

FamilyLife Blended®

References to conferences, resources, or other special promotions may be obsolete.

Episode 40: Battle of the Moms

Guest: Jessica Patterson

Air Date: October 12, 2020

Jessica: If I had shared custody with my daughter and I was a fly on the wall in her other home and I watched my daughter being hugged by her stepmom or watched her stepmom braid her hair or overheard her stepmom say something negative about me or something indirect, that would be very hard to even swallow. I think a lot of biological moms probably sit at home imagining those things.

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.

And I think it's working. At least your feedback keeps telling that story. One woman recently posted this, "This podcast has been a major blessing. As a stepmom to three kids under the age of ten, trying to navigate something I never imagined I'd be part of, this resource is invaluable and gives me hope."

I'm glad that it gives you hope, and I hope that you're actually listening to this podcast because it's for stepmoms and for moms.

It's pretty easy for biological mothers and stepmoms to end up on opposite sides. It's almost as if moms and stepmoms believe there's only so much mom space to go around and they have to jockey to find their place in a child's heart. How does a mom and stepmom work together? How do they view each other in a way that is helpful to their relationship and to the child? That's the topic of this podcast, number 41, Battle of the Moms.

Jessica Patterson is my guest. She's a licensed professional counselor at New Life Counseling Center in Round Rock, Texas, which is outside Austin. She specializes in marital therapy and working with blended families. She's been a guest speaker at StepMoms ALIVE and The Smart Stepmom Retreat. She is a mom and a stepmom with a yours, mine, and ours blended family.

Here's my conversation with Jessica Patterson:

Ron: Jessica, as we're starting down this road today, would you just tell us a little bit about your family situation and the counseling work that you have, the practice that you have working with stepfamilies?

Jessica: Absolutely. I am a licensed professional counselor. I work with a lot of families, couples, with parenting issues, all kinds of anxiety issues, family conflict, and I also specialize with blended family issues. I personally come from a nuclear family growing up, but what came as a surprise to me in my life in my thirties was I entered into a blended family.

This is my second marriage and also his second marriage. I have a child out of my previous marriage. She is now five. He has a child out of his previous marriage. She's six. And now, we just had a baby together and he's four months old, so they have a little baby brother. It's really sweet. But we got married two years ago.

Ron: Okay, two years ago. You've been working with stepfamilies. Now you is one, and you're a yours, mine, and ours situation. You wrote an article for us here at FamilyLife that we entitled "Battle of the Moms in a Blended Family." By the way, listener, you can look in the show notes and see how you can read that article. Fundamentally, Jessica, what's the battle about between moms and stepmoms?

Jessica: I think they all have different stories based off of their personalities, based off of their history, based off of the pain that they've experienced in their past. I think that most of the problem that they experience is a lack of understanding of each other's side.

Ron: Okay, so they are coming at this from their own viewpoint, from their own side, and they're pretty wrapped up in that perspective. You're saying it just creates a chasm between the two?

Jessica: Right.

Ron: What does that chasm look like in real life? I mean how does that chasm show itself?

Jessica: Often I see a lot of biological and stepmoms come into my office saying the other is the high conflict one; the other is borderline narcissistic, all of these negative things they label them.

Ron: Yes, labels are great, aren't they? I mean you can just point the finger and go, "You are this, they are this and that is the problem."

Jessica: In human nature we tend to blame. It just feels good to blame. It looks like a lot of high anxiety to me, high stress, high conflict going both ways but it's—I like to say, "It's not the other person that's your problem. It's your reactivity to that person that's the problem, and it's your perception of the event."

Ron: Okay, I think you just said something really important and we're going to come back to that. It's your reactivity to the person or the situation that really is the problem.

We're going to come back to that. Before we get there, let's just unpack a little bit more in terms of the experience that each has from their point of view.

Recently I asked a few people, "What do you think's going on with moms and stepmoms when there is a battle going on between the bio mom and a stepmom?"

By the way, Jessica, I'm curious if you have had this similar experience? As a clinician myself through the years, I have found myself in a few circumstances—many of the family situations that we deal with, we're only going to deal with the biological mother who's talking about the stepmom, or sometimes we're dealing with the stepmom in a counseling session who's talking about the biological mom.

There have been a few instances where I've had access to both, working with both households, the adults in both households, and even then, just as you said, I hear each pointing the finger and saying, "They are the problem." I can hear the biological mother's version of the story and how she makes sense of things in essentially making the stepmom out to be the real source of the conflict. That's her narrative, that's her version of the story and it makes sense to her.

Then when you hear and you sit with the other person, they too have a narrative where they're making sense of the whole situation and saying it's the other person's problem.

Neither of them realizes that the other has a different point of view, that there's facts that are a little different than they understand, but at the end of the day the narrative they tell themselves, the reality that they're living out of, adds up to there's a chasm here and until we figure out how to build a bridge or change each person's perspective just enough that they realize there might be something there—I see you nodding your head. You're nodding your head. Has that been your experience as a therapist as well?

Jessica: Yes, I think that our biggest desire when we're stressed out with someone is to change that person. When we come and we vent about all the things that they're doing and we're really convinced that they're out to get us or that they really are creating the turmoil in our lives, we don't focus enough on changing our part in the pattern. We're just focused on wanting to change them, and that's exhausting. It's futile. It won't work.

Ron: Extremely futile because there's—you don't have any power in that.

Jessica: Right. You have no power at all.

Ron: Yes.

Jessica: But your perception, which you touched on, is the biggest issue that can help calm *you* down and also inform your response to the other mom. Being able to have that perception of understanding her side is what's important. Instead of just focusing on how you're seeing things, know that her experience is also completely valid.

I can understand that personally because I am a biological mom and I'm a stepmom. I have my daughter home with me full time. I'm very thankful for that. Her dad is not in the picture. But we do have 50 percent custody of my step daughter, so we deal with different coming in and out transitions. We deal with the other mom.

But I understand that as a biological mom, it was my biggest nightmare if I would have had to share custody of my daughter. I can also understand my stepdaughter's mom's plight. I understand the pain that she must experience having to share her daughter with another woman.

Ron: It sounds like what you're having to do there is force yourself into empathizing with the biological mom's point of view about you.

Jessica: Right.

Ron: Okay. Again I want to come back to that, because I know in unpacking this whole thing about perspective and what you can change and what you can't change, therein lies the hope for the battle of moms between bio moms and stepmoms. We're definitely going to spend a little time for that.

But again, I just want to flesh out what I think the common experience is, so I asked a group of people, "What do you think are the key emotions that a biological mother feels towards a stepmother?" and they said these words:

"She feels threatened," which means she's a little jealous of the stepmom and fearful of how she might move into the heart of her children or what are the implications of that for her relationship so she's a little worried along with that.

"She sometimes feels hurt that her ex-husband has married again." Sometimes there's a personal element to that that's left over from their previous marriage and so that just creates this angst about the stepmom in general. "Sometimes she feels guilt that her biological children are with somebody else and not with her and that she doesn't get as much time with them as she would like to."

Alright, let's just break that down for a minute. We're talking about biological moms. *Threatened, fearful, hurt, and guilt*—with those kind of—are those key emotions you've seen, and with that kind of stuff heavy on a biological mom's heart, where's that going to take her? What's she going to end up doing with that?

Jessica: First of all, I think a lot of biological moms that have all of those real feelings, many can't even identify them or they don't spend the time to actually identify that they're there. Instead they come out with anger, resentment, depression, anxiety. They really suffer inside because they don't know that that's what that's about and then dealing with those problems, those feelings.

Ron: It's kind of that old secondary emotion thing versus primary emotion thing that we talk about sometimes; that what she feels is anger and she doesn't realize that what's underneath it is feeling fearful and threatened.

Jessica: Yes, and I think when they can understand those feelings, they can calm down a little bit more and start to deal with that with themselves.

Ron: Let me press you on that. Somebody's kind of stuck in that place. They feel angry. Now we're suggesting that maybe there's a fear or a level of threat underneath that anger and that they really need to understand that or they're not going to be able to deal with their own anger. What would you say to that mom when she's just stuck? "I can't see that I'm feeling threatened."

Jessica: I would say you could actually honestly ask yourself, are you feeling threatened? Because I can't imagine a mom that holds their baby in their womb for nine months—plans for that baby by the way—is pregnant with them, suffers with that pregnancy, goes through delivery, raises the infant, nurtures them, and then for you to share the responsibility to raise that child with another mom.

I can imagine there's some threat in there for any mom because built in us is that desire to protect our children and to be *the* mom for our children. It's not really natural, honestly, to have another mom step in when you can't be there and instill different values and love in your child, so the threat comes from the thought that, "I'm giving you my kid and I'm risking that they may love you more than me. What if you have an attachment that even rivals my attachment with my own kid?"

Ron: "How can I trust you with how you're going to treat my child or what you're going to bring to my child's life and how you're going to influence them as people and building their character?" There's a lot to trust if someone's going to influence your child.

It's one thing to get a babysitter for three hours on a Friday night. They probably can't ruin your child unless they do something really malicious. But to entrust your child to somebody that you really don't know if you can trust them and what they're about. Yes, that's got to bring about at least some perceived level of threat.

Jessica: Right. When your kids are in a separate home with different values, different parenting techniques and you can't be there to watch it, you can't be there to—I mean I can imagine if I had shared custody with my daughter and I was a fly on the wall in her other home and I watched my daughter being hugged by her stepmom or watched her stepmom braid her hair or overheard my stepmom say something negative about me or something indirect, that would be very hard to even swallow.

I think a lot of biological moms probably sit at home imagining those things.

Ron: Maybe every once in a while, they have some indication that may have happened, and if it's happened once, it can happen again. That's when anxiety and fear kind of grows.

Yes, just to be clear to the listener right now. We're not trying to inflate your sense of threat. We're not trying to make you feel more fearful. We're just trying to unpack, yes, this is understandable why you might feel this way.

For some people, back to Jessica's point, you may not even realize that's what's going on. That's why you're irritable, angry, on edge. Maybe this is really the primary emotion that you're going to have to take a look at. We're going to come back to what you *do* about this in just a minute. Let me shift to the stepmom for a minute.

Jessica, when I asked some of these folks, "What do you think stepmoms are feeling about biological mothers?" They said "jealous," "unappreciated," and "lost."

Jealous is kind of that, "Man, I'm doing a lot. I'm cooking. I'm cleaning. I'm feeding. I'm caring for. I'm picking up. I'm dropping off. I'm doing all the things, the motherly things that moms do, but I'm not getting much credit for that."

And then *lost* is that, "I'm still trying to find my place, trying to figure out my role. When do I step in? When do I step out? There's lots of questions and ambiguity around the role, but I'm doing the best I can. Again, it doesn't feel like people appreciate all that I am doing."

Those are pretty heavy emotions for stepmoms. Is that in keeping with what you see going on in the battle of the moms?

Jessica: Absolutely. In fact, I think that's the personal battle of most stepmoms. Most stepmoms that care and really love their stepkids and want to be a motherly figure in their lives, they experience those feelings.

Ron: Yes, so stepmoms...jealous, unappreciated, lost. Bio moms feeling threatened, fearful, hurt, maybe a little guilt. The bottom line is both of those postures mean that they feel little bit like a victim to the other side. That's where that blame thing comes in. "How you're treating or what you're doing over there is making what I'm experiencing over here feel bad. I feel like a victim of this circumstance and of you."

Of course, when you get a bio mom and a stepmom who both feel that way, we've got problems, right? We really have some problems. By the way, as I was talking with our team here at FamilyLife, especially the FamilyLife Blended team, somebody said, "You know you don't have to be friends with the bio mom or the stepmom, the other, but you're not my enemy either."

That's kind of a nice perspective that maybe what people need to hear sometimes is you don't have to necessarily be best friends with the bio mom, stepmom, but to not view them as the enemy is a really good start, a posture that opens the door for us to figure out how to collaborate on behalf of these children.

Jessica: Yes, I agree with you. Absolutely, seeing them not as the enemy but being able to see that your kid is extra loved.

Ron: Yes, exactly. Okay, in your article, "Battle of the Moms," you say this—we were just talking around the emotions but here you begin to unpack it a little bit—you say:

A stepmother has a particularly difficult role in blended families, the struggle of which few can understand. She is to be nurturing and caring to children she did not birth, but is concurrently seen as an intruder who has taken over her husband's family. She's often stigmatized and portrayed to be a villain, like in the Disney movies. She's expected to mother her stepkids and love them as her own, but also to "know her place" and to not be too motherly.

What a bind—be a mom without being a mom.

Jessica: I know a lot of stepmoms struggle with this. A lot of the feelings of jealousy and threat, being lost, not knowing their role, how motherly can they be, what are their boundaries around that. Most stepmoms really care. They want what's best for their stepkids.

What gets them trapped is when they start to believe that their biological mom doesn't; that their biological mom is handling things in the ways that obviously, they wouldn't handle it. Everybody parents differently. Stepmoms tend to think biological moms are hurting their own kids and they're trying to fix things. They're trying to mend it. They're trying to patch it. But at the same time, when they try to be there, it can upset their biological mom.

Ron: Yes. Are you saying even in a situation where the biological mother is perhaps being unreliable and untrustworthy and there *is* a bit of a gap in the child's life, that the stepmom moving into that space and trying to fix all of that could still ignite more negative feelings from the bio mom?

Jessica: It could, especially if it gets back to the bio mom and she hears the stepkid reiterate something or repeat something or sees an effect on the kid. But I think the stepmom is the one that deals with most of those feelings that backfire on herself.

The anger toward bio mom is not good for them. They stew on it. They sit in it. They kind of obsess a little bit—"What is she saying to stepkid?" or "What is she saying to my husband? How is he handling it? I need to jump in and try to edit that text for him. He

needs to be more confrontational with her. He needs to be more direct”—in all of these things that stepmoms shouldn’t even worry themselves about, but it’s really hard for them to accept that.

Ron: You’re saying the narrative that they’re living in is, “This is a problem and I need to do something about it.” That just creates more angst within themselves and then drives them to do things that make things worse.

Jessica: Absolutely.

Ron: Regarding bio moms in your article you say this:

Moms don’t want to share their children with a woman that her former spouse chooses to marry. These moms don’t want to miss out on anything in their child’s day-to-day experiences, watching them grow or develop emotionally or physically. They didn’t carry a child in the womb for nine months with a desire to have another woman be the “mom.” Certainly, no mom wants to be forced to be away from her child and kept out of their lives, even for a few days or a week.

Yes! That’s that thing of, “Wait a minute! Wait a minute! This was not part of the plan. I never asked for somebody else to step into this place.”

Jessica: Yes, it’s so hard for bio moms to have to go through that. It’s a hard role for stepmoms to have to fill. But you’re not enemies. I think too often moms feel that each other are the enemy.

Ron: Okay, let’s turn the corner and let’s try to figure out what to do. If we’ve described fairly well—and by the way, to the listener, I’m well aware, I’m sure we’ve missed something in your experience. If we’ve overstated something that doesn’t quite fit you, I apologize for that. But I think in general, we’ve kind of captured what a lot of people feel. What do they do about that?

You said earlier in our conversation that it’s how I respond to what’s going on in the other home or with the other person that’s really most important. Alright, we need to unpack that a little bit. We’ve all heard the mantra, “You can’t change somebody else but you can only change yourself.” But how do you do that without giving up a part of yourself or losing the battle?

Jessica: It’s important for you to ask yourself who you want to be, what kind of mom you want to be, what kind of wife you want to be, what kind of sister / daughter that you want to be. You can decide to be *that* person regardless of the other person’s actions.

I think often people think, “If I have to change myself, that means that I have to do what they’re demanding that I do. I just have to give in. I just have to not have my own voice

and not do what I want to do in a situation, and that's okay. I'll just die to that, die to self, be a martyr."

That's losing the battle. But you're also losing the battle when you continue to try to change the other person. You're exhausting yourself. It's not going to work. If you look back at "Who I want to be," and you strive to be that despite what the other person's doing, that's the key. But you do that by calming down.

Ron: Okay, hold on, hold on. I got to stop you for a second. You got to decide who you're going to be. You've got to try to be that person *in spite* of what the other person is doing, and one of the first steps toward that is calming yourself down.

First of all, what if there is a, "But they're doing this." I can hear somebody pushing back "But Ron, the other side is doing this. They're saying that. They're—you don't understand what it is. They're putting me in a really bad place." What do I do with that reality when I'm still trying to focus on changing myself?

Jessica: You have to trust your kids, your stepkids, trust yourself. You can only control what *you* do. You can only control what *you* say to your stepkids. You're never going to have control over what the other mom does or says to your kids or your stepkids. You have to control how *you* handle yourself.

It's not going to help you to sit there and stew about it or get angry about it or *especially* retaliate; especially to say something to your kids or even type an email to the other mom to tell her what's what. You're definitely not going to get change there. In fact, it's probably going to just keep the flames going. It's going to get it worse.

But if you're able to, no matter what, be the person you want to be by, step one, calming down. In order to calm down you have to think about it. You have to think and thinking means looking at the other person's perspective, understanding what your contribution is in the situation, understanding how you can change your part in the pattern. "What's the pattern been? What can I do differently?"

Ron: All of that requires the frontal lobe of the brain, does it not?

Jessica: Yes! Because our fight or flight is deep within the brain and that's usually what we act out of whenever we're angry and we are in fight or flight mode. If you activate the frontal lobe and you start thinking—guess what—your fight or flight goes down and then you're not as stressed. You're not as upset.

Ron: Every once in a while, I run across somebody who says, "That brain science, that interpersonal neuroscience stuff, eh, that's just a bunch of malarkey." Well, no. I actually think when the New Testament talks so much about taking off the old self and putting on the new self, what He's inviting us to do on a neurological level is stop reacting out of

fight or flight. Start thinking; doing, “What would God have me to do?” “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

We have all of these scriptures that say over and over and over again essentially stop being that and start being this. Living out of righteousness and godliness, be like Christ. In order to do that on a neurological level we’ve got to calm down.

Jessica: Yes, it is absolutely biblical to *think* before we act or speak. I have some references for that.

Ron: I’d love to hear them.

Jessica: You just quoted Romans 12:2, “Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you *think*. Then you will learn to know God’s will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.” [Emphasis added]

There’s other scriptures. Proverbs 15:28, “The heart of the godly *thinks* carefully before *speaking*; the mouth of the wicked overflows with evil words.” [Emphasis added]

A biblical guideline on how to speak is Proverbs 15:1, “A gentle answer deflects anger, but harsh words make tempers flare.” I also have Proverbs 13:16, among many, many others, I’m sure, “Wise people *think* before they *act*, fools don’t—and even brag about their foolishness.” [Emphasis added]

It is literally in the Bible and amazingly in the science of our brains that it helps us to *think* first.

Ron: Calming down is really, really important. You’re absolutely right. This principle is repeated over and over and over again. We could go on and on. Colossians 3, Ephesians 4, Philippians, Chapter 4, “Whatever is good and right and noble and praiseworthy”—what do you do? —“think on these things; put them into practice,”—notice thinking precedes putting into practice; action—“and the God of peace will be with you.” [Paraphrased] Emotion is the last thing to follow.

We have to overcome our emotions of the moment, the anger, the irritation, the threat, the jealousy, the fear, whatever that is, we’ve got to shift and calm down so we can begin to say, “What would God have me to do in this situation?”

Okay, you’ve made the point, calming down. What is it that we should do? What is it that somebody should *do* if they’re feeling that level of threat or that battle between the moms?

Jessica: First of all, acknowledge that feeling and have grace for yourself and understanding for yourself—why you’re feeling that way. It’s okay to have those feelings, and it’s natural in this situation.

Ron: You don’t have to shame yourself is what you’re saying.

Jessica: Of course.

Ron: But then what do you do?

Jessica: Then you try to think about what might be going on. “What’s the bigger picture? What’s predictable here? What’s been the pattern? What did they do? What did I do? How am I responding? How might they be feeling? Where might that have come from?” When you start to jog your mind about this, you’re then finding that your reactivity goes down.

Ron: Is it because you’re beginning to empathize—like we talked about earlier—with what may be going on with the other person?

Jessica: Yes, getting a different perspective of the situation and having empathy.

Ron: Let me play this out. If a stepmom’s listening to us right now and she’s going, “Okay, for the first time I’m beginning to wonder *maybe* the reason the bio mom says those things harsh about me behind my back is because she feels threatened by me?”

Jessica: Yes.

Ron: Now what does that stepmom do with that?

Jessica: I can imagine that whenever they start to think, “Oh, it’s not about *me* as much as it’s about *her*.” Not that she’s a bad person. I think that the things that she says about you or thinks about you is *probably* offensive to you. You’re probably taking offense because of your own fear of how you come across to people or what people believe about you.

But if you’re able to look back at, “Oh, she’s probably threatened and that’s probably why she’s saying those things.” Why might she be threatened? Well, let’s count all the reasons.

Ron: Some of them have something to do with you as a stepmom and some of them don’t have something to do with you as a stepmom. But you can begin to see, “Yes, maybe she has good cause to feel threatened.”

Jessica: Yes, and I think that also you have to be responsible to her for how *you* are behaving. Are you doing something that would inflame her? Are you doing something

that's overstepping? Are you doing something intentional to hurt her or jab at her? You have to be aware of that and be responsible for yourself.

Ron: Okay, so it could be that there's some conviction that comes along with this realization, "You know what? There is something that I've been doing that I need to stop or turn down or something and that's what I can do to help, perhaps, lower her level of threat."

But let me ask you a quick question right here because I think this is where a lot of people get caught. They hear what we're talking about and they say, "Oh, so I as the stepmom, it's my job to make her feel completely okay with me, to never have any fear or worry or concern or threat as it relates to me, so I've got to work her out of that feeling."

Is that what we're saying?

Jessica: I think that what you're saying is the definition of "walking on eggshells."

Ron: Yes, it is. [Laughter] That's exactly where that would lead, yes. Are we saying that's she's got to do that? You've got to walk on eggshells, stepmom, so the bio mom will never feel threat?

Jessica: I would say that that's where you are changing yourself in a way that loses the battle. But instead, how do *you* want to behave? What kind of person do you want to be? Do you want to bring peace? Do you want to be a person that words can just roll off your back? Do you want to be the kind of person you don't take offense to everything and that you have a solid sense of yourself and your own identity and security that, "You know what, that's probably coming more from them and it's not about me. I know who I am, and I know I try my best and that's all I can do."

Ron: Let me tell you what I just heard because I think it's really profound. What I just heard you say is, "No, don't be other-defined. Don't say, 'I've got to do what the bio mom needs me to do so she won't feel threatened anymore.' Don't be other defined. Be self-defined."

Going back to the scriptures that we read, being self-defined really only has life if it's God-defined. In other words, if who I'm trying to be is who God would invite me to be in this situation, that's the person I chase—being that. It may or may not reduce all the threat in the biological mother, but I'm still living out of righteousness and doing what's right and doing what I *can* do in this circumstance.

The beautiful thing I think about that, Jessica, is you can walk with integrity if you're trying to be that person. Even if the biological mom continues, for whatever reason, doing things that are evil or malicious or whatever label we would put to them, or

unhelpful, just unhelpful, irritating for example, then you don't have to be responsible for that because you're living the God-defined life.

Jessica: Yes! I think boundaries are really important to being able to know what you're responsible for, what you're not responsible for. Good boundaries means that you stay connected as possible while being safe. It may not be safe for you to engage with the other mom, and that's okay.

I think there's a lot of freedom in being able to say, "This is as close as we can be without there being a lot of reactivity and stress and outburst or inflamed rage or whatever might happen, any kind of disaster or catastrophe. I can't be in her presence. I can't communicate with her. It helps me to allow my spouse to communicate with her because she probably gets too anxious around me and threatened around me so it may not be safe."

Ron: And just recognizing the limitations there and just knowing, "I need to try not to be around her because that's helpful for her and for us."

Jessica: I think it's very helpful for us. I think it can calm her down. Laura Petherbridge says this, and I really like her words, that "stepmoms are a constant reminder to bio moms of the loss that they've experienced."

So if your presence is a constant reminder to her and she has a hard time dealing with that and that comes out in front of the kids or that reflects back to you and stresses you out, you have to be able to put up good boundaries to protect yourself and allow yourself to have more freedom and say, "Okay, this brings me peace that I really don't have to worry about her. I really don't have to continuously stress and agonize over what she's doing or saying or how she said it or what my stepdaughter came in saying."

You get to calm down more by having that distance there and that's okay.

Ron: Why don't you take us inside your own world, your own experience. In what ways have you implemented in your own life this, "Calm down, think, figure out what it is I'm trying to do and who I'm trying to be, and then make decisions and act accordingly." Can you give us some examples?

Jessica: Yes, first of all, when I first met my husband, I intentionally invited his ex-wife to have a meeting where I talked to her—

Ron: This was back when you were dating, even before you got married?

Jessica: This was when we were dating. It was when we first met. Before being around her daughter, I wanted her to know who I was and I wanted her—I sort of came with an olive branch and wanted to let her know that I understand what this experience must be for her because I had my own daughter.

I looked at her and I said, “I know this is probably your biggest fear, the worst thing that you could imagine that you begin to share your daughter and another woman comes into her life. I’m not going to be replacing you. I’m not going to be threatening you or overstepping in any way.”

Then I think in every situation there’s plenty of room for a lot of reactivity and anger and stress in a blended family. You can definitely drive yourself crazy worrying about what your stepdaughter just said. “Where did that come from? What did she say about my husband?”

You can start to look at how your husband’s talking to her like how’s he coming across to her? “Is he being clear? What about this? Why are you going to give up our night with her? You’re going to give her over early.” You can easily start to get involved in those battles between the two of them. It’s crazy making to be caught up with that.

Personally, I experienced the beginnings of that coming up on me and I was able to—because of the work I’ve done in my practice with others and the things that I have learned about self-management and being able to calm down and think, I’ve found myself having to implement that a lot.

I know the struggle is real for stepmoms and bio moms to have that anxiety and be put in that position of, you really don’t want to think about it. You just want to react. You just want to feel it, you know? It’s easy to throw this out but it wasn’t serving me well to let myself stress about it. Being able to think, “What might this be coming from? How does it really affect me?” Decide to let go of what you can’t control.

I was able to pick my battles with her and say, “I have no control over what—how she parents my stepdaughter. I have no control over what goes on in the other home. I have no control of what she thinks or what she says. But how much of that am I going to allow in my home emotionally?”

I think that’s where we easily let other people into our families and our marriages when we allow it to get to us emotionally. The boundaries emotionally that I put up is a hedge of protection around myself and around my family that I’m no longer bringing anything up with my husband about it.

I’m not—I’m definitely not probing my stepdaughter. I would definitely encourage, do not sit there and grill your kid about what happened that weekend in the other home. I’m not worrying about how she’s being raised in the other home, even it’s different than the way I raise her. I’m responsible for my home and my family. When she’s here, she’s a part of my family and she adapts to the way our home is run and it works really well for me.

Ron: What I hear you saying is you're actively on a moment-to-moment basis saying to yourself, "What are the things that I'm in charge of here, that I have management over, and what are the things I don't?"

You're choosing not to allow those external things into your heart and mind such that it takes over who you are, such that now you're responding to that little story you've told yourself in your head as if the bio mom was right in the room with you. Now you've got to react or parent or do something with your husband because of that. What you're saying is you're just actively not allowing that to control who you are.

Jessica: Absolutely.

Ron: Is this a 24/7 thing? Do you get to make a decision one time and you're done with all of that and now you're free to just be who you want to be?

Jessica: That would be the fantasy, wouldn't it? [Laughter]

Ron: Yes, it sure would.

Jessica: We're always continuously growing and working on ourselves and the work that we do on this will never be perfected. Until we die, we will be growing as people and self-management will be something that we'll never completely achieve.

If this is a daily battle, that's okay, but you need to have the tools. I think it's easy to say "Don't let it bother you so much. Just get over it. You just have to keep doing what you want to do." You can be told all these things but it's really hard to put it into practice until you have the tools. These tools may need to be used all day, every day.

But then, eventually, it does get a little easier because once you have some boundaries set up—let me just say, for example, you teach others how to treat you. Once you start to retrain people how to treat you, that's something that can kind of stick for a while, so your stress level can be lower more often. You don't have to use these tools as often.

Ron: That would be nice. You're still going to have to use them, but you don't have to use them as often. I want to hear a little bit more about tools.

Before I do, I think I just heard something that's worth repeating. That the battle of the moms is really about a battle within myself, about allowing things that I can't control to enter in and dictate who I am as a person. I stop being God-defined and start being other-defined. Then I'm being reactive and I'm not responding the way God would want me to. That's the real battle here.

Are there any other tools we haven't talked about yet?

Jessica: I think that something that would be helpful to know is when someone is criticizing you or attacking you, how you can go about managing yourself in that.

Ron: Good question because I know that happens. What do you do?

You've been listening to my conversation with Jessica Patterson. I'm Ron Deal and this is *FamilyLife Blended*.

We'll get to Jessica's answer to that question in just a minute. But before we do that, do me a favor right now. Would you give us a review? Maybe give us a little feedback. That's very helpful to the team and it encourages other people to listen to the podcast as well.

My conversation with Jessica made me realize something. Our world expects moms and stepmoms to be against each other. The social media club of "Let's bash the mom or stepmom and commiserate together" is alive and well. It's easy to get caught up in that. But when a mom and a stepmom don't play that game, when they find a way past resentment and appreciate what each offers the children and they try to cooperate on raising the kids, people take notice and the world celebrates a small victory.

That's exactly what the wisdom of God is inviting us toward when Paul says in Romans Chapter 12, verse 2, "Do not be conformed to this world." Don't go along with the herd. There's so many social norms in our world that we've got to rise above.

By the way, later on in Chapter 12, verse 14, Paul goes on and he says, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them." "Live in harmony," verse 16, "with one another. Don't be haughty, but...give yourselves to humble tasks. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

In other words, do what you can to live at peace. The world takes note of that. More importantly, *much more importantly*, your children will take note of that and your households will live with more peace. Who doesn't want that?

If you'd like more information about my guest or her article, "Battle of the Moms in a Blended Family," you'll find it in our show notes or you can check it out on the *FamilyLife Blended* podcast page at FamilyLife.com/podcasts.

While you're there, check out everything FamilyLife has for your marriage and family. If you haven't already, you can subscribe to this podcast on Apple Podcasts, Stitcher or wherever you get your podcasts. Just search *FamilyLife Blended*.

Since we're approaching the holidays, I'll remind you, one of our most popular podcasts is podcast number 21. It's called "Stepfamilies and the Holidays." If you haven't listened to it, check it out.

We do appreciate you writing a review or sharing this podcast with a friend. Speaking of impacting others, we would love to help you help other blended families. We just completed our annual *Summit on Stepfamily Ministry* that helps churches and leaders and couples like you minister to other people. This livestream event is still available online and on demand. You can register through the end of October 2020. Just go to SummitonStepfamilies.com.

If you didn't already know, FamilyLife Blended is the leading resource ministry for stepfamilies around the world. We'd love to have you visit us at FamilyLife.com. We have all kinds of free content for you as well as the largest collection of articles and videos and resources for blended families including my *Smart Stepfamily Series* of books and curriculum. Again, it's all available at FamilyLife.com.

By the way, a good resource to compliment this podcast if you want to learn a little bit more. Let me suggest my book, *The Smart Stepmom*, coauthored with Laura Petherbridge. See how you can get your copy in the show notes.

Now, let's get back to Jessica's response about how to manage yourself when being criticized.

Jessica: Like I said earlier, it's not to the other person that's the problem, it's your reactivity to the problem, so zooming out and getting a bigger perspective of what's going on.

It's really hard to manage yourself when someone is blatantly criticizing you and attacking you. That is a challenge. But what is the most important is to calm yourself down and look at—by thinking, remember—and look at what buttons of mine are being pushed right now and what's that about? That is actually a tool to look at “What button just got pushed? What's that about with me? What do I want to do about it? Who do I want to be?”

Ron: Next time, we'll hear from bestselling author, Dr. Meg Meeker, about good parenting in today's culture.

Meg: We have so idolized *feelings* that we allow *feelings* to determine our lives, and when you do that, there's chaos ahead.

Ron: That's Dr. Meg Meeker, next time on *FamilyLife Blended*.

I'm Ron Deal, thanks for listening and thank you to our FamilyLife Legacy Partners for making this podcast possible.

To help us produce this podcast and other resources, you can make a tax-deductible donation specifically for FamilyLife Blended by simply going to

FamilyLife.com/BlendedPodcast, or if you'd rather, call us at 1-800-FLToday and tell them your gift is for FamilyLife Blended.

If you become a monthly partner, we'll send you a gift card to our *Weekend to Remember*® marriage conference held throughout the US and Canada.

Our chief audio engineer is Keith Lynch. Bruce Goff, our producer. Our mastering engineer is Justin Adams. Theme music provided by Braden Deal.

FamilyLife Blended is produced by FamilyLife and is a part of the FamilyLife Podcast Network.

We are so happy to provide these transcripts to you. However, there is a cost to produce them for our website. If you've benefited from the broadcast transcripts, would you consider [donating today](#) to help defray the costs?

Copyright © 2020 FamilyLife. All rights reserved.

www.FamilyLife.com