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Season 1, Episode 6: Challenging Co-Parent Situations, Parent Alienation, and What You Can Do

Guests: Helen Wheeler, Rodney and Lisa Webb

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Helen: People get so caught up in the anger and the hurt and the frustration from the divorce. Maybe they think the other person is the sole cause of it so there's a little bit of revenge that they try and do. What better way to hurt a parent than by using their child against them.

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

We've all seen the movies about a child who's kidnapped. Have you ever really thought what would happen if one of your children was kidnapped? What if they were taken and you knew right where they were, but you couldn't get to them? Well that's what happened to Rodney and Lisa Webb when their former spouses alienated their children from them for years. I spoke with them and Helen Wheeler, an expert in high-conflict divorce. The story is compelling.

Helen Wheeler is a professional counselor at the Center for Families. She specializes in working with high conflict divorces. She's a family court mediator and parent coordinator. She and her husband, Tom, are good friends of mine and co-founders of Changing Families a ministry to single parents and blended families.

Rodney and Lisa Webb from Auckland, New Zealand—they manage a number of businesses and they lead the blended-family initiative of FamilyLife New Zealand. They are friends to Nan and me. We've enjoyed their company in their homeland of New Zealand. Lisa is originally from Australia but Rodney is a native Kiwi.

Rodney: I am a New Zealander. I was born in Britain in Auckland, New Zealand. That's where I've—other than vacations—it's where I've lived my whole life.

Ron: It's great to have you guys. I should say that all three of you are in town here in Little Rock for the Summit on Stepfamily Ministry that this year is being hosted in Little Rock. You guys are participating in that later this week. Helen's speaking. The three of you will be joining a few hundred people from around the country and New Zealand and Canada for the summit. If you're not aware of that event, it is about helping equip people to minister to blended families in the local church.

Helen, I want to jump in.

Helen: Okay.

Ron: So I get an email. I get a lot of emails. I love to hear from people. It's another one of those emails that just yanks on my heart. It just hurts to even read it. She just gives me a little bit of a picture into what is going on in this.

It's a difficult co-parenting situation. She has a son who's nine years of age. She is remarried to a man. He has a couple of kids. Her former husband says things to the kids like, "We like you better." She's beginning to hear that from her son. It's taking sides between the two households.

She said, "For nine years this is what's been going on. It's creating difficulty with my relationship with my son and my husband's relationship with my son." She says, "We're just at a total loss. We don't even know what to do. It just feels like more and more my son is picking up on their *propaganda*" was the word that she used. "He's being consumed by the stories they tell about us." It's breaking her heart and it's really creating a difficult situation for her with her child.

Does this sound familiar—this kind of thing?

Helen: Unfortunately, it sounds way too familiar to me, Ron. It's so complicated and it's so counterintuitive that you can't imagine that a parent would go out of their way to do things that hurt their child in an attempt to make life difficult for their former spouse. Not only will they have problems with their child and the parent, but it also presents problems for marriages. The remarriages are really strained by this because these children end up broken and angry and acting out and making life difficult for this particular mom and her husband.

Ron: Yes. Could you tell us a little bit about the work that you are doing these days? Working with a lot of high-conflict divorces.

Helen: I work with mostly high-conflict divorces at this point in time—probably 60-70% of my caseload is like that. It's a continuum. Not everybody has this level of conflict in it. One of the things that drives it is that people get so caught up in the anger and the hurt and the frustration from the divorce. Maybe they think the other person is the sole cause of it so there's a little bit of revenge that they try and do. What better way to hurt a parent than by using their child against them. That's one of the things.

Sometimes we just have people that have, what we call in counseling world, personality disorders where they grew up in a broken situation for whatever reason. Sometimes they think they're doing the right thing by bringing their child to them. I had one woman who said to me, "I just want my child to know that they're safe at my house." What I

explained to her was in doing that, she was making the implication that the child was not safe at the father's house.

Ron: There's an implied message to that.

Helen: There's absolutely an implied message.

Ron: I think what you're getting at here is something I've observed in working with families as well is that sometimes people think they're doing the right thing, they're doing the honest thing by their child, and then not recognizing how that really is putting their child into a terrible situation.

Helen: Yes. There are certain people who think that their child needs to know. Would they ask me about the divorce or whatever therefore I think they need to know. If they're smart enough to ask the question, then they need the answer. Well, as we know, children aren't short adults.

Ron: [Laughter] That's well said. They're not short adults.

Helen: No. They can't process everything at the same level that adults do. They just hear this information. These kids are caught in the middle of this terrible loyalty bind that there's no way out because if they say "Yes, I love Mom" then they know that's going to upset Dad. Then they can't say that so then when they get to the other house, they can't say the reverse. They're caught in this state of limbo between their parents.

Ron: I want to unpack that a little bit because I think sometimes those of us who work in this field fly by. We say those terms, "there's a loyalty bind for kids," and I'm not sure people really understand what's happening there. On the emotional and psychological level, can you unpack that for us? What's a child going through when they feel like to choose one side is to betray the other?

Helen: Kids are born with a Mom and Dad-shaped hole in their hearts. If you look at it from a Biblical perspective—if you look at it from a psychological perspective, it's supposed to be—and I'm using air quotes with *supposed to be*—Mom and Dad. When they break up, by definition, it puts the children off balance. They instinctively know that they need and love both parents.

When they get put in that situation where like a mother, for instance, would say to a child, "Do you remember when your father didn't come pick you up at your football games? He never came to your basketball games. You remember that, don't you?" She's actually implanting memories in the child. The child doesn't need to know that.

In order to garner the mother's love, the child has to adopt her viewpoint. Yet he is torn because he still loves his father. He doesn't want to say that to his mother because he knows the mother will be upset / disappointed / frustrated so he keeps his mouth shut.

He goes over to his dad's house and very often ends up turning on Dad because he knows he needs to garner Mom's love and affection and acceptance.

Ron: In other words, loving Dad comes at a cost in his relationship with his mom.

Helen: Absolutely.

Ron: Can't win for losing.

Helen: Absolutely.

Ron: If I say, "Yeah, Mom, you're right," then I lose something in my spirit about my relationship with my dad. If I say, "No, Mom, you're not right. I do love Dad," then all of a sudden I have this huge emotional cost that I have to pay with Mom. The child can't win for losing. You talk about a rock and a hard place.

Helen: Absolutely. These kids *all*—and I don't often use "all" in behavioral situations—these kids *all* end up with anxiety. They *all* end up depressed. They end up confused, angry, frustrated, scared.

Ron: Yes, because they're constantly—what they learned to do is walk on pins and needles, constantly assessing the room, "Who's happy? Who's not? What can I say to whom to keep the peace? What happens if I cross the line? Mom's upset with me. Now she's upset with Dad." That just breeds anxiety as I try to deal with the people that I love and care for.

Helen: Yes, it causes a splitting off in the child, which not only causes confusion, but it causes this hurt and this frustration in their part. This kind of this fractured reality because they end up with delusions because a parent has groomed them and fed them with stories that may or may not be true.

Ron: But it's a narrative that I have to live by, whether I fully embrace it or believe it in the beginning or not, I have live according to that narrative or it comes with a cost.

Helen: —or I lose the love, and the affection of that parent is withdrawn. Ironically, what happens is they end up being mean, quote, unquote, or angry with the other parent because that parent is actually safe. If I know that I can show that anger there, that parent isn't going to reject me. But I know if I say the wrong thing at the other household the love / affection / acceptance is going to be withdrawn. It's a terrible place to put children in.

What we're seeing is we're seeing this being identified as psychological abuse. The impact of psychological abuse is even more long lasting than physical or sexual abuse because it ends up changing who a child should have been, who they could have been because their whole worldview is changed. Kids have told me when I'm trying to bring

them out of that situation, “I don’t know what’s true and what’s not true. I thought I had these memories. Now I’m not sure.”

Ron: Rodney and Lisa, does any of this sound familiar to you guys?

Rodney: Far too familiar actually.

Lisa: I actually got a bit emotional just listening to that last part—just we’ve got five children between us. We’ve had four of them, four of them alienated. My youngest girl is the only one that stayed and then transverse between the two houses and having to deal with the negativity from the other house and then also her older sisters once she chose to stay and remain 50-50. It’s so complex and so heartbreaking.

Ron: Rodney, tell us a little bit about your family. Paint a picture for our listener.

Rodney: I’ve got two children. I’ve got a boy and a girl, 14 and 17 at the moment. Lisa’s got three daughters. That’s the five children between us. They’re all pretty close in age.

Ron: How long have you guys been married?

Rodney: That’s, uh—you’re putting me on the spot.

Lisa: It’s funny. He’s not very good with all these dates. We’ve been—next year it’ll be five years. We’ve been married for four and a half years so far, but together for six and coming up to seven. Early next year will be seven.

Ron: Did this distancing, this alienation, if I can use that word, with your children, had that started before you guys got married? Or really has it started just since you’ve been married?

Lisa: Well, we were actually—we weren’t living together but we were together for about two years. At that time, my ex-husband was living overseas. That first two years it was really actually quite good. I mean, we had the trying to blend the kids together but we did not have any influence of people speaking negatively to them at the other house.

The first two years was actually quite—“Oh wow,” in hindsight is what I’m saying—in hindsight it was fantastic even though you had the challenges of the blending. But when my ex-husband came back to New Zealand and then he actually met a partner probably six months after that, that’s when things just changed. His way that he was interacting with me, it changed. It was very aggressive. It was sort of like, “What’s going on here?”

The step mom coming onboard on the other house. Then we’ve also had the challenge of that Rodney’s ex-wife and her partner became socially friends with my ex-husband and his partner.

Ron: And they started talking.

Lisa: That just became—I can't even put the words—because the kids would be socializing. The five of them would be socializing at the other houses. Then the four adults would just be going hammer in tongue about Rodney and I. My girls, before the alienation started to fully come in, they would come back and go, "Ben and Courtney's mom has just made a life out of hating Rodney. That's all she talks about."

We would hear this stuff coming back. You're just sitting there going—you start communicating going, "Well, it's probably not a good idea to do this. Why don't we just keep this stuff up at our level?" That just seemed to inflame things ridiculously.

Ron: Even more.

Lisa: Yes.

Ron: So when you started, Rodney, when you started hearing those things, what did you do?

Rodney: We were between a rock and a hard place, because in some I was thinking at the time, that you're probably better off just to let it ride. You're not really in a position where you can confront other parties that are saying it.

Ron: It almost makes you look bad if you do confront.

Rodney: Yes, that's right—in a position where you just add fuel to the fire.

Ron: Jesus says, let them turn the other cheek and go the extra mile. Kind of, "Let that roll. It's okay." I'm saying that, not sarcastically, but seriously. Just to say that Christian people often say, "Well, that's just something that I should just be long suffering about that and go on. It'll go away. It'll be okay."

Rodney: Yes, that's right. Helen mentioned the whole co-parenting thing before. The two schools of thought. There's the co-parenting, and then if that's not working, you go down the parallel parenting route. That even wasn't working either. We were looking after our own stuff. I was looking after the stuff for my children and their mum was looking after her own stuff. Pretty much that's the way it went.

We didn't have too much interaction between the two of us about what was going on for the children. But thinking that that even is taking a step back but it still was going on. Really, you don't have any dominion over another person.

Ron: Yes! Boy, is that well said! It's something all of us really struggle with. You know, I often say you have some influence, actually quite a bit of influence, when you're married

to somebody. You have far less influence when you are no longer married to somebody. That just begins to dissipate fast.

Even though you were saying, “You know what, we’ll just take care of our household and be in charge of that. We’ll be good over here—assume that they will do that over there.” That’s not what was happening. They were getting into your business. They were altering the relationship between you and your kids.

Rodney: Yes.

Lisa: Absolutely. That became—we couldn’t quite understand it. The children, my girls, would come back—probably yours were a little bit more silent and that’s a whole other story too. After we’ve progressed through the alienation, my girls have started to come back, but Rodney’s children—nothing, nothing for the last two years. Like nothing, even though we’ve tried now to contact and stuff like that. But they were silent about it.

My girls were very vocal. They were very angry. They would scream into my face and you’d be going, “Can we just talk about this? Let’s just step back and let’s just talk about this.”

Ron: Okay, let me just make sure I’m understanding—scream into your face, repeating the things that they had heard or that they were upset about what they had heard?

Lisa: Yes, I think there was a little bit of a journey with that. It started once Mark, the girls’ dad, came back into the scene because he had been, even probably three to four years before we got divorced, he was mainly overseas and doing business and stuff like that.

He was actually quite removed. I was—I did everything for the girls and I did it by myself mostly. I mean there was money coming in from Mark. I was just doing all the taking to school and making the lunches and doing the activities and all of that. We were a tight little unit.

Then when Mark came back on board—we got divorced and then he came back to the country where he wanted to be involved. It’s like, “Fine. Great. Okay.” We start to manage that process. Like I said before, once he actually got involved with another partner, the tone of it just changed. The way that he spoke to me or communicated to me was quite aggressive.

Then my girls would come back and say, “Oh Mum, Mum just tell me what happened from your point of view. What happened in the divorce?” This is while putting them to bed at nighttime. You’re lying in bed with them, talking about stuff as you do, and it’s like, “Oh Mum, just tell me from your point of view.”

I was like, “Girls,” or whichever one I was talking to, “it’s not really for you. Let’s just wait until you grow up a little bit.” “No, no, no, just tell me about this bit.” Probably stupidly on my behalf you sort of, when you’re in that sort of close situation, you’re thinking, oh well, “Look this is blah, blah, blah.”

Then they’d go off and talk to Dad, and Dad would say, “Your mom’s a liar.” Then they would come back and say, “Dad says you’re a liar, Mum. You’re a liar.”

Ron: They would begin to repeat that.

Lisa: Absolutely. They did, “You’re a liar. You’re not doing this, and you’re not doing that.” I’m like, “But I’m doing everything the same.” Then, I also had the complication that Mark’s partner went—because we were doing—well, I was doing more than the 50% but we ended up being 50-50—she would text them when they were with me.

We were starting to have challenges with, like for example, one of them wanted to go back and do jazz-ballet. This would have been the third time that she started jazz-ballet and she quit after the first time every time. Anyway, so you had this, I’m like, “Well, no, let’s not do that yet.” “I want to do this.” I’m like, “Well, blah-” As you do, you—the negotiation starts.

Then the other house is like, “Well, why won’t you let her do it?” Then she’ll come back. Then she’ll be getting texts from the stepmom saying, “Oh, I don’t know why your mum is being so difficult about this. I don’t know why she’s not letting you do it. I would let you do it. I love you so much. We think you’re amazing.” I saw these texts so you’re having all this undercurrent stuff happening. Then the children—they’re so angry. I mean I can still see their eyes being so angry with me, “Why don’t you let me do it?”

Ron: And the manipulative message there is, “We love you. Your mom doesn’t.”

Lisa: Absolutely.

Ron: That’s their anger coming through. They’re reacting as if you don’t love them. Somehow, they’ve forgotten all the things that you’ve done for them through the years and the quality of the relationship and now all of a sudden they see you as somebody who doesn’t love them and they feel it’s unfair and mistreated.

Lisa: Yes.

Ron: Well again, I just want to remind our listener that we’re talking today about really difficult co-parenting situations including when there’s alienation going on.

Helen, let me come back to you for a minute. I think we have to come back for a second and just go, “Okay, wait a minute. What’s going on here?” Now I know you can’t talk specifically. Let’s not talk about Rodney and Lisa’s situation. But when parents do this

type of thing and they are manipulating their child and it's not a personality-disorder related, why would somebody do this?

Helen: I see a lot of times if they are what I call the “dumpee” in the divorce and so it's about revenge. What better weapon to use than the person that the other parent loves and cares about. That's the ultimate weapon you can use.

Ron: Yes.

Helen: I see that a lot.

Ron: So they were hurt in the divorce, didn't want the divorce, and now they're getting their revenge through the children.

Helen: Yes.

Rodney: That's an interesting one, because both Lisa and I are effectively the dumpees. We were the ones who were left. As you'll know, being the one that's left, you're sort of two years behind the play by the time the situation manifests itself. The person that leaves really left the relationship up to two years previously and you're still catching up with the ball. Both of us were the dumpees. We're sort of left sitting there going, “Well, actually you made a choice, and you've got the life that you want. So why are you still dumping on me?”

Helen: Except that it's your fault that they made that choice, don't you know it.

Rodney: Oh, yes.

Helen: It's your fault and if you hadn't been _____, fill in the blank, then I wouldn't have had to make that choice. Therefore, it's ultimately still your fault anyway.

Ron: Blame is at the root of this. Whether you're the dumper or the dumpee.

Helen: A lot of times.

Ron: If I blame you for what's going on in my whole and my life then, man, I'm going to control everything and I'm not going to let you control the kids. I'm going to keep them close to me, keep them distant from you.

Helen: Both of you, I noticed, when you were talking about when your respective former spouses came upon new relationships, then it accelerated.

Ron: What is that about, you think? It's a catalyst but why?

Helen: I think there's a couple things in action. Sometimes when we've got a stepmom, the stepmom wants to come in and be the mom. Then there's this competition that goes on—who's the best mom? So there's, I think, there's probably some of that.

Ron: Then her husband takes up for her and starts working the kids.

Helen: Absolutely, yes. Absolutely.

Ron: And on their end, you can see how they're wanting to be a blended family. They're wanting to merge their home and the kids to feel comfortable there with the stepmother. But they just take that desire to the point of manipulation with their kids.

Helen: Yes, and with women, a lot of times when they get a new man in their life, this new man wants to fix everything—again I'm using air quotes there. He wants to fix everything so he's going to come in and try and take over. She is going to let him.

I have situations where Moms are saying to the kids, "Well, this is going to be your dad. You're so lucky that you have this Dad because your dad isn't worth anything."

It works on both sides. Although statistically I have more alienating females than I do alienating males. But I have some of both. It's a little bit different, but in both cases it's exacerbated by remarriage. Sometimes they don't even wait until they're married. They're already moving the prospective stepparent into that role even before the marriage takes place.

You know something I wanted to come back to with you, Lisa, and not talk to you only, because I see this a lot, is you want to defend yourself. We end up talking about the content of what the kids are saying rather than the hurt / the pain / the frustration / the confusion. "I'm sorry you feel that way. It looks like you're really confused. I can see that you're caught in the middle."

Join them with empathy rather than trying to tell them, "No, you got the wrong story." Because in a way you're saying to them, "Yes, but you're lying. What you're saying is not true." It's a really difficult—there's a lot of counterintuitive stuff. That's one of them where you actually don't correct them. You just join them on the pain, the confusion, and frustration that they're feeling.

Ron: Yes, that is counterintuitive. I know that's really difficult because in that situation your heart is sinking because my kid's telling me I don't love them and I'm a liar. Like, I'm not a liar, where's this coming from? You see that pouring out. Of course, you want to counter that. Of course, you want to squash that. In the back of your mind, you know where this is coming from. You know it's stimulated by the other home. You don't want them to win because that's just wrong. Absolutely, it pulls you into that defensive mode.

Lisa: Absolutely, I was confused. I was hurting because my children were being ripped away from me. I had that old emotions of—and I didn't know what to do. Like I wasn't fully aware of what was happening and what the impact of this negative talk was. I was still right back at the beginning. It was very confusing and I had to deal with my own emotions.

My kids would be upset with me but then I would respond to that. I would be crying. I'd have to run out of the room and go to my room and cry. I didn't really—I just didn't know how to handle it. I didn't have anything in my toolbox.

Helen: An empathetic way of handling that particular thing would be to say, "It must be terrible for you to feel like I don't love you. I do love you and I always will."

Ron: Of course, that assumes you can get past your own panic and then tune in to what's going on with the child. I agree that that's the ideal response but that is a very, very difficult situation in which you have to hold on to your tears, in your case Lisa, and set them aside and try to respond to the child.

If you can get empowered to that place, the idea there is the child hears that you connect in with them. Then I'm assuming, Helen, that you're wanting to begin to slowly lead them towards a different understanding.

Helen: One of the ways that I work with kids that are in my practice is I try and show them that there is another possible explanation for whatever it is they're saying. Is it possible that there's another way of looking at it? Is it possible that there's another explanation for what you're saying? Sometimes just putting a little bit of doubt in there gives the parent who's hurting, the rejected parent, gives them enough space to come in and address those places later on.

Ron: Let me just say something about what I think you can't do. You can't fight fire with fire. If you feel like your child is being alienated away from you, for you to turn right around and say, "Nope, this is all about your dad. Let me tell you why he's a no good," is to, in effect, do the same thing that the other household is doing. Of course, something inside you may feel like that's justified, but it's not.

By the way, I should comment that when you were talking earlier about why people do this, one of the things I've seen with Christian people is they go through a divorce, they didn't want the divorce, they feel justified that they were wronged, and they're kind of the spiritually superior spouse in this situation. "Because I'm better than your other parent, I have justification to say things about them that you need to know," right? People can justify themselves in that posture.

But when it's happening to your kids, fighting fire with fire is never good. The Apostle Paul, in Romans 12, says God is the one Who's going to get revenge, not you. It's not your job, that's His job. He's a much better judge so leave it to Him.

Then he says when somebody gives you evil and you repay it with good—now that doesn't mean—I want us to struggle with that as a group here, don't repay evil with evil but repay evil with good. He goes on to say, now the reason you do that is because sometimes you can influence the person with your godly response in a way that makes them change themselves / that they see that they shouldn't be treating you that way / that you can overwhelm their evilness, if you will, with a positive good.

But that doesn't always happen. What does that even mean anyway, "Repay evil with good"? Does that mean I just like take it? Like I never say anything in a situation like this—that I just have to sit back and let my kids think whatever it is that you're telling them over in the other household? I sure hope not.

Helen: I think you're absolutely right, Ron. The answer is *no* because you're fighting to protect your child. This is about child protection. This isn't strictly about custody or visitation. It's about child protection. If we allow them to go on in their distorted way of thinking, their deluded confused state, they are going to end up really, really damaged at the end.

This is about figuring out how to protect them. That's when you turn to experts. That's when you do reading. That's when you find out who can help you with this. Because if you don't, the cost is extremely high. We end up with kids that are not only more likely to become divorced, but they are also more likely to become depressed / anxious / suicidal / have lower levels of education / lower levels of job satisfaction.

Ron: That's what you mean by child protection, you're trying to protect them from those negative outcomes. Sometimes it means that you have to be direct. You have to be loving and gentle and yet you have to give them a counter story.

Helen: Yes.

Ron: You have to get there. Start with the empathy as you talked about. Again, that's a bind I think for a lot of Christian people who go, "You know what, good Christian people are not direct. We're never assertive. That's not what Christian people do."

Helen: That's why we're also told us to speak the truth in love. This is the ultimate gift of love that you give to your children is to protect them in every way that you can.

Ron: I think another bind that I think of as I was listening to Lisa a little while ago was her responses were measured in the beginning. She probably went to some good co-parenting classes or read a good book about how to play fair with the other household. She was playing by the rules. But the other house doesn't play by the rules. They've got a different set of rules.

I've often kind of laughed about when you talk about the rules of engagement in war. I remember one point in my life thinking, "Well, I thought it was a war. Aren't you trying to win? Why would you play nice in war? You don't kill women and children. There's just certain things you don't do. You don't attack hospital units, just certain rules that everybody goes by."

Then you encounter some terrorist organization and they don't play by any of those rules. They're playing dirty. I think that's the reality when it comes to situations of alienation.

Helen: Not only that, Ron, but it's interesting that you use the story of war because a lot of the strategies that alienating parents use are brainwashing / bad mouthing / denigration / inserting themselves into the child's life / over controlling their life. It's brainwashing. It's absolutely brainwashing—which is war.

Ron: It's almost like a trance.

Helen: It absolutely is a trance. It is absolutely a trance. I had a kid tell me that one time. It took him about three or four months after being out of the alienating parents household. That's usually what it takes. It takes removing them from the household so that they can be—I hate to say, reprogrammed—but help them see and understand a different paradigm. He said it was about three to four months before he could really see what was going on. He's still struggling a year later, trying to straighten that out, and he's almost eighteen.

Rodney: That sort of sticks out as something that can only be instituted by the social services or by the justice system—

Ron: —somebody outside—

Rodney: —somebody outside of the relationship circle of the parents and the child themselves. It's hard to get there.

Ron: Yes. If you don't have somebody on the outside helping to intervene, what can a parent do? For example, somebody in Rodney or Lisa's situation that's listening to us right now and so far nobody on the outside is intervening on their behalf, what in addition to the things we've talked about can they start trying to do?

Helen: One of the biggest things is to protect your time with your children. They will say they don't want to be there / they don't want to stay with you / they don't want to go with you / they don't want to do things with you.

Ron: Don't accommodate that.

Helen: Don't accommodate that. It's very difficult when they get to be teenagers because teenagers want their own life. But the only way that you can counteract that is to constantly show them that you are not what they are hearing. One of the ways you do that is you put yourself in situations where people love and value and appreciate *you* so that they can observe that you're not this crazy, hateful person that they're being told that you are.

Many times, it requires some kind of legislative or judicial intervention. In Europe, they're working on something called the Coaxum Compromise for custody issues. It's not a win or lose. It's just something that I ran across.

I'm part of an organization called The Parental Alienation Study Group, which is an international organization studying parental alienation. We had an international conference and we're talking about how it is. The amazing thing to me was I knew at some level it was the same all over the world. But hearing all of these different speakers with all of these different accents telling the same story / the same symptoms / the same behaviors / the same course of alienation, it was really amazing and disturbing.

Interestingly enough, it was really first described back in the 1970s. Then when it was first described, it was like the "alienation of affection," which is how it got its name. But as far as being defined as—it was really the mid-80s, Dr. Richard Gardner, who first said—okay, there he called it the "parental alienation syndrome." It just raised all kinds of heckles among psychologists because they said, "It's not a syndrome. It's not in the diagnostic manual," and all of this stuff.

It's been around for a while. I've been practicing since 2000, and it has gotten much, much worse. It has gotten worse. I've missed some cases early on because I didn't know what I was looking for.

Ron: I think it's more common. I agree. It's more common in my counseling practice. It was always in the outlier extreme situation that you'd hear about from time to time when I first started working in the areas of step-family ministry. Now it's a pretty frequent thing. We get contacted here at FamilyLife and our heart breaks for the situations.

I want to just stop for a minute and talk to the listener who may be in, Rodney, in your shoes. Lisa said her kids have reconnected. We're going to hear a little bit about that in a minute, but your kids still haven't.

Rodney: No, they haven't.

Ron: As you sit and listen to us talk about this, I'm wondering what's going on in your heart.

Rodney: It's pretty hard. I love my kids.

Ron: Yes.

Rodney: One of the interesting differences between Lisa and I is that my kids weren't vocal. They were quiet. They were, I guess you'd call them, the solemn sufferers. I didn't really know what was going on in their world in terms of where they stood with the alienation. I knew that they were hearing things about me and things about Lisa that weren't right.

Ron: But you didn't know the depths of it.

Rodney: I didn't know the depth of it. For me, I believed that they knew me / that they knew who I was as their father / that they knew that I loved them. I took them to their football games. I took them to ballet, to horse riding. I was an active father—active in their life. I believed that they actually knew me and that my relationship with them was *the* most important thing and that they saw that and no matter what other people said, that they actually were secure in their knowledge of our relationship.

Then it proved not to be the case. Yes, so I haven't seen them for two years and it hurts.

Ron: Do you have any contact with them?

Rodney: No. No, I haven't. The last time I tried, I sent their mother a message and said that I would like to—it's been two years—I'd like to explore the rekindling of a relationship with them. If they were interested in that and willing, then I thought that we could go to see a counselor and to start the process of rekindling a relationship.

She replied and said she'd talk to the children about it and it wasn't something that they wanted to pursue. So I'm still in the position where I—

Ron: Of course, you don't know if she really did talk to them. You don't know a lot of things. You're just helpless in that sense.

Rodney: Yes, just have to trust that she did.

Ron: The waiting. That's just got to kill you.

Rodney: It does. It really does. But I mean I'm—I guess part of what you do as a Christian is you go back to the Word and you use the Word as your yardstick for your life and for where you are and how you should respond in certain situations.

I guess I draw some comfort from the story of the prodigal son. The father brought up two sons. I would assume he brought them up both the same. They're in the same household. As you know, one of them decided he wanted his inheritance and he went

off, had nothing to do with his father or his brother anymore, went off and lived his own life and did his own thing.

Even though my children haven't received an inheritance and they're not adults and haven't made a willing decision in such a way as he did to go off and squander things, they are still removed from me—they are removed from the relationship with me just like the prodigal son removed himself from his father's relationship.

The father didn't go chasing after him. The father remained available. He was there. He still loved him. He was ready, willing, and able to accept him for what he was and who he was when he came back, and he remained healthy.

For me, I really see that that's how I have to be. I have to maintain a healthy relationship—healthy relationship with Lisa / healthy relationship with the other children that are in my life / healthy relationship with God. Be the healthy person / healthy parent for when or if they decide to actually rekindle the relationship.

Ron: That's such a good story. I'm glad that brings you comfort. I think there are some good principles in that story that we can garner. The father kept his face toward where the son was, if you will. In other words, when that son came back, the father could see him.

Rodney: Yes.

Ron: He tried to do what he could about the distance between them. Ultimately that's the son has to make that decision to begin to move back toward the father. But as soon as the father sees him, boy he closes the gap fast.

And I think when we're trying to move toward kids in whatever ways we can, using technology / reaching out from time to time / remaining persistent—somebody who's listening who's in your situation and there's no contact, you know not giving up on trying to create contact, the little things to try to close the gap however you can. You're managing distance there to whatever degree you're able.

Ultimately, what has to be resolved is the anxiety of—well, you remember when the son's coming back in the story in Luke 15 and he's like, "Dad's never going to let me back home. Boy, maybe I could be a servant. Maybe I could just do that and hang out near the house." He's anxious about fixing this relationship. He doesn't know what it's going to be like. He's worried Dad's going to be angry or reject him or whatever.

The first thing Dad does is communicate love and acceptance and, "No! Your anxiety—you don't need that here. It's all good."

Lisa, I'm wondering about your kids. Did you see any of that anxiety? Apparently, they've begun to reconnect—a couple of them have.

Lisa: Yes, the two older ones. As I said, my youngest one was the one that stayed and still did the 50-50 going to her Dad's. She had her own journey to deal with. That's a whole other little dynamic going on.

But my older two, particularly my middle daughter, Marron, she was probably the angriest. She was probably the one that was really, really angry. She—when she left to go and live with her dad—she didn't want to talk to me or anything at all.

We have had a counseling session. We have sat down. I had a counseling session with Marron. Then she wanted to have a counseling session with Rodney because we couldn't really come back into the household without smoothing—just, "Let's talk about it."

Ron: "How are we going to do this?"

Lisa: "How are we going to do this?" That's right because it did. For us, it was actually, we did have a flash point incident which then had its own journey on top of everything that we'd been through which included legal police cases—all that sort of stuff—with the idea that we were abusive parents. We were taken to court along that line.

We've had the extreme journey. Having been through all of that, the anger from my children was very, very angry. We've had Marron and also my oldest girl. We've been to the counseling session to try and smooth the way.

It's interesting, Marron, she was the one that was so angry and how, "Oh, this is just awful." To hear her sit in the counseling session, she looked at Rodney and she said, "I know that I actually don't know you. I've realized that I do not know you and I've been—I've heard stories and I've been influenced by the other house." She said, "I can see that there's a lot of lying and where the lying lies." She said, "If I can, I would like to get to know you on my terms."

Ron: That must have been an amazing moment for both of you.

Lisa: Huge.

Rodney: It was. Yes. It was a big moment.

Ron: Still the anxiety's there on some level for you, for them.

Lisa: Absolutely.

Ron: Not sure what you can trust, I would think.

Lisa: That's exactly right. Because we had—they were video recording us on their phones so they would push and push and push. Of course, there's yelling—not stuff that you're proud of—but when you're constantly attacked like that—I did find it and I'm fairly an honest emotional person, probably too much so—where you're just, "Hey this is really hurting me. Why are you talking to me like this?" And they would record this.

That was used against myself to say that I was an abusive parent. Marron, as it turns out, she didn't realize that all of this stuff was happening though. When I received a lawyer's letter saying I had abused Marron and when we talked through all of this later when Marron was there at the counseling session, she said, "I didn't know that happened. I didn't know that happened."

There was a lot that was concocted from the adults and then the children didn't know. It's exactly what you were saying. They don't know. They're told something.

Ron: They end up being pawns—

Lisa: That's right.

Ron: —and they don't even understand the role that they're playing.

Lisa: I was actually very amazed to watch my daughters in those counseling sessions and to hear the depth and the understanding that a little bit more maturity has afforded them. But yes, I do agree, there is still—I'm very hesitant. I do a lot of listening to them now. It's like I'm just going—exactly what you were saying—I've learnt that now that it's just, "You know what, how are you feeling about that? How are *you* feeling about that? What's happening in your world?"

Let them talk to you. I don't put any judgement on anything that they're doing. I don't even offer that advice unless they ask me directly, "What would you do Mum? What do you suggest?" Now I just listen.

Ron: Well, I would commend you for learning how to regulate your own emotions there in that moment and stay focused on them. I think if you—not in all situations but sometimes—if you reflect back to a child, "This is what I hear you saying. So it feels this way? Oh my goodness, you're caught in the middle, that must be so hard! What is it like when your dad says that to you? How does that feel?"

Sometimes kids talk themselves out of, "Well, it's really not that I believe him." It's just that eventually they, when they hear their own voice coming back to them, they can see that that's not quite right. That's where you have an opportunity for them to experience you the way you really are, not the way they've been told that you are.

You've been listening to my conversation with Helen Wheeler and Rodney and Lisa Webb. I'm Ron Deal and this is FamilyLife Blended.

We'll hear one last thought from Helen on the temptation to give up on your kids in just a minute.

At one point, Rodney suggested when a parent is being alienated, they need to involve social services or the appropriate authorities. In my family therapy experience, I find many Christian parents are reticent to call the authorities or report something to social services. Sometimes even pastors discourage people from doing this.

You know, I appreciate when parents are concerned about getting the other parent in trouble. But if the law's being broken or a child is being abused or put in harm's way, you are *not* getting them in trouble, you are just recognizing the trouble that they have already brought on themselves.

No, you shouldn't report somebody if there's not good reason—never for revenge, never for manipulation or a power play. But to protect a child, yes, you can make an anonymous call if that helps so it won't come back on you perhaps.

But just know this, even if it's completely justified that you make the call, there may be some negative repercussions at some point for you or for your child. For example, if the other parent gets in trouble, figures out something related to you, there's no guarantees what the outcome will be but it's worth the risk if a child is suffering.

We've got one last thought from counselor Helen Wheeler in just a minute. But if you like more information about our guest you can find it in our show notes. Check it out on the FamilyLife Blended page at FamilyLife.com/podcasts. Please know that we appreciate hearing from you. We love your feedback / your questions / your comments. Online positive reviews, those are appreciated as well.

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For more about coping with parent alienation, I personally suggest the book *Divorce Poison*, by Dr. Richard Warshak. It's not necessarily written from a faith perspective per se, but it's a very value book to parents who find themselves in these very difficult situations. I do also write about this in my book, *The Smart Stepfamily*.

Be sure to visit us at FamilyLife.com/Blended for more articles and videos and resources for blended families. You'll also find information about the *Smart Stepfamily* Series of books and curriculum for churches.

Now before we're done, Helen and I talked a little bit about the temptation to give up. I've seen parents do this. She made a very important point.

Helen: Don't give up on your children. Don't ever give up on your children. Figure out some way of trying to reach out to them—even if they're not reading it / even if they send it back / even if—because what happens is I had one Dad who was doing Skype calls with his kids and his kids were extraordinarily rude and obnoxious. That's why it's so difficult working with these kids because they get that rude / obnoxious / entitled / empowered. Eventually he said, "I just can't do it anymore."

When they came back to me, as I was trying to reunite them, they said, "You gave up on us, Dad. Why did you give up on us?" Unfortunately, some well-meaning counselors make things worse. That's one of the ways that can make things worse is saying, "Well, just back off. Give them some space. They'll come back."

What kids want to know is that you've never given up on them however you do it. I said, "Send them a card and make a copy of it. Then you keep it at home. That way when they reunite with you, you're able to say, 'Well, here was your birthday card from when you turned 12. Here's your Christmas card that I sent you when you were 13.'"

Ron: I coached a parent to do that very thing and when they finally got reconciled after years of distance, when they handed all those cards and letters—you know, it was back in the day when you wrote letters—all of a sudden it was like, "Wow, you and I have a whole history I don't know anything about." The child's eyes opened and they start reading and, "I can get caught up on all that I missed."

Helen: "You didn't give up on *me*." That's the key.

Ron: You didn't give up.

Helen: That's the key.

Next time, we'll hear from best-selling author and pastor John Ortberg, who says that having the right perspective about eternity can help us live here on earth.

John: Many people, when they think of the word heaven, we often have a cartoon picture. We'll think about gates and clouds. We think of it as this pleasure factory that if you could just get there, of course, you would be happy. Then we wonder why doesn't God just let everybody, or at least more people, go there.

Ron: That's Pastor John Ortberg, 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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