: It's like, “Wait a minute! What just happened? I thought we were okay. Now you're looking at me like I'm a stranger—like you don't have that same respect for me that you did ten minutes ago.” Is that what it was like for you?

Lamar: Yes, you definitely do and I always think in those situations—it feels like—the child, hands on their hip, ready to draw at all moments their weapon against you which is the dreaded, “Well, you're not my Dad,” “You're not my Mom,” “I don't have to listen to you,” and all these types of things.

I think where it starts to become a slippery slope is when other people around them can also be feeding those thoughts into them—whether it's friends or whether it's family or whether it's the other biological parent or it's not just everyone not being on the same page and being on board to move the family together in the right direction.

Ron: Ronnie, I'm wondering, as you begin to watch this go differently now for your child and Lamar, what was going on in you?

Ronnie: I just had a lot of feelings— because it just wasn't a good feeling—because the first thing is, I just didn't know why my child was acting out, and I did not stop to ask him. He was more like probably between nine and eleven—I'd have to go back and do the math—but he wasn't a baby.

We didn't have any issues with my daughter. She was two going on three when we were dating—turning from two to three years old when we got married so she was three probably when we got married and just didn't have those issues with her. She started calling Lamar “Dad” short after we got married. He was just “Dad” or “Daddy” or whatever.

But my son, he just started acting out / being really resentful / not wanting to cooperate / not wanting to do family things. Then when you did ask him to do family things, he would almost do things to ruin it—like, just with his attitude—like I just wished he wouldn't have come because he ruined the whole time. I'm sitting here fussing and arguing with him. That wasn't good.

I just never even recognized that I needed to stop and talk to him about what is he feeling—what is he going through—how did he feel about us getting married? I just never did that.

Another thing I was feeling was with Lamar is just like, “Okay, hold on here.” I didn’t know that I wouldn’t like to see someone else discipline the kids or I didn’t like having thoughts about, “Is he strict on these kids because they’re *my* kids or is he just strict? I don’t know.” Or just feeling that urge to want to protect my kids because I never wanted anyone to say, “Oh you married this man and you allowed him to ____.” You know.

Ron: Yes.

Ronnie: Although he wasn’t necessarily doing anything like that, but you feel the need to want to protect your kids or to say, “Hey, I’ll take care of this,” or whatever. It was just like all of those thoughts going through, “Okay this is my husband over here. These kids are clearly not acting right.” You know. [Laughter]

Ron: Yes.

Ronnie: Then I still have those feelings like, “How do I handle this and how do I talk to him about what I’m feeling?”

Ron: It’s funny when the Bible talks a lot about anxiety and how we are borrowing worry from tomorrow. That’s essentially what that is. Sometimes we borrow guilt from tomorrow. You were fast-forwarding, “Well, what if they come back to me someday and they say, ‘You didn’t do your job, Mom. You didn’t protect us,’” so you’re responding out of guilt that you might feel someday. It influences who you are now.

It’s funny how that stuff happens. Because you have the best intentions and good will towards him and towards your kids and he has the best of intentions and good will. Everybody’s trying to do the right thing, and yet, sometimes you still end up going, “I’m not so sure we’re on the same team.”

Ronnie: Right, yes.

Lamar: Exactly.

Ron: And if there are others—were there others in your situation that were speaking in different messages that—as you said, Lamar—that weren’t necessarily encouraging the family moving towards one another, all the parts?

Lamar: Sure, I know the kids’ biological father—when he was around, he definitely wasn’t on board moving in the right direction—which even still as a stepparent, I don’t understand this because I’m saying and I’m thinking in my mind, “Well, I’m here. Me being here is actually helping your children out—them having a constant presence—them

having somebody to help lift the burden and some of the load of being a single parent with their mom and being here to fill in the gap in the times that you're not." So it definitely was that and just other—

Ron: You kind of felt like, "Hey, I'm due a little respect here. I'm helping you out."

Lamar: Exactly.

Ron: He didn't see it that way?

Lamar: Not at all. [Laughter] I think what it was—from my point of view and I'm sure Ronnie has hers—from my point of view, I think it was almost the opposite, "Even though I don't want to be fully engaged with the kids, I don't want you to be either."

Ronnie: Right. From him in particular—he told me one day, "Your son is struggling with this, and, Ronnie, you should tell your son that you will never love another man more than you love him." That came out of his mouth. I'm like, "What are you telling him? Why would you even phrase it that way—comparing my love to his love? It's just like—I don't even know how to respond to that." He was like, "Just say it—just say it to him."

It just keeps ringing because he kept repeating it over and over, "Just tell him—tell him you'll never love anyone else more than you love him." I'm like, "What are you telling my son?" That was the first—to me—moment where I thought, "He's telling my son some things about our relationship and about our family."

Then I just heard other things like—just from family about like, "You were better off. You could do this alone. Why did you have to get married? You own the house. You have a nice job. You could take care of your kids alone."

Ron: You're sufficient. You don't need somebody else.

Ronnie: Right.

Ron: So they were questioning it. I mean, how does that make you feel—I'm trying to figure out—what's the implied message under that? You're enough? You don't need him. What's wrong with you for needing him?

Ronnie: Yes, to me it was just hurtful. I felt it was kind of selfish—like you just want me all to yourself because I guess maybe they felt like I was being pulled away to this relationship or I had a different allegiance to my husband or whatever. But that's what I took it as—is like—they just felt like it can't be me being married and they can have me as well. They want it just me.

Ron: Yes. Did it make you feel guilty?

Ronnie: No, that just kind of upset me a little bit. It just made me feel sad. It didn't make me feel guilty but it made me feel sad. Because I didn't feel guilty because I liked my marriage and I liked my relationship so I thought it was a great decision. I didn't feel guilty about being married. I just felt sad about the direction things were going.

Ron: Because clearly you couldn't really enjoy Lamar and your family and own that in front of your extended family because they were saying, "You don't need him."

Ronnie: Right.

Ron: So you were kind of having to choose—

Ronnie: Right.

Ron: —one over the other—which is never fun. It's a lousy place to be in whether you're a kid or an adult.

Okay, so there were a couple of things that were speaking into your family situation but were instead of encouraging the parts coming together, were planting messages of doubt and kind of things that would pull you apart.

By the way, I would like to go back for a second to what your kid's dad was saying to you in terms of, "Tell our son that you'll never love anybody more than him."

You know—I think sometimes parents get into this sense of, "How do I say that in a way that doesn't hurt somebody?" I've just learned to tell people, "Look, you don't have to necessarily rank them in terms of loves." There is a loyalty and an allegiance in marriage. "Leave and cleave" is what Genesis tells us—for the husband and wife to leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife—that there's a process there of switching allegiance from the parents that you grew up with to now the spouse that you have.

I think that applies to children and it applies to a job and it applies to your video game set that you love like crazy and the internet. You should leave all those things and have an ultimate loyalty to your spouse. It doesn't mean that you cut yourselves off from all those things. You don't leave father and mother and never see them again. That's not what it's talking about. It's just about your ultimate allegiance is placed there.

I think with children for example—you still love them—you're the most important boy in my universe, right? Nothing has changed that. But then there's this most important man in my universe and *that* person / the allegiance that goes with *that* relationship is "til death do us part." It's not the same kind of relationship with a child. They're going to grow up and go their way as life would have it, so it's really two different things.

I think sometimes when people put themselves into a corner—I've got to choose one over the other—well, marriage is marriage and that has a different quality about it than it does with children. But at the same time, you can love them both with all of your heart. Would that have been a message that would have been helpful for you at any point?

Ronnie: It would have been helpful because I didn't know how to articulate that, so I avoided it. I don't even think I went back to my son to find out what his father was actually saying to him. I didn't even bring it back up. I may have told Lamar about it but I never actually went back to my son and said, "Is he telling you this? Is this going on?" I didn't. I just avoided a lot of conversations.

Ron: It might have even been something you could have said to your extended family.

Ronnie: Right.

Ron: It's the same sort of message, "Hey look, I love you guys. You haven't lost me but you have lost part of me. I'm married now. That makes a difference. But I'm still your daughter / I'm still your sister / whatever—we're still family. But yes, some things have to change and I'm still committed to you."

Well, Lamar, I'm curious—did you pick up on some of the messages that Ronnie was getting from her family?

Lamar: I did and that was directly because just the communication between us—which I'll give Ronnie credit for—because a lot of what was going on, she would come and share with me. Though it was hurtful to me, I still felt gracious that she shared those things.

I know that's always a tough situation when you hear people talking negatively about your spouse and the person you love and you're trying to decide on one hand, "Do I tell that person—because they may forever view my family in a negative fashion?"—right? "What turn would this take?" Also, "I love the person. I don't want to hurt them. I know this hurt me for them to tell me these things about my spouse but it'll probably hurt my spouse even more because that's the person they're actually talking about."

I just loved that she talked and shared those things with me even though I knew they were tough for her to do. She shared those things. A lot of times as we faced turmoil and different things in our marriage, I really just thank God and realize how blessed I was that even though Ronnie was being tugged and I can see her being tugged by the kids—I could—I knew I was tugging her to a degree on my end—I knew family may be tugging her on another end—that through it all, she stayed committed to the marriage.

Because I know that in a lot of situations she could've easily just said, "You know what, I didn't sign up for this. This is not what I planned and it's not worth it." I think so many couples just throw up their hands and say, "It's not worth it. This is not what I imagined."

But she didn't do that. I told her at the time, "I thank you for not giving up. I know it's tough. I know it has to be an incredible feeling to be in the middle of not knowing if you're doing the right things for your kids—not knowing if you're doing the right things for your marriage."

But the fact that—like I said—she stuck it out—the fact that we were able to come closer together and not allow cracks in the foundation of our marriage—I just appreciated her even more and loved her even more for that.

Ron: And your empathy—communicating back to her, "Thank you for telling me. Thank you for including—this must be hard for you." Boy, that's huge, because it's you getting outside of just how it impacts you and stepping into her shoes and seeing that she is in an awkward situation and that you're sensitive to that. That has to make it a little bit easier for you to trust him with hard things—I would think.

Ronnie: It is—I mean— it was. I definitely appreciated him just because I knew that he was trying. He is not perfect, I always say that I feel like people expect stepparents to be perfect parents. Like he had never even been a parent before. I—over the years, I've seen myself—I'm just an imperfect parent. I just get forgiven over and over and over. Because I'm a biological parent, I have room for mistakes.

I feel like with stepparents, sometimes we just hold them to a higher standard. What if he blew up one day or what if the way he responded to something was not the right way? That will get held against a step parent. That will. They don't have any room for not being the perfect parent.

I would ask people, just to take a step back and remember that you're an imperfect parent and the stepparent is an imperfect parent as well. They're going to grow and become better parents. I think people don't have the patience for that—to see that develop even in them. He was 28. I was in my 30's when we got married.

But to your point, Ron, I just appreciate Lamar because a lot of times he may have wanted to do things differently, but he didn't because of how he saw it impacted me. He may have been in his right to do certain things because this is his home or this is whatever, but I saw him change course a lot of times just because of the way that I felt or maybe I came and talked to him or I saw him pull back and say, "Let me look at this," or just change his behavior just because he wanted to make sure that I was alright. I think if we do that for each other, we'll make it through the difficulties.

Ron: Yes. Do you remember any of those moments where you felt like you had to—you were really being sensitive to how it was impacting her and you let something go?

Lamar: Yes, definitely so—I think a lot of times—even with our son in those early days—a lot of times there would be things where if he was my biological son, I probably would have been more forceful towards discipline and things like that.

One of the things he would even say sometimes is, “You don’t treat me like—” once we had our children together, “—you don’t treat me like you treat your kids.” One of the things that I would always think is, “Actually, if you were my biological kid, you’d probably get treated a little bit worse and get dealt with a little bit differently.” But there were times when he would do things and I would let it go.

But the kind of things that really pushed me over the edge more so, was when I saw him doing things to her. Because I can kind of let some stuff go if you’re not doing this thing or you’re not doing that or ways you disregard me. But because of my love for her, what I didn’t feel like doing was seeing her disrespected / seeing her stressing and worried or having to hit the roof because of different actions he may have been taking.

Ron: Did you find yourself speaking up when it was about her?

Lamar: Oh, definitely so. I think a lot of times I would share her—it would almost be—sometimes I would have to share with Ronnie because she may not like me getting involved in certain things. Well, for me not to get involved, I need you to not let him take it there. Because at a certain point I felt like almost as a man—I don’t know if it’s the macho / I don’t know if it’s the father / I don’t know if it’s bravado / whatever—but at a certain point I feel like I have to get involved.

So I would even tell her, “Okay, before it gets to level ten, I need you to interject at level six and make sure that he’s not going back and forth with you too many times—because after the fifth or sixth volley, then I’m going to interject myself and tell him, ‘Hey, you don’t talk to your mother like that,’ or ‘Hey, whatever she told you, you just need to actually go do it and not have a conversation about it.’”

Ronnie: I noticed that he actually would come before even a situation would escalate—he would say, “I’m looking ahead. You need to talk to the kids about this.” So just like allowing me to be the main person to discipline but also letting me know as far as my home and the levels of respect or things going on in it, “Let’s have a conversation because it’s kind of getting out of hand.”

Ron: How did that feel to you? He’s coming. He’s kind of saying, “Look, I’m seeing some things. I’m asking you to handle this because I know you can and I probably shouldn’t.” Did that feel comfortable for you? Did it feel like he was criticizing your kids? How did that feel?

Ronnie: Sometimes it felt good. Sometimes it was like, “Ah man, now he’s on me,”—just to be honest. I would love to say I was so mature and I was like, “You know what—thank you.” But I wasn’t—I didn’t have that kind of response all of the time.

Ron: Sure.

Ronnie: Looking back on it, I definitely appreciate it because I see what he was trying to do. He would—but sometimes I would just roll my eyes or what have you—but sometimes when I let it sit in, I knew—I knew regardless of what my response was I knew that that was like a wakeup call. Sometimes I’m like, “Well, I don’t even know what else to do because I’ve already tried my best. I’ve already exhausted all my parental tactics and skills.”

Ron: So taking his thoughts on it gave you another tool for your toolbox in some ways.

Ronnie: It did, or it made me wake up and say, “Well, you better figure something else out. It’s not over and it is escalating.”

Ron: I’ve just got to commend both of you because that is such a delicate situation. But you guys both handled it so incredibly well—even on your side, and of course, not every time did it go smoothly.

But the process of Lamar—you recognizing, “I have some limits in my role at this point with my stepson in what I can do and what I can’t do.” Yet, you don’t give up. You speak to your wife, but you recognize she has a role with him that she can play. Mom’s mom and that’s a clearly defined relationship, and so you’re still getting the parenting done.

I think that’s something a lot of stepdads in particular—they feel like, “Well, if I don’t do it, it’s not going to happen.” Well, there is another path and the path sometimes is through working with your wife—talking, “Let’s come to terms about how we’re going to deal with this. Let’s create a plan and go where the power is.” You’re still getting it done.

I call that responsible smart stepdad kind of behavior, right? And you received it and heard it and maybe his point of view was five banter back and forth between your son is too much, and you’re like, “Hey, I could go for seven or eight. I’m okay with this.” Sometimes tolerances are different between parents.

Ronnie: Yes, definitely.

Ron: And yet, you talk and you say, “Well, maybe there is something to this. Maybe I do need to head it off when we’re at four rather than letting it go all the way to ten. Because when he gets in—when Lamar steps in—then it might not be pretty, so we need to figure out another way around that.” That’s really good.

I’m coming back to this. How was all this affecting your marriage? There’s these external forces—people speaking into your situation. There’s these voices for you, Ronnie, saying, “Why did you do this? You don’t really need this guy.” Lamar, you’re picking up on some of that. How did that sit in your marriage?

Lamar: I think it was tough. I definitely think it was tough because we were newlyweds still. Neither one of us—even though Ronnie had children—she hadn’t been married—I

hadn't been married before. Not only were we dealing with just regular new couple issues / communication issues / unfulfilled expectation issues on who's doing chores, who's doing dishes, who's cooking—all this kind of stuff, but then it's all the blended stepfamily issues on top of it.

I think sometime it just created incredible stress in our relationship / in the family—where on top of that—I always say—a lot of times we could have had all of our children together and disagreed on discipline. Just because we had the children together doesn't mean that we see discipline. Just because we grew up the same way seeing the same way with discipline—the same way what we think is right. But now because this is a stepfamily situation, what may have been a level-five issue is now level ten.

Because before we had kids, Ronnie said, it was, “Are you treating the kids this way just because they're not yours?” I'm trying to tell her, “No, this is just what I think kids should do as far as discipline.” She's thinking, “That's what you're saying but I can't really see the proof of that because you don't have any children?”

Even when we began to have children together, it just was trying to get on the same page and—like I said—having the frustration of going through things with the kids and trying to figure out—what I can say—what can't I say? If I go and I say, “Hey I think he or she shouldn't have done x, y, and z,” Ronnie may blow up at me and say, “Hey, don't talk about my kids like that.”

But I'm thinking, “I would talk about my kids that way if they were doing that.” But I don't think she believed that at the time. I think it definitely caused incredible stress and additional levels of pain and hurt on top of what would have been a learning situation anyway.

Ron: Sure, they're not just parenting eggshells you're walking on at that point. It's marriage eggshells because now you're angry with each other.

Lamar: Definitely, I just remember there were times when I would just pray to God and ask and just wonder, “Is this how a divorce starts?” Because I would always see the end of a divorce but I never knew what were the cracks that led to it along the way. It just would appear. A couple—you'd think they were perfect one day and they'd show up and, “Yeah, things didn't work out.” You're like, “Hold—where did that come from?”

I remember there were literally times when I just would sit and think, “Is this the beginning path to how divorce starts?” It really was thoughts like that that made me say, “We have to do something about this.”

Ron: So did you guys kind of, “Hey, we've got to get a handle on this”?

Ronnie: Yes, I definitely think we actually had a conversation. After one really big blowup, we had a conversation and I remember Lamar reassuring me like, “Even

though we're not on the same page or we don't agree right now, I still love you and I want this to work." We actually really said that to each other.

Then just really got intentional about it—"What are we doing with our family and what are we doing with our marriage and what are we doing with our family?" When we really got committed to our marriage and family and started getting resources—just attending marriage events.

Our church had a marriage ministry—was a really good one called "Marriage Made Easy." We would go to that and just get some things for our marriage—resources for our marriage—attending conferences—actually, eventually coming upon specific resources for blended families and stepfamilies and reading those and reading how we should handle discipline and things like that. That helped—really getting intentional about what we were doing, not only just for the step family, but also for our marriage—like really taking care of our marriage.

Ron: Did you have to take care of our marriage with some of those external voices? Was there ever a time like, "All right, we've got to do something about this"?

Ronnie: Yes, I think it was just like really setting boundaries. It was like setting boundaries.

Ron: What did that look like for you?

Ronnie: To me, it was like we just didn't come around them as much. We had to protect the kids and protect the messaging that was coming into, not just our kids, but to me—to Lamar. It was not necessarily cutting people off 100% but just letting them know that we're kind of like setting some boundaries and pulling back for a while. I really think that helped. That really helped.

Ron: Some couples that I talk to say, "We had to have a really hard conversation," or "We just had to politely say, 'No, Mom, we're not going to do it that way anymore. Please stop saying that. That's not happening.'" That there was a moment in time where they had to find their courage and set that boundary. Did that happen for you guys?

Ronnie: I mean we had conversations but just—I mean to me that just doesn't always worked out that way where you can say, "Hey this is how I feel," and they say, "Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, we respect that. Let's move on happily." Sometimes it's like, "If you don't see it this way, we need to take a step back for a while," and that's what we had to do.

Ron: So for you it was managing time and space.

Ronnie: Yes.

Ron: And that sent the message that, “Look this marriage matters.”

Ronnie: I think that sent the message that this marriage matters, but I think also just being dedicated to each other. The best recipe for all of that is showing that we are going to be successful married couple regardless of what you say. So over time they see, “Oh my gosh, they’re just getting stronger. They just love each other. They’re supporting each other. What else can I say? There’s nothing I can do that’s going to break that up.”

We just had to show a united front and we just had to show that we were growing in spite of—despite everything that’s coming at us, we just kind of hunkered down and just got tighter with each other. I felt like that time and them seeing, “Oh, that’s not going anywhere.”

Ron: Permanence.

Ronnie: Yes. “That’s not going anywhere” and it’s just like, “Okay, let me just try a different approach.” I really felt like that was what it took with the extended family because we’re not having those challenges anymore. It’s like it’s just useless to even try us in that way.

Ron: They’ve accepted that your marriage matters and this is your family.

Ronnie: Exactly.

Lamar: And I was going to actually say the exact same thing Ronnie said. I think what it is—is realizing that our love for each other isn’t going anywhere / our relationship isn’t going anywhere so coming up against that is futile at some point, right? It’s not working. Like Ronnie said—not even that it is just sustaining but it’s beginning to flourish and it’s getting better and then also realizing that the grass is always greener on the other side.

It’s all these things that you’re pouring into the kids and you’re saying, “No they could never do that. They could never do this right. You guys are just doing it all wrong.” But then, as you start to receive those same things from the kids yourself, you know Ronnie would start to get calls, “Hey the kids are doing this. The kids are doing that.” We’re saying, “Yeah.” Pretty much what we were saying before but things just got flipped around on us.

But like Ronnie said—really just the stability of our marriage—and if there’s one thing I wanted couples to focus on I think that would be it. And then in my mind one of the other questions you had asked a moment ago—I was also thinking—what it was to me through all those different things is that in my heart, I felt like it would only be a season.

We were going through so many things with the kids. They were younger. In my thinking—even though I wondered, “Is this how a divorce starts”—I was worried about, “Is

this how a divorce starts? Will Ronnie be cracked? Will just people coming at her all the time / will the kids coming at her all the time make her just say, 'Hey,' like I said—throw up my hands and leave?"

My intention was not to go anywhere. That's what I was worried about was I knew she just—I felt that she was being attacked from so many different sides—but how I felt like it is—this is just a season. I don't know if the kids will come around or not, but at a certain point, they won't be living in the house with us.

Even if it's still crazy, it won't be crazy every single day. It won't be "clean up your room" every single day, right. Because we'll get to a stage when they're not cleaning up their room here—they're cleaning up their room at their own house. [Laughter]

Just viewing it that way, I think helped me as well of knowing that the situation, as it stands right now, is not permanent. Even if things don't get better the way I want them to, it won't be exactly the way it is now.

Ron: So there was hope in all of that for you. This is a hard season but they're still hope.

Lamar: Yes.

Ron: Even if it's just the kids moving out, things will get easier. But you were more optimistic / you were hopeful about what was going to happen for the two of you and your family.

Lamar: Yes.

Ron: When you guys had to start setting those boundaries, it sounds like you did it and that you reinforced—not only to everybody outside your family—but to one another, more importantly—"Yes, we're in. This is going to last, and he or she is committed to me."

Lamar: Definitely so. I definitely feel like there was a point when we turned the corner where those thoughts of "Is this how divorce starts?" went away. I never doubted whether Ronnie would be there / whether she would not be there / whether people would be able to impact her because I had saw how solid she was and how she was just rock solid in the relationship / in the marriage. I felt like if they weren't able to penetrate that, then there'd be nothing that would be able to penetrate that down the line.

Ron: You've been listening to my conversation with Lamar and Ronnie Tyler. I'm Ron Deal and this is FamilyLife Blended.

We'll hear one last thought from Lamar and Ronnie in just a minute. You know—at one point he made a good observation—when he first met Ronnie's kids, the impression was

good on all sides—she thought it was good—he thought it was good—the kids seemed to respond well, so Ronnie and Lamar just made the assumption that things would be good from that point forward between her kids and him.

That is a huge pothole for a lot of dating couples. It makes sense that you would think that. Everybody's on their best behavior during that season of life. Everybody knows what's happening and not happening here. The future stepparent is hands off and pleasant and nice and kind and not trying to tell the kids what to do. But the truth is, even throughout that entire process, there are many sides to how a child feels about their parent dating and marrying and changing the household into a blended family.

It's a long and winding road. Sometimes I call it *hot and cold responses* from children. The same child who loves the idea of Mom dating this guy—warms up quickly to him—and everything about him can turn on a dime—all of a sudden have a different response. There's multiple layers going on for kids—there's loyalty sensitivities—there's loss going on in the background—how their siblings are reacting to this whole thing.

Then there's vacillations of what's going on with the other parent or grandparents in the other home like, "My dad was okay with mom. My dad seemed to be okay with this new guy coming into mom's life. But now Dad is *not* okay with that so I'm with him. I'm not okay with it either." Kids are thermometers of the people that they care about so there's a lot of things that influence these hot and cold responses.

Now, there's a parent's side to this coin as well. Adults—we *want* to believe that it will be fine with the kids, so sometimes parents see what they want to see. Here's a few takeaways for both dating and married couples: First, don't make assumptions. Don't lean into any one particular response from a child too much. It could change pretty quickly.

Second, go slow. Let dating take time. I like to say to couples, "Time is your friend. Let it teach you where you are and what's going on with the children and listen to what you're hearing from them."

And that's number three—check in with the kids often because again they may change their tune a little bit. You just want to know where they are today.

The fourth takeaway is—don't panic if they go cold on you. Lean in / listen—what is it they're trying to say / what's their concern / what's their worry? Validate how they feel, hug that hurt whatever that is a little bit, and then step back, consider their thoughts, absorb it, pray a little bit, and decide how to move forward as you consider what you've learned from your child.

Ronnie and Lamar have a few more thoughts coming up.

If you'd like more information about them you can see it in our show notes at FamilyLife.com/podcasts. I do want you to know that we enjoy hearing from you. Your feedback means a lot to us. Positive online reviews—*wow*, those are *really* appreciated as well.

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I know you're invested in your marriage and family. That's why you're listening to this podcast. Let me suggest you pick up a copy of Ronnie and Lamar's film, *Blended*. It's available on their website BlackAndMarriedWithKids.com. You can also join us for our livestream event, *Blended and Blessed*[®], Saturday, April 27, 2019.

We'd love to have you join us. You can be part of the live audience in Minneapolis, MN. I'll be there as well. Or you can just livestream this on your smartphone or on your laptop or your church can host it for a group of couples for just \$99.

You, as an individual couple, can be a part of this on your smartphone for just \$19. An entire event designed just for blended family couples. As I said, I'll be there, along with radio personality and pastor Chris Brooks, best-selling author Shaunti Feldhahn, and popular speakers Dave and Ann Wilson, and more, as a matter of fact. Delivered right to you wherever you are. This experience offers practical help and encouragement for your blended family. I hope you'll join us. Learn more at BlendedandBlessed.com.

Be sure to visit us at FamilyLife.com/blended for articles, videos, resources for blended families including my *Smart Stepfamily* Series of books and curriculum for churches.

Now here's a final word from Ronnie and Lamar Tyler:

Ron: Here's the story that I'm hearing—you guys discovered in creating the film *Blended*, you're walking a similar journey to a lot of people. Here's the way that journey seems to go for a lot of people / here's the way it went for you—high expectations before marriage / a lot of positive things happening between different people and parts of the family relationships / get married / discover “Wow there's some things that don't fit easily” / get discouraged / get disillusioned—“Where are we—what's going on?”

There's some voices outside that are speaking in creating a little havoc like, “So what do I do with that? Will the other person honor me?”—some questions looming over your

heads / some struggles in stepparent/stepchild relationship / figuring that out and how do we work together as a parenting team and ultimately making this decision like, “We’re going to guard this marriage. We are really going to leave and cleave. There’s a permanence here that—we’re not going to let all that external stuff tear us apart.” Is that right?

Ronnie: Yes, exactly right.

Ron: That’s where you turned the corner.

Ronnie: Yes.

Ron: Not only did things get better for the two of you, but it began to turn the corner for the family.

Ronnie: That’s right.

Lamar: It definitely did. When I look back to that time now, where we’re at today is somewhere totally different to where our son—I feel like he’s my buddy now.

Ron: Cool.

Lamar: Times we hang out—he comes over to the house—he’s going to wrap me up in a 15-minute conversation about the latest computer processor. I just nod my head [Laughter] as I sit there through the whole thing. He’s excited to come over to the house and excited to be a part of the family—which is just a total opposite of how he was through those teenage years.

Ron: Wow!

Lamar: He looks forward to coming over and he wants to play with his little sisters and he’s bringing his virtual reality games and wants me to do it and Ronnie to do it. It’s just really a totally different place.

Ron: Next time, we’ll hear from Melanie Anthony as she offers *Daily Bread Encouragement for the Starving Step Mom*.

Melanie: You know, my husband will say, “You know there are some good parts about being a stepmom.” I’m like, “I *know* there are. It’s a blessing.” I feel like God chose me, but it’s also very hard.” Sometimes he reminds me—he goes, “You talk about how hard it is too much—like you don’t talk about the blessing and the value that you add to them and that they add to you.”

Ron: That’s Melanie Anthony next time on FamilyLife Blended.

I'm Ron Deal. Thanks for listening. Thanks to our FamilyLife legacy partners for making this podcast possible.

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