

Lee: What to expect when you're expecting stepchildren. This is Stay Happily Married, Episode number 213.

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Lee: I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Did you grow up dreaming of the day that your life would turn into an episode of The Brady Bunch? Probably not. Blended families, those with children from previous relationships, are becoming the norm. That means more and more people are facing the challenges of being a stepparent every day, and many of them, probably most of them, are completely unprepared.

Many people are now entering into a marriage scenario where one, or both, partners have children from a previous relationship. Drawn in by love, these new stepparents aren't considering how becoming a stepparent will affect them emotionally, financially, and psychologically. On top of that, unrealistic expectations about stepparenting often leave people disappointed, worried, and in constant turmoil. The Brady Bunch is hardly a realistic portrayal of a blended family, especially if you try to apply it to today's busy households and lifestyles.

Dr. KaRae Carey is a licensed professional counselor who specializes in helping individuals, couples and families adjust to changes in the family unit, especially in stepparent and stepchild situations. Dr. Carey uses both her extensive education and her personal experience as a stepmother of two to help others deal with the drama, trauma, and chaos of stepfamily life. Welcome to the show, KaRae. I'm so glad you could join us.

KaRae: Thank you so much for having me.

Lee: This is a hot topic. It seems like people who are marrying into a family with children from a previous relationship really don't know what to expect. Either because they assume stepparenting will be like biological parenting, or because they don't really give it much thought, or consideration. Tell us, what are some of the special challenges that a stepparent faces that biological parents don't even consider?

KaRae: These are great, great questions. The first thing that a stepparent can experience that a biological parent won't ever experience is the statement, "You're not my real mom or dad." That is a very, very common statement that stepchildren make. Also, the stepparents are coming into a situation where there may be unresolved feelings on everyone's part. That includes the biological parents, children from the previous union, the new spouse, the new spouse's children, in-laws, friends and family. All of these outside relationships may affect the relationship with the spouse.

Lee: Wow.

KaRae: Sometimes, there are disagreements in parenting philosophies. It's not uncommon for parents in a stepfamily to disagree on parenting because even sometimes biological parents may not agree on parenting. However, the situation is compounded when biological parents divorce. Now the biological parents may not agree on parenting, the new stepparent may not agree with the way that the children are being parented, and the situation becomes even just more complex. It's really important for stepparents to respect the biological parent's parenting style even in the face of disagreement. Stepparents need to remember that these are not biologically their children. They do have an influence on them, but the final say does go to the biological parents. The biological parents, whether they verbalize it or not, will appreciate that level of respect. Everyone, meaning parents and children, need to set personal boundaries and stick to them. That goes very far with respecting each other as well as with building relationships.

Lee: Wow. Complicated situations. I imagine that, in a lot of situations, people just get blindsided when they enter into a marriage that involves kids from a previous relationship. How do the issues with the kids impact the new marriage?

KaRae: The first thing that people should know is that the children's biological parent may not support the way that the stepparent does things and that this is OK. While it might be ideal for all parents to agree, what's essential is for the parents in the same household to agree. That makes these situations run a lot smoother. Criticizing children in front of them, or in their absence, can be interpreted as criticizing their natural parent. This is very, very damaging. People need to remember that children are half one parent and half the other parent. If one parent is bad, the children can interpret it as meaning that half of them is bad. That's not a good situation for children to be in.

Sometimes, biological parents cannot understand what the stepparent is feeling. This is very common when the biological parent is not a stepparent themselves. It becomes really important for the stepparent not to be caught up in emotion, but be able to calmly communicate feelings to their partner. Good communication in a couple is essential. It's also important for stepparents to understand, and biological parents to understand, that when a stepparent starts to feel like an outsider, they behave, then, like an outsider. It's important for the stepparent to feel included in all family activities and decision making. In each household, that is going to look different.

Lee: I know, from the introduction, that you learned a fair amount of this from your practice, but you've also had some firsthand experiences with being a stepparent. Have you bumped into a lot of these issues? I never really thought about criticizing the child as being a criticism of the other parent. It sounds like you may have found out some of these things the hard way?

KaRae: Absolutely. My personal experience, as well as my professional experience and research definitely informs my practice, but I feel like my personal experience endears me to my clients just that much more because I understand exactly what they're going through and where they are and can meet them where they are to help them to work with them so that they can transition to adjusting much better.

Lee: Let me ask you this. Everybody's now dating somebody that has kids, that's been married before. That seems to me, at least, at my age, that's the norm, not the exception. What's it like when you go from the dating relationship to actually becoming a spouse? What are you dealing with there, especially as it relates to these kids?

KaRae: When you are dating, there's always the possibility of breaking up. In today's day and age, even when you're married, there's a possibility of breaking up. The major difference, though, between boyfriend and girlfriend and husband and wife, are the legal and binding agreements that are made and the intention that marriage is forever. When you introduce someone to a child and say, "This is my spouse and I'm going to be with them forever," things change. They're a permanent fixture there, not a possible transient fixture, like a girlfriend or boyfriend. There are also legal and binding agreements between the adults as well that makes marriage a far more serious institution than boyfriend and girlfriend.

People need to understand that no matter how much time kids spend in a home, they definitely react immediately to the transition, just as boyfriend and girlfriend will attest that once they get married, even if they live together before marriage, things do change in that relationship. Expectations change. Stepparents can expect that it takes time to build a relationship with their stepchildren, just like it took time to build a relationship with the spouse. If you've ever heard the joke about a person goes up and sits next to you at a bar and says, "Hey, will you marry me?" That just doesn't happen. It takes time to build a relationship. It takes time to get to know a person.

It's unrealistic for a stepparent to expect because they picked this spouse that their children will automatically have the same endearment to them that they have for their spouse. They need to expect that there will be some times that the children won't like this new marriage. The stepparents can expect to be talked down to and mistreated, but they do need to decide beforehand that they don't have to respond in the same way. They need to understand that the marriage to their partner is another life change for the child that they don't welcome, just like the divorce between the biological parents.

Lee: You talk about deciding beforehand and making a plan for how you're going to deal with this feedback from the kids. How much preparation does one really need in order to be a stepparent?

KaRae: A lot. This is definitely something that people do not consider when they're getting married. If you think about when people are getting married for the first time, let's say, to someone and they don't have children, they spend a lot of time talking about how many years they want to be married before they have kids, what schools they want the children to go to, what kind of clothes they want them to wear, how they're going to parent them, what kind of neighborhood they want to live in. They spend a lot of time and investment in talking about that with each other, however, in a stepfamily, you don't have that luxury, that option, or that privilege. Steps should be very serious about pre-marriage counseling specific to stepfamilies because what works, and what's applicable,

for nuclear and biological families is so very different from what works, and what's applicable, to stepfamily members.

Lee: I buy that. That makes a lot of sense. I can hear our listeners yelling at me, "It's too late. I can't prepare. Premarital counseling should have taken place years ago, now I'm living in this family. I've got these stepkids, it's too late to get prepared. I'm in it every minute of every day." What do we say to those folks? What can they do starting right now to make their lives with these stepkids work better?

KaRae: I'm glad you asked. I can hear them yelling, loud and proud, the same thing. One of the things that they can do is make good communication skills with everyone, and this includes the biological parents, a priority. Good communication, clear communication cannot be underestimated. They also need to make a commitment to do the very best that they can to co-parent with the biological parent. Not being able to co-parent between the biological parents is a common issue and if this happens, they need to definitely seek professional intervention to help them to be able to do that for the child's sake. When all parties are in agreement, ideally, house rules, including bedtimes, etc., will be the same within both households, but that's not always possible. When that's not possible, having the same rules in one single household is ideal, and if that's not possible, they definitely need professional intervention.

Stepparents and biological parents need to have a safe communication environment where they can speak up if they're feeling disrespected, if they're feeling disappointed with the experience, or if they have some input about how the experience can be made better without fear of reprisal or backlash. If the parents in one home cannot have a cordial relationship with the biological parent in the other home, then the two ex-spouses need to deal with each other and remove the stepparent from that contentious situation. They also need to understand that stepparenting, at times, can be more than anybody can handle. There is support available to help them, and they need not be ashamed to step out and get it.

Lee: That's what I was going to ask you. It does sound like, in a lot of situations, it really is just more than anyone can handle. I certainly know people where the stepparent has become the negotiator with the other parent. All kinds of craziness that goes on and makes it really tough. I know that you've got a practice, Strong Stepfamilies, that you've started that helps biological parents and stepparents work through all of these issues. I'm curious, what kind of interventions do you usually recommend for people that are trying to do the stepparent job but really having a tough time with it? What do you suggest for those folks?

KaRae: What I suggest for them is to put their marriage as a priority. That is key. Good communication, strong couple relationship is primary. I work with them to identify any barriers to that goal of having good communication and a strong marriage. Support groups, so that stepparents don't feel alone in their struggles, are really, really helpful because they can have some camaraderie with other people that are going through the same thing, at the same time. They're able to share ideas. One-on-one counseling to

address concerns that maybe, bring shame to the stepparents, like how to deal with the ex, or how to deal with the in-laws, discipline, their own emotional state, as well as guidance on handling possible scenarios that might come up in the future, are all areas that one-on-one counseling can address to the specific concerns of that family. Also, counseling is essential to address any marriage issues that have already come up because, like I said at the beginning, if we don't have a strong couple relationship, there is not going to be peace and harmony in the stepfamily.

Lee: That's terrific advice. Speaking of terrific advice, you've given us a download that we've got on our website at Stay Happily Married, called Terrific Tips that stepparents can use to be more at peace in their families. We've got a link to that right here on the website. Your list includes things like repeating "Not my ex, not my problem" I love that, and little gems of wisdom, like "Respect the children's biological parents even if you are at odds." You also mention making the marriage a top priority. When you talk about a top priority, what does that mean exactly? How do you fit all these priorities together between dealing with the kids and dealing with the marriage?

KaRae: That's an awesome question, especially in today's society where everybody is so over scheduled and so busy, however, if that marriage is not first priority and people are not ensuring that it gets the attention that it needs and deserves, the marriage will not work. That's where we find a lot of re-remarriages, which complicates that family even more. Not giving the marriage the attention that it deserves is what contributes to our remarriage divorce rate being higher than our first marriage divorce rate. Kids are extremely important, and I don't want to take anything away from that. I do want to emphasize that they are important.

Hopefully, all of the knowledge and skills and abilities that they've cultivated over their life will help them to grow up and move out and have lives of their own. Then you'll be left with your spouse, and it's important to keep the spark alive with your spouse, and it's essential, not just for today, but in making the marriage last long after these children have grown up and moved out of the home and have lives of their own. It's so very important to make time to communicate and just be with your spouse. Spouse one-on-one time is very important in order to cultivate a close relationship and keep the spark alive.

Lee: You mental health professionals are always wanting us to talk.

KaRae: As humans, that is our benefit language and we need to use it.

Lee: When you can figure out a pill you can give us that we don't have to communicate, then we'll have it under control. That would make it a lot easier. You've given us the Terrific Tips. You've got the download for us, that's terrific. I know you've got a website, that's StrongStepfamilies.com. What other final words of wisdom, what other last bits of advice would you like to give us before we let you go?

KaRae: I would like all of your listeners to know that no matter how dire the situation seems, with the proper and correct intervention and some action on their part, things can

go better. A lot of stepparents give up and a lot of biological parents give up before finding just the right tool to help them to make their marriage be strong and their stepfamily run smoother. One thing I would leave with your listeners is to encourage them not to give up, to fight for their marriage and family and to find the proper resources to help them. They can always pop over to the website, StrongStepfamilies.com, where there are lots of free resources that they can download, or even make an appointment to talk with me and see me regarding what their concerns are and get them going in the right direction.

Lee: Fantastic. KaRae, thank you so much for talking with us today. I really appreciate your perspective, both as a professional and as an individual, part of a couple and a family that's been through a lot of this. I really appreciate you taking the time to talk with us.

KaRae: You're very, very welcome. I really appreciate you having me. It's my honor to be here as your guest as well as my honor to reach out to your listeners.

Lee: Thanks. If you'd like to find out more about Dr. KaRae Carey's practice, Strong Stepfamilies, you can visit her website at StrongStepfamilies.com. I'll put a link to that in the show notes so that it's easy to find. You can also reach her office at 919-454-7857. Thanks so much for listening in today. I hope you'll join us again next week. For more information about this show and future episodes, visit us at StayHappilyMarried.com. I'm Lee Rosen, until next time stay happily married.

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