



Episode 7

Lee Smith: Modern Dads and the most Fragile Thing in Any Home

Matt: Welcome to the Robertson and Easterling podcast. Thanks for listening. I'm Matt Easterling.

Craig: And I'm Craig Robertson. Matt and I are board certified Family Law specialist or simply, we're professional storytellers. Together we run one of the most successful boutique law firms in Mississippi.

Matt: As divorce lawyers, we are creative problem solvers who work with real people during the most difficult seasons of their lives. So, sit back, relax, take a deep breath. Everything's going to be okay. You found us and what you're about to hear is going to help.

Craig: All right, today's episode we are talking about some really near and dear to me. I lost my dad five years ago and he was 83. He was a man's man. He had big hands. He was left-handed, loved baseball, loved gardens, loved his tractor, loved his grand kids, and I've had this aspiration about telling stories of dads. In my practice, our practice, I meet so many aspiring dads, step dads, biological dads, adoptive dads, mentors, coaches, just people who father other people, and today we've got, a great guest to talk about that.

Matt: And to talk on today's episode about the role of the modern father is Lee Smith. Lee Smith is the founder and director of Cornerstone and has been counseling since 2006. Since beginning his counseling practice, he's worked with adolescences, families, and with married couples. Currently specializes with married family dynamics, anxiety, depression, working with those who served in ministry, Lee, thanks for being here today.

Lee: Glad to be here with you guys, thanks for having me.

Craig: Yeah Lee, tell us a little bit, I know that you're a dad, well we have three dads here. I think between the three of us we have six kids. Talk about your family a bit, tell us about them.

Lee: Yeah, I'd love to, so Jenny and I celebrated 20 years this year, which is crazy, absolutely nuts. But we have three kids we just love to death. Ford is our oldest. He's 13 years old. He's in 7th grade. We have Millie who is 10 and in the 5th grade. And we have Moses who is 7 and is in the 1st grade. And, man I tell ya, everyday is full throttle around our house. Its exciting stuff.

Craig: Yeah, One of the things near and dear to my heart is adoption, and caring for the fatherless and some people who know me know that several years ago, my wife and I started an organization called 200 Million Flowers and quite frankly, you and another dear friend of ours

was part of the inspiration of that. You have the adopted son, tell us a little bit about that process and about your son.

Lee: Man, it's a crazy story. So, probably some time around 2009 or 2010, you know Jenny and I had Ford and Millie at the time and we thought, "Gosh we got our boy, we got our girl, we are set." Though life was pretty much carved and our path was straight from there, but we just started sensing around that time that there was just something more for us and we really started feeling our hearts being called towards adoption. And Jenny and I had, the friend you are referring to, who were adopting at the same time, I think through their journey and through our own hearts, we began to feel like, "man this is something that is for us too", and so after a lot of thought and a lot of prayer, we began to pursue an international adoption through Ethiopia and from the time we placed our application on file, to the time Moses came home was about a three year time frame. It was a really challenging three years but the moment that you get to meet your son for the first time and is actually placed in your hands and you get to bring him home, is just a moment you never forget and it just makes it all worthwhile.

Matt: Wow, how old was Moses when he came to live with you?

Lee: Yeah, Moses was 6 months old when we got the referral but he actually came home when he was 8 months. So soon thereafter.

Craig: yeah one of the things that, we've talked to a formerly chancery judge on our podcast and he talked about the progression the 24 years he was on the chancery bench and how much more involved fathers have become, and Lee you're a dad, and you're a professional counselor, can you talk a little bit about how that intersects with your counseling practice?

Lee: Well you know I think what I do for a living every day, you have examples in front of you of things that have gone really bad. It really keeps you honest as a dad and I think everyday I leave with even more of a desire to just get it right. I'm always aware that I'm on a clock when it comes to my kids. I mean, you get them for 18 years and then they are out. That 18 years, I mean, you know you are getting closer, Craig, so that 18 years flies by really quick. So, I think the word intentionality really comes to mind when I think about how I spend my time with my kids. What do I want to do? What are the things I want to impress upon them and really I think the biggest part is just learning to connect with their hearts and hearing from them.

Matt: Do you feel like you have noticed a change, even in your patients, the people you see, where the fathers have a more active role inside their home?

Lee: Yeah, I think so. For sure. I think what you referred to the judge what he had said, you do see dads more and more wanting to spend more time with their kids. Craig you and I were talking earlier about sometimes, it's unfortunate, it takes some tragedy sometimes to really prioritize people's lives and I think through divorce or just through some tragedy, just some difficult times in marriage, sometimes it can kind of reprioritize everything for you. And you do see dads taking more of an active roll with their kids. That's real encouraging.

Craig: On our Instagram page, a several months ago, there was this graphic about how much custody time do dads get in various states. And I was really struck that, in Mississippi, and I knew this but when you see it you see it graphically, it changes kind of the paradigm of your perspective. Something like dads, noncustodial dads or dads who don't live in the same home as their kids, enjoy 23% of time, custodial time, and that's a stark contrast for like Colorado for

example and when it's a strict 50/50 determination. Of course, I am on the opinion that we as human beings get part of our identities from our mom and dad and is certainly vitally important for children to have the benefit of that. Generally speaking, there are certainly times when one parent is simply not healthy or one parent is suffering from some kind of chemical dependency or psychological condition that renders their parenting dangerous. But, most of the time, most kids benefit from a relationship with mom and dad.

Lee: Yeah, I agree with you. I think there are things, the mother role and the father role are both critical and I always say femininity is the only thing that can bestow femininity and masculinity is the only thing that bestows masculinity and there are just parts of the role that moms and dads play that kids need both.

Craig: I wrote, I use to write a blog, and I wrote an article one time about the Super Dad Syndrome and it's kind of like, your world is falling apart and there is disharmony between husband and wife, and there is this thing that happens when the family is kind of falling apart and mom and dad are disconnected. We see dads kind of step up to the plate, they become super dads, whereas they didn't show up for the soccer games and all of the sudden they are showing up and whereas they didn't take the kids to school or show up for a doctor's appointment and all of the sudden they are doing those. And in a conversation leading up to this podcast, we talked about that. And it's not all bad when dads are taking a more important role even when the family is unraveling.

Lee: Yeah, you know Craig, I think as men we are hardwired to lead our families and to invest in our kids and that way. I think it's unfortunate that sometimes, for a lot of different reasons, men pull back from that. Whether that's passivity, fear, maybe they are just marginalized out from things in their life they have going on, but there is a hardwire out of us men. We want to jump in. We want to help. Men are always accused of trying to fix things all the time and so it's unfortunate that sometimes it takes a situation like that for that switch to get flipped. But I think it's in there, it's in all of us guys, it's a matter of "hey what's it going to take to bring that out of you".

Matt: Well I think sometimes, roles get defined in the home and it can be very difficult to break out of those particular roles. So if you have a certain couple that starts doing things in a particular way, sometimes it takes trauma or a big shake up before things change and I know one thing I see from a lot of people is, they will take it for granted to a degree, there is something to be said for just knowing that you can go home every night and see your child and then the way that changes when somebody changes when you can't, that "you only get Friday Saturday and Sunday and it's going to be every other week" and it can really change your perspective on the whole thing.

Craig: Right that's one thing that I tell people that if you start walking through the process of divorce, we are all walking around with a suitcase full of civil liberties, I have certain civil liberties and I have the right to parent my kids, I have the right to vote, and there are just things that I have the right to do. We are carrying our little suitcase full of civil liberties but when you start walking through a divorce and you submit your life to the jurisdiction of court, then you're going to take that little suitcase of civil liberties and you are going to set that suitcase on the court house step and where as no body can tell me that, if I want to go pick up my kids and take them to the movies and to get pizza then I can do that, as a married person I am the joint legal and physical custodian of my kids, but once a judge makes a decision and there is a court

order, than that changes and that's difficult for some people to understand and I get it. I totally get it.

Lee: Yeah, I agree with you. I think it's almost like you don't know what you got until it's gone. You don't fully appreciate the opportunities that you got until the opportunities are removed from you. Then all of the sudden, the switch gets flipped and can cause you to go into overdrive as the dad or mom.

Cassie: Hey guys, I'm your new friend Cassie. I'm a paralegal and the client care coordinator, Robertson and Easterling. Are things not working out for you at home? I am so sorry. What you need right now is honest feedback and wise counsel about how the legal system works in Mississippi and how it could impact your future, click on the link on our website or just give me a call. After meeting with one of our attorneys, you'll feel like the weight of the world has been lifted from your shoulders and you'll have guidance about what you need to do next. When you're ready to talk, just give me a call. I would love to talk to you. The fact that he even spoke to me it's totally confidential. Until then, take care and enjoy the second half of our show.

Craig: Talk about the dads that you see in your practice. What are the struggles of the modern father?

Lee: That's a great question. I think the struggles are various. I mean I think you've got guys that most of them are either overworked or they've overextended themselves, whether that be in their jobs, extracurricular activities, trying to coach too many things, trying to do too many things, but a lot of the guys I see are margined out. You know a lot of guys have entertained things in their life for a long time and where these things are really beginning to compete with their connection and what I mean by that is that men have kind of fallen asleep on their roles, in the home, and just has a husband and a dad. They are distracted by so many things in life from finances to social media to health issues, and there are just a lot of different distractions there. So, as you can see there is a lot of pressures that are in the modern man today.

Matt: In your professional opinion, what do children need from their fathers today?

Lee: They need authenticity. They need a dad that can sit with them and be engaged with them and just be authentic with them, meaning just to be truthful about life. I think kids today are growing up in a very technological world. I read a statistic the other day that children between the ages 12-17, spend on average about 20 hours a week on technology and 90% of that time is spent on social media on snapchat, Instagram, tiktok. The problem with a lot of that, it just presents a world to kids that if it's not the prettiest thing, you can filter it up, fix it up, doctor it up and present this product that is there for people to like. It sends this message that you have to have it all together for you to be loved and accepted and I think dads have an incredible opportunity just to model, "Hey you don't. I love you just the way you are. You don't have to fix anything up or filter yourself or whatever it is". I actually enjoy sharing some of my failures with my kids. I want them to know I don't have all the answers. I don't have it together. And it's almost like you see them sit back, Matt, and they just get some encouragement from that. It almost gives them some more freedom to just be who they are.

Craig: My dad, like I said, was a man's man. Later in his life he had some vascular health issues and his left leg was amputated right below his knee and it was obviously a big surgery and I can remember after the surgery I held my dad's hand and I looked into his eyes. My dad had these smokey grey eyes and I was just real proud, I mean he basically made the decision to

whether he was going to live or die. Because had he not had the surgery, I mean he wouldn't have lived, he did live a couple of year after he had his leg amputated. I said "Dad, I'm so proud of you!" and he looked me back square in the eyes and said "Son, I'm proud of you." And just that blessing of a father, I mean that is just one of the greatest moments of my life receiving that blessing and I mean its biblical.

Lee: I agree, I mean that really is. I find that my words as a dad carry more weight to them then I will ever realize and I mean I don't even take into consideration what I am saying or how I'm saying it. My kids are filtering my words all day every day. Just the stewardship of our words, I think is critical.

Matt: Something that I feel like I hear, unfortunately, I think there are dads out there that think that the relationship with their children is something that can develop once they are a little bit older. And maybe they don't invest as much time in it when they are super young. What does research say about at what age do your children start picking up on that authenticity and your presence and things of that nature?

Lee: I think its really young. I don't think I can pinpoint an age but I think it's really really young, Matt. I always say kids are key observers but poor interpreters. Meaning they observe their world around them very well but they're extremely poor interpreters. They can't make sense of what they are seeing sometimes. Children even at ages 2 and 3 and 4 can pick up on things in home, and kids are what we call in counseling language, egocentric, meaning the whole world sort of revolves around them. So, when you have a kid that's going through like a divorce or something, often times you will see that child begin to look inward and ask questions about well what is wrong with me? Its that egocentric thinking. Its about them. What did I do wrong? What can I do to stop this? So, kids from a very early age begin to pick up on some of these things.

Matt: Moving forward with that, we were talking about things children need out of their dad. A child whose parents are going through some type of disruption or divorce, is there anything extra that they may need?

Lee: I think just extra of all of those things, extra time with them, extra touches, extra check ins, I think its important that spouses going through a divorce should never speak negatively about the other spouse to the kids. Find things about that spouse that you can still respect and admire about them even if its just the fact that "hey we will be your parents regardless", but find the things and never speak despairingly of the other spouse. Try to always communicate your love for them and "hey mom and I or dad and I are sill a team. We are still a team and will be for life".

Craig: Yeah that's the difficult thing because, lets just be honest, a lot of people just flat out don't get it. I tell people that when I touch my kids in bed at night, I can whisper in their ear life and tell them how beautiful they are and how smart they are, or I can say what a crazy person their momma is and it is certainly internalized by my kids, like we talked about before, they get a piece of their identity from mom and from dad. If mom is bad, then I feel bad and I'm bad, and the same thing with dad. If there is something wrong with dad then maybe there is something wrong with me.

Lee: That's right. I think too, we talk about words being really powerful in a kid's life, and they are, and I think don't underestimate your presence in your kid's life because your presence is powerful. Kids long for you just to sit with them and you don't even really have to do anything spectacular. I remember asking Ford a couple years ago, he's my oldest, and said "Hey buddy,

what's something I can do to show you my love with my time with you?" and you know what he said? He said, "Would you download this app on your phone and play this game with me?" and I thought wow that's all it takes for him. So, I downloaded the game and we played the game together and you would have thought I just gave the kid a million bucks. My presence with him is really really powerful and I say this too, the single biggest event in your kid's life every day is when you walk through the door at night, whether you realize it or not, it's the biggest event of their day. How you handle that how you steward that, if you come in on your phone or dropping your work bag or if your kind of are just going through the motions, they pick up on that. They are keen observers.

Craig: I think that's something that dads, who are facing the reality that they might not be with their kids as often as they would like when facing a divorce, that's a challenge for them. I like to tell people that even though your time with your kids is going to be different and you may not be there every Tuesday evening but you really have to make most of the time that you do have with them. So, sometimes a dad that, maybe does have standard weekend visitation, what he does with that time is critically important. That doesn't mean that he can't show up at karate practice or he can't be on the sideline of the baseball field or show up at the volleyball court or to watch their daughter cheer at the football games, sometimes part of showing up is important too. My dad was a man of few words but he showed up, if I were playing a game, he was on the sidelines. At the big events he was there. That's something that I think modern dads that are struggling through the process of divorce have to reevaluate and reassess what that looks like to them.

Matt: What would be something important for maybe the modern mother in the home to know about fathers and what their children need from their dad?

Lee: Yeah, I think just understanding that their role isn't more important, its just a critical role. I tell the ladies in my office all the time, you need to understand the most fragile thing in your house, its not your china, it's your man's ego. And you need to understand that he needs support. He needs to be encouraged. What we said earlier was true. He is wired to do this and wants to do this but he may need encouragement. He may need you from time to time to point out, hey you are doing a good job at this.

Craig: You know we live in a digital world, Lee, and a common thing among the men and women I visit with in my office is struggles around pornography. Can you comment on that as it relates to the plight of the modern man?

Lee: Yeah you know I think to understand pornography I think you have to understand how we are wired. We are wired for intimacy. When I talk about intimacy in my office with me, men typically think sex but sex is just an expression of intimacy. So, intimacy, when you think about the word intimacy you break it down, in-to-me-see. We are wired to be known fully and to be loved fully. Often times in marriage what you begin to see is, kids get introduced into the picture and some of the things that couples were able to do just readily and freely in their marriage at one point, are much more difficult to do and the demands are different. Sometimes that intimacy gets broken down in marriage and there is no longer that connection that use to be there and this is a common thing I hear a lot and what you use pornography for is false intimacy, it's a quick kind of surge. It's an adrenaline rush. It gets them over the hump of not feeling connected and when that pornography comes in it gives them a little hit of that dopamine. This guy likes what he is experiencing but yet he feels so much shame in what he is experiencing often times

and that shame is the gasoline that compels him to go back again because then he begins to become more hidden with his wife and more disconnected with her and often times he becomes more angry with her. You see this vicious cycle begin to unfold. So when intimacy between a husband and wife begin to break down, you also see intimacy between the father and the kids break down too. So that relationship between husband and wife is so critical and I would say to any of your listeners who pornography is apart of the home, whether that's the man or the wife, 23% of online viewers are actually women now so if that's the case find some one safe to talk about it with. Its like fungus, if you bring it out in the light it begins to die, if you keep it in the dark it begins to grow, bring it into the light, talk to someone about it. There is much help for this. We love to try to help men and women find healthy ways to stay connected and there are some great things we can do with that.

Craig: right so the longing is for connection and for intimacy and pornography is a false source of that.

Lee: It's a band aid.

Craig: And the shame associated with the false source of intimacy, drives them further into the dark and creates further disconnection and a further need to the medication and what we are describing is the addiction cycle.

Lee: You got it. That is how it happens.

Matt: Lee, Thanks so much for being here today and as we start to wrap things up, are there any practical guidance that you can give dads?

Lee: Yeah, something I try to do everyday between my commute home from the office to my drive way, it's a bout a 25 minute commute for me, so to you dads out their listening if your commute is not 25 minutes you may want to find a parking lot, somewhere close to home to do this but I encourage you to just turn your radio off, put your phone up, and deal with what my mentor calls the nats. The nats are all things you didn't get done to day and you need to get done tomorrow. Just have some mind space where you can kind of process through all the things you have going on in your personal life and in other words, connect in with yourself first. You can't go home and try to connect with wife and your kids if you are not connected with you first. That is most important. Spend time with yourself and to speak spiritually for just a second, I try to ask a very simple thing and its just a prayer. God, help me do what I'm about to do better than anything I've done all day today because I don't want my family to suffer. I don't want to give my best to give my best away to my clients all day and then have left overs for my family. If you guys are like me, I drive up some days and I'm often times on empty and I don't need a full tank to go into the house. I just need a fourth of the tank to get through the rest of the night. My goal is and my challenge is to the guys listening is, to go to bed every night exhausted, worn out, given out everything you had today. Rest your body, get up, refuel your heart and your mind and go at it again the next day.

Craig: What's the best way, because this is a challenge that I have, I am kind of like my daughter I have two speeds, on and off. Talk to the guys listening and me too, How do guys refuel. What is it that we do to fill things up? I mean we are in the helping business, you are in the helping business, I'm in the helping business and so sometimes we see that we are pouring ourselves out for our client and that's what they want us to do, that's what they need from us, and that's why we are there and that's why we are hardwired but, some dads spend too much

time filling themselves up. But I think for myself, I don't spend enough so what thoughts would you have around how dads can refuel so that we can give our bests to our families?

Lee: Yeah, I think it's different for every dad. I think every dad has to figure out what that thing is for them. That's a good question to ask, what is it, when I do it, that recharges me? For me it's going for a ride, it is reading a book, I love the outdoors, going for a bike ride, going to the gym, whatever your thing, whatever it is for you, make it a priority. The thing we said earlier is true. You don't need three hours of that, often times it's just 30 minutes, 45 minutes, and I would say just try to make that a routine thing. I think for most guys, if we are honest, feel guilty, we feel like hey if I go do that I'm cheating my family somehow or my wife is going to have to do extra if I'm not there and a lot of guys I talk to are like "Man I don't want to do that. I feel like I'm being selfish". Well think about the opposite. If you don't do that, you are going to burn out and then what good are you going to be for your family. So, think of it as going to sharpen your axe for the purposes of going back in and chopping more and being more effective.

Matt: One of the things probably important for spouses to make sure they are supportive of their significant other taking that time to refuel so not just the dad but also the moms because I know that they can get burned out too. If you don't feel like you have permission or you are not being supportive in that, I think it can be hard to do.

Lee: yeah Matt, I would say I think that's a great conversation to have with your wife and say "hey I feel like I don't have permission or maybe I do, but I just need you to voice that to me" and what that does, and I haven't met a wife yet that doesn't give them permission to do that, make sure you balance that back and say hey what do you need? What can I do to fight for you? And just create this environment in your home where you both fight for that. It's critical.

Matt: Lee, Thanks so much for being here with us today. I know that this episode is going to be enjoyed by a lot of different people and where can people find you to get more of your brilliant insight?

Lee: Yeah appreciate that, Matt. We are located in Jackson at Highland Village and in Oxford across from the new Malco Theatre at Oxford Commons. You can check us out at www.cornerstone.ms.

Craig: You've been listening to the Robertson and Easterling podcast. Thanks for spending time with us.

Matt: We'd love to hear from you. If you need our help, you can request a consultation from our website in less than five minutes. If you liked our show, please subscribe to our podcast so you'll be one of the first to know what our next episode drops.

Craig: Have a great rest of your day. And remember, there's nothing wrong with arming yourself with information. On behalf of Matt and our entire team. Thanks for listening.

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