

LL56-How to relate to children from a prior relationship

I'm Doug Weiss, and I'm Alvean Lyons, Welcome to Love Life

You know, Alvean I have to confess that I love to read advice columns in newspapers. It's not professional curiosity but I am interested in the kinds of issues that people talk about and one of the more frequent has to do with how to relate to children from a prior marriage, whether that relationship ended as the result of a divorce or a loss of a spouse or parent. This is one of those issues that defies age. It doesn't matter whether the children are young or adults, there are issues.

A lot of the conversation is about etiquette. But etiquette is often used as kind of code language here for what to do in a particular situation? Probably that's a perspective on life in our times, that more and more people are experiencing these issues than they did in my parent's generation when people tended to stay together. So, there are more people who divorce and therefore there are more blended families. We've talked about the challenges of blended families in the past. But I think our challenge today is to really focus on the parent who comes into a relationship, where the children are not theirs. And I turn to you here for some insight: how do you relate to children from a prior relationship?

Alvean:

The answer is very carefully. There is an interesting line in the sand for most people. Biology takes precedence. And this is particularly true when the child or the children belong to the mother, and a new father or significant other is stepping into a relationship with these children. Women can be profoundly protective about their babies, no matter how old the babies are, because they are always their babies. As the new parent, how harsh you are with them, and as a person in an authoritative position how you take on certain things can be fraught with challenges. You may relate to the children, in terms of the tenor of what you say and the tone, in ways that are very similar, but it's interesting how sensitive she may be to you doing that and not at all sensitive to you talking to her in the same way. There's a level of sensitivity that a mom has to her children that requires very cautious navigation.

One of the things that I would recommend early on is to establish ground rules, particularly if you're talking about someone with younger children. Discipline is one of the stickiest subjects so being clear about who will be doing the discipline, what kind of discipline, and how together you will be handling those issues is very important? The next thing is understanding what your respective roles are. Are you supposed to be stepping in as father or mother or are you stepping in as friend? There are different expectations people have about the relationship you will have with their children. So, having some honest dialogue about that early on, is very important. And then knowing that even though those things have been pre-established, at the height of emotion, they may still be abandoned, because the intensity of what we feel can transcend whatever rules we have logically established. Emotions aren't based on logic. They are just how you feel. So in the moment, I may feel one thing and the next something different. I feel like you're letting them run all over. Now I feel like you're not speaking up when you

should. Those are not necessarily logical reactions, they are just emotional. And they're incredibly real. So I always tell people, be careful with what you say, be honest and prepare for the unexpected inside of your relationship. The more you have discussed these things beforehand the better off you are likely to be navigating them later, but it will still be imperfect.

Doug:

What resonates with me is the need for ground rules, setting up some understanding going in about how you're going to parent together. I have a friend who's going through a very difficult time in his relationship and one of the contributing factors, if not one of the most discordant issue has to do with how he and his wife manage the relationships they have with their respective children. One of the things I see playing out there, is what I would call displacement. So, my child has done something that I don't like, and I'm upset with them. But I'm not going to show you that I'm upset with my own child. Instead, I'm going to blame you in some way for their transgression.

To give you an example, I was talking to my friend today about his college age step son who invited his girlfriend to a family event that required an airplane ticket which the mother had agreed to pay for. Husband and wife were both watching a football game when the phone rang. It was the son calling to say that they needed to change the ticket for the girlfriend.

The mother said, okay, and hung up, taking responsibility for making the necessary changes. Unfortunately, dad stepped into it and said, Well, why can't 'Joey' figure out what the alternatives are himself and let you know? Why is he calling you and asking you to be responsible for fixing things? You can imagine what happened. He found himself in the revolving door of accusations and anger. The wife's response was, this is between me and my son. I don't want to hear from you. I bought the ticket, it's my responsibility to fix it.

I'm not trying to take sides in this argument. But it seems to me that it is right at that threshold that you talked about. There's no set of rules that have been established between these two people about how to deal with a situation like this. Was dad wrong to offer input was the mother wrong to respond that way. Knowing these people, I think she was probably upset with her son for not having handled things but because of their history she was darned if she was going to tell her husband that. Instead she went to defensive, my son can do no wrong. I'm going to protect him, and you're wrong for having anything to say about this. You have no status in this situation.

Alvean:

It's a really tough space to navigate sometimes, because there are no perfect ways to be able to do it. There's no recipe that says, If I do two of these, three of the six of these things, bake at 250 degrees for 22 minutes, I am going to get this particular outcome. The reality is that you and your partner need to communicate before these things occur and recognize that you can never predict all of the issues that could potentially arise. So, there won't be rules to accommodate every possible circumstance, but you can recognize that you may struggle in these situations, and it's hard to take input during these times. You may have something really

valuable to say, but you need to let your partner work through it first, and then talk about it afterwards. Being able to be self aware, which is tough sometimes, but to be self aware enough to recognize that there's certain times when we are not at our best will help you recognize when you need to give your partner the space to work through what they are feeling.

As your partner, I would like to be a better version of myself towards you. Because you don't deserve to be at the other end of that gun. But it will happen because when I'm working through things with my kids, I can't hear you clearly. It's not intentional, but it is my reflex response. We have to be honest about how we feel and how we navigate spaces in order to save the person we love, the person we're in partnership with, from unnecessary fire. In the end, the elasticity of the relationship will determine whether or not you can bounce back.

And it's so interesting to me because in my experience, just my experience, we're not talking about science at this moment, men tend to give their women more latitude with their own children than women will give men with their children.

Doug:

Well, let me let me say I'm speaking only from life experience. So I have a very limited perspective but that's what I've observed as well. There is a double standard. Having been in relationships where I was not the birth parent, I learned an important lesson about keeping my own counsel. As we said at the beginning of this conversation there's a minefield into which you step; enter at your own risk. We try to avoid gender classification but I think this is one of those circumstances where it's appropriate. In general men claim a different kind of relationship with their children and are more inclined consciously or otherwise to give their partner more latitude. They tend to be less territorial.

Alvaen:

It may be those nine months that we carry the kids, it is no easy thing.

Doug:

Well the only easy thing that we do is these few minutes that we spend with you every week. They go by all too quickly and we enjoy them so much. We hope you'll be back next week. If you have some thoughts about today's episode. Please write to us at doug@lovelife.digital or alvean@lovelife.digital

We want to thank Kamaria Mason, our producer, Todd Washburn, our Recording Engineer and the entire Love Life family, including you, our listeners. We'll be back next week with another episode. Until then, have a wonderful week. Bye folks.