

Season Episode 11/49 Childless and Step Parenting

SPEAKERS

Berenice Smith, Lisa Ann, Sarah Lawrence, Ken Fenton, Michael Hughes

Ken Fenton 00:00

Um, as you can see I'm sitting in my car is this right now is my safe play? The my internet isn't so great out here. So I'm using the phone to connect to the internet. It's my first time trying it. So I guess it's working.

Sarah Lawrence 00:13

I can hear you any

Berenice Smith 00:17

The audio sounds quite good from here to be honest.

Michael Hughes 00:20

The audio inside the cockpit is really good because you get no echo. The sound is being sucked up by the you know the linings in the car. So yeah, all good.

Berenice Smith 00:30

Oh, I might try that stuff next time.

Ken Fenton 00:33

Yeah, it does work.

Sarah Lawrence 00:44

Hello, and welcome to the Full Stop podcast, a child is community podcast with Michael Hughes, Berenice Smith, and me, Sarah Lawrence. If you're new to this podcast, we're here to delve beneath the surface of the child's identity, to cover what's going on in the wider community. And to look at the topics that really affect us. Our goal is to help and support those of you out in the community by sharing the stories and the voices that make up our narrative so that you too can begin to find yours. We also aim to inform and educate those who aren't members of our community, so they can begin to understand and support those people in their lives who are facing a life without children. In this episode, we were lucky enough to be joined by Ken Fenton and Lisa Ann Kissane who are both members of the child's community, but who are also stepparents. If you're a longtime listener, you might very well recognise both of their voices from previous episodes. Lisa from Episode 23, making connections, and Ken from Episode 14 clan of brothers, it was great to have them both back on talking about something

that many of us really don't know enough about. As Lisa says, In this episode, they span the two communities, parents and non parents. But this can cause problems in and of itself. This is a really informative episode that helps us learn more about how tough it can be caring for other people's children, while not being able to have our own.

Berenice Smith 02:06

Thank you for joining us today to talk about step parenting, because it's been asked a lot, actually, this is quite a subject that we've been asked to talk about quite often. And it affects quite a lot of people in our community, but somehow doesn't get talked about a great deal and certainly hasn't been on the podcast before the buttstock has not done this before. So this is a bit of a new area for us. And we're very much kind of led by where you'd like us to take the conversation and we're interested to hear about it. Because I think from my side, I think there's that kind of quite a few myths of things that need to be busted as the whole kind of obviously, all that stuff in fairy tales out there about childlessness and wicked step parents is perennial thing, isn't it in others. And also the idea that if you're a step parent, you've kind of got a family. And that also I'm sure is as well. And I'm just wondering if you'd like to kind of take it away, Lisa, I know you're not feeling 100% We tonsillitis, those speakers political and as much as you want to take good care of your voice.

Lisa Ann 03:23

Thank you. Yeah, it's I just really wanted to be here because it is something that's really close to my heart. And as you say that there's this whole spectrum of what being a stepparent as a child of person means. I personally became a step parent when the children were seven and 10. That was 10 years ago, they're now sort of going into adulthood. But then there's lots of people who become step parents later on or earlier on. So it varies so so much. And yeah, I think what we're saying about the the evil stepmother tropes, it's just rife. And it's almost like I fall into, I fall into the gaps, because I'm not quite childless, because I do have these children that are in my life, and that I sort of have a parental sort of relationship with, but then I very much don't have children, and I'm very much not the parent. So I find it difficult. And I have found it difficult a lot to know, where my places in childlessness in parenting in the world, really? And it's just one of those things that yeah, I still don't think I've quite found that place. But the childless community, certainly one of the most accepting it's certainly more accepting to me than the parents and community. Let's put it that way. So yeah, I suppose that's a little bit of an intro for me. I'm gonna rest my voice and let Ken talk now I think.

Ken Fenton 04:46

Thanks. Yeah, I have been a step parent now for 38 years. When I when I married my wife, her kid, already grown out of the house. So wasn't like dealing with with little kids or anything like that. And, but it's, it's a, it's a different thing. I mean, I know everybody knows that, you know, what it's like not to have your own kids, you know you just from everything going on at work and what you see every day, but it's like, you also have it at home every every day you you, even though they're not living there, there's, her kids are coming over, say and, and, and you see the smile on her face when they walk in the door and your high Han, and all the all the different things come not only what you see every day, it's what you know. But when you come home, when you almost feel like you'll be in that safe area where you can get a break from some of that stuff that don't stop, you know, because they come over their call on the phone and, and you see the end here to the happy tone and my wife's voice when when they talk to

him in oil. And, you know, you know, it's another just another reminder that you'll never have that, you know, you'll never feel that that that joy of seeing someone that Wells Fargo, you actually, you know, in a way, of course, I know that the two big holidays during the year the mother and father's day is difficult for everybody. But you also have that added thing like on those days, say Mother's Day they are kids come up she has to that come over to house and, you know, bring the give and whatever flowers and things and and of course the conversation usually always gets into what when they were young, something they did or you know, silly things they did annoying things they did. And and the other thing is each her kids have kids have to so then then it branches out into into that. And and I sometimes just feel like I'm sitting there like like the biggest fool you know, at times like I don't know what to say I'm just a just an innocent bystander that doesn't have any input note nothing to say nothing to add to the conversation. Though it's lonely, that's well, I know it is for everybody in our situation, but you feel very left out and not part of the whole thing. Again, you go in and another in another instance, another way.

Lisa Ann 07:35

Can I think what you said about being a grandparent or having grandchildren is really interesting, because my stepson who's 20 His girlfriend is now pregnant, they're expecting their first child. And it was, I felt so honoured that they told me and they they were really, really sensitive about it. They knew my struggles. And they came to me and said, We're going to have a baby. And I was I was so thrilled for them. But underneath that I was absolutely heartbroken all over again. Because when my husband, so I actually got told before my husband, which was probably a bit naughty, but he came home and then they told him and his face just lit up and I have never seen him so happy. And it brought it all back how I would never make him look like that how that would never be a result of anything I could say to him. And so I had to swallow all of the hurt and all of the pain. And I had to be happy for them. And I am happy for them. And I always feel like I need to qualify that, don't you because of course I'm happy. But also, oh my god, it's heartbreaking. And I've got that coming. Now in a few months time there's going to be a little baby around. And I just know that it's going to bring it all up. And yes, I might be a grandparent, but I'm not the grandparent. I'm not. I'm not the one that can tell them about who their ancestors are or any of those kinds of things. So it's just another another step another barrier, I suppose. That gets put in. That just reminds me like you say that I'm just an outsider really?

Ken Fenton 09:07

Yeah, yeah, I know. I've I felt the same exact thing. It's just Well, okay. Like you said another one coming yet? Well, I just found out there's another one coming to the end of this year, I think around August or something like that didn't family. Her daughter was over. telling her that. Let's see who it is her son's husband is going to have their second. The first one I had mentioned in our community with Michael. There was it was the first one went to went through some terrible traumas in a hospital. And I asked the men's community to pray for them and and it was a very awkward thing, you know, asking a childless community to pray for a new One and I went to Michael first being the admin and asked him if it would be okay for me to post this and he said sure, absolutely. And I did. And I got a I got surprisingly good results I was surprised by how many people i i said even if you just you know, I'm trying to do exactly a word of it even if you just give the the post a thumbs up or something I know you're thinking that was a tough thing that was tough for me. It was tough for the parents a little bit but back to my point is I found out that they are going to have their second this year. And you know, it's all I even said to my wife because I said I'm I'm happy for them. They're a young couple they I am i but you know it can be

heartbreaking at the same time. I grew up I grew up I since I've been married to my wife like I said both her she has a son and daughter they both had gotten married they both had two now one of them is having is married and having you know it's you see this whole it's like I can see my wife her what would you call legacy is grown every year it's multiplying it's getting bigger and bigger and minds minds like nothing blank you know it's it's it's hard to deal with sometimes you see it in a daily thing living living with a person how there's this could just constantly growing and and what could be no end to it. It just could go on for years and years. And mine ends with me I guess pretty much

Michael Hughes 11:47

how you are just came in on a thank you for what you just said because what just earlier because um it's it really hit home to me. Like Mother's days and things like that. Vicki and I can bunker down in the house and we can just doesn't shut the world out. And just listening to you. You say I'm getting a lot at home to know now there's no malice in that. You know, I mean, obviously but but yeah, there's no, I've never I never really thought about it until you said it that there's there's no relief.

Ken Fenton 12:27

Wow. No, it's yeah, it. I mean, no, it just isn't an everyday thing. But it's it's some I sometimes I go off and go on a computer, I am into aviation and flight simulator. Use that to to distract my my mind. And, you know, because yeah, it It's a never ending thing. Sometimes you think you leave you leave work, you're going home, you're like, I can go home and just get a break from all this. But yeah, you don't

Berenice Smith 13:07

thought of that before? That I have absolutely something that I had never appreciated before that when I go home, that there is an equal level of, you know, different levels of obviously pain. I think mine's more than my husband. And I think sometimes we find that I think in communities anyway, but it's the same, isn't it and maybe talking to our guests about being single and going home to an empty house, you Senate realise sometimes some of those privileges that that that we have going home to somebody and being able to just say, Michael to just hunker down and keep the world out. But actually, if that world is within your homes, and it breaches the walls, that's that's really tricky, because the level of grief is different, isn't it? There's a difference in those feelings because of the difference in circumstances I hadn't realised. Thank you for sharing that. Your home supposed to be a safe place?

Lisa Ann 14:16

Yes, that's something I've struggled with a lot over the years. Because both of my stepchildren at one point or another have lived with us. They have quite difficult relationship with their mom. I won't get into that. And I won't get into that relationship because that's their story, not mine. But so for example, today, I knew that I was coming on to this podcast, about half past 10 My husband gets a text from a step back from my stepdaughter saying, Oh, Dad, can you come and pick me up? And I just my stomach just dropped and I thought I can't have her here while I'm doing this. This is she can't be in the house while I'm talking about her in this way. It's not fair. And it just it always comes down to logistics. So then her husband had To begin, he's poorly as well. So he had to then go and pick her up from a friend's house, take her to a different friend's house, just so that she wouldn't be subjected to this kind of chat, because she's only 17. She doesn't need this on top of all of her own teenage stuff that she's got going on. But yeah, that the whole thing about home being a safe place, I've never felt that home is

a safe place. Because there's always been, if not the reality, then the potential for the children to just turn up. And often, particularly when they were younger, not in a nice way more in a, there have been so many occasions that it makes me so sad that the children have turned up here with black bags, because their mom has kicked them out. And we take them in, and we care for them. And we do everything we can. And I go to bed at night crying because I would never do that. As a mother. I couldn't ever do that as a mother. And yet, we just have to pick up the pieces every time. It's yeah, it can be impossible.

Berenice Smith 16:01

There is that whole kind of thing going on with fairy stories and Grimm brothers. We know who's going to be the villain here. Because it's always going to be the, you know, invariably the childless man or the childless woman, but actually then, throughout history as well to be judged as being wicked. It's a constant kind of thing. And those myths about like, they haunt us that kind of like becomes this blueprint for society.

Lisa Ann 17:00

Yes, and then you've got the other side of it. I see a lot on social media of families, particularly in the US, I think, but blended families where you've got, you know, that there are watching a football game or something. And I've got matching T shirts, and it says, bio mom and stepmom, and dad and stepdad and it's just like, that's so unrealistic. But on the other end of unrealistic, I can't even be in the same room as their bio Mom, let alone you know, wear matching jerseys. It's insane. So the expectations that each end of the spectrum just don't fit reality, in my experience

Ken Fenton 17:32

at all. Yeah, we've done some they've been some occasions where we had to be together with her ex and God really awkward. Yeah. That was with some well, they had a pretty it wasn't a good divorce that they went through tough. So she was she was never looking forward to being in the same room with him either. But, yeah, the I don't know. It's you're looking at this guy and saying what you got what I never was able to, you know?

Sarah Lawrence 18:13

Yeah, and you don't deserve it.

Ken Fenton 18:15

But yeah, yeah. From what she says how he treated her now. And then, of course, he remarried. And then he had some children with his second wife. And, you know, it's like, Oh, come on, give me a break. Good.

Lisa Ann 18:34

Yeah, had that to the ex wife. Actually, right in the middle of when we were trying to have a baby took great pleasure in telling us that she was pregnant, and sent me just absolutely spiral. And it was awful. That child is now six years old. And I still feel the unfairness of it, I still feel like I've spent my life working with kids. So I was a social worker, I worked in schools, I would have been a great mom and

that woman, she just gets to procreate with wild abandon, you know, with no consideration of what that life is going to be like for that child. There's a lot of anger there, you might recommend.

Michael Hughes 19:13

Lisa, that Vicki and I often have a conversation, she gets very well back angry, but she gets very, very angry about seeing, you know, children being neglected. And I don't have to explain that to us here about how that makes us feel. But I'm thinking about your situation in that, that that must be an absolute minefield. And for us, of course, we can be detached from that because it we can see it in on the television, but there's a certain distance away from that, but for you living it, man, that must be tough.

Lisa Ann 19:49

Yeah, it's been very tough, particularly when they were younger, and you know, they couldn't really think for themselves. They couldn't make the decisions for themselves about what they wanted. But then just put a positive spin on it, I suppose. For these children in particular, I feel like we have had a little bit of an influence. They've come to us now as adults. And in fact, my stepson is seeing a therapist who's sort of helped him understand the his mom's a narcissist. And he sees some of the behaviours that were problematic in his childhood. And I think having us there, as the other side of the coin, maybe helped him in a way that might not have been the case had. I don't want to give myself too much credit. But you know, I was a social worker, I kind of had all the theoretical stuff. So I was able to help my husband, see it and understand it. And now that my stepson is older, we have really frank conversations about it. And I feel grateful that I was able to be in his life in that way. Because otherwise, Yeah, who knows what what might have happened if he'd have only had that one parent that was influencing him?

Sarah Lawrence 20:56

Oh, sorry. I was wondering if I could take you both back to a comment early on where you said, Lisa, you've found that there's been more acceptance from the childless community, as opposed to those that community that are parents, I was wondering if we could sort of, I'm very aware that you're both sort of caretaking for other people's children. And, you know, you mentioned that legacy can what, what is it? Do you feel about the community that is kind of being more accepting? Because obviously, you're, you're, you're triggered, we're triggered on way by by the word parents and seeing other people have that legacy? How is that for you? Because it kind of feels like you've got a foot in both camps, but very much you've been told. Actually, no, you perhaps you don't have a foot in this camp.

Lisa Ann 21:45

Yeah, I didn't spend too long trying to be involved in the parenting community. It was more to do with like, I suppose when they were children, and I had to do things like understand their homework, stuff like that. But it was just absolute pure rejection. I wasn't a parent, I'd never given birth, I'd never raised a child from baby. So therefore, I had absolutely no say, and any, any kind of attempt I made to be part of that world was completely shut down. Whereas with the childless community, I think we all have, or most of us have somewhere in the family, aunts, uncles, cousins, somewhere that there's a child that we care about isn't ours. And I suppose that understanding is what makes the childless community so accepting of it, because I often think of my relationship with the kids as a more like an art than anything

else. I'm not someone who, who has a printer, I don't discipline them. I think that might be something that sets it apart. I've never been one to discipline unless it's like in the moment, they were about to put their hand into a fire or something like that. I would never get involved in that. So I see it as more of an auntie or a relationship like that. And the childless community. We I think most of us have someone that we recognise that relationship in that makes sense.

Ken Fenton 23:04

One thing I thought that comes up well, I know like, as a stepparent, of course, I have no rights or anything over over them. Y'all know, I'm an outsider, I'm their mom's husband, you know, that's it. And one thing I made some kind of journals of my thoughts, feelings and things. And one thing I've written in there just about a month or so ago, is I hate being called Ken. And it's in there I said, not not by my friends and not by my, my co workers, but by like her son and daughter, you know, like, one of them comes in the door and says, 'hi, mom. Hi Ken.' That is another stabbing in the heart kind of thing, you know, something that you're not my kid. And it it hurts every time. You call by your name and not called dad.

Lisa Ann 24:21

I feel that on, particularly Mother's Day. I sometimes get little cards or little gifts from the kids. But the card will always say to someone who's like a parent or to someone who's very special. The card will never say Mum. And particularly when they were younger, I always questioned whether they were doing it because they wanted to or because my husband had told them to. So it never really felt very authentic. Now more so because they're adults and they're making the choice and it's very sweet. But yeah, it's it. There's always a caveat. It's never just Mom, it's stepmom, or like a mom or one of those things.

Ken Fenton 25:00

Yeah, I had, actually her son did give me a card for my birthday and it said to say Happy Birthday Dad. And which, you know, I thanked him for and I thank, you know, I said, later on, I had said to his mother, I said, Yeah, it's very, it's nice. It's sweet. He's, I think he's trying. He's trying. But I said, that's one thing. He will never he'll be able to write it down. But he will never be able to say that to me; 'Hi, dad'. It's different writing something down and then actually voicing it to someone. And I said that to my wife. I said, I guarantee they'll never be able to say that.

Lisa Ann 25:42

What did the what did the children's children call you? Do they also call you Ken?

Ken Fenton 25:48

No, they call me grandpa. That's nice. Yeah. And at times when I'm when I've been upset, my wife has said to me, she said, You will always be their grandpa. You know, she, she, my wife has tries, sometimes she has her ups and downs to some times she really tries to help me to understand. And then there's other times where she doesn't want to hear it literally said that, to me once he says I don't want to hear you. And so it's a roller coaster, sometimes, you know, trying to sound like I did have a bad day where someone at work says something that bothered me, I can go home and sit on the couch and talk to my wife about it. Now. It's not like that.

Berenice Smith 26:37

For the children involved in this it must be quite messy and complicated for them too? But also, I guess, for your partners as well, because that must be quite complicated for them to they got this kind of, I guess, a role somewhere in all of this, where they're having to navigate themselves, their children. There's the relationship with with you, too. They're in a very strange places. I've been aware of that difficulty and the differences between my upbringing with two biological parents, and growing up with others where there has been divorce and a step parent has come in, you're kind of just aware of it, if you kind of forget it on the day to day, but occasionally, there'll be a blip somewhere and they are navigating a boundary that's been crossed in company. I hadn't realised how much exclusion there is and how off kilter family life must be for step parents.

Ken Fenton 28:30

Yet, even sometimes like her her daughter will come over, and well this is only about two weeks ago, she came over and and she was sitting on the couch showing showing her mother some pictures of of her grandson which is of course my wife's great grandson. And this is yours. And that just really made me feel like left out I just came home from work to sit on a couch showing pictures to my wife and videos. The guy come in, I do my normal routine I put my bag inside that I take to work on my lunch and stuff and I make a cup of coffee isn't like a five minute span and then I go walking until my coffee in my hand and then all sudden I heard her daughter saying okay, I'll see you guys later I love you mom take care of so you can and I just like stood there just just walking into the literal like what happened here and it was like it didn't wasn't gonna sit and include me in any of this. Now it's time to I'm not even sure if I want to be. I'm on that fence with you. I'm happy for them. They have. She has a grandchild now. But that made me feel really left out of this whole thing. I As you can see, I'm sitting in my car is this right now is my safe play so the the my internet isn't so great out here. So I'm using the phone to connect to the internet. It's my first time trying it so it's working.

Lisa Ann 30:17

There's been many times where I've gotten in the car because as you say that the house is sometimes just not a safe place. So I get in the car and I just go and sit somewhere. And yeah, that that can be quite relaxing. When the house is less than safe

Berenice Smith 30:58

What because it sounds to me like there's clearly some pockets here of exclusion within parenting communities, and also probably in the childless community, too, that we aren't perhaps as universally accepting as perhaps we might think that we are, what can we do? That's, what's the message? What can we all do to help and provide support for you? What can we do better as a community? If you're talking say to the child bust community, but also maybe prosperity communities to if there was a parent listening? Who was thinking, okay, yeah, this could be perhaps my friend. What can we all do to make things better for you and to be more inclusive? That's a big question. What can we make better for you? What's the ideal scenario? How can we welcome you more to this space? Because it feels like it's been? How many episodes of the podcast?

Michael Hughes 32:08

I think this is 49.

Berenice Smith 32:13

Yes, and we haven't talked about this. And we really should have done this is a real blind spot. On our part, you know, yes. There's lots of topics to talk about. But actually, step parenting is a big one. We could have done this earlier, too.

Lisa Ann 32:45

I'm wondering whether the terminology of step parent is slightly exclusive, because as soon as you have that word, parent, there's an expectation and there's a there's a kind of assumption that I'm doing a parenting job, but I've never felt that I've never, okay, yes, sometimes I used to take the kids to school, or I would comfort them and they were crying. But I would do that for a nephew or niece or a friend's child in exactly the same way. And just because I'm married to their dad, doesn't make me their parent. I'm very aware of that. I'm constantly aware of that. And particularly when we talk about, I know in the childless community, it's a big topic of what happens when we're older. And I might say something like that to my husband. And he'll say, Well, you, the kids will look after you. And I say, well, they don't have any. You know, that that's not on them at all. They've got enough parents to look after? I don't come under that. Maybe if I'm very lucky, they will. But I could say the same about my nephew, in exactly the same way. So I suppose for me, just the assumption that I am in a parenting role is quite hurtful, because I'm not.

Ken Fenton 33:57

Yeah. Ah, what? I don't know, what could be done. What could people do? Or say you're in the communities or outside to help? I don't know, I don't know. The trellis communities that I belong to I belong to Bri and you know, the drill amazing people, they they, they they give support, you know, when needed the there? I don't know, I'm not sure.

Lisa Ann 34:32

It also is very different depending on I think the age that you come into the child's life, because as you say, can you they were adults already. For me, they weren't sort of primary age children. I've got friends who have come into children's lives where they've been very small babies. And that distinction will define your relationship with them because younger children obviously need a lot more support and they need more from you. whereas adults not so much. So You just within step parenting, and I've already poo poed that terminology, but just within that the range is so huge again. It's a minefield, isn't it?

Ken Fenton 35:13

Yeah. Like Like, yeah, like our kids yesterday, we're both grown, they were living out on their own. I've been to both their marriages when they both got married. Or four or four grandchildren each had to, I've been there with their birds and growing up and everything and now one great grandchild. And then second one on the way. You have been torn down with all that. And that's, that's one of the, I guess one of the hardest things to was was many years ago after her daughter got married, and she was pregnant with her first. Which is a little story with that too. Just seeing her, you know, when she was pregnant and thinking I'll never see her my wife like that her mother, you know, in that supposedly most

beautiful time of a woman's life I've heard it put out. And one thing her heard her daughter said after she got married before she was pregnant a couple of months she was married. She came over to the house very upset one day, and I think I might have mentioned this on what, on the men's community that she very upset. She was crying. She said, she's a mom, what's wrong with me? She says, Why aren't you getting pregnant? And the third thing, what will people think? And it went well, and she said that as a while? What will people think it is a big social thing of what people say what people think. That's how you life is judged by by? You know, if you have kids, how many you have? Seems to make a difference sometimes in your status level of society. You know, I? You know,

Sarah Lawrence 37:12

I'm really struck by how you can, Lisa, you're kind of, you've been a big part of this family units life. You know, you've seen these big landmarks. You've been there when things have gone completely pear shaped with the logical parents. But there's still this sense that you're not, you're not in it, you're sort of sitting on the the, the edge looking in watching this this almost like this movie play out? Yes. When I mean, I'm sitting here sort of a bit gobsmacked. It's like, well, when when do you become become part of the family unit, given that you've both had such a huge part of it, if that makes sense to you, if you sat by and watched all of this happen and been part of it? It? When do you get to be part of that, that unit?

Lisa Ann 38:02

For me, that's there's quite a bit of sweet elements to that, because I often feel the most connected with my stepchildren, when they fall out with their biological mom, my stepson in particular has had a very rocky relationship with her. And they're sort of pockets of time where they'll fall out for a few months. And we'll see him regularly or come round sort of almost every day sometimes. And I feel incredibly close to him. I feel very connected. As I said before, I was actually the first one to find out that they were having a baby. But then as soon as that relationship repairs, I'm cast out again. And it's not anything that he's doing. Intentionally. I'm sure he doesn't even realise it. But for me, it's just like, Okay, I'll just, I'll get back in my box. And you and I want him to have a good relationship with his mom. And it's so difficult because I hate the thought that he has to have a mum who is not everything that she should be. So I try and step in without overstepping. And it's that tight rope again, where I'm not quite sure how far to go. And I suppose it is coming a little bit easier as they're growing up. But But yeah, I don't know that I'll ever feel that I'm in it, I suppose.

Ken Fenton 39:18

Yeah, I don't really know. Yeah. No, I will feel that. Yeah. Like, like, I'm part of it a part of the whole thing. You always feel like the outsider. You know, as far as like, like, the grandkids. Like my wife, like I said, My wife always says you're always gonna be grandpa to them, but I wonder how I don't really know how they think about it. You know, am I just, you know, they just take it as that fact. He's grandpa, or is it? You know, well, he's not really family, grandpa. Yeah. It's not blood. It's not you know, you know, So, again, I don't know how to look at I guess I can assume but no, you're not. I'm never I never really feel part of the whole thing. Oh, we feel like that a little bit in the background persons outside looking in.

Michael Hughes 40:16

It reminds me, I can cut this out if this is something you don't want to talk about. But it reminds me of the very first email you sent me. That still sits with me even now, how many years later? I've got no idea. But I would so you know, brains going. In there where you talked about you went to an event with your wife, and I think one of the one of the kids were maybe two of the kids were there. And they've introduced your wife is this is this is my mum. On that's kin.

Ken Fenton 40:49

Yes, yes. Wow, you do remember that?

Michael Hughes 40:53

I sat with that email, it really for me, it really drove that exclusion and isolation. That you must feel.

Ken Fenton 41:20

That was it was a I believe may have been the daughter's wedding. I'm not sure. Yeah. Introducing. It was a Yeah, her daughter was introducing her me to us to some family members. Something I'm not even sure might have it for him. But yeah. Hi, this is my mom. And she had a big smile on her face. You know, the whole thing and this is Ken. And I think I wrote nothing when I said to you like well, who's can see the milkman is someone she grabbed outside the street and said, Hey, you want to go to wedding? Yeah, didn't didn't explain this is just my stepfather. This is you know, something. And I guess I have to give her son some credit. Because he has done the same thing. He was not the same. But introducing me to somebody said this is my mother. And this is my stepfather. He at least he gave me a classification. Which, which is what that's what I am. Instead of just as Ken and that is a lot while ago

Michael Hughes 42:28

But it was believably brother. It was impactful. It really was.

Ken Fenton 42:35

Yeah, it impacted me that day.

Berenice Smith 42:40

Is that an unconscious bias by children? I guess when they're little, they wouldn't know. But as they get older look at that difficult bit when they become aware of things, and aware of relationships and language and the complexities as to why perhaps they have this other person who's around and trying to puzzle all of that out. And I guess that's kind of where sometimes language and unconscious bias can creep in. Because they're not sure. And I guess that's kind of where the other person the the biological parent, if they're still around, can also create that bias by storytelling. There's so much wrapped up here in language and labels here isn't there?

Ken Fenton 43:32

I mean, like, like, just talking about her daughter introducing me, she didn't mean any malice. She wasn't trying to put me down in any way or anything like that. It was just just how the words just came out. No, she didn't think about it, probably. And yeah, without thinking that's just how to use the words.

Berenice Smith 44:00

All of the hidden things that you did the things that perhaps they don't realise, that you do and provide such structure to their lives, they'd missed if you were not present? I read a while ago on social media about how we don't give praise to the people around us until they are gone. Society -we - tend to leave it until when they're not there to listen. And it feels like there's an awful lot of that thanklessness in our community but particularly perhaps with step parenting a need to give thanks for the essential role that that step parents do. It must feel very thankless but actually is incredibly important. What you do for your stepchildren is epic.

Lisa Ann 44:51

That's such an interesting point. Berenice my, my dad died just over a year ago, and I grew up with both my biological parents My mum and dad were married, etc. But they both had previous families. So all of my siblings are half. Dad had a couple of children, mom had a couple of children. And so all of my siblings understood the step part of that relationship I never did. And it wasn't until I became a stepparent myself that I really started to see it in their eyes. And now I look at my mum and the way she behaved when we were younger. And I look at my dad, and I just think, Wow, you, you had all of this, and you took it on and you ran with it. And so like my sister's children would call my dad, grandpa, even though he wasn't biologically. And it's just this whole other world that as a child, I didn't see it at all, I was completely oblivious. But as soon as I became that person, myself, I started to see and interesting, I started to see the things I didn't want to be. So there's some difficult relationships in my family on my mom's side, my mum as a step parent, and I just feel so strongly that I don't want to make the same mistakes. But it's impossible because you just don't know what's coming. You don't know what's coming from you left, right. And it can just be all over the place. But yeah, I think when my dad died, there was a lot of the step part of that became very, very stark. And the way the children responded to his death was very different depending on whether they were his children or stepchildren. And that that scares me, because I feel like, is that going to be me? Am I just going to be forgotten? Because I'm not the mum. One day when I'm gone. Is my existence just going to just going to be forgotten? Yeah, it's difficult.

Ken Fenton 46:43

Yeah, yeah, that's true. I thought, yeah. Like he just said, just, am I going to be forgotten? You know, and I felt the same thing for me about me. I feel well, you're the mother, of course, there's there's going to be all kinds of memories and up times, bad times. With them, but that's their mother. I mean, Jesus. You know, how much more you can say to that? And? Yeah, me? I don't know. Yeah. I don't know. I know. I know, sometimes step parents do make a great influence on on, on the step children's lives and, and I think it was her son's wife had a stepfather, and who she loved the guy. And her father, our biological father, she couldn't give two cents for she didn't want to ever hear from the guy again. I don't know all the details. But but she loved her stepfather. And I'd met him too. And he was even a great guy, funny guy.

Lisa Ann 47:54

You hear about that a lot, don't you whether and particularly when it's the stepfather who's kind of dad in, in the very early part of the child's life, and they've come along and they get to be dad. And so that child then sees that person as their dad. But I don't know, when it's a woman, it's completely different. Because even if their mum wasn't around, I don't think I could ever slip into that, that position of being

the mum, because there's a different societal expectation of it. And you know, the idea that a mum wouldn't be around for her children is absolutely horrifying to many people. But when you think about a dad who's just sort of done a runner or whatever, that is accepted by society, they go, okay, yeah, that men do that. And it's fine, because this other person's just stepped in and become dad. But a woman can't do that. And I don't know that I'd want to be honest, because that brings a whole nother level of pain and what have you. Yeah, I'm not sure what my point was there. Sorry, I went off on a bit of a tangent.

Berenice Smith 49:05

Biological parents are allowed to do more even if that's not always good behaviour and you don't feel you can say anything about that?

Lisa Ann 49:22

It's, yeah, stay in our lane.

Berenice Smith 49:43

By talking we are resetting the word and changing the landscape. You've both mentioned separately how your partner's reactions are to certain things with their children and how you feel you can't feel that same sense of joy because of childlessness.

Sarah Lawrence 50:36

Stay in your lane as your role is not defined?

Ken Fenton 50:43

There's no rules here or there that no manual. Any but somehow, you have to carry the weight of rules or expectations that nobody's really created for you. Or the children in all of this as well. What are Mother's and Father's Days like for you, if it's okay to ask? Mother's Day and Father's Day are two big holidays. For us, unfortunately. But for me my Mother's Day is a worse experience than the Father's Day. Because on Mother's Day, that's when they call my wife when they'll come over and bring the gift and things and, you know, yeah, there's more of a big deal made out of it than than not up, of course, on Father's Day, I usually never hear from the daughter. The son tries. He'll text me. Happy Father's Day. And he has, I think, two years ago, he came over with a card over the last year and he called me but yeah, I think one of the days probably worse for me.

Lisa Ann 51:53

And actually, sometimes I think on Mother's Day, I feel a little bit like, well, they're gonna go and see their mom. So actually, maybe I can have a bit of respite, I can have a bit of peace. Because I know that I'm not going to have to acknowledge the day even I can just go off into my little bubble and not worry about it, because I know that they're with their mum, and that's the priority. But then occasionally they'll turn up here and have a card and a box chocolates for me and it's excruciating because I don't know how to respond to that. I'm equally over the moon, I'm so happy that they thought of me and I feel really grateful for that. But also, it's just a big fat slap in the face. And a reminder that I was a secondary consideration and that's how it should be. And it's just all those emotions that just swirl around all the time.

Ken Fenton 53:01

Like you said it was late on in the day when they would it's like you feel like you weren't yet secondary or ven on the list, an aftertought - we better go do something or say something to her. Yeah, I understand that I felt the same way on Father's Day. Yeah, I know they're gonna go see their father of course and things like that. And maybe eight o'clock at night there's a text you know. Gee, thanks for thanking me.

Lisa Ann 53:46

But you don't want to seem ungrateful because it is a very sweet thing to do if they do turn up later on at night. So yes, you have to put on the face the smile and you say thank you and you give them a hug and and then just go cry.

Berenice Smith 54:14

I'm sure it must be bringing out lots of emotions for you both this morning, and joining us here, but just it's so educational and so informative. And I feel like I have learned so much in the hour we've been together. I can't thank you enough for that. And I know that you know, obviously you're conscious you've got your family around you as well. And they're there and that's obviously difficult to talk about that the field keep them safe too.

Ken Fenton 54:52

One thing that was amazing for me today, which I really appreciate was talking to another step there and that Uh, I thought that was terrific. I've never, never happened. Yeah. And it was nice to talk to somebody that, you know, understands what you're thinking and feeling and, and you understand and seeing them, you know, their their difficulties that are outside some of the other people's feelings and things, you know?

Berenice Smith 55:24

We do have that quite often we have lots of our guests have never met each other before. We'd bring them together on the podcast and they stay in touch! We're building a friendship circle that we didn't expect to do!

Sarah Lawrence 55:30

Such an important point. You know, the fact that we've been asked about this topic so often suggests that there's a real need for it out there to kind of, I guess, normalise your experiences, because as you say, it's quiet. Sounds quite honest. Sounds quite lonely. Because it is, it's such an unusual, I must say it's unusual. But it's kind of you're not, you're not in this camp, you're not in this camp, you've got a foot in both. Where do I sit?

Lisa Ann 56:07

Yeah, you've got an inbalance life because you can't quite settle anywhere. And I think for me, what's important, and the reason I wanted to do this podcast so much is because I mean, five, six years ago, I wouldn't have been able to sit here and talk the way I have done. But now I'm sort of 10 years into being a step parent. And actually, I look back at where I was 10 years ago. And there are so many

people coming into it at that point. And I just want them to know that it does actually get better. And everyone says it's gonna get better. And the kids, well, the kids will see what's going on. And maybe they will; maybe they won't, but actually what will get better is you'll find it easier to navigate, you'll figure it out. And you'll get to a point where it doesn't feel like your heart's been ripped out every five minutes. And that that for me is what was important to get over.

Berenice Smith 56:51

Having people around you to have a conversation and to meet up step parents would probably be a huge, important part of that. And that's something that we three perhaps need to think about because it feels like there is a gap somewhere that we could facilitate for you as it sounds incredibly lonely at times.

Sarah Lawrence 57:41

Thank you, but I really genuinely heartfelt thank you. It's been a real eye opener for me.

Michael Hughes 57:49

I'll repeat what Berenice and Sarah have just said, and thank you. Thank you for your courage. I know we've spoken in the past and this is difficult for you. So thank you for being here today. I'm going to call it a slap in the face in terms of what it's like to be a step parent. Because I never thought I never imagined some of the things you've said that I so thank you so much.

Ken Fenton 58:44

Oh, thank you. I enjoyed the conversation. I really did and seeing all you guys again. Yeah, it's been a while. And the other thing I appreciate so much is that right now, we were talking from opposite sides of the world basically, you know. I mean, well, I got the UK in the middle. And then I'm you know, I'm in the side Michael. He's got he's literally on the other side of the world for me.

Berenice Smith 59:26

It's the power of a broadcast. We all love it very much.

Ken Fenton 59:36

I always get it. Yeah, it always hits me that I've talked to people from Australia, from the UK, from Africa and all over the world.

Sarah Lawrence 1:00:16

Thanks for listening. We hope you found this episode touchingly honest as we did, we'd love to hear from you and how you felt about Ken and Lisa's stories. If you'd like to find out more about our podcast or you have a great idea for a topic we've not covered, or you just want more of something else, we'd love to hear from you. We want this podcast to have as many voices from across our community as possible. So if something's missing, or you just want a deeper dive on it, let us know. You can find us on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn. And we have a YouTube channel now too, along with our own website at www.thefullstoppod.com You can sign up to our listeners listed at the website which keeps you up to date on what we're up to. And if you'd like to, you can also donate to our work too. But as ever, as Michael always says, you're not alone.