



## **Episode 8: Tara Mills: Unpacking the Box and How Adults Mess Up More than Kids**

Matt: Today's guest is Tara Mills. She is an amazing licensed professional counselor with the Sheppard's Staff. She has worked for 15 years, specializing in child adolescent and adult issues. Those include abuse, trauma, traumatic stress, anxiety, depression, grief and loss. Throughout the episode you are going to hear some of Tara's personal do's and don'ts for parents in dealing with their children as they navigate through divorce, importance for therapy for children who are suffering their parent's divorce, and how divorce has touched her life personally.

Craig: So, I first met Tara Mills about 10 years ago. She was actually the counselor for my clients kids and unfortunately we had to interact in that process and I've just grown to know and love Tara and appreciate the work that, not only she does but the Shepard's Staff counseling group does, and Tara has graciously agreed to be with us here on today's episode and so Tara, Thanks so much for spending time with us today.

Tara: Thank you for having me! I love being here.

Matt: Tara, have you ever done a podcast before?

Tara: I have not.

Matt: How long have you been working as a counselor?

Tara: Well I've been a counselor for over 15 years, and I've been at Shepherd's Staff 13 years.

Matt: And you've specialized in children the whole way through?

Tara: I have!

Craig: Tara, let's talk about that. Obviously, our podcast is force people who are faced with family conflict who have something going wrong at home and the children get caught in the crossfire of that. Tell me a little bit about the process of when a child is referred to you.

Tara: So, when a child is referred to me, I try to meet with the parents first to get background, to introduce myself, to go over confidentiality and answer any questions that they have. Then, bring the child in typically and meet with the child you know half a session and get to know them. I work the first

several sessions establishing safety and repour because if I don't have that, a child will not open up to me and that is very important in this process.

Craig: So, Tara, obviously sometimes parents are aligned when their child is referred to you, but often times we are in a situation where the parents are not, and the parents aren't agreeing. How does that impact the initial process that you do with the child?

Tara: Typically when parents are not aligned, the child has a harder time opening up which means the child has a harder time trusting therapy and the process and does not feel safe in my office, so it's a lot longer for a child to open up completely if the parents are not aligned.

Matt: Often times parents who are going through a divorce they allow their feelings for one another to cloud their communication with their children. What are some of the ways they can prevent that?

Tara: I think putting the child first. Meaning, whatever resentments, issues, they have between each other, they need to work on that separately with a different therapist. They need to come together for this child, be able to talk to the therapist about different issues that they have parenting wise or with the child. It is so important that they put those issues aside because it will cloud therapy and it will make it a lot messier and harder to clean up.

Craig: How does therapy work, I'm a family law attorney, I know 20 counselors in the metropolitan Jackson area, but not everybody does, it's a foreign concept to some folks. What does therapy look like specifically for a child?

Tara: Therapy for a child is extremely important especial if they are going through divorce. What it does, it allows a child to tell their story, it allows the child to describe what this big change is like for them. It allows the child to talk about their thoughts and their feelings linked to their behaviors. It's a place where they can come and know that mom and dad, no one, will know what they talk about. It is an amazing thing because children, we can use all different things for children. Play, art, I have an outside area that we go sit outside and you use sidewalk chalk. We talk and sometimes they will show me their dance at school, or they will show me something that they do in theatre at school.

Craig: So, Tara you've been making Tik Toks with kids?

Tara: Absolutely not!

\*laughter by everyone\*

Tara: That's another issues!

Craig: We were at a party last night and my daughter saw this high school kid and was like "oh my gosh!" It was like she had seen Justin Bieber. He has like a million followers on Tik Tok.

Tara: But in all seriousness I do have to engage. It is very important for me to engage in what is important to the child. There are often times that they want to show me a YouTube or a Tik Tok or something to that affect and I absolutely let them do that because it helps me understand their world.

Craig: So, what is going on in a child's world? Parents are divorcing, there are a thousand reasons why parents might be divorcing, what are the typical reactions of a child whose parents are divorcing?

Tara: With a child, what I see often times manifests in a way that are physical like headaches, stomach aches, nervousness. They are frightened about something that they have never been frightened about before. Those are the ways that it comes out. Also, withdrawal from their friends, withdrawal from the world, you've got anxiousness, panic, OCD, these are all ways and examples that children can show when something is going on with them.

Matt: Just to hopefully put our listeners to ease. It is possible for parents to get divorce and for the children to move through that process in a healthy way?

Tara: Absolutely.

Matt: Would you say that the way the parents communicate to the children is the most important part of that aspect?

Tara: I think its one of the most important parts. I think another very important part that the child sees that they can come together without fighting. They can come together for school plays, school performances, even a therapy session without fighting because children typically internalize family arguing; their parents arguing. Vicki Lanski, which is one of my favorite books, its in the car, she says "There is no such thing as a no-fault divorce with kids". They blame themselves or they blame a parent.

Matt: Well I know that, I feel like im constantly telling clients, there child should never feel like they need permission to love both parents and when they are so pitted against each other, its really hard and they are usually telling each side what they want to hear, or at least I feel like they are. Do you encounter that?

Tara: I do. I do encounter that often. I think that children have to figure out where to put that blame so if they put it on themselves, often times they are either going to internalize it like I said they may have headaches or stomach aches, or they will externalize it and act out. Whether that's rebellion, OCD, if they put that blame on a parent, often times they don't want to be around that parent. They put distance with that parent, or they are angry and act out on that parent.

Craig: But parents aren't always healthy and parents sometimes do stupid things and those stupid things affect their family. I love to think that everyone could be collaborative when it comes to the well being and health of their children but unfortunately that's not our reality, is it?

Tara: It is not. I think adults mess up more than kids.

Matt: I feel like I see parental alienation to some degree in almost every case that we deal with. Its very rare that you've got people who are able to separate their failing marriage with parenting their children. Is there any way that people can identify that they are being a bad influence on their children?

Tara: That's a great question and it is very prevalent. I agree. I think one of the biggest ways is therapy because there is an accountability there. I meet with the parents or a parent pretty often, not to break the confidentiality of the child, but to check in with them parents and they ask me questions and I tell them what I think is the right move for the child and that is very helpful because there is a groundedness there and accountability.

Craig: I've been telling people for years the legal system is really bad at trying to parent kids. What I choose to whisper in my child's ear when I put him or her to bed at night, its really between us and I can

tell them you are wonderful or beautiful, you did an amazing job today, or I can also tell them that your daddy just disappointed us all today. So, we as parents make those choices and I like to think that generally people want what's best for their kids but unfortunately, sometimes the yuckiness of everyday life gets in the way.

Tara: This is a tricky issue. One of the things that I try to educate parents about when they come in for the first session is do not talk negatively about your ex-spouse, or your soon to be ex-spouse. If you don't think that's its going to impact your relationship with your child, it may not right now, but it will bite you later. I mean parents, that is sabotaging therapy. Its sabotaging their safe place when they pit the child against the other parent. When they try to make themselves look wonderful and excellent as a parent and they make the other one look horrible, that's one of the worst things you can do in the process of the divorce because often times the child is going to believe you because they want to believe you and they are confused because they love both parents. They've got this one parent saying negative things about another parent they love and they don't know how to feel. So its an extremely confusing experience because they don't know what to do.

Matt: You know when parents do things like that, not only are they damaging their child's relationship with their other parent, they are unknowingly telling that child that part of them is bad too because they are made up of those two parents and although it may not manifest itself right then, it may come back and bite you later because you are telling your kid they are basically half bad.

Tara: That is absolutely correct.

Craig: So, Tara, Matt and I are professional talkers and sometimes we are bad at it, but you are a professional listener and educate, we stubborn men lawyers and parents about active listening.

Tara: I'd love to talk about active listening.

Matt: I think I need to take notes on this one.

Tara: Everybody does. SO, what I teach parents and children, active listening is simply shutting down your own thoughts and truly listening to that person. That also means that you are not coming up with what you want to say in that process. You are listening and then after that person is speaking, you tell that person what you heard. Sometimes, it takes repeating back what you heard the person said until you grasp what that person was saying.

Craig: So, what I heard you say was...

Tara: There you go. That's a good start.

Craig: I need to be focusing on the speaker and not necessarily my needs to communicate to the person who is holding the conversation.

Tara: So, if you think about what you what to trying to say, you are not really listening to that person.

Craig: I've noticed this thing. I've been practicing law long enough now that the cases I did early in my career, the children were really little, 4, 5 6, and I've seen these kids grow up. I've seen 8-year-old that were the subject of a nasty custody dispute become, gosh, 25-26-year-old. So, how are children affected by parental conflict at different ages?

Tara: So, divorce is a trauma and trauma affects kids and divorce affects kids at each developmental stage in their life so that can look different in all different stages of their life. Also have seen that kids will be aligned with one parent during one developmental stage and then may flipflop over to the other parent the next developmental stage. That is why it is so important to co-parent effectively and consistently so you both can have a good healthy relationship with your child.

Matt: Often, we run into situations where kids, whether it be because they become aligned against one parent or because they want to do something else that they want to do, they maybe go over to their dads for a visitation or go see their mom for this part of the summer, how would suggest those parents deal with those situations when you want to see your child but they are actively voicing a resistance towards coming.

Tara: I think if it's any other stage, other than being a teenager and wanting to be with their friends which is really normal, I would say maybe have a third party figure out what the block is because there is something going on if the child continues to be resistant in seeing the other parent. I have had that situation several times and I've had that parent come in with the child and try to work through what it was and that was going on and it was very helpful.

Craig: Tara, what is the key, I mean people get divorced unfortunately, we don't promote divorce at our firm, we help people who make that choice for themselves, but divorce happens. what is the key? If you could sit down an auditorium full of parents who are going through a divorce and you could tell them something they would remember? What would that thing be?

Tara: Put your own issues aside. Put resentments with your ex or soon to be ex aside. Become healthy yourself. A child is only as healthy as the parents are.

Craig: So how true is this? I've been saying it, I don't know if it's true but I think it's true, you know when you are on an airplane and they are going through the safety protocols that nobody listens to but they do the piece where if there is trouble put your oxygen mask on first and then help the person you are traveling with. What, if anything, does that mean to parents during the process of divorce?

Tara: often times one of the first questions I will ask if I know the divorce is occurring or it was just finalized for the process is just beginning, I will ask the parents if they are seeing a therapist, who they are seeing, and that I will probably have them in my office to give them some feed back parenting wise as to how to be the healthiest parent because they must be healthy if they expect that from their kids.

Matt: So, Tara, obviously you deal with children and parents who are experiencing divorce all the time, has divorce ever touched your life personally?

Tara: Yes, my parents divorced when I was four and dad moved several hours away and so my mom, back in the 80s the typical custody arrangement was you see your father every other weekend and then maybe longer during the holidays, and so that is how it went. My mom was a single mom and it was hard. Dad, I was not close to dad and I think how it impacted me was that I wanted so hard to prove to dad that I was worthy. Worthy of his love, his time, and did not want to get rejected and abandoned again and so my mom caught the brunt of all the actin gout because I was trying so hard to feel loved by my dad and so I can see that now backing up and having done a lot of therapy on my own but it was an extremely confusing time.

Craig: At what point in your life were you introduced to the process of therapy?

Tara: So, my mom put me in therapy at the age of 8 and that's when she remarried. My dad remarried much earlier on and the way it manifested with in me was constant headaches. My mom was very, she didn't know what to do. She took me to our member; his name was Mr. Tarpley and took me to a therapist and I remember this visual. He looked at me and said, "Tara, the inside of you is like a box and if you fill it and fill it, what is going to end up happening is its going to explode so this is for you to empty out that box so you are not exploding". So, fast forward several sessions later my mom calls him and says what have you done with my child? She is so angry. Walking around saying how angry she is all the time and he simply said, "Good. It's working. She's getting it out rather than internalizing it."

Craig: Why is that so important Tara?

Tara: Internalization of emotions can cause headaches, stomach aches, panic, much worse.

Matt: Well it's almost like that box that you were referencing was bursting at the seams and that is why it's hurting us. Its pulsating because it's trying to get out and it doesn't have any more room.

Tara: That's exactly right and I use that with clients.

Craig: Empty the box.

Tara: Empty that box. In fact, sometimes I will get a Kleenex box and we will take it and decorate it and then they will start putting inside that box what is in their internal box.

Craig: What kind of things do kids put in their box?

Tara: It may start out, I'm scared of the weather and then after a little work it may be "I don't like my parents fighting" or they are still fighting and they are divorced or I don't want to go over to moms house or dads house because the new siblings. I mean there is so many things that they do not talk about unless they have a safe place.

Craig: And that is what therapy provides.

Tara: That is what therapy provides.

Matt: Tara, we have been talking a lot about things you see going on through children in your practice, do you have a specific list of do's and don'ts or tips for parents out there who are traveling through a divorce?

Tara: Yes, I have a lot of things to say. I am going to hit a couple of things that I think are extremely important. The first is, communicate age appropriate with your child about the divorce. If you need help with that, talk to your attorney or therapist. Your relationship with your ex is a separate focus. It may be very important for you to get help to be able to separate that relationship from the parenting relationship. Conflict resolution, if it doesn't happen in your marriage then try very hard to establish that with your child and model it. They are going to need it. Listen and actively listen. Do not bash the other parent. Honesty is great but it needs to be age appropriate and it will bite you later if you manipulate your child by influencing them to believe your agenda. If you are having trouble feeling heard, get help for this. Do not sabotage therapy. Kids need time and space and love and boundaries. Part of effective co-parenting is consistent boundaries.

Craig: Explain to our listeners, what are boundaries? From a therapy sense.

Tara: Boundaries would be, I'm going to give you an example. Bedtime is at 9pm. There are times that one parent may think in their head "I'm going to let johnny stay up later because he has had a hard time with this divorce. That is overcompensating. Boundaries must be consistent. Rules and boundaries must be consistent for a child to feel safe. That doesn't mean that a child can't talk to a parent about them wanting the boundaries or rules changed but there are certain boundaries and rules that need to stay in place and consistent through the process of divorce.

Craig: So, consistency is what boundaries are about with kids.

Tara: Yes, consistency

Craig: Because boundaries when we speak of them with another adult, sometimes that takes on a different tone.

Tara: Boundaries by Cloud and Townsend is just one of the best out there. There is a boundaries with kids book that is really good too and that would be a great tool for parents as they navigate co-parenting.

Craig: I wish I had an hour more just to talk to you Tara. Just great, rich conversations. Thank you so much.

Tara: Absolutely.

Craig: How do we, let's wrap up with this. How do parents sabotage the process? Because anybody who is listening and paying attention realizes the value that comes when kids get to empty the box. How do we as parents screw that up?

Tara: I think one way is forcing themselves to come into session. That happens and I put boundaries down. I always ask the child if they would be okay with it and if not, I try to work them to be okay with it because the end goal is to try and communicate with their parents and vice versa. Another way that sabotages happen frequently is when I'm subpoenaed for court.

Craig: Why do you look at me like that when you say that?

Tara: This is so important. Would you want your parents knowing your first sexual experience? Would you want your parents knowing the first time you smoked weed or when you had a drink? No! Guess what? Kids in divorce, if I am subpoenaed and my records are subpoenaed, guess what that means? Both sides know everything and that's not fair and that is an injustice to the child.

Craig: What do we do then? Help me out. We hear you our listeners hear you. What do we do? Most parents who are reasonably healthy want what is best for their child. What do we do?

Tara: I know there are times that a therapist may need to advocate for their client in a custody situation. I think there needs to be a way that the therapist can communicate directly to the judge, or give the records sealed to the judge and have a conversation or type a summary that speaks for the child. I think it's just really important to leave that safe place alone.

Craig: So, what I heard you say was, what happens in the therapy room is sacred but there are occasions when the therapist needs to advocate for their client and when they do so they need to do it in an

effective way to protect that sacred communication, that emptying the box that happens in the therapy room.

Tara: Yes.

Craig: Well Tara, just thank you so much for educating us, for your wisdom, for the work that you do with kids, we are just really grateful.

Matt: With all that great work that you do, can you tell our audience where they can find you so that you can help even more people?

Tara: I'm at the Shepard Staff. We have 13 therapists there who are wonderful, and our website is [TSS1981.com](http://TSS1981.com)

Matt: And the Shepard's Staff doesn't only deal with children, right? There are other therapists there who deal with people who are suffering other challenges like that?

Tara: Yes, ages three and up.

Matt: Thank you for being here today.

Tara: Thank y'all so much!