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Episode 32: The Essentials of Co-parenting

Guests: Jay and Tammy Daughtry

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Jay: Children are having symptoms that look like PTSD. They've got this hypervigilance every time Mom and Dad are in the same space. They're just waiting for something to go off. They just know something's going to go wrong. Having that level of hypervigilance and the anxiety and the stress that goes with it, over time that becomes what we call toxic stress.

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

Hey, before I jump into my conversation with Jay and Tammy Daughtry about healthy co-parenting, if you're new to FamilyLife Blended, you may not know that we have a series of books, videos, and online articles, the leading curriculum for blended families, and podcasts, lots and lots of podcasts on a variety of subjects, all pertinent to stepfamily living.

It's time to make plans to be part of our annual ministry equipping event *The Summit on Stepfamily Ministry*. It's September 30 through October 2nd. It's designed for ministry leaders, pastors, lay couples and professionals who want to know more about stepfamilies and how to make a difference in the lives of blended family couples in their church and community.

Now you may not think of yourself as a leader but maybe it's time to start thinking about yourself and how you can influence other people. Lots and lots of people have come to this event and learned they can make a difference in the life of somebody else. I hope you'll make plans to join us, *The Summit on Stepfamily Ministry*.

If you've ever had frustrations dealing with between-home issues, the parents, the adults in the other home, we're going to get very practical in today's conversation. We're going to wrestle with the everyday hiccups of co-parenting and the stressful ultra-frustrating challenge of dealing with a difficult former spouse.

If you have a high conflict co-parenting situation or are dealing with alienation in particular, let me also suggest that you listen to podcast number six entitled "Challenging Co-parent Situations and Parent Alienation". That very popular podcast I think will serve you in addition to this one.

Tammy and Jay Daughtry are CEO and executive vice president of Co-parenting International, as well as the co-founders of the Counseling Center for Modern Family Dynamics in Nashville, Tennessee. They both hold Master's Degrees in Marriage and Family Therapy and are the executive producers of the DVD resource called *One Heart, Two Homes: Co-parenting Kids of Divorce to a Positive Future*.

By the way, I was *very* honored to appear in that series. It is extremely well done. Tammy is also the author of a book, *Co-parenting Works!: Helping Your Children Thrive after Divorce*, one of my favorite books to recommend on co-parenting.

Both Jay and Tammy have extensive media experience and train ministry leaders around the country. They are raising their blended family of four in Nashville, Tennessee.

This is an emotional and practical discussion of co-parenting. Here's Jay and Tammy Daughtry:

Jay, Tammy, when it comes to co-parenting, I'm sure you've seen the news stories or the pictures that go viral. There's a couple of images that I have in my mind: a father who's walking his daughter down the aisle, he stops halfway, he goes back and he grabs the hand of his daughter's stepfather and he says, "Come on. Help me with this," and together they walk her down the aisle and that goes viral.

I'm thinking of a picture of a little girl sitting in her soccer uniform, just a itty bitty little girl with her cute little uniform on. She's flanked on her right-hand side, I think, Mom and Stepdad. How do I know that? Because they're sitting beside her with uniforms that look like hers but they have on the back "Mom" and then his says, "Stepdad."

On the other side of her is the uniform that says "Dad" and "Stepmom." Clearly they are presenting this picture of parents and stepparents coming together to love this child and help celebrate this four-year-old's soccer game.

Those things go viral because it taps into something in people. What is that?

Tammy: Well, I think that taps into hope. It taps into the longevity of what some families can do when they can collaborate and get along. I think that the one about the wedding—a lot of people sent that to me when it first came out because they said, "Tammy, have you seen that?"

For some families that can be a beautiful gift to a young person getting married. When the parents can be that mature, it can be a beautiful moment. Yes, we've seen some of those.

For children, I think in the long run, if they can have that kind of freedom that all the adults allow them to love everyone, that's the hope we're all after whether you're the parent or the child. That's the hope we're after.

Ron: Yes, Tammy, what it taps into, I think, in people is that sense that this is what's good and right and kids shouldn't be stuck in the middle, they shouldn't be caught, they shouldn't be prisoners of war. What's going on that when the adults get it right, the kids win. I think people really feel good about that and they're drawn to that idea.

Jay: Yes, Ron, I agree. I think one of the reasons that those things go viral and that they resonate so deeply with people is because of the pain that some have experienced. I believe a lot of people who are sharing those things are adult children of divorce who experienced just the opposite; who had parents who may have kept that war alive so to speak throughout their life.

When they see that, I think, you're exactly right that they're saying, "Hey, this is the way I wish it had been for me. This is the way I hope it would be for anybody else who might have to experience a family that divides."

Ron: The hope is there. People know the ideal and what it should be like but we got to get really practical in today's conversation because what gets in the way of that, as you just alluded, Jay, is pain.

Often parenting after divorce has baggage. There's hurt. There's a reason they're not together anymore as a married couple. How does that baggage and the addition of new adults, the stepparents, how does that complicate co-parenting and what are some of the things that parents must do to get the baggage out of the way?

Jay: That's a good question. I think it's multifaceted. Let me start with what first comes to mind. That is, often when we talk to folks we're very clear that one of the very first things you need to do to have a stable household is to become a stable parent. We have to recognize that the pain that they experienced in a post-divorce world is very real. We can't stuff it down somewhere. We can't hide from it.

But what we need to do is to look within ourselves, become self-aware and say, "Okay, what do I need?" If we're not really sure, then we need to reach out to trusted people and say, "I'm really hurting. How can I get through this?"

Find ways to get in front of a counselor, to find good support groups. Because before we can be healthy co-parents we have to become a stable post-divorce parent that has gone through the process of dealing with those hard emotions, dealing with that pain and figuring out where to put that.

Ron: Do you think most parents post-divorce know what they need or do they need a little help knowing what they need?

Jay: I think they definitely need help knowing what they need. I think we all do because it doesn't matter whether it's post-divorce or any other trauma in your life. Because that's exactly what it is. It's trauma and it's grief and loss. When we're in that space we generally don't know. We're a little bit lost in the fog of that pain.

A lot of times we need someone there who can maybe reflect for us some of what we're experiencing and some of what we're speaking about and help us really look at clearly the pain that we're experiencing to maybe reframe it for us in some ways.

I believe sometimes when we're in that kind of pain we will have a version in our minds and in our hearts of what just happened. Quite often that's not necessarily accurate. We get kind of a tunnel vision and we see these pain points without seeing the context in which that pain was experienced.

That's where I think a very good divorce adjustment group or a counselor becomes really, really valuable, or even a good trusted friend who has an outside perspective can be very helpful.

Ron: Now, Jay, I should just throw in here, you haven't been through a divorce but you did lose your wife. She passed away and that left you as a single dad. That adjustment post-crisis dealing with sadness and sorrow, that fog you talked about, that's something you're familiar with?

Jay: Oh, absolutely. In the moment I couldn't articulate what I needed. Over time with the help of good friends and counseling and a good pastor who loved me very well and loved my family deeply, I was able to recognize. Probably, I would say, the key thing for me, and it is especially for a lot of men, men do not connect socially in the same way that women do.

Ron: Oh really, we don't? We don't do that very well? [Laughter]

Jay: Yes, right. Quite often we just don't have that same friend pool. We have a few close ones but we don't have a larger pool to reach into. Typically what happens is there's some isolation that takes place.

I know that was my biggest challenge was trying to be sure I didn't isolate, trying to be sure that I came outside of myself and had the courage to ask for help. Even simple things like getting all the laundry done. Having people show up at your door and say, "Hey, I just want to come in and do laundry for you today." I'm like, "What?" [Laughter]

Little things like that change the way you're experiencing life and they highlight some of those things that go unnoticed when you're so focused on how you hurt.

Ron: Tammy, I'm curious about you. You did go through a divorce. You do know this fog and how it gets in the way of managing co-parenting well. What was your experience?

Tammy: Well, it's interesting because that was, at this point, about 19 years ago was when we separated. My daughter was just—our daughter was just one, so she was itty bitty. I grew up—I grew up in a complicated family [crying] and so—

Ron: Even now it touches—it touches deep even now doesn't it.

Tammy: Oh, yes.

Ron: Yes.

Tammy: Even with the great redemption and the joy and the hope and the healing that God has brought all these years later, I can remember honestly sitting at my kitchen table and not even knowing, "How will this work next week or the week after?"

Feeling as if, really feeling as if all hope was lost. At the beginning of this, I will say I didn't know—I didn't know that there would be hope on the other side. Yes, I was a successful business woman. I had a ton of friends.

Augh, it's been a while since I've talked about this. I share about this a lot. We were just in a—we did a podcast, three podcasts yesterday. We did a big training yesterday. I share about these topics a lot but it's been a minute since I talked about that very beginning.

But I remember that kitchen table and it's actually, it's still the kitchen table at my daughter's other house. I didn't see what was next. I didn't know how it was all going to work.

But I will say I knew a couple things were true. I knew that I wasn't alone, I knew God had my back and I knew I had to figure it out so that I could be, like Jay said a few minutes ago, I wanted to be the most stable parent possible because I knew my little girl was going to need a stable mom.

I also knew whatever it was going to take, I wanted to work well with Angelia's dad. I didn't want it to be Third World War. I didn't want to put her in the middle. I didn't want to make it about the past. I wanted to figure out, how can we do a good job of this? For a variety of reasons I just knew that one of the first steps to the next step was going to be around the topic of forgiveness.

Ron: I really like the way you just said that because I know somebody's listening right now and they're feeling your pain because they're still in it. Maybe, like for you, it's been

19 years for them and yet it's still there. You've got to figure out how to figure out what you need.

You just brought up the next part of that is forgiveness. Again, let me just pause for the listener. It's hard to be a good co-parent and cooperate and do all the things that co-parenting requires of you when you're seeding anger and bitterness toward the other person. At some level, at some point, you've got to wrestle with the forgiveness questions and decisions. That's not easy.

I don't want anybody listening to us to think we're preaching at them right now. We're just inviting them into that journey, right? Because you've worked with tons of people around these matters. They really have to do the hard work.

Tammy: Ron there are different layers of forgiveness. Part of that really, Ron, was allowing God to forgive me and to know that I would be forgiven. [Crying] Because the number one thing that I wanted to do with my life was to get married once and forever. I did not want to be, nor was I ever going to in my lifetime, walk through a divorce.

There were so many things in my story that I was changing from past challenges in some of my family tree. I was first Christian in some parts of the family and first of other parts. I won't go into some of that but I was doing a great job and God was so faithful.

We had been married eight and a half years and five years of counseling. Honestly, I absolutely have loved FamilyLife ministries for decades and was just absolutely committed in thinking that we were going to be that comeback couple that never ever went through a divorce.

Getting to the place to not only choose to forgive my daughter's father, I had to believe that God was going to forgive me and allow myself to really accept that and embrace it so that I could walk in God's forgiveness, forgive my daughter's dad and forgive myself for all of these different layers of life that weren't turning out like I'd hoped.

Ron: Right.

Tammy: That moving forward, my hope became what now could become the very best of being a mother and being a co-parent with my daughter's father and how could we still be a version of a family—

Ron: Yes.

Tammy: —that was going to be complex but still Godly.

Ron: Jay, what's at stake if somebody can't do those things, forgive their former spouse and allow God to forgive themselves?

Jay: What's at stake, I believe, Ron, in a space like that is your own personal peace and thereby also the peace of your household and your family, your children, right?

Because if we're unable to allow ourselves—and that's really what it is—allowing ourselves, to be honest about the things that we might have done differently or things that—expectations, I guess. So much of our pain in life I think comes back to expectations.

We set expectations for ourselves and we set expectations for our children and things. Sometimes we have to slow down and ask ourselves, "Are those realistic?" Are we being unreasonable to expect a certain level of perfection sometimes? Quite frankly that happens within the church often that we have this very, very high, high standard for ourselves.

Yes, I believe we have to be able to be honest with ourselves and look at ourselves and say, "Yes, I might've made some mistakes and maybe there are things I wish I could've done differently; nevertheless, my God is a God of grace and love and He's going to—He's going to bring out of these ashes beauty because He promised He would." And He does.

When we can find that freedom and the peace that comes with it, then that's going to be something we can transfer to our kids because we can't fool ourselves and believe in some way that our kids are going to find homes and peace for themselves if we're not allowed to give it to ourselves. To allow our God to forgive us, gives us the open door to help our children understand that we can make mistakes and we can go through hard things—

Ron: Yes.

Jay: —and we can find the other side of it because our God's grace is so much bigger—

Ron: Yes.

Jay: —than the mistakes we may have made.

Ron: That's what I want our listener to hear. That that is absolutely the truth. Sometimes we do have a hard time forgiving ourselves or allowing God to forgive us and then resting in His grace because our expectations—kind of like you said, Tammy, the one thing you always wanted was to have a lifelong marriage. That's part of your hope and dream and you're disappointed that it didn't happen.

Sometimes that transfers over into, "God must be disappointed in me. There's no way God can for—I can't let go. I've got regrets." That equals He can't forgive.

Well, no, that's not true. You can have regret over a choice you made or somebody else made or what has happened. That doesn't add up to, "I'm beyond God's forgiveness, God's grace." Those are two different things—learning then to transfer that grace into our own hearts.

One of the things that's clear when Jesus teaches about forgiveness is if you've been forgiven much you have—it motivates you to pour that into other people. When you recognize what God has done, is doing for you, that becomes your motivation to then let go of what others have done to you.

People who don't have gratitude for what God has done often hold judgement over others and keep their hurt and their anger and their bitterness, all of which means you're not going to be a good co-parent.

These things are very intertwined with one another, are they not? We just want to help people today think through and try to unpack some of that for themselves.

I've got some other hot-button words that get in the way of good co-parenting: Anger and resentment. Hurt—we talked about that. Distrust, and sometimes that's legitimate. Like they've proven to you they're untrustworthy. Power plays. The anxiety or worry about finances, about your kids, about how they're going to turn out. That's a lot of stuff that people have to deal with.

Tammy: You're right, Ron. I grew up in a divorced family. Unfortunately my mom, she really stayed angry at my dad. So I grew up around some very toxic difficult situations where I had a very loving father, who was imperfect, yes, had made some mistakes early in my life. But my mom stayed stuck on repeat where she could not get past the past.

Having grown up around that and seeing what it felt like as a small child as young as—they divorced when I was very, very young—all my memories growing up were Dad was doing wonderful, loving, kind things, showing up, driving every other weekend to see me, miles and miles to come to all kinds of life events, giving, doing all the right things.

Mom kept going back to the few significant things that he did wrong in the beginning. I get it. I mean, I get it as a therapist and walking through pain with people, I get it. Some of the most significant life moments when we get abandoned or hurt or deeply wounded, it is easy to get stuck in those moments.

Part of why I'm so emotional when I share that about the choice to forgive and the choice to move forward and wanting to be set free from being stuck, I had seen that first hand, up close as a little girl, all through my life.

I experienced it because unfortunately there was nobody that came alongside my mom and helped her process. She didn't go to counseling. She didn't have a healthy net of

friends around her. She was angry at God. She was angry at everything. Unfortunately, I experienced the negative effect of that.

Becoming that mother who was going to end up divorced, as a single parent and in the moment of it all, thinking, “There’s no hope.” Right? Thinking, “Oh, I’m going to turn out just like her.” And yet there was God.

I knew I can do something different because God can help me do this different. I was very motivated to *not* stay angry, to *not* repeat, to *not* tell my daughter anything negative about her father ever. I have kept that commitment all these years because I wanted her to grow up and feel free to love her dad, to enjoy a relationship with him, to never get in the way of that. [Crying]

It is hard to let go and it is hard to forgive and all these things are difficult that we ask people to do but the toxic anger—unfortunately, what happens when we choose to stay angry, it doesn't hurt the ex, it doesn't hurt the other person. First and foremost, we end up captive ourselves and then the people that it hurts the worst are our precious children. They're the ones that get the worst of it.

Ron: Yes.

Tammy: No parent wants to do that. No parent *ever* intends to hurt their children. It is emotional blind spots that happen and moments that they never intend. They're accidental comments and accidental overrun of unfair moments and injustice. Yet I guess where I come back to in trying to just share that there is hope when we do that work and we try to walk through and process so that we aren't captive in that prison of anger.

Ron: Yes.

Tammy: We go to the counselors. We go to the healthy friends and we process and we get to the other side so that our children are free of our anger. No matter what the other parent does or doesn't do, we can't change them. We can't make them do the right thing or stop doing the wrong thing. But we are free and we let our children live free and they can live in a childhood not toxic and shattered and not held captive by the past.

Ron: I want to promise our listeners, we are going to get to some very practical suggestions about how to co-parent well here in a few minutes. Tammy's book *Co-parenting Works!* is *the* book that I point people to. It is filled with great ideas. We're going to get to some of those.

But I do want you to feel the heaviness of what we're saying now. The practical stuff will not pour out of you, will not be something you find yourself able to do, if you don't do this hard emotional work, this forgiveness work, this wrestling with “I can't create a toxic environment and expect my children to thrive.” You just can't.

The evidence is pretty real. Maybe we should throw out a little bit of the science of what we know. Conflict between parents, toxic environment, you have these images of an oil refinery that's burning and people in the community are having to be evacuated and they're trying not to breathe and there's smoke all around on the news. That toxic kind of environment is what kids end up in and then we ask them to live and thrive and be and play and be children.

No, no, no, everything changes at the point. What are some of the things that happen in kids, internally, externally, when they're in the midst of that sort of environment?

Jay: It's interesting you mention research, Ron, and what that can tell us. I think research is always very valuable. But what I like to do is take that research sometimes and turn it on its head.

One example I'd give you is there was some research done a number of years ago. It came out with six risk factors of kids of divorce. Essentially what it was telling us was the more present these factors were in a child's life, the more trajectory they would have towards negative outcomes, all the typical ones we hear: difficulty socializing well, bad academics, maybe cutting behaviors or leaning into addiction to numb out. Those sorts of things. Those are really, really painful powerful things.

Unfortunately, I think sometimes we dwell on that and we get focused on, "Oh my goodness, look at all these negative things." Which I think is doing a disservice to those parents who are going through a lot of pain already and carrying a lot of guilt. Then we give them a laundry list of all the ways they're destroying their children.

We want to point towards some hope so we take that and we turn it on its head. We say, "Well, if these things lead to negative outcomes, what if we mitigate or minimize these factors in the lives of our children—"

Ron: Good.

Jay: "—so that we might give them a trajectory towards positive outcomes."

Ron: Yes. Can you give me a couple of those?

Jay: Absolutely. Number one on the list, because it is the factor that provides the most pain for children, is going to be inter-parental conflict, right? When that conflict is daily and it's volatile and there's this flash point every time those parents are together, whether it's at a transition or at a ball game or recital, you know.

The child recognizes this, the two people that they love the most in the world, every time they get in the same space they end up yelling and screaming at each other.

Ron: And the kid begins to anticipate that and have stress.

Jay: Exactly, exactly.

Ron: Stress hormones are going off. Anxiety runs high.

Jay: Oh, absolutely. What we find happening, as this research points out, is basically children are having symptoms that look like PTSD.

Ron: Wow.

Jay: They've got this hypervigilance every time Mom and Dad are in the same space. They're just waiting for something to go off. They just know something's going to go wrong. Having that level of hypervigilance and the anxiety and the stress that goes with it, over time that becomes what we call toxic stress. The child can't get rid of it. There's no way to let go of it. They hold that with them.

Okay, so that's the bad news. Yes, it's really terrible for children. It puts them in a space where they're constantly feeling the pain of their parents' war. They don't know how to get rid of it or how to process it.

What we tell parents is, "Do it differently." When we recognize that we are going to be in the same space, we have to prepare ourselves for those moments to compartmentalize this personal pain that we've experienced with our child's other parent so that we can stay and maintain and be present in a parental role when we're together with that child in a public place.

What we've done then is instead of reinforcing this negative factor that produces these negative outcomes, we've figured out ways to minimize that impact so that now we're creating a trajectory towards a positive outcome. Because well, Tammy, she sat down and figured out generally that her and John had transitioned Angelia somewhere between 760 to 780 times in her life—

Ron: Wow.

Jay: —because they've co-parented her now 17 of her 19 years. That becomes one of those places where that kind of conflict shows up quite often, during those transitions and handoffs.

But when we take those things and we turn them into positive things where we've prepared ourselves for instance to know, "Hey, I'm about to say goodbye to my child" Maybe it's for a weekend, maybe it's for a week, maybe it's for two weeks or three weeks in the summer.

But I've got to prepare myself emotionally so that when I'm in that moment I can be present for my child to be able to release them, to release them and say, "This is going to be an amazing time for you and your father," or "you and your mom. You're going to and see family over here for the holidays," or "You're going to have a summer trip and you're going to do white water rafting and that's going to be so exciting. Can't wait to hear about the trip. See the pictures. That's so fantastic Honey, go have an amazing time."

Ron: Wow. That is not just releasing. That is celebrating. That, I can see how what a difference that would make for the child. Tammy, what are your thoughts about that?

Tammy: I was going to highlight that, in the same way we would cheer for a child to go to their first day of kindergarten, "Hey, you're going to have a great time. You're going to meet new teachers. You're going to make new friends."

You know, when little kids are transitioning, it's pretty common sometimes they're having fun with Mom, they're not ready to go or they're having fun with Dad, they're not ready to go back to Mom. I tell parents all the time, instead of manipulating that and making that harder on the kids, to make it harder on the other parent. Do a better job at that. Cheer for them to go like you would help them go to the first day of school or like you'd be excited for them if they were going to camp for the summer.

It's first time for an overnight camp and they're a little nervous about it. "You're going to have a great time." You would cheer for them. When you're dropping them off for Sunday school maybe the first time. They're meeting new teachers at church or they're transitioning up in the year in Sunday school classes and they've got new peers or you've moved to a new city and they've got new people to meet. Yes, it's their other biological parent but sometimes parents will use transitions to make them more difficult because they just want to make it hard on the co-parent.

That's one small caveat about handoffs, that we want to make it as positive as possible, give them our emotional permission to go and enjoy the other family, because that tells them they can love us both. You don't have to pick a favorite. "I'm okay when you go. I'm okay when you enjoy the other parent." That's a message that's really important for children to know.

Ron: Guys, I love this. You're talking about flipping those negatives over, making them positives, doing what you know how to do. You've got a list, Tammy, in your book, "Indicators of Healthy Co-parenting" which is what we're talking about—just sit and worry about the negative—you've got to do something positive—healthy co-parenting. We've already talked about the first couple things on the list.

I've got a few more flagged I've love to have you comment on but we've already mentioned give children the freedom to love both their parents and the transition

between homes is you try to make it smooth and positive. You've already commented on those.

How about this one? We discuss and deal with financial matters in a rational way. I think maybe keyword there is *rational*. [Laughter] Is that it?

Tammy: Let me say, that can be a challenge, especially in the first year or two. But here's what I would say about talking about anything that is co-parent business:

Two things: never, ever, ever talk about it at the handoff, never! That is not the time or place to ever, ever have a co-parent business discussion, not about money, not about switching time and schedule, not about, "Hey, you owe me 20 bucks for soccer shoes," or "Where's the backpack?" or "Can you take him on the field trip?" or "Hey, why didn't you wash the such and such?"

Don't do co-parent business at the handoff but especially don't talk about money at the handoff. Instead try to have a conference call as a co-parent business discussion or possibly meet as a co-parent business meeting at a McDonald's or Starbucks. We're talking to churches now about the idea of maybe being a place where parents could schedule and use a conference room or a classroom to have co-parent meetings.

Because I can tell you all the years that we were raising Angelia, John and I, that was the one thing I can remember sitting at that kitchen table doing our parenting plan, I asked him, "John, can we make a promise that we will never ever talk about co-parent business at the handoff?"

He had no idea what I was talking about. Nobody in his family was divorced. But I said, "The one thing I hated growing up was the handoff. It was traumatizing most of the time. I don't ever, ever want to talk about co-parent business."

He said, "Well, everything's going to be in the decree."

I said, "Well, no, there's going to be a lot of things outside that divorce decree that we're going to have to keep talking about." She's one at the time; two when it's final. I said, "There's a lot of things ahead. Let's just figure out a way and a time and a place; never at the handoff."

So we figured out conference calls and business meetings and most the time at McDonald's while she was in ballet practice or other activities. But it worked out well because it saved our sanity because we knew when and where we were going to talk about co-parent business.

Ron: Which allows you to contain it, right?

Tammy: Yes, compartmentalize it. Most the time we were rational. Part of what helped us be rational is we knew when we were going to do it. We weren't blindsiding each other at a volleyball game or a basketball event or calling each other in the middle of a business day over things that were not urgent.

We knew when we were going to talk and we mostly would let each other know ahead of time, "Hey, here's two or three things I need to run by you at the next co-parent meeting." It was very much a business model when we would discuss things. We tried to keep those to about 60 minutes, 90 minutes or so.

Then when he got remarried, I said, "Hey, bring Paula to the meetings." And when Jay and I got married, Jay joined us at the McDonald's. There we were, four parents, four day timers, about once a quarter at McDonald's having co-parent meetings. It saved our sanity because we knew when and where we were going to communicate.

Mostly it saved Angelia's sanity because we weren't trying to talk about it at the exchange. We weren't putting her in the middle to be a messenger and never was she around when we were talking about it. So when it got out of hand a few times or we argued, she wasn't there to hear it. That to me was one of the most important decisions we ever made.

Ron: You've started talking about what you call "team meetings" and so let's just run with that for a second. I think that's so important. A lot of people have questions around that. I could imagine somebody just heard what you said and, "What about text messages? If you have these planned things is that a big disruption for me to send a text about FYI or to ask a question?" What do you guys think about that?

Tammy: I know with today's technology there's a lot of ways we can share information. I will say there are several apps out there designed specifically to help co-parents communicate.

I recommend several of them to my clients all the time because, (a) not because you don't want to have a vocal conversation, you know a human conversation, but just keeping a calendar when you're co-parenting I think it's an important thing to have an app or a shared calendar somewhere digitally. Because life is busy.

Sometimes we use a text as a starting point but if we don't have a general place where we store all of that in one place, over years, especially if you have more than one child, it's pretty common to misfire and forget.

Then that becomes what shouldn't be an argument ends up as an argument because somebody forgot and it was an honest mistake. I think sometimes digital technology can help us if we can agree on an app or a shared document or a shared Google document somewhere to store the information.

Yes, that can help a little but I never think that texting and email should replace a good conversation. But sometimes you can't start there. I would say there are steps towards the idea of having conversations and maybe they can't be in person. Maybe they start with a conference call. I have found most people will actually act a little more mature in public, when they sit down in public, because there are witnesses, right?

Ron: Right, when you're sitting at McDonald's you get rational. [Laughter]

Tammy: You get a little more rational, right? Everybody's watching. You can also bring someone with you. If it's a new divorce and maybe you've only been apart a year or two and you don't really trust each other, well you could each bring a neutral party to just sit at another table, right.

You sit down with your day timers and you work on some things. I don't know. There's a lot of different ways to do this and I can't necessarily say there's a one-size-fits-all.

But I will say the tough thing that happens post-divorce, and Jay likes to talk about this about the all-American divorce—unfortunately when people are divorcing and they both get an attorney and they go to war, usually then the trust is broken, right? The attorneys start talking. The parents stop talking.

Then usually it's very hard to recover. When you've gone to war and your attorneys have done a great job, usually the co-parenting gets even harder on the other side and the trust is broken. Yet you still are parents.

Ron: How do you, if you've had difficulties, if you've tried to even put on some of these good co-parenting behaviors and it's not being met with cooperation on the other side? Do you have some thoughts around that?

Jay: Here's one thing that comes to mind, first, just reaching back a little bit I heard both of you use the word "agree" a number of times in talking about the communication aspect, right? I think that's important.

I also think that when we start talking about digital ways of communicating, we have all been in a space where we've sent an email or a text and it's been misunderstood because there's no vocal inflection; there's no body language to read. That's a huge part of our communication, right?

That's why Tammy and I really advocate for, at some point, making sure that these co-parent meetings take place face-to-face as much as possible when you're able to. Now, as she said, there's a time to move towards that. Maybe initially it's got to be a phone call. But a phone call is better than a text. Again, because we're going to hear more. We're going to hear that vocal tone. That, I think, is important and helpful to recognize that.

The other thing I know, and we've experienced this with some of our co-parenting clients, is that something like a text can become overbearing for instance. A person using the vehicle of text messaging to pressure the other co-parent, to press on them on a regular basis when they're at work trying to do what they're supposed to do in the normal course of their day, and this co-parent is using it to nag or push or press on them.

Again going back to the idea you said earlier, that word "agree" which tells me there needs to be boundaries. It's okay to have those boundaries and to talk about them upfront and say, "Here is what the boundary needs to be."

If you have something that you don't want to forget, certainly go ahead and send that via email or a text, but understand that I'm not going to respond to the content of that until we're in a place where we can really discuss it; that means our co-parent meeting, right?

Because what you don't want to do is allow yourself to get trapped in this ongoing text thing when you're trying to do your normal daily activities. It's not fair. It's not fair.

Ron: Yes.

Jay: You want to have some boundaries there to do that. I think that's really important.

As far as understanding how to make that work, I think one of the things I like to point out to people who are in this space and who are just getting started, sometimes we have a co-parent who is pointing at the other parent and saying that they're in some way not healthy as a parent because they do things differently.

What we always try to emphasize is there's a very big difference between an uncooperative co-parent and an unsafe co-parent. That's one of the first things that you want to clarify for yourself.

Ron: Uncooperative might mean that they're just not doing it the way you do it.
[Laughter]

Jay: Right.

Ron: That's as much about you as it is about them. Unsafe has to do with maybe some moral decisions or some behaviors that are bringing pain or heartache to somebody in the picture.

Tammy: Right. In our *One Heart Two Homes* digital resource, which you contributed such a great segment to, you give a good analogy, Ron, where you talk about the two countries and how kids come and go between two countries. They're different.

Mom's house has a different culture than Dad's house. Dad's house has a different culture than Mom's. Different isn't bad.

What's hard on kids is when the countries are at war. When the expectation is that these two homes have to operate and function identical that's completely unrealistic.

Ron: Right?

Tammy: Even cooperative colleague co-parents who have meetings once a month and talk all the time and get along and make t-shirts like the soccer family, even those families are not going to do everything exactly the same.

I think the expectation that you can be exactly on point isn't real. But the differences are going to play out just like when you were a couple. One of you is more rules-based than the other. One puts more emphasis on bedtime than the other. One pays more attention to technology and screen time devices than the other. One pays more attention to healthy eating than the other.

When you were a couple you probably navigated and negotiated. Now that you're not a couple those differences are hugely—they just stand out more. Then to expect that you're going to all of a sudden organize and run your countries the same, that's not going to happen.

They're not necessarily safety issues, although technology can become one, but they're different. For kids coming and going between these different cultures of Mom's house and Dad's house, then one of you recouples, then maybe both recouple. That changes everything again and it becomes critical that the countries communicate and that they communicate on a regular basis.

But back to your original question when you talked about one side wants to communicate, the other doesn't; where do you begin? There's a couple of words I think that co-parents stop asking each other when they're no longer together as a family about parenting and decisions about children.

I think a common question they stop asking is, "What do you think? What do you think?" I think a lot of co-parenting perspectives are dictating and they start telling each other how to do it but they stop asking, "What do you think?"

Ron: Do you think that's because they've kind of lost that sense of partnership—

Tammy: Oh, absolutely.

Ron: Yes.

Tammy: And trust.

Ron: —and trust? That's really interesting. You're inviting co-parents to go back to that a little bit, to listen to the other home, too consider their point of view and to even perhaps start the conversation around that. That's a way of drawing them in, especially somebody who's not been cooperative in the past, to begin to enter the process.

Tammy: Right, to try to at least come to the other party with some curiosity. Maybe it's not about everything concerning the child, but where are the points on the child's life that you could ask your co-parent for input about sports or about something that's important to that other parent?

Begin to ask them, "What do you think about this? It's been awhile since we've talked about it. I'd like to know what you think. I need your input. I need your help."

Because, again, when divorce breaks the family up, a lot of times the trust is broken and they stop asking for the input of the other person. Then it goes sideways and they just assume they're no longer needed and the bridge is out.

I think co-parenting meetings and conversations can become, again, not a place that you always agree, but at least you become curious to ask the other parent for input. Be willing and humble enough to ask, "What do you think? We may not agree, but I'm curious. You're important to our child. You're their other parent. I want to know what you think."

Ron: Jay?

Jay: Yes, I agree. I think you're right on point with that. I didn't want to lose track of that initial question of when you have a co-parent who's not necessarily cooperating, how do you coax them gently back into this process because we are asking them to do exactly what you said. We're asking them to reengage as parents in a parental partnership because that's what's necessary. They have to continue to communicate about the needs of their children. I think that's one important point.

I love what Tammy was saying, just the simple idea of asking what they think gives them a voice again. Because many times in that divorce process, it doesn't matter how quote, unquote amicable a divorce is, there's always one person leaving and one person being left. Especially that person being left is going to have much more pain and hurt connected to this divorce and one of those things is going to be that they didn't have a voice.

They didn't want the divorce. They didn't want this pain in their life. They wanted to find a way to work through it. But they were not left with that choice so they feel like their voice was taken away. Quite often you'll find that, yes, now they feel like they don't have a right to speak. They're angry about that so they push back by not being communicative when you're reaching out to them.

I think one of the things that's really important is to not have a pointing finger, so to speak, and say, "Hey, I've learned all this great stuff about co-parenting but you're not going to join me in this process and I think you're just being a bad parent because you're not doing this stuff with me."

That is not going to be helpful.

Ron: Right. I've seen that work the other way where the person who was left who didn't have a voice pushes back in the co-parenting relationship and says, "I'm the only one who's going to have a voice because I was victimized by you and you're not going to have your cake and eat it too."

They're not stopping to say, "What do you think?" because that's almost like giving power back to the person who had it in the beginning. It can go both directions right?

What you guys are saying is, "Hey, you got to recognize that whatever that is, is not helpful. You do have to move back toward some partnering around parenting as best you can. I think that's so important.

There's something I don't want to lose, back to the team meetings, just real quickly. Again, I've heard these questions so many times from people. What are the parameters around? How do you structure the business meeting? How often do you meet? How long's it going to last? You already said something about stepparents can join. What if you try that and it doesn't work? It backfires. What are some of the other parameters you'd put on that?

Jay: I think I'll speak to the issue that you just brought up right there at the end, that question and that is when you try to involve a stepparent. Someone new comes into the relationship. They marry the other parent. You want to be cordial because you know that this parent's going to have an impact on your children. You want them to be a part of that team, right?

I want to mention *teamm* because we spell it with two m's. It stands for as an acronym, "the end adult matters most". That is to bring focus to your co-parenting agenda. Coming in with an agenda that is all about what's happening in the lives of our children that's important that we need to discuss.

But that stepparent needs to understand that they're being invited into this process. Whoever that parent is that's married to the new step parent has to also recognize that they are building a co-parenting relationship and that they have to value that because in the end, it's about their children and about them growing up whole and healthy and about them maintaining a parental role in their children's lives that's going to be helpful.

There may be times, if that stepparent is struggling for whatever reason, they may have some insecurities or frustrations about the process. If they become disruptive in the process, it falls on that parent to speak to that new spouse and say, “Hey, this is important to us. It’s important to me because in the end this is about helping my children grow up whole and healthy.

“For me being a good parent, and I want you to be a part of this process but you need to do that in a way where you don’t become a disruption, because we want you to be a part of the *teamm*.

“That means helping us move towards positive outcomes, beneficial outcomes for the kids. That includes us having civil conversation and discourse and being able to share ideas and not become frustrated if that idea’s not accepted in the process.”

But that’s a big challenge in and of itself. Yet co-parents who have developed a co-parenting relationship like John and Tammy did for Angelia—Miss Paula came into the picture when Angel was five so they had been co-parenting on an ongoing basis at that point for over three years and there were some times when it got difficult and it wasn’t about, “Hey, I’m in charge and you’re not.”

It was simply saying, “We need to respect each other and recognize why we’re here. Why we’re here is to be about the business of co-parenting. That is, what’s happening with the kids, what’s going on in their lives, how can we help them do well, social matters, academic matters, how are they doing developmentally, all of those things along with the logistics of getting to basketball practice and dance class and all the other things.”

Ron: You’ve been listening to my conversation with Jay and Tammy Daughtry. I’m Ron Deal and this is *FamilyLife Blended*.

We’ll hear one last thought from Tammy in just a minute. I wanted to go back though to part of our discussion. It was about inviting the other home to join you in being better co-parents. Jay and Tammy had some good suggestions. I’d like to add one more.

On my personal website SmartStepfamilies.com I have an article that’s designed for you to share with your co-parent. The show notes will point you to that article. I’m actually suggesting right here, right now that you share it with the other household or perhaps you can share this podcast with them.

How do you go about sending that article or this podcast is really important. If you accompany it with a message that says, “You know what, you’re really messed up and you really need to read this or listen to this.” Obviously that’s going to backfire if you imply that all the blame belongs with them and none of it belongs to you, that’s just another power play. That’s just another move. That’s another rock that you throw at them in a long line of other rocks that have been thrown back and forth between homes.

No, don't do it that way.

Instead shift to a more humble posture and say the truth. "I'm learning how to be a better co-parent. I was listening to this podcast and I learned a few things." Maybe you mention what those things are.

"Then I read this article and I learned a couple things there. Here's what I'm not going to do anymore as it relates to how we get along. Oh by the way, the podcast host suggested that I share this with you. Here's what you can expect from *me* going forward out of respect for you and out of love for our child. Thank you for your time."

What's the point of starting this way? First of all, you're changing you first. Second you're showing them that you're making some changes, that you're living and learning and you're trying to get better at this and you're going to walk it out. If they see you walk it out, then maybe, just maybe they will be inspired to make a few changes of their own. Who knows what will happen?

I offer no promises with this. But I've been recommending this for years and I've had countless people come back to me and say, "We shared that article and let me tell you, it's made a difference." It's some measure of time later often before you see the outcome. Maybe months, maybe years, but it makes a difference. No guarantees but I do have a lot of hope for you.

Now having said all of that, I have also learned I also need to add this little additional thought: For some of you, if you say to the other household, "I'm learning not to do x," they're going to use that against you in a court of law. They're going to save that message and they're going to use it against you. If you suspect that might be your situation then you might want to rethink how you go about sharing this material with them.

You might just say, "I'm learning a few things," period. Not really share the details of what that is. I'll let you decide how to handle that. You know who you are. Everybody else go for it.

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Maybe, just maybe, if you like what you're hearing, you'll help us spread the word, share something on social media, share it with a good friend, a ministry leader, somebody that could share it then with other people as well. It makes a difference and we appreciate it.

FamilyLife Blended *is* the leading resource ministry for step families around the world. Please visit us at FamilyLife.com/blended. We have all kinds of free content for you as well as book and video resources.

That reminds me, we have an entire section of articles on FamilyLife.com called "Multiple-Home Realities". That's what we've been talking about today. There's a number of articles on a variety of subjects related to co-parenting. You can check that out. That link will also be in the show notes.

It's time for you to make plans to be part of our annual equipping event called *The Summit on Stepfamily Ministry*. This is where we bring together leaders and pastors and professionals who want to know more about stepfamilies but also want to give back and pay it forward and help other stepfamilies. It's all going to happen September 30 through October 2nd.

The Summit on Stepfamily Ministry. I hope you will consider being a part or encouraging somebody from your church perhaps to be with us.

Now before we're done, a final word from Tammy Daughtry:

Tammy, comment on some of those structure questions I was asking about how you structure a meeting?

Tammy: What we've found was helpful was to plan, again somewhere in public, plan about an hour, maybe 90 minutes at the most. Sometimes we had to end early if things were not going well. We'd say, "You know what, let's pause. Let's come back to these things at our next meeting."

Our most important thing was, we wanted to find a way to keep communicating and not let it break down. There were a couple times over those years that we would end our meeting early just because it did get a little heated or maybe it wasn't going in a productive way.

I believe—this is my belief but I cheer for this all the time—bio parents, if we can be the one to invite the stepparent, the new stepparent in the other family to the team and really mean it, because if we can all work together—I'm saying to the moms, be open to the idea that the stepmom is an important part of the team with your kids and to the bio dads, be open to the fact that the new stepdad is really an important part of this team.

Now legally, sure, it's just bio mom and dad. Those co-parent meetings could just be between bio mom and dad. But as far as logistics and lingo and discipline and showing up and supporting kids, if there are three or four of you and you could all sit down at McDonalds or Starbucks or whatever that favorite place is and come together and really rally together.

Like Jay said, as you launch that young adult or those young adults, as they go, if you could throw a graduation party together and move them into college together and show up when they screw up in high school and you have to go to the principal's office *together* and show your kids that you can really do this thing together, that is going to benefit the children more than anything.

I have heard, not just from our family but from children that we work with, at the end of the day most kids just want all the adults to be friends. They just want them all to be friends. The place to work that stuff out and organize is at those meetings.

Step parents are really important to that. If there can be an authentic invitation and maybe they just, the stepparents, come, but they just observe the meeting. But at least they're honored and invited to the meeting. That's my two cents. When they're officially in the family they ought to be at the meetings because it's tough to feel like they have an import—invited.

Ron: Kids just want all the adults to be friends.

Tammy: Yes.

Ron: I think we came full circle to where we started with those images that go viral, those videos that get shared on social media, where everybody says, "Yes, that's it. They're friendly. They're acting like adults and they're doing this on behalf of that child. Yes, the child wins."

Tammy: Amen.

Ron: Nobody loses. The child wins when that happens.

That brings this podcast season to a close but don't worry. We'll be back.

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. Our mastering engineer is Justin Adams. Theme music provided by Braden Deal.

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