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Episode 41: Raising Kids in Toxic Culture

Guests: Dr. Meg Meeker
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Meg: We have so idolized feelings that we allow feelings to determine our lives, and when you do that, there's chaos ahead; there's nothing good ahead.

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 number 41. It's entitled "Raising Kids in a Toxic Culture." You and I can't help but live in a social culture, but we can do something about how that impacts our children. That's what we're going to be talking about on this episode: what parents and stepparents can do.

But before we jump in, if you're not familiar with FamilyLife Blended, we are the leading resource ministry for stepfamilies around the world. We have the largest collection of articles, videos, resources, books and of course, podcasts for blended families in the world. So check us out if you're not familiar with us, FamilyLife.com/Blended. Of course, you can subscribe to this podcast on Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, Spotify or wherever you get your podcasts. You can listen on YouTube if you'd rather do that.

Like I said, today we're going to be talking about how blended families can protect their kids from the influence of the culture. But here's the context: blended families often have multiple households, right?—parents in different households, kids moving back and forth.

There's multiple layers to the roles that a parent or stepparent, a grandparent or a step grandparent plays in the life of a child. Some of those roles are clearly defined. For example, a biological parent is Mom or is Dad and that has clear definition to it. But stepparents have this evolving role that starts off ambiguous and then it evolves into something that's a little bit more defined over time. But in the beginning, it's kind of like what did you expect of me? What do I expect of myself?

There's a lot of moving parts in blended families. I often point out the math of stepfamilies. Biological families have six primary parent figures, mom and dad; two sets of grandparents. Blended families often have somewhere between nine and twenty-one

parent figures trying to influence the lives of the child, and some of those people don't like each other. All of that creates complexity. It makes it more difficult.

How do you begin to talk about parenting and culture in light of all of that? Here's a good starting point for us. Good parenting principles have to be implemented based on your relationship with the child, your role in the home and how the family is doing as a whole.

For example, one of the things that we emphasize in this educational program is that you connect before you correct. Biological parents have connection. They are the mom. They are the dad, end of story.

Stepfamilies again have an evolving role and without an established connection emotionally, it's difficult to then correct, right? We encourage stepparents to be cautious in using authority for corrective means; behavioral management of a child early on in the stepparents' journey with the child.

But I have some good news because a lot of times stepparents hear that, and they go, "Well, then what am I supposed to do?" Here's the good news. You can do a lot of character development. A lot of the things we're talking about today can be done by both biological parents and stepparents. This, stepparents, is where you can really make an impact.

My guest today is Dr. Meg Meeker. She's a pediatrician who's practiced child and adolescent medicine for 31 years and is a best-selling author of six books including the best-selling *Strong Fathers*, *Strong Daughters*, and she's also written *Strong Mothers*, *Strong Sons*. She's appeared on programs like *The Today Show*, NPR, *Fox and Friends*, and the *Dave Ramsey Show*, and she spoke at the United Nations on fathering. That says a lot.

Meg's podcast is called *Parenting Great Kids*, and I highly recommend that. I had an opportunity to be on her podcast. She has great guests and really good content. She's at over four million listeners across the globe. She has online courses to help parents. She is a mother herself—four grown children at this point and she's a grandmother to five. She's been married to her husband Walt with whom she shares a medical practice for 38 years.

Here's my conversation with Dr. Meg Meeker:

Meg, I know you are passionate about helping parents raise great kids. In fact, that's the name of your podcast, *Parenting Great Kids*.

Meg: Yes.

Ron: I've often thought that learning to be a really good parent means training yourself first before you start training your children. Is that on target? Is that right?

Meg: Oh, absolutely. I learned many years ago, probably 30 years ago, from an elderly pediatrician who I just admired so much, he said, "If you really want to help kids, help their parents because they're the ones that have the power in the child's life."

So what I do is I write books right to parents. Parents have often said, "Would you just write a book telling my kids what they need to do?"

I said, "That's—I could do that. A. kids don't buy books and B. you know they'll listen to me for a couple of weeks and then they're done, but they'll listen to you forever." I really work hard at helping parents understand their kids, know how to respond to their kids and help them get their kids to move in a direction that they really want the kids to go to.

Ron: I'm so glad to hear you say that because that's really our strategy here at FamilyLife and FamilyLife Blended in particular as well. One of the things I believe is that kids in blended families *have something to say*.

Meg: Oh, yes.

Ron: They have been through a lot. They have opinions about these new people in the household. They clearly have agendas and needs. We need to hear that, give them an opportunity to voice that. Adults need to hear it, so on, so forth. At the same time, practically day in and day out, the best way to intervene in the lives of kids in blended families is through the parents.

Meg: Yes.

Ron: Here we are. Let's have a conversation around that. By the way, before we jump in to talking about culture and its impact on parenting and kids, what are some of those self-disciplines or the frameworks that parents need to have about themselves. Like when I'm looking at myself as a parent, how should I think about my role as it relates to raising my children?

Meg: I think it helps, first of all, to think about what we as parents want from God. We want Him to love us and adore us and accept us and not worry about our performance, but just to draw close. When we understand that, then we can turn and give those to our kids. Because we tend to really focus on our kid's performances. We drive that—should you choose soccer or football? Should you take piano or violin?—because that's what our friends do.

What we want from God is what our kids want from us. I think it's important then, as parents, to understand that if we really want our kids to open up to us, we have to practice listening. We're terrible at that. I was terrible at that.

What I would do is ask my kids a question and while they're answering it, I would formulate *my* response to that question in order to correct them. Nobody's going to talk to you that way. First of all, I think you need to train yourself to listen. Train yourself to study your kids. Watch what they're doing. Who are they talking to? What are they doing in their bedroom? What do they like? What do they not like?

I think I read somewhere the average parent spends about 40 minutes with their child per day.

Ron: I have heard that.

Meg: You can't know a person doing that. I think that's really important to understand.

The third thing is to understand how much our kids really want our time. Parents say, "My kids don't want to be with me. They're so busy." No that's not true. They *want* to be with you. They don't feel they have the opportunity. They *feel*—this is true—parents don't really want to be with them so they pull away.

I think those are some of the best places to start in understanding what this parenting project is all about.

Ron: I can't believe you talked about performance in your very first answer to my question there because I have about three or four *more* questions on my piece of paper right here all about performance-based parenting. I can imagine somebody listening right now went, "Wait, wait. Dr. Meeker, are you saying it's not my job to get my kid to act like a good little Christian? Isn't that what it's all about is just getting their externals to do what we want them to do?"

Meg: Absolutely not. It's about the heart. I think we get so caught up in that.

Our kids went to Christian school, and there were many times they felt that their teachers were just trying to get them to do this and this and this. There were many times they thought, "Why? Don't they care about me?"

We have to be very, very careful because I think we have this sort of mentality that the way we separate ourselves is how we act and how we teach our kids to act. That's not true. I think we really have lost the beauty and the belief that first and foremost is about nurturing that heart and let all the other stuff flow out of that.

Ron: I love what you said earlier about what we're trying to do for our kids is what we want from God in our relationship with Him. Because nobody wants to come before God with a performance-based status. Like, if that's true, I'm in deep trouble.

Meg: Oh, we're all in deep trouble. What if I went to God and said, "God, I only sold 5000 books this year, is that okay?"

Ron: Yes, yes.

Meg: Or if I said, "You know we've done so many podcasts and it's so popular," or "Gee, I was a really good husband this year. I really worked hard on this." But our culture, Ron, trains us so much. Even our Christian culture trains us to never lie, always open our homes to other people, serve other people really well, always make sure we're in church on Sunday mornings and so on and so forth.

Those are all really wonderful things, don't get me wrong, but they're secondary. We miss that. I think that's why we're seeing a lot of our kids going, "Wait a minute. Wait a minute. I don't want you to just tell me there's a lot of stuff to do. I want something authentic and deep."

Ron: Because they do see past the externals and that's just all that is, is externals. I mean Jesus said God looks on the heart. It's not about just checking the boxes and doing and performing in the right way and doing all the right things and then all of a sudden, you get into heaven. That whole system is so upside down and backwards and self-defeating. All that does is breed shame.

Meg: It does.

Ron: I'm concerned about shame-based parenting where you're just driving at those externals. Then all of a sudden, your child's living with anxiety of every moment not living up to whatever the expectation is.

Again, that's not the way we want to approach God. That's not the way He approaches us. It's acceptance and love. Out of that, then He invites us to live a certain way that he knows is going to be beneficial for us. It's not just about pleasing Him. It's about what's good for us.

Meg: Right. That's why I always bring parents back to think of yourself as a child. What is it that you really want? Or you, Ron, what do you really want in the evening? Do you want your wife to come home and say, "I filled the car with gas and I mowed the lawn and I did this and I did that." Or do you want to come in and she says, "Hey, sit down with me for 15 minutes. I'd love to hear about your day." She turns off her phone and she looks at you and she listens? You feel so loved.

That's what our kids want from us. They want our attention. They want us to look them in the eye and say, "How are you?" not "How'd you do on your Algebra test? Did you do well enough? Well, let me get you a tutor and we'll do better the next time."

The truth of the matter is we're all in this. I would ask the women out there—this is going to sting a little bit—that's okay—that's kind of what our job is—how many times do you say in front of your kids, "Gee whiz! I've got to lose that last 10 pounds of baby fat," and they say it over and over. What the message that you're giving to your daughters is "If you really want to feel good about yourself, if you really want to have a good life, this is what you need to do." But that's not what we're supposed to do.

How many times when your kids come home from school you say, "How was soccer practice?" or "How did math go today?" or "How did this...?" Kids don't want that and that's why they stay away from us. They want us to look at them and say, "You know what? You and I haven't spent any time together lately. I just need to know how are you feeling? How you're doing? What are you struggling with? What do you need prayer for?" And leave it at that.

Ron: That just opens a door I suppose to them feeling safe and received and accepted. Then the little hiccups in life or the struggles in life, it's okay to talk about those with a parent, I guess.

Meg: It's completely okay to talk about them, because then kids begin to see what your priorities are, our priorities are, not just for them but for life. If your priorities really aren't about getting your kids to have a great portfolio before they go to college, don't talk about it. But you can tell what's important to parents by listening to what they talk about.

I would ask parents out there, what is it that you talk about with your friends and your spouse with regards to your kids? If you're constantly talking about them wanting things or the stuff they do, man, you need to really check it. We always can tell our priorities in our lives and in parenting by what we talk about and where we spend our money; where we spend our time.

Ron: Wow! What a self-assessment to just for the listener to go, "Okay, I'm going to put a little gage on myself for the next 48 hours. What do I talk about out loud in my home with my kids? What am I asking them about? Wow! That would be hmm, I'm a little afraid right now." [Laughter]

Meg: It's intimidating, isn't it?

Ron: And a little sobering.

Meg: Because here's the thing, we are as vulnerable to parent peer pressure, more so than kids are to their peers pressuring them. We always say—this is weird—I never understood this—but we always say, "We want you to get along with everybody. We

want you to have friends. We want you to be accepted. Dada, dada, dada and be liked and you like everybody.” Then they go to high school and you say to your kids, “But don’t follow them. Don’t feel pressure from your peers.”

Why do we do that? We just told them to get along with everybody and be accepted by the kids. We’re saying now go against them. That has always felt a little bit crazy to me. But I think we as parents need to take a look. If we’re parenting the way our friends are parenting, there might be something seriously wrong.

Ron: Keeping score; trying to gage ourselves based on what everybody else is doing, rather than—

Meg: —when to give the kids a cell phone.

Ron: Yes. Okay, let’s come back to that because that’s getting into culture and its influence on parents. Before we do that, I just want to point out to the listener one of the things that I’m hearing you say, Dr. Meeker, is the way we talk to our children says a lot about what we expect and what we value. They pick up on that. If it’s performance based, then their self-esteem takes a hit. They feel like they’re never going to be good enough.

That cuts into that and we marginalize them from ourselves. They feel like talking to us about their struggles and the things that aren’t necessarily going well for them. They can’t be people. They have to be performers. So we’re inadvertently shooting ourselves in the foot in terms of being an influence with our children.

Meg: Exactly. We think we’re being a positive influence by telling them the best way to go. “You want to make sure you go to youth group.” “You want to make sure you invite the person.” “You want to make sure that your devotions are done every day.” “You want to make sure that you’re praying enough every day.” Well, how much is that? You want to make sure your A, B, C, and D, but our kids can’t do that.

Because they’re very egocentric and they’re thinking about themselves and what they need to get, they clearly want to please their parents because they feel that if I please my parents and I do these things, they’re going to love me more. They’re going to see me as more spiritual. They’re going to be happy with me. But the problem is they always fall short, *of course*. But we fail to tell them, we fall short, too.

But if we set the standard of stuff they need to do—now I’m not saying that we shouldn’t expect a lot of good behavior from our kids because we should—however, if we expect our kids to do these things in order to earn our approval, then we shoot ourselves in the foot because kids believe, “I can’t keep up to my parents. My parents are doing this. I can’t.” So they pull away and they feel very ashamed.

Ron: Yes, that’s absolutely *not* what we want to do.

Meg: No!

Ron: Before we shift and talk about culture, I just got to bring up one more thing. I read in one of your books, you recommend that parents tell their children the story of their birth, and I think this is getting at telling them how much you love them. Is that the objective there?

Meg: Yes, and to say when I was born, when you were born, you hadn't done anything yet. You cried, you wanted food, you wanted everything, you needed something. Yet, I was crazy about you no matter what, so to talk about that and to talk about what it feels like to be that person who receives everything from Christ but has done nothing.

I think that really helps us as parents to approach our kids because we constantly need to reset and reset and reset. I do think that Christian parents put more on their kids than non-Christian parents do. They need to be nice and accepting and kind and faithful and prayerful and happy because "They'll know we are Christians by our love and how happy we are."

These kids are like, "Wait a minute." I think we have to be really careful.

Ron: Yes, yes. You know it occurs to me—I love that strategy tell them about their birth and how much they were wanted—a stepparent listening right now is going, "Oh, wow. I wasn't around for the birth. I wasn't a part of that. I'm not connected to them biologically speaking. How do I do that? How do I affirm?" Let's try to talk through that a little bit.

Because I think one strategy is parents who adopt a child have a similar journey. I heard one mom say, "No, you didn't grow in my belly, but you grew in my heart." That was her way of communicating that "I came to love you. I came to adore you for who you are." I think a stepparent could do that.

Meg: Yes. It will take perhaps a stepchild a little longer to believe you as it does an adopted child a little longer to believe. Here's one of the things I've learned about kids, particularly as it has to do with mothers. I could be completely wrong, but this is what I see. When a child is born to a mom and a dad, a child believes that a mother *has* to love him or her. If mom doesn't love you, you don't have a chance in life because mom is the person who love starts with.

Now, your dad, maybe yes, maybe no, because he may not be around or that kind of thing. Now you could be an *amazing* father, an *amazing* single father, whose wife really doesn't have much to do with the kids, but that's their psyche. I mean that's their psyche.

I think that from an adoptive child's standpoint, yes, you adore and love them, but it takes a little bit of more time for them to see that—

Ron: Yes.

Meg: —and particularly with a stepparent, you can feel that love and adoration for that child, but your job really is to do whatever you can do to allow that child to *feel* it. That's going to take time. It's going to take self-discipline on your part to do what you need to do to, in a way, woo that child. You can't just walk in there and go, "Listen kid, *I'm* in here now and I don't have the same rules that you're used to so you better just—

Ron: —and I love you." [Laughter]

Meg: Exactly—"and I love you." Yes, so it's just a little trickier. It absolutely 100% can be done but it just may take a little longer and it takes a little more work on the stepparent's part.

Ron: Yes, I think there's a lot of truth in that. Kids *crave* love from their biological parents, *crave it*. They can learn to appreciate it and value it and absorb it and take it in from a stepparent, but it is not the same initial craving so it really becomes optional in a way. But the good news is for stepparents, that continual pursuit and the developing of that relationship over time can foster that sense of craving in children where they really do value that from you.

But I think you're exactly right. Stepparents should have a reasonable expectation about how this process will go. Just because you offer and communicate love for the child does not necessarily mean they immediately receive it or that they're going to reciprocate it. Continue down that path, keep going, keep loving, keep leading with love, we like to say, and trust that it will eventually get there.

One of the things I know from research about children in blended families is that kids at some point come to look back and go, "You know what? My stepparent communicated that they valued me and that they loved me and that they wanted me in the family. At first, I didn't know what to do with that, but, oh my goodness, it was so good to *know* that. I just had to come to trust their heart and their intentions around that. But once I did, then I could rest in their love."

That's just a longer more difficult journey.

Meg: Not only that, but a stepparent is stepping into a position. Of course, they're not trying to be the biological mom or the biological dad, but the very fact that you are stepping into a place where dad was or wasn't means that that child comes into his or her relationship with you with a pre-load. That person isn't there because of some kind of pain.

Let's say the dad died and you're a man and you marry a woman and you adopt this child. That kid's mad at Dad because he died, and we don't see that. Or perhaps you're

stepping in a situation where there was a divorce and the child is angry or hurt from Dad. Now you're not trying to compete with that. But in a child's eyes, you need to prove that you're not going to do the same thing.

They're going to give you a run for your money. That's normal and healthy, because they're not going to open up their heart and trust you until they know 100 percent, you're not going to do what the last person did. Even if that person was a wonderful person, it doesn't matter. Children who are separated from a parent, no matter what, hurt, and you're going to step into that place where they have known hurt from a man or a mother or a woman.

How are you going to navigate that? It's very hard, but absolutely can be navigated. I've seen so many of my patients get married—I've been doing this for a long time now—and how beautiful it is to see a daughter walked down the aisle by her stepdad. It just makes you sob because you know the work that went into that. Sometimes I've even seen daughters walk down with bio dad on the one side and a stepdad on the other and I thought how blessed that girl is to have all of that male love in her life.

Ron: It's a beautiful picture. It's a beautiful picture.

Meg: It is.

Ron: We talk on this program a lot about how God has taken all of us as outsiders and through Jesus made us insiders and that's a similar journey when stepparent and stepchild go from being outsiders to putting each other on the inside of their hearts. How reflective is that of the Father's love for us.

Let's talk about culture some because culture is going on around us all the time and it's impacting our kids. It's impacting the climate of parenting. You've written about this a lot. I've just kind of keyed in on some of the things that you write about. Before we dive into some of the specifics, what bugs you most right now about the culture that we live in and what it's teaching parents about parenting?

Meg: Transgender stuff. I mean right now, honestly. The reason it bugs me so much is that people won't come out and talk about it in a reasonable, open and sane way. That's because of the cancel culture.

Ron: Yes.

Meg: Those of us who think it's a travesty to take a child and interrupt puberty and change their sex and render them infertile at the age of 13 and believe that these feelings they have should really determine their life as an adult when these kids don't even know what classes they want to take next year in school, or they don't even know if the friend they had six months ago can be a friend again in six months because they don't know how to respond.

We've normalized crazy and the reason the transgender thing bothers me so much is because it's representative of a much bigger issue that's going on in our culture and that is, we have so idolized feelings that we allow feelings, adult and kid feelings, to determine our lives. When you do that, there's chaos ahead; there's nothing good ahead.

This is exactly the *opposite* of the way we're supposed to behave as Christians. Because God says, "If you listen to my commands and you do as I say, then you show me your love." He didn't say, "I gave you these feelings. If you listen to your feelings and then you just go by your heart, then life will turn out." No! Our job is to fight a lot of feelings that are going to take us into *very* dark places.

Ron: Yes. If my inner truth is the only truth that matters, then my definition of me can change my body and how I live my life. If my inner truth is then whatever I think is right in my own eyes, that's what I'm going to pursue.

Meg: Exactly. That whole sentiment has been building for about 40 years. It started with the sexual revolution saying, "Gee whiz, medicine is to the point where I don't need to worry about getting pregnant so I can do whatever I want. I feel it."

Then it kind of morphed into "Gee whiz, you know what, if I want to have multiple partners that's okay." Then it morphed into "I like guys and I like girls so I'm going to do that." Then it kept morphing and changing. "I like pornography and my wife isn't satisfying me so that's where I'm going to get my needs met."

Then it morphed into "I'm in sixth grade and I'm a girl. I want to cut my hair short. I really think I want to be a boy. Take me to a clinic, Mom," and the mom and dad buy into it because that's what they're taught. In order to be a good parent, they let their child determine all this stuff.

Then they take them to a doctor and a counselor who say, "Okay, okay. I interviewed for three hours, you qualify. I'm going to start giving you testosterone, and before you're 14, young lady, you will have a man's voice, you will want to be shaving and you won't be able to have babies when you're 25."

Ron: And then we have a legislature that reinforces it by saying you can't tell that child—

Meg: You can't tell that—you know what though? I don't care. Close down my practice. I tell kids the truth. I will tell you it's very interesting because the kids that I've had come into my practice that say they're transgender—which by the way is mostly girls—it's not boys; it's mostly girls now—I say, "Here's the deal. I don't agree with this. I cannot support this. I will fight this. I don't want you to go to a clinic. You need to get a new doctor."

They inevitably say, “No, we don’t want another doctor. We want you because you always shoot straight.” They recognize honesty. They like it and they don’t want to leave it. They just don’t want to listen to it.

Ron: Let’s shift in to talking about social media and screens for a minute. For our listener, the context that we’re in having this discussion today, we’re still in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dr. Meg, social media inherently gives a performance-based value self-esteem to kids, does it not?

Meg: Oh, absolutely. Now we know that time on social media is directly related to level of depression girls have. It makes perfect sense. If a girl spends an hour on social media looking at what her friends are posting and how lovely her friends are and the good life her friends have and how smart they are and how athletic they are and how they have this boyfriend, even after an hour she’s going to shut that off and go, “Oh, man, my life is not that great.”

Now you put her on for three or four hours *every single day* and she is going to feel so badly about herself—and depression is all about self-hatred; it’s really the self turning on the self—it’s not the self being mad at other people—that she can get suicidal.

I actually, a couple of years ago, had a beautiful 15-year-old kid who tried to commit suicide, went to the emergency room, was hospitalized and came to me about a week later. We talked about this. Even at 15, she *knew* that her depression was intimately tied to social media. I said, “We need to stop it.”

She said, “I can’t.”

I said, “Then we need to wean you from it.”

“I don’t know if I want to do that.”

We know it’s a doorway to very serious depression. The difficulty I have, Ron, is convincing parents of that.

Ron: Do you think it’s just because we think, “It can’t be that bad,” or “Man, I do Facebook for 10 minutes a day and then I’m kind of done with it so it doesn’t really do much to me. It’s not doing anything to my kids.” Do you think that’s what it is?

Meg: Yes, and here’s what it is. Everyone believes that their child can handle this, that their child’s a good kid and they’re going to be able to look at this and go, “Alright, but that doesn’t affect me.”

Of course, it affects them. As a matter of fact, it affects the “good” girls more than the girls who are going astray. This is why. They want to please everybody. A guy comes and preys on them on social media, a creepy guy who is 20 years older. These girls don’t want to say “no” because they don’t want to hurt anybody’s feelings. The Christian girls, so if I say if you have a smart good Christian girl, *keep them off social media* because she’s going to be the one who’s taken down first.

Ron: One of the things I think parents miss is the immediacy of social media. All of us went to school on Monday morning and heard about the party on Saturday that we were not invited to. We all felt left out and we all felt a little lonely. But now they live not being at the party in real time. They see moment to moment what’s happening on that Saturday social gathering that they’re not a part of.

All of a sudden, their isolation and loneliness is magnified tremendously over and over and over again in real time. It’s a different level of impact that we underestimate.

Back to, parents need to do something. What kind of guidelines would you offer parents about helping their kids with screens and social media?

Meg: One of the things I recommend—first of all, I fight very hard and usually, I fight parents very hard to delay giving their kids a cell phone. And again, “My daughter’s a good kid. She’s 13 years old.”

Ron: “All her nine-year-old friends have one.”

Meg: Yes, exactly. “Her nine-year-old friends have one. A. I don’t want my daughter to be the outcast and B. She’s so good she can handle it.”

No, she can’t, even if she’s a good kid. Kids can’t regulate the amount of time that they’re on social media, so I try to help them delay the giving them cell phone as long as they could. Now just to turn aside, there’s a gentleman in California who developed something called the Gabb phone, G-a-b-b. It’s the most amazing thing. Have you heard about it, Ron?

Ron: I have heard about it. Yes, tell our listeners.

Meg: What he does is it’s a smart phone that kids can have. They can text, take photos and everything, but they can’t connect to the internet. I think, “Why didn’t somebody come up with this sooner?”

Ron: Right, right.

Meg: Because what it does is it allows the kids to call their parents, the parents call them, all that kind of stuff, but they can’t get into *trouble*.

Ron: Right.

Meg: There is absolutely no way a 10- or even 13-year-old boy or girl should have a cell phone where they can connect to the internet even if they're good kids. I'll tell you what happens. What the parents forget to think about is that your kid is not only in charge, you opened *the world* to your kid. You allow all these people to come on and approach your child. So that's the first thing I do.

The second thing I do is really put limits on technology and make it a *family* rule. Don't just say, "Daughter, you're on social media five hours a day. You got to stop that. We're going to make you at an hour." No. Everybody in the family has maybe half hour in the morning, half hour in the evening where they're allowed recreational time in front of a screen; they're done. That means mom and dad shut off their phone and stop checking their email.

If you find your child *really* has a hard time when you tell them to get off video games or social media, and they have a fit, that's a big red flag that they're *addicted* to it. That's all the more reason to dial it down and *wean* your child off of the internet.

Ron: And I know the research is clear. I mean there is an addictive quality to this—the dopamine rush that hits. It is neurological and—

Meg: It's real!

Ron: —it's real.

Meg: It's physiologic. Yes, it is.

Ron: We as adults are just as addicted.

Something I keyed in on what you just said. Everybody has to be self-disciplined. When adults are modeling "Yes, I'm on my phone all the time. Yes, we're sitting at dinner and I'm looking at my phone instead of talking to you sitting across the table from me," what does that communicate to a child? That we allow third parties to impact our relationship. We always allow the third person to invade and the third person in the form of social media on a phone.

We have to show them self-discipline so that they learn the self-discipline of managing those devices when they do ultimately get them.

By the way, I've got to tell you a quick story. One of my kids said to his friends, "Yeah, I don't have a cell phone. My parents won't let me have one yet. We're Amish." I was really proud of that. [Laughter]

Meg: That's right, yes.

Ron: It's okay that your kid is the only one who doesn't have one. We've got to make those decisions. The next question people are always going to ask, so I'll ask you, "So what age is the right age?"

Meg: For a cell phone with the internet, I say 16. Now some people would gasp at that. Ideally, it'd be 18. Because kids don't have the brain development, the abstract thinking. They don't have the cognitive ability to understand that what they do and see today is going to impact them in two years. They just don't.

I negotiated 16, because I know that parents aren't going to do it. If I could tell parents to—I mean my wish would be at least 18, because kids at least have enough brain cells to begin to be able to navigate some of that. Their children—they can't navigate the internet. They're easily influenced which means the internet can really hurt them.

Social media—and by the way, talking about boys and pornography, extremely addictive. These kids can sit in class and look at porn while the teacher's teaching Algebra.

My daughter teaches high school at a Christian school and she said, "Mom, I've almost given up. They're not supposed to have cell phones in school but somehow they do. The kids that are constantly on them, I say, 'Give me your phone. Give me your phone.'" She said, "It's such an incredible battle and I can't get their parents to support me."

It's a real problem.

Ron: Let's just settle on that for a minute because I think a lot of this comes down to sometimes, we as parents know there needs to be a boundary here but we don't make it happen. I've often said as a family therapist—and somebody comes to me and says, "Okay, this is what's going on with my kid. Such and such. You know x, y, z. Here's the scenario."

I say, "What have you tried?"

They say, "We kind of talked to them about it."

I'm like, "Yes, okay, that's not going to do anything."

"We did this, but we didn't really follow through."

I'm picking up real fast the narrative here is they're hoping the child will spontaneously choose a different set of behaviors and I really don't want to have to *do* anything hard as the adult. My response to them is something like, "You know the good news is I think there's some things you can do to change that situation. *You* let me know when you're

ready to actually *do* something and I'll let you know what I'm talking about," and then I turn and walk away.

And inevitably they're like, "Tell me now."

I'm like, "No, you don't want to change it. You're kind of okay with it being the way it is."

"What do you mean? No, I'm not. I'm talking to you."

"But clearly you are having a hard time setting this boundary."

What is it in us that keeps us from following through?

Meg: We don't like conflict, and we certainly don't like conflict with our kids. Because we're afraid if we have conflict, we will emotionally push our kids away and they won't talk to us, they won't open up and they won't connect. They won't be close to us.

That's a ruse. I mean you know that and I know that. What I say to parents is, "Look, anybody who is going to be successful at anything in life—relationships, school, work, you name it—has to have self-control."

Ron: That's right.

Meg: The *only* way you teach self-control is by—you think about yourself—is setting up a boundary, "I can't do that but here's what I can do. I can't do that but here's what I can do."

You tell a child—anytime you tell a child, "You can't do that," you're going to have a fight on your hands. *Oh, well!*

Ron: That's right. That's parenting.

Meg: *Oh, well!*

I'll never forget, my son when he was 14, we didn't allow video games at all in the house. He's 14 years old. We had a knockdown, drag out. He didn't talk to us for a month.

But I'll tell you, he went off to college, and after his freshman year in college, he came home and he said, "Mom, I am so grateful that you guys wouldn't let me play video games at home, because I went to college and when I saw these guys sitting there for six, eight hours a day in a dark room while their parents are paying all this tuition playing video games, it was horrible."

It didn't take him long to realize that saying "no" and setting a firm boundary made him into the person he really wanted to be.

Ron: Let me add something to what you just said about why we don't follow through. Because I think our listeners right now, parents and stepparents in blended family situations, there's another temptation: everything you said and "I feel sorry for my kid. They've been through a lot. I feel a little guilty about what life has spun in their life and in our world, and I just want to protect them from more."

Then there's that feeling for some people, "I'm kind of all they've got," or "I'm the only parental influence. The other home is not a good influence." Like, "I need to keep things okay between me and my child because if I lose some of this connection, I'm afraid they're going to go to the other home."

Fear and anxiety over that, again gets in the way of them saying, "No I'm sorry. We're not going to do it that way," and walking that out. I feel for anybody listening right now who goes, "That's me. That is me. Because, Ron, you don't know what is at stake."

You're right, I don't. I get that there is another side to that coin that you have to consider. At the same time, I also know that boundary-less parenting—here's the irony—if you're afraid the other home is going to influence them towards something, so you've got to placate your child left and right, guess what? You become the other home. I mean that's the irony of it. You can't do that.

Finding the courage to lovingly, gently, and the emphasis on loving and gentle, but set boundaries and limits, is an important quality.

Meg: Absolutely. What I would tell parents, "Whenever you feel sorry for your child, *stop!*" Because when you feel sorry for your child, first of all, that child knows it right away. Then they feel pathetic. They feel you feel sorry for them because something's really wrong with them and then they become paralyzed. That's the worst thing you can do to a child.

My niece has a son with leukemia. I remember when he was going under this awful, awful treatment and when I was around her, she was tough on him. I felt like, "Don't do that! Don't. That's so mean."

She said "Absolutely not. I will treat him like a normal child because right now he feels like a normal child. He just feels that getting all this medicine, getting poked in the back and being in the hospital is just part of life. But if I stop and say, 'Oh, you poor kid! Oh, this is terrible,' he starts to feel like a pathetic person, and you should never ever do that."

I don't know if you know John O'Leary, but he's extraordinary. He's been in a house fire, burned 90 percent of his body, burned off all of his fingers. When he came home from

the hospital after months and his sister tried to help feed him, his mother said, “Don’t you dare. Don’t you dare feed him.”

I thought that’s one of the meanest things I’ve ever heard anybody do in my life. He said, “That was one of the best things. My mom is—she was tough on me and she said, ‘*You will live a normal life.*’” And guess what? Now he’s living a normal life.

Ron: The message in that is “You are capable. You can figure this out.”

Meg: Absolutely! Feeling sorry for a child even if you don’t say anything, kids pick up on it right away. They feel like, “I can’t! That’s why my mom feels so bad about me. Everything she does because she feels sorry for me is really bad and it cements the idea that I really can’t do anything because that’s what she’s teaching me.” So toughen up on your kids and they’re going to feel like strong people.

Ron: I love that. Even in their sadness, I think you can join them in their sadness, you can cry with them over the hard things that they have experienced in their life and then you can say, “Now what are we going to do about it? You’re still responsible to deal with this and to measure your behavior. I’m going to help you. I’m not going to let you just get away with murder.”

Let’s talk a little bit about fashion in culture.

Meg: [Laughter] Sure.

Ron: My goodness, in your book, *Raising a Strong Daughter in a Toxic Culture*, you say that sometimes mothers are more okay with girls wearing fashion that helps them fit in socially, right? Whatever’s kind of hot in the culture even though it may be revealing and demeaning to their own daughter. Then you said something I thought was really great. You said that dads can be more conservative but they often don’t trust their judgement, so they say nothing.

Meg: Exactly.

Ron: What’s going on there?

Meg: Here’s the thing. You know by now I shoot straight and I just tell what I think is right.

Ron: We love that about you.

Meg: I believe that dads should have say over a teenage junior high and high school daughter’s wardrobe. Now mothers hate that but here’s why I say that. Because if your daughter comes down to breakfast and she’s getting ready to go off to school and she’s in something that dad thinks is *really* revealing and he just sort of gasps at it, this is

what happens. He said, “You know what, honey? I don’t like that. I want you to change your clothes.”

She goes, “Oh, Dad! Oh, Dad!”

Then Mom rushes in and says, “Wait, wait, wait. Be quiet. You just don’t understand how girls dress these days. You don’t—she wants to fit in with her friends because she needs to fit in with her friends.”

Dad goes, “Okay, I guess I don’t get it.”

Dad gets it. He really gets it, but he feels intimidated by wife and daughter because his wife understands something about her daughter that perhaps he doesn’t, so he just goes into the background. I say to dads, “Don’t do that.” I would say to moms, “If your husband objects to what your daughter’s wearing, support him.”

Ron: Listen to that.

Meg: Listen to that because he knows how people are going to see her more than you do. You’re worried that she’s going to fit in with her friends and maybe get some attention from guys. He knows how guys are going to look at her—

Ron: That’s it.

Meg: —and he knows he does not want guys looking at his daughter that way. So, dads, stand tough. You need to look over your daughter’s wardrobe and have a very strong say about it. Moms, you need to let him have a say.

Ron: Okay, so let me talk about the awkward piece for a stepdad. He comes to his wife, imagining this conversation, and he says to his wife, “That’s too sexy. What your daughter is wearing is too....” Now all of a sudden, he’s risking, she’s thinking he’s perverted, he’s sexually attracted to the daughter, he’s something like, “Wait a minute you’re looking at my daughter the wrong way.” What a bind for him. “How do I have a voice in that situation?”

I’ve thought through this a lot. Let me just throw a little idea at you and you could react to it. I think in situations like this here’s a good rule of thumb for a lot of different circumstances. When you find yourself in an awkward situation as parent, stepparent, or whatever—you’re trying to work together even in your marriage relationship—it’s just awkward kind of bind you don’t know what to do—you feel like you can’t win for losing—make that overt; say out loud what that bind is.

The conversation may go like this: “Hey, honey, I want to talk to you about the way your daughter’s dressing. First of all, let me just say, you know I love her like crazy and you know I have the best will for her and I want good things for her. I also know what I’m

about to say is going to sound weird and bizarre and a little strange and it might just communicate the wrong thing. I'm definitely *not* communicating some sort of sexual attraction to your daughter. That is not what this is about."

"I want to help her understand her value separate and apart from what she's wearing. Having said all that, I feel like what she's wearing is just too revealing. I feel like it's not healthy for her."

What do you think about that strategy of say up front, "Here's the two sides. Here's how you might view this. Here's what I'm really trying to say. Here's what I'm not trying to say," then you get to whatever it is about the fashion.

Meg: I think it's a great idea. I think that there's another tactic you could take. I don't know if it would work as well, but you could talk about it from the kid's perspective. You could say, "Here, honey, I'm uncomfortable with it because I know how 14-year-old boys think. I don't know exactly how 14-year-old girls think. But because I was a boy a long time ago, I'm concerned that those young boys would look at her this way." Then you're taking the viewing off of your shoulders and putting it on the boy's shoulders.

Mom thinks, "Okay, he doesn't want boys to see her this way. It's not about *him* seeing her this way. It's about boys seeing her this way."

Just say, "I know it's hard for you. It's kind of embarrassing but boys at 14 think very differently than girls at 14. I just don't want that kid who's just learning to shave or who already shaves—he's a lot older in her class—looking at her that way. What do you think? Do you think that he may? If so, what can we do about that in changing her wardrobe?"

I think both would work.

Ron: Yes, good. That's a good idea.

Let's talk a little bit about sexuality. We were talking about gender earlier so that's related to this theme. If somebody listening right now has an elementary-age child, what can they begin to do to just help them develop a healthy sexual identity?

Meg: It's hard and I will tell you—I mean it's hard but it's not hard. The hardest part for parents is that kids are going to be in a school system, a public-school system that is openly going to work against them, because a lot of teachers are taught and trained in their teacher training that anything goes with kids. They should never talk against anything. That this is healthy and normal. That if Samantha in third grade comes in and wants to be called Sam, that's good. They should support it and go with it and make it very open.

What I would encourage parents to do is say, “Look, your sexuality and your gender is a big part of who you are but it’s not the biggest part of who you are. The biggest part of who you are is that God created you with a mind and a heart and a soul. Yes, whether you’re boy or whether you’re girl is important and it’s entwined in that, but it’s not the *biggest* part of who you are.”

Because I think one of the biggest problems we have in an oversexualized culture is we make sexuality and sexual identity and gender identity front and center in a person’s life. Kids are profoundly pressured to put a label on themselves, even in third grade. They have to figure it out. They have to stamp this label on themselves saying, “I’m—I’m trans, I’m bi, I’m straight, I’m gay,” whatever.

We need to say to kids, “Okay, I know your friends and your class are thinking about this, but I want to go deeper with you. I want you to put that aside for a little bit. You have feelings of a boy, you’re a boy. You have feelings of a girl, you’re a girl. Let it rip. Let it run. Now if you’re in the fourth grade or fifth grade or sixth grade and you have feelings of the opposite gender, it’s totally normal. It’s so normal for girls to have feelings that boys have life better and we’re going to give it a go here.”

Ride it out with your kids. Don’t just go, “Oh, my life is upside down. My fourth grader wants to be a boy.” But when you’re in the third grade and Samantha wants to be “Sam” and she wants to be a boy and you’re in the third grade looking at this person that looks like a girl but is saying she wants to be a boy, that’s extremely confusing.

As a parent you say, “You know what honey? It’s complicated. You love her. You are kind to her. Don’t talk to her about it. Don’t talk to the teacher about it. If you have feelings, talk to me about it.” Then as a parent talk very, very simply about it and tell your child, “As we get older, we’re going to talk about this more but all you need to know right now is it’s complicated. It’s not part of your life. Be kind to the person.” That’s it.

Ron: Facing the messages of sexuality in the culture is just so hard for kids. It’s absolutely everywhere. It’s on every screen that they’re exposed to, every media, every entertainment source, every song. It’s everywhere. It just seems to be, we have got to have ongoing constructive conversations. It’s not, “Have a talk about sex with your kids.” It’s, “Have a *series* of conversations about sex with your kids,” right?

Meg: Yes. Oh, absolutely. You know this new movie *Cuties* coming out that Netflix has been getting. I mean these are 11-year-old kids on the cover in seductive sexual positions. I mean this is *sick*. It’s just sick.

If you have a 12-year-old, 13-year-old, a 10-year-old and she sees that photo, you *have* to talk to her about that. Because I’ll guarantee you, she’s being talked to about sex and so is her brother, so you better join the conversation. We know that a parent’s opinions, beliefs and perceptions about her or his sexuality carry more weight than media’s. If you

allow the media to shape your child's sexual identity, you're doing a huge disservice to kids.

Now I know a lot of parents don't want to do this. I've even had Christian parents say to me, "I don't want you to talk to my daughter about sex in this appointment."

I say, "Ma'am, if you don't want me to talk to her about sex, then there's trouble because I'm going to tell her she shouldn't be sexually active." Okay, I mean we don't want to shame kids. I do it in a whole way where you tell kids it's wonderful, but they're made for it for the long haul, so they need to really pay attention to the next five or ten years.

We talk about it in a very positive way, but we have to, have to engage the conversation. You don't need to talk about the nitty gritty all the time. But you say to your daughter or your son, "Look at—what do you think about that picture?" "What do you think about that when you saw that on a movie?" "How did that make you feel when you saw that kind of weird pornography picture come across the screen?"

"We've got to talk about this because this is really important stuff. Oh, and by the way, son or daughter, they're trying to manipulate you and you know you don't want to be manipulated and I don't want you to so let's touch base and have a deeper conversation."

Ron: Let's come back to this whole blended family dynamic for a minute because as we're talking, I'm thinking okay, there's all that cultural stuff going on and we're trying to combat that within our home and help our kids make sense of what the messages they're hearing in the culture. But I'm thinking about a stepfamily where parent and stepparent don't really see eye to eye on this. Now we're adding a whole other layer of parental disagreement about what should be done or what should be said.

In particular, if someone's listening in and they're a stepparent and they're going, "Man, I want to have those conversations with the children. I'm not sure I can." That's one question.

The second one is the biological parent needs to be involved and they won't. How hard is that, right? I just want to say to our listener, you've heard me say a lot that authority is that thing that stepparents should move gradually into. You got to earn your place in a child's life before you become the person handing down consequences and things like that. But I believe that pretty quickly, earlier than that, you can begin to be a tremendous moral influence, building character, teaching them about things like this in life.

Now, you got to get past the awkwardness of talking about sex for the very first time with your stepchildren. You decide if and when it's time to do that. If you're unsure, then let the biological parent take the lead. But that assumes the bio parent *will* take the lead.

What if they won't? Then nobody's giving any instruction and the kids are just being consumed by the culture. Those are challenging situations, are they not?

Meg: Oh, they're very challenging. First of all, you always try to get on the same page and even though—I tell parents all the time, negotiate with each other. Just negotiate.

You're used to negotiating business deals or things like that, so come to the table and say, "These are three things that are very important for *me* to teach my kids. These are three very important things for me as a stepdad to teach the kids. I will honor yours if you honor mine. One of those is that I feel strongly about teaching our kids how to handle an oversexualized culture."

Now if she says, "Absolutely not. You can't do that. They're my bio kids. You can't." I think the one thing that you can do A. is give her time and hopefully you can win her over.

But to even talk about things from your perspective, you can even, "Guys, I saw this movie. It had this kind of stuff in it, and I was really uncomfortable. Have you ever seen anything like that and how did that make *you* feel?" How can she criticize you for that if you're opening up about your experience seeing something and inviting the kids into that conversation?

Ron: Oh, I like that.

Meg: It's very different than you saying, "Hey, guys, you can't watch that movie. That's R rated and you're 11 and all this sex is going to be pushed on you." Like *Fifty Shades of Grey*—very, very popular with a lot of teen girls. I felt badly for dads who are probably silenced going—mothers going, "No, no, no. It's okay."

I would try it from that tactic. If you can't get your spouse on board, I think that you can talk about your response to cultural events. Invite the kids in and then make those have to do with sexual innuendo or—

Ron: I appreciate that approach. I think it's really good.

By the way, I think in my experience when the biological parent says to the stepparent, "No, you can't do that. I don't want you bringing that up. I don't want you talking about this. Don't say that," I think it comes down to trust. As you said, you need more time. It's still about negotiating and finding unity, parental unity in this, so keep the conversation going.

It's sort of like, become curious stepparent at that point, "Hey, honey, help me understand what it is that makes you uncomfortable about what I would like to say or what we want to do here." Because until they trust that what you're bringing to the table is truly going to be good for *their* child, they're not going to let you do it.

Meg: Right.

Ron: That's what you're chasing in that moment. Keep the conversation going behind the scenes. If you get into gridlock, get a counselor, a helper, a pastor, somebody else to join the conversation and maybe help you guys lead through it. There's some sort of roadblock there and sometimes it's helpful to just have another voice.

Meg: Yes! The other thing you could do is ask for her permission to have the kids watch somebody online—I do this a lot—but talk about sexuality and abstinence in a healthy context. Because maybe they don't want *you* talking about it, but they'll let another person that you trust talk about it.

There are a lot of people out there who are really advocating for your kids who your spouse may let them listen to. But usually I think if a parent really objects, it's either because they were trained to object, "These are just things you don't talk about," or they had a bad experience or something like that. But I think you're right. Keep working on the spouse and keep encouraging.

I'll throw something back at you, Ron. The real difficulty I have is when you have one parent who is telling them messages that are healthy and good, and then you have another parent who's got girlfriends or boyfriends cycling through the house—

Ron: Yes.

Meg: —and very inappropriate. How do you reconcile that?

Ron: —and the child is moving between two very different homes.

Meg: Yes!

Ron: We actually did an entire podcast on that subject, when the other household has a very different set of values than what you're trying to teach. Podcast number 26, I'll recommend to our listeners, "Two Homes, Two Sets of Values: From a Child's Point of View," where we talked with Melody Fabien about her exact experience in that realm.

One of the things that I think is generally true is that children definitely hear the messages of both homes. They definitely take those in. Because they love their dad and their mom, they want to please them and that puts them in such a difficult bind.

The level of conviction, if that's the right word, or belief that they have about their own values can sometimes be a guiding light. But if they're not really sure what they believe, then they're just going to wave whichever way the wind blows in whichever home that they're in. That does lead them to experiment with different kinds of behavior. For the

Christian parent who's trying to invite their child to walk in the light, that is so *difficult* to watch and experience.

The thing that we tell people is you continue to be the influence that you are. In some sense we all have to send our children into the world, right? It's called adolescence. It's called school. It's called hanging out with friends. I mean there're always going to be worldly influences. Sometimes it's just the other home that is a part of that.

We continue to teach and to live and to try to demonstrate the light as best we can and pray, pray, pray, pray, pray that they can move toward it. Are there potholes? Are there "oopses" and are there difficulties in a child's behavior and life? Yes, in the midst of that, absolutely there are.

Maintain your connection, your love for them. Continue to demonstrate that, and at the same time, consistency around what you believe and teach and what you want for them. More often than not, I think kids come back to that. But it is definitely a challenging situation.

Meg: The only thing I wanted to add to that is what I've seen is often kids may go one way or another way during adolescence, but ultimately they recognize what is good and true and right. Often if they're familiar with that, they circle back around and that's where they land in their 20's and 30's.

I always want to encourage the parent who's trying to do the right thing to just be patient, to keep teaching and be an example of where you want the child to be. I really believe they'll come back to that because eventually they realize that the lifestyle the wild parent is having doesn't end well.

Ron: Keep that long-term view.

Okay, Meg, as we kind of wind down our conversation, let's come full circle to where we started. You know, high level, what is it that we as parents need to keep in the forefront of our minds? What are we after? What are we chasing? What do we need to remember as it relates to parenting our kids in today's culture?

I'm Ron Deal and this is *FamilyLife Blended*. You've been listening to my conversation with Meg Meeker. She's going to answer that question in just a minute, but I've got to tell you, after we turned off the mikes, Meg and I had another conversation. We started talking about how parents of young children today seem to be paralyzed. They're afraid of taking action. Let me tell you, when it comes to parenting, actions definitely speak louder than words.

The conversation kind of goes like this. Parent comes up and says, "Ron, my child is grumpy when he plays video games. He's competitive and when he loses, he's hard to be around. I just don't know what to do." [Laughter]

I say, “What do you mean you don’t know what to do? I think you *do* know what to do. You need to limit his play time unless he can manage his behavior or take the game away for an extended period of time.”

Then the pushback comes from the parent, “But he gets angry.”

I say, “I know, but what’s your point? Look, I hate to say it but it’s *your fear*, parent, that is paralyzing you. You can do something about this. You’re just afraid to. Find your resolve and do something.”

That’s often the most important thing in parenting is don’t just sit there and look at them, do something. If they get angry or upset and try to guilt you into letting them have their way, which inevitably children will do, just remember you’re the parent; you can act like one.

By the way, if you do have resolve and you’re not afraid to act but sometimes you’re just not really sure what to do at that point, now that’s a different problem. I would encourage you to check out FamilyLife’s Art of Parenting® video curriculum. Dr. Meeker is actually one of the many featured guests in this series. That series is available online for free. The show notes will tell you how to link to that.

By the way, I was in the series, and we had a lot of blended family content. We’ve put that parenting content on YouTube, so it’s free. It’s really easy to find. Again, the show notes will link you to that, so take a look.

If you’d like more information about Meg, you’ll find it in our show notes as well, or you can just check it out on the *FamilyLife Blended* podcast page. You’ll find that at FamilyLife.com/blendedpodcast.

Hey, if you found something helpful in this episode, would you mind sharing it? It’s amazing how the word spreads and then *you* can have an impact on someone else’s life.

Now, before we’re done, here’s Dr. Meg answering my question on what parents need to keep primary as it relates to parenting in today’s culture.

Meg: First of all, I think it’s very overwhelming for parents. They don’t know which way to turn or how much to do or how much not to do. I always encourage parents, “*Keep it really simple.*” Focus on the big stuff. Write five things down, character qualities that you want your child to have when they’re 25 and *focus* on those. That will keep your focus off of where does she go to school, whether they should play this or whether they should play that.

Focus on nurturing a healthy heart and a healthy adult. Really write those things down because we don't think about that when our kids are five. "Okay, how do I want them to learn to be courageous so that when they're 25, they have that?"

Keep it simple. Parents are *so* wound up about *so much stuff* they don't need to be. The second is "Don't parent out of fear." When you were talking about that feeling sorry for kids or not doing this because our kids get upset. We're told not to live in fear. We're told to live with perfect love which *drives* it out.

Ron: Yes.

Meg: We are to be bold, courageous parents and not be afraid of what happens, what our peers say, what our kids say, what our parents say. We're to parent in strength.

Then third, teach your kids to love the true and alive Christ. Don't focus on all the stuff they should do. Talk about who He is as the person, who He is as the man, who He is as the God who created them and loves them and what He has to offer them. Then you're not going to focus so much on what you need to do as a good Christian kid.

Next time, we'll hear from Todd Gangl about military stepfamilies and deployment is a part of that.

Todd: You just don't come home the same person you left and all that blending that you did before you left was with this other person that you can no longer be.

Ron: That's Todd Gangl, 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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