

Ep #35: Family and Friends in Divorce: Balancing Advice, Support, and Boundaries



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Lauren Fair

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You're listening to *The Sensible Split* podcast, Episode 35.

The Sensible Split is a podcast for smart but overwhelmed women in search of a roadmap to a successful separation and divorce. If you are looking for guidance in navigating the practical, legal, and emotional aspects of divorce with confidence, this is the show for you. Here's your host, Master Certified Life and Divorce Coach, Divorce Attorney, and Mediator, Lauren Fair.

Lauren Fair: Hello there. How are you? I hope you're doing well and enjoying your fall. It's the day after Halloween, and I just finished changing over the Halloween decorations to Thanksgiving decorations. It was a bit of work, I have to say. Shout out to the parents making the holidays magical for your kids. It's a lot of work at times, isn't it?

We did a little trick-or-treating last night in the neighborhood, which was fun. My daughter was a "devil diva," is what it said on the costume package, and sort of felt very apropos for her right now. She is a force and a half and just loves to be kind of diva-ish. So, yeah, it was a good match for her. And my son was Harry Potter, and he really looked like Harry Potter. It was so darling. Good times, good times. They're 10 and 7 right now, and I'm just really enjoying the holidays with them at this age. I hope you had a fun Halloween as well.

So, I recently was interviewed by Tracy Callahan, Florida Supreme Court-certified family mediator, educator, conflict expert, and co-founder of Divorce Coaches Academy. I don't know if I've ever shared this with you before, but I'm a mentor coach at Divorce Coaches Academy. In that role, I mentor and help train new divorce coaches in applying the skills they learn in the classroom. And so I've known Tracy for a number of years now. She's an amazing, dynamic woman who loves to help people with resolving conflict. And she asked me to come on the Divorce Coaches Academy Podcast and talk about the involvement of family and friends in the divorce process and the challenges that sometimes brings.

I know this is something that comes up for my clients a lot. Family and friends are an important source of support in the divorce process, absolutely, but there

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are times when their opinions, often unsolicited, create confusion and can become a barrier to resolution.

In the interview, we talk about ways coaches can help clients with this issue, offer suggestions to those of you going through divorce how to handle this, and also to family and friends about how they can be effective support. I hope you find it helpful.

Tracy Callahan: Welcome back to Divorce Coaches Academy Podcast, where we explore the powerful intersection of emotion, strategy, and conflict resolution at the individual level in the divorce process. I am your host, Tracy, and today I am so pleased to be joined by someone whose insight and compassion continues to shape the world of family law and mediation, Lauren Fair. Welcome, Lauren.

Lauren: Thank you, Tracy. I really appreciate the opportunity to be here.

Tracy: So happy to have you. So Lauren is many, many, many things. I'm going to try to get them all in. She is a family law attorney, runs a family law practice, is a family mediator as well, a certified ADR divorce coach, runs a divorce coaching practice, mentor, podcaster, colleague, and friend. Did I miss something, Lauren? There's so many titles, and then even when I looked at your bio, I was looking at all your education and my head was like, you are a lover of education. She is a consumer of education.

Lauren: That's true. I think you got it all, Tracy.

Tracy: Okay. All right. So today our topic hits close to home for almost every client we work with, and we are calling it, "When Love Gets Loud: Family, Friends, and the Barriers to Resolution," because here's the truth. Divorce does not happen in a vacuum. It happens in a chorus of voices. Right?

Family and friends rush in with love, opinions, fierce loyalty, hoping to protect someone they care about. But sometimes, a lot of times, that emotional investment, that love, can actually make things harder.

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So today, Lauren and I are diving into how personal support can both heal and hinder, and how we, as ADR divorce coaches, can help clients move from chaos to my favorite word, clarity.

Yes, that's a lot. I know, a lot for 20 minutes, and I'm going to try to stay on track here. Okay, so Lauren, let's start with the heart of this. In your experience, what are some of the most common ways that family and friends, even when acting out of love, unintentionally make the divorce process harder for our clients?

Lauren: I think it starts primarily with giving advice. It's so common for somebody who's going through divorce to turn to friends and family to want to talk about what's going on. And people who love you want to protect you. It's hard to see someone hurting, and so the natural instinct is, I need to do something to help. I need to fix this situation. And what does that look like? It looks like giving advice.

And the thing is, is that advice comes from that person's beliefs about divorce that they pick up through their life, from their own experiences, from media, from other friends' experiences that they've witnessed. They pick up these beliefs about divorce and the way that you should approach it, and then they feel free to offer those opinions.

Tracy: Yeah, sometimes not just offer it, right? Sometimes kind of expect it. I don't know about you, but I can only relate to this. My kids aren't old enough yet to be married and go through a divorce. Just yet, I'm sure we'll have plenty of opportunities in the future. But I can tell you this, right?

As a mother, if my child got into an argument with a friend, and that friend did something not nice to my child, damn, I was all in. I did not like this kid. I didn't like anything about them. And then, when my child, who was again, deep in her roots, like her mother, resolved the conflict and was able to move forward with her friend, do you know who couldn't move forward with the friend? Me. Me. I'm still like, "Well, she said such mean things about you." Right?

So, just a perfect example of how that loyalty and love, right, which I was acting out of love, the instinct was to protect my child. So that happens all the time, right, in divorce with especially parents I see of clients.

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And I think you mentioned something else that I think is also, aside from that protection part, also friends who've gone through experiences who then share kind of this interesting perspective of divorce. Like, "Well, I got the house. You should be able to get the house, too." So then my clients are running back to me like, "Hey, but my cousin, Shelly, she said she got the house, and I want the house. Why can't I get the house?"

Lauren: Exactly. Yeah, it's hard for people to realize that their situation is unique and different from someone else's situation. Right? Sometimes that friend or family member isn't even in the same jurisdiction as they are, right? So different laws may apply. And also, there are just differences in factual scenarios that a layperson just isn't trained to see. So it's natural for a client to think, "Oh, well, my friend got this. Why couldn't I get that?" right? Because they're just not in a position to be able to assess the differences.

Tracy: Yeah, they just they're not educated, right? So they're in there. And what's happening, right, in this process? And this love and support, protection, and influence, it's also creating some additional conflict, right? It's creating that barrier for that client to be able to effectively do what we're hoping they can do, right, is move forward in developing some skills and efforts to resolve.

So, we talk about this all the time in divorce, that conflict is inevitable. Right? Combat is optional, our favorite Max Lucado quote. But divorce often activates what we call sort of this tribal instinct, if you will, right? Family circling the wagon. How can we help clients, right, discern between this sort of emotional comfort and strategic clarity for them to be able to sort of understand what part of this is and then understand how this could potentially prevent them or create a barrier to moving towards resolution, which is what we're supporting our clients to ultimately get to for the benefit of themselves and their family.

Lauren: I think really it comes down to the neutral space that we're holding for clients and being able to walk them through that process of inquiry to figure out what's really driving this decision, what's really driving this action that I'm wanting to take. Is it a feeling like fear or anger, or is it, am I getting kind of rallied behind by people in a way that feels really good? Right? It always feels

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good, especially when you're in that emotionally activated place and having conflict with a soon-to-be former spouse, to feel like you have yes people behind you.

Tracy: Yeah, yeah, let's go, right?

Lauren: We're taking him to the cleaners.

Tracy: We're going to take him to the cleaners. You deserve everything. You've been a stay-at-home, right? Yes. So there is that rallying, right? It's like if you will a literally circling the wagon, but it's like this pep rally of people behind you, confirming maybe some of those not necessarily good instincts. Right? But it feels good.

Lauren: Right, totally. It feels really good in the short term. But we've got to help clients refocus on the long term. Are we looking for emotional justice, or are we making decisions that are in your long-term best interest based on the options that are available, the professional advice that you may have, and a consideration of what your values, interests, and priorities are.

Tracy: Yeah. Yeah. Because that rallying, right, really keeps clients stuck in that emotionally sort of a little dysregulated place in the fact that they're really grounded in their position. So they're not being able to effectively separate the two because I'm staying in that state of activation with some level of confirmation that it's okay. My agenda is right. These are the things that are right.

So I'm going to fight for 80/20 custody, or I'm going to fight for the house, or I'm going to fight for X amount of money and support, right? I'm using it to justify it, which then is that emotional support is then providing a barrier to be able to get to that next point, which we talk about as dispute resolution specialists all the time, is that future focus. Where do you want to be and what are you willing to do to get there?

Lauren: Right. It really has the potential of making clients more anchored in their positions and being less in a space of flexible thinking.

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Tracy: Yeah. Yeah. I find it interesting because I do think two things can be true at the same time. I say this a lot, right? That our clients can seek the emotional support and be able to continue to build the skills to be able to be strategic in their approach to conflict resolution. So that sort of leads me to my next big question, right? In our role as ADR divorce coaches, right, what can we do that basically friends and family can't do for our clients, our distinct role?

Lauren: Yeah. Well, I mean, first of all, it's being neutral and holding space for a client to sort through these big decisions in a way where they are not pressured and they're not making these decisions based on biased opinions alone. I think it's unnatural for a friend or family member to be neutral, right? It's not their fault. It's just not, it's just not their inclination in that situation.

Tracy: It's true. I don't want to be Switzerland, right? Yeah, right.

Lauren: Yeah. So, you know, I think we can provide neutrality, a structured process that helps them to sort through these difficult decisions, because it can be really confusing when you receive input from a professional in the process, a friend, a family member. Maybe all of that conflicts to some degree, and that makes it extra difficult too when you have conflicting information coming in. And so how do you sort through those things? Because there's, I think, an inclination to want to please everyone, take their advice, and what does it mean if you don't do that? What impact is that going to have on the relationship if you don't take that person's advice?

Tracy: Absolutely. And especially when you're already losing a relationship, right? And need those other relationships. Those are, you know, sort of our accommodating conflict styles.

Lauren: Right. Yeah, and I think our role as a divorce coach too is to always be listening beyond what the client is saying to be able to pick up on what we hear as their values and their interests and their priorities, and keeping that in mind as we work through the relationship with them and being able to check in with them when they're about to make a decision, take a certain action, and have them pause to see how does that particular decision or action match up with

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what they've shared with you that they would like this process to look like for them or how they want to be in the process.

Tracy: Yeah, I love that. And really also building off that neutrality piece, right? That we can also create a safe space that is without judgment to be able to process some of these things and these experiences, to be able to look at those two conflicting thoughts, right? "Well, this is where I want to go, but this is what my parents want me to do," or "This is what my friends think I should be doing," or "This is what everybody's telling me I need to do."

And then to be able to really kind of dive into those in terms of what is everybody's interests, because when we talk about dispute resolution, we're not only just talking about the interests of the two parties in divorce, we're talking about the spouses, but in these other outside kind of extraneous noise, as we just talked about this, this chorus of voices and conflict, there's also conflict here. There's interests of those other parties.

Lauren: One thing that just came up for me, as you were saying that, is what can make this extra complicated is when a family member is helping pay for legal services or for other professionals in the process.

Tracy: Yeah.

Lauren: Because I think sometimes when that's the case, that payor believes that their opinion should have even more weight, maybe.

Tracy: Yeah. Yeah.

Lauren: And so how do you deal with that, where you might want to make a decision that's contrary to what that person wants you to do, but they're paying?

Tracy: Yeah. Mhm. Such a good point. I was, it just was making me think about a client. I was sharing this story earlier, who was really, really close to reaching a resolution, and the family itself was a very, you know, kind of modest-income family. They had limited funds, but they were trying to move forward, but they had a special needs child.

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And the special needs child needed to go to special schools, and although they were getting actively working towards grants and scholarships to be able to keep their child in these sort of higher level special needs schools, that the tuition was really, really high, there came a point where she, in her negotiations, was kind of agreeing. Each of them were agreeing that if we couldn't figure it out in the support, that if we had to, we could go into our separate property and do it.

So for my client, it was really about some money she had, believe it or not, from her bat mitzvah umteen years ago, right? And she was working towards an agreement that said, "Yes, if it got to that point that she would do such in the best interest of her child."

Her mom, on the other hand, was furious. And her mom was not only paying for her work with me, but paying for the process in general. And she was not happy about it and was really, really close to blowing up the entire negotiation based on, I'm not even, I think it was maybe \$16,000 that had accrued some money from when she was a young child.

And that was an example, right? That the mom had sort of undue influence in that case because she was also the person funding the process, creating some additional conflict that really almost derailed a pretty reasonable agreement that was really focused, again, on what the best interest of her child was. It wasn't that she was giving that money to something else. So, really, really valid point there.

Lauren: Yeah. Well, I think in a similar vein, too, one of the things that we can do as divorce coaches is to help clients go through a cost-benefit analysis of the decision that they're making, too, in a way where the friend or family member may not have that same ability to do that or the same level of information. And that's a key piece, too, of what we do is education. So it's a combination, I think there of education on what's, what does that look like if you take that action? What is the likely outcome? And then also, what's the cost-benefit analysis look like of that?

Tracy: Absolutely. So, in sort of general, we as divorce coaches separate from families can bring structure, safety, neutrality, a place to be able to process this

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that is outside of often that a very emotionally flooded space when friends and family are there.

So I really want to stress this, right? Our role as coaches, as I understand it and in my work with clients, is that we're here to complement that process. We're not here to replace friends and family. That emotional support from loved ones still extremely important. Right? But we can play a really significant part in supporting clients through this process.

So I know we talked about a couple different ways and how we do this. But can we just kind of go back and maybe highlight again, as divorce coaches, what do we actually do to help clients sort of find their own space when outside opinions start to take over?

Lauren: Sure. What comes to mind for me is first just normalizing the fact that the client is looking to trusted advisors of all sorts that includes family members and friends, for input on what they should do. And normalizing the fact that the friends and family members are offering that information because they're trying to do what they think is best for the client. So it makes sense that everybody's engaging in this exchange of information.

And from there, using our inquiry skills to help clients reality test what one course of action versus another would look like. So, just looking at, what are the positives of this? What's the flip side of this coin look like? What do you think about that? How does this match up with your values, your interests, your priorities? Especially when there's conflicting information that the client's getting, it presents as confusion in the session. So helping them look at all of those different options and maybe others that they hadn't thought of through that inquiry and reality testing process.

Another thing that, you know, for me is really effective and can be for certain clients depending on their level of connection with their body is some somatic work. Like, what does it feel like in your body when you think about this particular option? What does it feel like when something is the right decision for you? Do you have access to that? Like a certain level of intuition or just inner knowing of this feels settled, it's an open feeling maybe versus what does it feel

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like in my body when a decision is not actually the right thing for me? It doesn't really resonate with what I want to do here.

Some clients will have access to that, or you can help them create some awareness around what that feels like. And that might be a tool, among others, that you could look at to help the client sort through, is this someone else's decision or input that they're not really wanting to onboard? That they know isn't really for them. Or is this something that they do agree with? Like it's something that would be useful for them.

You know, another thing is helping clients to see that they don't have to be available for advice that they don't want. So, like you said, the friends and family members might not just offer the input, it might be a little more forceful than that, but that doesn't mean that you have to be open to receiving it. And maybe you want some support from family members, but not of the nature that you're getting.

Tracy: Yeah.

Lauren: So kind of deciding in advance, like, who is my emotional support circle? Who is in that? And what are their strengths in that regard? You know, like, is my uncle really good with numbers, and he could help me sort out some questions I have about some of the numbers? Right? But I don't really want him telling me what to do with my kids.

Or maybe it's I don't want any kind of input in that regard. I just want some support in my transition. Like, I could use some help when I move. And kind of training people to understand, like, this is what I would like for you. Like, I would love the support that you're wanting to give me, and I so appreciate that. And here's what you could do that would really help me can be a useful approach.

Tracy: And I think that's so much the work that we do with clients in setting boundaries, understanding what a boundary is, setting boundaries within themselves, and getting clarity on that, and then being able to effectively communicate that, or what I like to talk about, sort of those boundary scripts.

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So much there, right? Education, we talked about, right? Also, the client is learning skills in conflict resolution, and their friends and family aren't. Right? So they may be starting out this one level, and now the education and the skill development is helping with the client as we're working with them and supporting that process, but the family's still stuck because they haven't gone to any of that education or skill development.

So that's also a challenge when we're seeing that, which then creates opportunities, as you were just sharing, to really be able to look at who is part of their team, who's providing emotional support, and what do they need from them.

Which, which is such a beautiful sort of next piece to this as we're close to wrapping up. So if there are any clients listening, Lauren, what advice would you give them about balancing sort of that family support with independent decision making?

Lauren: Yeah. I think first is just recognizing that input from friends and family members really is just data for you. It's someone else's opinion, and you get to decide how you think and feel about that. And if you don't want to take on that advice and implement it, understanding that that's okay. Like, even if you have to feel a way that you'd rather not, which is maybe judged or misunderstood or something along those lines, in order to not move forward with that advice, that's okay. Like, you can make space for that and not act on that feeling by doing something that you know isn't right for you. And so I think you can ask yourself, is this someone else's fear or is this my fear? For example.

Tracy: I love that. And that's a hard question. And building off of what you had said earlier, right, about who's on your team and then what their strengths are, what you need from them. I work with a lot of clients, but clients can do this as, so if you're somebody listening in balancing, trying to figure out what is it that you need? Right? Because other people need things too. Your friends and family need stuff too, right?

What do you need? And then what's your request? If you need some support because you are working and trying to manage as a single parent, maybe the

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request from mom is that she makes a casserole. And then mom feels useful, can move a little away from the advice giving, and you had a need met. So, really, that need and request, I think, is also something if you're a client and you're going through this, try to take some perspective on that.

And then on the flip side of that, what advice would you give for family and friends showing up for this process? How can they both show love and loyalty without taking over?

Lauren: Yeah. I think it's listen more and advise less.

Tracy: Yeah. I love that. Yes.

Lauren: Don't try to fix the problem. It's so tempting to want to do that, right? And instead of trying to fix it, instead, resist the urge and be a good listener. Ask, "How can I support you in this process?" And then that allows your loved one to be free to tell you how you could be most useful to them because you are useful to them.

Tracy: Absolutely. And empowering everybody in that situation, right? Because I know family and friends, they mean well. We mean well. We just need to listen more. So I love that. Be a listener, not a fixer. And for our coaches, what is one takeaway that we want to leave for our divorce coaches listening out there when they're working with clients surrounded by strong outside opinions?

Lauren: Well, it's going to come up a lot. That's for one. I mean, I don't think a week goes by that this doesn't come up in some form for me in my practice. So expect it and think about what we've said today, and come up with a protocol for you of how do I want to approach this?

When the client brings this to the session, how can I really help them sort through this in a way that is conflict resolution-oriented and also helps them to see that by choosing a conflict resolution-oriented method or approach, it doesn't mean that we're shutting out the friends and family members. Right? We're taking the good from what they can offer and then helping the client sort through what is best for them because at the end of the day, this is their

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situation, their life, their finances, right, their decisions that they have to be satisfied with how they handle.

Tracy: Yeah. That was so beautifully said, right? Love and protection are powerful, but clarity and resolution are the gifts that absolutely help families move forward.

So Lauren, we've totally gone over my time. I want to thank you so much for joining me today. And to all of our listeners, thank you for tuning into Divorce Coaches Academy Podcast. If you found this conversation valuable, please be sure to subscribe, share it with a colleague, leave us a review. We always appreciate that. And until next time, please stay curious, stay compassionate, and keep helping clients move from chaos to clarity. Thanks so much.

Lauren: Thanks, Tracy.

Thank you so much for tuning in to this episode of *The Sensible Split*. If you're looking for more information and guidance to help you successfully navigate a divorce, please visit TheSensibleSplit.com.

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