

Where You Are

S6 Episode 8 — Talking About Step-Parenting, Blended Families and Supporting Kids as New Families Come Together

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Josephine: We always hear that no one gives you a parenting manual, and they definitely don't give you one for stepparenting, but I think a lot of stepparenting is about supporting yourself so that you can support every other member of the family.

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Char Black: This is Where You Are, a podcast that helps families and their children promote their mental health and wellness. I'm Char Black.

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Bryn Askwith: And I'm Bryn Askwith. Every family is unique, and changes to your family structure can be challenging for kids at any age. It can mean redefining existing relationships and perhaps even building new ones. Becoming a stepparent, learning to co-parent, or navigating life in a blended family can be incredibly rewarding and fulfilling, but it can also come with unique challenges for both the adults and the kids involved.

I know, in my family, I can speak to this from a little bit of lived experience. My parents separated, although when I was a teenager, so a little bit later in life, but it definitely came with navigating new relationships, I think, with both my parents trying to work toward connection, but at the same time being a teen when it happened and having limited sense of awareness, as you typically do as a teen at that and stage, I definitely made some observations but probably was a little more in my own world.

All that to say this is a big topic for families, and so I'm glad we're diving into it.

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Char Black: Thanks, Bryn. This is a big topic, and I see it with my partner's family. They have a very blended family, so I'm looking forward to the conversation.

In today's episode, we'll explore how children of different ages experience changing family structures, helpful approaches for supporting children in blended families, navigating co-parenting and managing conflicts, and where parents and caregivers can seek support. Let's get into that conversation.

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Bryn Askwith: Our first guest on the podcast today is Josephine. Josephine is a full-time stepparent to a 13-year-old. Welcome to the show.

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Josephine: Hi. Thanks for having me.

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Bryn Askwith: So glad you're here. Josephine, wondering if you can start by telling us about your experience navigating two families coming together and what this looks like for you now.

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Josephine: I'll start with a little bit of how we became a family. I met my husband and my stepdaughter about 10 years ago. She had just turned four at the time. We got married in 2020 at the height of COVID, and we'd been through all the different custody arrangements, all the different emotions, all the different learnings and growth within ourselves as adults. We've been through a lot.

When we first started, it was every other weekend that we'd see her, and then we switched the arrangement about two years ago where we are now full-time stepparents. And now at the age of 13, for my stepdaughter, we are giving her a lot of autonomy. And if she wants to sleep over at her mom's house, that's totally fine with us. Her constant is here, but we're all pretty flexible. It was a long road, but that's where we're at right now.

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Bryn Askwith: I appreciate you sharing that it is a long road with lots of kind of emotions and big feelings and learnings along the way too. I think that can often be the case for families who might be experiencing parental separation and divorce, but that there's that commitment in your family to those learnings and recognizing that this is a journey and not necessarily a destination.

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Josephine: Definitely. In the beginning, it was really hard, and it still can be hard because kids didn't ask to have two homes. Kids never asked to be a part of the breakdown of their parents' marriage, and no one really knows what they're getting into when it comes to the blended family situation.

We have all come a long way. We used to compete with the other household, and now we've come to a place of just total compassion for each other, and now we're in a place where we just are better at listening.

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Char Black: Thanks, Josephine. I also wanted to welcome our next guest, Kai. Kai is a third-year medical student, and he has been working with the Kelty Center to develop resources to help children and families navigate significant life changes. Welcome to Where You Are, Kai.

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Kai: Thanks so much. Excited to be here.

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Char Black: Are you able to briefly explain how changes in family structures, like becoming a stepparent or a blended family, affect children at different ages?

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Kai: This is such an important question because I don't think anyone really walks into parenthood expecting to have to navigate a major family transition, like a blending of families, a divorce, or even a remarriage, and yet life happens, relationships evolve, and for kids that change can feel really huge. And we also know that kids don't experience these transitions the same way at every age.

A toddler might not have the words to say that, "I feel scared that my family is changing," but they might show it in their behavior. Things like clinginess, maybe having more tantrums than normal, or trouble sleeping. Whereas a school-aged child might be asking a million logistical questions. "Where will I sleep? Will Santa know where to bring my presents?" And for teens, they're more likely to pull away, say, "I'm fine," and process it internally.

Now, I would like to get a little bit into the research because there's a lot of myths out there, and I want to be really clear that divorce and other family transitions themselves don't negatively impact kids, but what does is ongoing conflict. It's uncertainty. Feeling caught in the middle. And studies have shown that when children are exposed to ongoing high-conflict environments, it can increase their risks for anxiety, depression, and even physical health issues. But when parents work to reduce conflict and create a sense of stability, kids do so much better.

No matter the age, I think the core is really the same throughout all age groups. It's the sense of stability, the importance of reassurance, and the space to process their emotions without feeling like they have to take care of their parents' feelings in the process.

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Char Black: Wonderful. Thanks, Kai. And I just wanted to check in with Josephine here. Given what Kai just said about how changes in family structures can impact toddlers, did you notice anything in your daughter when you became a stepparent?

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Josephine: What jumps out to my mind was the sleep part. We co-slept for quite a long time. She was quite clingy, and that was initially something we were thinking about like, "This is interesting," but we recognized it as her needing to feel secure, and so we did co-sleep for a long time. We never wanted to push her toward independence because we kept going back to the empathy piece. She never asked for this, so any way we can support her would be just fine with us.

I think the other thing I would add about toddlerhood is those behaviors ... We were really careful to model the language for her. Even just acknowledging and validating, "You're having a really tough moment right now," or when she didn't necessarily want to leave at the end of the weekend, and she would sort of shut down, I'd say something like, "It's really hard to have two homes, isn't it?" And just that alone without any judgment and without saying, "But," and an explanation, I think that helped her process a lot.

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Char Black: Great. Thank you, Josephine. I want to jump back to Kai. Earlier, you outlined how these changes can affect kids at different ages and the impact that conflict can have on their well-being. I'm just wondering if you can maybe expand on some ways parents and caregivers can support their children.

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Kai: For younger children, I think that these kids are really wired for routine at this point. They don't fully understand divorce, but they feel it. For younger kids, it's important to really keep the message simple by saying, "Mom and Dad love you. You are safe. This is not your fault." And I think consistency is really key at this age range as well in terms of keeping routines as predictable as possible, which can really help them feel secure.

Then for school-age children, this is the stage where I was talking about sort of those logistical questions and asking lots of questions, and I think it's really important to really entertain those conversations. And I think what is often needed most in this age range is really space for open conversations. Asking them how they're feeling, listening, validating their emotions, even if they're angry or frustrated. Instead of dismissing their frustrations, I think it's important to acknowledge it. Maybe you can say something like, "I understand that you're angry. This isn't what you asked for." And I think it's important because it lets kids know that their feelings are real, and they're not alone in them, and parents don't have to always have all the answers, but they really need to create space when feelings are allowed.

One thing that we are a little bit concerned about as kids progress into teens is this idea of parentification, when a teen sort of takes on the emotional burden of being a parent. They might start playing mediator, taking sides, or feeling responsible for their younger siblings. And I think what they need at this life stage is really just permission to be kids. Open, honest conversations. Respect for their autonomy. And it's really important that, as parents, you really model this resilience for your teens as well, even in those difficult times.

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Bryn Askwith: Kai, I really love how you gave some helpful examples in terms of language because I think parents and caregivers who might be going through this and experiencing it with their kids often maybe are looking for, as they will sometimes express when they connect in with the Kelty Center, what's the right thing to say? How can I really connect with my child and support them? I think examples on language are always really, really helpful for our listeners.

Josephine, what was it like figuring out the new role that you would play as a stepparent? Can you maybe give one or two examples of how you support your daughter as a stepparent?

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Josephine: First of all, we always hear that no one gives you a parenting manual, and they definitely don't give you one for stepparenting. I think a lot of stepparenting is about supporting yourself so that you can support every other member of the family, especially your children, your stepchildren, because there is that tension. They have two different sets of rules, two different physical homes, physical beds, two different family cultures, two different value systems that they have to navigate. Any way that we saw that internal struggle, it helped for us to not let her behavior affect us personally. It isn't about us. She's having a tough time.

Some language that was helpful was really being clear about, "That's okay. You can do that at your mom's home. And over here, we do this." An example now that we're dealing with is phones. We don't allow phones in the bedroom, and it has to be outside in the communal areas, and that's different at her other home, and that's okay.

The nonjudgmental piece is about saying, "It's not wrong that your mom doesn't like that over there. It's just different. And over here, we do it this way. Over there, you can do it that way." That consistency and non-judgment of the other parent can really help with that internal stability.

When Kai talked about parentification, and the kids sometimes feel like they have to manage the parent's emotion, when we see that happening, it's like, "You know what? You don't have to worry about hurting my feelings. We can have these conversations, and your mom might think about this in a different way from me, and all of it is okay."

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Bryn Askwith: You are listening to Where You Are. I'm Bryn Askwith. To learn more about changes in family structures and moving forward, including resources that can be helpful to parents and caregivers, visit our website at keltymentalhealth.ca.

Are you busy and overwhelmed supporting your child's mental health and well-being and could use someone to talk to who can relate? Contact a trained Kelty Family Peer Support worker who can offer a non-judgmental listening ear and connect you to mental health resources in your community. Connect by phone, email, or via Zoom. Find out more at keltymentalhealth.ca/contact-us.

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Char Black: I want to jump back to Kai. We often get questions at the Kelty Center about how to manage conflict that can sometimes be a part of or come up in co-parenting. For example, strong feelings and disagreements with parenting approaches.

Do you have any tips for parents and caregivers listening?

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Kai: I first just want to acknowledge that parenting is hard, and I think co-parenting can sort of take it to a whole other level. And when emotions are high, conflict can happen, and it can sometimes be inevitable. But here's the thing. How you handle the conflicts matters more than you think. Conflict is really the thing that gives a lot of children a lot of emotional stress. And sort of having the ability to avoid conflict can be really helpful to give your child a sense of safety and a sense of stability. Every family situation is different, and there's really no one-size-fits-all approach, but I think there are a few practical strategies to sort of help you navigate disagreements in a way that protects your child's well-being.

The first is really to keep the child at the center and not in the middle. Your child is not the messenger. They're not the referee. I think it's important to make a commitment that all co-parenting communication happens between adults and not through your child.

The second thing is to try to shift from a reaction to a response. When tensions rise, it's important to really just take a breath, give yourself space, before replying back to a heated text or email, for example. A simple, "Let me think about that, and I'll get back to you," can really prevent an argument from escalating.

The next thing is setting boundaries for communication. Deciding what works best early on. Whether that's text, email, maybe a co-parenting app, it's important to keep it respectful and businesslike. And you can also think about it as a professional partnership. The goal is cooperation and not control.

The next thing is really never fighting in front of your kids as much as possible. And this one's big because studies show that conflict more than divorce itself is what negatively impacts kids. If things get tense, it's important to really table the discussion for a later time.

And the last thing I want to leave off on is really just giving yourself grace because co-parenting isn't about being perfect. It's about making intentional choices moment by moment that keep your child's wellbeing front and center.

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Char Black: I never heard keeping your child at the center, not in the middle. I love that. Josephine, Kai just shared some insights on managing co-parenting conflicts. What has this looked like in your experience?

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Josephine: I really resonated with what Kai said about keeping it professional. That's what we do. You want the best outcome, and that is the well-being of your child. When there is conflict, we communicate through the written form. It's not always easy to take that breath or to respond versus react, and we've come to learn that it's okay to parallel parent. A lot of it is letting go of what you can't control when your child leaves you and goes back to the other home.

Earlier on in the journey, a lot of the conflicts stem from, "You're not doing what I want you to do in the other household." Once you can let go of that, you really have no control what they do in the other home. It can be pretty liberating. All we can do is focus on making this home a secure place for her. We have our boundaries, reasonable boundaries, age-appropriate boundaries, but also this is also her safe haven.

And I will say for the stepparents, being a united front with your partner, the biological parent, is really key. The biological parent's going to feel the conflict way more than you will. You can be that professional, reasonable person that detaches a little bit, and that's going to be really key in supporting your spouse in those conflicts.

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Bryn Askwith: Josephine, I really resonate with what you're saying there, and I also am wondering ... You've mentioned a couple challenges throughout our conversation. One of the things I'm wondering about from a stepparent's perspective is just maybe a bit around grief or any other kind of feelings or emotions that you may have had to deal with that might be maybe unique to a stepparent role or experience?

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Josephine: I think grief is a big part of the blended family transition for every single member of the family. And for a stepparent, it's especially so because you have to let go of the vision you had of what your family was going to look like, right? Growing up, we all picture our future families to look a certain way, and when you're in a blended family, you have to be flexible, and you have to embrace what your current family actually looks like and acknowledge that that is hard.

Sometimes a stepparent can feel like an outsider in their own home. You won't have a lot of firsts with your spouse. You're not a part of certain memories of your stepchildren. There might be traditions and rich cultural traditions that you've always wanted to pass on to your stepchildren, and maybe there's no room for that, or it's not quite accepted because you also want to make room for them to maintain their traditions from their first family. And all of that can come with heartache.

It's really important for stepparents to get that support, to acknowledge that grief is a big part of the journey, and I would say for your spouse to understand that you did not know what you were signing up for. No one can.

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Bryn Askwith: Absolutely. I think, to your point, I definitely had a blended experience a little bit later, and I've heard some of the things that you've outlined as a stepparent from my stepparents, but there was definitely some hope and some exciting pieces that came to it as well.

Josephine, do you want to just mention what's been helpful to you during this journey that might be helpful to other parents and caregivers listening and how you've supported your own well-being?

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Josephine: I think that's it right there. Support your own well-being as much as you can, and that might mean having a supportive community that you can turn to. It might be finding professional help. We are a big therapy family. Every single one of us is in individual therapy. We're also in couples therapy. We also do family therapy together, and it's been great. It has been exactly what we needed for our family to grow into what it looks like today. Find your people. Find your community. Find the community that also understands your lived experience of stepparenting. Find other stepmoms. Personally, I have a community online that we'll commiserate together but also focus on that resilience piece.

I will say it's really important to filter out some of the more negative-leaning communities. It's very easy to connect through negativity, but that'll make it a lot harder to be resilient in all of this.

Also, my spouse has been incredible in this journey. He kind of has my back. Even when I'm not there, especially when she was going through the phase of, "You're not my mom," and all of that, he'll say, "She really loves you. These are the ways that she takes care of you. And she's not your mom, but she is a trusted adult, and you can lean on her." Him having my back, legitimizing my role, it brought us closer as a family unit, and I am so fortunate that my stepdaughter and I have a beautiful relationship, and that's my priority.

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Char Black: Thanks so much, Josephine.

Kai, hearing what Josephine shared about her own support systems, where can families navigating changing family structures go to seek support?

Are there any other resources you would like to share?

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Kai: Absolutely. Asking for help is a great thing to do, and it's certainly not a sign of weakness. There are a number of resources out there right now, and parenting through a big transition isn't something you have to figure out alone. There are people who want to help and get it.

I think the first resource that I'll share is the Kelty Mental Health Family Peer Support workers. Sometimes the best support can come from people who've walked a similar path. And Kelty's Family Peer Support workers offer guidance and validation and lived experiences to help you navigate these challenges. That's a great resource to check out.

Josephine was mentioning seeking therapy and potentially counseling and professional help in that way. That could be a potentially good avenue to walk toward.

Another one is really the community support groups, whether it's sort of in person or online. I think connecting with other parents who are going through similar experiences can be a real game changer. I think it's important to look for support groups in your own community. Sometimes just knowing that you're not alone can really make all the difference.

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Bryn Askwith: Thanks so much, Kai. Getting toward the end of our time together today, we'd like to end all of our episodes by asking our guests for any words of wisdom that they might have.

Josephine, love to start with you. Any words of wisdom you'd like to share with our parents or caregivers who might be walking a similar journey?

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Josephine: I think just let go of what you can't control. Trust yourself. Trust your kids. Lean on your support systems. Above all, prioritize your relationships with yourself, with your spouse, with your stepchildren.

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Bryn Askwith: Kai, any words of wisdom you'd like to share?

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Kai: I think, first, just acknowledging that transitions are hard and that kids don't need perfection, and they're very resilient. Instead of perfection, they really need presence, and you don't have to have all the answers. You just really need to show up and listen.

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Bryn Askwith: So true. We're all doing our best on any day, and keeping that child-centered approach is definitely essential. Thanks so much to both of you for joining us on the episode, and we look forward to potentially more conversations on Where You Are with you both.

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Kai: Thanks for having us.

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Josephine: Thanks for having us.

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Char Black: Thanks to our Where You Are listeners for tuning in today. We're grateful to have you join us each episode.

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