

Scott: Successful Co-Parenting. This Stay Happily Married Episode Number 285.

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

Scott: I'm Scott Blair, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show.

Do you and your spouse have different beliefs when it comes to parenting your child? Marriage requires a delicate balance of values, such as commitment, trust, and honesty. This balance can prove to be difficult when trying to keep a marriage strong and healthy.

When you decide to grow your family, you not only have a responsibility to your spouse, you now have an obligation to your child. Learning to balance the two may turn out to be more challenging than you had anticipated. Contradicting beliefs on parenting cannot only hinder your ability to co-parent, but it may also affect your marriage in a negative way. How can you and your spouse learn to co-parent effectively?

Earning her Master's degree in social work from the University of Illinois at Chicago, Mrs. Jennifer Viemont founded Triangle Parenting Solutions in Raleigh, North Carolina. At Triangle Parenting Solutions Jennifer offers a range of coaching and consultation programs to parents of all conflict levels going through divorce. She teaches parents to make co-parenting decisions that are based on their children's needs.

Mrs. Viemont has experience working with children and families in a variety of mental health settings. She also has been a life coach helping people create and implement plans that would help them reach their goals.

Welcome to the show, Jennifer. I'm so glad you could join us today.

Jennifer: Thanks for having me, Scott.

Scott: What is it exactly that you are seeing when it comes to couples parenting together?

Jennifer: Well, as parents we have so many competing messages today coming from all different sources about the best way to parent. We hear how our friends are doing things, how people on Facebook claim to be parenting. We see things in magazines, books, television, and our mother-in-law.

Since even the current trends about parenting differ from one source to the next, parents often find themselves disagreeing about parenting decisions. They might disagree about things like allowance or the right age for dating, chores, or discipline.

Scott: Are you suggesting that everything we see on Facebook isn't reality?

Jennifer: It's true. I am.

Scott: What problems do you see that couples experience in a relationship when they aren't co-parenting together effectively?

Jennifer: I really believe that parenting is hard even on the best of days. So when you're working against each other instead of as a team in parenting, you start to feel a lot of stress, tension, and isolation. There's also a dynamic that happens where there's a winner and a loser in this situation which can affect the overall power dynamics and lead to marital problems.

The other issue that I'm sure many of us have experienced is that kids are really aware when their parents aren't on the same page. It's natural for them to work that to their advantage by playing one parent off of the other. If the parents are already in conflict, likely their communication isn't as strong between each other and they often don't even know the splitting is occurring.

Scott: Okay, you say they often don't know the splitting is occurring. So at what point do you see that couples actually become aware that they're not co-parenting effectively?

Jennifer: Interestingly, they often don't even see it as a co-parenting issue. They think it's a problem with their spouse, that their spouse is controlling or doesn't listen to their perspective. It's often later in couples counseling, or if their child's in counseling, or with great self-awareness that they're able to see that the root is a co-parenting issue.

Scott: Is there any trends, I guess, or maybe a specific demographic that you've noticed with couples that struggle with co-parenting?

Jennifer: I really believe that it's a problem that affects most parents at some point or another. But the couples who I see who struggle the least are the ones who were raised very similarly and were happy with their upbringing.

Scott: Sure. You say very similarly, and I suppose that's because my parents raised me with one parenting style and that's probably what I'm accustomed to and is going to greatly influence how I raise my children. But then I marry my spouse who came from a completely different background and upbringing. And their idea of discipline or their idea of arguing or conflict may not be similar to mine at all. That, I'm assuming, is what you're pointing out would cause a great amount of stress or miscommunication between us.

Jennifer: It absolutely can. The other problem is about couples who were raised similarly and were happy with their upbringing. The other thing is if you're saying I don't want to raise my child the way I was raised. That's not really a template for parenting. It's just saying what you don't want to do.

Scott: Sure. Okay, that makes sense. Well, what do you suggest for couples to do when it comes to co-parenting their children?

Jennifer: Well, we were just talking about that couple who was raised similarly and were happy with their upbringing. The reason that they don't struggle very much is they have this plan for co-

parenting. Theirs is just very simple. They just are going to parent the way that they were parented.

Most couples don't have this advantage, and they haven't thought about making an intentional plan for parenting. It's really something that you can do that strengthens the parenting as well as the marriage.

Scott: Okay. So what specific steps can couples take to make a plan like you're suggesting?

Jennifer: Well, the first step is just to sit down and think about the skills and values you want to develop in your children. It might be things like independence, competence, education, responsibility, just sort of the person that you hope that they become. Then, you have that list to use as a guide when you're making parenting decisions. You look at how either side of the decision might affect the cultivation of those skills and traits you identified.

For instance, my husband and I, we disagreed on the age our daughter should be allowed to walk to school by herself. We live a half a mile from school in a safe neighborhood. We have sidewalks and a crossing guard. But, in our neighborhood... I was talking about those messages we get. In our neighborhood it's the social norm for parents to walk their children to school.

So we had to make this decision. We consulted our list of skills and values and determined that our daughter walking to school without us could really help develop independence and confidence, which were two traits we value a lot. So she started walking to school by herself and loves it.

Scott: Yeah. There are so many of those decisions. As a parent, I know that we have to kind of negotiate on and find a balance for, and it can be very difficult at times.

Jennifer: We often have the same end results that we want, and it's just a matter of making decisions that lead to that.

Scott: Sure. With couples approaching parenting this way, what are some of the changes that you're seeing in the quality in the interaction of the relationship because earlier you stated that a lot of times they think the problems not in the co-parenting, it's actually with the spouse or in the relationship.

Jennifer: Right.

Scott: So when they make these changes, what's some of the quality of change that you're seeing?

Jennifer: First of all, when you're working with your spouse instead of against them, your communication increases. And that feeling of partnership - you're a team and you're on the same page. That certainly improves relationships. Making that list of skills and values helps them recognize their intentions, and then they work together to make deliberate parenting decisions.

Scott: So it boils down a lot to finding common values, and like in all marriage issues we could all fall back on communication improvement.

Jennifer: Absolutely. Absolutely. And a very specific communication skill as well. It's easy to say we need to enhance communication, but what does that mean? Here's a simple activity they can do to do that.

Scott: All right. Well, Jennifer, is there anything else that you think our listeners should know when it comes to co-parenting or finding this balance and this communication?

Jennifer: You know, Scott, I work with a lot of parents going through divorce. Making a parenting plan is a required component of the divorce process, but it's not required in marriages. I really think that putting the effort into creating the simple plan we talked about today can prevent many couples from getting to that point.

Scott: Well, Jennifer, this has been some great information. Thank you so much for taking the time and talking with us today and being on the show.

Jennifer: Thanks for having me.

Scott: To find out more about Mrs. Jennifer Viemont and her practice, Triangle Parenting Solutions, you can visit their website at www.triangleparentingsolutions.com or call 919-539-4840 for an appointment.

Thank you so much for joining us today, and I hope you'll join us again next week. For more information about this show and previous episodes visit us at stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Scott Blair. Until next time, stay happily married.

Announcer: Thank you for joining us today on Stay Happily Married. If you'd like more information, please visit us on the web at stayhappilymarried.com. We would love to hear your feedback or comments. Please email us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com or call us at 919-256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.