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Episode 17: Grief and the Blended Family

Guest: Brian and Diane Fromme

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Ron: You knew your stepchildren before you came into their life and still you felt some resistance?

Diane: I was okay with them; they were okay with me until the day we got married and that ceremony seals the deal, “My mom's not coming back.”

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.

Before we jump into my conversation today with Brian and Diane Fromme, I wanted to invite you to the Summit on Stepfamily Ministry. It’s coming up real soon, October 24 through 25, 2019, in Chesapeake, VA. I’ll tell you more about this opportunity at the end of the podcast but you can always just go to FamilyLife.com/blended for more information.

Is stepparenting after a biological parent has died different than stepparenting after divorce? If so, how is it different? That’s going to be the subject of our conversation today.

My guests are Brian and Diane Fromme. They’ve been married for 25 years, a second marriage for both of them. Diane was previously married, no children, and divorced. Brian had two children, lost his first wife to cancer.

Diane, a grief author and workshop leader birthed this book *Stepparenting the Grieving Child* when she started looking around for resources to try to help her make sense of her world as a stepparent with kids whose biological mother had died. She couldn't really find anything.

So she and Brian put their heads together and began studying and researching and have shared out of their experience and now after 25 years they can honestly share what has worked and what did not work for them along the way.

Diane has spoken about the joys and challenges of raising grieving children at our Summit on Stepfamily Ministry and by the way I’m sure she will again, I hope to have

her there in the future. She's also spoken at the National Alliance for Grieving Children Symposium and the National Association for Relationship and Marriage Education.

Brian and Diane live in Fort Collins, Colorado. In her book, *Stepparenting the Grieving Child*, Diane says that stepparents need to know that early on their stepchildren will far and away be more drawn to other biological kin—to extended family members—more than they will be drawn to the step parent. I eventually asked Diane how that realization impacted her personally.

But first, before we get to that, I asked Brian and Diane to set the stage for us. To tell us about their family.

Okay as we jump in here, set the stage for us guys. Diane you actually knew Brian and his kids before his wife, their mother, died is that right?

Diane: That is correct.

Ron: Yes, so tell me a little bit about that process of knowing them and then hearing about his wife and cancer and what was that from your point of view?

Diane: Brian and I worked together at Hewlett-Packard and I always thought he was a very kind person and was getting to know him. I was actually a PR manager for a product that he was responsible for and had actually invented.

One day Brian disappeared from work. I thought, "Oh that's strange where is he?" That was the beginning of the significant discovery and treatments that his late wife was going through. So when he came back Brian needed a support system. This was huge. He was struggling with, "If she dies how the heck am I going to go forward? What about the kids?"

So we started having lunches and just chatting about what that might be like. It was an interesting time because I would see—at company parties and so forth I would see and got to meet—his late wife and the kids so had some exposure to all of them before things got worse and Cathy passed away.

Ron: Yes.

Diane: So that whole process, it was a very difficult time. I had actually separated from my first husband. I think the main thing is the person who is supporting the person who's ill often doesn't have that same support system and I think that's what we realized was we both were supporting each other in some of the grief and pain and loss that we were going through. I had also lost my father in the same time frame so it was really truly a very crazy time.

Ron: Yes. Now Brian so Cathy had cancer. How long was it from the time of the diagnosis until she passed away?

Brian: Not long at all. She was very young. She had metastatic breast cancer. It was 18 months from diagnosis being found and diagnosis to when she passed away. Breast cancer often moves slowly in older women. It's rare in young women but it seems to be much more challenging and moves very quickly in young women.

Ron: Diane was saying that it's hard to get support when you're the caregiver. Was that your experience?

Brian: I think that's true for any kind of grieving situation whether it's our parents or any loved one. I am a very giving person as is Diane, so you're trying so hard to support someone else and it's hard to think about supporting yourself.

I'm a very open person; I am a very emotive person and I think it really helped to have somebody to talk to. To say, "I'm going through this, it's very difficult. I don't know what to think of it." You know when doctors say, "She's going to live three more months," it's like, "Wow, I've got to get ready to take care of my children."

Ron: Right, right. I mean go inside that for a minute because eventually that notion became reality. I mean she did pass away and it was just you and your kids. Can you take us inside those early days? What did you feel? What were you feeling as a dad and as a husband who's just lost his wife?

Brian: Yes, that's an astute thing to ask about. It's a mix of, of course, your own grief, sadness for the children because as an adult we can process our situation in a different way. They were six and four. How does a six-year-old or a four-year-old understand their mother leaving?

So just sadness for my children. I felt a real responsibility to just be there for them. So that meant anything I could do: leave work early, be around for dinner, or whatever I could do to be in the presence with them so that I could do my best to give them something from myself.

Ron: You know, I was just sitting here thinking even in my own interviews with people but certainly when I've been interviewed when I've watched interviews or listened to interviews of others who are talking with somebody who has gone through a significant loss, we're pretty quick to skip over the pain.

We turn the corner and we say, "Okay so then you find Diane and you start dating," we are going to get to that but there's a whole lot of pain in between losing Cathy and starting to develop another relationship.

There's a lot of uncertainty. There's a lot of, "How do I do this? How do I comfort, again, my children again and again? What new words do I have to offer? I can't seem to put a good explanation on this for them. What am I going to say the next time this comes up? What do I say to my friends and family and coworkers? What do I do when people at work stop asking? Sometimes I want them to ask and then sometimes they stop asking, like you can't win for losing in that space."

Is any of that reminiscent of what you experienced?

Brian: Definitely for me that's true. The feelings were just every day across the board. I might feel okay then I'd feel guilty for feeling okay. Like you mentioned as I began to lean on Diane more that was a great thing to have somebody who was so caring and understanding and even that was so complicated.

In one way it sort of didn't give me as much time to do my own kind of private grieving which I didn't even understand how. I didn't really know what that meant for me. Now that I'm older I can look back and say, oh well as I've lost my brother and my mother and father I can say, "Oh I need time to grieve," and who knows how that happens.

It's different for each of us. You have to go through a process and it keeps resurfacing in some ways as a young person I think I wasn't prepared to understand it.

I think it's really part of the reason that it led Diane to working on writing. She was always a writer. She wanted to write about her experiences and she was looking for written material to help her in the complex situation that she was dealing with.

Ron: Your situation Diane was you'd been through a divorce. Then you start this relationship with Brian it started benign. Can I say it that way?

Diane: Yes.

Ron: Very neutral relationship. Platonic.

Diane: Sure, a working relationship. Yes.

Ron: A working relationship and then it was kind of grieving together and offering a little support to one another as coworkers, but then at some point it turns the corner.

Diane: Yes, that was a significant moment I think when Brian and I realized that our friendship was truly very precious and it was more than just the support club. It really was a tender thing that was growing between us that was very complicated. It felt like it was coming way too soon but the feelings were there and it was not something that we could ignore certainly.

So then as time went on and Brian--I have to say--Brian was really, really good about drawing a boundary to say, "I need a year with my children. I need to know that I can parent them. I need to be the stable force in their lives." That boundary, I think really helped everyone in the situation from not moving too quickly; not changing schools, not changing neighborhoods, things like that.

Ron: Okay so you guys, somebody suggested, "We need some space here and we should not move our relationship forward during that season," is that what I'm hearing?

Diane: Yes, that's right.

Ron: And looking back on that, I'd love to hear from both of you, was that a wise thing to do? Would you encourage others to do something similar?

Diane: Yes, I'll go first. That space and drawing the boundary for that space was the incredibly wise thing to do and it could have been even longer. I really think Brian made a great point. Brian said, "I did not have enough time to really get in touch with my own grief."

That is a classic situation for a widower or a widow when there are kids in the relationship they come first and who comes last is the person the parent who's grieving. So in the end as much time I think as you can give before launching into that new relationship, and yet as a human, as a parent, as a person, we need love. We need support, so at some point you have to give yourself permission--

Ron: There's a real tension there.

Diane: --to move forward.

Ron: Yes, a real tension. Brian, what are your observations about it?

Brian: I definitely think that time is helpful again mainly because of the grieving aspect of it. Especially in that phase of my life, I was early thirties, I haven't really lost anyone in my family so I didn't really understand much about the grieving process. I read a little bit about it but I had to work. I had children, it was busy every day. I just had to focus on that.

In a way, like Diane said, I did focus on keeping the children in the same situation, same school, not moving houses all those things seem stable for the children. But I didn't focus on my own need to grieve. I didn't have time to grieve. I'd go straight from work to picking my kids up and making sure they were okay.

I remember it took me about four or five months to finally walk into this shared walk-in closet where my first wife's clothes were. I finally said, "I've got to get these out of here."

I've got to put them in boxes." I spent the weekend working through taking them off the hangers, putting them in a clothing box, and crying.

It took five months to get to that point, just to walk into the closet. I walked into the closet before that but I didn't want to go take the clothes down.

So that's an example to me of the resistance to going through these processes and the need for the time. I just had to come when the time was ready, not when I said, "Oh today's the day to move the clothes.

Ron: Right, right. In my book, *Dating and the Single Parent*, I talk so much about the pain of loss can push us into new relationships. You don't want to deal with that pain, you don't want to deal with cleaning out the closet, so it feels so much better--such a relief--to spend time with somebody you really enjoy and with that then comes the temptation for that new relationship to move faster than maybe it should.

I'm curious, let me ask you guys this: you both commented that looking back in hindsight for you as adults you could have used a little more time, what about for the kids? Do you think it would have been helpful for them if there had been a little more time before you started moving your relationship forward?

Brian: Yes. In short, I think the answer is yes. It's so hard to get a child to say what they really need or want. Same thing that you just described Ron, they sort of want some new figure and interesting dynamic in their life and yet it's very complicated, especially if you begin to -- This person is sort of dating my father. What does that make her to me?

So yes, I think it is complicated. I think the real puzzle is well, when is the right time?

Ron: Right.

Brian: Again there's no way to really get a child to say the right time is next year. In fact the youngest of our two children would have said maybe never right for a while. That's just a grief of his own. I don't want anyone to replace my mom.

Diane: I was going to say there's no prescribed time. If the text book answer would be wait at least a year before you repartner and actually work on that process of bringing a new love into your life, and I just think it's going to be a little bit different for every family.

Brian is spot on the kids would not have volunteered to welcome a new person into the home really at any time in those young years. I really believe that. So the tricky part here is, it's incumbent upon the two adults to make an informed decision that is compassionate for everyone.

Ron: I appreciate that perspective, Diane. Back in my early days in giving advice about this sort of thing I used to put time frames on how long you should wait before you

started dating again, how long you should date before you get married again. I have repented of all of that advice.

[Diane laughing]

I now have the great admiration for how complex grief is and it is different for different people and different circumstances. Did you know the loss was coming? Did you not see it coming? Was it immediate? Was it ambiguous? There are so many factors. The age of the children; on and on it goes.

I just think that there's wisdom and the things that we've been talking around here that having space to give yourself permission to grieve and to focus on grieving you and your children is wise. How much we don't know but having space is helpful.

Monitoring and dealing with the tension of a new relationship, actually putting the brakes on that new relationship so that you have space. I think there is tremendous wisdom in that, having self control to put on the brakes.

Then at some point you move forward. Nobody knows if it's right. You just take the risk of moving forward. You step into it, you listen, you learn, you reflect, you figure it out as you go. Sometimes, like the two of you, you get a number of years down the road and you look back and you say, "You know, we learned some things, maybe we would have done this differently but by God's grace here we are and we're moving forward."

Brian: I was thinking that word is the great word there, it's grace. We try to approach these difficult situations with grace so that we bring our best heart and compassion to the change and the difficulty.

Ron: Nothing is final. I mean I've wanted to say that to so many people. Nothing is -- okay you made a bad decision, well not that's not final. That's not determinative of what happens now. You may have a few bumps in the road because of a bad decision. Okay get up, let's get going. Right? I mean, to say somehow, "Oh we blew it." No. No. No. No. That's deterministic in its understanding.

God's grace is bigger than that. His ability to lead us through difficulties is much, much larger than that. Who are you relying on at that point in time? Yourself? Well you've got troubles if that's the case. Let's pull back and rely on God a little bit more than you and see where that gets you.

All right let's move forward a little bit. So at some point you do turn the corner and Diane in your book you reflect and you say you were very optimistic about the notion of getting married to a man who is widowed and becoming a stepmother to grieving children. Do you mind telling us about the optimism? What was that in you?

Diane: Stepparents, I believe, are bringing a very unique momentum into the family. Optimism is a great word, one of my partners in stepfamily ministry would say that is actually clueless-ness.

[All laugh]

I like to call it optimism.

Ron: Yes.

Diane: The stepparent is wanting to help and move things in a forward direction. This is not necessarily the energy that the biological parent or the children welcome. I think that's just a point to consider as anyone is preparing for this role in joining a grieving family.

On the flip side I think that naiveté does help the family with the joyful moments. Let's create some joyful times together as we're moving forward. It can be something very little like we love summer here in Colorado it's just a gorgeous, gorgeous time so something fun like taking the kids to the pool.

We always found that water was a common denominator for both of our kids. When you're having fun in the water and snacking and laying in the sun, life seems pretty good.

Ron: Right, right.

Diane: So I think there's a balance of bringing that naiveté perspective in and yet I do wish that I had educated myself more about grief and prepared more to be in this role.

Ron: That's a good word. What about you Brian? I'm curious. She was optimistic. How would you describe yourself?

Brian: I'm actually also an optimist. I felt optimistic too. I think the energy that Diane brought to the family was very positive and I felt that. It was clear that she was doing everything she could to help and yet that's the conflict almost and ironic aspect of the situation is that sometimes everything is too much.

It's so difficult to know when the kids just need to slow down and maybe do a little of their private grieving. Again they're not going to talk about it they can't say it that way. So at a certain age maybe older, if they were teenagers maybe they could enunciate it.

So I think her energy that she brought was really wonderful just like she said. Every day she would bring a positive attitude and looking for ways to structure or help in every way, and bring life to the family.

That was joyful and beautiful. It's so admirable that she could bring that that she had that much positive energy to bring to a difficult situation. Because I didn't always have that. Even though I think I am an optimist I think I would just have days where I felt gloomy. I would just try to cope through the day.

Ron: Which is what grief does to you. I mean it depresses you in so many ways. It just steals your energy and your joy out of life sometimes so I could see how invigorating it was to have that dose of energy reinstated into the family through Diane. That feeds that optimism, of course it does.

You know, I mindfull there's a reason people get married and form a blended family. It's because you see some real good coming about as a result of these relationships. There's something there that you're drawn to of course there is you wouldn't do this if you didn't see that or feel that or even anticipate that on behalf of the children.

I want to just clarify for our listener, Diane you didn't have any children when you married Brian. You guys have had one since that time. So Diane was coming in as a childless stepmom into the scenario parenting these grieving children. Now here's an interesting dynamic sometimes getting around the other side of this offers an interesting perspective.

Diane, you were raised in a family where your mom was parenting grieving children. She married a man who had been widowed and she was their stepmother. Then she went on and had you. So you grew up with a mom who had done what you are now getting ready to do.

At one point she advised you not to do this. What do you think she was trying to tell you?

Diane: My mom came into a blended family when the girls were teens. That really affected her viewpoint of how incredibly difficult it is to become a stepmom with girls that had completely established routines and rhythms and now launching into independence; one was headed off to college, the other one was still in the home and loved her daddy.

My mom really impressed upon me even as I was growing up how difficult this was for her and yet the heart wants what it wants, so of course when Brian and I realized that we were growing closer I could hear her voice and she and I talked about how I could hear her voice and yet I was just going to blaze forward.

Ron: So your optimism won the day. [Laughs]

Diane: Absolutely. Absolutely. I do want to mention, I think there's a huge difference between joining a blended family when the kids are young and when the kids are teens.

Ron: Yes, what are some of the factors? Why do you think that is?

Diane: I think when kids are young they're developmentally still looking for guidance. They are open to different people in their life who are adults still shaping their lives; they're looking for role models; they're looking for heroes and heroines at those younger developmental ages.

When kids are teens developmentally they are turning more to their peer group and adults in general even the biological parents have way less influence. I do want to say, too, 15 is 15 is 15. I don't care if that teenager's in a step family or completely biological family; 18 is 18 is 18.

Ron: Amen to that. That's important to say for the listener because sometimes you think everything is about being a stepparent, everything is about being a blended family and that is just not the case. It certainly complicates things—that you're a blended family—in particular when did you come into this teenager's life? Did you come in when they are younger and now they're a teenager? There's so many layers to this but don't just assume that everything is about being blended.

Diane: In fact two thoughts for our listeners who are parenting teens. One is just what you said reach out to other biological parents with your frustrations. That can be the best barometer for stepparenting and parenting teens ever. Don't just talk to other stepparents.

Ron: If you're sitting at lunch with your best friend and she's not a stepparent and you lay out your frustration and she says, "Oh yeah, Honey, I've got the same thing going on," it gives you a little perspective about what's happening with the kids.

I wanted to jump in and ask you guys a little bit about the difference between stepparenting a child after divorce and stepparenting what we're calling today grieving children that is all children are grieving children after divorce are grieving but we're just talking specifically about bereaved children grieving the death of their parent.

I think you point out in your book there are some differences let me just list those real quickly. I want you to comment on a couple of them.

One of them I think is really important to observe is there's a permanence when a parent has died there's a permanence to that loss. Post-divorce more often than not usually the case children are continuing to see both parents. They get time with both parents; yes, it's divided time but they absolutely get to see them. Post death obviously kids don't.

Another one is that bereaved children sometimes struggle with trusting that new people in their life are going to remain in their life. The idea that, "Hey, I like you as my stepparent but I'm not so sure you'll be around. So how do I give myself permission to

get attached to you when I'm afraid? I now know what death does. I don't want to lose any more. I don't want to be in that position of hurting anymore." I think that's a common thing—adults do that, I think kids do that as well.

But then here are the two that I want you both to comment on. Diane, you talk about the difference between realism and idealism. You say children of divorce see both their parents' strengths and their weaknesses because you're living with Dad and Mom and you get to see them as real people who have weaknesses. But post death sometimes children only remember the positives about their parent, they may idealize that parent.

The second thing is what you call the empty seat. It's the—there's an empty chair at the dinner table that is a temptation for the stepparent to come in and go, "I'm going to fill this, the kids need—" in your case a mom or if you're a stepdad or the kids need a father—"I'm going to fill this empty chair." It kind of ramps up the intensity of the pressure to perform, to make this work, to be embraced and accepted by the kids.

I know there's a lot there to unpack but what are your reflections on the realism versus idealism and then the empty chair?

Diane: There's a huge temptation to jump into the gap that's created when a parent is physically absent. In terms of the idealizing of the parent who's gone this is the tender trap—this is the angel trap—of course, we want to think of our loved ones, who are gone, as angels watching over us. But as the kids get older that can really become a burden on them to feel like they have to live up every moment of their lives to this angel force.

Ron: In contrast to here's an imperfect stepparent.

Diane: [Laughs] Right.

So now they are seeing the person that's in the home every day with their faux pas and there's no way to compare or compete with that ghost/that angel/that memory, nor should we try. Even on holidays such and in my case Mother's Day. There's a huge temptation to think and expect, "I'm in that role. I should get that praise and that day and that recognition, too."

I think for listeners to just be aware that anything that is competing or threatening that memory is going to be sensitive is going to be a very tender topic. So rather than compete or step into a gap into the empty chair pull up a chair alongside. That's the visual that I would like to suggest. The person who's gone should always be there and you're just pulling up a chair alongside and you're joining the conversation.

Ron: You're adding a chair. I like that. Okay so Brian let me ask you this were there times where you looked at your wife—looked at Diane—and you saw in her eyes the

disappointment of not being accepted or embraced by your kids? How did you deal with seeing that pain in her?

Brian: That's a great question. Of course I did as you are probably beginning to hear in her voice she's a very empathetic and strong person. So she really felt like, "I'm doing everything I can do for these children," and to build the family and I think in the beginning she was hopeful that and maybe she mentioned earlier naive about wanting to maybe fill the role a little.

That's just because we didn't know that what she just said over years of learning to pull up the chair next to the empty chair. So when the kids would then turn around and either ignore like on a holiday or subtle emotional responses to the kind of classic, "You are not my mom," it hurt Diane.

There wasn't anything I could do. I would talk to her about it. I think that's one of the strengths we have and our relationship is that we are able to talk but there wasn't much I could do.

Ron: Yes, that's when you hug and hold and try to support and hear it. Don't necessarily try to fix it.

Okay, I've got to ask you another question, Diane. Again in your book *Stepparenting the Grieving Child* which I just thought there were so many poignant insightful points. It's really a good read I would recommend it to anybody especially people in ministry who are trying to help other families as well as couples that are dating where there's been a death of a parent or if you're already married, I think it's very helpful.

You say this, "Kids have an undeniable pull toward their biological kin—their extended family—over the new step parent. In other words, stepparents you may want to come and fill that empty chair but you need to understand they have connections to extended family and those blood connections are very powerful and strong. Their pull is stronger in those directions than towards you as the new person. How in the world did you experience this, and what did you do when you experienced it?"

Diane: One story that I think really captures that pull to the biological family was a time when Brian's late wife's family visited Colorado, coming in from the East Coast. Here I was thinking I'd established a good base with the kids, it was probably around a year into our marriage. That day the kids were just running around and checking out the window. The energy was so different with them knowing that their mom's family was coming to visit.

I saw that and I saw my stepdaughter pressing her little face against the window and as soon as they arrived they rushed out, didn't say a word to either of us and they were embraced by their mom's family and I watched that scene as if I were about 11,000 feet

above. Hitting me this is what they need. They need doses of the people who can carry their mom's stories forward.

Ron: And you came to the realization that you really have to work at supporting those relationships.

Diane: Yes and that it was difficult. I did not know Brian's late wife's family. We hung out together. We talked about things we liked. We didn't have a lot in common; they liked football, I like baseball. [Laughs]

There were so many things that were not aligned but we all really made an effort to be civil with each other and get to know each other enough so that there was a comfort level in them establishing a tradition where the kids would go every single summer to the East Coast and visit. That one visit I described was the one summer that that didn't happen because we had not established that tradition yet.

Ron: But after that you saw the wisdom of it.

Diane: Absolutely. That was a huge and a beautiful moment. It was actually one of the pivotal moments that told me the little bell went off at wasn't a full awakening but the bell went off to tell me, "I may not be the 'it girl' I think there are some other forces at work here and I might need to start educating myself."

Ron: I think that's a good observation. You even say that in your book stepparents are the "and" not the "instead." You're not a replacement. You're in addition to. It's that imagery you were talking about earlier I think pulling up a chair, adding a chair, to the family dinner table.

Diane: It's so easy to sit yourself down in the original chair.

Ron: That's going to work against you. Brian, and maybe not, was there any disappointment on your part like did you hope Diane could fill that chair so to speak in your children's life and when you realize that wasn't going to happen either you had to make some adjustments?

Brian: Sure, I think I was naive too. I sort of thought to some degree that the children need a mom and so it was a logical in some ways to think that she should take the role. But it took my own as Diane mentioned she had to reach out for education and I think I had to just get the awareness of and education that nope that there's two. There's the biological mother and the stepmother and they're both important for different reasons.

Ron: Okay, so let me turn to another important point that I thought you made in your book. You say often everyone in a stepfamily has loss even if it's just the loss of an expectation. Sometimes you just come into the blended family with some expectations

and that's your loss. Other people have a loss of a death or divorce or whatever's in the background and then their expectation as they come into the family.

But Diane you point out that the losses of a biological parent and children are in sync, meaning they've traveled that road together. But the stepparent isn't part of that. Their losses are not in sync, so it creates this natural emotional divide between where the stepparent is and where the biological parent and children are. That must leave you on the outs from time to time?

Diane: I think stepparents do experience a huge loss based on expectations. There is a natural expectation that if I'm a nice person, I'm a thoughtful person, the kids will like me eventually maybe they'll love me.

Realizing that kids need a mom or dad but it may not necessarily be you that they pick. That puts you in a different mind frame and you do feel like an outsider when they're not accepting you in the role that you are trying to play.

Ron: Yes you knew your stepchildren before you came into their life and still you felt some resistance-rejection—I'm not sure which word to use there, but it wasn't smooth.

Diane: I was okay with them; they were okay with me until the day we got married and that ceremony seals the deal, "My mom's not coming back."

Ron: Right, it's another funeral for kids in a way. I think that's undeniable. So again having the perspective that it may not be me that gets to move into this space in their life and I need to try to support them with the connections they have—extended family or what have you—and then find my own seat at the table.

Diane: The wind beneath their wings, that imagery, if you can humble yourself enough to allow that to happen that is a beautiful thing. It's a very difficult thing. Our ego really tries to take over there and time and education, good listening, all those things are really going to help move the outsider to feeling like they can be an insider but in a different way.

Ron: Brian, I teach and research supports the notion that biological parents must be primary in the early years of a blended family. Diane also repeats this in her book. She says and we like to talk about this notion of biological parents need to be the central hub for their children.

They need to be the main disciplinarian. They need to be physically and emotionally present and active, and then they need to work alongside the stepparent who is trying to find that seat at the table and trying to find their way in and try to help them move into the family in a relational sense. How well did you do looking back at playing those roles as a biological dad in your blended family?

Brian: Right, first of all I totally agree with those statements. That's powerful statement for in particular for men societally we are so used to providing but it's difficult sometimes to engage as the center of the family that's typically maybe the Mother's role.

I think I'm blessed with having a strong emotive side, so I was good at being emotionally available. I'd come pick them up and scooped them into my arms and that part was always there. That was great. But I wasn't the strong disciplinarian. That's interesting—a role reversal to some degree because many men are good at that and I was not as strong at that.

Interestingly Diane was good at that. That caused some challenges because she felt, “Well we need to do this,” and it was conflict for me first of all because, “Well I'm not even sure if I agree with that,” and second for the kids because as you said I was still the center of the family and the hub as you described it.

So for Diane to say, “Oh well we need to do this kind of discipline approach,” it was right. I mean she was in good faith doing the right thing but she would try to impress that upon all of us and I think it really in the early part of the relationship was difficult.

She was trying to get me to do it but that was even difficult because I wasn't really good at that part. So I think all of us are good at some things and not good at other things. It's interesting that the discipline side for me was the part that I was weakest at and maybe some of that came from grief to.

Ron: You've been listening to my conversation with Brian and Dianne Fromme.

I'm Ron Deal and this is FamilyLife Blended.

You know if you're a biological parent and you can relate to what Brian was just sharing I want to encourage you to find a way to step up as a parent as a biological parent. You've got to fulfill that role.

It really creates a fragile situation for the stepparent. If you vacate that role then stepparents feel the need to step into that place and their relationships are still wet cement.

So it's a challenging place for them to step into. It's far better for the family—the entire family unit—if you fill your role in the home that allows the stepparent to continue to build and firm up their relationship with the children.

You know I asked Diane and Brian how things have changed over 25 years for them regarding their parenting and in just a minute we're going to hear that final thought from them.

But before then I wanted to just make one other observation. Do remember that portion of the conversation where we were talking about what's unique and different about step parenting after a biological parent has died? They made a number of good observations I wanted to just add a couple more of my own.

You know when conflict causes divorce sometimes at the end of the day, after the divorce is over, both children and parents recognize that it's kind of a good thing that Mom and Dad aren't together anymore. They just could not do life and it was just so much hostility between them people can come to that conclusion it doesn't necessarily mean they're happy about it but they do understand why it happened.

But after the death of a parent the "us-ness," if you will, of Mom and Dad's marriage is still alive in the children's heart. They still honor that. They cherish that us-ness that never came apart just because one parent died.

So when that parent marries somebody new and now has a new "us" it's difficult sometimes for children to embrace that because they're still seeing their parent attached in an "us" to somebody else. Something that is important to them that they cherish. I think we have to give children space for this.

I want to encourage as a couple, celebrate your "us-ness" even if your kids are not celebrating it yet. Yet. Notice the word "yet." We trust and believe that they can get there but even if they're not today it's okay for you to rest in it and enjoy it.

Another observation I have about what happens with the biological parent and the children is that they share grief they go into the foxhole together after that parent dies, especially if it's before the new stepparent has come into the picture, so that shared grieving creates a strong bond that doesn't end any time soon after the stepparent arrives.

I think it's easy to be intimidated by this as a stepparent and here's the way I would suggest you look at it, yes, you are an outsider to that bond but you do not have to be threatened by it. Yes, an outsider but you don't have to be threatened by it.

Give them permission to continue to share that grieving that space that's intimate and sacred to them. So if you try to invade that then you're stealing their opportunity to grieve, I think that works against you not for you.

And then one other observation, a big thing that's different is after a parent's died you have financial concerns and inheritance and possession questions that need to be resolved. There could be a sadness around that and people just need to know what's happening with those important possessions.

So that's a conversation and often a big conversation that deserves time and attention and putting it in writing and then communicating to others.

For example the book that I have co-authored with Greg Pettys and David Edwards *The Smart Stepfamily Guide to Financial Planning* we try to help you do that and put it in writing so that everybody knows and that those concerns can go away. They don't continue to get in the way of embracing the stepparent that's really what we're after their.

But the point in all of these observations is this understanding the dynamics at play in your home can really help you depersonalize the actions that people sometimes take. When a child asks about inheritance that's not necessarily them saying they don't want you in the picture. That's them just needing to know what's happening there.

When a child and a biological parent look at each other with deep empathy and they have one of those moments where they both know what they're talking about they obviously shared this. It's their space.

You, as a stepparent, don't have to feel intimidated by that little look that they share. It's just them grieving together. That has a rightful place in their life, you don't have to be intimidated by that or threatened by that; rather bless it, honor it, and give them space to deal with that sadness. That's loving toward them and I think it makes you approachable and respectable.

You'll earn some trust points if that's the posture you can take. So knowing those distinctions helps you respond in a way that actually moves your family forward as a blended family.

If you'd like more information about our guests you can find it in the show notes be sure to check it out there or on the FamilyLife Blended page at FamilyLife.com/podcast.

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We are committed here at FamilyLife to providing excellent resources for you and your family and we want to make sure that you're aware of the Summit on Stepfamily Ministry coming up here in October. October 23 is Summit Immerse a half day workshop all on

step family finances for leaders and guide, mentors, people who work with step families and ministry.

The October 24 and 25 is our Summit on Stepfamily Ministry which is an equipping event for lay leaders and pastors and couples who lead small groups. If you're new to stepfamily ministry we've got stuff for you. If you've been in this game for a few years we've got stuff for you, just come network. See the new resources that are available from FamilyLife as well as countless others.

It's just a place to be encouraged and inspired to go back into the world and share the good news for blended families where you live.

We'd love to have you join us October 23 to 25, 2019 in Chesapeake, Virginia. Go to SummitOnStepfamilies.com for more information. That's SummitOnStepfamilies.com.

Now before we're done, here is that long term perspective from Brian and Dianne:

Diane: Brian and I were on vacation recently and we were taking a nice walk by the Napa River and we were talking about the old times and the kids and, "Wow, how do we go through that?"

Brian said something very powerful, he said, "You know we would have been fine without you. I could have raised my kids without you. I needed you but we would have been fine if I had raised them with my discipline structure."

Twenty-five years later I could hear that. I could hear that without taking it personally. So if there is a way for stepparents to hear that message sooner, I think stepparents and bio parents would be able to work out the discipline issue a lot more smoothly.

Brian: I didn't mean it personally either it was really a reflection like you pointed out, Ron, about how we grow and how we see our situation so differently as we become more aware as we age.

Again I think what Diane brought to the family, even that discipline issues and discussions, were right it just wasn't something that I could do easily and I had to grow into them and relearn. It goes back to your point about being the center of the family. In the end my style had to be the center of the family because I was the natural parent.

Ron: Next time we'll hear from Dr. John Trent and his daughter Carrie about how you can bless the members of your family and specifically what's unique about offering a blessing to children in blended families.

John: If you have more than one kid guess what they're going to respond differently. Some kids are like, "Give it to me right now." Other kids are like, "Well prove it to me." I think a lot of times in blended families--

Ron: Yes.

John: Then it's like, "Yeah right I have heard that before but somebody has left."

Ron: That's John Trent and Carrie Trent Stageburg 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, our producer. Mastering engineer is Justin Adams. And theme music provided by Braden Deal.

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