Bob: Sometimes there are reasons why children of divorce no longer want to have an ongoing relationship with one of their biological parents. Sometimes that estrangement is the result of one parent alienating the children from the other parent. Rodney Webb is a divorced dad who would love to have a relationship again with his kids.

Rodney: I haven’t seen them for two years and it hurts. The last time I tried, I sent their mother a message and said that I would like to explore the rekindling of a relationship with them. If they were interested in that and willing, then I thought that we could go to see a counselor and to start the process of rekindling a relationship. She replied and said that she’d talked to the children about it and it wasn’t something that they wanted to pursue.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Friday, August 2nd. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson; I'm Bob Lepine. What if anything can a mom or dad do if they have been cut off from their children post-divorce? We’re going to have that conversation today. Stay with us.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us. So have you guys joined the ranks of regular podcasts consumers? I mean are you listening to podcasts on a regular basis?

Dave: Yes, every week.

Ann: I do.

Dave: I guess that’s regular.

Ann: I do a workout and listen to a podcast every day. Well, not every day.

Bob: Are you using the app on your phone and just downloading podcasts you’d like to listen to?

Ann: Yes.
Bob: Have you added Ron Deal? I guess you’re not in a blended family so it’s not like it’s something you’d listen to regularly out of your own need. But you know as people who are involved in the lives of husbands and wives/moms and dads we need to know how to help our friends. We need to know how to empathize with what’s going on with the blended families in our church, in our community, and in our neighborhood.

Ron Deal’s new podcast *FamilyLife Blended,*—we have a lot of people who have started listening to this—pretty excited about it. They are benefiting if they’re in a blended marriage or family, but they’re also benefiting by helping people they know who are in stepfamilies, and as a pastor you know that’s huge.

Dave: Oh I was going to say how critical it is to have wisdom, help, practical advice available, and now a podcast. Every time I talk from the pulpit about any relationship issue, I have to know a good percentage of my audience is blended or separated or second marriage. So you have to address all of those, and now we have a podcast that goes “We have help for you.”

Ann: I don’t think the church has done a great job of helping the blended family, so this is such a great resource.

Bob: Well and I love the fact that anytime I’m talking to somebody who’s in a blended marriage, or I’m speaking to a large audience, I can say: Here’s what will help. Get a copy of Ron Deal’s book, *The Smart Stefamily,* start listening to his new podcast, *FamilyLife Blended.* You can just offer them something that you know if they start listening to this, it’s going to help them significantly. This is like getting continuing education for your stepfamily.

Ron sat down recently for one of the episodes in his podcast with Helen Wheeler who is a licensed professional counselor. She works a lot with couples who are going through separation/divorce/stepfamily situations and together, Ron and Helen had a conversation with Rodney and Lisa Webb. Rodney and Lisa give leadership to FamilyLife Blended® in New Zealand.

We’ve got a ministry to blended families in New Zealand. Rodney and Lisa are leading that and they’re working together with Ron. They talked about the fact that for Rodney and Lisa there have been some significant challenges with their stepfamily relationship. Most significantly, they’ve had to deal with ex-spouses who have created alienation and division and separation with the children—the biological children—causing them to not want to relate to a former spouse or to a new stepparent.

Lisa: We’ve got five children between us. We’ve had four of them, four of them alienated. My youngest girl is the only one that stayed and then transverse between the two houses and having to deal with the negativity from the other house and then also
her older sisters once she chose to stay and remain 50-50. It’s so complex and so heartbreaking.

Ron: Rodney, tell us a little bit about your family. Paint a picture for our listener.

Rodney: I’ve got two children. I’ve got a boy and a girl, 14 and 17 at the moment. Lisa’s got three daughters. That’s the five children between us. They’re all pretty close in age.

Ron: How long have you guys been married?

Rodney: That’s, uh—you’re putting me on the spot. [Laughter]

Lisa: It’s funny. He’s not very good with all these dates. We’ve been—next year it’ll be five years. We’ve been married for four and a half years so far, but together for six and coming up to seven. Early next year will be seven.

Ron: Did this distancing, this alienation, if I can use that word, with your children, had that started before you guys got married? Or really has it started just since you’ve been married?

Lisa: Well, we were actually—we weren’t living together but we were together for about two years. At that time, my ex-husband was living overseas. That first two years it was really actually quite good. I mean, we had the trying to blend the kids together, but we did not have any influence of people speaking negatively to them at the other house.

But when my ex-husband came back to New Zealand and then he actually met a partner probably six months after that, that’s when things just changed. His way that he was interacting with me, it changed. It was very aggressive. It was sort of like, “What’s going on here?”

The stepmom coming onboard on the other house. Then we’ve also had the challenge of that Rodney’s ex-wife and her partner became socially friends with my ex-husband and his partner.

Ron: And they started talking.

Lisa: That just became—I can’t even put the words—because the kids would be socializing. The five of them would be socializing at the other houses. Then the four adults would just be going hammer in tongue about Rodney and I. My girls, before the alienation started to fully come in, they would come back and go, “Ben and Courtney’s mom has just made a life out of hating Rodney. That’s all she talks about.”

We would hear this stuff coming back. You’re just sitting there going—you start communicating going, “Well, it’s probably not a good idea to do this. Why don’t we just keep this stuff up at our level?” That just seemed to inflame things ridiculously.
Ron: Even more.

Lisa: Yes.

Ron: So when you started, Rodney, when you started hearing those things, what did you do?

Rodney: We were between a rock and a hard place, because I was thinking at the time, that you’re probably better off just to let it ride. You’re not really in a position where you can confront other parties that are saying it.

Ron: It almost makes you look bad if you do confront.

Rodney: Yes, that’s right—in a position where you just add fuel to the fire.

Ron: You know, I often say you have some influence, actually quite a bit of influence, when you’re married to somebody. You have far less influence when you are no longer married to somebody. That just begins to dissipate fast.

Even though you were saying, “You know what, we’ll just deal with our household and be in charge of that. We’ll be good over here—assume that they will do that over there.” That’s not what was happening. They were getting into your business. They were altering the relationship between you and your kids.

Rodney: Yes.

Lisa: Absolutely. That became—we couldn’t quite understand it. The children, my girls, would come back—probably yours were a little bit more silent and that’s a whole other story too. After we’ve progressed through the alienation, my girls have started to come back, but Rodney’s children—nothing, nothing for the last two years. Like nothing, even though we’ve tried now to contact and stuff like that. But they were silent about it.

My girls were very vocal. They were very angry. They would scream into my face and you’d be going, “Can we just talk about this? Let’s just step back and let’s just talk about this."

Ron: Okay, let me just make sure I’m understanding—scream into your face, repeating the things that they had heard or that they were upset about what they had heard?

Lisa: Yes, I think there was a bit of a journey with that. Once he actually got involved with another partner, the tone of it just changed. The way that he spoke to me or communicated to me was quite aggressive.

Then my girls would come back and say, “Oh Mum, Mum just tell me what happened from your point of view. What happened in the divorce?” This is while putting them to
bed at nighttime. You’re lying in bed with them, talking about stuff as you do, and it’s like, “Oh Mum, just tell me from your point of view.”

I was like, “Girls,” or whichever one I was talking to, “it’s not really for you. Let’s just wait until you grow up a little bit.” “No, no, no, just tell me about this bit.” Probably stupidly on my behalf you sort of, when you’re in that sort of close situation, you’re thinking, oh well, “Look this is blah, blah, blah.”

Then they’d go off and talk to Dad, and Dad would say, “Your mom’s a liar.” Then they would come back and say, “Dad says you’re a liar, Mum. You’re a liar.”

Ron: They would begin to repeat that.

Lisa: Absolutely. They did, “You’re a liar. You’re not doing this, and you’re not doing that.” I’m like, “But I’m doing everything the same.” Then, I also had the complication that Mark’s partner, she would text them when they were with me.

We were starting to have challenges with, like for example, one of them wanted to go back and do jazz-ballet. This would have been the third time that she started jazz-ballet and she quit after the first time every time. Anyway, so you had this, I’m like, “Well, no, let’s not do that yet.” “I want to do this.” I’m like, “Well, blah-” As you do, you—the negotiation starts.

Then the other house is like, “Well, why won’t you let her do it?” Then she’ll come back. Then she’ll be getting texts from the stepmom saying, “Oh, I don’t know why your mum is being so difficult about this. I would let you do it. I love you so much. We think you’re amazing.” I saw these texts so you’re having all this undercurrent stuff happening. Then the children—they’re so angry. I mean I can still see their eyes being so angry with me, “Why don’t you let me do it?”

Ron: And the manipulative message there is, “We love you. Your mom doesn’t.”

Lisa: Absolutely.

Ron: That’s their anger coming through. They’re reacting as if you don’t love them. Somehow, they’ve forgotten all the things that you’ve done for them through the years and the quality of the relationship and now all of a sudden, they see you as somebody who doesn’t love them, and they feel it’s unfair and mistreated.

Lisa: Yes.

Ron: Well again, I just want to remind our listener that we’re talking today about really difficult co-parenting situations including when there’s alienation going on.
Helen, let me come back to you for a minute. I think we have to come back for a second and just go, “Okay, wait a minute. What’s going on here?” Now I know you can’t talk specifically. Let’s not talk about Rodney and Lisa’s situation. But when parents do this type of thing and they are manipulating their child and it’s not a personality-disorder related, why would somebody do this?

**Helen:** I think there’s a couple things in action. Sometimes when we’ve got a stepmom, the stepmom wants to come in and be the mom. Then there’s this competition that goes on—who’s the best mom? So there’s, I think, there’s probably some of that.

And with women, a lot of times when they get a new man in their life, this new man wants to fix everything—again I’m using air quotes there. He wants to fix everything so he’s going to come in and try and take over. She is going to let him.

Something I wanted to come back to with you, Lisa, and not talk to you only, because I see this a lot, is you want to defend yourself. We end up talking about the content of what the kids are saying rather than the hurt / the pain / the frustration / the confusion. “I’m sorry you feel that way. It looks like you’re really confused. I can see that you’re caught in the middle.”

Join them with empathy rather than trying to tell them, “No, you got the wrong story.” Because in a way you’re saying to them, “Yes, but you’re lying. What you’re saying is not true.” It’s a really difficult—there’s a lot of counterintuitive stuff. That’s one of them where you actually don’t correct them. You just join them on the pain, the confusion, and frustration that they’re feeling.

**Lisa:** I was confused. I was hurting because my children were being ripped away from me. I had that emotions of—and I didn’t know what to do. Like I wasn’t fully aware of what was happening and what the impact of this negative talk was. I was still right back at the beginning. It was very confusing, and I had to deal with my own emotions.

My kids would be upset with me but then I would respond to that. I would be crying. I’d have to run out of the room and go to my room and cry. I just didn’t know how to handle it. I didn’t have anything in my toolbox.

**Helen:** An empathetic way of handling that particular thing would be to say, “It must be terrible for you to feel like I don’t love you. I do love you and I always will.”

**Ron:** Of course, that assumes you can get past your own panic and then tune in to what’s going on with the child. I agree that that’s the ideal response but that is a very, very difficult situation in which you have to hold on to your tears, in your case Lisa, and set them aside and try to respond to the child.

I want to just stop for a minute and talk to the listener who may be in, Rodney, in your shoes. Lisa said her kids have reconnected, but your kids still haven’t.
Rodney: No, they haven’t.

Ron: As you sit and listen to us talk about this, I’m wondering what’s going on in your heart.

Rodney: It’s pretty hard. I love my kids.

Ron: Yes.

Rodney: One of the interesting differences between Lisa and I is that my kids, they were quiet. I didn’t really know what was going on in their world in terms of where they stood with the alienation. I knew that they were hearing things about me and things about Lisa that weren’t right. I didn’t know the depth of it. I was an active father—active in their life. I believed that they actually knew me and that my relationship with them was the most important thing and that they saw that and no matter what other people said, that they actually were secure in their knowledge of our relationship.

Then it proved not to be the case. Yes, so I haven’t seen them for two years and it hurts.

Ron: Do you have any contact with them?

Rodney: No. No, I haven’t. The last time I tried, I sent their mother a message and said that I would like to—it’s been two years—I’d like to explore the rekindling of a relationship with them. If they were interested in that and willing, then I thought that we could go to see a counselor and to start the process of rekindling a relationship.

She replied and said that she’d talked to the children about it and it wasn’t something that they wanted to pursue.

Ron: The waiting. That’s just got to kill you.

Rodney: It does. It really does. But I mean I’m—I guess part of what you do as a Christian is you go back to the Word and you use the Word as your yardstick for your life and for where you are and how you should respond in certain situations.

I guess I draw some comfort from the story of the prodigal son. The father brought up two sons. I would assume he brought them up both the same. They’re in the same household. As you know, one of them decided he wanted his inheritance and he went off, had nothing to do with his father or his brother anymore, went off and lived his own life and did his own thing.

Even though my children haven’t received an inheritance and they’re not adults and haven’t made a willing decision in such a way as he did to go off and squander things,
they are still removed from me—they are removed from the relationship with me just like the prodigal son removed himself from his father’s relationship.

The father didn’t go chasing after him. The father remained available. He still loved him. He was ready, willing, and able to accept him for what he was and who he was when he came back, and he remained healthy.

For me, I really see that that’s how I have to be. I have to maintain a healthy relationship—healthy relationship with Lisa / healthy relationship with the other children that are in my life / healthy relationship with God. Be the healthy person / healthy parent for when or if they decide to actually rekindle the relationship.

[Studio]

**Bob:** Well, we’ve been listening to an episode of Ron Deal’s podcast, *FamilyLife Blended*. I want to encourage our listeners if you’d like to hear the entire conversation and hear Ron and Helen and Rodney and Lisa talk about the huge breakthrough that happened in Lisa’s relationship with her daughter, and hear Helen talk about never giving up on your relationship with your kids even if there is alienation, go to FamilyLifeToday.com and get information about the *FamilyLife Blended* podcast.

There are a number of episodes available you can listen to / you can subscribe to it, along with other FamilyLife podcasts. Again, go to FamilyLifeToday.com for more information on the FamilyLife Podcast Network. I just have to tell you guys that kiwi accent I could listen to that all day long. [Laughter]

**Ann:** Me too.

**Dave:** I was thinking the same thing. What a beautiful, deep voice.

**Bob:** But what a challenge.

**Dave:** Oh man.

**Ann:** What a challenge.

**Bob:** What a challenge to be alienated from your kids because an ex-spouse is poisoning the well, or saying things that aren’t true, or just trying to drive a wedge between you and them and trying to know how do I deal with this in a way that honors God? How do I deal with it in a way that heals the hurt in my own heart that I’m experiencing? This is a real difficult path for folks to be on.

**Ann:** I think it would be one of the most difficult paths for a parent to be alienated from their children and it would be really hard not to become bitter and hopeless. So I love
that as we put our eyes on Jesus that can help but also have some practical tools of what that looks like.

**Dave:** Yes, I was thinking the chaos / the anger / the resentment / the hardened heart that happens and yet Rodney takes us to one of the most beautiful stories in scripture and is pointing toward the father of a prodigal son. You know that father in that story in Luke 15 feels the same thing as his son rebels and walks away. And yet, he gives us a picture of the Father’s heart which is—Rodney’s point is like “Okay, what would it look like for me who’s been hurt to run to the mailbox / run down the road after even my former spouse you know that’s the one stopping what I want.” That’s impossible apart from the heart of the Father being our heart.

So it’s like every parent out there / every blended family is like “Man, that’s where you go. You’ve got to fall on your face and ask God to give you His heart.” Otherwise you’ll just live in bitterness and that’s no way to live, and your kids will be the result of that and feel that. And yet, if you get the Father’s heart, it’s possible: God’s heart can transform our heart—to soften us to a place where God can bring something beautiful out of this mess.

**Ann:** That’s the grace of God.

**Bob:** And you guys know in October, Ron Deal and the FamilyLife Blended team are putting together an event. *The Summit on Stepfamily Ministry* is going to be held in Chesapeake, Virginia October 24th and 25th. The theme this year is “Stepfamilies in Crisis.” This is an event designed to help people in ministry, whether it’s in a local church or in para church ministry, those who are helping to work with blended families to help know how to navigate families that are experiencing this kind of crisis. You can find out more about the 2019 *Summit on Stepfamily Ministry.* Again, the dates October 24th and 25th in Chesapeake, Virginia. Go to FamilyLifeToday.com for more information. There is special pricing available now. So again, go to FamilyLifeToday.com and the information is available there.

You know as I said, our goal here at FamilyLife is to help strengthen marriages and families to effectively develop godly marriages and families. Whatever your family situation is today, we want it to be a marriage and family that honors and glorifies God, and to that end our team has put together a fitness guide for marriages this summer. There’s no heavy lifting involved, no weights, and no jogging. Although there’s strength training and cardio. I mean we’re talking about getting your heart racing a little faster and about strengthening your marriage relationship.

This “Stronger Forever” marriage fitness guide is available for a free download and we’ve had a ton of these downloaded already. I think the reason is because when you download, you become automatically eligible—You’re automatically entered in a contest and one couple is going to win a week on the *Love Like You Mean It* marriage cruise in February of 2020. There’s no purchase necessary to enter. The contest began back on
July 1, 2019; it ends on August 30, 2019. Official rules can be found at FamilyLife.com/StrongerForever. So strengthen your marriage this summer and maybe, we'll see you on the Love Like You Mean It marriage cruise in 2020.

And we hope you have a great weekend. Hope you and your family are able to worship together in your local church this weekend. I hope you can join us on Monday when we're going to talk about how we can help young men grow into greatness. Dr. Gary Chapman will be here along with our friend and FamilyLife Weekend to Remember speaker Clarence Shuler. They've written a book that's designed to engage teenage young men around these subjects, and we'll talk about that Monday. Hope you can join us for that.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our hosts, Dave and Ann Wilson, I'm Bob Lepine. We will see you back next time for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

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