

FamilyLife Blended®

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Episode 33: Bonus Parenting

Guests: Stephen and Misty Arterburn

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Ron: You guys mentioned before we started this recording that just yesterday before the recording you guys celebrated your 15th wedding anniversary. [Misty laughs]

Misty: Yes.

Ron: Fifteen years in, did you have some hiccups, some rough spots early on? [Misty and Steve laugh] I think I hit a nerve.

Misty: Did we have some hiccups? Yes. We had some hiccups.

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

Well the reviews of my book with Dr. Gary Chapman entitled *Building Love Together in Blended Families* are coming in. Laura gave the book five stars and writes this: "I received my book today and have not been able to put it down. Like every other book by Dr. Chapman and Ron the book is incredibly insightful regarding the inner workings of marriage and blended families. This book," she writes, "is an absolute must-read if you are part of a blended family."

Well thanks Laura. We appreciate those positive words very much. You can get your copy wherever books are sold. But you can only get the one-day livestream event that we did based on this book through FamilyLife. The event was called Blended and Blessed. It was this past April 2020.

Just go to our online store and look for the Blended and Blessed All-Access Digital Pass. Go to FamilyLife.com.

Hey, before I jump into my conversation with Steve and Misty Arterburn let me encourage you to attend our annual ministry equipping event. It's called The Summit on Stepfamily Ministry. It's going to be October 1st and 2nd, 2020. You may not think of yourself as a leader or somebody who can influence other people, but let me tell you your marriage can be on mission.

You'd be surprised what you can learn and how you can help others. This event is an equipping event for ministry leaders, pastors, lay couples, and professionals who want to know more about stepfamilies and how they can minister to couples in their church and community. I hope you'll join me. Again, that's October 1st and 2nd 2020. Go to SummitOnStepfamilies.com.

If you had your pick, what term would you use for the stepparent in your family? I mean, so many people are perfectly fine with the word "stepparent". But others prefer "bonus parent" or "smom" if you're a stepmom.

Does a label really matter or is it how you conduct yourself that really matters? We'll get into all of that and more on today's FamilyLife Blended.

Steve and Misty Arterburn are my guests. They've been married since 2005. He brought one child to the marriage; she brought two. Together they had two more. Steve is the founder of New Life Ministries, a best-selling author, a popular speaker and radio host of the New Life Live radio program.

Misty, his wife, is a life recovery facilitator and co-author of several books. Here's my conversation with best-selling authors Steve and Misty Arterburn.

Well, Steve and Misty, you guys have been involved in ministry for years in various ways/fashions: conference events, local church ministry, you're involved in that very much now in this season of your life, you've been involved in helping leaders, training leaders, working with people who are in recovery; all kinds of ministry opportunities. I'm wondering how often does the need for stepfamily education or ministry just show up in those conversations?

Steve: Often it does, Ron because people know that we have a blended family and of course, you know you have just a great ministry of Blended and Blessed. We've found most people are living offended and stressed [Ron laughs] so they're looking for somebody that's been through it and loves being in a blended family.

Both of us have made major mistakes in our lives but one of the things that we were both so committed to was to not make our marriage a hostage situation or a hostile takeover where the kids feel like this is the worst thing that's ever happened to us.

We're really -- it took a lot of work and intentionality, you could say, and our partnership but we're really reaping the results of that. We're grateful, but Honey, wouldn't you say that people they want answers for these horrific problems that are coming up.

Misty: Yes, and Ron, it's a really good point that whatever kind of/type of ministry that we're involved in somebody's affected by blended families in some -- whether it's family of origin or maybe they're in a blended family now. I do think that always the ears perk up when there are ideas and solutions offered for how to do that successfully.

Ron: Yes, of course, there's stepfamilies and stepfamily relationships everywhere so people no matter where we are in life and in ministry it's going to come up when we actually sit down and listen to people. I find in my ministry circles that other people often don't bring up the need for blended family ministry. I think just because for them if it's not their life it's kind of out of sight out of mind.

Misty: Yes.

Ron: But I do know that you guys have amazing opportunity to bring that to the forefront of people's minds. I just want to tell you as somebody who's deeply committed to blended family ministry, thank you for walking and being transparent and using your own life and journey and struggles to help lighten the way for others.

Misty: Thank you.

Steve: Well, and Ron you know you have never been through divorce. You aren't in a blended family. For you to take up this cause is really so powerful. Right before this program I was doing an interview for another program and they were getting some tweets and interaction there.

When I mentioned that I was in a blended family and that the both of us had been married before and we felt like, based on biblical principles, we were free to marry each other. Someone texted in, "You know, you have been divorced so rather than talking about these things, you should be experiencing nothing but condemnation from other Christians."

Ron: Wow.

Steve: So the host read that to me. He said, "What do you think about that?" I said, "Well I feel like that the person that wrote that must have been deeply wounded and probably has developed some kind of rigid, rule-based religion," because that doesn't really reflect the words of Jesus, His teaching, very clear about that.

But also the Bible says that God is rich in mercy. I didn't find his comments to be rich in mercy. I read that there is no condemnation for those that are in Christ Jesus. So if someone looks at a situation and it's easy for them to judge it, you really should ask yourself, "What is it within me that would lead me to do that versus try to understand it?"

One of the things that Misty has done so well with other people and with me is trying to get to what's beneath whatever it is that's on the surface. There's more to this. She is just really good at knowing there's more to it and trying to get to the bottom of all of that.

We've worked really hard, not on each other, but separately with our Christian counselors and other people that specialize in different types of counseling whether it's trauma or whatever to get beneath our own things and try to clean that up down there

so that we can be connected in healthy relationship for each other and to honor God and for our kids, they need that.

Misty: Ron, I really was puzzled, when we first met you and we first did our interview there at FamilyLife and I didn't know that you hadn't gone through this. I was really puzzled when I found out why you would care, why this would matter to you.

Maybe that's a representation of how I sort of expect the church to respond, I don't know what was in there but it was so touching to me that you would commit your effort and your mission to those of us that are going through this. It was very powerful and was a really nice ministry to me personally in my own little heart there, so thanks for what you do.

Ron: Well I appreciate that. From time to time people ask me, "So why are you doing this?" It's because I believe in the power of love and the power of family and I believe that God uses relationships.

All relationships whether it be friendships or an intimate marriage relationship, or children, parent/child whatever that might be, He uses all of those things as His -- I think His primary tools of discipleship for who we are.

That's true no matter what kind of family you live in. I just am passionate that all families should be healthy.

Misty: Yes.

Ron: Because healthy people in families and healthy family environments creates a climate where we really can come to know our heavenly Father and our brothers and sisters in Christ and we can walk with each other. So at the end of the day that's the journey for me.

I get a little stuck as Steve did when you get a caller, somebody who sends in a message that says, "You should be experiencing condemnation. I'm perfect. I don't need any condemnation in my life." That's almost what's implied is--

Misty: Yes, yes.

Ron: Okay so the church is a hospital for sick people and you're among them but your sickness is a little different than my sickness but your sickness is much worse than mine.

Misty: Worse.

Ron: I mean that seems to be what gets implied in all of that. Micah 6:8 jumped in my head, Steve, as you were talking, "What does the Lord require of you, but act justly, love

mercy,” not just be merciful, love mercy. You said, “God is a God of mercy.” He is rich in mercy and we, as His children, are called to love being merciful to people rather than judgmental and condemning. So amen to all of that.

Again, thank you for being here.

You guys mentioned before we started this recording that just yesterday before the recording you guys celebrated your 15th wedding anniversary. [Laughter]

Steve: We did. We’ve just been, we’ve kind of been celebrating progressive celebration. [Laughter]

Misty: It was progressive. But I’ll tell you it just sort of snuck up. You know, I wasn’t really thinking of it as a milestone. I knew -- it’s 15, it’s a nice round anniversary number but then when we got here I really feel the impact of having accomplished 15 years together and raising our children together and we still have two at home so we’re still doing it.

But it’s just -- I have a ton of nostalgia for it. I have some bigger picture with it. I’m not so in the weeds as we were for several years. You know, I can see the grander scale of it. I’m just totally soaking in gratitude right now.

Ron: Well.

Steve: Me too.

Ron: That’s a good message for our listener who’s in the weeds going, “Oh I can’t see the forest at all. I’m just sinking in the midst of all of the stuff we’ve got to deal with day in and day out.”

But what a joy that you get to a place where you can kind of sit back and look and go, “Yes, well the rewards are here and look we’ve made it 15 years.” That’s got to be a great feeling.

I want to go back to where it all started. [Laughter] Steve, you have some friends John Townsend and Henry Cloud. You work with them. They’re buddies of yours.

Steve: Yes.

Ron: Back when you were a single dad, and starting to date they gave you a task. [Misty laughs]

Steve: Well they did. They knew that I had been in a very, very difficult situation and they were well aware of all the things that had gone on and so I remember Henry Cloud saying to me, “You know when you come out of a situation like that, when you do start

to date, which shouldn't be soon, you know you might be tempted to marry the first woman that's just nice to you."

So, he suggested, and John forced me also to agree that I would at least date 20 people before I would settle on the person that I was going to marry.

Ron: What did you think when you first heard that?

Steve: I thought it'd be impossible. You know, but there were two things that it did. Number one, it eliminated what they were talking about. Secondly, that takes time. Time is required for healing. So, it kind of built in some time that would take place before I would get serious again.

Then now once we got married having gone through that, I have to tell you some of the 20 would be standing next to someone in starbucks and me saying, "Hey how you doing?" I'm like, "Okay I'm going to count that one."

Ron: You met the letter of the law, right.

Steve: Right, they talked more than five minutes. But then once we were married all doubt had been eliminated. I hadn't rushed into it. I had talked to other people. Gotten to know folks. I had never thought that there was someone out there that would've made a better partner.

As we've talked about the last few days, I really believe God brought us together. We see some miraculous things that happened that make me believe this unlike what the guy did in the previous program, this was meant to be. It's just like when I adopted Madelyn when she filled out her essay for college, she said, "I was adopted at birth, but it seems like it was meant to be from the beginning of time."

That's the way I felt like this. God didn't want divorce; hates divorce but in God's world we make mistakes and then whatever happens when we come back to Him when we commit to Him He just says, "You know I can work with that." Things that weren't part of God's perfect will as we humble and submit to Him it is as if they were always meant to be.

Ron: He is rich in mercy. Right?

Steve: He is.

Ron: He often brings more grace than we can imagine given our circumstances. All right so let's just talk around this 20-people dating rule thing. I'm hearing it's adding some discipline to the dating process. Let's talk about that a little bit. I'm also hearing that it forces time on you in other words you can't be quick.

Steve and Misty: Right.

Ron: And make quick decisions which I agree time is your friend when it comes to making a really big decision like another marriage. And yet on the ground the user experience of that must have been weird and confusing. Misty, were you aware [laughs] that he had to date all these women? Which number were you?

Misty: Yes, right. I did not know I was part of a lineup at first so -- and when I discovered this mission I was not entirely thrilled about it either because pretty quickly Steve and I made a connection and I knew that this was something he needed to do.

I had been dating. I was a single mom for about a year and a half before I met Steve so I had dated and yes, I thought it was probably exactly what he needed to do, but what I chose to do was not be a part of it. [Laughs]

I just thought, "Well you just go do what you've got to do," and I've probably took about two different one month breaks because I couldn't handle that. That was me putting a boundary and doing something healthy for me and just knowing that it would work out in some form or other.

Ron: Yes, to me what I'm hearing in this is there was discipline on both sides. It kind of forced -- I don't want our listener to think, "Oh I've got to date 20 people or I should've dated back before we got--" No. I think the point here is take your time. Be careful.

Steve: Yes.

Ron: Be cautious and have a process to dating. Don't just rush in.

Steve: How many people do we know she was married to an alcoholic, a year later after he's left her for someone else she's married to another alcoholic. We're comfortable with these big problems and many times they come into play.

So, you have to take this as a major adjustment in your life. That time varies for a lot of people but I'll guarantee you, you would be hard pressed to find anybody that had wisdom saying that after a person has been divorced they ought to get married the next year. That's just, you know.

Boy we hear it all the time. "You know this is the exception. God's really -- God brought us together," all that stuff. Okay great. If God brought you together then He can keep you together while you set an example to other single folks that you don't have to get married nine months after your divorce was final.

Ron: And your children. Set an example for your children.

Steve: Oh, no kidding. Right.

Ron: Yes.

Misty: I do think it took some of the emotionality out of it too. It's just easier like you said, the first person that's nice to you, you think, "Oh this is God's will." Do you know there's a lot of different ways to interact with people. It just kind of gets you talking again and not so desperate.

Not thinking that there's this scarcity that I might not ever meet anybody else. It just starts moving it into the abundance of people in the world and God's abundance and His provision and I just think it's a kind of a slow down. It sounds like a speed up, oh date 20 people kind of thing, [laughs] but I really think it creates the opposite effect. It is very intentional. It was a good thing.

Steve: You know when it comes to the blended family aspect think about this too, I mean we were slow before our kids got involved and stuff but if you walk out of a marriage and walk right into another committed relationship, your kids, I mean they haven't even dealt with the fact that there's loss and divorce and Mom and Dad don't live together. Now you're expecting them to come along and accept this new reality.

Again the slower that you can go for their sake you're really going to lay some great groundwork for a future that the kids can enjoy and you should never introduce that other person early in the relationship and you must not marry that person if they're not great with these kids.

Ron: Right.

Steve: Some people make the case, Ron, if you are free to marry again, wait until they're in college until you do that. Well I can understand that. That might be necessary especially when you find that you've got a great person but man they are horrible at parenting and you are going to literally, literally destroy your relationship with your kids because you've chosen someone that is not good for them.

Ron: I think far too many people have if you want to call it stop signs; red lights, yellow lights, and green lights. They only have red lights as it relates to the person as a dating partner slash spouse. But you should also have red lights as it relates to them as a parent figure to your kids. How do they parent their kids? Because if they're a poor parent to their kids, you're marrying those problems as a result of their poor parenting.

Steve: To your point, when I finally came out to Indiana and saw Misty and this she had purchased this house and there were her little boys. By the age of six they'd already read through *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Adventure Bible*. I saw the kind of mother she was.

It just blew me away and it wasn't everything of course but it was huge to see that. If somebody doesn't see that you really, really need to stop and get some help. Join the

support group. Something so you don't rush into something that really it doesn't just -- it isn't going to destroy you alone it's going to destroy those kids too.

Ron: You know something I really appreciated about you guys I've heard you both talk about how through the years back when you were still single and even now, you surround yourself with people: counselors, folks that speak into your life.

Misty, I've heard you talk about how you went through some really dark days as a single mom and a really hard transition there and yet you had people around you and spoke into your life. Since you guys have been together you've had people speak into your life. What's the value in that? What are you chasing by surrounding yourselves?

Misty: I just think a shared journey and my little mind can get me into trouble on its own [laughter] so I tried to be a learner. I just always want the posture of being a learner. Knowing I have something to give and I always have something I can learn some way that I can grow and what a trip to be able to support others and be supported. It's just such a better experience.

I was in a small group when I was a single mom and the men in the group and the couples would come and they'd change the oil in my car or something.

One of the dads would take my little boys. I had asked him would he would consider being a mentor, a male mentor so he'd take my boys out into the woods and chop wood or they'd go, I don't know, they just did fun things together. Go out in nature and just talk and just be a guy--a healthy guy--in the lives of my two little boys so they didn't get all this over mothering.

I was trying to balance out my sons' experiences. That was such a gift to me. I just really, really appreciated that. Really made a difference for me.

Steve: We both did that. That was another thing it was something that we both brought people into the lives of our children of the opposite sex. When Madelyn was 16, Misty was part of a dinner of the six women--I wasn't there, it was all women--who had come around her and been to her what a nurturing mom would be and they all shared their best memory of what they loved about her strengths and things.

That was another thing that we had in common that neither of us were thinking, "Well we've got what it takes." We had brought not only helping people in our lives but we wanted to bring strong faithful people into the lives of our kids.

Ron: That's ultimately what you guys like to call bonus parenting as opposed to stepparenting.

Before we turn the corner and talk about that and unpack that a little bit, 15 years in, did you have some hiccups, some rough spots early on? [Misty and Steve laugh] I think I hit a nerve.

Misty: Did we have some hiccups? Yes, we had some hiccups. [Laughs]

Steve: We did.

Misty: Yes, and you go in with the best hope. No one goes in, you know, anticipate--we knew it'd be hard. We could never have totally understood how hard it would be so that is another great reason why we are surrounded with people to help hold this thing together.

We were absolutely committed to each other but yes the first year especially is such a transition for everybody. It's for the new marriage, it's for these children that are blending and they're traveling back and forth, you know, typically you start living together in some way and it was complicated. Different parenting styles. Yes, all the things that we know in blended families, we sure went through it.

Ron: Merging routines, daily traditions, trying to figure out how to get this done and that done and only you know when the moment comes for the first time that you have to set a boundary and say "no" to somebody else's kid, it's kind of like that's when you realize, "Oh maybe they're not used to that," Or, "It would have been handled in a different way so what role do I have?"

So, this whole thing of being a bonus parent I think is a wonderful image and there's definitely some contrast between healthy ways of going about being a bonus parent versus unhealthy ways of stepparenting that work against you.

I want to flesh some of those out but before we do, Steve, I remember you said something to her kids when you came into their life. You basically let them know you weren't going to try to be their dad.

Steve: Right. I said to them, "You have a father and he is a good dad to you and I don't want to replace him. I don't want to compete with him. I also don't want to be a stepdad. It sounds like you're going to step on me or over me, but I want to be a bonus to your life. I want to be something that you weren't counting on and that it turns out to be better than you ever thought it could be. That's the path I'm going to take."

So, I came into our marriage more with an attitude of benevolent uncle to those kids. We agreed that each of us would be the primary disciplinarian of our own children. We weren't going to step in.

I had heard all the nightmares, especially from women. This man came in and demanded respect, started to discipline my children, and they hate him. So, I had all those things going for me knowing that that's just the worst experience for a child.

I came in to earn their respect and let them know that I cared about them and what they were going through and I didn't expect them to care anything about me, I was a stranger to them.

I'll tell you one day when Carter was at college and he had a big dilemma--

Ron: Hey, before you continue the story let me just set the scene. Carter was seven/six when you came into his life.

Misty: It was about six - well when we got married he was six, so he would've been younger--four--when we were dating. Four or five.

Ron: Okay so fast forward he's in college now, go ahead.

Steve: Yes. One day he called me up and he had to have some advice and I'm just sitting there shaking my head, it all just kind of came together. This is what we had hoped for. This is what we had been working for that we could have a relationship far beyond anything like that. Now, I've got to tell you when we're together there's so much expression of love and respect.

Misty: Well here's the sign is that they miss him. They'll say that they're missing him which to me it just gets me.

Steve: It's just too good to be true, almost. I tell people all the time, when you marry someone with children you might have the attitude of well, "Yes, I love them and I've got to have these kids with me too."

But if you'll do it in a different way than that, then the other person's kids become these amazing blessings. They are such a blessing to me and I've added so much to my life. That's what I want for other people.

But you don't do that by coming in and you're more of the little baby child demanding things from a five or a six year old. You come in, you be the adult and you realize where they are.

The other day on our radio program, Ron, a woman was telling a story of her son and when his eight-year-old boy decided to live with the mother rather than him he never wanted anything to do with his own child again.

Ron: Wow.

Steve: I said to her, "You're -- I'm sorry -- your son," it was not a great moment in radio, "Your son is just a big baby. I mean really, to put that on an eight year old." Any time you're expecting--

Ron: Yes.

Steve: --something of a child that you haven't raised that doesn't know you, you really need to question the level of maturity in your life.

Ron: Clearly Steve you saying that to them put your heart in the right place. You were setting your expectations low in the sense that you were saying, "I'm going to be an adult to you and you don't have to take care of me."

Misty, I'm curious from your mom-heart point of view, what did it do for you that Steve communicated that to your boys?

Misty: It was everything. He was being a respectable man. Someone that they could -- you know it's a process, right? We can't just instantly attach to somebody. [Laughs] It's like he was inviting relationship and he was showing up to be there to know them, to hear them, to play, be in the moment with whatever was needed at the time.

He was such a gentleman with them. It's almost like if you think about scaring a cat or something [laughter] I think these kids recoil and they're trying to figure out what has happened in their world. They're at different developmental stages. They have these different households. You know a little eye contact of getting down on their level. A little bit of listening; it feels good to be known and to be drawn out.

I know God pursues me pretty gently. He's pretty patient with me. He's pretty understanding and loving and yes He has limits but it's all for the sake of love. So, tone matters, how we engage to not only the things we say but how we say it. I mean he was just a champ and they responded.

Ron: Well we've already started talking about one contrast between a healthy bonus parent and an unhealthy stepparent. Unhealthy stepparent demands respect you guys say and a bonus parent says, "I'm going to earn your respect." We've already been talking about that but let's press in a little more on the word "demand" and the word "earn."

I can imagine someone listening to us right now going, "Oh wait a minute, wait a minute, Stepmom or Stepdad I have to earn respect? What do you mean? I'm the adult, I'm paying, I'm feeding, I'm doing laundry. I'm picking up, dropping off. What do you mean I have to earn respect?"

Steve: Well if you're going to earn respect then you have to be in the world of the people that you want to respect you. My daughter, so much of her life she had many struggles in school but so much of her life was played out on the soccer field.

When Misty came along there are a lot of things Misty could've done on a Saturday morning but Misty was there, not just there at the soccer stadium, she was running up and down the field yelling at her. She entered her world.

You could say, "Well they need to respect me," but earning respect is respecting their loves, their interests, and adjusting to it. Misty's favorite sport was volleyball, not soccer, and yet she became a soccer fan because that was the world of my daughter. What that says is, an unspoken message is, "I'm coming into your world to understand you and to be with you."

The child sees that and then they're drawn to come into the world of this other person and be curious. If you can develop curiosity from those kids, that is a huge accomplishment where they want to know, "What was your mom and dad like?" And, "What did you like to do?" Those kinds of conversations that might not seem like much that's earning the respect -- you have earned the respect of those children.

Ron: As you talked about Misty I thought here's another unspoken message that comes through in that.

It's you saying to the child, "I respect your journey in our relationship. What brought you here, the stuff you didn't ask for, how you're feeling confusion even now about me and my place in the family and loyalty conflicts between you don't want to hurt your mom's feelings if you're drawn to me. I'm respecting all of that in you and I'm going to approach gently and softly and we'll figure this thing out together."

Misty: Yes, and I think that they're really watching for cues about, "What is your position here? What's your commitment level? Are you sticking around or is there going to be another unexpected major trauma?" They wouldn't call it a trauma but, "Is my life going to fall apart again?"

It's scary to love someone if you're not sure they're going to stay. If someone is coming in all about their rights how is it possible for a little one to start to feel and experience love with that new person?

Ron: Oh that's so good.

Another contrast: unhealthy stepparent becomes a disciplinarian from the beginning. A healthy bonus parent says, "I'm going to let the biological parent take the primary role with the kids and work my way into being a disciplinarian."

Yes, let's talk around that for a while. How did you guys practically do that? Let the other maybe take the lead when it came to the hard things with their kids and what did you do in the meantime?

Steve: Well first of all this area causes so much conflict between newly formed families, blended families and it's something that is so hurtful to the kids when it happens but typically one is more lenient than the other or one is much more smarter, wiser, consequence based, things like that.

To expect them to adjust sometimes to a new home, new person living in a home and now this person is in charge of how I'm going to be disciplined is just too much for a child and they're going to create a very rebellious situation and they're not going to be supportive of coming together.

Misty was very smart and wise with her kids. She had put everything into them. What right did I have to come in and lay down the law or have the iron fist or something like that? So I set upon myself to observe what she was doing and how they responded.

One of her boys, you could tell this one as loud as possible not to do something and he was probably figuring it out how he could do it in a better way. [Ron laughs] Her other son you didn't even need to whisper and he already had figured out that wasn't good, he wasn't going to do it anymore.

She had different ways of dealing with the uniqueness of her own sons. I needed to watch that. Whatever I thought was the way to discipline had nothing to do with the way they had been raised up to that point.

The same thing with my daughter. Maybe I was a little too lenient on her. Maybe I was a little bit codependent, whatever. Maybe -- well she didn't know that. Madelyn didn't know that so to come in and make some kind of abrupt change in the way I dealt with her because I was now married.

Misty: Yes.

Steve: Boy that would do nothing but make Misty look like the hard person, the bad person. We just stuck with what we had done. We observed what each was doing to get a feel for that. Then it just became a natural evolution.

Misty: But boy we have experimented in all the ways. I have one in particular painful memory of me really stepping in with Madelyn and when it wasn't time. It wasn't helpful and it created more division. I just had all this regret and I couldn't undo it. I got irritated with her. I said what I would say to my children but that was not how Steve worked with her.

So, we definitely experimented and tried things and suffered the consequences of fumbling quite a bit. I just think, you know, it's tricky too because as a mother I was certainly a mother bear.

When you're first married, like let's say you're newlyweds and you're young and it's your first marriage and you haven't gone through all this. You get a little time actually to bond and form your marriage and figure things out together and you bring children into the family together. But in blended families you're trying to figure out the marriage.

Ron: Instantly. Everything.

Misty: And be parenting at the same time.

Ron: All at once.

Misty: And parenting other people's children. I didn't know how Steve would parent my boys instantly. I had watched because we dated for a long time: a year and nine months before we married.

So, I knew enough to make the commitment and trust him but boy when you get married in a blended-family situation and now the deal is sealed I think that our intensity rises. Things get a lot more intense; fear is heightened. We've got to figure it out. I think it's maybe a potential for a lot more reactivity early on which is what we experienced that first year.

Steve: I want to say this, we both, we weren't perfect in this but just like with Misty when she moved in a little too quickly or too hard there she didn't continue on that path she backed way up.

Here was the thing, she could be more stern, you could say, or more directive with her children with confidence because the other part of her was so nurturing. She's the one that taught me the only way that you can put love into a child it has to be downloaded eyeball to eyeball, only way it can be done.

Well, Madelyn had never had a female that held her/nurtured her so it was a little bit different and I treated her a little bit differently. We just made those adjustments. Sometimes I didn't understand what she was doing with her boys but we clarified those things separate than in the presence. We didn't argue over that.

I was totally supportive of whatever she did with them. She was supportive of me and what's so great is when she looks back on her relationship with Madelyn there's one incident where she says, "I think I blew it." One incident.

Now when Madelyn went to graduate school and needed to do an internship, she didn't do that internship in California where she was. She found a place in Indiana to do the

internship and she came and lived with us for 12 weeks. Now I'd say that's pretty good evidence she loves Misty and we all love being together or the last place she would've ended up was living with us doing her internship.

Ron: Yes.

Steve: In her 20s.

Ron: Misty?

Misty: Yes, well when we do make those regrettable mistakes which we will inevitably, we do have the opportunity to make the amends and to go back. I certainly did that.

Once we get insight that maybe I could've done that differently [laughs] it's not just this performance and now it's over. It's no, it's relationship and I want to own when I see that I've blown it. I just had to and was very happy to go to her and try to make that amends. She was very gracious about it too. That's not always the case. Sometimes the amends is a long time.

I do think that there was a lasting impact for probably a good year of us just trying to trust and know each other and how we were going to be related. But she did see me come back and really keep trying and reaching. I think that that was worth a lot too.

Ron: Absolutely. That's great.

Let's do another one. Unhealthy stepparent makes obedience the primary priority, a healthy bonus parent makes connection primary. Misty, I've heard you say it this way, "Correction submits to connection." Let's talk around that for a minute.

Steve: She does say that.

Ron: Yes.

Misty: I love that. I love that if you look at those words on paper they are spelled the same except for the "r"s and the "n"s. I always just want to drop the 'r"s down and aim for the "n"s.

Aim for the connection because really when there is a connection that is somewhat secure, and we're moving toward more security in that relationship, correction is more welcome. Sometimes even invited like the phone call of Carter calling Steve now that he's in college and saying, "Hey what do you think about this?" That's because there was a connection that was built.

When we try to correct without connection, my experience is that we get a lot of rebellion, a lot of anger, a lot of not feeling like anyone actually cares, nobody really

understands what I'm going through. How can you correct me? You don't know what's going on in my heart. You don't take the time to know me.

That's the dialog internally I think a lot of times. When a child knows, "Hey this person has invested," they've observed that that bonus parent shows up. Just in the non-conflict times they're interested in me and my life experience and who I am. If I start to believe they truly care about me I might be more willing to hear what they have to say about my behavior and how I could do things better in life.

Ron: This one kind of plays in with another one I've heard you guys say is that bonus parents listen to know the child whereas somebody who is pushing themselves on the child they're talking to be known. It's a totally different focus and direction there.

Steve: It really is. Kids are fascinating and I say this, we love our children until 9 P.M. [Laughter] you know kids are fascinating and if you don't believe that then don't become a stepparent or a bonus parent.

When we listen because we want to know the heart of these kids they feel that so much. You don't listen to nail them or you don't force them to listen so they'll know where you're coming from and all that stuff.

When you genuinely have a heart for those kids and you want to know their heart, they just have that sixth sense and it's going to come back to you, that investment of two ears listening it's going to come back to you.

It's going to be such a valuable foundation for when all the tough things happen when they're in their 20s and they're faced with the conflicts and stuff and they don't know what to do and they're big, big consequences if they make the wrong decision about spouse, job, future, things like that.

Really ask yourself is it a pain for me to listen to these children that I'm about to get involved with and if so you really ought to get some help for that or don't move forward. If you're in the relationship and you don't like these kids, you again go get some help with it. Find out why is that that you can't have compassion on children that have had everything that was secure ripped out from under them. Why is that that you can't do that?

Misty: Well one more thing, I just think it's a really good skill to teach our children is how to listen. You can almost tell if someone was raised in a family where listening was valued. Generally we are either talkers or listeners and if we've been listened to, we know how to do it. It just comes more naturally.

We used to really practice this when my children were all little and we still work on it reflecting back what you hear and really trying to know and be known. That's just a great skill in life.

Ron: Absolutely. You know one of the things I'm reflecting on is people that I've worked with in the past and kids who let's just say perhaps through their first family and their single parent family they weren't listened to very much at all.

They're not used to people really being interested in them, really loving and caring for them so some kids find it harder to let a bonus parent who is doing everything right they just find it harder to lean into that, to trust that, to be vulnerable to that.

Misty: Yes, like what's the motive?

Ron: Right.

Misty: Yes.

Ron: It's almost like they're doubting and questioning the motive. The other part is they're just not used to being known in that way. It's foreign to them and yet what an incredible grace opportunity for you as a bonus parent again to bring to them their significance.

You at that point are mirroring their significance back to them by taking great interest in them and listening. It may take a while. It probably will take a while and it's like that's a hard thing to endure to try, to try, to try. Feel like you're hitting your head against a wall but to just trust that eventually that will I want to say break them down, but you know what I mean it will break through--

Misty: Soften.

Ron: Soften them. Break through those barriers. Then you've gained a friend, a child, a family member.

Misty: The coolest thing just to watch that transition that happens of the melting down, the softening and you know you're invested and invested and invested. And finally it does break through. That's awesome.

Ron: Well there's one last thing that you guys point out about bonus parents. We've already mentioned it but maybe there's more to say and that's they admit their mistakes and they make amends. We talked about that a minute ago. Whereas an unhealthy stepparent just says, "No, I'm right. I'm an adult."

Steve: Well it's true because we have admitted mistakes to each other from the beginning. We were able, whenever we messed up, to go and try to make it right. I was raised in a family where I never heard my father say he was sorry for anything. He was a great man but he couldn't do it.

This was not something that was modeled for me. But what a great thing to go to a child and try to repair something that your tone was too much, your consequence was too severe and you want to take it back a little bit. You've rethought it.

It just gives a child such security to know you're on the right track and you're checking yourself and if you discover you're not on the right track, you're going to self correct and you're going to come back.

That provides such security versus the person thinking, "Well if I ever admit I'm wrong, they'll never trust me again." Exact opposite impact.

Ron: You've been listening to my conversation with Steve and Misty Arterburn. I'm Ron Deal and this is FamilyLife Blended.

We'll hear one last thought from the Arterburns in just a few minutes.

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We've got a variety of topics covered in a variety of podcasts. we hope that you'll browse and take a look at all of them.

You know the Arterburns and I spent a good bit of time talking about healthy and unhealthy stepparents. I just want to balance that by reminding biological parents that you play a big role in the stepparents' success or failure.

I believe in this so much I put two chapters for biological parents in each of my books for stepmoms and stepdads. *The Smart Stepmom* has two chapters for the biological dad. *The Smart Stepdad* has two chapters for biological moms.

Now why did I do that? Well, because you can really help or really hurt the stepparent's ability to lead and have a relationship with the kids. If they're going to be a good bonus parents you've got to be a good biological parent.

Parenting is always a team sport. So, make sure you are talking through your team strategy and game plan otherwise you just might suffer a little defeat.

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It's all available at FamilyLife.com/blended. One of those books, a 365-day devotional includes some devotionals inspired by the Arterburns. Learn more about *Daily Encouragement for the Smart Stepfamily* at FamilyLife.com/blended.

Let me remind you again about our summit on stepfamily ministry coming up soon. October 1-2, 2020. You can learn all about this ministry-equipping event at SummitOnStepfamilies.com.

If you'd like more information about my guests today you'll find it in the show notes. Or you can just check it out on the FamilyLife Blended podcast page at FamilyLife.com/podcasts.

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Now before we're done, a final word from Steve and Misty Arterburn.

One of my favorite topics to think about is humility and our posture before God and how humility softens other people in relationships and Misty you call this “humbling down.”

Steve: She does and she does it too. Oh my goodness, it’s amazing.

Ron: It is powerful in the sense that it keeps our hearts in the right place and it does soften when we inadvertently cause conflict or a difficulty and a wall goes up ultimately it does help repair that.

Misty: Yes, humbling down. It’s like, “Oh I forgot I’m not God. [Laughter] Oh yes, humble down.” I don’t have to know everything I just need to seek. Right? That’s a position of humility if I’m seeking and I’m trying to find some answers and I’m reaching out and I’m asking God to provide resources and whatever my next step is that’s a much better and safer position with God than the throne.

We want to get on that throne and figure it out and force solutions but that is never my rightful place. I’m trying to be the listener just with God, you know, so I think that as we have that personal practice that’s what spills over. We practice it with our spouse. We practice it with our children and all of our peers. Then things take a better shape and things unfold a little more naturally and the answers come.

Ron: Next time, we’re going to hear from my good friends Gill and Brenda Stuart on finding help and encouragement and sometimes counseling for your family when you need it.

Gill: Because of what they’re learning they actually then start acting differently. They start talking differently. They start regulating their emotions differently. Then all of a sudden I have the husband sitting in my office because it’s like, “What did you do to my wife?!” [Laughter] I was like, “Well she had a safe place to talk. Would you like to learn how to do that?”

Ron: That’s Gill and Brenda Stuart on finding the help you need. Next time on FamilyLife Blended.

I’m Ron Deal, thanks for listening. Thanks to our FamilyLife Legacy Partners for making this podcast possible.

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