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Episode 21: Stepfamilies and the Holidays

Guests: Candice Colclough, Jeff and Kim Roberson, Shannon Simmons
Air Date: November 11, 2019

Candice: The pressure has always been making sure all four children feel the same. The first Christmas I remember counting gifts.

Kim: I can second that.

[Laughter]

Candice: Oh good, good, good. I'm not alone.

Kim: I remember laying them out on the floor and I'm counting them out.

Ron: It's unanimous at the table.

Candice: Okay, good, I'm not alone.

Ron: What was that about for you, counting gifts, what was the need in you?

Candice: I didn't want anyone to feel "step". I didn't even want them to pay attention to that or feel that.

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.

Do you like road trips? Well if you live within driving distance of Houston I want to invite you and perhaps other couples from your church or community to join us at Houston's First Baptist Church on Saturday, April 25th, 2020, for our next Blended and Blessed Livestream Event. Yes, it is a livestream, you can be anywhere in the world and watch this on your smartphone or laptop or with a group of friends.

We'd love to have you join the live audience in Houston if you can be there. I'll be there and one of my heroes, Dr. Gary Chapman will be there as well. He's one of our keynote speakers.

Put the date on your calendar today. It's Saturday, April 25th, 2020. Plan to be a part of this event Blended and Blessed. You can learn more at BlendedandBlessed.com.

The holidays can be stressful for blended families. Special days have a lot of meaning and tradition and you can't help but notice who is not there or what tradition is not the same. This has a way of bringing stress and relational uncertainty to the surface in blended families. So we want to help you with that.

So take a look first of all in the show notes, there's an article there that you can download called *Thirteen Ideas to Manages Holiday Step-stress*. It's very practical.

In this podcast we're going to be talking about the holidays and stress. Now all this fall we've been asking our podcast guests to share their life wisdom with you as it relates to the holidays. Then I gathered a few friends from a variety of blended family situations to react to the collective wisdom of our guests and share their thoughts and insights.

My guests, my little panel today includes Jeff and Kim Roberson. They've been married thirteen years and share six children, two sons-in-law, a daughter-in-law, six grandchildren, five dogs, a cat, and two fish.

Jeff is an RN administrator of nearly 30 years and Kim has been an educator for 24 years. She's currently pursuing a degree in Marriage and Family Therapy through John Brown University. Jeff and Kim are mentors at their church to blended-family couples.

Shannon Simmons is a stepdaughter, stepmom and mom to five children. She serves on my team FamilyLife Blended here at FamilyLife as administrator/project coordinator. We love her. She's been married to Roosevelt for 19 years and she says that she's still learning how to navigate through their stepfamily forest with five children ranging in age from twelve to twenty.

Candice Colclough is wife to Harold. Mom to Cassidy, Hudson and Haven, and bonus mom to Calvin. She is the email marketing specialist for FamilyLife and an avid leader in the women's ministry of her church.

To start our conversation, I asked my panel of blended family members what their first thought is when they think about their stepfamily holiday experiences.

Hey guys, thanks for being with me today.

Jeff: It's a pleasure.

Shannon: You're welcome.

Kim: It's great to be here, thanks for having us.

Ron: I'm glad to have you. We've got a chorus in the studio with me today. We're just going to be talking and reacting to things related to blended families and the holidays.

Let me just start by asking all of you when you think about your blended family holiday experiences, what you're first thought that comes to mind.

Candice: Mine would be calendar. I can just visually see how we're planned out this season with our visitation.

Ron: Calendar. Is it a detailed calendar? Is it just a few things on there or what?

Candice: All my calendars are detailed and yes there are more than one. [laughs]

Kim: I agree.

Ron: Same thing for you guys?

Kim: I'd say plan early. Yes, don't wait until December for Christmas and don't wait until November for Thanksgiving.

Ron: What happens if you don't plan?

Kim: Confusion, I think, for the kids. Our kids, they wanted to know what was coming. They knew when they we're going to be at our house. They knew when they were going to be at their other biological parent's house, but they didn't really know, what did that mean when I'm out of school. What did that mean when we have holidays coming? For them I think it relieved some of their anxiety.

Candice: Yes, for me since we're double blended, his, mine and ours, if we're not planned we can miss being together as a whole. One child may be gone the other one may be here so we have to be strategic in that area.

Ron: Yes.

Kim: Yes.

Ron: That's good.

Jeff: Even with things you plan out I think flexibility is important because things change on the fly. If you're so rigid in a set thing you can easily get offended and that can spill over to the kids. There are things that are unpredictable like families coming in that you don't plan on and if you can be flexible and allow those kids to see family, maybe they haven't seen in a while, even if it's taking up your time. I think the kids benefit from that and they see how well you work together.

Ron: Jeff I think you're exactly right. I've often thought that I give couples in blended families whiplash when I say, "Plan, plan, plan and be flexible." It's like, "Wait, aren't those two polar opposite things?" Right, that's the point.

It's just so many things you don't control. The other household may change their schedule, that's going to change your schedule. You just don't get to dominate everything in your world so planning is about trying to get out in front.

By the way, planning also includes contacting the other home and trying to get on their schedule early.

Kim: I was thinking the same thing. I was thinking communication is so important because you might have all these plans and it's all in your head but if you haven't communicated with the other home they may have plans that conflict with that and then you wait until the last minute. Goes back to the communication well ahead of time.

Ron: Yes.

Shannon: Yes.

Ron: Good thoughts. Anybody else? Anything else?

Shannon: Disjointed. Depending on the nature of the relationship with the children that don't live in your home could be disjointed because you may just want to give space for the biological parent to spend time with that biological child that may not want to connect with the rest of the family.

That can be a little hard to watch as a bio parent wants to connect with a child that doesn't live in the home. Yet, that child is either putting up barriers emotionally where they may not want to connect on those special moments but for us some holidays and special days have been disjointed because we've just had to make space for if this person wants to spend time.

Ron: Okay guys, as you know we've been asking our guests on our podcasts recently to share their thoughts, insights, and experiences related to blended families and the holidays. So we're going to be listening to a series of those clips and then just reacting to them.

Our first one comes from Willie and Rachel Scott. I interviewed them in Episode 15: Navigating Your Custody Battle.

[Beginning of clip]

Rachel: So one of the things that we've learned about navigating stepfamily holidays is being flexible. In the morning time, for example, one of the things we do is, rather than having Christmas dinner, we have Christmas brunch. That allows everyone to come over for brunch. It doesn't impede on the evening activities. So after brunch is over everyone can kind of go their own separate ways.

Ron: Right.

Rachel: We don't feel that we were necessarily not given the time--

Willie: Slighted.

Rachel: Slighted, that's the word. We don't feel slighted on the holidays they don't feel slighted. They have more things to anticipate. They get to be with their family during that time, all their family that day.

Willie: You expect to be able to get up in the morning and open presents with your children and not them be off somewhere else. So that's a perfect, perfect setup for us. Then it also allows us because we all pitch in with the breakfast, doing the brunch, cooking, so we interact, we clean and we do all that stuff together. So.

Rachel: And then for those that don't necessarily get to do the wake up in the morning holiday thing for something like Christmas they can always shift that a little bit and then maybe do dinner that day or do something later in the evening having maybe a night time routine that they do for the holidays just to create tradition because really that's what. It's about establishing and creating that tradition.

Willie: Your own tradition.

Rachel: Your own tradition that the children can continue to do as they get older.

[End of clip]

Ron: Okay so that was Rachel and her husband Willie Scott. They, too, like the flexibility idea that Jeff mentioned a little while ago. What did you guys pick up, what did you guys perceive on what they were saying?

Candice: I feel that could have been a conversation between my husband and I. We are the exact same. But when it comes to calendar for our custody, we either have my stepson that morning up until 3pm or we get him at 3pm, so we're either going to do brunch, and we do a Christmas brunch with both sides of our families. Everyone gets together. We cook. We open presents together. Or we wait until later that evening—everybody does—and we all get together for dinner and we open up presents and we do our Christmas at that time.

Jeff: I think our hearts' desire is to have all of our kids, all under the one household to have that time together but that's not always realistic, especially, it sounds like maybe their kids are older, as our kids are older your expectations are we wanted to see them but sometimes just having a come as you can. Come in. We're there.

That's kind of the way my parents do. My mother is—they open their home up because they also have six children, blended. They say, "We're here. Come see us when you can. We know you have other obligations, you have other family, other grandparents." So it really takes the pressure off us and the other kids. We come and we stay and visit and we leave and other kids do the same. Sometimes we're all there at the same time and sometimes we're not. But it works.

Ron: So Jeff, your comment and Candice's comment tells me you guys have already come to some measure of acceptance about you can't have it when you want it. But what if somebody's listening to us right now and they're going, "Wait, wait, wait a minute, you don't understand, Ron. We always do brunch in my family. It is always the same time, it's the same food and if we change the time of day it changes the menu and that's not tradition." They're really wrestling with that.

Kim: Ron, I'll tell you when I was hearing Jeff talk about that it made me think about the years that we've experienced. We've been married thirteen years. We do have six children between us, they're all grown, the last ones left the house for college this year. I remember back about probably twelve years ago that we didn't have even one of our children in the house.

Prior to our marriage, in my previous nuclear marriage we had all the family there all the time, big gatherings. We had people there that didn't have other families so I was the host. I was used to that. That was my happy place during the holidays so to change to a new pattern of expectation was a really hard thing for me so I can really relate to that.

The one holiday where we did not have anybody we went to a soup kitchen and helped serve food, it was just the two of us. We ordered food from somewhere, we didn't even cook. So it was a whole new world and we did have to learn to grow with the changes that came.

Candice: Yes, it's a learning process for sure. My kids are very young and I am what people call me extra. [Laughter] I want to do the Christmas Eve boxes, I want the pajamas, I want The Polar Express, I want all of that. But I have learned that sometimes it's not that way. The sooner I accept that as a parent the easier it is on my children that "Hey, we did Christmas Eve box last year, this time we're doing Christmas night boxes with the same type of activities, same type of things." I get my feels, they get their feels and nobody's feelings are hurt.

Ron: Now there's a dose of wisdom right there. The sooner I accept this as the parent the sooner my kids are going to adjust to this. It doesn't mean the kids won't have adjustments and reactions --yes, they'll still do that but you lead the way. That's really good.

Let's listen to another clip.

[Beginning of clip]

Laura: Well the first few Christmases as a stepmom I couldn't deal with the tension, the expectations, I would get angry when my stepsons weren't happy with their gifts or they didn't think they got enough from their father. That was very frustrating. My early stepfamily Christmases I had too great of an expectation, too much of a Norman Rockwell view in my head of what Christmas was going to be.

As we progressed as a stepfamily, I learned to lower my expectations. I learned to keep focused on what was important. I learned what my stepsons loved about Christmas and what they didn't love about Christmas. I learned as a stepfamily unit not to make the priority making sure you had the kids on Christmas Eve or Christmas morning.

If that caused too much stress for them it wasn't worth it. It wasn't worth making Christmas morning something to fight over. If all the kids were going to do was feel disjointed and unhappy and miserable because they were tired.

I learned in a stepfamily that Christmas is often what you make it. If you set the expectations for the kids to be thrilled about everything you may end up disappointed.

I learned in a stepfamily that you often are not going to be able to take the stepkids to church like you thought you would.

I learned that my example of Christ was doing more to help them see Christmas for what it should be than preaching to them about what Christmas should be.

[End of clip]

Ron: So that was author Laura Petherbridge from Episode 15, our episode on The Childless Stepmom. What are your reactions to some of her thoughts?

Shannon: I liked how she learned to lowered her expectations of what Christmas should be. The tradition in our home is that this is the day to celebrate the birth of Jesus so it's not about you. In fact, we don't go overboard with all of the gifts. So if Jesus only received three gifts you're not getting any more. [Laughter]

Ron: And it's not going to be gold, frankincense, and myrrh, by the way.

Shannon: Right. Right. So you get no more than Jesus. We try to go overboard for birthdays but for His birth it's not about you. If we teach them that day is not about you then when you don't get your way you're not bent out of shape because guess what? It's not about you.

Ron: Yes.

Candice: I need to get there. I need to--

Shannon: Girl, bless your heart. [Laughter]

Candice: I need to get there because the pressure has always been and this pressure comes from Candice, myself, I do it. I pile pressure on myself and my husband, our parents on making sure all four children feel the same.

Ron: The same.

Candice: Equal across the line where I mean first Christmas I remember counting gifts.

Kim: I can second that. [Laughter]

Candice: Good, good, good. I'm glad I'm not alone.

Kim: I lay them out on the floor and I'm counting them out.

Candice: Oh good.

Ron: It's unanimous at the table.

Candice: Okay good, I'm not alone.

Ron: What was that about for you, counting gifts. What was the need in you?

Candice: I didn't want anyone to feel "step" you know what I'm saying? I didn't want them to feel any indifference. This is my new family, these are my new grandparents, this is my new mom, this is my new dad—or stepmom, my new stepdad. I didn't want them to feel like, I didn't want them even to pay attention to that or feel that. That was pressure that I put on myself because if you notice, kids will open one gift and they're like done for a while.

Ron: Yes.

Candice: You're shoving more towards them but they're not even paying attention to that.

Jeff: Ron, I was thinking and I hope this is a I don't think it really was in our home but holidays are not a competition but let's say the other home they go big or go home.

Ron: Yes, they almost make it a competition.

Jeff: Yes, the kids come over after they've already been there and you're more responsible and maybe a little bit—you want to teach more of the value of what

Christmas is about, like Laura is talking about. They're talking about how they got—you know they made the big haul.

I think sometimes you can feel empty, like you didn't measure up to what they're getting over there and that's not a good thought to have.

You need to come up with and be satisfied and content with that you're doing in your home and be happy with that because they will sense that. If you teach them the right thing about Christmas and what it really is that's there's no value to that. It's a lot more than anything they would get gift-wise.

Ron: Yes.

Jeff: But I think as Candice is talking of that pressure because you don't want a child to think, oh he's only gotten—you know our kids have counted presents. "He got ten over there and we only got four."

Ron: Right.

Jeff: They don't know that four cost as much or more than those ten.

Ron: Yes.

Candice: Right.

Jeff: So I think we really lose focus on what it's all about. It's easy to do. So it's not a competition.

Ron: I think this is so catchy because controlling the environment is really about, as Candice well said, controlling the heart of a child. You want them to feel welcomed and a part and nobody's "step" but everybody belongs. So you try to control the climate and the environment such that they will feel that.

Well when there's other homes and other parents and other players in the game you don't get to control all those things so you can drive yourself a little bit crazy if you think that all the externals are going to dictate the internal of the child. Keeping the reason for the season—

Kim: Yes.

Ron: --at the forefront. Staying focused on that. You heard Laura say it, "Focus on what's important, lower your expectations about some other things. And being that example of Christ to them." You can be loving like it doesn't take any gift for you to show a child they're valuable.

If ultimately that's what you're trying to show them you can show them just by your time and your energy and your excitement. Yes, they may have questions. I've got a stepbrother who got five gifts and I got two. Well they went to another home but you didn't and that's the way it works, and we understand that he has another home.

By the way, I've heard that so many times through the years, kids going, "I want another home so I can get more gifts."

Candice: That was me growing up.

Ron: That was you?

Candice: That was me growing up. I remember telling my parents my older brother came home with this video console and these shoes and all this stuff and I'm younger. I'd tell my mom, I'd say, "I want a stepdad." [Laughter] She was like, "It's not how it works, Darling."

Ron: What do you do as a parent in that moment?

Shannon: You explain the truth of the reality. The reality is that other home isn't paying child support. How about that. But no you just explain the truth, the reality of what's going on. At least for me it's another opportunity for me to redirect them to Christ. Remember it's not about you.

Ron: Yes, that's good. I do think the question imbedded in that comment, "Hey they got five and I only got two," is "am I as valuable?" You can always speak to that.

Shannon: Right.

Kim: You know, Ron, I think for me it wasn't so much about giving the value of the gifts but my son's dad did not stay in his life during those growing years and he did watch his stepsiblings go back and forth. It wasn't about the number of gifts or the quality of the gifts, but it was about "were they more valued" because they had all of these individuals giving them time. I was burdened in my heart about him, he was just in our home. He didn't have another home to go to and that's -- I felt that burden for him.

Ron: You do the best you can and you explain and you show them their value and then I think you keep moving on.

Okay let's go to the next clip. It's Brian and Diane Fromme. I interviewed them in podcast 17, called Grief and the Blended Family.

[Beginning of clip]

Brian: Well what I've learned about navigating the holidays is to include the entire family. I think some of the biggest holidays, Christmas for example, it's a family holiday, right. It's not just your immediate family it spreads across to grandparents and uncles and aunts so it takes energy for the natural parent and the stepparent to realize that and to bring them in in some form, so that's one piece that I grew into and learned over the years.

Diane: What I learned about navigating the holidays over the years is that you have to be very clever about blending traditions. You need to observe what's important and ask what's important.

We had two females in the family that both wanted the choice of which live tree we bring home from the mountains or the lot. That was a very powerful conflict. It was two people desperately wanting control, two people who had lost control in their lives so now the tree becomes the symbol of all that control.

Eventually we got to the point where we'd split the family into teams and one team would go out and pick three trees and the second team would come pick the final of those three trees. So everybody won.

[End of clip]

Shannon: That was smart.

Ron: What was smart about it?

Shannon: Everyone feels like they have a choice and a say and I like what Brian said, he talked about including everyone. I think sometimes in a stepfamily, particularly if your children are a little older, because you can include because you're the adult in the situation and you may have custody agreements so you can include all of the children when they're younger at certain points but as they grow and get over that threshold that age, you can only invite.

You may want to include them but some hearts are still hardened. Some are still believing one side of the story and you can only invite. It's hard when they may not accept that invitation.

Ron: That could be true for extended family like Brian was saying. Welcome everybody. I think is really what he was saying. Welcome everybody even if to you they're not family they are part of the expanded stepfamily system. Invite them in, but again everybody will make their own choice in their own time. That's hard when your dream and heart is for togetherness among all. You do have to grieve that in the moment. I think, yes?

Kim: Yes. My oldest stepdaughter, his oldest child, she didn't engage in a lot of the activities we had because all of the children were younger than her. She would go to the movies with us or she might go out and look at Christmas lights but it would be short lived. Today the relationship looks different. It's a good relationship. It's just different than it is with the other children and that's okay because that's her comfort zone and she still engages with us and that's what's most important.

Candice: That was a good word, different. We, as blended families, have to learn that there is no really right or wrong way to do the holidays, it's really your way. What works for your family, what works for that child relationship, what works just for you guys. So I like that word, different.

Ron: Let's listen to another clip.

[Beginning of clip]

Judi: Our first Christmas was a disaster because we had never discussed our expectations or really how our customs might fit together.

As a result of those unspoken expectations we were both assuming things would happen the way we'd hoped for and it didn't. It created some really hurt feelings so I think it's really important to talk about how you celebrate Thanksgiving, how your family celebrates Christmas? What are meaningful things for you? What do you like to do? What do your kids like to do?

Have a conversation because you want to honor each family that's coming together but you also want to develop some new traditions together. As you develop more of those traditions together with holidays that will be helpful in actually blending your family and making things memorable for everyone.

[End of clip]

Ron: That was Judi Parziale. She and her husband Jeff were our guests on Episode 20, talking about couples who are about to blend.

I heard different parts there guys. React to this. I heard her say it was a disaster. So we learned we had to talk, we had to try to plan, we had to honor traditions, and we had to find new ones.

Candice: Key word "expectations." That conversation is very important, blended family period but especially around the holidays. It's not the time to be, "Oh I'm fine with whatever you decide," because then you find out, "Oh I'm not fine with everything that you decided."

Then it can be a disastrous holiday so yes, I think the expectations and that discussion and pretty much laying out this is something we've done that I really can't let go. This is something that I've done that we really can't let go.

Do we decide not which one is more important but which one do we want to make our new tradition or how can we change that or what works for our household?

Jeff: Sometimes when we put together something or say I have a conference, what do you do afterwards? We sit and we evaluate what worked and what didn't? It may be a good idea that you have a team family meeting, including the kids and all and ask what worked with this holiday. What did you like about it? What could we have done differently?

Get their input instead of coming up or assuming what didn't work but get everybody's input so next year you can plan differently and maybe do something different.

Kim: A holiday travel log.

Ron: How does that work?

Kim: I think it's just what Jeff said, sit around the table and talk about what did Christmas or what did Thanksgiving, birthdays look like to you before we came together? What did that look like for the parents in the home when they were growing up? Then talk about what do we want now? What is important do you want to bring into this new family that you had in your previous family? What things do we want to merge together and create as our own new tradition?

Jeff: That travel log is one of our most successful things. It really wasn't about the holidays it was about learning about each other. We sat around the table and did it. At first our kids were like, "Ugh, what's this?!" But when we did it, man talk about opening up and finding out things about that they didn't know about us. It was pretty cool.

Shannon: That's good.

Ron: That is good.

Shannon: I don't think couples in blended families realize that this is the point of contention for couples in a first marriage.

So my husband and I are first marriage blended family, so because we are both from central Arkansas and our families are still here we don't necessarily have to fight about, "Okay, where are we going to go for the holidays? Are we going to go to your mom's?" We can do both, that's the beauty of living so close to family but we also didn't have those really good conversations about, "Hey did you talk to his mom? Hey, did you talk to her mom?"

As the stepmom and the potential smart stepmom I try to be, I always try to initiate those conversations but you have to realize that you married someone who may be a planner, who may not be a planner and guess who's the planner and guess who's not the planner in my situation.

So a lot of times conversations didn't get done like I wanted and that's where the stepping back and allowing whatever chaos to transpire transpires so that this heart lesson could be learned by my --

Ron: Loving husband.

Shannon: -- loving husband.

[Laughter]

Kim: You know Shannon, I think that's a really good point. We really need to look at the marital relationship when this issue comes to the forefront, not just in the parenting side because when Jeff and I got married, I didn't realize he had a romantic idea. Every year he would go out at midnight—correct me if I'm wrong---midnight and the night before and buy stocking stuffers. That was his thing for the family.

Well I'm the planner, so what did I do? I had them all bought before Christmas Eve hit. [Others on the panel sympathizing] So I stole one of his romantic plans and I don't know if he grieved that but I grieved that for him when I found out that I'd stole his thunder.

Jeff: That's when the best deals are, Christmas Eve. [Laughter]

Candice: That is true. That is true. I really even going back to the comment that I just made about how we had the discussion and thinking about your travel log that will be implemented in our household going forward but that discussion that we had was about us. It wasn't about our children, we didn't even think of -- I didn't even think of that until right now. Now that I'm thinking, when you were speaking, I'm like, "Is it too late?" And no I think that's something you can continue to do every holiday.

Ron: Yes. Yes.

Candice: Every birthday. So yes, that will be happening in the Colclough household.

Ron: You can read about the travel log in my book *The Smart Stepmom*. By the way the bigger narrative there is that as a family as you continue to dialog about the past and the present and what worked and what didn't work and how we're going to move forward you are taking further steps in defining how you're going to be family with one another. This is part of the process of becoming family. The travel log is not just about information it's about that bigger story of *us* figuring out *us*.

Let's listen to another clip.

[Beginning of clip]

Ryan: So for me holidays in stepfamilies are when cultures collide. You have two likely distinct cultures and traditions coming together for moments that are really deeply rooted and nostalgic and those two cultures and traditions are vying for equal time. If for the kids, if they're like me they don't really have the emotional maturity to know when to minimize their own upbringing to celebrate a stepsibling's upbringing or when to own their own traditions so that they can feel valued and understood.

I really struggled with adopting everything; from the food being served, to how we spent our time, the songs we sang, the church service we went to all of it was different or didn't go to depending on whose year it was.

Frankly entering adulthood I was excited to embrace a singular tradition--my own. My family, we're going to create our own cultures and traditions and it's all going to be about this and all that went away whenever I got married obviously because now I'm bringing in all of those traditions and whatever was nostalgic to my wife.

So I've had to really become flexible, if anything I think being in a stepfamily has helped me be more flexible and adaptable to different people's upbringings.

[End of clip]

Ron: So that was Ryan Guinee from a podcast episode that will be coming in 2020. Ryan was referencing there his childhood growing up and all the things he had to change and adapt as the family. Notice from a kid's point of view he said the cultures "collided" at the holidays. I think it's really good that we jump in the kids' shoes for a minute. That are your thoughts and reactions to that?

Shannon: I can definitely relate to that. I didn't just marry into a blended family. I came from a blended family.

I can remember going to my father's side of the family. I shared this with my stepmom maybe two or three years ago, this was her first time hearing it, but I always told her I never felt a part. I always felt like I didn't belong. That side of my family didn't know that. They did not know that. But I always felt like the illegitimate child. I always felt like I didn't belong.

There was nothing different about the cultures, it was the same types of food and that sort of thing, but even as a stepparent, I realized that I can't protect my stepchildren from the blended-ness of our family. There is difference, of course we want to love the same and we want to treat them the same, but I can't protect them from that feeling

because I had the feeling and I know people around me didn't even realize there was a difference.

Ron: That is a hard truth.

Shannon: Yes.

Ron: But I think it's an honest truth. So if we can't protect them from feeling that is there a way to comfort them within it?

Shannon: I think so. For me I always try to put myself in their shoes because I was in their shoes. We're all different of course so how I would respond to a situation that I see my stepchildren in they may not respond that way but because I've been in their shoes, I always try to anticipate the possible emotions.

So if my husband says, "A" and I know my/our children together know what that means I would circle back and say, "Hey you may want to have a conversation with him. He may not really know what you're meaning behind that. You may need to talk about that a little further.

Ron: That's kind of insider language.

Shannon: Yes.

Ron: And we need to bring him in.

Shannon: Yes.

Ron: To what that means so he doesn't feel separate and apart.

Shannon: Right.

Ron: Yes, good. Any other thoughts about comforting kids within the collision of cultures?

Kim: I was thinking about Thanksgiving a couple of years ago. We had one child left in the house at that time. She was going to be at several houses for Thanksgiving, what does that mean, turkey, ham, turkey, ham. So we got creative and made her favorite meal, we made egg rolls and fried rice. That was our Thanksgiving meal at our house that year to give her comfort because the rest of the family wasn't there.

Jeff: She commented, said it was one of the best meals she'd ever had for Thanksgiving.

Kim: Oh good.

Ron: Wow.

Kim: We created a memory. We took pictures.

Ron: Yes, and you put her and her need in the center and everybody kind of gathered around that. From time to time you can do that, you can't do it all the time but when you can it's helpful.

Jeff: You know when you have a child that's one household that is religious and then you have another household that's not. It can be very challenging going back and forth because you know like in our home church and all of that is going to be very important around the holidays and in the other home there's not an emphasis on that.

I also came from a blended upbringing where my mother was all about church and then when I went to my father's there was none of that. So, it can be confusing for a child because they're like, "How come you don't go? How come you don't have that same belief system? How come it's not important to you?" It's, like I said, it's an opportunity to teach your children and say -- hope one day they do.

Kim: Pray for them.

Jeff: Pray for them. But not hold it against them.

Candice: Yes, one thing that I hear is confusion. When you say, "Let's get in their shoes." I'm like, "No." Because that's where a lot of my pressure comes from, as a mom, as a stepmom is the heart of those children and if that's where my pressure comes from and that's what I'm thinking the best thing that I can do is communicate with them and explain to them how things are, why things are this way. How we can help these ways.

Explain to us how we can help you because one thing that we've learned by trial and error is that our children were very young when we got married but we underestimated how much they were feeling and understanding as young children in a blended family.

So we have to continue to have those conversations of this is how our family is and not undermine this you're a blended family but this is your special family and we even explained to the older kids you just have more parents loving you.

We try not to separate that from our nuclear children, there's two of them, but we do want those older kids to understand that. You have a bigger support system. You have a lot more people who are loving you and being there for you but we're raising you differently and sometimes that's hard for you. So we try to help them hone in who God has made them and the positive things that we know don't need to change from household to household and we communicate that with the other bio parents as well.

Kim: Candice, do you see times where they come home and they shift from that other home okay and then other times where who is this kid? What happened? Maybe nothing happened it's just having to do that transition time, especially at the holidays where they're not going to school in a regular routine.

I had to step out of my shoes and into my stepdaughter's shoes when she was young because we had a very close relationship and then there'd be times when she'd be so distant and nothing happened. I didn't understand why until I started stepping in her shoes and seeing what it was she was dealing with going back and forth.

Candice: The stepping in that shoes just recently started to happen for me probably within the month. Being here helps me because I go and talk to Shannon, I'm like, "These are my feelings, this is why I'm feeling this way. What do you have to say?"

[Laughter]

And she's like, "Read this chapter," so that does help me a lot because that is where I'm struggling in right now is getting into those shoes and understanding why the feelings change or that transformation is happening.

Kim: I noticed that I was focused on my feelings and how frustrated I was and confused I was about it when I thought, "Well how confused must she be?"

Candice: Yes.

Shannon: Yes to give grace space.

Kim: That's good, grace space I like that.

Ron: It's good.

You've been listening to my conversation with Jeff and Kim Roberson, Shannon Simmons and Candice Colclough.

I'm Ron Deal and this is FamilyLife Blended.

You'll hear us discuss one more clip in a minute but before that I'm just wondering if a friend sent you this podcast or maybe you saw it on social media. Well if they did you can subscribe for free and not miss any of our podcasts. Just go to Apple podcast, Stitcher, or wherever you listen to your podcasts and search FamilyLife Blended with Ron Deal.

You know after we turned off the mics Jeff Roberson made one more comment, he said, you know one big lesson that he learned about managing the holidays in his blended

family was to be content with what you get. Now that sounds good on the surface but man is contentment tough. Finding contentment is always difficult I think.

But to be okay with what you're able to orchestrate for your family is important because your attitude sends messages to your kids. Discontent, for example, puts pressure on people and all of a sudden it's not the holidays. It's take-care-of-dad-or-mom day, that's not a holiday, it's work.

Now I didn't say, I want to be clear, I did not say that this means you're going to be happy with everything going on with your family and all of your circumstances. I just said find a way to be okay with them. Focus on what's going well for your family so you can enjoy that. You can keep working on what you don't have over time yes. Absolutely keep hoping and keep working on that. But for now you're in the middle of a holiday try to relax into it, it helps others do the same.

If you'd like more information about our guests you can find it in the show notes. Or you can check it out online at the FamilyLife Blended podcast page. That's at FamilyLife.com/podcasts.

We want you to know your feedback means a lot to us. It means a lot to me personally. One person wrote to us recently and said, "This podcast has been a major blessing. As a stepmom to three kids under the age of ten," wow, that's a lot, "trying to navigate something I never imagined I'd be a part of this resource is invaluable and gives me hope." Well we're glad to hear that.

Sharing help and hope is what we're all about here at FamilyLife. We'd love to hear from you. If you don't mind, take a minute and give us a rating, or a review right now. You can do that. It encourages us. But more importantly it helps others find the podcast. More positive reviews means better placement on Apple podcast. You can make a difference for someone just by sharing a positive review.

Remember to look in the show notes for links to additional resources like the article *Thirteen Ideas to Manage Holiday Step Stress*. You can also learn about other podcasts on the FamilyLife Podcast Network. *FamilyLife Blended* if you're not familiar with us, we're the leading resource ministry for stepfamilies around the world. Please visit us online at FamilyLife.com/Blended.

We have all kinds of free content for you as well as books and video resources. And you can search our map and find ministries and conference events in your area. Speaking of your area, I told you earlier about the Blended and Blessed Live Stream event April 25th, 2020. I know it's coming to your area because it's a livestream. If you have an internet connection you can be a part of this one-of-a-kind event designed just for blended family couples.

Our theme is Now You're Speaking My Language. Dr. Gary Chapman will be speaking with me and others. We'll be expanding on some of the themes of Dr. Chapman's and my new book called, *Building Love Together in Blended Families* that comes out in February of 2020. Learn all about this at BlendedandBlessed.com.

Now before we're done here's one more clip. It's a thought from David Boden. He's a podcast guest coming in 2020.

[Beginning of clip]

David: Yes, holidays in a stepfamily for me have been about control but hopefully gracious control where we from an early time and I'm talking about after I was married, so after I was married, I realized that I wanted to set a precedent, my wife and I wanted to set a precedent for what we wanted our holidays to look like then we just stuck to our guns.

We would spend Christmas with everybody, but in their own slots and we wouldn't allow those slots to blend over into other slots so we were like we're here with my dad and my stepmom on Christmas Eve morning, and we'd do that all day pretty much. But then Christmas morning is me and my family and just me and my wife, now we have a son we're bringing him into that.

So we basically scheduled around all our different family groups because having a stepfamily is also like having in-laws in a sense when it comes to holidays so you have to adapt regardless so the thing that's been most healthy for us when it comes to the holidays and stepfamily have been setting a precedent that is healthy for you and your nuclear family. We've just noticed that all the different family groups that we have to get to in holidays they just get used to it. So set a precedent and stick to you.

[End of clip]

Ron: Now let me give you guys a little context and then you can react to what he said. David grew up in a blended family, complex, had really hard feelings about what was happening in his world and in his life. Part of what he's saying there in an outgrowth of his childhood. Like it was chaos, I'm not doing that so we're going to take this approach.

By the way, that cuts two ways. I think we all do learn hard lessons from our childhood no matter what that story is. And we learn what we don't want to repeat when we get married and have our own families. Sometimes though we do the polar opposite even if it's unhealthy. You know it may have been unhealthy their way and it's unhealthy your way. Like two extremes are not balanced either way.

So it's good to reflect on what is leading us to make the decisions we're making. It's good to be aware. It's also good to say is this balanced? So for him what he wanted to do is he wanted to have slots, compartmentalize those relationships and part of that's

his story. Biological parents couldn't be in the same room together at that season of his life that changed eventually, you'll have to listen to the episode to understand why but at that point when he started his family he needed the two parents to never meet. Right.

So slots was functional, it worked. Now with all of that what are your thoughts based upon what you heard David say?

Candice: We have spent a couple of our holidays what I call "on tour" and it is so overwhelming and probably two years ago our oldest two told us, "We have not even gotten to play with our toys." And I thought back, "Well yes you did you were at your grandma's house and we played--" "Well yes, but that was only for like an hour." "What about when you were at N--" "Nope, just another hour." I was like the kids are in the car the whole day.

Ron: We've been on tour.

Candice: We'd been on tour. We were just stopping by, giving our smiling faces, spending time, eating the food, just enjoying the time but we're not being able to spend time just as our family so that has not worked for us I will say #fail. For sure. We are doing our thing.

Ron: You're learning what your thing is.

Candice: Yes.

Ron: And how to orchestrate it.

Candice: Correct.

Ron: That's the takeaway. And then making sure the pressure that Candice puts on herself is that nobody feels left out. The parents because Shannon, you said earlier all your family is here and so that makes it easier on you guys. I feel like it makes it more overwhelming for us because we can touch everybody then we feel like we need to touch everybody. So we're still under construction. [Laughter]

Kim: I was thinking that same thing. As we were testing the waters to figure out what'll the holidays look like for us, I tried to reinvent that big gathering I was used to doing and I brought in all of these family members together and we realized after time together they were all kind of segregating to their own little worlds inside that one roof. That was the last time we did that.

The next year to avoid even having discussions about that we packed all the kids up and we went to Branson and we spent time at Silver Dollar City and shopped and just enjoyed our own nuclear family in our own roof.

Jeff: I'd like to bring another little aspect, we're also grandparents. We have grandkids so if we're not careful we can put pressure on our kids at the holidays, "Well why are you going to that parent? What about us? We want to see our grandkids."

So that puts undue pressure on them to try to do the tour.

So we encourage our kids, you do your family how you want to do your family. When we get to see our kids and be a part we're going to be okay with whatever that is, we just want to see you.

But we can out of selfishness in missing grandkids can say, "No you need to come see us? Why are you making the trip down there?"

Ron: Grandparents can be selfish, really?

Jeff: Yes.

Ron: Huh. [Laughter] Interesting.

Kim: Yes, I think the flexibility has to continue on just because our kids are no longer in our house doesn't mean that that flexibility ends. Now you do have that next season of life that you become grandparents and you have to continue that flexibility. So our kids are around the country. We buy a plane ticket, it may not be on Christmas day or Christmas Eve it may be a week later but we still try to spend time together just at their schedule.

Ron: Let me just add for those that are listening, feel free to share this podcast with that grandparent in your life. That grandparent just heard me say that I gave them permission to give it to you. So you heard it and take that to heart. That's one of the ways you can really be a blessing to your adult kids' blended family.

You know, your feedback means a lot to us. A few months ago someone with the user name, secondrodeo said, "This podcast was just what I needed. I don't know why the episode stopped very sad."

Well, I'm a little glad that you feel that way and I'm a little sorry that you feel that way. Guess what? They're going to stop again. This is the last podcast for the fall of 2019. We take a little break from time to time but we'll be back. We've already started working on our podcast for 2020 so don't worry. Stay tuned. We'll have more.

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

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