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Season 2: Episode 1C: Parenting Through Divorce

Welcome to Healthier You by Vanderbilt Health & Wellness, a podcast to help Vanderbilt faculty and staff live their healthiest lives.

LG: Hello everyone! My name is Lydia Gardner, and I am the senior communications specialist for Health & Wellness. So today, we are mixing things up a little bit, and I have the privilege of interviewing our Work/Life Connections host, Megan Bergfeld, about parenting through divorce. So, Megan, thank you so much for swapping seats with me and sitting in the expert seat today. I appreciate you being willing to share your story and talk about the topic with us.

MB: Thanks, Lydia. I'm happy to do it.

LG: So, can you share a little bit of background with us just about yourself and your story, just as much or as little as you want to share with us as it relates to parenting through divorce?

MB: Sure. I'll start with a basic timeline, I guess. I got married in 2011 to my long-term partner. We moved to Nashville in 2014 and then found out on New Year's Eve of that year that we were pregnant with our first baby. She was born then in August 2015. A couple summers later, we got pregnant again and had our second daughter in March 2018. So, sadly, in the summer of 2019, we decided to separate and then got legally divorced in 2020. So, it's been over five years apart, and four years technically divorced, I think. Now, our kids were only 4 years old and 18 months old when we split up, so I can't speak for my ex on this, this spot, but for me, it was a very challenging season. Mentally, emotionally, there's just a ton of unknowns, you don't know what you don't know pieces to that. I think I was really

grieving the marriage and our home plus trying to process all these whirlwinds of emotions, both for myself, for my children, about him, just everything, plus try to figure out how to support and raise these tiny little humans when they'd be living under another roof for part of the time. I was just genuinely terrified going into that season.

Those first nights, weekends, holidays, birthdays, all those firsts were very hard for me, and still sometimes are, like, honestly. Now, we've got both of our girls in school, and that brings its own daily juggle of logistics for all parents, but as a single parent, I'm usually thinking multiple days in advance to make sure, you know, rides, homework, extracurriculars, etc., are all coordinated around this visitation schedule. And it's like, oh, they'll be with their dad tomorrow night, but they've got X the next day, so let's make sure to pack Y, and then remind him to send Z back with them, like, etc., etc., etc., just on and on. The mental fatigue is a real thing there, and sometimes, stuff falls through the cracks. It's just the reality of the situation. So, I think I went into single motherhood wanting so desperately to protect them from the stress of the whole thing, you know? And I just wanted to be this ever-present, solid foundation they could rely on, no matter what, but it turns out, I am human, and so is my ex-husband. So, we are not perfect. Sometimes, those old resentments and anger, like, still bubble up, and while those feelings are very valid, I think, we've also learned to set our own hurts and egos aside when it comes to our kids, because we agree on one primary thing, and that's that we love our girls, and we want the best for them. I think that kind of mutual purpose has guided us through many potentially contentious moments over the years.

LG: Wow, yeah.

MB: That's the basics.

LG: Yes, oh my gosh. Well, thank you for sharing all of that. I know it's a lot to share, and I think that's really amazing that you can say that you've been able to, you've prioritized your kids in that way and you're able to do that together and coparent that way. It's really amazing.

MB: Thank you. It's a daily practice.

LG: Yes. Yeah, moment by moment.

MB: Yes, yes.

LG: So, what are some things that maybe you wish you would have known going into the process about parenting through divorce and coparenting that you kind of learned along the way you wish you would have known?

MB: Yeah. Yeah, I think I've seen many examples of coparenting in my life, both in my personal life as well as my professional life. Unfortunately, oftentimes, it does get contentious, right? Sometimes, it's even downright hateful, cruel, just very ugly at times, and I think going into that season, I had a better idea of what I did not want it to look like for us than what I did. I was really worried that discord was the only option. So, what I want people to know is it does not have to be that way. It really doesn't. It is possible to coparent respectfully. It's not always easy, that is for sure, because again, we're human. I

think it requires a good bit of self-regulation and healthy communication, which is funny because those are often the things that were lacking in the marriage, right?

LG: Yeah.

MB: Like, these are the problems that led to our demise, but now we have to learn them so that we can do the next best thing for our kids. The good thing is those are learnable skills. They really are. And as long as there's that focus on the mutual goal of taking care of your children, we can put these practices into action. I also, I think, I had this persistent worry that our divorce would damage our children, so hear me loud and clear when I say divorce isn't always a bad thing.

MB: Yes, it is hard. It is disruptive. It's confusing. It's all those things, and it might give your family the space it needs to breathe again.

MB: For some folks, it may even increase safety in the home. Now, I am not over here advocating for divorce, okay? Don't get me wrong. I just want people who are facing divorce to know that it's not all downhill from here. Good things are possible in this season and beyond it.

LG: Yes, I love that. And, honestly, as the child of two divorced parents, I can say that is 100% true, and I see that for my parents and then also for all of my siblings and I as kids.

MB: Totally.

LG: So, I agree, and I think that's a really good point to make for people, that it's not, it doesn't have to all be bad or, you know, that way.

MB: No.

LG: Do you have suggestions of how parents can help their kids kind of navigate the process; because, obviously, it's a lot. You're navigating it, but then also trying to help these little humans figure out how to walk through it.

MB: Right. Yeah, I think age-appropriate communication is a big one here. My clients often ask me, you know, when should we tell the kids? What should we say to the kids? And I had those same questions. I don't think there's one right answer to that, but I lean in the direction of telling kids sooner rather than later. They are going to notice if their parents are sleeping apart. They just are. They're going to notice if you start selling things or packing things, moving things to a new house. They're going to know! So, the sooner you involve them, the more space you're allowing them to process and grieve in their own ways. Now, this also gives you more opportunity through the timeline to offer them opportunity to express emotions, to ask questions, to allow frequent discussion, and then just repeatedly emphasize that they're safe, that they're loved, and acknowledge all those feelings that are involved. I want to note there, though, that acknowledging the feelings does not mean that we turn our kids into our therapists.

LG: An important distinction!

MB: An important distinction. It's a slippery slope when you are also feeling all the things, so again, age-appropriate talk about feelings. This might look like, you know, "It's okay to feel sad. I'm sad, too." Right? There's actually some really great resources from Sesame Street on this.

LG: That's fun!

MB: We can include in the show notes if that's helpful for folks.

LG: Perfect!

MB: I also strongly believe that it is inappropriate to tell them all the things that the other parent did wrong. This is not the time and not the audience, right? I get that these are things that, you know, at times we just want to scream. We just need to vent, and there are appropriate outlets for that, but when we're trying to parent through divorce, we've got to be mindful of who we're talking to. You know, your kids are watching. They're listening, likely when you don't even realize they are. Just being mindful of that in the home and on the phone and around conversations that you're having around them.

LG: I love that. I think that's a huge gift that you can give your kids during the process is to be there for them but not tell them all the things. Age appropriate, like you said. So, do you have suggestions of ways that parents can care for themselves? So, as you're going through the process, what are some things that you wish you would have known and done to care for yourself emotionally just as you're going through it?

MB: Totally. There are three main things that stick out to me. The first, please, please, please admit when you're not okay. I tried really hard to maintain this facade of wellness, but dang was I hurting. I was so stressed, so anxious. I was so sad. But, I didn't want people to see that side of me; because, I was known, particularly at work, as somebody who could handle tough stuff, so Megan doesn't cry, right? Like, Megan doesn't get overwhelmed. And that is simply not the reality of what I was dealing with at that time. I actually really felt every day like I was failing my children somehow. There were days maybe I didn't have the time or the money to do something extra with them, or maybe I lost my temper again, you know? There were times I could not decide if I wanted to just be the fun mom or consistently discipline. You know? When you only have so much time with your kids, your perspective of that time together changes. So, do I want to send you to your room or put you in a time out for a chunk of our time together? It's really hard to decide. Then there would be times where it's like I need to do dishes and laundry, but you guys just want me to play with you, so maybe I do choose to play, but then I forget to wash the shirt that you needed for the next day or, you know, I don't have your lunchbox ready or whatever. There was just always something, always something that felt like I was lacking, like somewhere. I really would have benefitted from a healthy dose of self-compassion, like we talked about in last week's episode with Natalie. That was really lacking for me at that time. I think the times that I finally admitted to myself, like to my family, my friends, my colleagues, that I wasn't okay, it was like those clouds parted, the light shone through. Eventually, I started going to therapy. I got care for my anxiety and all that mom guilt, and I just, I just really had to give myself permission to allow support in all its forms. That would lead me to my second suggestion, which is to call on your people. I'm not sure what I would have done without my mom, my friends, my sister, the key people in my life. One example,

I remember I was preparing to move to my new rental house with the girls, and we had just gotten our oldest daughter one of those wooden swing set playhouse things that take forever to put together.

LG: Literally forever! Yes!

MB: Awful! We had just gotten it for her birthday the year before, and I was already heartbroken, right, to leave my house, and then there in the yard is this playhouse that she loved so much, and I just, I could not leave it. I couldn't leave it! So, two of my dear friends brought their husbands with their trucks and their tools over, and they somehow broke this thing down into moveable pieces, hauled it across town, and reassembled it in my new yard, like, no questions asked.

LG: Amazing.

MB: Yeah. I remember one of my friends actually saying, she's like, of course you're taking it.

LG: Yes. This is not an option.

MB: Yeah, like, she never once made me feel, like, silly or a burden, or like, are you sure, like, you really want to go through all this? No, it was like, we're taking that thing. We're getting it to your new house.

LG: I love that.

MB: It was so cool. It was this, like, lovely display of friendship and support, and I'll never forget that. That's, you know, a big example, but it's also just those small daily ways that you can let your people in, both with and without kids. You know, sometimes it's just phone calls, texts, you getting coffee together, you doing book club with a friend, you know. Whatever that looks like for you. And that would piggyback, then into my last suggestion for this, is let yourself explore and learn who you are again as your own person. Because parenting is a big part of your life and identity. It's a beautiful thing. And you're also you. You are you, an individual. So, I realized after my divorce just how much of myself I had lost touch with over the years through trying to be the wife and the mother that they needed me to be, right? And suddenly, I had all this free time, and I didn't know what to do with it, so I got hobbies! I found hobbies. I spent more time with friends. I explored new aisles in the grocery store. I figured out what scent of laundry detergent I actually preferred.

LG: I love that.

MB: Simple things! Simple things, but it meant so much. All of this to say, like, some days, especially at first, you're going to need to stay home in your pajamas and watch Harry Potter and cry, and that is okay. But I think gradually I learned that I didn't have to watch Harry Potter alone. My mom would gladly come. Several of my friends would come and hang out with me and just watch that. Or maybe home wasn't the only safe place to cry. Like, it turns out Radnor Lake is a great place to do that.

LG: I love that, yes.

MB: So, it's really just been a fun and exciting process of getting to know this new version of me. So, I encourage anybody facing divorce to consider that for themselves, too.

LG: Yeah. I love how you kind of turned it into an opportunity in that way, like, you were able to discover new things about yourself, and in that way, it was just really cool.

MB: Yeah. It turns out there's a lot there that I didn't know about.

LG: Yes, I love that! That's right!

LG: So, kind of piggybacking off of that, we know from the surgeon general's most recent report on parenting that he had shared out that all parents are struggling with loneliness and isolation at a higher rate than nonparents, but then also, he said specifically that 77% of single parents are experiencing loneliness, which that just blew my mind. That's a huge percentage. And we know that there's obviously a lot of single parents, as well, so how can single parents kind of fight that loneliness, but then, also, how can all of us, those of us who have friends who are single parents, how can we support them as they may be going through a divorce, or even after, just when they're feeling lonely and overwhelmed with their kids, like what can we do to help?

MB: That's a great question. Thanks for including that in this. I think single parenting has definitely been lonely at times. You know, I mentioned calling on your people, right?

LG: Yeah.

MB: But the truth is, not all of us have people. Some single parents don't have a coparent at all or family nearby, and sometimes we can experience loneliness even when we're surrounded by loving people. I was never without people. I'm lucky in that way. But there were many nights that I sat crying by myself, just completely overwhelmed.

LG: Yeah.

MB: There's many reasons for that. I think there's this underlying sense in single parenting that you've got to carry all of this stuff on your back. You've got to keep everything balanced. If one domino tips, then what? We don't know. When we're in this survival mode like that all of the time, we tend to zoom in on the immediate issue just to keep ourselves afloat, and in doing that, I think we might miss opportunities for help or, let's be real, maybe we don't ask for it or admit that we need it, right? So I think we have to pull that lens back out and consider ways to expand our connections. You know, maybe there's a colleague, a neighbor, another parent at school who would be willing to assist with a ride or childcare so maybe your kid can do that after school activity that you couldn't get them to or from, but maybe someone else can. We just have to be willing to brainstorm and look at that. I think it's also pretty financially challenging to be a single parent. We can't always pay for big outings or activities. So, even something as simple as going to the movies, which we did recently, and I was like what the heck! It's so expensive to go to the movies! Like, even if you're naughty and you smuggle in your own candy, it's like dang, the ticket alone is so, so expensive.

LG: Yes, so true!

MB: Like, along those lines, for anybody who knows a single parent, maybe consider ways that you can make togetherness accessible, right? So, I talk to my clients a lot about the idea of doing life together.

Maybe consider dinner nights with multiple families coming together to make and share a meal. Right? You can take turns. You can all bring ingredients or sides or whatever, but you're together, and the kids kind of keep each other entertained. You've got childcare plus some adult time, which is just lovely. It can look like a homework club after school. It can be laundry parties on the weekend, you know? Let's turn some of that otherwise unpleasant stuff into something that can be enjoyable. I have some friends who do, like, evening walks in their neighborhood with like some of their neighbor families, and just everybody knows at, you know, 7 p.m. you come outside and you go for a stroll. Those sorts of things are lovely. They're low pressure. They're inexpensive. They're so helpful. Play dates, library trips, parks, I mean, all that stuff is good. Some of the most nurturing nights, especially early on, that I had without my kids, involved random friends coming over with take out or whatever just to watch TV in yoga pants, like, no pressure there, right?

LG: Yeah.

MB: I think these are things that could benefit anybody, right? But in the context of single parenting, connections like this are just truly priceless.

LG: Yeah, that's amazing, and a really good reminder I feel like for everybody just how we can support parents and single parents and also, if anyone is walking through that, just ways to care for themselves, too. So, thank you Megan so much for sharing all of this with us and being willing to share your story. I really appreciate it.

MB: Yeah, I'm happy to. Thank you so much.

Thanks for tuning in to Healthier You by Vanderbilt Health & Wellness.