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BLENDING FAMILY

Interview

Announcer: Parenting can be pretty challenging at times but bringing two families together to form a new one raises the stakes. I'm Richard Fox and this is Messages Of Hope. When two established families join together, there's a lot of stuff to work out. Each family is used to their own parenting styles - in the way they discipline, solve problems and meet expectations. Today I'm talking with Mark and Beth about how they managed to bring their families together. They both had two children from their previous marriages. Mark's were in their late teens and Beth's were primary school age. Thanks for joining us Mark and Beth. What would you say were your biggest challenges in blending your two families together?

Mark: Well one of the biggest challenges initially was actually that we both had sons who were called Paul!

Beth: There was no way the youngest one was going to be little Paul. And it's just as well because he's six foot five now and bigger than what would have been big Paul. I think the biggest challenge was the difference in parenting styles. His kids, at my kid's age, were very different.

Announcer: In what way were they different?

Beth: Well for one thing they would sleep anywhere and everywhere whereas my kids, anything that made them anxious, they just didn't sleep. So I remember lots of arguments about the way in which you put kids to bed. And I had a son who's a very fussy eater and Mark's kids would eat anything.

Announcer: So how did you handle the differences in parenting style?

Beth: To a certain extent we both parented our own kids when it came to discipline. But we both decided we wanted to be active parents with the other kids. Now that decision for me was very different to the decision for Mark because of the difference in ages of the kids.

Mark: Well I think the hardest thing I found was with Paul junior my style before was just I've told you what to do you just do it you know. And my opinion is always right and yours isn't, you're only a kid. Whereas Beth would say "no you go and work it out." Just because you're an adult doesn't mean you just have the right to say that's it. And I think that was probably the most difficult thing for me. Because the path is unknown and you don't necessarily have a feel for it doesn't mean it can't still work and you still get to a place better than perhaps you were before. Somehow Paul junior and I got through it.

Announcer: Tell us more about the area of discipline. How strict or relaxed could you be?

Beth: Being strict for me was about boundaries and consequences for going over those boundaries. Being strict for Mark was about, as he said, do it because I said so. And we eventually came to a place where Mark was happier to deal with boundaries. Would that be fair?

Mark: Yes. The biggest learning I had was to work out the difference between boundaries and having your own way I think. So rather than being autocratic, what I said had to go, rather saying no there's a boundary here that that's my boundary and to be flexible with anything until I get to that boundary. And I think that helped me in a lot of other areas too.

Beth: They helped us in our marriage. We read boundaries in marriage.

Mark: It's also what took us beyond, you know, when you both get married you do come across the walls that were obstructing in your marriages before and you could end up in the same place that you were having your disagreements with the previous relationship. If you haven't worked out a way to get through the walls that you hit before in your relationships. And so boundaries is one of the things that helped us go beyond our previous relationships and go further into overcoming some of the obstacles.

Announcer: Can you explain more about what boundaries are?

Beth: I suppose boundaries are the fence you put around yourself to keep safe emotionally and the fences you put around your kids to keep them safe as well. I suppose we both learned where that fence was with each other and with the kids and when things got beyond that fence we did something about it. We didn't accept things getting beyond the fence.

Announcer: What kind of boundaries did you set?

Beth: I think we set boundaries about arguments. Personal attacks weren't going to be part of it. That it was ok to yell at each other but not in a personal way, not in an attacking way. Yeah and there were just some places you just didn't go. We both had weaknesses and we tried to steer away from each other's weaknesses in setting boundaries about how you solve issues because there were years worth of issues and there still are issues. You know I always say in a second marriage nothing's ever simple. It's always doable but it's always more complicated.

Announcer: You're listening to Messages of Hope and I'm talking with Mark and Beth about the challenges they faced in blending together their two families. Is there any particular issue that stands out from your experience?

Beth: It's a funny thing when you join two families and two houses. You don't mean to be but you're actually really quite threatened about trying to maintain territory. When Mark and Lisa and Paul moved in you know there was all this sorting about what we would throw out and what we'd keep. And that was very territorial in hindsight wasn't it? You know like, who's egg flip will we keep? It was very, very territorial.

Mark: That was my favourite egg flip, can't throw that one out!

Beth: It's my favourite bucket you know. When you get past that physical territorial stuff then you have to move on to the emotional territorial stuff and spiritual territorial stuff. You know, like I'll give a bit here and you give a bit, you know. It's the giving I suppose. Someone said to us you've got to give more than 50 percent to make the marriage work. And I think we learned fairly early that we both had to give a lot more than 50 percent to make it work.

Announcer: The idea of giving up more than 50 percent sounds a bit unfair.

Beth: I wouldn't say we gave up more than 50 percent territory but we learned to give emotionally to each other more than 50%.

Mark: I can explain that 50 percent too because you think you're giving up 50 percent but you actually haven't given up 50 percent. You've given up what you think is 50 percent but that 50 percent is the things you don't really value. You actually have got to give up 50 percent of the things, starting with the things you really value the most. You follow what I mean? It's sort of like the 50% you think you're giving away is not the real estate that's really important. So I would say to you, say in any relationship really if you feel it's a 50/50 relationship your relationship is in trouble. You've got to feel as if you're giving around about 80 percent. If you're giving 80 percent in your relationship you're about right and you both have got to feel as if you're giving up 80 percent. That's how much you need to be listening to one another and the value of territory you're giving up to one another.

Announcer: You've talked about different kinds of territory. Can you explain them further, starting with emotional territory?

Beth: Part of emotional territory is having your own way. In a lot of ways Mark and I are opposites. You know I'm really well organised. Before he moved in I knew where everything was, I was very careful with money. I was very independent from being a single mother. I could change tap's, I could drill a hole and put a screw in. I could do a lot of things. That all changed for me. I now, well I rang Mark this morning at five to nine and said do you know where the keys are? I don't know where anything is half the time! And that was very hard to begin with, giving that up. I think that happens with age too just knowing which battles to fight and which not too.

Announcer: Let's move on now to spiritual territory.

Beth: We had many arguments about faith and God and I think the arguments were generally productive but I had to come to a place that my experience wasn't everyone else's experience and Mark had to do the same thing.

Mark: And I think God has placed things in our path which has sort of brought us together in some of those areas.

Announcer: Tell us more about how you feel God has supported you in blending families together?

Mark: Oh I think God is part of everything really. At the end of the day what we're talking about, God is never absent. He is speaking to us through all sorts of ways. And he is always informing us of things that he wants to say to us through other people, through what we're reading, as we go. And I guess you really can't put a value on all those little bits of knowledge that he gives you in this journey.

Beth: I think it starts with a sense and an understanding of how much God has given you and how much God has forgiven you. That gives you a huge sense of God's grace which you can then give out. It's like the jug that gets stuff poured in then pours it out. He pours it in to us and we pour it out to each other. And I think we've got better at Grace as our marriage has got longer. I think this letting go of defensiveness when we talk has a lot to do with grace.

Mark: God has been before us. He's in front of us. He's behind us. He's with us you know in what he's doing with people. And I think we're always looking to put up barriers whereas God is actually trying to break down all those sorts of things.

Beth: That does help defensiveness doesn't it. As your experience of faith grows you learn to trust the Holy Spirit more, you're less defensive.

Mark: So the only one who can heal and open up doors where both of us are not able to or our kids aren't able to is God. He opens the doors and somehow changes our hearts, works out ways that we can sort of find a common thread to cling to again to go forward.

Beth: I look back and you know it's only by the grace of God that we are where we are I think.

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