

Sex? After Kids? Tell Me More, Esther Perel

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SUMMARY

Ester Perel joins the podcast to discuss the intricate relationship between parenting and partnership, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a vibrant couple dynamic amidst the challenges of raising children. She highlights how the happiness of the couple is crucial for the family's well-being and offers insights on how to navigate the complexities of intimacy and connection in modern relationships.

- *The survival of the family now depends on the couple's happiness, making their relationship vital for effective parenting.*
- *Parents often pour energy into their children while neglecting their partnership, leading to resentment and disconnection.*
- *The shift in focus from couple intimacy to child-centric parenting can diminish the erotic energy in relationships.*
- *Couples must be deliberate about nurturing their relationship, prioritizing time together and acknowledging each other's efforts.*
- *Communication is key; partners should express their needs while also recognizing the other's feelings to foster connection.*
- *Parenting practices have become overly dogmatic, increasing pressure on parents and detracting from the natural development of children.*
- *Acknowledging the role distribution in parenting can help couples appreciate each other's contributions instead of fostering resentment.*
- *Using shared resources, like podcasts or articles, can facilitate difficult conversations between partners about their relationship dynamics.*

hi Ester hello Becky I am so excited to have you on the podcast and when I told the members of our community that you were coming on people I don't know more sophisticated way of saying it they freaked out they just freaked out they're so excited um and I joined them in that feeling so um I'm just so happy that you're here it's a treat really So for anybody listening who is not familiar with you or your work tell us a

little bit about who you are and the types of things you're interested in so I'm a couples and family therapist I was trained particularly in working with families and with couples and I've had a predilection for working with people from multiple different cultural racial and religious backgrounds I spent many many years actually working with mixed families then I brought to that the subject of sexuality because it was also a cultural lens of how we look at

sexuality in our relationships and I am the author of two books mating in captivity and the State of Affairs I

have two podcasts where should we begin and how is work which both feature Anonymous raw life couples therapy sessions one in the Romantic sphere one in the workplace where I invite you to come behind closed doors and see what really happens in the lives of couples behind closed doors but this is what you

do with parents do you do something very similar you bring the parents out of their isolation out of their shame out of their you know this is just happening to me thing why can everybody else have normal kids and handle situations well and and you create a community for the challenges of Parenthood today like I try to create a global Community for the challenges of Modern Love and I love the overlap that we're entering a due here because so many of

the challenges in parenting are the challenges of partnership Hall parenting or maybe especially while parenting young kids and when I think about the questions that come up the most from parents when I might say to them something like okay I hear all the stuff going on with your kids all important we'll get to it let's kind of just put that to the side tell me about what else is going on in your life tell me the other things are going

on in your home the state of the partnership is almost always like the first thing to come out you know some version of oh there's so much conflict with my partner I hate my husband you know we have different parenting Styles I do everything I'm resentful um you know we're so disconnected we're fighting all the time sex oh sex oh my goodness none of that that is so far from what's Happening and the relationship between how someone feels

in their partnership and how their family system is functioning and the behavior is their child is in a way therefore displaying are also interrelated they're absolutely interrelated but I will give you I will even push it a level above is this this is the first time in the history of humankind that the survival of the family depends on the happiness of the couple we used to get married or that basically was the way to be in a committed

relationship and that was that one time for Life Fitness you were stuck today you can leave and so the only reason there's no excommunication there is women who have enough to take care of themselves economically the only reason the family will stay together is because the couple is relatively content that means that if you're going to want to give everything to your children you really want to make sure that one of the things you give them is a relationship between two

adults that is alive and thriving give everything to your children let me open that door what what do you see well there is an unprecedented child centrality that has almost reached an apex of folly at this point and it is living side by side with a high unprecedented rise of expectations of our romantic Partnerships and these two are clashing on resources

time money attention intimacy connection who's gonna get it so just tell me if this is right I have higher expectations of partnership than we've ever had while I'm pouring more of my energy into my kids that's right than I ever have yes that's exactly and those are really hard symptoms well it's a pool so and at the same time if you really want to give more to your children make sure to give more to the couple hmm

because otherwise comes a time when there won't be a couple for the children so I want to jump into a specific and I'm going to a little bit make this up but it's a myriad of so many people's stories and I just hear their voices right hearing what you're saying put more into my into my partnership my partner is someone I feel very angry with right now my partner puts no energy into me or into the kids my partner

comes home and thinks they can just Waltz in and play with the kids and doesn't think it's a big deal that I've been you know taking care of the family the whole day how can I put more into my partnership when I feel like I'm owed more by my partner right but that is one litany you just gave me now which is you know I'm a couples therapist uh it's often a drop-off center where somebody drops off another person to come and say

to me here here's the problem let me explain to you I'm an expert on this problem and then you can go and fix it and much of what you start to do when you work with a couple is basically you try to divide accountability you know what is it that you do that you bring how is this what are you doing together that keeps this problem in place that's an ecological view how is the couple organized in such a way that you keep on

being resentful and your partner keeps off being being missing in action so the first thing is you you know does your relationship matter to you that's just the first question you now you can say I don't have anything left to give to this relationship and then it divides in a few different strain so we need to break your question in small pieces I like your first question right and I want to like allow the listeners to like sit with that as

they're I don't know probably also driving or I don't know a pickup line or doing something else like that that question really hit me it's like does your relationship matter to you it's interesting how quickly it seems like someone says but this but this but just to sit with the question like it doesn't matter correct and like if the answer is a yes allow that like allow that to be enough no there's a second follow-up okay then the follow-up is and

what is it that you do to express its importance hmm because when you take care of your little Smurfs you are organizing activities you are making sure that there is novelty you go and make sure that they have new clothes no friends no Explorations no discoveries you bring a tremendous amount of energy into that relationship and so there is plenty to

talk about plenty to reflect upon plenty of pictures to look at Etc now tell me how have you manifested how have you shown to yourself forget even to your partner that your relationship matters what have you done for that typically the kid has a play date every week and many of the couples of the kind that you've just described have three dates a year my birthday you birthday and our anniversary and maybe we'll have sex on the anniversary just to make sure

that we can still you know prove we are a couple so to speak so does it matter to you and if so what is it that you do that makes that importance visible you know it's so uh so simple what you're asking and this is what I was saying to you before we're recording I give this way of reframing things with such Simplicity but they're so it's so provocative at the same time is there like a myth out

there or a fantasy like my partnership should work out in a way or without without this effort or why why is that so hard to put the energy into your partnership to say yeah I have to plan things too and I also just like with kids I say sorry I repair I reconnect I you know do fun things together we play why why does that feel so unnatural

and Partnerships when I wrote meeting in captivity I tried to really understand what happens to this what I call the erotic energy right the Creative Energy that makes us feel alive vibrant vital that's what you call to play to to roll on the floor to love to create to tickle to to look at each other to love together Etc that's erotic energy you're not just talking about like sexy time no no no I'm talking about that creative

Outburst that energy that makes you feel alive everyone understands it with children and the way that I understood why it happens there's a few different things happening in the couple you know first of all when you have kids it's a revolution in the couple it completely shifts all the resources the time the attention the intimacy the money it all shifts why because when you are in a relationship you negotiate continuously two pools you negotiate you need for stability and predictability

and reliability and then you also negotiate your need for novelty and exploration and risk and change and movement Etc but when you have a child you become stability you become security so that a child can become Adventure the child itself is an adventure that you're going on and that you are accompanying and so you try to stabilize yourself and as a result when people say actually if you ask me about sex it's like people say sex in a couple

you must be kidding and I said no let's not talk about sex but let's talk about that erotic energy playfulness imagination aliveness curiosity engagement Etc it is alive and well but it is Eros redirected it all goes to the children with the idea that the adults will kind of survive like a cactus that should not don't even need to water and on occasion you look at and it will give all its energy to the

little ones and slowly it will begin to gasp and then one person says what is going on here where are we at we haven't you know whatever we haven't gone hiking we haven't been alone we haven't gone on a date when is the last time we went dancing when's the last time we touched each other and looked at each other the way that we are constantly adoring each other's kids and when's the last time that when you say how are you I didn't

answer how is Jimmy but actually how are you and not what you did and what you got done and what is of the list how are you what's happening to this person right here next to me who is going through a lot of things that is the the the the loss that takes place Eros redirected all that energy goes to the little ones and then there's the next tension which is that everything that family life flourishes

on consistency and routine is often what kills the erotic eroticism thrives on this mystery on the surprise on the unknown and it's as if people have enough of that coming just from their children and it's what it's like eroticism thrives on everything that family life defends against so those two poles right you're saying once you have young kids like it's actually understandable that you lean more into the stability and predictability side

like it's understandable no one's doing anything wrong and it used to be fine when we thought that family life should be about family and that we didn't really care if a couple was romantic and parents slept in separate beds the day after they were done conceiving and all of that worked perfectly fine when we had a different conception of the adult relationship and in this day and age right where we are overwhelmed with information I wonder also if that pull into the

rigidity and the stability right parents these days it's like this is how you have to do this with your baby and this is what you have to do there's so much rigidity right and so much focus on you know the right way I feel like these days there's even more of a pull you know toward that toward that end yes because parenting and child rearing practices have become very dogmatic in the West highly dogmatic with a sense of over

responsibility on the parents on the responsibility on the institutions and the society so the parents are literally filtering through all the unknowns and all the pressures and it's all on them and every small movement can make or break the future of their little ones with a sense of complete overwhelm and panic yeah so the system that is in place when I see the system I'm saying the culture at large is um really no longer saying Child

Development is a natural process that you go to certain stages and the role of the parent is to Shepherd you through those stages no today Child Development is an artificial creation on the part of the adults that are taking care of these children and depending on how they respond to them how they expose them Etc they're going to create this creature versus that creature so we are in a phase where culture is more important than nature that changes by the way that

changes every 10 years are we close we're closer I don't know but I know that every time that you do that we get you know Hooked On A Dogma when it comes to Parenting 10 years later the truth of today is the joke of Tomorrow a hundred percent so we have to really be on this clear that these are not fundamentals you have three you know that what works for one is very different from what works for the other and that what allows

you to really flow is the fact that you can change because you see who is the other kid I always I always say that that my kids each require made a lead with a different part of me like they all require every person that's extremely well and so that's required me to do a lot of work to build certain certain of those parts are more natural to lead with that's right and others you know weren't you know so which is

super important in when people get into the I'm not a good parent of course you seem to have been perfectly fine for child number one and two or one and three or whatever and this one is more challenging because they call something in you a part of your leadership that is more difficult yes but that is to do with the relationship and the fit between one temperament and another not your competence a hundred percent I feel

like it it calls out the one of the more underdeveloped parts of you right so I'm gonna push back to you how did you manage this all like when you had young kids you're parenting your partnership your and the other thing that I know we both care a lot about is to be playful or have any erotic energy in a partnership so many especially women have lost that in themselves right like the ability to create space you know I remember saying

to my husband there's a few things we're not gonna do um I do not want us to when they wake up and just say there's nothing here yeah I've worked with enough couples I also understood that we are going to do these things very differently and um I'm gonna leave every once in a while for a week and you're gonna manage perfectly fine and if that happens then I should know that I need to trust you

so that when I'm next to you I don't need to constantly monitor you with the remote control I made a lot of what I think I'm not particularly popular things in in the American context I didn't accompany my kids to their games every Saturday I thought that this is bizarre so I had a way of of setting things by bringing in a cultural difference from as a European and for many other places where I've lived and I just knew that

this is not this is not the truth this is just one way that people do it here but people do other things completely different and this was true from the from sharing the bed to letting cry to the to the bottle to the you know from the beginning they were I read childbearing books in French in Flemish in Hebrew and in English and for everything that was I was told this is how you should do it I then went

to read and I saw that there is other cultures where they said the exact opposite and I thought oh well then I can go for my own intuition yeah if there isn't one truth then I can figure out which one is the rhyme that fits here and that was so important to me I have more I always wanted to write an article about that very experience of what it was like from zero to three to read child rearing books from different

cultural contexts it really gave me such permission the nothing that I was doing it wrong later I um you know we had our fights because I also came from a model of you know I thought we're going to be equal and no we fell into traditional gender roles and gender divisions that was just like okay this happened to me as well but what we did have is a shared desire to make sure that the relationship stays

vibrant because I had seen too many couples die on the vine and I was determined not to make that happen so we traveled alone from the moment they were very little small little things but we gave ourselves time away we continue to go and listen to live music because we like that and it's an energizing thing or to go dancing every once in a while I mean we continue to do things that were not just in the identity of the parent

there was we were two colleagues we would go to conferences together we would learn new things so we had new things entering into our system as well I wanted to socialize I understood that if you want a rich social life you invite people into your house they come to you then the kids are there they can meet these adults they can develop relationships with them over decades they're in their late 20s now they know these people since they're born

and the you know it became a kind of an extended family of sort and I was deliberate about a lot of these things I have to say I it became a mission for me to arrive on the other side and to feel like I'm so glad now we have a few more decades hopefully alone again but not like you know I have nothing to say to this person well here's something I want to say to all

the listeners because what I hear you saying though is like being deliberate being intentional and there's a tension there's like a little bit of a fight for for being able to maintain your relationship and being able to have that vibrancy and that energy it doesn't just happen and I I like yours you know how I say it in a long-term relationship everything that's going to just happen already has it's extremely deliberate yes it's deliberate to say I'm gonna

put my hands on your hand even though it's more hairy than on the little silky skin of the baby because we need to stay connected it's deliberate to say let's go out and not to dinner and sit across the table from each other and finally talk about the kids because now we have each other's ear it's deliberate to say you know we are going to take a night away and not feel guilty about it but actually think that this is

extremely important to Resource ourselves it's willful it's deliberate it's the it's premeditated I would even say and so is the physical connection sometimes you have to just say it feels good you know it's deliberate sometimes to go to the gym not every time you go to the gym you just want to go there and you're running but somehow in your head you know that you have rarely regretted afterwards so if the connection is good it's deliberate to say I want to invest

in this but it's equally deliberate to tell your partner thank you this is important you see what feeds the system is the acknowledgment of the effort too so when you have little ones I think it's very natural in a family to have a role distribution you asked me before what's one of my important Court Roots this would be one of them one parent the front line parent this is true in same-sex couples no different so it's it's not always

gendered but there is a front-line parent it's also the one that wakes up more easily that has a different sensory threshold it's the one that maybe is not working for the moment or works with more flexible hours and can attend more to the disruptions that children bring in the lab all of that but everyone understands Frontline parent the Frontline parent looks at all the stuff the Domesticity the chaos the needs of the children the child care whatever the

doctors visit you name it the other parent you can blame them and resent them for not doing what you do or you can thank them for thinking about the stuff that you can't think about because you're too involved so if you understand a role distribution is that like what though like because I'm just I'm just hearing someone saying like sitting on the couch watching TV no right like one person says shall we go for a hike well the other one is talking

about what needs to be done or shall we take a bike trip or shall we go shall we call so and so and go out on sad how can you think about it don't you see the freaking message you know you only talk about play and having fun yes because you don't and you need someone who reminds you in every couple over time where people say we were able to maintain it there is always one of them that says

the other person just didn't let it go they made sure that we had a coffee or a breakfast they made sure we had our date night they made sure we still physically connected and even though I didn't feel like it it's because they didn't let up so instead of fighting the difference develop a complementarity around it and there's something

and I love the way you say it and thank thank the other person for holding that that poll or that part

and so one of the things you do that I love is you turn things on their head and help us all see things differently so I'm thinking about someone who recently wrote in this as a question for you right so it was a woman married to a man and she said you know I do exactly I'm the Frontline parent it's not what she said but essentially I'm the Frontline parent and I need my husband to do more with

the kids I need I need him to come home from work earlier I need him to acknowledge the mental load I have and then at the end of the day he is basically trying to have sex with me like doesn't he understand that like I can't have sex after feeling so alone and so unsupported what like help us see that a little bit differently and and what would be some steps I've been that person just so it's

not I can think this way I like it but I also I force myself to think a different way and the first thing I would want you to think is that probably he feels just as Alone um because first of all quite often if you think all he wants is sex you're missing it all he wants is to connect with you to feel less alone but it is also the case that for men intimacy tenderness connection touch

affection are only allowed through the license of the sexual language just pause on that for a second because I think that's so important and when we divide she wants intimacy she wants not to feel alone he wants sex we're we're often off it is sometimes true but it is often off but you're saying we probably want the same things we want the same thing and that doesn't mean your husband's Insight that's true sweetie I want vulnerability and

intimacy that's not right that is not the language in which it will be spoken the woman has you know every woman has received a licensed language that has helped me every man has received the licensed language which is make love to me but we want the same thing we don't want to be alone we don't want to feel disconnected we don't want to feel that we've become a function in the house that the other person barely sees us

anymore that we're just a machine yeah and that we're just on a task list all the time so here's what I say to this woman instead of you want him to help you want him to help you it this may be all true but it's not useful so I'm gonna try to give you a different way to approach your guy and your predicament because if you continue as is it's just going to be more of the same

and I know where it goes I'm 40 years doing couple's work I kind of know where it goes I see it I see you around the corner before you get there and that's why I said it like that it's really annoying because I'm gonna make you say things that are not what you really want to say so I'm I'm twisting you this is I I know I know the moment you know so if you went to your husband and instead of I

need you to do more with the kids I miss you I miss us you know it's like days go by and we barely talk connect check in with each other it's like what the hell has happened and I would love to be able to think more about us I know you've been asking for that I know that you often reach out and I'm just called to you I know that I'm

often resentful of course I think I'm legitimately

resentful and I think I'm right that may be so but that may not be wise and I have a feeling that I would be much more available to us if when I ask you certain things you could also be more responsive to me so you first acknowledge Him then you take ownership for what you're not doing and only then do you ask for more more for what you want um that that order of operations really

matters right because as soon as we lead with you're not or I need the defensiveness that then we're against each other right yeah you're in an adversarial situation but it's not just that it is defensive is that when you are in that dance you reinforce in the other the very position that you actually don't want mm-hmm why would they want to do more when all you're telling them is that they do nothing

tell them that you also want to feel closer to them if that's the case which I hope it is because if all you want is just a helper then your partner is picking up on something which is why I ask you does your relationship matter alright if you're feeling like I'm feeling you're left wanting so much more there are so many more questions I want to ask a stare and I'd love to absorb

all of her wisdom well guess what you don't have to wait too long next week Astera will be back answering the questions that came directly from you you don't want to miss it I'll see you next week thanks for listening to share a story or ask me a question go to goodinsight.com podcast you could also write me at podcast@goodinside.com parenting is the hardest and most important job in the world

and parents deserve resources and support so they feel empowered confident and connected I'm so excited to share good inside membership the first platform that brings together content and experts you trust with a global community of like valued parents it's totally game changing good inside with Dr Becky is produced by Jesse Baker and Eric Newsom at magnificent noise our production staff includes Sabrina farhi julianat and

Kristen Mueller I would also like to thank Erica kabelski Mary Panico Ashley Valenzuela and the rest of the good inside team and One Last Thing Before I Let You Go let's end by placing our hands on our hearts and reminding ourselves even as I struggle and even as I have a hard time on the outside I remain good inside

so I have an idea you might be thinking oh so much of this episode resonates but it's such a hurdle to get over to talk about these things with my partner well one of the things I know from working with couples is talking about tricky topics is much easier when you have a third what do I mean a third instead of talking directly about a topic to a partner the two of you talk about an episode you both listen to or

an article you both saw or a book you both read so right now consider sharing this episode with your partner as a way to bridge the gap maybe add a note like hey there were a lot of really interesting points that made me think about things differently thought you might be interested in this too or take it a step further and write I miss you I'd love to reconnect maybe we can both listen to this and talk

about it together