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Episode 37: Co-Parents, Teachers, and Your Child's Education

Guests: Gayla Grace, Allison Weather, Steven Helmick, and Nan Deal

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Steven: If you have a seat at the table with this child, you *all* love the kid. You might not agree on what's *best* for the kid, but everyone loves that kid. I think that if we can all realize that, then we say, "Okay, let's put our differences as adults aside and truly say, 'In this situation, in this circumstance with your kid this year in first grade or fifth grade or wherever they are, what do they need in this moment?'"

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

Welcome to Episode 37, "Co-Parents, Teachers, and Your Child's Education".

I love hearing from our listeners. This feedback just came in on Instagram. She says, "I've been listening to your podcast for about a month now. I have three stepdaughters and am blessed to consider them mine. Your podcasts have helped me feel understood, give things to God in new ways, take on the heart of the Father in my thinking and continue to seek the best for these young ladies. Thanks again for the work you do. I also passed this on to a few friends, and they have been blessed."

First of all, let me say we're grateful that the podcasts are helping you, and thank you for sharing them with others so they can be encouraged as well. That's the way it works folks. It's really easy. Think of someone who could benefit from this podcast, a friend, a family member, a coworker or pastor, counselor, and share some encouragement. It's just that simple.

Pandemic circumstances vary around the world, but it's that time of year when kids are returning to school. Whatever your circumstances, if your child moves between homes, you know how important it is to coordinate with teachers, the school and your child's other home so that your child gets the most out of their school experience. Today we're going to be discussing the school-home relationship and how to make it great.

I've got a team of parents and professionals that are joining me for this podcast.

Gayla Grace is on the staff of FamilyLife Blended. She is passionate about equipping blended families as a writer and a speaker. She's the author of *Stepparenting with Grace*, a devotional for blended families, and coauthor of *Quiet Moments for the*

Stepmom's Soul. Gayla holds a master's degree in psychology and counseling. She and her husband, Randy, have been married since 1995, and have a "his, hers and ours" family. She's the mom to three and stepmom to two.

I've also got representatives from Don Roberts Elementary here in Little Rock, Arkansas. This is a National Blue Ribbon School, which if you're not familiar, is a designation from the Department of Education recognizing exemplary schools in the United States.

Allison Weatter is the school counselor at Don Roberts Elementary. She's a nationally board-certified school counselor and has 12 years' experience. She is married and has one son.

Steven Helmick is the principal of Don Roberts. Formally, he taught fourth grade and fifth grade and was awarded the Arkansas History Teacher of the Year Award and the Little Rock School District Teacher of the Year award. He's married and has four children himself.

And finally, my wife, Nan Deal, is joining me in the studio. She has a degree in early childhood education with over 20 years teaching experience. Currently, she teaches kindergarten at Don Roberts Elementary. She is the proud mom of our three boys, Braden, Connor, and Brennan.

This conversation is kid-focused and has something for everyone, parents, stepparents, teachers, administrators. Okay, let's jump in.

Okay, so we're sitting here. We're still in the middle of the pandemic as we sit here today. I've got to tell you guys something. As school administrator and teacher and school counselor, Gayla and I are confident that this statement that I'm about to make is very true. One week into the pandemic, you guys became heroes [Laughter] because parents all over the world recognized how important teachers are and schools are and everybody—the value just went up tremendously.

I hope you guys felt that. Nan, I remember some Facebook stuff came across—

Nan: Some funny stuff, yes. Like they were going to kiss our feet when we walked into the building in the fall.

Ron: Exactly. Did you guys get a raise since the pandemic started? [Laughter]

Nan: I haven't seen that.

Steven: Negative. [Laughter]

Ron: That's not happened but we all agree that it should happen. We appreciate teachers and schools and all that you guys do.

One of the unsung aspects I think—I'm married to a teacher—been married to a teacher for 34 years—I've seen this as a close observer for a long time—one of the unsung aspects of teachers and administrators, in my opinion, is how you advocate for and look out for the needs of children far beyond their educational needs. I mean that's on point. But even beyond that, you guys are looking out for them as people. Talk around that for just a minute. Kids matter to you guys, right?

Allison: Absolutely! I think, especially in an elementary setting, you spend so much time in the classroom seeing these kids grow, seeing how they react to and handle their peers, risk taking behaviors with somebody gets hurt on the playground—if they get hurt on the playground. You just—you have a front row seat to a lot of that. It's really wonderful to see.

Nan: Yes. I'm an early childhood education major so I'm with the littles and I love it. They do, after a whole year, well, after a couple of weeks, become my babies. Sometimes, inadvertently, they'll say, "Mom—oh, I mean Mrs. Deal," and you know inside I'm just going, "Yay! I'm glad I can be your momma for seven hours of the day." They do become my kids.

Ron: We don't have any teachers sitting here at the junior high or high school level, but I know it's the same with them, because we've spent a lot of time with teachers and administrators. It's on your heart and your mind. You're looking out for their well-being and it really does matter. The conversation that we're having today about the school-home relationship and how you cooperate for the well-being of kids really is a conversation for both parents and for teachers and administrators.

Gayla, I'm curious, just from a mom, stepmom standpoint, as you think about your kids through the years and the roles that schools and teachers played in your kids' lives, what benefit did it bring to them?

Gayla: First of all, I want to say thank you to administrators and teachers. After raising five kids in a stepfamily for 25 years, I know that stepfamilies complicate your lives. I know that, honestly, it makes it a little harder for you because you have to communicate to more than one home; you have to navigate complexities of co-parenting relationships that are not always friendly.

For our own family and with our kids, I've seen teachers make huge impacts during very stressful times. When, for instance in our family, my stepkids lost their mom and unexpectedly a cancer diagnosis and was very stressful. I saw teachers impact my stepkids in a way that is remarkable and made such a huge difference.

Ron: Steven, you're a principal of a large elementary school and this school-home relationship, it's important. From your standpoint, how does this impact a child's education? Like, if the level of cooperation between school and home is poor versus when it's really good, what's the difference for the child?

Steven: I like to tell people all the time, whether they come into my office for the first time and they're just meeting me or if they're coming because they're hot and frustrated, right, because of something that's happened, is I let them know first and foremost that the school can never be a battleground. The schoolhouse has to be a safe place for kids.

Ron: Yes.

They have to know that regardless of what's happening at home, whether it's great positive stuff or extreme challenging circumstances, when I step foot on that campus or in that classroom with that teacher or that counselor or whoever the staff member is that I'm interacting with or other kids that I can let go of all the worries that the adults in my life are processing, or even myself at times, and that parents play a huge role in that. They need to know that administration, we are there for them.

I think administrators, our main role is, I call it the three E's. For me it's, can we *encourage*, can we *engage* and can we *equip*?

What that looks like for parents is letting them know that—like encouraging them, “We are here for you whatever the complexity you're dealing with. You have court document papers. No worries; bring them to us. We're going to follow those with fidelity. We will make sure that everything is confidential. We will make sure that what your child needs they get. But you can't make this place a battleground. If you need to have those conversations, we can have them behind closed doors away from the kid.”

The kid can never be the tension point, and the school needs to be a safe place.

Ron: What I hear in that is, you're going for a cooperative environment where the child can really thrive. You're there for the parents. You're there for the kids, but you're inviting them to act like adults and take the battleground somewhere else.

Now, the two ladies sitting beside me, the teacher and the school counselor, what's that like for you guys when the battleground comes into your space?

Allison: Oftentimes school counselors serve as a bridge between home and school, especially with really tender situations or really complicated situations or in times of crisis. It's helpful to have a school counselor come and come alongside the teacher and the administrator *and* the family and create this very round table discussion, much like we're doing right now, serving as an advocate for the kid.

When I have conversations with families and teachers, I do my best to point the conversation back to the kids, to redirect it, to try to make it as productive and collaborative as possible and remind everybody, including myself, that, “Okay, what about Steven?” or “What about Allison?”—“What about Nan? How are they doing? Let’s talk about them. Let’s figure out how we can *all* come together for them.”

Nan: For me, when I see the child and I see the complexity of what’s going on in their life, I want to give them a safe place to either bridge that gap. For instance, it’s Christmas time and we’re making something for mom. Well, we’re going to make something for one home and we’re going to make something for the other. I would never want to make a child choose where that present is going to go. I’ve got to be thinking of those ways of how I serve both homes.

But it’s so comforting to know, especially at my school, that I do have an Allison I can go to and Mr. Helmick that I can go to, that they have my back. Because sometimes it’s amicable and sometimes it’s not. Sometimes the communication is great! This is mom’s week. This is dad’s week. It’s cut clear and dry.

Sometimes the waters are so muddy that I’m scrambling to try to figure out how to communicate best. But my job in the classroom is that child and how can I make it easier for them while they’re in my classroom.

Steven: I appreciate what you were saying of just the sometimes it’s cut and dry and other times it’s not.

I would say from an administrative standpoint, it *behooves* all of us as adults to be as transparent as possible, as willing as we are to share our real story that we’re dealing with as our family. Because at that point, all of us at the table that are trying to do what we can for kids can truly come together and figure out what is the game plan, what’s that going to look like? Because every kid’s story, every family’s story is different.

Every single year, just because you’ve dealt with a situation before, the next year you might have what you *feel* like is something similar and it’s *completely* different. I think that the sooner any staff in the building know as much as the family feels comfortable sharing, that’s going to help us love those kids well. It’s going to help us know how to effectively make two gifts or to make sure that kids don’t have to remember which house they’re going to. That can be a way that the teacher can support in that process.

Ron: Okay, we’ve already gotten practical real fast here. We’re going to come back to the making two gifts idea, communicating with the teachers well—what Steven was saying.

Allison, you said, round table discussion like we’re having right here on this podcast. That’s exactly our goal for the listener right now is that we want to represent both the home, parents and stepparents, and teachers and administrators so that it’s a two-way

street, right? Both sides have to come to the table. We hope we're representing that well in the conversation today.

Now, Gayla, I want to get your input on what we've heard so far. But I'm also wondering just as a parent, stepparent through the years, as your kids were going to school, what were you and Randy wondering about every year? What were the things that you were mindful of as you were sending your kids off to school?

Gayla: For me as a stepmom, I was mindful of I probably wouldn't receive anything on Mother's Day or at Christmas. We've been raising kids for a while so not everybody has been as open minded about the recognition that kids oftentimes are living in more than one home.

Ron: Right.

Gayla: For me, I had to learn how to not take things personally if I didn't get something on those special days. I'm thankful that that has changed but still not every teacher recognizes that. I think parents do have to realize we're still trying to benefit the child in the best way we can and a stepmom doesn't need to make a big deal out of it if it doesn't happen.

Nan: That's the point I was going to make earlier. I don't live in that land so I have had to learn by making mistakes, asking parents, asking the bio dad and the bio mom but also just asking my students. Because I've even had them say, "Mrs. Deal, can I make another one?"

"Sure."

And like with conferences, I've had some parents that amicably want to both be in there together, and then some are like, "Can we have a separate one?" I've had to make those arrangements. I think if you don't live in that land, then you definitely need to step out and learn.

Ron: This reminds me of a comment. In preparation for this podcast recording, we asked our Facebook audience, "What are some of the things you've faced as it relates to school and your children?"

One woman wrote in and said, "Hey, teachers need to accept the fact that there's tons of blended families in the world and they need to get on board with this reality." That was one thing I just heard from Gayla.

Then also, Nan, what you were saying, that if you don't know ask our children. I thought, "Okay, there's just some real good life wisdom there."

Ask the kids. It really is okay to come to them and approach them and say, “Tell me what this is like for you.” Kids will tell you where they’re going to be on what day and whether they can take that homework with them or not or—they have a sense of this so feel free to empower the child to have a voice.

Okay, so now what I want us to do is I just want to walk through some very practical elements of this school-home relationship and cooperation, working towards cooperative environment. Let’s just walk through some practical things and then get you guys to comment on them.

I want to start with some of the legal parameters. Allison, you actually did some homework for me. I appreciate you doing that. The questions arise, can teachers talk to parents in both homes, to stepparents in both homes? What does the Department of Education have to say about that?

Allison: They have cut out all of that very cut and dry for us and it’s very helpful to know that. Any parent who is spending time with a child in the home, so step, bio, is classified as a parent in the law. So as educators, we can disclose *critical information* to those parents. That falls under my counseling ethical standards as well. It can get a little tricky because critical information is not—

Ron: Yes, what’s the definition of that?

Allison: —clearly defined. Also in my role we want to balance confidentiality with the student with family rights. FERPA, The Family Education Act, defines all of that and parents, bio, step, all have rights to access their children’s educational records.

Ron: The stipulation there is—you educated me on this and it was so good to learn—the stipulation from the Department of Education’s standpoint is, does the child spend any time living in a home with that adult, parent, stepparent, what have you, guardian, whatever that is? If the child does, then they are defined as a parent and they have the right to the educational information of the child.

Allison: Sure, so that can be a maternal grandmother.

Ron: That’s right. It could be a number of people who have any sort of parenting responsibilities related to the child.

Allison: What complicates it a little bit more is that every school district is then going to have different ways that we flesh out parent contact. For instance, our school uses an online platform for all kinds of student contact information. If I register my son for school, I’m putting all of my information in and then I am disclosing anyone else.

I think that it would be a really great conversation to have at home and then at school with one, “Who are we going to include on our students contact information for the

school?” and two, “How can we ask the school to label that?” It is very confusing when not all families look alike.

Ron: Right.

Allison: In fact, no families look alike. When an automated electronic system says guardian one, guardian two and there are a lot of homes with one guardian or four guardians, then it complicates that. I pick up the phone to call who I think is mom and I’m talking to stepmom, or I pick up the phone and I call dad and I’m talking to stepdad or I’m talking to grandfather. I don’t know. I don’t have that information on hand.

Ron: Okay. There’s a lot of things in this. Let’s unpack this for a second. I just want to pull back before we go and make a comment about the legal parameters. Because on our Facebook page, we had one person write in. She said, “I’m a teacher and a parent and I can tell you in our district, we’re not allowed to communicate with stepparents.”

Even though Department of Education says you can, that doesn’t mean that they actually can. You might have to go an extra step to figure out how to give that permission in your particular district. There will be local statutes and guidelines that apply, and you have to be aware of that.

By the way, this could be a little confusing to anybody who’s listening who’s going, “Yes, but my kids go to a counselor,” or “We went to a counselor.” That’s a different set of rules and guidelines and ethical codes. We’re not talking about that. We’re just talking about Department of Education as it relates to schools and teachers.

Whew! All of that to say, wow! The thought that came to me, Allison, as you were talking was, “Okay, a parent puts one thing down on the form that they give to the school or in the app that they’ve logged into and given permissions, you still might need to communicate a second, third way, like a verbal conversation with the teacher, to really flush this out, to really help them understand who’s involved here.” That would be an important piece.

Gayla, I’m wondering about this because one of the things we heard from our Facebook audience was parents should be willing, in a spirit of cooperation, to put all of the adults in their child’s life whether they’re in your home or not in your home, so a mom writing down her former husband’s name and his new wife’s name, the stepmom’s name. Now you and I both know, Gayla, that sometimes that’s challenging because the co-parent relationship is tense and stressful.

Gayla: I think you can’t expect that that’s going to happen. That would be great if it did, but it’s not necessarily going to happen. The thing that I would say to teachers, administrators, counselors is, say you’ve received only the information of a primary parent, the biological parent, but if the stepmom is showing up to all of the conferences and all of the activities that the child is participating in and you never see the biological

mom, then that's a good indicator to you that the stepmom is playing a huge role in that child's life.

Even though there was no contact information given from that stepparent, I would try to find it and have communication with that stepmom and begin to understand what are the roles of who is parenting the kids in the home?

Ron: Nan, I've heard you say before, "Teachers should be proactive." Kind of like what Gayla's saying. Be proactive. Be proactive to find out this information. Ask the parents, "What's the relationship between the homes?" Why should teachers do that?

Nan: Because you're advocating for the child and the child's going in two different directions. They've got one back pack but it's going to two homes. They've got maybe one award, but they've got two homes that that's going to be split with, or parents are coming to activities and then they're in the middle of that meet and greet. It's just advocating for the child.

But as a teacher sometimes, it's very hard when the parents don't want to communicate or they don't want to communicate with one another. It's very dicey on that meet and greet night and you're not knowing what's going on in the situation. If they're not forthright with the information, then we're left either go to admin or a counselor or *ask the child* information. Sometimes I think that puts a lot of stress and pressure on the child.

Ron: Okay. Go to admin. Steven, that would be you. [Laughter]

Steven: That's right.

Ron: What happens behind the scenes when a teacher comes to you and goes, "I'm feeling a little tension between this child's homes." What are you thinking and what should they expect from the administrators?

Steven: I think that the relationship that an administrator has with their staff is crucial. Because if the teacher isn't comfortable with their administrator, why would they ever come to the administrator?

Ron: Right, right.

Steven: Like some people might not even want to walk into that door because they know that the response they're going to get is not going to be helpful. I think that teachers and any staff in the building need to know that no matter what, as long as the staff is doing what they feel is best for kids, the administration is going to have their back.

Ron: Okay.

Steven: Therefore, I think that principals should allow the teachers to be that front line, right?—Allow them to have that opportunity. They're the ones interacting with the kids and the family every single day. If administrators receive parents in their office and they find out that that parent or that stepparent or whoever it might be has never stepped foot in the classroom and talked to the teacher, that's not the administrator's battle to fight at that point.

Ron: Okay.

Steven: I feel like that the administrator needs to say, "Have you had a chance to sit down and talk with the child's teacher?" Based off of that response, lead them to an opportunity of helping them schedule something. Maybe you bring the counselor in to introduce or work through some stuff but give them that opportunity first to have that conversation.

If they're realizing at meet and greet or something else or a conference that they have that, "Man this is just not working," then administration needs to be willing to sit down with families, not to just have a phone conversation, "Hey are you willing to come into my office and chat. Your kid means the world to us." Like, "We care for your child deeply and we want what's best for them, but I'm sensing that there might be a little bit of challenge for what's going on here for all of us to be on the same team.

"So let's come into the office. Let's talk. You can tell me the complexity of some of the things you're frustrated with. We'll bring in the teacher and work through those things to figure out how we can have a win, win situation for the kids."

Ron: I love that because you're inviting them to put on a spirit of cooperation. We talk so much on this podcast about the importance of co-parent cooperation as it relates to the emotional, mental, spiritual health of a child. It's the same conversation as it relates to education. But sometimes, educators, teachers have to be proactive to get parents to the place where they're considering how they can work better together.

One of the things that occurs to me is as a therapist, sometimes I'm in this situation, I only have access to one parent, one voice, and they're telling me a whole lot of stories about the other home.

I think a trap for teachers is believing the one story. Don't you think you should be talking to the other household too, asking them, "Hey, how does this work day in and day out in your life?" If you only heard from mom, bio mom, and you haven't heard from bio dad, you probably only have part of the story.

Nan: Right. And sometimes, too, getting that information from the child, it might be a little dicey, too, from whatever is going on in whatever home. But definitely, you've got

to ask that one family, bio mom, if there's bio mom and stepdad and then stepmom and—you've got to make those conversations happen.

Sometimes you can get a lot of information from the children at the beginning of the year. They're forthright to say, "Hey, I'm at Mom's for a week and then I'm at Dad's," or "Hey, no, Mrs. Deal, that backpack goes to Dad's this weekend," and "I'm at Mom's," or "I'm at grandmothers."

But then there are some kids that are shy and timid or there's a lot of stress and strain going on and they don't want to share that information because it's hard. Sometimes then you've got to take the lead and find out what the true information is from both homes.

Allison: I think that this is where technology is really helpful for us as parents and educators because it allows for a lot of communication to happen simultaneously for teachers—I am—or counselors and administrators—I am drafting one email and I can put four parents for one kid or I can put one parent for one kid. That's no problem.

If we've got a working email system going on, there's a really wonderful way to distribute information effectively. We miss out on the personal side of it so I don't think that that's something we should do in place of.

Ron: But it's a system that allows you to communicate with some neutrality and not everybody has to be in the same room at the same time and that's really good. You just said the personal piece. I want to just come back to that for a minute. What do you guys think about the importance of establishing a personal relationship with at least one adult from each household? Seems to me you're missing something if you don't ever make that connection.

Allison: Yes, I would agree because at the elementary level it happens a lot more organically. A lot of milestones—there are a lot of milestones in every junior high, middle school, high school but that first kindergarten year—and a lot of firsts are happening. Parents are starting to understand and teachers, too, this gradual release of responsibility, so they're learning to let go a little more but they're still very much there or wanting to be there.

Kids are not embarrassed by their parents just yet, especially in the primary grades. [Laughter] So it's okay for stepmom to come have lunch and play at recess or dad to be there on field trips. There's a lot of organic opportunities that take place in the elementary level that I don't have experience with in junior high or high school. I only have my own childhood experience. My dad and my mom, no, they did not come to junior high and high school stuff outside of like sporting events.

Steven: I think it's important to realize that not everyone had a good school experience themselves. A lot of times I think that families, maybe just an individual in that family,

maybe dad was burnt by the educational system. Therefore, they're hesitant to trust a teacher. They're hesitant to trust administration because they had an awful thing happen, whatever that might be.

I think that we can't just expect all the time for them to come, to share. I think that administration, teachers, schools in general, we've got to find ways to reach people where they're at. Maybe it's the email. Maybe it's a blog. Maybe it's a podcast. Maybe it's newsletters that you're sending out. Maybe it's events where you're inviting them in but maybe it's an opportunity where you go into communities, too.

I don't know I just think that we've got to find ways to help families see that we truly do care and your story doesn't have to be your child's story.

Ron: Right.

Steven: The experiences that you had in elementary school or middle or high school don't have to dictate what your kid's experience. I think that the relational aspect of that, the relational equity that you build with those families will go a long way.

But it's not easy, right? It's super complex.

Nan: I do a thing called "Student of the Week". The poster goes home on one weekend and I had a little guy one time say, "I did this with my mom but can I do it with my dad?" How can I say no to a six-year-old little boy? So yes, here's one for mom and then the next week there went one for dad and both of them went up.

Yes, I've had parents say, "We want our conferences separately. Is that okay?" or "Can I just have this one on the phone?" Or the mystery reader coming in and its stepmom one week and then mom the next week.

I try to *make* opportunities for both homes to be able to be involved. I've even had some say, "I don't want to be on the same field trip so can we split them up?" Most certainly. Some parents like to get ahead of the game with me. I think that's my job so that I can make it amicable for everyone but more importantly for the child.

Ron: That brings up something. Let's just go there because I think sometimes that's going the second mile for a teacher to do that on behalf of a child. Not all teachers are willing to do that, to have two conferences. That's going to create a difficulty for some co-parents who just can't be at the same parent, teacher conference in that moment, or they're unwilling to send home two awards for a child to be able to take one to one house and one to another.

Nan: Yes, over the years we've lived many places and I've taught in many different states. I've taught in a lot of schools, public and private. One time I had a teacher come to me and say, "You're making the rest of us look bad." [Laughter]

I thought “No, I’m just trying to do what’s best for this child and their families.”

Ron: Yes, yes. It’s not about you.

Nan: Right.

Ron: It’s about this kid and navigating that stuff. By the way, if you’re somebody listening right now and you go, “I just don’t understand. Why is it so hard for Johnny to take the award to his mom’s and then take it over to his dad’s?” Sometimes there’s just enough war going on between the two of them that they don’t play nice.

The analogy we’ve used many times is if you’re the US and Canada, it’s all good. We love each other. We cross the border all the time. Their laws are a little different than our laws here. Their money’s a little different but we *like* each other. It’s a good working relationship.

But if you’re the US and North Korea [Laughter] or the US and Afghanistan, all of sudden, nobody is communicating well, nobody’s talking well. To cross the border is a major ordeal.

There’s fear and hostility and anxiousness involved in a child’s heart when they cross that border. Then they get accused of being traitors when they get to the other side. Then they come back to this side and they say, “How’s it going over there?” The kid doesn’t want to tell them because, “You hate them so I don’t want to tell you that I like them.” It’s just hard, right?

Steven: I think to that, I don’t want parents to hear in this, or families in general, to hear that administration should expect that everything has to just, everyone’s getting along and it’s great and we’re—but what I think is crucial is that everyone acknowledges that if you have a seat at the table with this child, you *all* love the kid, right? You might not agree on what’s *best* for the kid, but *everyone* loves that kid.

I think that if we can all realize *that*, then we say, “Okay, let’s put our differences as adults aside and truly say in this situation, in this circumstance with your kid this year in first grade or fifth grade or wherever they are, what do they need in this moment?”

The reality is maybe in kindergarten you need to have separate conferences because the families just can’t do it. But maybe by the time they get to fifth grade—

Ron: Yes, it’s changing.

Steven: —maybe it’s changing.

Allison: I think again, this is where technology is really helpful. Our school has a Google calendar that's shared among all the staff.

You know what? Both sides of the families, let's put that calendar and share it and add everything else about that child on that calendar. If we aren't at a place where we want to come to the conference together, you know what? "I see that there's one in October and I see that there's one in February, so I'll take the February one. Dad, you want to take the October one?"

You can see it there. You can color code it. [Laughter] All of the beautiful things. But then it can make talking a little—

Ron: —easier.

Allison: —easier.

Ron: Yes, that's right. If you have a hard co-parent relationship, make use of the apps and the online stuff because that really does take a lot of the—

Allison: —that emotional like response. If I see something on the Google calendar and it's changed, I can put my phone down and not react to it right away. Later, I can come back to it and I can text a solution or an idea if I'm still feeling that way. It's a little bit more solution-focused than if you catch me in person.

Steven: Yes, I think that I love that, Allison, because I think that it makes it to where we're not majoring on the minors, where we can say that this ticky-tacky stuff of figuring out the logistical stuff, it's important and it needs to happen, but if the kid is struggling to read, we both care about that and we want that fixed. We need to get that kid to a place where they can learn to love learning and they can read and do that well as an elementary student.

Who goes to the conference, who's going to relay that message and stuff like that, those are the minors, right? We've got to figure out what are the major points in this kid's educational journey that we *all* have to focus on. If there are apps or things that simplify that process, then yes, let's do that because we don't want to get stuck in the details.

Ron: Major on majors.

Steven: Yes.

Ron: Yes, that's very well said. Keeps the perspective in the right place.

Nan: Gayla, can I ask you a question from a teacher's perspective?

Gayla: Sure.

Nan: What do you want from us or from me during the school year? Can I ask a lot of questions? Sometimes I just don't know the territory because I don't live in it. I want to ask certain questions of the mom or of the dad or the stepmom or the stepdad, but I just don't really know the terrain.

Gayla: That's a great question. I think it is going to be different for different people but I think particularly if you see a child that's acting out, you're seeing some behavior, you're trying to understand what's behind that, that is a great time that really you need to be asking questions.

For me, I wasn't offended if somebody said, "Hey, how long's it been since your divorce? It seems like maybe your daughter is still struggling a little bit and the back and forth routine, could that be affecting your daughter?"

Or maybe it's a situation with a stepmom and you see when she's there that she seems really tense and you just want to say, "Hey, I'm sensing maybe there's some animosity. Is there anything that I can do to help? I notice that you're really contributing to your stepchild's stability and education, and I so appreciate that."

I think it just it's going to vary. There's not a black and white answer but I will say a couple of things that I have experienced. One was a teacher telling me, "I see the stability you're offering as a stepmom and I'm thankful for that." That goes a long ways for a stepmom or a stepdad who is insecure in their role and just trying to do the best they can and navigate it and they don't do it perfectly.

But then also, Nan, I was never offended by the questions. Some people might be if they're more private in regards to maybe questions about a divorce. But if a divorce just happened six months ago, as opposed to a divorce that happened 10 years ago, there's a whole lot of different affects that the child is experiencing. I think that's helpful for administrators and teachers to understand that.

Nan: That's so good. Thank you.

Ron: I really think you've demonstrated something really great here, Nan. That is a teacher asking a parent, "Hey, help me understand the terrain. What do I not know that I need to know to help your child this year?" I mean those kind of early conversations, or middle of the year when you figure out there's more going on than I realized, be proactive and ask those questions.

Even if you're not sure if you can ask, you can ask if you can ask which is what you just did. "Hey, Gayla, is it okay if I ask you a question?" That is a very respectful way to approach parents. Parents listening to this podcast, what I want you to hear from what just happened is take it upon yourself to coach teachers. They really do want to know.

Nan: We do. We do.

Ron: They really want to know what they can do to be helpful to your child. Help define what is helpful to your child and be proactive and let them know what that is.

Steven: I love that as well, because our educational journey, there wasn't a class for this, right?

Nan: No, no.

Steven: Most of the stuff that educators *need* to truly be solid educators, you don't learn in your four years of getting your degree, right? [Laughter]

Nan: No, it's on the frontlines.

Steven: It's on the frontlines. I think that's in most things in life. I think that, yes, we want to know. I tell my staff a lot of times, I'll tell students, "I want you to fail forward," right?

We are going to make mistakes and that's okay. If we own them, that's a good thing. It's how we learn from that. If I botch it with a parent, okay, that's going to happen. We're not going to be perfect as educators, but do we learn from that?

When we have the interaction with that mom or that stepmom and it doesn't go well, am I teachable myself to say, "Okay, am I reflective in my practice as an educator to say, why didn't that go well, and what can I do next time to ensure that the family or the next family that comes along feels more of a connection or a trust?"

Ron: Let me ask the group a follow up question because we got at least a little feedback in preparation for this podcast from somebody who made the observation, "Sometimes older teachers are a little more content-focused, especially if they've been teaching a long time and also, teachers of older children—a little more content-focused, a little less focused on children, maybe a little less flexible as it relates to working with parents."

Can that be problematic? If there's a teacher listening right now and maybe they fall into that camp, what would you want them to know?

Allison: In short, yes. [Laughter] It is problematic. I think that that's where self-awareness comes in to play for everybody at the table. If I am that teacher and I just love seventh grade English so much [Laughter] and I really love technology and I am email-based in my communicative style, I have seven periods with hundreds of kids and if I know my best communication style and if I'm aware of how I operate optimally, then I can kind of bend without totally uprooting a system that works for me.

I can ask parents, “You know what? I’m really great at email. If you want a quick response from me, I check it at the end of every class period and I will be diligent to just shoot you a response of, ‘Hey, you know what? Let’s talk about this in between classes.’”

Ron: Help give definition to how you’re going to work with parents.

Allison: Yes and be upfront with that. Then, hopefully, the parents are all self-aware also to say, “This really works for me. This is something that we are comfortable with as a blended family. These are some things that we’re absolutely not comfortable with.” You don’t have to disclose all of that all up front, but it is helpful to know that so that when the situation arises, you have a response, not ready, but that you’ve thought through.

Ron: That’s a good word.

Nan: Let me take it to a personal level, maybe, to speak to that teacher that’s set in her ways, old school, only looking at it from one perspective. That happened to us with one of our kids one year. We have our youngest who’s full blown ADHD, was busy in the womb and there it came at a certain grade and she liked little girls that sat still. [Laughter] It was the hardest year ever for our son.

Ron: Yes, yes.

Nan: I tell you what, that was hard as a mom. Then there was the year when we lost Connor and you know how hard that year was for both of our boys. The teachers that went the extra mile were endearing to me. They made it for our boys. The ones that didn’t, it was a wash.

I mean you can either make the school year or break the school year depending on what’s going on in that child’s life. The backpack that they’re wearing that’s full of all kinds of stuff. We as educators have got to look at every single child differently no matter what’s going on in the home, what’s going on in their life. Sometimes we’ve got to get outside of our comfort level to learn.

I’ve learned I’ve got to double up. I don’t have 20 kids in my classroom. I might have 26 things I have to print off because there’s multiple homes. It’s not just cut and dry anymore. I don’t know. With our experiences, I’ve just learned that I’d rather go the extra mile for a child, learn them and not just be set in my ways.

Allison: I think what you’re saying is exactly what all of us are trying to do which is leading with empathy and following it with the education.

Nan: Yes, right.

Allison: We're going to seek first to understand and ask questions but we're going to humbly lead with empathy and then pull in the education piece.

Nan: Because there's so much going on inside that building, not just getting prepared for the lessons or not just teaching those lessons, math and reading. We're teaching life skills. We're teaching social skills. There's just so much more going on.

Steven: I would say to that as well of you find elementaries are full of very similar style teachers in terms of they're an elementary teacher because they *love* that age group, right?

I think though what you'll also see is that as a kid moves in their educational journey, they're going to be interacting with teachers that love content, right? They *love* calculus. Hard to believe but they do. They love a certain content, but I think that my challenge for myself and every other educator would be is that if we forget the child and we only focus on the content, we're out of a job.

We are all there at the end of the day in the K-12 system to meet the needs of the kids that come to us. What does that look like?

I think a lot of times, too, we forget that parents are sending us their best. They're not leaving the star-studded superstar at home. Therefore, we've got to figure out how can we in all of our quirkiness and stuff too—if I'm a certain way, if I'm bent in my way of communication or the content that I deliver, that that's okay but the communication's crucial. At the end of the day, regardless, we have to be kid-centered.

Ron: Yes. Okay, I want to just take everything we've just said and turn it sideways a little bit because first of all, now you know why teachers are my heroes. I'm married to one, but I *know* how hard teachers work. I know how committed they are to making things work well for children.

Basically, you guys are saying teachers are called to go above and beyond, to go the second mile. I think that spirit of sacrifice is great. I want to talk about some things that I think teachers should be able to say "no" to that parents need to be aware is a boundary that the parents should not try to cross.

One of the things I think is dangerous for teachers is when you get triangled. That big word basically means somebody's pulling on you to make you an ally for their agenda as it relates to the other home. Teachers need to guard against that because that will really hurt your credibility with both households and both parents, the stepparents, everybody involved. I think it will really give you a lot of stress. You don't need that.

For example, teachers, if you find yourself just talking to one household, one parent for example, and you're hearing things about the other household and you find yourself getting drawn into the narrative that you've been given, it makes you one-sided.

I think you should be able to say "no" in the sense of, you take it with a grain of salt and you hear it, but you always then go to the other household and hear the story from their point of view. If you don't do that, then you're going to end up lopsided in terms of how you think about what's happening in the child's life. Anybody relate to that?

Gayla: One of the things I want to make reference to that we really haven't talked a lot about is in regards to bio dads who could be playing a very active role in the lives of their children, yet you don't see them much on the playground. You don't see them at parent-teacher conferences because of a demanding job and they're trying to keep up with child support and their own stressful situation.

I would just ask for administration and counselors and teachers to be aware of that, that you could have a dad that is trying to play a role in their child's life but you may not be seeing them. Just be aware to include them in conversation, especially if you have a difficult issue going on with a child.

Ron: Great comment. I think related to that is, if one household is saying, "You don't understand." Let's just say for example a biological dad is communicating to you as the teacher or the school administrator and saying, "You don't understand. The stepdad you know blah, blah, blah," and he gives you some information about the stepdad.

If you just get wrapped into that as if it means you should no longer communicate with the stepdad, as if you should no longer see him as an asset to the child's education, all of a sudden you've been triangled. Unbeknownst to you, you got sucked into their games.

I think teachers need to give themselves permission to just not get pulled in like that. You lose your objectivity at that point.

Nan: It's hard to do. I mean over the years I have been. I have been with just a mom and a dad in a conference saying something about the child and dad says to mom, "Hey, because you did this, this is why this is happening," and the fight is happening in the conference. I've had it happen between stepfamilies. I've got caught in the crossfire. I've got triangulated.

It's just one of those things I've learned from my mistakes and with maturity and more years under my belt of teaching and being able to have an admin that I can go to and bounce things off of and good coworkers.

But yes, you do get caught into it and sometimes you get sucked into it and before you know it there, you're going down that rabbit hole. Sometimes, they're playing you to get into it. That can be a really dicey area.

Ron: Yes.

Allison: I think that I feel that way oftentimes in my role in particular, as the school counselor serving as that bridge. Something that I have learned from experience and then also helps me is just, "Okay, how can I help with that?" It offers a very empathetic response without necessarily feeding it.

Ron: Right.

Allison: Then it also points our conversation right back to the child or the student that we're talking about.

Ron: I love that.

Something you said earlier, Steven, just came back to me. If one household is saying to you, "They can't get the kids on this date," or "They can't attend the field trip," then you can say, "Okay, I'd like to see the court documents just so we have those." Go ahead and ask for that because that's more objective than just what one person is telling you.

Steven: For sure. I think, too, we can find ourselves in the trenches all day long with kids and families, and sometimes we get stuck in the trenches. When what we really need to do is have that 30,000-foot view.

I love what Allison said of, "How can I help in that? What can I do to move forward in this situation?" Because getting stuck in the muck of conversations, like everybody's side is going to be different and the complexity of that. I think that we've got to be constantly ebbing and flowing from that 30,000 foot to ground level view. [Jet Noise]

Ron: If you ask how can I—

Steven: There it is. [Laughter] Right on cue.

Gayla: You know there's a air force base here.

Ron: If you ask, "How can I help with that?" one of the things I want to encourage teachers today to not do if the response comes back, "Could you just communicate to my ex such and such?" I think you can say—I think you should say, "No, I think that's something I'll let you do. I'll just remain the teacher. I'll let you guys do the parenting."

Don't become the go-between communication tool. They have technology. There's apps for that. By the way, if a parent does that with you, they're probably doing that with their

child, okay? That tells you something about what the child is going through on a day in and day out basis.

It's okay to say, "No, I'm not going to be your communication device." That's a no-win game because you play that out and what happens? Then you communicate to the other household and they go, "That's not right. You just tell them," and you're really stuck in the middle.

Steven: I think it goes back to we're not going to be the battleground.

Ron: There you go.

Steven: We're not going to be the battleground between the complexity of challenges that you have as adults. But if your concern is based off of your kid, we're here all day long.

I think that as administrators, and I'm learning this as a fairly new administrator, of just the importance of debunking the myth of what is an administrator? That's my responsibility. That's not the family's responsibility or the student's responsibility or the staff members

Ron: What's the myth that people believe?

Steven: That administrators are stuck in their office, doing paperwork all day long, only dealing with discipline and unwilling to truly engage and love kids where they're at. One thing that I've tried to do is—me and my administrative team, our assistant principals—we try to do a good news call of the day. That is staff, it can be anybody in the building, saying, "Hey, I saw this kid doing an amazing thing."

Then we get on a call where we call dad who can't make it up to the school and we put him on speaker phone and the little kid gets to brag on themselves, right, of what they did well. The conversation always happens this way. We'll call and they see it's the school number. [Laughter] I'll say, "Hey, this is Mr. Helmick the principal."

Ron: I know what I'd be thinking at that point. My kid's in trouble.

Steven: That's right. Their response is always "What did he do?" or "What did she do?"

I'm like, "They did something amazing! They're here and they'd love to tell you." I think that it does—it does three things. It's one of the highlights of my day. I *love* seeing families celebrate together. It has the parent be able to get a glimpse into the classroom that they rarely get and it has the kid on cloud nine because they're getting to *brag* about successes they have to their parents.

Ron: To the point of our conversation today, what it does is it helps you as an administrator have credibility with that dad should you ever need to have a conversation about, “Hey, can we talk through how we need to make this better for your child—

Steven: Absolutely.

Ron: —this between home stuff?” You’ve gained equity that’s now afforded, and teachers can do the very same thing.

Steven: Absolutely.

Nan: Most certainly.

Ron: Those little steps go a long way.

I want to say to parents listening, when you go out of your way to connect with a teacher and say, “Look, I’m here. I’m with you. Let’s work together. Here’s what I’d like for you to know as it relates to my child and them moving between their two households,” then all of a sudden, there is a positivity that makes, sometimes, little bit awkward conversations easier to have.

You’ve been listening to our conversation about the school-home relationship. I’m Ron Deal and this is *FamilyLife Blended*. We’ll hear one last thought from my guests about the benefits to children when parents and schools get this right in just a minute.

But before that, do me a quick favor right now. Think of someone you could share this podcast with. Every parent and every teacher could learn something from this conversation. Share this with one of them if you would.

At one point, my wife mentioned that we lost our son Connor. You might not be familiar with that story. He was 12 when he passed away. It’s been over 11 years now and I can tell you we miss him every single day.

Our other two boys, as Nan mentioned, eventually had to return to school after their brother died and we are so grateful for the teachers and administrators who stepped into their grief and loved on them. Honestly, we were not in a position of parenting well during those first couple of years, so it meant a lot to us. It means a lot to us that others stepped in and helped them out.

You know really every child in school has a back story to their life. There are all kinds of circumstances that put stress on a kid. Going through parental divorce or the transition to a new blended family home is among them. When school personnel, teachers or staff, when you step into those difficult spaces with kids, when you sit and listen, when you care for them, you are serving them well.

You may not see the fruit of that effort immediately but please know it matters and it helps. Please know that us parents are extremely grateful when you do.

If you'd like more information about our guests, you'll find it in our show notes or you can check it out on the *FamilyLife Blended* podcast page at FamilyLife.com/podcasts.

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You know church leaders who would like to learn more about helping others are invited to our *Summit on Stepfamily Ministry*. This is an equipping conference that is designed to help you understand more about stepfamilies and stepfamily living and how you can support families in your church or in your community. Our next event is coming up October 1 and 2, 2020. It's going to be a livestream event only so you can join from anywhere in the world. Just go to SummitonStepfamilies.com for all the information.

To wrap up my time with Gayla, Nan, Steven, and Allison, I asked one last question about the benefits to children when parents and schools get this right.

Nan: It's huge. They have a safe place to come and grow and learn and thrive and there's *trust* built. When you have that trust, then it makes my job easier, but it just makes them blossom and it's a neat thing.

Allison: We know that when the bridge from home to school is built and it's solid, academic achievement goes up. It's proven. We know that. But what is missed sometimes is we as adults model for kids how to resolve conflict in a peaceful way, how to have effective communication styles across different situations.

Ron: How to be kind.

Allison: How to be kind.

Ron: How to be decent and respectful with other people in society that we don't always see eye to eye on, on a variety of subjects.

Allison: Absolutely. Those are life skills that are being modeled moment after moment when that bridge is solid and that communication flows freely from both.

Nan: I've seen it on a kid's face when they see me interacting with their parent and there's a great relationship. They feel the love. They feel the support. I see it when they see my admin team out there on the sidewalk greeting. It's really a neat thing.

I love becoming a part of their family and they're becoming a part of my family in my classroom because it is a family. We're together a long time every day for over a lot of months. It's just a beautiful thing. It *can* be a beautiful thing for the child and for the teacher and for the family.

Steven: The last thing I'd add, Ron, is we need to realize that everybody has a different story. How we respond to our circumstances is going to be different. I have four kids myself. I guarantee you their perception of what our family is like and how that affects them in their school environment is completely different.

If you've got a kindergarten teacher that has 20 kids in her classroom and a handful of them come from blended families and they have younger or older siblings, I think it is one of the worst things that we could do to assume, "Hey, I've had your older brother," or "I had your older sister so, therefore, I know this family situation and what they need." Because older sister might have responded completely different to a situation that younger brother is dealing with, so the slate is clean.

We say that every year with all of our classrooms. Like, you need to get to know this child for this specific year.

Ron: Gayla.

Gayla: I would just echo what Nan said because I saw it in our own kids that they were allowed to develop their identity and to focus on who they were and concentrate on school work instead of tiptoeing around, "Is this going to make Dad mad? Have I said the wrong thing?"

That just is a trap for kids and life is hard for kids who go through divorce and remarriage and have stepsiblings. We need to do whatever we can to get them on a path that will allow them to succeed. You teachers and administrator's rock! That's all I can say.

Ron: Amen to that.

Next time, we'll hear from Mike and Jayna Haney about how to strengthen your marriage in a blended family and how do you deal with some of the stressors that come along the way.

Jayna: If you add anything else into that, like a lawsuit or having a difficult ex or having lots of issues with the children, you're just left with, "This is nothing like what I wanted or thought it was going to be like."

Ron: That's Mike and Jayna Haney, next time on *FamilyLife Blended*.

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

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