

Creating a happy marriage is possible and this site is dedicated to providing resources to help couples who want to stay together. By providing information about qualified marriage counseling, we hope to encourage couples to get the help they need. The site also features articles, other websites, books, and workshops which offer the tools needed to create happy, lasting marriages.



Staying Happily Married with Children - II

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

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This is Stay Happily Married for March 17, 2008, "Staying Happily Married with Children, part II."

Lee Rosen:

Hi. I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. We're going to be talking about staying happily married with children. This is the second in a two-part series. Welcome to the show. I'm here with Dr. Tina Lepage, a psychologist who practices in Durham, North Carolina. Dr. Lepage is the founder of Lepage Associates Solution-Based Psychological Services, which is a full service psychology practice in southern Durham.

From the very beginning of her career Dr. Lepage has been focusing on marriages and families, earning her Bachelors of Science degree in Child Development and Family Relationships before she completed her doctorate in clinical psychology. She is a specialist in relationship issues and has been providing couples' counseling for more than 10 years. Dr. Lepage has developed numerous seminars for couples and families and trainings for other professionals. She's often asked to speak at local events and write articles for local newspapers and websites.

Welcome back to the show, Dr. Lepage. Thanks so much for being with us.

Dr. Tina Lepage: Thanks for having me back, Lee.

Lee Rosen: You know, I have two children and I know you have a child, and it seems like staying married with children is -- at least for one reason

-- challenging because we all come to the table with different ideas about what parenting should be like. Am I right?

Dr. Tina Lepage: Well, we do. And not only do we have different ideas of what parenting should be like, but they tend to be pretty strong emotionally in terms of we all want to be a good parent. So we're striving to be a good mom or a good dad and that can mean that our sense of the way things should be is a little bit stronger even than some of the other things that we hold opinions about.

Lee Rosen: Do we get a lot of these ideas from the way that we were raised?

Dr. Tina Lepage: Well, definitely, although some people get those ideas meaning that they were raised a certain way and hence they believe that's the way things should be. Other people were raised a certain way and believe that isn't the way things should be. But whatever they ended up thinking on their own, we certainly do all have opinions about how we want to make things for our kids -- what their life should look like and how we need to parent them so that they're happy and well-adjusted children.

Lee Rosen: It almost seems like these are things that you should work out before you have kids, but I don't even know that you can really think it through until you have a child before you really know what you're dealing with.

Dr. Tina Lepage: You know, I think you can try to as a piece of that. So in premarital counseling we're always telling people, "Don't leave these big talks until later. Have these conversations early on." So on the one hand you can certainly start to have these conversations. But, as all of us know who have children, there's a whole lot that's different once the child is actually there and you're parenting. A lot of what you thought you knew before comes into question and you have to kind of figure it out.

Lee Rosen: Are there certain types of couples that typically run into these issues and have problems because of them?

Dr. Tina Lepage: Well, I think in general if you do have similar ideas on parenting that makes it a little bit easier. If you already communicate well and tend to be pretty good at compromise that makes it easier. But in general I say no two people are exactly alike in terms of you're going to parent for a very long time and things are going to come up that you disagree on. So probably most couples come upon something at one point or another that they disagree upon, and a lot of couples with kids will certainly say that over the years a number of their disagreements were probably around parenting issues.

Lee Rosen: Are there some biggies that are sort of the things that parents end up finding out they have very different perspectives -- I mean, I guess discipline comes to mind. Is that common?

Dr. Tina Lepage: Sure. Discipline is a big thing. I think before you even get to that, when you have younger children people have ideas about the amount of structure and routine and flexibility versus lack of flexibility and all of those types of things, and those are things that lead or play into discipline. And then discipline and rules and the way things should be and what rules kids should have to follow, that certainly comes up a lot.

Lee Rosen: One of the things that in my life -- that I feel like we bump into on this issue is that we have different levels of tolerance for being embarrassed by our children. Do you hear much about that?

Dr. Tina Lepage: Well, sure. I mean, people definitely have different levels of tolerance for embarrassment, or what they perceive as embarrassment. So one person is feeling embarrassed and the other person really isn't feeling embarrassed.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Dr. Tina Lepage: I think sometimes over the years you're less embarrassed by your children because you start to realize that other parents are going through this, too. That this is just the child acting out in a moment in public is nothing new to anybody else who has kids.

Lee Rosen: I guess I feel if you just leave a slightly bigger tip at the Red Lobster that they can get the macaroni --

Dr. Tina Lepage: When we had our daughter we had to start tipping better just because of the mess of food that's left under the table. But she's still under 4, so we're hoping by teenage years she might not spill quite so much.

Lee Rosen: I have a 14-year-old and an almost 11-year-old and I can tell you, you still have to -- the tipping doesn't go down. Yeah. And then they start ordering adult-sized meals so it really goes up.

What strategies are people -- before they come to you and they're having these issues over kids and trying to navigate this, what do they try to do before they get professional advice?

Dr. Tina Lepage: Well, I think what people often try to do that doesn't go so well a lot of times is that they really focus on their position as to how

parenting should go as the right way to do things. And they feel strongly about that and they try to convince their spouse and they explain why and why it would be good for the child and explain the values behind it and all of that. And it's not a bad place to start a conversation, but basically in the end you have two people trying to convince the other person that they're right, and that's not particularly helpful.

Lee Rosen: That would be my approach. As a lawyer I try to convince everyone that I'm right; and you're right, it doesn't work.

Dr. Tina Lepage: Right. Yeah, I was going to ask you how that worked.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. It especially doesn't work at home.

Dr. Tina Lepage: Not at home.

Lee Rosen: No. A lot of people realize this problem is causing them to not be happy at home and they come and they see you.

Dr. Tina Lepage: Sure. I mean, people get to a point where they're having lots of arguments about it and start to notice that it's just something -- whereas they would consider themselves maybe even in a lot of other ways a very happily married couple, but this parenting style and parenting issues might be something that they argue quite a bit on or oftentimes don't see eye-to-eye.

And as always, some people come see us earlier than others. So some people come see us as soon as they start not being able to work out an issue. There are people that come in very early, almost like preventative medicine; and that's different than people who wait until they've been maybe arguing sometimes for years over parenting.

Lee Rosen: One piece of this puzzle that occurs to me is that not only are the parents having trouble figuring out what to do, but in a family with children you have the extra players. It's not just the two of you anymore and the children, especially as they get older, can really be a -- they become a huge factor. You're not just arguing about them, but suddenly they're in the argument.

Dr. Tina Lepage: Kids as they get older, and pretty much as soon as they get verbal, they start to tell you what they think about when you tell them they can or can't do something and your reasons around it. So certainly they're part of it. And the strategy that child psychologists talk about -- one of the strategies of trying to be a parenting team and

present that to the kids, that's always helpful because it's less confusing to the children.

So if you can sort of work out your compromises as parents between the two of you for the most part and then present those to the kids - - not that they shouldn't know that you're compromising because I think it's an education for children to see how a functional and happy marriage works and that part of that is that sometimes there's compromise and sometimes things sort of go one person's way.

Lee Rosen: Do you sometimes have situations where you're meeting with the parents and the children?

Dr. Tina Lepage: Definitely. We do family therapy, sort of what we started out talking about here in terms of parenting and parents not being on the same page and having different parenting styles.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Dr. Tina Lepage: Some of that we might want to take into just a couple sessions where the child isn't there, but particularly as the kids get older and are teenagers if they're arguing over rules and consequences and the way things should or shouldn't be in the house. Then the children can be part of that process and be heard and sort of have a bird's eye view to watching their parents, then take the information that the child adds to the session and make some decisions about what they'd like to do as parents.

Lee Rosen: We come to you and we have this difference of style and perspective. How do you help bring us together? What do you do with us?

Dr. Tina Lepage: Well, one of the first things I do is try to encourage people to move a little bit away from seeing things as so much right and wrong and instead looking at respecting and honoring differences in parenting styles. That's sort of a starting place is taking a step back and taking a deep breath and saying, "Okay."

There's a lot of research out there about parenting and there's a lot of information out there about parenting, so there are some sort of specific things that people can learn and there's information that sort of can be provided. But aside from that, a lot of it is just figuring out how to present a loving place for kids to grow up. It's not necessary that there really is such a strong right and wrong way of doing things.

Lee Rosen: We sort of reach a more peaceful place not so much by changing what we're doing but more about how we look at the conflict?

Dr. Tina Lepage: I think that's the starting place is how you look at the conflict. And then the practical place that we go with it after that is really trying to encourage parents that instead of looking at how things "should be done" -- you know, they come in with their thoughts about "we should be parenting this way" -- instead of starting from that place is to have a dialogue and conversation about, "Okay, what are we trying to create for our child? What is our goal here? What is it that we want this to look like? What values are we trying to instill," etc., and to have that conversation.

And then to take sort of a trial and error approach and see what works. Because the other piece we haven't really mentioned here is that all kids have different personalities, different temperaments. And you can parent two children the exact same way and one will respond very well to that parenting style and another child won't respond so well to it. And certainly there are plenty of parents out there with more than one child that will sort of describe that experience.

So we try to get them to take sort of a trial and error approach. It's more of a team approach, it's collaborative, they're both on the same team at that point just trying to create the best life and home experience for this child that they can, and they try things and see what works. And then if it doesn't work, don't do it; versus, it should be this or it shouldn't be that way.

Lee Rosen: You know, I listen to all that and I think about my life at home with our children and it just sounds way too hard. You've got to get along with your spouse. You've got to figure out what strategies work with your kids. I mean, it just feels a little overwhelming. Is that typical?

Dr. Tina Lepage: Well, I think if people are in a problem at the moment it can feel that way, but I have to say that once you get that as a process it's actually easier. So if you're getting along with your spouse and you're having these conversations about, "Okay, here's what we want," and over time then those conversations build on one another and you've already had the conversation. So then you're just implementing it.

You've come to agreements. You're doing it. You're sort of playing out what you've worked on. So probably more work on the front end but I think once you do it, it just becomes a way of life and maybe even, one would hope, make things easier.

- Lee Rosen: It does sound like once you are in alignment and working together on it that that must have a pretty powerful impact on the state of your relationship, that you really come together working for a common goal and that must make a big difference.
- Dr. Tina Lepage: Yeah, I think so. I mean, we're kind of talking about how these parenting differences can be a problem in the relationship; but having children, one of the things that they really add to the relationship is the ability to bring it closer. The parenting experience is a very bonding experience between husband and wife and very emotional experience. And so kind of figuring out that you're doing this right together is really strengthening for the marriage.
- Lee Rosen: Sometimes when I'm talking to you about these issues it feels like there are things that are right in front of our noses and that we don't see them and somehow you have the ability to turn the light on. It's almost like everything you say is common sense except that it's like we don't have common sense or we wouldn't have gotten into this mess.
- Dr. Tina Lepage: That's one of the nice things about having maybe somebody from the outside looking in or somebody from the outside be able to give a little bit of a different perspective or coaching on a problem like this, is that sometimes the answer really is sort of right there or not far out of reach and it just takes a little bit of help or even just a moment on your own to stand back and look at it. I mean, as somebody who works in this field and, as you mentioned also has a child and a husband, this is a process that I go through in my personal life as well regularly, which is having the emotional piece of what's going with the kid, trying to figure it out, and then reminding myself we have this way of doing it. And it's nice to see that it works.
- Lee Rosen: That's great. Well, are there other things that you feel you should add to all of this? I mean, obviously this is hard work and getting help from someone like you makes a tremendous amount of sense. Are there other critical pieces to the puzzle that we need to understand?
- Dr. Tina Lepage: I don't know if there are other pieces. Just to sort of reiterate that taking a proactive and a really joint and collaborative approach to figuring out what works in terms of parenting, and then also that piece of really honoring and celebrating the uniqueness of each parent and what they bring to the parent-child relationship.

So as much as that can cause us to butt heads occasionally I think oftentimes we can sort of step back and watch our spouse interacting with our child in a way that's different from our personality and really see what a beautiful thing that is and it's sort of lucky for the child that they have both people.

Lee Rosen: Well, Dr. Lepage, I'd like to thank you for being with us and for sharing your ideas and insights with all of our listeners. I think all of us will take away some things that will make a difference in terms of staying married and helping us to deal with our children as a couple. I appreciate it.

Dr. Tina Lepage: Well, thanks for having me, Lee. I really enjoy talking about this topic a great deal.

Lee Rosen: For all of you that are listening, you can learn more about Dr. Tina Lepage by visiting her website at LepageAssociates.com.

Thank you so much for joining us today and I hope you'll join us again next week.

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