

FamilyLife Blended®

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Episode 14: In Their Shoes

Guest: Lauren Rietsema
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Lauren: So many stepparents that I have sat across the table from drinking coffee just trying to help understand have just felt deflated. “I don’t know what else to do, this kid is just incorrigible. They’re just not ever going to love me.” My response is always, “It’s not about you. It’s not about you.”

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.

Have you ever wondered what’s really going on the inside of a child of divorce? Or what their experience of your blended family is? Well, getting inside the world of children and making sense of how they make sense of their life is the focus of this episode of FamilyLife Blended.

We’re going to address common questions that parents and stepparents ask about kids and we’ll share some insights that will help you love and lead them well.

Now before we jump into the conversation, I wanted to let you know that we just released the revised and updated edition of the Smart Stepfamily Video Curriculum. It’s a widely-used small group curriculum and it’s a do-it-yourself tool for couples.

I also want to invite you to join us for the Summit on Stepfamily Ministry, October 23 to 25, 2019, in Chesapeake, Virginia. I’m going to tell you more about these and other opportunities at the end of the podcast.

My guest today is Lauren Rietsema, she’s a wife, a mother. She grew up a child of divorce and living between two stepfamilies. Today she’s the Vice President of Strategy and Communications at the Center for Relationship Education in Denver, Colorado.

She teaches relationship skills, basically, to youth, adults, and corporate teams. Lauren’s new book, *In Their Shoes: Helping Parents Better Understand and Connect With Children of Divorce* comes out in October 2019. By the way, it’s part of the Smart Stepfamily series of resources, but it’s available now for pre-sale on amazon.com.

I wrote the foreword for Lauren's book and personally, really advocated for its publication because, for me, moving the heart of adults closer to the heart of children is an important part of blended family health and healing a child's heart.

In the foreword I tell a story about a woman who sat next to me on an airplane. I was working on a presentation on my laptop and caught her looking over my shoulder, looking down at what I was doing.

Before long she started asking me a question about it. She could tell I was working on a conference presentation so we started talking there but then pretty quickly she asked a question that really caught me off guard, came out of left field. She said, "What kind of psychological issues come with being from a stepfamily?"

Now I knew there had to be a story behind that question, so I asked her a few questions of my own. It turns out that her parents divorced and she, like Lauren, grew up between two stepfamily homes. Now she's in her mid-twenties and she's trying to make sense of her life. Trying to cope with the residue on her heart.

Well to start my conversation with Lauren I asked her if she could relate to that journey and if it's typical of kids in blended families.

Lauren: That's a great question. I think the word "psychological" has some triggers in it when you say, "What psychological things come from being in a blended family," because that's internalized as a stepchild or somebody with a family experience that is not a nuclear first marriage situation.

I do think that many kids would, I think they would resonate with that question and but there some shame that comes up there even in asking, and so what I hear when she leaned in to ask is I see children all over the country, even the world, asking, "Is it okay? Is it okay to question the things that I'm going to have to deal with because of this decision?"

Because some of the social norms about resilience in children and their capacity to overcome have, I wouldn't say minimized, but sometimes they negate the healing process a little bit or they try and speed it up. I do believe that kids are begging the question, "Am I going to be okay? And if I'm not is that okay? And who do I talk to about it because you're so consumed with taking care of all of the emotional weight that comes from divorce?"

I can't speak personally from losing a parent to death but I do know that in a blended family there are emotional things that happen and sometimes kids are experiencing something that their parents don't necessarily know where or how to give them the space to ask those hard, grieving questions.

I think the word “psychological” is what comes out of that because I, by no means, think that I am psychologically scarred or that I have issues. Nor do I want to be labeled as somebody who has issues; however, without the freedom to ask and without the consideration of: “What will my life look like because of this?” I think kids miss the opportunity to fully heal and fully deal with the ramifications of what they're going through.

Ron: Yes. I think you're right about that and one of the bigger questions in this narrative is, “Who am I? How do we make sense of this? What do I do with all this? How do I move forward?”

That's imbedded in this question that she asked. I'm still making sense of it all. That's kind of the journey you were on when you wrote this book.

Lauren: I think one of the things that's really telling about divorce—at least in my experience—is that it's not something that is one-and-done, meaning you don't heal from blending your family and then all of a sudden your life is new. Rather there are so many incremental, whether you want to call them triggers, or experiences, or emotions that actually come in a quite surprising way, that you couldn't ever prepare for until you're there.

Some of the milestone memories that I mentioned in a few of the chapters of the book which really don't necessarily even—they don't register in your experience as a piece of the divorce until it's happening to you.

So I think that one of the things that parents can free themselves from, in knowing this experience when they're dealing with children and their hurts, is that a healing process not just for you but also for the children is not a calendar date. It's something that is very linear and has ebbs and flows and sometimes takes on forms that you may not expect.

So I think giving yourself the space to recognize that there's a lifetime of healing and that that shouldn't necessarily discourage people but rather give them realistic expectations to trust that the hope of redemptive healing is not something that is one-and-done.

Ron: I appreciate that because I think people sometimes desperately want—if I could put it that way—they want things to be done. Like, “I want this to be okay for my kids and over.” So when we say to them, “Look this is an ongoing journey,” and part of what we want you to do is to join them in the journey at various places and stages and see if you can help coach and guide and lead the process.

That really was part of the reason that you wrote this book, *In Their Shoes*, is that you're trying to help parents and stepparents better understand their kids. I'm curious what, for example, will a parent do differently if they understand the journey of their children or their stepchildren better?

Lauren: I think just a lack of data or a lack of knowledge around any circumstance does not always allow us in our human capacity to make full helpful whole decisions. I think what this book will do is provide data. I don't see it as the magic solution or the game changer to make the blended family experience perfection. What I do see is maybe it will add some data points to people's journey so that they can actually make informed decisions with information that they just were missing.

Not because they haven't tried to grab it but because the children in their life stage of development they don't have the capacity to share the data from a perspective that I can now looking back at with more words and more clarity in my own experience as a healed and whole family.

Ron: Yes. Let's follow up with that thought because you do talk about how it's hard for kids to put words on their experience, I mean, and that's absolutely true. I mean, young children in particular really don't know what they're feeling, they certainly don't have the vocabulary for it.

I think most teenagers have a few words and every once in a while can have some insights into their life and experience. But often you have to really grow up and step away from home a little bit before you really begin to be able to reflect on what you were even feeling or experiencing.

So it's hard for parents to talk to their kids, like, "Tell me how you're feeling." Well maybe they can, maybe they can't. That journey for an adult is frustrating when they can't really reach their kids which is one of the reasons you're trying to put words on it for them.

Lauren: I think even as adults we struggle to articulate our feelings.

Ron: I do. [Laughs]

Lauren: Often there's humor in that. I think of a marital relationship when I'm really upset or frustrated and my husband is really trying to understand me and I just can't articulate what I need to tell him so that I can get what I want from him. That's as adults who teach in this field.

I imagine take that experience to an early adolescent or to a five- or six-year-old little boy or girl who are wrestling with emotions that are heavy and sometimes misunderstood on their part and it makes a lot of sense that they can't communicate, but it doesn't change the fact that the parents are really wanting to hear and wanting--I don't think for a minute that parents are disconnected from where their children are in the journey. I think that there are so connected.

If I've learned anything about my own experience and interviewing people in this blended-family experience is that one of the heaviest burdens that parents bear is, "How is this going to affect my children?"

It's not approached with insensitivity. It's not approached with a selfish, caustic kind of a posture, but rather a tender, "How do I help?" So there's this desire to lean in and there's this need to lean in but a lot of times the children just can't offer what the parents need. My hope is that this resource will do just that, it would offer some insight and words that maybe even thematically will resonate with all of the families that read it.

Ron: My encouragement to people who pick it up is that as you read it don't assume everything in it is exactly what your kid's experience is, but it gives you a topic, like you said themes, to ponder, to explore, to bring up with your child. In the process you help them put words on their own experience but you also get clarity like there's just some things where they'll go, "No that's not me at all." But you've still learned something and they've learned something in the process.

Lauren: Absolutely. One of the things I experienced after talking to a couple after the Blended and Blessed event is they said, "You put words with something I haven't been able to articulate. You called it something. You owned it with that. I believe that had to do with the stolen first idea that I explore. They just said, "I've never been able to articulate that." And how just putting words with that concept was so freeing for them.

Ron: We'll talk about that in a minute. The book provides insights into the experience of children going through parental divorce, the single parent years, and then moving into a blended family situation. It follows your journey through that. You experienced all of those things. You knew eventually your parents would read it, step parents perhaps would read it, your siblings would read it. Were you anxious about writing some of that and being honest and really open? What was that journey like and what has been the reaction and response from your family?

Lauren: Absolutely that's one of the things I would say may be a barrier for why there is not a lot of content around this from a child's perspective because as a child our ultimate goal is to honor our parents and to make sure that they feel that by sharing the journey they're not being disparaged in front of anybody especially when it becomes public.

So absolutely there was a lot of fear and anticipation around what that process would look like; however, I knew that the risk of their spots was worth the help that other people may receive. As I have experienced every one of my family members has approached the book a little bit differently. Some haven't read it yet just because it's still in its editing phases.

My parents and stepparents have all read it cover to cover of the manuscript. I believe that the ultimate takeaway was there's freedom to tell this journey, Lauren, because it's

yours. So even if there was maybe some personal sting or some things that were hard to re-read because they had moved past that and healed in their journey.

For me the freedom came when they said, "I want you to be able to tell your story," and that's where I felt we were able to navigate that is I wasn't talking about all of them, I was sharing my perspective and my walk and other people's walks in that have given me permission to use their journey.

Ron: Certainly it's helpful that you tried to honor them even while telling the truths of your experience. I just want to compliment them as I'm listening to that feedback of how they've reacted because that is permission for you to be different than us.

Let me just pause and explain that a little bit and maybe we can talk around that because one of the observations I've made as a therapist who's worked with families for years is that the experience of adults and children, in particular in blended families, is often very different. That what is exciting and helpful and joyous for the adults is kind of good and kind of bad for kids.

That's just sometimes really hard to relate to like, "Why do you see it that way? Isn't this a really good thing?" The kids are like, "Yeah but it also has a downside for me and it's hard to explain that, and I'm not going to explain it to you, Mom, because then you're going to feel sad and I see you're happy right now. Do I need to protect your happiness and so I'm just going hold on to what doesn't feel good to me and not share with you."

That creates a little gap between the parent and the child and nobody even realized it happened. To me, one of the beautiful things that we try to do in our ministry is constantly move parents toward an understanding of their kids so that they can connect around those things. But if the parent is taking a posture that says, "Well at the end of the day, Kid, you've got to feel the way I feel about this," we have a problem.

Lauren: There's a defense rather than empathy.

Ron: Yes.

Lauren: The whole perspective that you're trying to accomplish is that your experience as an adult's blending your family is very different than that of a child. Different isn't necessarily good or bad, it's just different. If you don't allow the space to navigate the healing process in whatever role that you're playing then you may actually miss the healing process altogether.

Ron: Yes. So I'm curious about siblings. Kids don't always have the same experience either. Sometimes kids experience different from adults but then siblings have a different experience of the same family journey; sometimes they're older, sometimes they're younger; male, female; they have a different position within the family, play a different role within the family. They can see things very differently do you find that that's

true with kids in general and what are some of the extreme differences that maybe parents could expect from their children?

Lauren: That's a great question. I think from a perspective of siblings the age thing is huge because I think in adolescence as we know there's every year feels like four, there's so much development that happens. A lot of times I've interviewed a lot of people, for example, whose brother or sister may have been off away at school or at college before they ever came back to a blended family experience, where that same family had a youngest sibling who is still going back-and-forth with a suitcase.

So because of those differences just in their life stage they're absolutely going to process the blend very differently. Also personality plays into it I think sometimes siblings are really different in how they grieve: some take humor, some take that withdrawal, a few of them may just ignore the process altogether and not deal with it until much later in their life.

Personally in my family all of us digested the divorce and the blend a little bit differently but at the end of the day we can come together around some common togetherness, I guess is what you call it, where we bonded over our process of healing but even in that bond there's some different perspectives that each person takes these personality takes.

Ron: Yes, I like the way you said that you and your siblings digested the divorce and the new blended families differently. Let's just talk about you for a minute, just as a case study. You know some kids are, as you suggested, are more prone to internalize some of the stress going on in their lives. Some kids are more prone to externalize. You know depression would be an internalize and anger would be an externalize.

What did you do? How did you cope with the changes going on in your family? How did you try to find stability in your life?

Lauren: For me personally, I carried the performance drive in that I didn't want to be a statistic. I had known enough about divorce and kids and what they struggle with. Their grades go down, they aren't necessarily as active in the community, maybe their sports they stop playing sports, things like that. I drove the pendulum the opposite direction. I went into extreme performance mode and did everything I could to mask it. I didn't want people to know.

Ron: Let me stop you. You said you were aware as a kid that some kids slide in their academics so that you were determined not to do that?

Lauren: I was an anomaly when it came to--I must have known interpersonal communication was in my future because even before my parent's divorce I was aware. I had walked with some friends whose parents had gotten divorced in early elementary

school. I was determined to rescue them. I was a peer counselor and a playground problem solver.

Ron: [Laughs]

Lauren: Which is really cool when I was in the third grade I was a playground problem solver, I carried a clipboard around and made sure that if fights were happening, I had “I” statements and I had a blue vest--I still remember it--with a buffalo on the back at my elementary school I think I was destined to do something in interpersonal strategies.

Ron: Absolutely. That was foreshadowing. [Laughs]

Lauren: Exactly. At that point my family’s trajectory did not look anything like it was going toward divorce so I felt as if I were carrying the weight of a lot of kids that were in that place and I tried to help them and in that process I just was aware. I knew that people struggled and with that struggle came some of those dips in performance. So I knew I didn’t want to be seen in that light, I wanted to prove the world differently that you could overcome divorce very quickly and not let it affect you.

Ron: Wow.

Lauren: So I think it worked for a long time. A lot of people didn’t even know that anything was wrong, but that caught up to me in college for sure.

Ron: I bet it did. So you went the performance route, the straight A route, you tried to hide it by being really good at stuff. What I want the parents to hear listening to this is that was a coping strategy. From the outside that probably was like, “Wow! Lauren got straight A’s again! That’s super cool! Aren’t we happy!”

Yet there's a little bit of a dark side to that. That that was your way of trying to figure out how to overcome what was going on in your world and your life, to put a lot of pressure on you over think.

Lauren: The pressure I think was really real and it wasn't necessarily felt until it became too much. I almost I think it was the idea of when you actually cook with a pressure cooker and you can see the steam coming out of the top and you're just wondering when it's not going to be safe anymore.

Ron: Yes.

Lauren: I hit that point, I would probably say, my sophomore year when I have been out of the house, my sophomore year of college when I had been away from the house for a couple years, I was talking with a mentor who had poured into me and I just felt heavy and she gave me for the first time she gave me permission to express the gaps and show the cracks in my life and in my heart and where everyone would always look at

me and say, "You're so put together," she gave me permission to say, you've got some stuff.

I didn't quite know how that would manifest until I really started to feel and allow myself to really dig into some of the pain and it was really interesting because I think in that place of feeling the heaviness and feeling the pain I actually felt the freedom and the healing I had been searching for in the masking, but never really--it didn't become real until I felt that.

Ron: You had to actually feel it and express your sadness not just stuff it.

Lauren: Exactly and I think that that's a permission thing that parents can maybe lean into with a theme is that sometimes even if your kids are resilient and are doing amazing things allowing them the space to have grief is a necessity when it comes to self-actualizing into a healthy single before they become their own family.

Ron: I'd love for you to react to this: it was a friend of yours in college you're away from home. Maybe you have a little more freedom there to be vulnerable. She helped give you permission. You decided it's time to let this out and face it. In my experience, sometimes a parent can do that they can be the person who gives the child permission and the child will begin to really look at it in a different way. Other times it really needs to be somebody neutral who's not a parent. Do you have any thoughts about that?

Lauren: I do. I think parents-regardless of a blended family—I always am looking around our community thinking, "How can I find people that are going to echo what I would say to my children?" Because I know there's going to be a point in time and it might have even been this morning when they didn't want to hear from me.

Ron: Right.

Lauren: They wanted to hear it from someone else and as soon as those sound bites continued to be connected in their life then they actually can process it fully. I would say that the desire for the parent is probably the highest. They're the most desperate to get their child healing, but they're not necessarily the conduit that's the most effective all the time.

So whether that's a roommate or a friend or a mentor or coach, I think one of the experiences I'm walking through actually right now and in our community there's a few kids that I've been alerted to that their parents are in the middle of the separation. One of the things that is interesting as you try and support these children sometimes there is this, "Oh don't tell anyone about it. Don't worry about it. We've got it all covered, they're going to counseling."

I don't know where that comes from. I believe it's probably rooted in shame but my suggestion would be: don't be afraid to alert the community about what's going on in

your family, because the kids need teachers, they need coaches, they need friendships, and to know that there's something big happening, and it's not just an average day.

Ron: I think especially in a biblical community, in a community of Christians that are trying to support each other, shame can be at its highest. At the same time the community is a resource when you're going through a transition, in particular, for the very reasons you been talking about.

With kids sometimes that person who is just kind of the big brother can step in and say something that is brilliant. You said the same thing a hundred times and the child hears it or the child now has permission; they now share. I think that so very important and if there's a wish that I have for people listening right now perhaps you're in a blended family already and you're not allowing other people to come into the lives of your children because you're protecting something rethink that.

Okay so I want to continue on with your journey a little bit. Let's grab another piece because the experience of children continue. So after your parents divorced you threw yourself into perfectionism and performance to try to help cope with that. But then life takes another turn and somebody starts dating.

In your book, you talk about with a single parent children don't share the spotlight. Kids are prioritized as number one. When dating begins, and romantic feelings begin to develop for a new person, priorities shift. Children feel as though they are the shade instead of the sun. Do you mind talking about that for a minute?

Lauren: Sure. I think, and I really was trying to figure out of metaphor as I was writing that that would make sense and I loved the idea of when the sun is shining it's blinding and it's the only thing you can see. What I found is when you're in that healing space with just bio mom or dad in their single world after divorce there's almost this reunification and this strength around the bond that you have with your child because you're in it together. You get it; it's your family and you're safe.

The attention that you may have received as a child in a nuclear family actually increases when you have a--because it's just you. It's just you and Mom or you and Dad. If it's--if you're sharing custody and you're trying to maximize that time with the child it's the way you spend your time is even different.

I remember originally before my parents started dating we would go on these really fun trips. We weren't really a traveling family on a plane before that we would do road trips all over the place but then as soon as a divorce happened we got to get on a plane with Mom or Dad and go somewhere really cool. It was kind of exciting and I thought, "Wow! It's just us and Dad." Or, "It's just us and Mom."

Then as soon as the dating season begins the eyes that were once on you now shift toward this romantic interest and that should be a healthy thing that should be

something that is celebrated. But as you said before sometimes the experience of, “Hey shouldn’t this be really good,” from a parent’s perspective is actually received as resentment or anger from a child.

“Wait, why am I no longer the center of attention? But the attention I’m getting is typically negative, meaning I’m not being gracious enough to this person or I’m not being kind enough to this person. So what you used to talk to me about how school was and where I wanted to go on vacation now is more directed toward, ‘Why aren’t you being kind?’” Those types of things because the shift of priority from child to now adult dating partner is very felt by the children.

Ron: Absolutely kids notice it. I think they notice it when they’re 3-, 4-, 5- years of age. They can’t articulate it but they know Mom’s eyes--or Dad’s eyes--are more towards this other person they’re dating now than they were towards me. As you said, “We were in the foxhole together and we were surviving life and it was kind of cool that I had all of you and now I have to share you.” I mean fundamentally that’s what it’s about.

Lauren: Exactly.

Ron: Then I think that’s a great observation. If the parent inadvertently criticizes their child for not being welcoming of the new dating partner, not being super excited about my engagement the way I’m excited about the engagement now the child’s getting negative feedback for not being happy about the person who’s taking my mom away from me.

You know in a kid’s mind, I’m sure that’s confusing. That’s just a challenge.

Lauren: It is for sure and I think that sometimes the shift isn’t necessarily right when the dating happens. I was trying to figure out some of the interviews and some of the experiences that I found along this journey were at the opposite and that as soon as the dating began the child was almost more enamored with a parent community because there they had this new friend.

They talked a lot about it being a “friend” of mom or dad’s that was really--and then they would lean in with the birthday presents and the fun surprises. It was just, “So cool! I had all these people in my life.” When I say “I” I’m talking about the people I interviewed who had all more people to love and pay attention to them, but it was when the commitment happens that all of a sudden that retraction of affection came.

The children in this particular case that I’m thinking of were much younger they retreated from both parents and did not lean in as soon as the dating became a marriage. I found that to be very interesting as well that there this great excitement around, “Yay, you’re going to be my stepmom or my stepdad and I get to be a flower girl or I get to be a part of the wedding,” but as soon as the wedding happens the parents shared with me that that child was very different and difficult to parent.

Ron: We don't always hear that but we do hear that on a fairly regular basis that there's a little bit of a shift in the child's heart about the situation; sometimes it's a big shift. Again it varies from child to child and family to family, but the point is don't be taken back by that.

That's a pretty common thing because the child is feeling the difference in their time and energy that they receive from their parent. I think you talked about how when your dad remarried which happens first and then your mom married again which happened second a little bit further down the road that you responded to both of those but in a very different timing.

With your dad your, response happened *at* the wedding and then with mom it happened sometime *after* the wedding.

Lauren: You're correct, and that is the assessment, I think, from the outside would because of my emotional responses at my dad's wedding and then more the celebratory posture at my mom's wedding, people may have labeled the grief with my dad and then and the joy with my mom, but that wasn't the case at all.

I actually I felt like the timing manifested separately but both weddings carried a sentiment of sadness also mixed with this joy. I think what's hard that tension that you live in as you definitely want your parents to experience healed and whole love and you want you want them to have everything that they want. I don't think a child ever sits in shoes and says, "I don't want you to be happy." This is not about your happiness. That's not typically the heart of a child but rather, "How does your happiness affect my life?" is more what they're processing.

What I find interesting is that the ability for a second marriage to take off and start a new life in this protected kind of space. It's approachable/tangible for the adults because they *get* to move into a house; they *get* to have a marriage; they *get* to maybe change their last name or adopt new traditions.

The child gets to come with them but only part of the time and regardless this just doesn't have to do with custody, but half the time in a child's identity they're feeling like they get to move on with one or both sides but they're constantly moving on-torn or separate. Whereas the parents move on without that separation because the separation is what caused them to move whereas the child carries that separation behind them for their entire life.

Ron: There's some keywords in that. I think this is really significant for our listener right now. There's a grief that's going on. There's mixed reactions in the sense that part of you is happy that the wedding is taking place, the new family's taking place, the adjustments in whatever there's benefit in this for me as a child.

Kids are very egocentric, so we understand that that's a selfish perspective. Then they also notice that there's some downsides for them and so they can have mixed reactions, even--I want to point out--even adult children will go through this as so many people contact our ministry and say, "You know my kids are 30. Why in the world are they distressed over my marriage?"

Well, and I hate to say it but they are still kids from the standpoint of how they relate to you. One of the assumptions we make as children is that our lives change but our parents lives are not supposed to change. So when our parents move in directions that have implications for us, even if we're 30 or 50, you know there's a part of us it's like still a little ticked off about that you not like that's somehow not right. So again it bears a mixed reaction from them.

Then I heard the word "torn." I'm torn between dad's house and mom's house. When I'm here with Mom and enjoying this new family there's a part of me that's thinking about Dad and wondering about that relationship. I'm missing out on whatever's happening with Dad, but in Dad's experience he's living life in his family. So I'm with him but I'm not with him and then when I'm at Dad's house then there's a part of me that's torn as I think about Mom.

There are so many themes that are all kind of centered around this adjustment period and transition in time. If I'm a parent listening to this conversation right now and I'm beginning to feel concerned for my kids, like, "I didn't know this was all going on under the surface for them. I'm feeling maybe a little guilty about it; I did know what I didn't know and made choices and decisions. Now I can see it from their side, what do I do with this?"

What is the take away for the parent/stepparent listening to this who's gaining empathy for a child? Where do you put it and what do you do with it?

Lauren: That's a really big question but ultimately grace. Give yourself grace. Give your kids grace. For me the performance mask is typically rooted in my pride. There's a known felt sadness in even having to--we all know that no one would sign up and choose divorce. That's not something that anyone says, "I intended that someday this would happen to me and so I am living my path."

But when divorce happens we also can't create this sense of feeling so stuck and so ashamed that we can't ever experience--we put ourselves in jail--we can't ever experience the happiness and the joy and the redemption that can come out of owning your story. If it's possible, try not to make your life goal to apologize and try and make up for the loss that your children may be feeling.

You have to surrender some of that eventually and trust that first of all if your children are walking in faith that God is the ultimate Healer and He will do more work in their lives than you ever could when it comes to the capacity of what this means. But also

you have the freedom to be in a place of joy, and in a place of celebration, but if they don't share that with you, at that moment, try not to internalize that. The separation that kids may feel from their parents you actually can feel from them as well.

I think one of the things that's really unique about being a mom--I have three children, and my youngest child is now just 6 months old--I find that the most fascinating thing that I've experienced in becoming a mom is that the message of you're never the same in that you-everything becomes about your children. I actually carried a lot of guilt in becoming a mom because I had to remind myself three/four days after having this child that they were mine just because it was such an out-of-body experience.

I still had balance and I still had to an identity outside of my mom role. I just felt like, "Am I wrong for not thinking about this child every second of every day? Can my mind be consumed with other things and can I still be a great mom in that?" I have come to say and learn that the answer to that is yes, and I would say maybe the same mindset could be helpful for a blended family is enjoy your marriage, enjoy your new traditions, enjoy the trajectory of your life.

Yes, be there for your children but don't necessarily carry the weight of becoming your child's savior because that's just not a role that you have to carry.

Ron: That is so very important, I think, and there is a balance there between loving and serving and being responsive to our kids, and being compassionate over what it is that they feel and are going through. At the same time you don't have to be dictated by their emotional state.

There's a paradox, I think, in parenting - in leadership when you are able to rise above where the people you're leading are and lead from a position of self-definition. That's what I hear you saying, that that's important to do. I think the paradox is you give your kids a chance to figure out how to deal with their place in life, what life has dealt them. They become responsible for it, not you becoming responsible for it. So it's loving and serving being sensitive to but not necessarily controlled by all of that. That I think is really, really big.

Okay, Lauren what I want to do now is a want to kind of run through some questions that I think parents and stepparents are often wondering, like, "Hey is this what's going on in my kids?" So let's just rapid fire go through some of these and see if we can speak to different scenarios that I think people experience on a pretty common basis.

Okay, so here's the first question: you said a little while ago that you seemed to express joy when your mom got married but sadness when your dad got married. From the outside people would have perceived you as maybe showing preference to your mom or something because you were happy during that season. Is that really what's going on with kids, do you think, in general that what people see on the outside is that always telling of what's going on the inside?

Lauren: It's not always telling actually. I think we talk team a lot in our family right now and Mom and Dad are on the same team and if one team member is hurting or one team member is losing then the whole team loses because you can't have a score where one player gets a win and the other gets a loss.

So I think that happens a lot with divorce in that it may appear that there is a preference. It may appear that, "I want to spend more time at my dad's house because he has a really cool video game system." Or my mom, "She lets me have a dog so I want to be there."

But ultimately I think kids really prefer both parents. Ultimately their preference would be for their parents to be together sometimes. I think you have to be careful with time or posturing dictating affection or preference for the parent because a child has no choice but to prefer where they are.

Ron: Yes.

Lauren: Simply because of the dynamic that they're in.

Ron: Right and so you tell a story in your book about when your stepmother got pregnant, she was having a baby, they were making the announcement and you were a little less than excited in terms of your reaction and how you responded to that. How does that maybe reveal some of the things that are going on under the surface for a child?

Lauren: I think children are innately pretty selfish. I think really the only thing that I would take from that just from a surface level that would have meaning as that it's very difficult for a self-consumed child to learn to be other focused.

Ron: Yes.

Lauren: Especially when it comes to a family experience that you're not there to live in the present.

Ron: Right, kids don't see it from the adult's point of view. They just see it from a selfish point of view. So frequently they're not empathetic or sensitive to what's going on with adults. This is another one of those moments where I think, as we talked before, if the adults can have an identity separate and apart from what the kids are seeing in them or how the kids are reacting is not that you don't care what's going on how the kids are reacting you take that into consideration but you can't be dictated by it.

Lauren: Yes, don't give it so much power that it actually changes *your* day based on how the kids are reacting.

Ron: Okay earlier in our conversation we talked about stolen firsts, so here's another one of those questions that I think adults are asking: what's the experience of a child when something happens for the first time in a blended family but it's not the first time for somebody else in the family?

Lauren: This is a big one for me because I don't think I really put words to this emotional experience until it was happening. That's why it was the first chapter I wrote in the book because it was so concrete and meaningful to me. I think there's a jealousy. I think jealousy is an emotion that we don't necessarily explore a lot because it's not a healthy thing to have that jealous approach when it comes to love.

We hear love is selfless and you don't need to compare but you feel as if the right to your celebration or the right to your story. The things that those milestones that you cross for the first time have been robbed from you and not by your choice but just simply because of the timeline in which a stepsibling may have been born or a stepparent may have entered the picture in marriage.

Ron: So for you it was you were an adult, you were married and you're having your first child. But for your stepdad it wasn't his first grandchild so the celebration or the response you got there was different than what you had hoped or what you wanted it to be for your side of the family. So this is even as an adult, who's married and starting her life. You're feeling a stolen first.

Lauren: Exactly and I would say, it wasn't a lack of celebration that was missing. My stepfather was incredibly gracious in celebrating the birth of this child, but it was the number. This was going to be number five. He already had four grandchildren and I was the first in my family to have a baby so I thought "Wait, how are there already four grandchild in this family?" That was more of the emotional response rather than the lack of celebration and I don't think it really resonated what was going on until I was in that space and I had to grieve that in that moment.

Ron: I just have to make an observation here. This is another good example of how the definition of "family" varies from person to person within blended families. Clearly the adults, your mom and your stepdad had grandchildren already in their family. Their definition of their family included his kids and their children, so grandchild. But for you—the child—your definition was your side of the family and you were the first sibling born to your mom and dad to have a child. So in your mind this is the first grandchild.

That is so deeply profound. I desperately want and need for parents and stepparents to get that, the definitions of who's even in the family vary even after years and years. So it's an honest gap that your stepfather says, "Oh number five," right. Of course it is because that's the way it fits in his definition of family. But from your definition it's a different result.

Okay, let's talk a little bit about loyalty conflicts. We've talked about that a lot on this podcast and in our one-minute feature, our articles online, the books and different materials and resources that we make available to people. Let's just jump inside this from the kid's point of view for a minute.

What makes liking a stepparent so difficult?

Lauren: Well, oh, that is a difficult question, Ron Deal, that is a difficult question. Ultimately I would say it's the position and not the person. So many stepparents that I have sat across the table from drinking coffee just trying to help understand have just felt deflated, and, "I don't know what else to do. This kid is just incorrigible; they're just not ever going to love me."

My response is always, "It's not about you. It's not about you. This is about the position that you play in the family, not the person that you are." I would say the child's--

Ron: Okay hold on, hold on. You've got to distinguish those two things. What do you mean position and what do you mean person?

Lauren: The position being you now occupy a role as a stepparent that was not there prior to your arrival. So one of the metaphors that I have used in the past to help people understand this idea is if you've worked for a company for 25 years and all of a sudden there's a big reorganization and they hire a new VP and they come in and all these new positions are created.

You hire great people and everyone's on board in the interview process and the people start their job but then those that were originally part of the company really struggle to find synergy with those new positions because they weren't there before. Not because they're bad people. Not because they're mean spirited and they're not helping the family move forward, or the job move forward, but rather because I don't know how to make sense of my life with this position in it.

A lot of times what we'll do is we'll internalize that and say, "I don't know what to do with my life with this person in it," and it becomes very personal. If you can separate the position from the person I think you're freeing your heart to actually feel less of the pain.

Ron: Yes, and so if you invite that position into your heart does it sometimes then conflict with other positions that are in your heart, other persons?

Lauren: Yes, because first of all this is an energy drain. I don't know if you guys have ever been a part of a big family but I watched this with my children and with other children that are trying to have their game face on for every adult that they interact with all day long.

Sometimes they feel like, “Oh I didn’t--or my coach yelled at me today or my teachers said I didn't do this and now you're telling me I didn't make my bed.” There's this constant “Am I enough,” going on in that kid's life and so there's just not a lot of energy to share your authentic self and all the things that you have with multiple people. So when you have stepparents sometimes they come with stepsiblings.

Ron: Right.

Lauren: And step aunts and uncles and step cousins. You know that duplicity factor and therefore kids are at a loss sometimes to know how to give enough to everybody because you are just one person. But to them you're one of an army of new people. A lot of times they simply don't know how to navigate that.

Ron: Right. It's a lot of emotional work, mental work, relational work. You don't want to push out the people that are near and dear to you that you desperately want more of. So it's kind of like how do I expand my heart to allow this new position person in, but not at the cost of any relationship with a person that I really desperately want to hold on.

There's so many things. Just as you were talking through those different layers, you know it's like, “Yes, like there's a lot going on under the surface for children trying to figure that out which translates on the outside into hot and cold responses.

Lauren: Yes.

Ron: “I love you, go away.” Into, you might call it selfish responses towards a parent figure, “Hey, I appreciate you dropping me off at soccer practice. I appreciate the fact that you gave me some money to buy lunch today. I appreciate the fact you're washing my clothes. But don't tell me to clean my room. Don't be parental. Don't tell me how to live my life,” like, “So I embrace you in one way, but I don't embrace you in another way.”

It can look like rollercoaster responses from a child welcoming and then shut you out. No wonder stepparenting can be so confusing sometimes but I appreciate what you said if parents and stepparents can depersonalized that rollercoaster reactions, and see it for what it is; it's a child trying to navigate all of those layers and figure out what to do with them and where to put them. They don't have the clear maturity to manage all of that well. You're bound to see some inappropriate responses and reactions--doesn't mean I let him off the hook for that, you can still hold him accountable--but of course it's not going to show itself necessarily and be pretty all the time.

I'm thinking now about parents who are asking, “Well, how much do we tell the kid about the divorce? How much of the story do we go into in terms of the details?” So I'm wondering about that question and I'm also wondering about the narrative that sometimes people give their children at some point about even as a simple comment

like, “We feel like God has really blessed this blended family, that God orchestrated us coming together.”

What are the messages that are embedded in that that can be confusing for a child?

Lauren: I’d like to explore that away from a blended family experience where you take the sovereignty of God and put it into your reasoning or explanation for what’s happening interpersonally.

For example you lose a child prematurely and somebody says, “Well you know God has a plan for this.” Or you get fired at work after years and years and years of loyalty just because the economy is down and you say, “There’s a rainbow after every storm.”

All of those things that are truths, I mean God is sovereign in redemption stories and He always gives hope but it totally minimizes the experience that a child needs to feel. In that, “Wait a minute if this is God’s plan for my parents to have a blended family and then that must mean that my whole life ahead of this story was not God’s plan. What does that mean for me theologically?”

Ron: Or it means God orchestrated the divorce and the difficulties that arose and all of that can be confusing when a child is like, “But I’d love to have my family back together again. You’re saying somehow that’s not God’s plan for my life?” All of those have implications for how a child is making sense of their life and also their relationship with God and who God is.

Lauren: Correct and I would actually advise people not to bring God’s sovereignty or handiwork into the story in that kind of language at all. Because yes God blesses a lot of people and God is so much bigger than we can imagine in our human space. I feel like I can see the goal but it actually seems to sometimes undo itself in that I want my kids to know that God’s in this and that God is faithful and that there’s goodness for our family.

But by saying that and labeling your family experience as God’s plan, it actually--and maybe this is a place where I should speak for myself as to not typecast the population here--but for me it actually would push me away from God’s plan because I had a very concrete and wonderful understanding of God’s goodness in my biological family and my nuclear family. So to say that that was not His goodness and not His plan is very, very hurtful to a child and can be quite confusing as they try and put together their theological story.

Ron: This is another moment where to make room for different points of view would be good. I think as children grow and mature and become adults and as you talk about you know what is sovereignty mean and you discuss with your children how do we make sense of hard things in life in light of what God—how he feels about us and who He is in the world.

I mean those are all deep conversations with practical implication for our lives to come at it from a black-and-white perspective towards your child is dangerous, I think, is the word for listeners today.

But to be open to dialoguing and exploring the different experience within that and then going to Scripture and trying to understand and make sense from a biblical standpoint how we understand God and how He works in the world. Those are all really helpful conversations but the come in black-and-white and just say, "It's this way not that way," you can step on their toes. You can step on their toes pretty quick.

Lauren: Just a better--people may be looking for alternative, let's pretend you're in college and the person you're dating says, "God is leading me to break up with you," right. The person who's receiving that break up is not very impressed with that excuse.

Ron: Yes.

Lauren: It is quite hurtful but rather what if we were to be a generation that said, "You know what, our communication styles are always in conflict, our goals are leading us different directions, we have worked tirelessly to try and figure this out and I just don't see you in my future."

As hard as that is to hear that's more honest and that's more ownership out of our interpersonal decisions than blaming God for your decisions. I think that would be a really a helpful posture for all relationships not just in blended families to be able to say, "Where can I take ownership in this that's age appropriate? Where should I let the story fill in the gaps themselves as the kids mature?"

Ron: One more parent/step parent question that I hear from people is, "What do we do with old photos, videos, even stuff on our phones that are connected to the nuclear family, the biological family, the pre-divorce family?" What are the considerations there as it relates to children and their experience?

Lauren: There's actually a chapter in the book that really explores this idea about missing the mantelpiece and what do you do with that big family picture that is hanging over the fire? It doesn't go in the kid's houses obviously because nobody wants that and it can't hang on the wall of your new blended family because that's very strange, but, so the only other options really sometimes are: to hide it, or to sell it, or to destroy it.

Those words "destroy, sell, hide" those carry weight in a child's identity and how, again, that word "shame" that we're trying to avoid is sometimes heightened by the lack of physical evidence that you were a healthy family. Even looking at it's very strange--it's not appropriate for a child to flip through a family album of their biological family in on the lap of their step parent without some emotional weight that that's a very—that's a weighty heavy thing.

Do you let a kid have pictures on their bulletin board in their room? Absolutely! Don't take those down.

Do you allow a child to maybe take their memories and create a memory book before and after and let them know it's a timeline of their whole experience that there's not one that's better than the other or one the doesn't—is not as meaningful as the other? I think so.

I wish I could be the expert in this but this is still a topic that carries a lot of emotion and that's kind of difficult to answer but ultimately you don't want to attach shame to those older family pictures.

Ron: Yes, yes, that's very good. If the message to the child is we're erasing your past that's what you want to avoid because that's still part of their life that's very much their narrative and finding ways of being able to-as you say-let them sit on your lap and talk about photos of the family before you showed up is such a gift to a child that you can make space to let that happen, allow that to happen, to bless that as a part of who they are as part of their journey.

You don't have to erase the past.

You've been listening to my conversation with Lauren Rietsema. I'm Ron Deal and this is FamilyLife Blended.

If this podcast has been helpful to you would you do me a favor and rate it, like right now? A high rating and a quick review position the podcast so others can find it, so that they are blessed by it the way you've been blessed by it. We would appreciate that.

Now Lauren has an encouraging word for stepparents. We'll share that in just a few minutes.

There's a couple things about my conversation with her though that I want to highlight. First, our discussion about the sovereignty of God and how we narrate God's role in the dissolution of one family and the beginning of another, really reveals a lot about what we believe about God, His role in the world, and how he relates to us as His children.

Now to Lauren's point, I think we need to be careful of the assumptions we make and how we present God's role to our kids, and the messages that we give them about which family is right or wrong, good or bad. See as it relates to God's sovereignty and His activity in the world, we also need to do our homework, so that we as parents-as influencers-are presenting the truth about God, not just what we think to be true about God.

So let me encourage you if you haven't really thought through this at great length maybe talk to a pastor and get their understanding on topics like free will and predestination

and how God works in the world. Study the subject for yourself so that over time you can help your children really understand their life in light of the truth about God, His love for them and what we can trust Him for.

Now this is not a light, easy subject. You will revisit this conversation and in your own heart and mind and you will study the scriptures again and again but it's an important one, especially as it relates to children and their faith and how they see God working in their life.

A second observation about my conversation with Lauren is her comment that there aren't many books like hers that reveal the inner experiences of children. In part, that's because it's hard for kids to consider their feelings and to tell their parents the truth. Her observation about that really struck me.

You know it took great courage for her to write this book I can imagine that some of her siblings disagree with some of her thoughts or her assessment about what happened and what it means to them. Perhaps she's had a parent or a stepparent who got their toes stepped on. I don't know if that's the case or not.

My point for you is this: listening to the other side of the story from someone else requires courage. That's my suggested take away for you.

I said at the outset of this podcast that one goal I have is helping move your heart closer to your child's heart. It takes patience and understanding in order to do that. If you do as we've suggested and use some of the themes in this discussion to spark dialog with your child and you react to their courageous responses with criticism or defensiveness you will not move closer to their heart. You will inadvertently move further apart.

If they have the courage to tell you their experience, have the courage to listen without invalidating their point of view.

There may be a detail or two that you want to correct and there will be a point in time when you can do that but it's a timing issue. For now listen to what it means to be them and how their experience has shaped who they are and how they understand their life in the world. That is the person you're trying to respect and move toward, so don't miss your opportunity to see them—to really see them.

If you'd like more information about our Lauren and her new book, *In Their Shoes*, you'll find it in our show notes. Check it out on the FamilyLife Blended page at FamilyLife.com/podcast.

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For example we just released the 10th anniversary edition of the eight-session video curriculum *The Smart Stepfamily*. It is a perfect do-it-yourself training for couples or for small groups. It's available right now on RightNow Media and you can get the DVD copies on Amazon or familylife.com.

Also my newest book written with co-authors Greg Pettys and David Edwards is the *Smart Stepfamily Guide to Financial Planning: Money Management Before and After You Blend a Family*. That book is available wherever books are sold.

Finally if your church wants to learn more about ministering to step families we want to help with that. Maybe you as a couple want to know how to help other couples just in a personal relationship or having a few couples in your home. Let me invite you to join us for the Summit on Stepfamily Ministry, October 23 to 25, 2019. We'll be in Chesapeake, Virginia, for this event. The two-day ministry equipping event.

Lauren Rietsema, my guest today, and dozens of other leading voices in the field of blended family ministry will be there. You can meet them and people just like you who are just trying to share good news with step couples from around the country. Would love to have you join us. Learn more at FamilyLife.com or go direct to that website summitonstepfamilies.com.

Now before we're done here's some encouragement for stepparents. In my conversation with Lauren I asked her about how she ended her book. In it she says this:

"Thank you for loving our parents the way they deserve to be loved. Fight for your marriage; the best is yet to come." Then you say, "Please remember your stepchildren love you, too."

Now there were times-I think-when maybe you didn't know what to do with your stepparent, maybe resented them a little bit or resented their position now in your life that was forced on you and you had to deal with that. And yet you closed the book by encouraging stepparents. Why would-why?

Lauren: I just think empathy started the book and empathy is where I want to end it in that I've never been a stepparent and I know that the hurts I felt as a stepchild are my own but that I've also caused a lot of hurt to their role.

Ultimately there's a lot of hurting parents out there. There's a lot of people that are working really hard to make it right and feeling defeated and I just want them to know that it's not over. That there are really wonderful things that come out of the relationships of blended families if you allow yourself the space and time to do the honest work it takes to get there.

Ultimately I was telling the truth that I do love my stepparents and I want them to know that I am who I am because they're in my life and they matter to me and it's important that all the pain can sometimes be trumped by the present healing and the future hope that lies ahead.

Ron: Next time on FamilyLife Blended we'll hear from Willie and Rachel Scott about managing the stress of a custody battle.

Rachel: Because of the parade downtown I couldn't even talk with my attorney because all the cell phone towers were being used up. That was my only point to go to was my attorney. He was unavailable to time but when I did get on the phone with him it was just a real short conversation. He was like, "I'm surprised. I'm shocked. This is going to cost a lot of money." Then the phone died.

Ron: That's Willie and Rachel Scott, next time on FamilyLife Blended.

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

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