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Episode 13: Calming Angry Kids

Guest: Tricia Goyer
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Tricia: Last month my daughter kicked a hole in the wall because she was angry. “Go ahead and call the case worker.” I’m like, “We’re not going to call the case worker. You don’t have a case worker anymore, you’ve been adopted for two years.” But still, that’s her go-to thing—that we’re going to send her away. It’s just something that’s deep in there that’s been there since she was a little girl.

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.

Does your childhood or previous relationships ever creep into your current ones? You’ll want to listen to today’s podcast if you’ve ever noticed that certain themes tend to repeat themselves and you’re going to want to listen if you’ve ever had an angry kid in your home and you’ve wondered what to do about it.

We’re going to be talking about that and so much more with my guest, Tricia Goyer. She’s a USA Today best-selling author. She and her husband, John, and their large family live in Little Rock, Arkansas. Hey, that’s where I live! She’s a conference speaker, podcaster and has been interviewed by numerous national T.V. and radio programs and magazines.

Tricia is an award-winning author who writes both historical fiction and non-fiction related to family and parenting. I asked her about her prolific writing career. Being an author myself, I know a little bit about how hard it is to publish a book, so I asked her how many books she’s published to this point.

Tricia: Over 70—I think it’s 72 or 73. I don’t know. I’m losing track.

Ron: Okay, that’s amazing that you’re losing track because I know every single one of mine. [Laughs] You’ve written *so much*. Like, how do you do that—one author to another—how have you managed to do that?

Tricia: Well, I’ve always had kids at home so it’s almost like mommy time. Mommy time—Mommy has to go work now. I get a couple of hours by myself in my own little world and I get to focus on that for a while instead of the laundry, the kids, the challenges of motherhood.

Ron: Wow. Now you just said you've "always had kids." You do have a lot of kids. Tell us how many.

Tricia: We have 10 kids.

Ron: Okay. Some of them are adopted; right?

Tricia: Yes. I had Cory—I was a teen mom, so I had him in high school, and my husband, John—when I met and married him—he adopted Cory. We had two more biological kids and then—in the last, I think, nine years now—we've adopted seven kids.

Ron: There's some sibling groups in those seven; right?

Tricia: Yes. We got the youngest one we got just from a birth mom, we connected with her through a mutual friend. Then we have a sibling group of two from foster care that are now eleven and eight. And a sibling group of four girls that are now between the ages of eighteen and fourteen.

Ron: Wow. Okay, that's busy. There's just a lot going on. To say that you've always had kids and you needed mommy time—[Laughter]

Tricia: Yes. I started writing when I had—I was pregnant with my third. So literally I've always had kids at home as I'm balancing the writing, the ministry, and then being a mom.

Ron: Speaking of writing—back to the genres—you've written historical fiction, devotional books, non-fiction, self-help, and the most recent one that we're going to talk about is *Calming Angry Kids*—we're going to come back to that in just a minute. You also wrote a book some people will know of as a movie—*Mom's Night Out*.

Tricia: Yes, I wrote a novelization for the movie.

Ron: That's great! That was a few years ago. What a fun, fun movie that really was. That must have been fun to be behind the scenes working with that project.

Tricia: Absolutely. Then we got to walk at the red carpet—here's the movie stars ahead of me.

Ron: Oh wow!

Tricia: They're answering questions and I'm like, "Okay, I'm a mom that's just suddenly in this world." It was pretty fun.

Ron: That's pretty cool! You've written some books about Amish family life. Is that a genre?

Tricia: It is—Amish fiction—It's a big genre.

Ron: It *is* a big genre. If you're listening right now and you've never heard of that before it's because you don't read those books, but there are a lot of people who do and you've written a number of them.

It occurred to me—as I was looking through on Amazon—all the books that you've written and I saw those—it occurred to me—I know a little bit about your life and sometimes the pristine picture that we might imagine in an Amish family story is not your personal story. Is that true?

Tricia: It's so true and I think the Amish—you know—I never thought about that before—you are so good at pulling that stuff out of me! I think the Amish world is definitely like the kind of world I wanted to grow up—with Dad out in the fields and Mom in the kitchen—and that wasn't the type of world that I grew up in at all.

Ron: Tell us about the world you did grow up in.

Tricia: My mom was a single mom—she had me when she was in college and I didn't know my biological dad growing up at all. So always was that hole, I didn't know who he was or why he wasn't around.

My mom married my stepdad when I was four and then my little brother was born soon afterward. He was a good guy—he provided for us but he was very distant. I don't remember ever conversations with him. He was like always in the La-Z-Boy watching sports. He was around but it wasn't someone I could go sit on his lap or talk to him.

My mom was involved so she would go to our games and that sort of thing but he was very distant and just there. He was a Vietnam veteran so I think a lot of it was just trying to deal with the war and aftermath and trying to live a normal life afterward.

Ron: Yes. So is it fair to say that your mom was present and available in your life? Stepdad was not.

Tricia: Right.

Ron: Biological dad was not.

Tricia: Right.

Ron: Looking for a masculine person in your life—did that end up being something that was important or relevant to how you lived life?

Tricia: Absolutely. When I was an early teen I became sexually active. I think it was just looking for someone to love me, to appreciate me, to tell me I was beautiful and so here of course—teenage boys—they were ready and available to do that for me.

I ended up facing two teen pregnancies. I had an abortion when I was fifteen—which is something I *really* regret—and then got pregnant again at 17 and had my son. It was just this emptiness inside that it wasn't until after I became pregnant the second time that I ended up turning to God and realizing that He loves me and cares for me—but for so many years I just wanted to be loved and cared for.

Ron: If you don't mind, let's just unpack a little bit more.

Tricia: Okay.

Ron: I know there's a lot of blended families listening to us right now—parent, stepparent, and they are eagerly working hard to establish bonds within their family. Striving to bridge the gap in the generations, stepparent to stepchild and to hear your story it's like here you were looking for that from your stepfather—at least on some level you were. He may not have been a really safe person to be around, like you, it sounds like you didn't know how to relate to him.

Tricia: Right.

Ron: Because he was distant kind of removed but you would have liked for that to have happened. Is that true?

Tricia: Yes, very much so. I remember one memory where he actually sat around the dinner table with us and I had just gotten a tape recorder for Christmas and he told stories and he laughed and joked. It was like this 30-minute episode that really stands out as the ONE time where he was involved in our lives.

I think, especially because my younger brother was his biological son, I saw more of a connection with them, so really felt that I was the odd man out because it was this little family unit with my mom and my step dad and my brother and then I was the one to like—I was the one always doing my own homework and getting good grades—like trying to get approval—but I felt still disconnected.

Ron: Man, how defeating that must have felt for you as a child.

Tricia: I think looking back you could see that but when you're just young—

Ron: You just don't know any different.

Tricia: —you just don't know any different. I'm thankful that my grandparents were in town and I spent a lot of time with them. I felt a lot of love and a lot of care and attention from them. They were my safe place where I could go and know that I'd be fully accepted by them.

Ron: Somewhere in there you're still longing for your biological dad?

Tricia: I really never—I mean now a lot of people talk about finding parents or siblings and I never thought to ask because I thought, "Well if my mom's not bringing it up, it must be something she doesn't want to talk about." I did know just always that my stepdad wasn't my biological dad, but I never really stopped and asked questions like, "Where is he?" or "Who is he?" I think just basically I thought, "Because she's not talking about it maybe it's a subject that I shouldn't be talking about either."

Ron: Interesting. So you didn't—on the outside—express what was going on on the inside?

Tricia: Right. Absolutely—but I always thought, "Maybe if I'm good enough he'll come and find me." It was always that approval, like I've got to do things to be good for people to love and appreciate me. Even as a little girl, I remember thinking, "If I get good grades he'll come back." Which I never—it's so weird thinking about it now—like I never talked about with my mom, it was just something I felt inside.

Ron: Yes. By the way, for the listener, just an observation that's something that's pretty common in all of us—when we're children we think we're all that powerful, like, "If I'm good enough you know this will make this thing happen that I really want to have happen." Kids really have deep longings in their heart, even if they're not articulating those longings. Sometimes parents just forget if our kids don't make it obvious to us what's going on inside them we kind of just assume nothing's going on inside them.

I can see stepparents listening right now going, "Yeah, my stepkids don't want a relationship with me." I'm not so sure about that—sometimes they're confused by their relationship with you. Sometimes they are deeply loyal to their biological parent and so they're not really sure where to put you. But there's some part of them that enjoys you and likes this and wants more of you—but just is not sure what to do with it all. I think that's maybe a takeaway for our listener.

So your journey to find your father, did that continue into adulthood?

Tricia: It wasn't until I was in my mid-twenties that I finally asked my mom about it. Even as I started writing and I was a mom myself I thought, "Okay I'm going to get a book published and then I'm going to meet my biological dad." Again, even as an adult I'm thinking, "I need to *be* someone before I find this person."

I end up connecting with him when I was 28 years old. My mom told me his name and I found him on the internet within two minutes. She called him and he was super excited to meet me so we talked on the phone and I thought, “This is great, this is perfect, this is what I wanted.”

He said he’d call me the next day and there was no call and there was no call. A couple of days later I finally call him back and he said, “Well my wife doesn’t want me to have anything to do with you or she’s going to get a divorce.” So I finally find him, found out I had four sisters, which I grew up with my one brother. Then I thought, “This is perfect,” until I talk to him a couple of days later and realize that again I’m not important enough for him to make the effort.

He would send Christmas cards and we ended up going down in his area on vacation and seeing him, but really—for many, many years there was hardly any contact—until one of my sisters found out about me and kept asking about it and then finally we were able to connect. I have a good relationship with my sisters, which is cool.

Ron: Wow! I mean what buildup—and then disappointment—buildup and disappointment. Where do you put that—if you don’t mind my asking—where do you put that in your heart?

Tricia: You know, when I first found him it was like, “Okay this is exactly what I wanted.” He was excited about me—there was no question he was, “You’re going to meet me.” And then that disappointment is like, “Okay, again, I’m not good enough for you to fight for me.” I thought, “Come on, get a backbone! Tell your wife, ‘This is my daughter I want a relationship with her.’” So again it was that kind of the feelings of the little kid inside coming back around like, “Okay fight for me.”

Ron: Yes; right. Like, “I’m valuable. He’s interested in me.”

Tricia: Right.

Ron: Then, “No I’m not valuable.”

Tricia: But then it didn’t—I realized—it didn’t matter if I had a book published—that—it wasn’t important.

Ron: It wasn’t within your power.

Tricia: Yes.

Ron: You kind of came to the end of that as well which had to bring about some sadness—some loss.

Tricia: Really, I almost thought, “Okay if he doesn’t want something to do with me I could find my sisters,” and I thought, “I’m going to fight for this—I’m going to find them.” But then really—after I prayed about it—was like God just told me to just wait and trust Him, like I didn’t need to fight for these relationships—that He knew the relationships I had and just needed to trust Him with it. It was six years, but one of my sisters reached out to me.

Ron: Wow, I’m glad that you have that relationship and I pray that maybe more will develop as a result.

Tricia, last fall at the Summit on Stepfamily Ministry you were gracious enough to join a panel of people talking about growing up in a blended family—and kind of behind the scenes—I remember you making a comment that gave me the impression that that journey opened up some stuff for you.

It allowed you to talk about a part of your life you don’t normally get to when you’re speaking at conferences or perhaps even writing books. Talk around that. Just share with us what has that done for you to be able to talk about growing up in a blended family.

Tricia: Absolutely. When we first connected I thought, “Okay, we have all these adopted kids, that’s what Ron wants to talk about.” Then it’s like, “Oh wait. I’m from a blended family.” It was like, I never really thought about that before and how much it impacted my life.

So really—at that conference—was the first time I started talking about my own experiences as a child growing up with a stepdad—feeling alone and even abandoned, I guess—in my own family. That was the first time I was able to talk about it and share about it. I think part of it too—because my mom, my stepdad, my biological dad—they’re all still alive out there—it’s always like I don’t want to say anything that’s going to hurt them.

Ron: Sure. Out of respect for them—

Tricia: Absolutely.

Ron: —honoring them and I think that’s very praise worthy that you would have that kind of attitude, but at the same time there is another side to that and that’s your experience of growing up in all of that.

By the way, I just can’t help but make the observation that your back-story of longing to be valued, looking for relationships within your blended family, not really knowing where that was coming from, not finding your dad, all that kind of stuff, feeling abandoned to use your word, you have as an adult worked really hard to help kids who have been

abandoned. You've adopted seven kids that have had tough situations in their life. It's almost like you're trying to undo for them what was never undone for you.

Tricia: I think when we set out for adoption I never would have thought about it that way, but when I'm holding a child in my arms and they are crying because their biological parent isn't there—I've shared with all my kids that we've adopted about my family and my stepdad—and feeling the same way.

That there is some longing to make them feel loved and appreciated, and part of our family even though they didn't come to us as biological children, but I want them to feel like they are one hundred percent ours and we care for them and love them and accept them just as they are.

Ron: You know—I've got to say—one of the things I think is great about what God does in our lives is He helps us redeem in the next generation things that we couldn't redeem in a previous generation—or in our own lives. We can pour into others and give them what we didn't get. It's kind of like the worst part of us becomes the best part of us when God gets ahold of it—and you're doing that. I just want to say, "Thank you."

Tricia: Thank you.

Ron: Let me connect another dot here—from your childhood—to the book that you've just released, *Calming Angry Kids*. You say in your book and I quote, that your stepdad, "went from calm to slap-you-on-the-side-of-the-head angry in fifteen seconds." You've already said he was kind of distant and removed and you didn't know how to please him and get approval from him—and wow—he had a temper.

Tricia: He did have a temper.

Ron: So where does that leave you as a kid?

Tricia: In my room, doing my homework, trying to be good, stay out of his way.

Ron: Wow—so avoiding.

Tricia: Avoiding.

Ron: Trying to be really good, I don't know if perfect is the right word but finding approval through performing well.

Tricia: Absolutely.

Ron: Yes—and afraid of him.

Tricia: Yes, very much.

Ron: Wow. I know that set you up to deal with anger—because we’re going to get eventually—to a story where now your kids had some anger issues and you as the parent have to respond well to that. That’s coming—listener hold on—we’re previewing what is to come.

But at this point in the story you’re still trying to deal with his anger in this case—and not really knowing where to put it or what to do with it. Right now I’m thinking about a stepparent who’s listening and if they have an anger problem and they’re trying to figure out a relationship with one of their stepchildren—what would you say to them about managing that anger problem?

Tricia: You know, I think all of us get angry. I think one of the things—especially if we’re dealing with a child that’s being disobedient or angry—one of the things that I’ve learned since then is that those responses will happen. Our heart will start pounding, our fists will tense up and we’ll feel the anger—like our body is made to respond that way—but we don’t have to express it.

We can send up a prayer. We can take a deep breath. We can open our fist. We don’t have to express the anger. I never thought I had an anger problem. I was always like the really chill mom until I had these angry kids in my face and then I found my voice raising and my, “You get back here!” It was that I learned that I don’t have to express the anger myself—I don’t have to yell at them—I can act in a calm way. When I act in a calm way then I can model for them what it looks like to be angry and to respond in calmness.

Ron: I really appreciated—in your book—you talked about that that it came full circle. You found yourself as an adult beginning to have some anger problems. You never thought you’d be there, but all of a sudden all this stuff that was modeled for you—that you saw—just kind of came out of you. I think that’s pretty common. I guess what I hear you saying is, “Yes, it happens—and we are responsible to try to learn how not to respond that way.”

Tricia: Absolutely! I think before—with my biological kids—we raised them, we had a loving home, we weren’t angry, they didn’t respond in anger—so I never had to be tested in the area—until I had someone in my face, pushing all my buttons. Then it’s like—all of a sudden it was like, “This is the real test.” This is—how do I respond to this teenager when she turns, says, “Whatever.” Or “I’m running away.” Or all these types of things?

I can’t control them with my body physically. I can’t control them with my words—I can’t talk her into obeying. I’d find my voice raising and raising and raising—and I realized that doesn’t control them either.

Ron: That's good—so, “pushed your buttons”—I heard you say that. What kind of buttons is that for you?

Tricia: Oh, they would say stuff like, “You love your other kids more,” or “You are just adopting us to get attention.” I was like, “Really, I wouldn't be going through all of this just to get attention.” Or, “You just want to write a book about us.” I was like, “Well eventually I probably will write a book about you.”

Ron: At least you're honest.

Tricia: Yes.

Ron: But yes, that's not the sole purpose. By the way those little guilt trips that kids throw at us—those are pretty common; right?

Tricia: They are.

Ron: I think there's some real parallels here. Yes, I know your situation for our listener, Tricia's situation is adopted kids but it can be similar with biological kids, your own children and stepchildren. Sometimes they don't always perceive well our motivations—and here they were accusing you of having selfish motivations. You're going, “No, no, no, no! I'm pure in heart—I don't know why you can't see that.” But that hit your buttons. That would set you off and you would find yourself getting angry.

Tricia: I think with them, they had so many people in their past who said, “I love you, I'm not going to abandon you.” They had a failed adoption right before us and their biological parents who said, “I promise I'll get better. I'm going to come back. You're going to come home with me.”

So for me to say, “I promise you're in our forever family. We're never going to hurt you.” It's like they've heard this 100 times from all of these different people and suddenly—and I really—looking back now—and we've gone to therapy, which has been wonderful for all of us.

They were just wanting to be bad enough so that we would finally let them go back to foster care so they didn't have to put down that wall. I think that wall was around their hearts and they were afraid to lower the wall—they were afraid to be vulnerable—they were afraid to let us in. So they are going to push and push and push—to push us out of the way so that we'd send them back.

Ron: That is so important for our listeners. That is a huge takeaway! Sometimes kids have a wall built up that has very little to do with you—it has to do with their past and their pain and what triggers that pain—then comes out on you and you get blamed for that—but it's about them self-protecting.

Tricia: It is.

Ron: That's just like adults—I mean—we can all relate to that. We did—in another podcast—we talked about betrayal and deception and how that, as adults, creates in us a distrust towards our spouse, for example—or a previous spouse—and now it's lingering into this new relationship and now I have a hard time trusting you with me. Well, I think kids are exactly the same; don't you?

Tricia: Yes, and even I thought, “Okay. Once adoption is finalized, they're going to be okay—like, they're going to know.”

Ron: Like, “That'll seal the deal.”

Tricia: And as soon as last month my daughter kicked a hole in the wall because she was angry. “Go ahead and call the case worker.” I'm like, “We're not going to call the case worker. You don't have a case worker any more—you've been adopted for two years.” But still that's her go-to thing—that we're going to send her away. It's just something that we're trying to work on—we're trying to read God's word and pray with her about—but it's something that's deep in there—that's been there since she was a little girl.

Ron: Yes. You know, man, that is so important because I think all of us struggle with, “Is God going to send me away? I've sinned again. He's got to be getting tired of this.” I mean, I have those thoughts—I don't know about you—but I think it's fairly easy for us to have that same sort of fear about even how we relate to God. Of course they would assume that, “Everybody else sends me away, this is the story of my life. You're going to do the same thing.”

Tricia: Yes, that's so good. I think even after I adopted kids I was still trying to keep the house perfectly clean and having well-behaved kids—and they'd act out someplace and I'd want to explain myself—because I don't want to look like a bad mom. I remember one day in the laundry room just being so overwhelmed. I mean, we added seven kids—that's a lot of laundry. That's a lot of work. Just being like, “I can't keep up.”

I felt God—His still small voice—saying, “I love you just as much as if you have a pile of laundry as if you kept this house perfectly clean.” I was like, “Okay!” It was almost that continual reminder to me—like, I don't have to perform, I don't have to be perfect—even with these kids I'm going to mess up—and I have messed up, but God still loves me.

Ron: Isn't that ironic that you're kind of having the same thoughts about God in your relationship that they're having with you.

Tricia: Yes.

Ron: Their relationship with you.

Tricia: And I'll share that with them, like, "I have these feelings too—and I want to perform—and this is what I felt God telling me." I think especially with the older girls I'm able to have those conversations with them more and more, and they are able to talk to me about, "I had a really bad dream last night that you and Daddy dropped us off at the DHS office." They're still struggling with that, but we have at least those conversations now where we can talk about that.

Ron: Wait a minute—because I think there's a real tool in there—you get vulnerable about your fears, concerns, worries—stuff going on between you and God as a way of articulating to them what? Like, "Hey, Mom's not perfect either"?

Tricia: Absolutely.

Ron: That opens them up to be vulnerable with you and their fears and concerns even as it relates to you. It's easy to talk about my fears in relation to somebody else not in the room, but Mom this is about you and me—and they're even sharing those with you.

Tricia: Yes.

Ron: That's powerful because you're using that fear and that concern as a tool to move you closer to the heart of your child and to show them that they are safe to do the same with you. I've got to tell you, that is awesome!

Tricia: Yes. I think the more I apologize, the more I explain my own worries and fears, then it is—it is just giving them a welcome mat to do the same with me. It usually—that conversation will usually continue with them sharing something that they're struggling with.

Ron: I will throw in a caveat for the blended family couples listening right now—try this. I think in general it's a good strategy—you be vulnerable first. It kind of helps kids later be vulnerable with you. They may not do it immediately—it may take them quite a bit of time depending upon how big their walls are and how thick they are—but at least moves them in that direction.

There are exceptions though. I think a stepparent could try that and discover that it backfires for whatever reason—that a child uses it against you—shares something to the other household, for example, and tries to create difficulty. So please, hear that with a try-it-and-see kind of suggestion along with it. I think in general the principle is really true—when we go first it makes it easier for them to follow.

Okay Tricia, in your book you write at one point that you and John—your husband—realized that your kids' trauma—and the anger that would come out as a result of that—was causing you guys trauma.

Tricia: Yes.

Ron: That really was the impetus for the two of you seeking some help, getting some counsel and really ultimately writing this book and being able to share with people what you learned. Talk to me about that for a minute—their trauma is creating trauma for us. That's not what you signed on for.

Tricia: No, there would be times I would be crying because someone would just yell at me. I'm an adult here but still those feelings of, "I'm just trying to love you. I'm just trying to help you here and then you're turning on me." They would team up and I think I would try to discipline one and all of a sudden other sisters would jump in to her side and it's like, "I can't win here. What is going on?"

Ron: Coalition against you.

Tricia: Yes—but I'm so thankful that John always—one hundred percent—was there to stand beside me and to back me up and to never let them make me look bad. He would always be there for me and listen to me and support me, which really helped a lot.

Ron: Okay, so looking back, what do you think their anger was about? The kids—what was their anger about?

Tricia: I think their anger was about fear of letting their wall down and being abandoned.

Ron: Okay, wow! Two biggies right there.

Tricia: Yes.

Ron: Being abandoned again. Again, the key word "again" for them because it's happened already over and over again. Then letting that wall down and being vulnerable and taking the risk of being hurt again.

Tricia: Absolutely.

Ron: When they would get angry, that would trigger in you some anger as well. What kind of reactions did you and John have? At one point in the book you talk about that hurt your emotional bond with him. You found yourself getting angry, you felt guilty on behalf of your biological kids who were kind of getting lost in the mix.

Tricia: There was so much going on there. [Laughs] I think also when you bring a child in and you think, "Okay my love's going to fix everything," and it doesn't fix anything, suddenly there's this wall that even went up between me and that child. Especially on a child that would act out more angry towards me—that would say things towards me.

Every time she'd come in the room I'd feel myself like prick up and I felt that wall coming up. Really, I just had to take it before God and pour out all my feelings and all my emotions and how I felt about it, that I wasn't hiding it from Him anyway but just getting it out there. I wrote it in a journal, put it out there, and just said, "God show me how to love her in a way that You do."

He really just made my heart tender towards her. It had to be this almost supernatural way that was like I would say, "She's so rude to me and she pushes me away and she talks to me disrespectfully." Over and over again I felt Him saying, "Look what she's gone through. She's been turned away. She's been abandoned."

Pretty soon, after prayer and crying before God—when she came downstairs anymore I felt this love for her that I hadn't experienced before and it really was just me being real with God like, "This is a really hard kid to love right now," and Him just giving me the peace that I can love her through Him—that I didn't have to try to foster this love on my own.

Ron: How transformative that moment must have been to try to see her through His eyes.

Tricia: Absolutely.

Ron: —and let go of how you were feeling about it. You actually write in your book what you journaled at one point about the kids. I'd like to just read both sides of this.

Tricia: Okay.

Ron: Then let you react to it; okay? In your book, *Calming Angry Kids*, on a bad night you write in your journal:

"I am hurt by my daughter's rejection. I give so much, and to have it rejected hurts. I feel abandoned and not good enough."

This is you talking—"I can't fix this. I can't fix her. I worry about the other kids. I want to be loved by her and I want to love her. I'm tired of being hurt. I feel angry to sacrifice so much and instead of gratitude I get defiance and rejection in return."

That's real—that's raw.

Tricia: Yes.

Ron: Then after beginning to try to see her through God's eyes, your heart softened and you wrote this—I don't know how much time's taken place between these two but what a contrast.

You write this:

“She is afraid of being hurt. She’s given so much to others and her heart is battered. She has been abandoned. She’s been told she’s not good enough. She couldn’t fix anything about her family or where she lived. She wants to love me and be loved by me but she’s afraid. No matter what she gets, she’s scared it will be taken away. She wants to reject me before she is rejected.”

Talk about what happened in *you* between A and B.

Tricia: A lot of crying. [Laughter]

It was like, four o’clock in the morning sitting on the couch feeling like, “I don’t know what to do here. I don’t know what to do with her. I don’t know how I’m going to deal with the day.” Every day was conflict. Every day was some type of getting rejected—some kind of her saying something to me—so really it was just pouring out to God. Then it was just sitting there with my Bible asking Him to change me—to change me to be able to love her.

It was probably a couple hours’ time of crying and praying and then I started looking at what I was saying through how God saw her as this little girl. I mean, she was five years old when she was first put into foster care—she was eleven years old when we first met her. That’s a lot of years.

Ron: It is.

Tricia: A lot of rejection. And even with the biological parents a lot of rejection as a little girl.

Ron: Wow! So that heart shift took place for you and I think that probably set the tone for you then to learn some practical things about managing your anger and responding to kids about their anger. Let’s just get practical for a minute.

Tricia: Okay.

Ron: Here’s some things that you feel like you had to learn—you talk about understanding the brain and strong emotional reactions, and then dealing with your own anger, and trying to manage how you respond, and calming down as being a vital part of that. Do you mind just talking around those real quick?

Tricia: Yes; absolutely. Well when—one thing the therapist helped me with is—when kids are emotional their thinking brain is turned off, so I would be trying to explain the right way to act and we shouldn’t act this way and this is how you’re making me feel which is not even getting through at all. So realizing I need to give them time to calm

down. They'd be trying to go to their room—go in to separate—and I'd be following them like, "No you need to respect me. We need to talk about this."

Realizing they do need time to calm down and afterwards we can talk about it. I think so many times we want to solve it in the moment. Sometimes it'd be the next day where I felt like we'd had a good enough relationship where we could talk about what happened yesterday. We didn't need to solve everything even that day—but we can put it off when we're both in a better state of mind to talk about what happened.

Ron: You're doing them a favor by giving them some space to calm down—and aren't you probably doing yourself a little favor?

Tricia: Absolutely. [Laughter] When they have space, I have space. I'm able to calm down. Then also think through what was going on because something usually triggered the emotion—which it'd be crazy strong emotions to what I thought was a very minor thing—but to them it triggered something that happened in the past.

Ron: By the way, that's a little tip for all of us as parents—if you continually see strong reactions from a child to something that feels rather neutral or benign—that sometimes tells you there's a back-story. There's something connected to that and that's where that strong reaction is coming from.

So, you had to calm down. By the way what you said about kids—their thinking brain goes off—happens with adults too. So finding calm is really important so that we can then choose to respond in ways that are going to be helpful.

You talked about a couple of other practical things—changing your thoughts about them, confessing your own inadequacies, and not taking the bait.

Tricia: Absolutely. I think one of the things about not taking the bait is—again, the therapist showed me—when I get emotional when I am angry, suddenly it's not about them, it's about me. So they may be doing something wrong—they might have just hit their sibling and I'm trying to discipline them and they're angry—if I get angry then suddenly it's like, "You're mean, you are yelling at me."

Suddenly it's not about them and their issue—it's about me. Then I have to go apologize later—and again, it's not about their issue. So really, the therapist said, "When you stay calm, you win." So I'll tell myself that in my mind, "When you stay calm, you win. When you stay calm, you win."

Then also giving them the skills to be able to calm down—and teaching them ahead of time—like go to your room. We have this little bag that had bubbles and a stress ball and some things—and this is ahead of time. You teach them this is what you use to calm down—so I know they are going to their room, they're calming down—I have some

space. I calm down and I'm not saying anything I'll regret, that I'll need to apologize later—and it just works better for all of us.

Ron: It's great that you're coaching them on how to self-calm because we can't be around them forever. They do have to learn that skill so that they can grow up and manage themselves a little bit better as well.

What an interesting thing—taking the bait. I'm thinking of the stepparent who's listening right now going, "I take the bait all the time," like, "I get to be the enemy just because I get hooked by those guilt trips—by that stuff that my stepchild throws at me, or sends indirectly through my spouse, their parent, then it comes to me. Then all of a sudden I'm the one who's acting out of line and the child is kind of off the hook of having to be responsible for their part of the equation."

So yes, not taking the bait ultimately puts you in more of a position of authority with the child.

Tricia: Another thing, too, is when I'm yelling or saying things that are not appropriate or acting out—then all of a sudden they become a victim. One of the things the therapist says is, "That child feels comfortable as the victim because she's been a victim—or he's been a victim, a lot—and if you don't break the cycle they're going to find people for the rest of their lives to be victims to." And I thought, "Okay I need to make them not a victim in our home."

Ron: Right, exactly. One of the other things you write about is ignoring the behavior. Okay. I'm just going to throw an objection and play devil's advocate right on the outset of this and go, "Okay, wait a minute. When they get out of line, acting disrespectful, they're calling me names—whatever it is they're doing—anger outburst, hurt siblings, taking it out of somebody—it's unfair somebody taking it out on me whatever it is."

I've heard a lot of stepdads go, "I can take a little disrespect but when my stepchild starts disrespecting their mother that's when I'm like totally getting up in their face." How do you ignore the behavior when it rises up something strong within you?

Tricia: We have a story that goes with this. We had one child in particular that every night at bedtime, she would bring something up, she would act out. It was like all the other kids were going to bed and we'd spend the next hour dealing with this child. Dealing with what she just said, dealing with how she just acted.

So I ended up talking to the therapist and they're saying, "Well she's getting a lot of individual attention from both you and your husband every night. She gets a whole hour of your time as you sit down and deal with this with her." So the therapist says, "When she acts out—whatever it is—completely ignore it."

So John and I were in the kitchen and you could see into the living room from our kitchen and she starts acting up and I don't even remember what—it'd be the littlest things that she'd get angry about and we'd have to deal with and so that night we just sat talking to each other pretending like she wasn't even there.

Pretty soon she's not getting the attention—we're talking about "Oh what should we do for dinner tomorrow?" And, "How was your day at work?"—just talking to each other. Then she goes and gets a lighter and starts lighting all the candles in the house and she's like, "What if I drop this? The house will catch on fire. Can you get the other kids out?" We're completely pretending like it's not happening.

So then she realizes that's not working she goes and I had just gotten a whole bunch of homeschool books in, a whole box of brand new books, I hear "rip, rip," and my heart is pounding in my chest. I'm telling my husband, "I can't do this."

Ron: She's escalating.

Tricia: I can't do this. She's escalating her behavior.

Ron: Trying to pull you in.

Tricia: Right; trying to pull me in. Finally, we're just like, "Well, we're going to bed." We just leave her—don't even look into the room where she's at—she's in the dining room at this point. Go to bed and we're on the other side of the room listening to see what's going on.

Ron: Panic. Do we call the police now or the fire department?

Tricia: After a couple of minutes we hear her stomping upstairs because that didn't work either. The next day I went in and she'd actually been ripping up binder paper. She hadn't actually ripped up the homeschool books but she made it sound like—she's like, "Oh a science book, rip, rip." She never did that again.

The next night when it was time to go to bed, she went up to bed. I was like, "It totally—" I don't know if it would work every time—but for that situation—she was getting so much attention from us at bedtime for acting out. When we finally didn't give her that attention she said, "Okay that didn't work," and she just went to bed.

Ron: You know, one of the things to couple along with this—if you're listening and you're going, "Alright, I guess we need to give that a try"—is as soon as you can—complement something as soon as you can—move in with attention around something that's going well and sometimes it's just the absence of a negative.

Tricia: Right.

Ron: It's like, "I noticed you didn't pick on your sister tonight before bedtime. What's that all about? That's pretty cool! Thank you for doing that." You know? Just finding something that they used to do that maybe they just slowed down even a little bit—find that one little positive step forward and complement the fire out of that so you are combining the not attention for the negative with now something good for, something in the right direction.

No fool-proof solution in any parenting strategy with any one kid. All right, let me just throw that disclaimer to our listeners. But it's worth a shot. That's a really good one.

Tricia: It's amazing that as soon as you start complementing one kid the other kids are like, "What can I do? I'm going to get my pajamas on too. I'm going to brush my teeth too." They are all running to get that complement so I'm like, "Wow, our words are powerful."

Ron: Yes. They really are even for us as adults we love hearing encouraging words and being built up with all of that.

Okay so let's just come full circle as we kind of land the plane a little bit. You grew up in a blended family, looking for something you didn't get. Found yourself kind of moving towards boys in your teen years, pregnancy couple of times. Then you're working with your own children—helping pour into them things that maybe you didn't get yourself—restoring that—redeeming that for them—and somewhere in there we get you talking about your blended family.

I'm just curious if there's you know what's happening for you now in this season of your life, both as it relates to your family you grew up in—your dad, your stepdad, all of that—and your family that you're raising. I'm wondering how those pieces are coming together.

Tricia: Yes. It's interesting now because still I don't have very much relationship with my stepdad. I have to call him—he would never call me. It's usually every three months I'll call him—he's off the phone in 10 minutes. It's like, "Hey Dad, we adopted four kids." "Oh, cool. Well I'm going to go get some donuts now." It's like—it's still—so I just for those relationships—those hard relationships—just realizing my approval comes from God.

I'm never going to please my stepdad. I don't know if it's a personality thing, if it's a Vietnam veteran—just hard type of post-traumatic stress thing—but that knowing I can still love him—I can still reach out to him but I'm not going to get that back. I think even with my mom, my biological dad—those relationships are there but I can only do so much. I can never please everybody and just coming to full circle.

Then even with our kids that we have adopted, I can love them there's still going to be conflict. I'm never, again, going to the approval—it all goes back to people can never

give us the approval we desire. We just need to realize that God's love is enough and that we are doing this to—as a way—as God says—to care for the widows and the orphans. I'm caring for them. I'm turning them over to God. I'm pouring into them His Word—as much as I can and just hope that their lives will be transformed because of that.

Ron: You've been listening to my conversation with Tricia Goyer. I'm Ron Deal and this is FamilyLife Blended®. Tricia's complex family brought her yet another surprise recently. I'll let her tell you about that in just a minute.

You know there were so many things in Tricia's book that we did not get to talk about. For example, she made this statement, "It's amazing how kids push us away when they really want us to hold them close."

Even adults do this. I think we can all relate to it in one form or fashion. We get angry and critical sometimes at someone we wish we had more of in our lives—kids do this too. You have to remember this when you're on the receiving end of that push away. Stepparents especially can feel the venom—but they don't have the internal assurance that the child really loves them.

Then there's something else—and let's be honest about this—sometimes when kids push stepparents away, they really don't want you holding them close—so how do you know the difference? Well, to be honest, you probably won't. Here's what you have to do—you have to act as if they really want you to stick around. In other words, be politely stubborn. Look past their anger and stick around long enough to get to the softer side of them that really does want you around.

If you'd like more information about our guest you can find it in our show notes at FamilyLife.com/podcast.

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We are committed to providing excellent resources for you and your family. There's some big releases I want to tell you about. We just released the tenth anniversary edition of my video curriculum, *The Smart Stepfamily*. This is an eight-session study great for small groups or a DIY enrichment program for your marriage and your family.

It's available on RightNow Media and at FamilyLife.com. In addition, this month I am releasing book number ten in the *Smart Stepfamily Series* from Bethany House Publishers. Along with my co-authors Greg Pettys and David Edwards, we're releasing the *Smart Stepfamily Guide to Financial Planning: Money Management Before and After You Blend a Family*.

Now, I've got to tell you, I think this is a must-have resource for families because we integrate our combined experiences in family relationships with day-to-day money manners and estate planning. Money divides a lot of blended families—we want to help you finance togetherness.

For you ministry leaders join us at the next Summit on Stepfamily Ministry, October 24 and 25, in Chesapeake, Virginia. This is a live, two-day ministry equipping event for lay leaders, couples, pastors—anybody trying to facilitate ministry within a local church. If you're new to stepfamily ministry you'll learn the basics. If you've got a ministry up and running, we'll help you network with others and learn about the latest resources.

That's coming up in October, the 24th and 25th, 2019. Learn more at SummitOnStepfamilies.com.

You know, blended families are full of surprises. When I was talking with Tricia, she had recently discovered another one in her family.

Tricia: My blended family's getting all mixed up in this blender. Just a couple of months ago we found out that we have a biological brother too—my four sisters and I. After my biological dad got my mom pregnant, he got another woman pregnant and now we have a brother! He's coming to visit in a couple of months and meet our family. He grew up as an only child so now he has five sisters.

Ron: Wow. You haven't met him yet?

Tricia: We've talked but we have not met in person.

Ron: Not face to face.

Tricia: Not face to face.

Ron: Stepfamilies have some interesting journeys, twists and turns sometimes—and you certainly have yet another one. You navigate this, and you're managing it, and you're walking with God, and letting Him be the reassurance about who you are. I think

that's what's empowering your ability to deal with the unknown and at the same time be a mom to kids who need a mom.

Next time we'll hear from my friend, Lauren Reitsema about the inner world of children of divorce now living in a blended family.

Lauren: If I've learned anything about my own experience and interviewing people in this blended-family experience is that one of the heaviest burdens that parents bear is "How is this going to affect my children?" It's not approached with insensitivity. It's not approached with a selfish, caustic kind of a posture but rather a tender, "How do I help?"

Ron: That's author Lauren Reitsema next time on FamilyLife Blended.

I'm Ron Deal, thanks for listening. Thanks to our FamilyLife Legacy Partners for making this podcast possible. Our chief audio engineer is Keith Lynch. Bruce Goff—producer. Mastering engineer—Justin Adams. And theme music provided by Braden Deal.

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