

LL09-When Should You Blend the Family

I'm Alvean Lyons

and I'm Doug Weiss and welcome to Love Life.

OK Douglas, so our audience has sent us another great one today. You know as well this is one that I think a lot of folks who've been in more than one relationship of had to to navigate.

And we get to have this conversation with our partner in crime and it's Barbara Hamm Lee.

Hi everybody how are you?

OK So a letter from one of our listeners who has a daughter who is under the age of ten and she, the mom, is Dating, mom's a single mom, and she's dating and her question is when is it appropriate for her child to be introduced to the person she is dating? I don't know whether they're in a very serious relationship or if it's more casual or whatever but just overall if you're above the age of thirty more than likely as you meet people one of the two of you are going to have or both are going to have kids or adult children in your life. So when is the appropriate time to bring them all together? What do you think?

Well you know I have a fairly strict view on this and that is that you have to be pretty comfortable that this relationship is durable, and that it's headed in a direction toward some type of lasting relationship, some type of purpose, some type of permanency, otherwise it's too soon. And I know that that's a controversial thing to say. Some people feel very strongly and you want to be very honest with your kids, you want to see how they relate to that individual, maybe that's part of your checklist, if you will.

There could be a lot of reasons for why you would want to do that earlier, but I think that the potential to do harm has to be the first consideration and so there are safety issues and there are also issues that have to do with the psychological impact of introducing somebody to a young child and then having them leave and that child not understanding why this person that might have been part of their family is no longer part of their family and sometimes kids will subliminate and say I caused that, I did something wrong. They'll internalize it and see themselves as culpable for why mommy and daddy or whomever are no longer together and that can have a long term psychological impact on a child for a long period of time maybe even to their adulthood. To me, it's not worth it. Why subject a child to that. I think you have to take the high road all the time, and put the interests of the child before anything. Now, different story when you start talking about older children and you can come back to that. I think there's some funny stories, one that someone wrote to you about-- what happens when you tell your adult child, actually.

You know, I am not too far away from Douglas on this one. I do understand certainly when you know women say like I don't want to get too far into this relationship or men say I don't want to get too far into this relationship and then find out that he or she don't work well with my children and my children obviously are the most significant thing in my life and I really do understand the concern you know. But what I would say to Douglas, his point is that know first that you're getting to a point that you imagine yourself staying in a long term relationship with this person before you casually start to introduce them to your children. Now one of the things particularly as your children are smaller that sometimes parents forget is that you are the gateway or the gate for safety where your kids are concerned. You're generally the person that your kids look to, to say OK is he or she OK? Is this person safe? And if you introduce someone into their lives that you have not appropriately screened, vetted, spent time with to get to know who he or she is, and you introduce them to your children only to find out that this is not a healthy person to have in your lives, your child is under the impression that if you brought them in this person is OK. Even though you may not necessarily be suggesting that the person is fine, so that then means that this person now knows what your kids look like, they may have information about where your kids go to school, where you guys live, the list goes on and on. So now, when I see your five year old and I'm like hey Tommy, Hey how you doing? and Tommy's response is to oh hi Paul. You know because it was wonderful when you were around, because of course you were showing your best self then, mommy didn't think that I was ready to explain to that you're not safe, that you're dangerous or whatever the situation may be. So I still... now I'm operating as a five year old, operating under the

impression that this person is safe to have in my life. So it's not to scare people, but we live in a very different world unfortunately with very different values than we used to have, and unfortunately there are people who have predatory behaviors and they utilize that access in ways that we would not want them to, so it becomes important that we are thoughtful about who we bring into the lives of our children, because our children trust us just because we're mom or dad.

That's a really good point. So how should.... well what about the conversation you need to have with the other person before you introduce your child, and what needs to be a part of that conversation. What do you guys need to talk about? I think that that's a wonderful point that you bring in and something that a lot of moms ask. How do II don't want to offend him that I won't bring him around my children, but do you know this somebody who is ready to be a partner to you will respect and appreciate your protection of your children?

That's a value issue if the two of us are about children first, as Douglas referenced. You know that that has to be your priority, then the two of us are on the same page about the fact the whatever we need to do to keep these kids safe while we figure this thing out as grown ups. I'm respectful of what you need and what I may need where our kids are concerned, so I'm not going to be pushing for something that makes you uncomfortable and I'm not going to take it personally that you want to be protective of your kids because if you were the mother of my children I would want you to protect our children. So it really is if that person can't respect that then you're probably not dealing with the right person already, so just be OK with the fact that you have a right as a mom or dad to be protective of your children because that's your first responsibility.

I have a kind of companion point coming from a male perspective and that's the role that men play in relationship to a partner's child and how easily you can flat foot this by trying to be daddy.

Prematurely

Yeah, well I think ever. Whether daddy died, daddy divorced, whatever happened. The relationship between that child and that child's father is their relationship, you can't substitute. You can be paternal, in the sense of caring about being a parent, but when you try to be daddy in an overt way and not just be a good parent and let the natural affection grow..... if a child sees you as a father that's great, but if you insist upon being Dad you insert yourself or assert a premature parental prerogative in the relationship, you're setting yourself up for a problem with whomever you are in a personal relationship with, and you're setting up that child. They're going to be confused.

Well, and also you and your partner, spouse, whatever, need to talk about things like discipline and those issues before hand. I love what you're saying here because I think that I know personally of situations where people have not learned to co- parent in a second relationship... where one parent feels that they have to take up the part of their child, not rationally, and does not allow the other parent to talk to them about how they should handle this situation but makes unilateral decisions. I know of one relationship...I'm familiar with both the Father and the mother, and they both do it in their own way. They don't co parent. They have a tendency to want to have the one to one with their own children and don't leave room to hear what the other parent has to say that may be useful objective input and don't allow there to be a joint decision about what we should do not what you should do and this can really be a very destructive force in a relationship

OK So what about when your child is grown?

You know I'll never forget a friend of mine, when her mother remarried and she at the time she said she was twenty six and she said, Barbara she said, I will never forget I laid out in the middle of the floor and had a temper tantrum she said, I couldn't even believe I did that. My own daughter, who was twenty six, twenty seven at the time also had a very strange reaction to the fact that I was getting married. You know, you just threw this guy on me. You know what I'm thinking, she's a grown woman and she's got her own life so why is this an issue?

And it's a little shocking sometimes to discover that your grown children can behave like such a baby yes?

It's a little shocking, but the beautiful thing about them being grown is that we can have a very grown up conversation about the fact that you get an opinion but you don't get a choice, and you need to know the difference

between those two things. I love you enough to listen to your opinion, but you're going to have to respect me enough as a parent to respect my choice.

So my joking response, as I shared with Barbara earlier, was you know you didn't get to choose the first time. And by the way, whether I made a good choice or made a bad choice that was my choice and you don't get to make it this time. I love you and yes I want there to be a great relationship with this person whom I care about deeply.

And I would say to children, yes, you're always a child. You can always go and sometimes and we know our adult children can revert right but if you love your parent and you want their happiness then let them be happy. It's not your job to pass judgment, it's not your job.

My mother remarried, actually she didn't remarry, she got into a long term relationship with someone that neither my brother nor I thought very highly of, after my father died. And there were some resentments I think about this person coming into that, but I never threw that up to her. And I have to say that part of the reason for it was that she's an adult. She made a choice. This was the person she wanted to be with, this was a person that cared about her evidently and that she cared about, and it was none of my business quite frankly. Would I have wanted, if the circumstances were reversed, for her to tell me no? Of course not.

A very good point. Just truly to remember that when we're doing relationships and we're blending families that it's never going to be perfect, but it can be respectful. We have to understand that each of us is trying to figure out our space, and all of this, but at the end of the day relationships are going to be what relationships are and where kids are concerned you get an opinion but you don't get a choice. Opinions are ok you know but you don't get a vote.

That's another episode of Love Life. As always, we touch on some interesting topics. If you'd like to tell us about your stories please write us at alvean@lovelife.digital, or you can reach me at doug@lovelife.digital. We want to thank Barbara Hamm Lee and Todd Washburn. And we will be back next week with another really interesting conversation, so write us. Bye Bye