



Claudette Chenevert - The Stepmom Coach

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Episode 102

Children's Books: How To Deal With The Emotions of Separation & Divorce

See show notes at <https://stepmomcoach.com/102-2/>

Claudette: Hi, Rachel. I'm so excited to be talking with you today.

Rachel: Hi, Claudette. I'm excited to finally connect as well. It's great.

Claudette: So, I first connected with you through social media, and I was really excited because of what you do. I want everybody to know because there's not enough of what you have around in the world. So we're gonna start by letting people know what it is you're doing, right?

Rachel: Good place to start.

Claudette: Yeah. So, Rachel let us know what it is that you do.

Rachel: Well, I guess first and foremost, I'm a psychologist. I do a lot of therapy here in Sydney, Australia, where I'm based. I work with children and families and young people who are going through divorce and separation and also in terms of when their family gets reorganized. Post-divorce and separation and stepfamilies are formed, and that's kind of my bread and butter. And in the context of that, I've also written some children's books to help the children in those situations in terms of their emotional journey. I also have a blog for stepfamilies and specifically stepparents and their partners called [Stepping Through](#).

Claudette: Awesome. And you know the reason why we connected is first and foremost to talk about your children's book, right? And I first had some people reaching out to me and say "there's not enough children's book out there. Where can we get them?" Then we connected. So how did you get started in writing children's books, but specifically about divorce and about the families?

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Rachel: I guess working with the children. I mean, I'm a bit of a bookworm, so I do love a good book, and I think that books have an amazing ability to help us deal with uncomfortable situations and just to help us understand things and not feel so alone when we're going through difficult times.

And when I was working with the families going through divorce and separation, when parents had repartnered, I really wanted to be able to recommend a picture book for parents of primary school age children. A book they could read with their children to help their kids better understand some of the feelings that they were feeling going through, some of these major life events and life and family changes.

And while there are some really good books out there, there wasn't a book that I was looking for. There wasn't a book that spoke about the feelings and the emotions without necessarily going into the detail of what a separation was or about how a parent repartnered. And so after many Google search over the weekend looking for the right books, I thought, well, I might just try and write one. I had a wealth of information from all the children that I work with.

So, that's how both the books kind of came to fruition. A bit of a need for a book that was literally just about the feelings and emotions and not being able to find the right one.

Claudette: When I saw your books, I went to the one called **Max Divorce Earthquake** and I loved the title. And you also have **Harriett's Expanding Heart**. In both of those books, you talk a lot about the perspective of what a child goes through and their feelings and emotions. And so I'd love for you to share a little bit more with us, how a child or how children view separation.

Rachel: I guess when separation happens, it's predominantly lost. It's a big, big sense of loss for kids. It's the loss of the family unit, as they've known it.

It's sometimes the loss of the only life they've ever known, and in and amongst that lost there are secondary losses. They may have to change schools. They may lose a pet who doesn't come with them into the to their new home. They may lose certain friendships or certain routines or rituals that have always been a part of their world up to that point.

And however much parents may want or not want the separation, for children, it's the loss of daily access to one of their parents. And that's really, really hard for kids because inevitably, kids love both parents. They want to have access to both parents and want to continue with those warm and loving relationships. To not have that readily accessible to you can be really hard for kids, to try and navigate the feelings and the situation that they're in because of that.

Claudette: And, this is one of the reasons why I love your books, because you talk about the children's feelings and all the things you mentioned about the loss that a child feels. And oftentimes these children do not have the words to express themselves.

And even adults have a hard time expressing themselves. They don't know how to put words to what is actually going on or to wrap their heads around everything that's going on. And so, I'd like to ask at what stage of the separation would you suggest that a parent or parents read these books to their children?

Rachel: I think in terms of a divorce and a family break up, as soon as the changes start happening. You ideally want to be talking or giving children a story of separation before bags are being packed, the furniture is being moved out of the house. They need to have some sort of narrative that helps explain what's happening in and around their world and their physical environment inside the home.

They also need to start to be given language to describe what might be happening for them internally. Kids, right from an early age, we're teaching them words, we're pointing to a tree and saying, "that's a tree." We're teaching them about colors. We're giving them words to talk about the world around them. We also need to teach our children and to give our children words to express their feelings and the physiological experiences that they're having to these events.

They're not born knowing them. We learn them as we go. And having a rich emotional vocabulary helps children to better understand themselves and the world around them, what they're feeling and to communicate that with their caregivers and their loved ones.

Claudette: Yeah, it's true, right? Our world is about words and identifying the feelings and emotions that may not be visual, except for what we see on the face. And sometimes it could be confusing because for a child they may be seeing their parents either sad or happy or joyful.

And sometimes the children may internalize this and say, "Is this my fault? Is this something that I'm responsible for?" And I think you address it in the books, right? So tell us about how children tend to internalize what's going on and how we can help them address that it's not their fault.

Rachel: Look, children from a developmental perspective can be quite self-referencing. And how they interpret what's happening around them and what they can control and what they can't when something happens, it's quite significant in their family. If they're not given an adequate child appropriate, helpful explanation by their parents say, for a divorce, children are going to start to make up their own explanation for what's happening.

And because of their age and their stage of development, they're likely to blame themselves for the family conflict for mom and dad's fighting. "If only I'd put my red gum boots on to go outside when I've been asked. Maybe, Dad wouldn't be so upset and wouldn't have left the house", or "I should have eaten my vegetables or if I'd gone to bed and, being a good kid, maybe this awful thing that's happened to my family wouldn't have happened."

So they can feel a lot of blame and guilt. And one of the easiest things that parents can do to help kids manage that is to reassure them that whatever has happened between their parents has got nothing to do with them. They are not to blame. They were adult problems, that mom and dad or mom and mom or dad or dad, whoever is in their family makeup, couldn't quite fix.

There is nothing that they can do to try to repair the marriage or the relationship, and just to reassure them that it is not them or their behavior or their responsibility as a child to manage what's going on between the adults.

Claudette: Yeah. I love also **Harriet's Expanding Heart** because that one's about stepparenting and adding people. When I read that book, it's very real, the emotions, the circumstance. You didn't make it overly flowery or overly positive, but very real.

So I'd love for you to share more about the idea behind **Harriet's Expanding Heart**.

Rachel: I think, and it's certainly true in Australia and around the world that stepfamilies are one of the fastest growing forms of family units happening. And that's because divorce rates and separation rates are high and people are repartnering. It kind of makes sense.

But for children, stepfamilies are certainly portrayed in a lot of fairy tales and a lot of stories in a very negative light. You know, the wicked stepmom is a myth that gets perpetuated time and time again. And there's a lot of negativity around stepfamilies. If you put that aside, there's also a lot of big feelings that happened for kids when their family changes.

And when a parent repartner, for a lot of children, even though maybe deep, deep down, they know that their parents are never getting back together again. They could still hope for that. They still wish for that and the arrival of a new person and seeing their parents in love and happy again can really seriously dent that fantasy. That in itself can have consequences for how a stepfamily forms and how the relationships begin to form.

Within that, I also think stepfamilies are one of those units that has a lot more invested people than just the stepparent and the parent, and that adds a layer of complexity that children aren't necessarily aware of. But they get caught up in it, and on top of that, it's change. And change happens because sometimes we've lost something, even if we're gaining

something down the end. So it brings up a whole lot of mixed feelings for kids, even when it's a really, really a good thing, right?

Again, that just addressed a child's emotional journey around the reorganization of their family when a stepparent is introduced to something without a guess, an ulterior motive. We're just talking about the feelings. They are what they are and having maybe a storybook that just talked about that without going into the stepfamily pros and cons. I thought that was something that was missing in terms of children's books, that I wasn't able to find.

Claudette: Yeah, I absolutely agree that there's not enough books out there from the perspective from children. It's really a great book. So what would be the recommended age group for these books?

Rachel: It's going to depend on the child but its primary school age. So probably somewhere between four or five up to eight or nine. But in saying that, I work with some children who are maybe nine or 10, and when you're reading it with their little siblings, they still get something out of it. They can still relate to it, even though they might be a little bit too old for this type of picture book per se. But the messages can still resonate with them. But generally speaking, four to about 8-9 would be the target audience.

Claudette: You know, having another sibling reading to a younger sibling could just be a great way to share that message. There is one particular place in the book **Harriet's Expanding Heart** where you talk about movie nights, where Emily sometimes claims the seat next to her dad and the attention is directed towards Cooper, her stepbrother.

Harriet also gets a sinking feeling in her tummy, her eyes prick with tears. And she's feeling like the outsider. I want our listeners and audience to know that you really grasped the feelings that these children go through. So as a stepmom, I often felt like an outsider. But sometimes we forget that the kids can feel like an outsider too, right?

Rachel: Absolutely. I think within stepfamilies the outsider role changes depending on the situation and depending on who's in the house at any given time. So there's an insider outsider dynamic that's happening in a number of different combinations.

You have the biological parent who is quite often the insider because they have the history with their biological child that a stepparent just doesn't have. And so when you know a parent and their biological child are engaging and sharing a family joke from 10 years ago or doing something funny that they've always done in terms of rituals, the stepparent doesn't know that stuff. They weren't there when those things kind of evolved, so they're in a bit of an outsider role.

But then you have a situation where perhaps the biological child has been visiting with their other parent or living with their other parent for a period of time, and they come back into the home. Life in that household has continued even in their absence. And there's going to be conversations between their parents and their stepparent or their parents and their stepsibling that they were not a part of and that they don't know about. And in that situation, the child is in an outsider role.

So the dynamic is shifting and changing and evolving, depending on what's happening in the household at any given point in time. For us adults, when you feel like an outsider, that's really hard to manage and to know what to do with yourself. And yet we have young children who have less life experience and less vocabulary to explain what's going on for them. They are managing some of those big feelings as well. It can be a very tricky dynamic for anybody in a stepfamily to manage. Being aware of it is sometimes the first step in being able to do something about it.

Claudette: You are so right. The fact of being aware is the first place to be, in order to reach out, get the support and help that you need in order to make those changes.

Rachel: Absolutely. And even in the situation, a stepparent or a parent might not know what to do. Being able to say to a child, *“you look like you're feeling a little left out. You're not too sure how to fit back into the family.”* even just being able to say that to a child and recognize the child's emotional reality in that moment is actually going to be helpful for that child to move through that feeling and through that difficult, uncomfortable space into what happens next because it sparks a conversation. Most children, if a parent would say that and they're right, a kid's gonna go *“Yeah, that's right.”* Then a parent follows their lead and says, *“Oh, come on, sweetie. Let's have a hug.”* If the parent's got it wrong, most kids will go. *“No, that's not it.”* And give them more information. So either way, it's sparking a conversation that's going to be helpful for all involved in that family situation.

Claudette: So many great points, Rachel. One of the things that I also want to address that I think is super important and this is for the parents: The last page of both books. You have a list of tips to help parents or a teacher or whoever is reading. There's a lot of great information there. A lot of times, parents are reading the book, but they're thinking it's just for their kids. But this is actually for the parent or stepparent, right?

Rachel: Yeah, absolutely. Because I think we sometimes don't know where to even start or what to do when we've got relationship or family issues. It can be overwhelming for us. Whatever our ages are. So because I guess maybe in my background as a psychologist and the work I do, I want to just to make sure that parents and caregivers or whoever is reading these books with children can also get something out of it in terms of meeting the child's needs in that moment. And they're not way out suggestions. One of the suggestions I think is just regularly reassure your kids that you love them. Sounds obvious, but kids really do need

to hear that when they're going through transitions and change. So I kind of thought, well why not put some tips in the back that the adults can get out of it. And maybe that's going to help the children in the family move forward into whatever comes next.

Claudette: I so agree. I mean, when I saw this, I thought this is amazing. This is so important because a lot of times you read books for kids, but then we have a hard time understanding - What am I supposed to do with this? You've actually shared with the parents, stepparents and the adults in these children's lives, whoever is reading – *“Oh, I can do this.”* And sometimes it's just a reminder or giving us permission, right?

Rachel: Yeah. You know, it's just not earth shattering, or amazing kind of tips. I like to think of them just common sense, practical stuff that most parents and stepparents are probably doing already. It's just a reminder about what they can do. They do have something that's within their circle of control, to be able to improve the situation for their children and therefore, for the family unit.

Claudette: And that is so important, right? It's sometimes those little things we overlook because we think it's too simple. It can't be that important if it's that simple. And the reality is that sometimes the most simple steps or tips are the most effective.

Rachel: Absolutely. I mean, parenting is hard, exhausting work and stepparenting is almost even harder and even more exhausting for all of those reasons that we've touched on. But in terms of what children need, it can often be quite simple. Parents and stepparents have the skills within them already to do. They just have to act on that. Almost all that gut instinct that says telling a child you love them, that makes perfect sense. That's what I'm gonna do or making time for a child to spend with their biological parent without the stepparent always being present. A lot of stepparents I work with breath a sigh of relief sometimes where it's like, *“Oh! sweet. I can go and take some time for me and I don't have to be there all the time.”* Some of those things are simple and meet the needs of all family members in in slightly different ways.

Claudette: Yeah, I love the common sense, the simplicity, but the powerfulness of, and remember because it's simple doesn't mean there's no power behind it. It could be even more powerful. As you said, it's the acting upon those tips that makes it that much more powerful. It's one thing to know about it. It's a totally different thing to do something about it, right?

Rachel: Yeah, definitely. And I think some of the things like accepting your child's emotions. You know what, whatever they may be, and it sounds simple and is it, it is in the scheme of things. But for a parent to do that, they also have to be prepared to sit with the uncomfortableness that it might raise in them, seeing their child sad or seeing their child grieving. That is going to trigger something in the adults around them. And sometimes that's

the tricky part - is for a parent to be able to sit with an uncomfortable feeling, seeing their child sad or upset. It's to be able to sit with them in the emotional space because it's not always comfortable. As a parent, you don't want to see your children unhappy. You don't want to see them sad but it's also okay if they do have those feelings. They will move through that feeling into something else. And that's just part of emotional acceptance, an emotional coaching.

Claudette: That is very important for all adults to give permission and to allow your child, the children, your stepkids to feel those emotions. Because if you stuff those emotions, or quieting them with other distractions or avoiding addressing them, it will create other emotional issues down the road that are going to be a lot bigger, a lot harder to deal with - even as adults. Then you become an adult, and you're wondering, why am I having these issues with emotions? If you've never had the permission to address them, that's part of the reason.

Rachel: Yeah, absolutely, whether you're given permission to have those feelings or not, you have them. They're there. If you're not taught how to tolerate that feeling, especially the more uncomfortable negative feelings, so to speak, you're not taught that it's okay. It will come out, for children, in their behavior. That creates a whole other set of struggles within families and stepfamilies. And then as an adult, you don't have the skills to manage what life throws at you. When you experience those feelings, which are unavoidable, we just need to be taught how to manage them and how to tolerate them, how to be with them even when they're not necessarily the most comfortable of feelings.

Claudette: And so this is why we, as adults, need to get your book.

Rachel: Absolutely. Yes.

Claudette: So tell us where can we get your books?

Rachel: Well, we're in the process of trying to look for a U.S. Distributor, but in the meantime, you can get them from me directly at my [website, www.kinshipbooks.com](http://www.kinshipbooks.com) or a variety of other bookstores online do sell them as well. If you Google them, you will find them. But certainly Kinship Books is a good place to go.

Claudette: I will definitely make sure that the link to your where to get the books will be in the show notes, so make sure to check them out. And also, where can we follow you on social media? Because everybody's on social media.

Rachel: Okay, through Kinship Books, I have an [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/kinshipbooks) account and [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/kinshipbooks) at kinship books and also through the blog Stepping Through that I write. I'm part of a co-founder where we have a blog, www.steppingthrough.com.au. And we have an [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/steppingthrough) following

and **Facebook** page as well. And that's predominantly where we will post blogs and evidence-based information regarding stepfamilies to assist stepparents and their partners.

Claudette: I will make sure that is also in the show notes as well, so that people can go to your blog with your posts and get your books - I really love them. They're great books. They're beautiful.

Rachel: Thank you.

Claudette: You're very welcome. So thank you, Rachel. This was a great conversation. I love this. I think more parents and more stepparents need these kind of resources. And so now they have them. They just need to go and get them at your website. And this gives a great opportunity to have a conversation with the children that are going through this. I mean, as adults, we know how we're feeling. These two books give words to the feelings and the emotions children are going through. And then you can have deeper conversation using the notes at the end of your book.

Rachel: Yeah. Brilliant. Thank you so much for having me, Claudette. It's been a lovely opportunity to chat.

Claudette: Well, thank you. And if you haven't already subscribe to this podcast, do so in the link provided in the show notes. Ok, bye for now.