

# ***FamilyLife Blended Podcast***

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## **Season 5, Episode 113: Bonus Dad Pro Tips from Mike**

Guest: Mike Haney  
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**Mike:** For me, I, for whatever reason, I knew enough to do this early in our relationship: focus on the relationship between me and my wife. Again, go back to telling her that you love her, telling her that she's beautiful every day. Use all you can to deposit lots of good things in her emotional bank account. Loving a woman is like a mirror. The more love you give the woman, the more chance it will come back to you.

**Ron:** Welcome to the *FamilyLife Blended* podcast. I'm Ron Deal. We help blended families, and those who love them, to pursue the relationships that matter most. If you listen to this podcast on a regular basis, you'll know in our last episode, we focused on the women. We focused on moms and stepmoms around Mother's Day. So in this episode, we're giving the guys a turn. My friend Mike Haney is going to talk with us about his work with stepdads. We'll get to that in just a minute.

Now, if you're listening and you're not a stepdad, hey, keep listening. I'm sure there's going to be something, a principle in there, that's going to apply to your home in some way. Find what applies to you; grab it and go as we like to say.

Hey, I want to make sure you get this on your calendar. Our next *Summit on Stepfamily Ministry* is virtual this year. It's going to be Thursday, October 12th. Again, you and a group of leaders from your church can sit comfortably in your home or gather together and be a part of this training day. It's a ministry equipping event, trying to help lay leaders and pastors and anybody who's interested in pouring into stepfamilies in your church and community. We'd love to have you join us. Again, the *Summit on Stepfamily Ministry*, Thursday, October 12th.

And while we're talking about calendars, I want to let you know you're invited to join Nan and I on the 2024 FamilyLife® *Love Like You Mean It® Marriage Cruise*. It's the only marriage cruise that takes over the entire boat. It is an amazing event; get away for an entire week. Everybody there is there to strengthen their marriage, worship God. It's really a great, great week.

We do all the programming, all the guests, all the musical artists, the comedians, the magicians; everybody there is a part of the FamilyLife event. I don't know. It might even be sold out by the time you're hearing this, but you need to know about this event. It happens every February around Valentine's Day. Check out the show notes. We'll get

you connected to both the *Summit* and the cruise. We'd love to see you at those upcoming events.

I've got to tell you I love it when people write to us, in part because you're telling us what you like. You're also telling us what you want or need, but it's really good feedback. We heard from "Growing and learning," somebody called themselves on Apple Podcast: "A must listen for those who want insight into blending families, especially those who are trying to do that. There's a whole lot of wisdom and truth about the difficulties, complexities, and the hope that we can have in trying to blend." I'm glad you're hearing that hopeful statement there. Thanks for sharing that with us.

We also heard from a woman who said, "I cannot tell you what your podcast has done for me. I'm a stepmother to three adult children who lost their mom when they were young. I do not have children of my own and was completely unprepared," she says, "for how complicated the relationship would be, and it's only gotten more difficult as they grow older and become adults. Your podcasts have given me community and a hope and reminded me to lead with love and grace. So much more I could say, but I will simply say thank you." Well, thank you to you as well for taking the time to write to us.

Again, if you're listening, we would love to get some feedback from you and if you don't mind leaving a review on Apple Podcast, for example, that lets other people find us, and that's helpful as well.

And by the way, if you're not familiar with FamilyLife Blended or FamilyLife, the ministry that we're a part of, check us out online. We are the largest blended family ministry in the world. That's what our department does. We specialize in helping blended family couples, single parents who are dating, for example, and we help church leaders know how to minister to those in their community. Again, the show notes will help you get connected to us if you want to learn more.

Okay, let's turn the corner here. Mike Haney is joining me today. He and his wife Jayna, live in Houston and they are a blended family with four children. Mike is an international energy consultant, works in the oil and gas industry. He's a coach to divorced men, husbands, and fathers. Jayna is a marriage and family therapist. She's a trauma therapist, a stepfamily coach. Together they have a ministry called The Bridge Across, which tries to help single parents and stepfamilies. They've been on my podcast before, but this time, just got Mike. We're going to talk about stepdads.

Since 2001 he has been coaching. He's been a stepdad himself, I should say, since 2001. And now he is turning the corner and trying to help other people have stronger relationships within their blended family. Mike, man, it's so good to have you back with me. Thanks for joining me.

**Mike:** It's really great to be here with you, Ron. I really appreciate your ministry and what you do and I'm just glad to be here.

**Ron:** You know I mentioned a minute ago that you and Jayna were with me, podcast number 38 for those who are listening. If you haven't heard it, it's called Daily Practices for Happy Stepdads. Mike, I don't know if you know this, but that has been one of the most popular, most listened to podcasts out of more than a hundred episodes that we've done. Did you know that?

**Mike:** I did not know that. I really appreciate the feedback and I know it's probably more about my lovely wife than me, [Laughter] but it's something that we feel a lot of passion about, and we are really trying to do what we can to help folks in this particular situation.

**Ron:** Let's start with this. I wrote a book few years ago called *The Smart Stepdad*, and in that I challenged men to think about their role as kind of like climbing a mountain—called it Stepfamily Mountain/Step Mountain.

**Mike:** Right.

**Ron:** I'm curious, looking back over your journey as a stepdad, what would you say it has been like for you? What would you liken it to?

**Mike:** Well, that's a great question. I appreciate your asking it. Definitely climbing a mountain is an analogy that comes to mind. I think that I felt like I was trying to make some progress. I wish the progress would've been faster. [Laughter] Maybe it's climbing a mountain slowly is a way to think about it.

The main coaching that I would, you know would've given myself if I had had the opportunity to do so, is take your time. Be deliberate about this, be intentional about the things that you do and say as a stepdad, and just know that it's not the same role as a biological father. I'm blessed to be both a biological dad and a stepdad to two children each. I had some ideas about how to be a bio dad and I thought, "Oh, well, we'll just use these." And sometimes that doesn't work. [Laughter] Oftentimes it doesn't work.

**Ron:** Yes. So give yourself some space and time and realize that the climb, if we could say it that way, goes a little more slowly than you might anticipate.

**Mike:** Exactly right.

**Ron:** Yes. That seems to be a theme we come back to over and over on this on this podcast, if you've never heard before. It's just a common dynamic that adults in particular have to slow their role— [Laughter]

**Mike:** Right.

**Ron:** —you know on themselves and what they expect from other people. You can get there.

And by the way, when you're climbing a mountain—I don't know if you're listening if you've ever really done that—every time you get to another little plateau there's another vista. There's another something to take in and absorb, but it may not be the ultimate vista that you're looking for so there are little rewards along the path and then you kind of look up and you go, “Ah, got some more climbing to do. I thought I was at the top, but I guess not.” Now, it's okay. Really, that's okay. And that's a good attitude, heart attitude, to keep in mind when you're trying to do stepdad stuff.

**Mike:** Yes. We started our stepfamily with our oldest children, both seven years old. They turn 30 this year. I've seen a lot of vistas, a lot of times where it was, as you say, that time I could stop and look around a little bit and then head on up the mountain. I do want to encourage men in this situation that there is great value at the other end. There is an opportunity at the other end to create new relationships, to learn new things, and to really learn how to be a better man.

**Ron:** Yes. Okay, so you're doing some one-on-one coaching these days with stepdads, and I think maybe some virtual stepdad groups or that's in the planning or something. We're going to get people connected to you if they want to look you up through the show notes, but I'm just curious, what are some of the things that you're hearing from the men that you're working with?

**Mike:** Oftentimes it starts with the stepchildren. I'm not feeling respected. They're just, you know they're sort of cranky with me, or rude to me or what have you. And then that can lead to frustration, especially perhaps if you're a bio dad and you sort of know ways to address that with your own biological kids. But here are new children in your life that really didn't ask for any of this, and now they are reacting like children, like perhaps you would if you were in this situation.

A key element is trying to figure out how to take that into consideration and start with your own mind in a sense, how should I react to this? What's the most loving and kind way to do so? One of the most important things is to, for the stepdad, to let the biological parent, parent. When a stepdad starts to do discipline or what have you, that really/I can really mess things up. You simply don't have the history with this new child in your life that you do with your own children.

**Ron:** Okay, so let's unpack because there's so many good things in there. I think I heard you say, if my math is right, 23 years, something like that, you've been a stepdad and you've watched these kids over time. Talk about that for a minute in terms of your role. Can you become more active over time? What does it look like for some of the men you're talking to? What has it been like in your journey?

**Mike:** It has been challenging. I think that one of the things that I believe I did well early in the process: I made it clear to my wife's children that “I'm here in your life. I'm your biggest fan, but I'm not your father. Your father is (his name.) I know of him. I don't know

him well, but I know you love him.” I tried to make it as clear as possible to them that I wasn’t trying to set up any kind of loyalty conflicts with the children because they’ve already got that going on, like it or not. So that’s one place to start; try to aim to be a friend instead of a father, at least at first.

**Ron:** Yes; and let that be the launching point for wherever the relationship might go.

**Mike:** Right. I know in some cases either the man or perhaps his wife may want/they want to encourage the children to call him Dad or Father or what have you and again, that’s a tough thing to do, at least at first. And even if the father is gone or passed away, it’s still/the children are still going to have loyalty conflicts and that really sets them up for something that is painful for the kids. And quite frankly, it’s great to be called Dad by my own children, my biological children. I love my stepchildren, but I don’t necessarily feel like I need them to call me Dad.

**Ron:** Yes. We talk about, all the time on this, it’s about the relationship not about the label.

**Mike:** Right.

**Ron:** If you make it about the label, then all of a sudden there’s pressure on everybody, and kids feel like—I mean, you just said it. You do not want to be in competition with their relationship with their father. As soon as you attach a label like “Dad,” you just started competing with their father, whether you realized it or not, and that just makes it harder for kids. Some kids are okay with that, but most are not.

**Mike:** Right. And I’ve got to say, my relationships with my stepdaughters have been really good over time. There have been some very challenging moments. It was a situation where I did have to learn new things in working with them and that was something that I—that was on me. I have heard some really sweet and kind things from them. I cherish and value those. Those have come over time and I would encourage stepdads to think about this as a long process. Again, the kids didn’t sign up for this. They didn’t have any hand in any of this, and you’ve really got to keep that in mind as you think about things.

**Ron:** Let’s unpack that a little bit more. You’re right; they didn’t have a decision in this. Mom decided to marry Mike. Mike decided to marry Jayna and your kids just really have to come along whether they like it or not. Sometimes they absolutely love it, and then there’s moments where they don’t necessarily.

Okay, so having a little sympathy for the fact that they didn’t get to have a voice in this whole process, I think that’s helpful for stepdads, but what does it mean at the end of the day? Like, does that mean, “Ooh, I expect nothing out of them”? [Laughter] Does that mean like they just get to get away with murder? I know it doesn’t mean that.

**Mike:** Sure.

**Ron:** Yes, just talk around that for a second.

**Mike:** Well, let's—you had two great points there. One thought that comes to mind is what I call the stepfamily triangle. I'm an engineer by training, so I think in these kinds of ways, Ron. If you think about the three people in the relationship—the stepdad, the wife, and her child—between the wife and her child there are at least three bonds. There's the emotional bond, there's the biological bond, and then there's sort of the legal bond. So really, three strong bonds and those have been formed over as long as the child has been alive, right?

**Ron:** Yes.

**Mike:** Between me and my beautiful wife, there is an emotional bond and then a legal bond. We are, you know, wedded to one another and responsible for one another. When you think about the bond that exists between me and my stepchild, or any stepdad stepchild, it's really can/really only starts with that emotional bond. That's really the only metric that will go into determining how strong that will be.

And then we get into the concept of the emotional bank account. I know others have talked about this, but these are nice things you say. These are deposits: “Hey, we're really proud the way you're able to do that that project,” or “Thanks for cleaning up the kitchen,” or, “I'm really proud of the way you're doing at school.” You know stuff like this, small things you can say, little bitty deposits that you're making with the child. If you have to make an emotional withdrawal—which again, I try to refrain from doing as much as I can—typically an emotional withdrawal, like a discipline or scolding or pick up your socks, so that sort of thing that typically withdraws at least five or ten deposits from that emotional bank account.

Stepdads need to start thinking about that emotional bank account as early in the process and try to do what they can to think about ways to make those deposits.

**Ron:** That is such a sobering way of thinking about it.

**Mike:** Right.

**Ron:** Because you walk in as a stepdad and you only have one account, if you will, with this/with your stepchildren.

**Mike:** Yes.

**Ron:** And on day one, the bank account is bankrupt. I mean— [Laughter]

**Mike:** Yes.

**Ron:** —maybe during the dating season you had a few small deposits in there, but it can get empty fast with just a little, what you think is a small withdrawal. You know, “Hey, you need to clean up your room.” It can just bankrupt that thing, and you have no other bond with that child whereas mom does. Mom has a whole bunch of bond and so when the child is in need, or the child feels some distress in particular as it relates to you, they're going to just go right over to that place where they've got all kinds of bonds connecting them. Your marriage then ends up taking a little heat in that too.

**Mike:** You mentioned dating; I think that's a great point too. When you're dating the woman who will become your wife, you may be perceived as fun boyfriend to the children: “Oh, let's go for ice cream” or whatever. But the moment that the marriage happens and you're all in the home together, it's again, it's sometimes a con of men. Sometimes we tend to like to say things that perhaps are inappropriate, but the point is, is that if we start to do things like “Clean up your socks,” or “Clean up your dishes,” or “It's your turn to clean the/do the dishwasher,” stuff like that, the transition from fun boyfriend to slightly grumpy looking stepdad; it's a pretty tough fall. Men need to be aware of that as they make that transition.

**Ron:** Okay, I really think this is—really this whole little conversation we've been having started with you saying something about respect and how you've got to earn respect and you don't necessarily start out with it and you can't demand respect. Let's connect the bonding conversation with respect. Don't you think those are tied together?

**Mike:** Well, they can be. I mean, in my sense, the presence of a man in the house is significant. To be there, to be around, to be present, that has a lot of energy and value right there, so I think men need to remember and recognize that and just try not to do so much and just be in a sense.

**Ron:** Yes.

**Mike:** Another thing that men wrestle with—I know a lot of men do this—is that the stoic face that we bring to the world, that we take to the workplace, that we, you know we're out trying to get the oil changed in the car. We're not mean necessarily, but we're trying to be/trying to get stuff done and we're dealing with other men and what have you. That stoic face needs to be softened in the stepfamily. And again, remember the children didn't sign up for this, so just try to be as warm and inviting as you can to them. And just try to be as, you know loosen the face, have a smile, just smiling and being there quietly, reading a book or carrying on your activity. That presence alone really will help signal to the children that you're there for them.

**Ron:** Mike, you are reminding me I worked with a family one time where husband and wife, blended family, both brought children from previous relationships into their marriage. He had to be—his wife passed away, and so he had two kids, teenagers—he had to be really, you know, high expectation, almost authoritarian in his style, and it

worked with his own biological children. He could absolutely get away with that. He immediately begins to be that same person with his new stepson, who had never had a male figure in his life, ever. And it just scared the bejeebers out of this kid and out of the mom.

**Mike:** Right.

**Ron:** And so immediately he has disrespect from both his wife and his stepson. And I just got playful with him one day and I said, "Look, dude, when you talk about parenting, you just, you're all grumpy and your eyes squint down and your mouth gets tight on the sides." And I'm like, "Hey, how about you smile every now and then. Like, how about you just look at this kid and find something that you can admire, a fondness for him as a person, and instead of trying to mold him into the man he needs to be, why don't you just enjoy him? Delight in him a little bit and put on a smile."

And he's like, "Well, I don't know how to do that." "Okay, we're going to work on this." And I'm telling you, it was radical for this guy and his stepson, but most importantly for his wife who could watch him delighting in her son and that, oh man, it took the weight off her shoulders as a mom. It took the guilt trip off her shoulders. She then began to look at her husband more admirably, more with more respect in her heart. That improved their marriage relationship.

I'm not saying this is magic for everybody, but what you just said really has power in it, and the point is, stop being so serious about getting everything done in a climate where you only have a very fragile bond to begin with. You need to focus on making deposits. And we're talking sort of the early years now of being a stepdad, but that is so very important. And by the way, if you're listening and you're like, "You know I used to smile [Laughter] and then they became teenagers and I'm not smiling anymore." Well, alright. Yes, there's still boundaries to be set, but you might want to recapture that smile just a little bit.

**Mike:** If I could give hope to dad/stepdad's situation, and especially the teen years, they will end. We came through the teen years and yes, it was challenging for all of our children, but they will end. This will be, as you suggested earlier, another vista that you get to look at and then keep climbing. There's a great vista ahead in that you'll live to look back and say, "Hey, the children have emerged. They are moving into the world. They have learned what we can teach them. They're moving into their own lives," and you can't help but be cheerful for that.

And another part of it is that cheerfulness; the, what Jayna and I like to call balcony people. People on a balcony waving "Oh yes, you're the one." You know, imagine the person going down the parade and "Yes, you can do this." Being a stepdad is an opportunity to be a balcony person for someone else and really help them. And what's the downside of that? I mean, people can always use more encouragement and give it a try and see what happens.



**Ron:** Okay, so we've been talking about some themes that you're seeing with stepdads. I want to move to another one: feeling disconnected from their wife. We kind of hit on that a little bit a minute ago. If you're having difficulty connecting with your stepchildren, it makes it really hard on your wife, their mom, to trust you with her kids. What are some other themes that are related to that you think?

**Mike:** If you think about all the pairs of relationship in a stepfamily between any two individuals: the, me and my biological son, my wife and my stepdaughter, the, my wife's older daughter and the dog, [Laughter] all those pairs of step/of relationship—you think all of those relationships, what's the most important one to work on? And that's the one between the stepfather and his wife. If they can get that in a place where they need to be, I think that that will fill the most benefits.

Find ways to love your woman more. Tell her that she's beautiful. Tell her that you love her every day, and try to find ways to reach out, connect with her, talk to her, find out what's going on with her and understand where she's seeing things going in the family. Women tend to have a better ability to sense what's happening in the family than men do. That's definitely true in in our relationship.

The questions I like to ask myself is, do I want to be right, or do I want to be curious? Do you want to ask questions, or do you want to say, "This is the way it's going to be?" It's interesting to think that you left your socks there, or it's interesting to think that your daughter or your son left his socks there. "I wonder what's going on there" as opposed to coming down as a, you know, "Let's get these socks cleaned up."

**Ron:** That's a good strategy. It's inviting somebody else to look at it, to consider it, to think about it, rather than you being top down, heavy-handed.

**Mike:** Right. And then also be curious about the way she has been a biological parent because she's obviously been with these children their entire lives. What's worked for her? What has she found to be the best ways to relate to them regarding their issues and their challenges and what has she learned?

The key element on respect is finding a way to make sure the biological parent is the parent. The bio parent needs to be the one that does discipline except in very extreme cases. I like to think if a stepchild is running out the road, you know, go grab them, pull them out of the road or something or they might get hit by a car, or something like that.

But other than that, if I as a stepfather see an issue, I need to go to my wife and say, "Darling, this is happening here. I don't know what to do about it. You might want to take a look at it." And then it's between the two of you, hopefully in a private place. Then the mother, the biological mother, then ideally will be able to make that move or make that comment and apply that discipline as needed.

**Ron:** Mike, this is so good. I'm feeling the need to say something to the stepdads listening and to the moms listening. I want everybody to hear this. Men, your wife is the gatekeeper to your involvement in the family. If she is respecting you, lifting you up—she's saying to the kids, “Hey, look, he's my husband. I love him. You don't have to love him, but you do have to listen to him when I'm gone. You know, if he says, “Clean up your room,” you've got to clean up your room.” She's the one who empowers your place in the home.

And if on the other hand though, you're disconnected from her and she doesn't really know what to do with you in her own heart, it's going to be really hard for her to elevate your status in the eyes of your/of her children. This marital thing you're talking about is really crucial.

**Mike:** It's very important. Again, think of all the pairs of relationships and if you want to get one pair of those relationships right, it's focus on the between you and your wife. Have the conversation with her beforehand say, “Darling, I will be a monitor for your kids. I mean, if they, you know, if we're all in the house and you happen/don't happen to be there and they're watching tv, but then all of a sudden, they start doing something that's you said that they shouldn't be doing, depending on the situation, you go, ‘What should I do in that situation?’ If they've only just left their dishes out, should I call you and have you contact them and have them put the dishes away?” But if it's something more serious, like they're about to set the house on fire, then you, that's when you are, are jumping in. It's that kind of monitor role that men have to sort of focus on.

**Ron:** It's talking with her, defining those boundaries, getting a game plan for how to move forward and always, always, always with every set of parents you can't anticipate everything. There's something's going to happen and you're going to go, “I don't know, I'm just going to do this” and it'll be a live and learn experience for you and your wife. But the next time you have a better sense of how the two of you have decided to handle this and that empowers you as a stepdad who's still trying to find his footing to do something and not feel like you're completely run over. Because I mean, all of this adds up to, “I don't feel like I have much strength or power in the home,” for guys; that's got to be something they wrestle with.

**Mike:** It is, and I know it's something that I've wrestled with. I know many of the men that I've coached have struggled with that as well. What is my place in the home? Where am I? I think a man really just wants peace in his home. That's really one of the main things that he really focuses on and, and it doesn't feel peaceful when your beautiful wife's beautiful children are—they're treating you poorly. They're upset with you or yelling at you. They're saying bad things. You know even worse behaviors could be there but think about the emotional bank account. Either it does or does not exist. Talk to your wife about ways to address that and really try to find a way to have it come together as best you can.

**Ron:** There's another part of this I'm thinking about and that is just knowing—you know if you get a new job, on day one you walk in and you say, “Okay, what do you expect of me?” And they say, “We don't know.”

**Mike:** Right. [Laughter]

**Ron:** Well, you're lost. You're completely lost.

**Mike:** You are lost.

**Ron:** You have no idea how to be successful or how to help add or contribute to the company and like you're just completely—so defining this relationship with your wife and what you expect of each other, how you're going to work together is a part of kind of writing your job description, so you know what success is.

**Mike:** That job description is an important thing. This is almost like the job description for being a stepdad, right? I've got an opening for it and here you—it's your turn to fill it. I think one thing that often men and women struggle with is when the biological mom wants her husband to take more of a disciplinary role. I think that in some cases, at least, a woman may want to marry a man so that her children will be/will have another source of discipline.

**Ron:** Yes.

**Mike:** And I guess if I were to speak to the bio moms out there in the situation, I would just encourage them to really think about that carefully before you go down that path too far. Your new husband can be a monitor and can be, again, as I said, a quiet source of strength in the house. But to have him be the one who's meting out punishments and checking grades and, and doing all the other stuff, that really is more the role of the biological parents. He just doesn't have the strength of that relationship. That triangle we talked about earlier, it just gets imbalanced because the relationship, the link between the stepdad and stepchild, just isn't that strong enough to be able to do that.

**Ron:** Okay, I want to bring up another dynamic that I've seen so many times; actually, write about this in *The Smart Stepdad*. I'd love for you to comment on this, Mike. Here's the scenario: man meets woman. He discovers she's a parent. “That's okay. We love each other. We really like each other. We have a lot in common.”

The whole dating experience is one of “Wow, getting to know you” and “Man, I like you. I like what you're about. I like your qualities and attributes” and “Okay, I've met your kids and they're kind of cool and nice, but we don't spend a ton of time during the dating courtship phase with kids. But when you and I are together”—man, this woman is all about the guy, right? She's falling in love; she's falling for him. He kind of feels like her knight in shining armor.

And then they get married, and he discovers that, “Wow, she is far more a mom to them than she is a wife to me.” And he feels a little duped. He feels a little, “Ah, what happened to knight in shining? What happened to you light up when I walk in the room? Now you light up when *they* walk into the room. Like they're a total distraction away from what you and I had.” Well, part of it was the structure of the dating. It was just the two of you and it could just be focused and there's all that energy, falling in love stuff. What does he do when he wakes up one day and realizes he's not as central to this woman's life as he thought he was?

**Mike:** It's a challenge, for sure, and I think it's one that many men face. For me, I, for whatever reason, I knew enough to do this early in our relationship: focus on the relationship between me and my wife. Again, go back to telling her that you love her, telling her that she's beautiful every day. Use all you can to deposit lots of good things in her emotional bank account.

In a sense, it's almost like loving a woman is like a mirror. The more love you give the woman, the more chance it will come back to you. I believe that in the nanosecond between—while you're telling a woman, your loved one, that she is beautiful, I believe that she actually gets slightly more beautiful. [Laughter] Also, in your own mind, telling a woman that she's beautiful, it makes her more beautiful in your eyes.

So again, it is a challenging situation for men. The kids are there, and they have, as we talked about earlier with that triangle, they have in a sense more right to be there than you do, right? They have more links with her than you do. They have three, you only have two so it's a big difference between the quote unquote nuclear family where mom and dad get together. Then they have children, and all the links are as strong as they're ever going to be between all those folks, and it's just a different situation.

**Ron:** Yes. That's so good. I think somewhere in here, a man in that situation has to learn how to, you know manage that part of himself that is really, really feeling wounded in that moment.

**Mike:** And the woundedness can go deep, right? He may have come out of a marriage himself that ended in a divorce. Finding ways for men to connect with one another is a very important element of this. I know that I've been very much nourished by my male friendships, the small groups that I'm in, other parts of my life that have been very important to me to make those connections with other men, so I can talk about these things in a way that allows me to learn from them and blow off steam in a sense, and not bring that back necessarily to my wife.

**Ron:** That's good. Okay, one other, kind of the flip side of what we've been talking about. Sometimes, us guys, I think to a fault, we have the ability to disconnect from people around. When we feel, I don't know, unimportant or, you know, something's going on or we get frustrated with something, we can just sort of shut down—

**Mike:** Yes.

**Ron:** —pull back and disconnect. You know this is the one of those qualities that allows men to go into war, to turn off everything else in the world and focus and go into battle, and it's also to the detriment our ability to try to cope with hard situations. We just shut down.

**Mike:** Right.

**Ron:** Okay, let's talk about that for a minute because we don't want guys doing that. We don't want them pulling away and we don't want them just shutting down. When life gets frustrating, how do you stay in the game?

**Mike:** In a lot of cases, I think women are, they have better ways to talk to one another. They're much more able to connect. They have better neurons. I'm sure there's some biological reasons for that and what have you. They're much better at talking to one another and getting those connections. I think men, as you say, we have that ability to focus and it helps us in some areas, helps us in work situations. It helps us if there's a conflict perhaps. War's a great example. Having, you know thankfully, I've never been involved in that, but we've all been in disputes with one another. We find that focus can be helpful as a man.

The challenge is that when you find yourself trying to—you know “There's so much going on with my stepfamily,” “My stepson is really rude to me, and now he's wrecked my car” and six other things have happened, or whatever it is and then you, “I just am so frustrated with this.” Sometimes it is the right move for the man to go and sort of sit and think about this.

Jayna and I call this the cave. And this is really more for men than for women. I think women may do it as well, but a man can go into the cave and think about stuff and ruminate. Go into the cave is watching TV or go in puttering in the garage or playing a round of golf. I'm not a golfer, but other men do that and just sort of doing something, you know, maybe typically alone or definitely without the wife.

What the woman needs to hear is that I'm going to the cave. I'm going to play, and I'll be back in an hour. I'll be back in half an hour. I'll be back in/I'll be back at three o'clock this afternoon, whatever it is. When the woman doesn't know how long he's going to be in the cave, she worries. Then she might go chase him into the cave, and then the cave time is not as useful for the man or for her as possible.

If a man can realize that he does sometimes need to be in, we call the cave, but he wants to communicate that to his wife. Have that conversation with her. “Honey, well, I know when you get overwhelmed, you like to talk to me about it. And that's great. I love to hear you. I'll listen. I'll do what you need to do. But when I get overwhelmed, I just need to be alone for a little while. I haven't gone away. I'm not/I haven't left you. I'm

here, but I just need a little bit of time to think.” As long as they can get together on how he enters the cave and returns from the cave, I think it would be good for both of them in the long run.

**Ron:** I'm hearing you say, let her know on the front end so it doesn't become something it's not. And then on the back end you better follow through and come back out of the cave and reconnect with your wife. In which she probably is going to want to know “So what did you solve while you were in the cave?” Like, so there is a communication aspect of it, but if that serves you to have that time alone, then make it work for both of you.

**Mike:** Women, as I said earlier, typically are much more sensitive and aware to what's going on in the family and can see things that men often can't, right? So again, do I want to be right, or do I want to be curious? Ask a question, “What do you see in our family, darling? What's happening that I'm missing?” And she'll likely tell you; man, just be able to take in the answer as best you can.

**Ron:** Okay, I've got one more little scenario regarding stepdads, and then we'll just turn the corner and see if there's anything we should say to moms who are listening today who want their husband to be successful, or maybe want their former spouse, the father of their children, to be really successful in where he is.

So last little scenario: I've heard from so many stepdads through the years, their stepchild is being disrespectful to the mother, to the man's wife, and he's like, “That drives me crazy, and I'm not supposed to correct him. Like, what do I do with that?”

**Mike:** So, If the man and his wife and her biological child are having problems.

**Ron:** Yes, and her child is a little disrespectful; talks back to mom or something. You know cops an attitude and the stepdad's there, he sees it, he's watching, and he might normally say, “Hey, you don't talk to your mother that way,” but he's like, “Do I say anything? Do I not say anything? I feel like I don't know what to do.”

**Mike:** This is kind of red alert territory as you might imagine, right, so the key question is you know, what is going on? But in my view, almost all the time, the less said from the stepdad the better. I know it's painful to watch. Will Susie make a bad comment about your wife? But know that they have those three strong bonds that they are in a sense, leveraging between themselves to the emotional bond, that biological bond, that legal bond, all those connections that they have. This dispute is part of a conversation that they've had for years and will have for years more. If you were to interject, “Don't say that to your mother,” or “I don't like that,” or what have you, then the attention turns not between them. It turns to you.

**Ron:** Yes, it does.

**Mike:** And then it's like they were upset about something between them that has nothing to do with me—about their grade, the kids' grades, or something that had nothing—you know, wasn't my thing. And all of a sudden, I'm injecting myself again. The stepdad role, a lot of it is less is more. It feels challenging. Women are much better at talking than men are. In a lot of areas men want to be active. They want to do, they want to, you know they want to jump in, they want to fix the problem. This is an area where you really have to think about that long and hard before you jump in.

**Ron:** Be very, very careful. I think that's good advice. Now, I know that that's really hard for somebody to hear because it feels like “I'm not doing my job. I'm not doing my thing.” Just think through “If I take all of the anxiety between the two of them and I channel that on me, now they're both looking at me as if I just did something that was out of line.”

**Mike:** Right.

**Ron:** That's self-sabotage. You know, we're not talking, by the way, listener, we're not talking about any extreme circumstances where a child is physically threatening your wife.

**Mike:** Sure.

**Ron:** Step in, stop that—you know, “No we're not talking about that, “but that little, you know, attitude that flies out of a 14-year old's mouth. If the curiosity thing, Mike, I'm imagining the conversation—you're watching that, you're seeing that, you're biting your lip really, really hard and then the first opportunity you have with your wife, you say, “I'm really curious how that comment fell on you. Tell me how that impacted you.”

And then you wait, and you try to hear her out and then say, “Well, I've got to tell you, it really bothered me. I mean, I don't want them speaking to you that way. I held my tongue, but I need to check in with you. Is this what you want going forward? Would you, you know, how are you going to address that in the future?” And try to let her handle that because it's between she and her child.

There may also be a conversation around, “Do you want me to do anything? How can I support you in those moments going forward?” But you're checking in with that number one pair bond relationship with your wife, as you said earlier, and making sure that's square before you step in and divert the conversation toward you.

**Mike:** Right, and it's a hard thing to have to do because you want to protect your wife.

**Ron:** That's right.

**Mike:** If someone knocked on the front door and she opened the door and that person started mouthing off to her, you would—

**Ron:** Then you'd step in.

**Mike:** —you'd intervene. You wouldn't think twice about it. Then again, the relationships are complicated.

Another element is that when your own biological child, if you have one, says something bad to your wife. And that's when, if you/if the shoe were on the other foot, you would definitely—I know I would definitely want to say something to my child as opposed to have my wife say something to her. It's always a complicated set of relationships. You do what you can to think about it from the other perspective. If you do happen to have biological children, if you thought your own son or daughter says something bad to your wife, how would you want—what would you want to happen next?

**Ron:** We've talked a little bit to moms, just indirectly. Is anything jumping out at you that you find, boy, moms need to hear this.

**Mike:** The mom has a tough role. She is generally come out of a relationship, divorced widowed. She has an ex-husband if he's still with us. She has a whole set of challenges on how to deal with him. Of course, she may be challenged dealing with the stepdad's ex-wife, and then you've got the whole set of in-laws. And some of the in-laws may be outlaws. Who knows, Ron. I mean, they're very complicated set of things.

So again, if I were to say anything to moms, just be patient with your husband and help him get the help he needs. Think about things like, “I love you,” “I'm so grateful I married you,” “You're a strong protector for our family, and I really honor, respect that,” “I know it can be challenging for you if my kid says something smart to you. Know that I've got your back and I will support you as long as you and I can make sure we're together on how to deal with these situations.” Because they're common situations.

The kids are three or four years old or what have you, you don't have to deal with the fact that they're not doing their homework. But of course, as you get there, you're going to have that situation, or later when they're teenagers and have friends over or driving cars, all the typical things that kids go through. You can predict some of the challenges you'll find and some of the situations that your kids are going to get into. Just make sure you and your husband are doing the best you can to talk to each other, to keep aware of that.

**Ron:** Mike, thank you so much for being with me again, and it's been great to have you. I appreciate it very much. God bless you.

**Mike:** And you. Thank you very much. It's been a real pleasure. I appreciate all you do.

**Ron:** To you, the listener, if you want to know more about Mike and Jayna and the work that they're doing, look them up in the show notes. We'll get you connected.



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Okay, next time on *FamilyLife Blended*, I'm going to be talking with a friend of mine, former NFL quarterback Jeff Kemp, about how men can be lovers and leaders in their home. That's Jeff Kemp, next time on *FamilyLife Blended*.

I'm Ron Deal, thanks for listening.

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