

Ep_24_What_about_the_kids

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children's impact, addiction disclosure, family dynamics, emotional regulation, age-appropriate information, parental honesty, sibling communication, professional involvement, emotional validation, adult children, relapse consequences, parental separation, emotional support, recovery journey, safe people

SPEAKERS

Pam B., Bonny, Lyschel



Pam B. 00:00

Music. Hi. I'm Pam Blizzard from recovered peace, and



Lyschel 00:05

I'm Lachelle Burkett with hope redefine, and



Bonny 00:08

I'm Bonnie burns of strong wives. We're so glad you're joining us. Welcome to another episode of hope for wives. Today we are discussing a very tender and complicated topic, what is appropriate to disclose to your children about your husband's problematic sexual behavior? We want to remind you that we are not therapists, we are coaches. We will be giving you what we understand, our best practices, and you can reach out to us for further discussion, or you can contact a licensed therapist who is appsat certified to explore this topic. The link to the database of appsat certified clinicians will be in the show notes. Our first question of the day is, what are your personal experiences and how your children were affected by the addiction?



Pam B. 01:06

So I have a story on April 17 of 2017 my 15 year old son, who's on the autism spectrum, very high functioning, came to the breakfast table and said how disappointed he was that his attempt to take his own life had failed, got our attention, and so a few things ensued over the next few days, of us trying to get him help and not the the right help wasn't available, and so we struggled, and My husband and I struggled with our communication. We were both obviously having a lots of big emotions around what was happening, and it was just about two

or three weeks later that I had had my last, most recent discovery, that my husband had actually relapsed. And I can look back and see how our communication and our parenting and our attempt, to quote, help our son was really very controlling, and a big part of my son's behavior had to do with all of the family dynamics that were going on because of my husband's addiction and because of my frustration and my stuffing and not knowing what to do, we ended up separating, having lots of discussions, trying not to make any snap decisions. One thing I know is that my son absolutely could tell something was going on. He knew things weren't normal with mom and dad. He knew things were different. He knew things were tense. He didn't know what was going on. He had some really, really big, adult sized emotions, but he didn't have the adult logic brain to process those emotions. And the best thing my husband did was sat us all down and said, We love you, Mom and Dad. Are going through some things. I hurt your mom, and this has nothing to do with you. I made really bad decisions. I did some bad things. So I'm going to be living out of the house for a while, but I we want you to know that we both love you. We are both here for you. If you ever need me, I'm just a phone call away. We didn't go into detail, and my son and I had dinner together alone later that night, and he tried to press me for details, and I didn't give him any. And I kept saying, go ask your dad. That's your dad's story to tell. If you want to go to Him and ask Him and He wants to share with you what's going on with him, that's his story to tell. That worked out really well for us. I think that gave our son a level of comfort. We immediately saw our son relax. We just saw his demeanor change. He became more light hearted. Prior to that, there had been yelling and screaming in the driveway and me saying, This is not normal. We're all going to therapy because of our emotions. We're out of weren't just weren't regulated well. We weren't acting like grown adults, we were struggling with our emotions and communication, and I'm sure it trickled down to him. He didn't feel safe. So

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Lyschel 04:31

my kids have been on this journey for their whole lives. It's been a part of their whole story, because my husband's addiction and behaviors came out before we had kids, but there was a particular season where my husband had a relapse after five years of sobriety. And at that time, we had a four year old, a three year old and a six month old, and so as a result of the relapse, we had already had a boundary that if there was a relapse, that he would leave the house for a period of time. And that was an excruciating season for. For me personally, but also for my kids. So I feel like like Pam, was able to offer some perspective around more of an adult or teenage son, even though he may not have been processing motions quite that way. I think in that particular season, the best that I knew to do was to answer the questions that and make them age appropriate answers. I did discuss with the kids that Daddy was not going to be at the house for a period of time. And I remember my oldest daughter, who was four at the time. She's a bit of a truth teller, and so she I think we actually saw him at church, and she said, Daddy. She said, I don't know what you did to hurt mommy so bad, but you better make it right. And that was the straight up truth and and he was, he was broken and hurting, definitely working towards restoration. My kids are now those, those those kids that were at that age are now tweens and teenagers, and they really don't remember it. I've asked them before, like, do you remember the season where dad was gone, and they really don't remember it, but it was a really it was a hard, hard season, and it was a really sweet season for me, personally, navigating that season pushed me right back into the arms of Jesus. I needed him to be my Sustainer. I needed him to be my husband. I needed him to show up in ways that I had, that I would have expected my earthly husband to show up because he was absent. I think communicating with our kids is the greatest gift that we can give them. It's funny now having teenagers, there aren't nearly as many questions. Now, it's kind of like I oftentimes will find

myself being more forthcoming with information that I assume they want to know, and then waiting for the follow up questions. They don't really seem to have as many questions in this particular season. But as my kids have gotten older, and we've had to navigate other season, other hard seasons, it's interesting how our kids will tell us something without telling us something, and telling us that something's wrong without telling us something's wrong. One of my sons has began to have a lot of trouble with school, but it wasn't his grades, it was relationships. All of a sudden, nobody at school liked him. Nobody at school wanted to play with him. His teachers didn't like him. So on and so forth. When you're so close to the issue, like Pam was kind of sharing in our own story. When you're so close to the issue, it's really hard for you to see that from a higher level or bigger perspective. Honestly, the result was, is that there was, there has been, throughout the different seasons, lots of chaos and confusion, also in our relationship, trying to move into recovery and stay in recovery and heal and grow, and in that confusion, I think our kids don't know how to sort that out and then go into their other environments and it not impact them. Well, my baby, my kids were babies, and we navigated separation. All their needs were still met like they didn't, so I think that's part of why there wasn't a huge impact for them, emotional needs for them as little people wasn't as pivotal and instrumental as it is when they're tweens and teenagers, right? Because when she's four, she's like, well, who's going to color with me? And we just find a substitute, and it's fine, but when you're 13, and Dad always does math homework with you, and now all of a sudden he's not there like you. You've got to be mindful about that. And there's so much grace. I feel like we there needs to be so much grace for families who are navigating these types of things. It's like even I think about the families who have known about some of our hard seasons, and some of them have tried to show up in really, really big ways. And others just don't even bother to ask questions, because they just assume nobody wants they just the the phrase is, I just didn't think you want anybody in your business, and you're just like, but I'm desperate for help, right? And so I just, I want to throw that out there. Don't, don't assume, don't assume that that family is isolating because they don't want people around. They're isolating because they're surviving.

B

Bonny 09:05

My personal experience, navigating telling the children was a failure. So our very first discovery was early, 2000s it might have been 2002 so I had two middle two middle schoolers and a high schooler, young high schooler. And so instead of waiting for the person with the addiction to come and be ready to do this, mom mandated a family meeting, granted, I'm gonna just lavish myself in that grace that Lachelle just talked about, because there was not a lot of resources at the time, especially in a very small town in North Carolina. So we muddled the best we could, but we sat down and kind of had a one and done. There wasn't ongoing talk about it. There wasn't I. Uh, additional questions, at least that I heard, I will say that we didn't keep a secret, which I think would have probably been even worse, because I think children do understand something is going on, and by keeping a secret, it's just not honest, it's not helping build an intimate relationship. Right? With that foundational piece of honesty, plus secrets around sexual addiction also kind of condone the sexual addiction. So we were honest. I was honest, and my husband was forthcoming. He was there, he was present for that meeting. He did not lead it, though, and I think that's where I was my fault that should have been a meeting for him to lead, for him to talk with the kids about the reality of what was going on. But we didn't, so that the long term effect of that is that no one got out unscathed. All of My children have struggled in different areas. So not my not my shining moment. There's no



11:00

P Pam B. 11:02

manual. They don't teach it to you in your senior year of high school. They don't teach it in Sunday school. Oh, but I think there's one thing we can all agree on. This is a common thing. Do your kids know? No, I want to protect them as much as possible. I want to protect them. Kids know. Kids can pick up on I think Jennifer Schneider did some research and said kids as young as nine years old can sense secrecy in the family. They know when you're keeping a secret, and that can create a feeling of unsafety, lack of stability, and the dissonance of I know something's wrong, but all the grown ups are walking around with smiles. Everything's fine, but I see that look on mom's face. I see that look on dad's face, something's going on, and just like grown ups, they fill in the blanks with with the with the worst possible scenario. And they do. They take it on themselves. They think it's their fault. It is better to give them age appropriate information. And I go back to when our son started asking about sex and physiology. When he was four or five, we only answered his questions. We didn't give additional information. We let him sort of guide that conversation. If he asked, we told him we were very matter of fact about it that I think we did right, and so I think we took the same approach with disclosing to him what was going on with us, and that that worked out well. It builds trust, it builds safety.

L Lyschel 12:51

So I actually am a daughter of a marriage of sexual betrayal. There was, and I this is probably where I took a lot of my own experience and then placed it what I had hoped I would have had in my own situation at a very young age, my parents divorced, and there was little to no information given to me. If it was It wasn't remembered, it certainly was maybe like a one and done, just like a betrayed partner when she's being under communicated with, right? And he's not telling her a whole lot, she's going to write a story. And the same is true for our kids. When they're not being told a whole lot, they're going to write a story. I err on the side of I would rather you have more of an accurate story to ensure that you're not picking picking up some inappropriate level of blame, which then can potentially shift to shame, which is terrible, and we don't want that either. So I would rather give them some sense of information, even if it's not the whole the whole thing. I also think that it's important for families who have multiple children. I think it's different when you have a single, singular child like because that's the one thing that kind of shocked me a little bit, was suddenly my sibling, my kids, are educating each other, and you're like, oh, wait, so we had given it certain information to the older kids, right? And now all of a sudden, we've got younger kids who are asking questions, and if the older kids are not processing well, it can come off as they can deliver misinformation to their younger to the younger siblings, one daughter who was really upset one time, and she just said something really irrational, like, you know, Dad just hates our guts, and that's why, and which it was so far from the truth, right? But she was in pain. And so here is the younger child sitting there with her, and here's this, right? So now, all of a sudden, the younger child has picked up a narrative that is not accurate. I do think it's important for us to be able to invite our kids in to do some of the group conversations, but also even the intentionality of following back up with them to ensure that even their siblings aren't giving them. Your siblings are your safe people too. Like, those are the people you're going to turn to and trust, especially when you're a younger sibling, you're looking to your older siblings to tell you what's going on, because they're in the know. So I think that's important when you're when you're thinking about how to disclose or share this with your kids and inform them. And I love what you said, Bonnie. Like, I think it's important to have both parents there, all just Michelle's opinion, so, but I do think it's important, if it's if it's doable, to have both parents there, because the other piece to that is that they get to see a level of honor and respect, hopefully that's being held and given to each other, in regard if it can be done in a civil manner. Now, obviously, if it's going to be super, super dangerous to do

that, I wouldn't never advocate for someone to do to do it that way, but it also allows for some sense of a united front from the parental unit, and those kids need that because that is their source of stability. So on the subject of, should you tell them? And how do you tell them? I love that. Pam said, Get experts involved. I've had clients who've attempted to do this with pastoral care support, inviting a youth pastor or a or a biblical counselor or something to that extent. And while I think those individuals can be safe community for those for your kids, I would definitely advise involving a professional therapist in the conversation, so maybe it's that you guys all do a conjoint session and and someone from your church is involved in the conversation to witness it and also to let your kids know that that's a safe person to process with. In one particular season, I asked some of my older kids, I said, Can you tell me a safe person for you, another adult, that you would like me to let them know this is going on in our family, because I and what I had said to my daughters was, there's a great possibility you're not going to like me, or you're going to be upset with me about a decision, because I was the one that was staying home with the kids, and I said, there's a great possibility that that that will feel really hard for you, and I want you to be able to have safe people, to be able to talk to outside of me and your dad. When I was able to get the list or the names of the people, I just sent them all a blanket email, kind of giving them an idea, and then giving them permission to talk to my kids like I wanted those adults, those safe adults, to know that I was asking them to be the village, to be part of the village so, and one of those was a youth pastor, so that's why I kind of bring that up, like I don't think that that can be the end all be all oftentimes, because when kids maybe potentially go into some sort of personal crisis, those are not necessarily professionally trained individuals who are going to be able to step into that that's going to be at the end of their training when a kid moves into any sense of crisis. So having those other trained professionals as a part of the conversation, I think, are going to be able to help guide it in a much healthier way. I

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Bonny 17:57

guess if I would offer just one mother. One more element to the conversation is that you validate your children's emotions instead of trying to fix it for them or tell them it's you know, it's fine. Everything's going to be okay, mommy, daddy, we're gonna be fine. Don't worry about it. You know what? They might be scared, and that's okay. There's stability right now. Look shaky. They might be scared about that. They might be sad. That's totally okay, too. They might also be hurt for mom, as Lachelle said, What did daddy do to hurt mommy? And that's okay, that that's empathy. That's really good too. But I think us showing up and not trying to placate, pacify, justify, minimize, just show up and sit with them in it, mostly it's fear, and that's not a good place to be without their their loving parents sitting there with them, even if you don't really know what to do, just sit there with them. Tell them it makes sense. They feel that way. I

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Pam B. 19:07

can tell you that in having discussions with my son about, why didn't you tell me this was going on, or that was going on, or he said, Mom, because you always just wanted to rush in and fix it. I just wanted you to listen. He just wanted to be seen and heard just like what we want, right? We all want to. We want to run in and and fix and save our kids. My son just wanted a witness. Just wanted someone to be there with him and allow those feelings.

B

Bonny 19:37

What I would say for age appropriateness is that you err on the side of caution, that you give them enough, but not too much, an err on the side of caution. And if they want to know more, they will come to you, especially if you leave the window open to say, if you have any more questions, you know you can always ask me. So if you. Give them quite enough information, they can then come to you and ask for more.

P

Pam B. 20:05

And I would add that it's good to have boundaries around the privacy of your marriage that you can give high level information. And like with my son, when he was pressing me for details, I felt a real some of it really wasn't his business, right? He didn't need to know every single detail and that we need to have those kinds of boundaries with our kids so that we don't cross over into that dangerous area of enmeshment, relying on our kids like we would rely on a best friend or our spouse to you know that we don't end up venting or dumping on our kids emotionally.

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Lyschel 20:45


Amen. Yeah, I took a lot of notes from Brene Brown's book the gift of imperfections. That was a gift to me to be able to and I had read it before I ever needed to be disclosing information to my kids, but for those who might be looking like trying to really understand what does that look like, and how do you show up? One of the things that I've always felt has been super important for me is that I've always wanted to create a space that my kids can have emotions, good, bad or indifferent, and I think that helping them know that that's safe and there's a space to do that, but I also have to be willing to name my emotions and even express them sometimes in front of them. My mom even talking about how much she would attempt to hide grieving, but yet i She said, But you knew something was going on even at five years old. And so while the betrayal and the addiction and all that stuff is things that are going on. It's also the emotional shifts and changes that they also sent. I tend to extend a lot of a lot of permission to myself, and I hope that that translates over to my kids, and it doesn't make it feel exhausting for them, but just that they say, Oh, she's comfortable enough to say, I'm having a really hard day today, or I'm sorry I'm just feeling super I'm just grieving a lot. I mean, even this morning, I snapped at my daughter and I said, Man, so I gotta go get some coffee. I said, I'm not doing so good over here. And it was just like, but I had enough self awareness with myself, right, right? So like there was an exchange of grace, like, okay, that's not how mom shows up and she owned it. I totally owned it. So those things seem to be, feel like they should be really important for us. It's just the gift of vulnerability, the gift of being able to express our emotions and have emotions like we've already said a few times, and giving them safe people.

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Bonny 22:42

So something came up in my mind as you were speaking, what about adult children? And so I can speak into that, because our final D Day was after my children were all in their 30s, and this time I handled it. How old are you? Bonnie, well, I will tell you that I had, I had a retreat team member tell me I looked 46

L Lyschel 23:14
the purple hair,

 23:17
I said, let me take off my glasses, sweetie. See those you see those eyes?

B Bonny 23:26
Okay? I'm sorry, okay, no, no, no, but so I did not schedule a family meeting completely put that in Dave's in Dave's field, in his yard, that was in his yard to take care of, and I told him it was very important to me. This was a request I was making that he be the one to tell the children what was going on in our marriage at that time, because we became very quiet, and the kids were like, What is going on so? And he did. He took that opportunity. He took opportunities with each one of our sons to privately share what was going on. And then he also gave them some resources for adult children, putting the request in the person with the addictions yard as part of their amends process, I think is a healthy thing to do.

L Lyschel 24:25
Okay, so I'll speak to just a few other experiences with clients or women in our community that have we've actually ministered to adult children whose fathers the father's betrayal story has come out. These adult daughters are now left holding this bag of their own betrayal story, right? Because this isn't who dad was. This isn't how dad presented. This is really confusing for me. Can't say that. It's like, oh, once they hit 30, they're going to be just fine, and you can disclose whatever you need to, but I do think it's important. Uh, you're the bottom line is you're going to know your kids the best. You will know your kids the best, and so disclosing to them the best that you can. I know that some women have needed to disclose to their adult children because they needed their help. One particular client where the father was incarcerated because of his acting out behaviors, and the mother was suddenly completely stranded, and so her adult children had to step up and care for her in ways that you know, never had they expected. Sometimes telling our adult children is out of necessity in order to get support and care. But I also see others who are attempting to still protect their husbands and they don't want to tell their adult kids, especially if they have grandchildren involved, they really don't want to tarnish grandpa's character. The likelihood, though, of this being present even in your kids marriages, if they're adults now, and it was never addressed with them and never exposed as for them as young kids, there's a great possibility that they're navigating some very similar things based on statistics alone, not necessarily an assumption of things I don't know. I still live by the moat of the scripture that the truth will set you free and take it or leave it, but the truth will set you free. I think I'm going to share hope from the perspective of being a daughter who's come from a story of betrayal because my parents didn't have any tools. Back in the 70s and early 80s, there were no therapists, you know, that they could go sit with and get wisdom and direction from. And while there were parts of that story that became my story, right, just simply for the fact that we had divorce and so much other pain that came as a result of that betrayal, the Lord was still good, and he is still faithful in that he has taken parts of that story for me, and he has taken and created Beauty from Ashes, right, something that could have held me

hostage my entire life, From coming from a broken family. That's not how it happened. That's not how it's happened. And so I think that's the hope for all of us, is that God is still bigger. He's going to fill in those gaps. So even when you screw it up, he's still got you. And the one thing I remember saying when my husband left during our first separation, I remember just being so anxious because at the time I didn't have a job, I was staying home with our kids, and so my husband was the breadwinner. And I, you know, you have those moments of catastrophic thinking like, This is it. We're never going to recover. This is going to be it. And I just remember saying out loud, because I needed to hear myself say it. And I said, you love those kids more than I could ever imagine. And so if I begin to pray and petition the throne of God to to protect those kids, he's going to do it like he loves those kids. And I that's all I did. I just kept praying. And so it is fun to be able to say, tell you all that story that they don't really remember it at all, right, because that was the Lord standing in that gap and protecting them. And so that would be my hope for you, is that Jesus is bigger. God's still in control, even in the throes of a tornado, and that he can, he can make up for this, and your pressure of trying to do this right will actually not make it go right. That would be my hope for you.

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Pam B. 28:40

Let me offer some hope. Have courage when being honest with your kids, because some good things are going to come out of it. There's going to be some fruits that you're going to build trust with your kids. You're going to validate their experience, their emotions. You're going to model a healthy response for them. You're going to tell them, you know, it's going to be okay, because we've got these professionals that we're going to go to, we're going to go outside and get help. We're not going to do this alone. So you're modeling that healthy behavior. You're also modeling reality and maybe busting this unspoken myth that life is a rose garden, that you know, if you find the right person, your marriage will always be easy and smooth. We just model reality that relationships hit bumps because that won't define you, that won't define the relationship, how you respond to it, can define your own character and the character of the relationship, and just modeling honesty, rigorous honesty, and not having to put on the the mask that's. Really common in families with all addictions. We put on this mask that the families find the family's healthy. Everybody from the outside has to look at us and see, you know, we're Instagram worthy, that it's it's okay to have bumps and bruises. It's okay that these things happen, and we're when you do that they're better equipped to go out into the world because they are going to hit their own peaks and valleys, and so you're modeling for them what to do when that happens, what not if, when it happens for them.

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Bonny 30:36

So I'll just leave you with Romans, 15:13, and this is the New Living Translation. I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in Him, then you'll overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit. Yes, amen to lachelles, that God is in control, surrendering and letting the Holy Spirit work is a piece of that too. And I just I love Romans, 15:13, so leave you with that. Well, friends, we want to wish you all a Merry Christmas. Take

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Lyschel 31:17

care of yourself.

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Bonny 31:21

And so we also want you to know that to take care of ourselves, we're going to go on a little hiatus through December and then into 2023 as we individually have some projects going that we need to complete, check back with us in late 2023 and see what's going on. If this is your first time catching us. Go all the way back to the beginning of this year. It's a road map of healing. We always wish to be a bright spot on your recovery journey. So if you'd like to help a friend find us, please leave a five star rating or positive review on iTunes, and if you have a question or comment, you can leave that at our website, hope for wives. That's f, O, R, hope for wives.com and you can read more about us there, as well as links to our individual ministries. So thank you all for your for your loyal listenership. It has been a privilege to speak with me this year. You.