

Modern Life – Episode 6 – Jen Fulwiler - Parenting

Title: Parenting Myths & Realities | Jen Fulwiler | Fidelity Modern Life

Transcript:

Jen Fulwiler: Do my kids seem to be okay? Do we seem to be okay? Is there harmony in my family? And if so, then I don't need to worry about what that influencer is doing that I follow. I can trust that this must be working out okay for us.

Jamila Souffrant: Jen Fulwiler, thanks so much for being here to talk about parenting.

Jen: Yes.

Jamila: Okay. So how did you get into comedy? How did you first know that you were funny enough to be on stage and to share that with the world?

Jen: You know, it was a lot of experimenting. I think a lot of us find our callings just through experimenting through trial and error. And way back in the day when I was in my twenties, I worked as a programmer, but I just started a website where I would write humorous things. And I just got a big response and it just seemed like there was a need for this. I was helping people, people said it made their day to get a little bit of a laugh. And I ended up on the radio and I would try to tackle serious topics, and I would think, man, I really killed that topic. Boy, that's going to change people's minds. And then the feedback I would get is just that I was funny and that's all people liked, and I thought, okay, I'm getting the message here that maybe it's very clear to me what people want me to do. And so, I transitioned into standup comedy.

Jamila: Now, did you start pursuing comedy as your profession before or after you started having kids?

Jen: It was after actually. I had six kids when I went into standup. Now, again, I'd been doing humor writing, using humor on the radio, but traditional standup comedy, I actually already had all the six kids when I started that.

Jamila: This is impressive because...

Jen: Very unusual!

Jamila: ...well because I'm just thinking I have three kids, so like half of yours and like I'm exhausted already. And the fact that you chose to pursue this career path after having six is impressive. And now I want to know how you had the energy and courage to do that.

Jen: The energy thing—this is actually something I tell parents all the time—is that when you discover some kind of gifting, it gives you energy when you do it. Writing standup, my mom would watch the kids and my husband and I would go down to a comedy club. I'd be on the stage at 11:00 PM. You know I'd have to get up early with the kids the next day, but it gave me energy. When people say, how did you do that with all those kids, I would say that that's how I got through the difficult times is that I had this calling that gave me energy and it can be any kind of calling.

Jamila: You know, that's such a great point because there's something that probably a parent or mom wants to do and they think it's going to take them away from being a parent when really, it's going to energize them to be a better parent.

Jen: Right? And it brought a wave of energy into my whole family when I started doing standup; my kids have actually given me great feedback on my standup comedy sets. And so, everything I've done in my career, I always see it as a family project and my husband the same in the work he does and the work I do. We see everything as we do this as a family.

Jamila: And so how did you transition from starting out not having a following, really learning the craft, to where you are today? You didn't always have a million views, right? How did you do that?

Jen: It was really slow over time because—so I had six babies in eight years—so when I was in the midst of having all these babies, I was just blogging and I would just do things like that little bit of Instagram at that time, because that is all I could handle at that time in my life. But then I developed a small fan base and then that turned into I wrote a couple of books, got on the radio. And as soon as I transitioned into comedy that small fan base turned into something much bigger because people started telling their friends, "You should check out this comedy." So, for me, it was a very organic step-by-step process that really took about 10 years to come together. I always tell parents you have to do—in terms of pursuing hobbies or passions—you have to do it at the level that's right for you at the time.

Jamila: Well, when did you know though that you could make this into something that you can make money from and that could support your family?

Jen: It was when I did my first standup comedy tour, when I was relatively new on the comedy scene and a lot of the clubs and things, they hadn't heard of me. So, I

was trying to get booked at clubs and just wasn't, understandably, I wasn't getting much of a response. But I thought my fans would like this and I thought there was a need for comedy from this perspective, because there aren't a whole lot of women in this field period, let alone bringing a big family minivan driving perspective. And so, I just went out and I actually Googled like "rent theater in Columbus, Ohio." I would cold call that theater and say can I put down my personal credit card to rent the theater. These people didn't know what to do with me, but they let me do it. It was the most haphazard slapped together thing. We probably would have been in bankruptcy if I had not been able to sell tickets, but so I self-produced my own tour. Out of 14 events, 12 sold out. Some of them sold out in like 12 hours. And so that it was a very successful tour. And for me, that confirmed that there is a real need here because even people who'd never heard of me were coming out to the tour. And I said, yeah, you know, a lot of families are struggling. They have real problems and being able to go out for a night and just laugh at someone who can relate to their experience...there's a need for it.

Jamila: And for you now juggling your career and your passions and being a mom. Can you talk about that struggle? Because what happens for people who are considering having kids is, they think that they may not be able to do both, and something has to get sacrificed.

Jen: Yeah. Oh, Jamila. This is a topic near and dear to my heart. One of the things I talk about in my comedy a lot is women were meant to raise children in tribal communities.

I studied anthropology in college, and I thought it was so interesting that when you look at any family, any time and place in human history for all of human history, except for the modern era, people lived in close-knit communities where your sister was, you know, right next door or whatever. And then your grandmother would live with you to hold the baby. And women gathered water together. They washed clothes together. They prepped food together. We weren't meant to raise kids in isolation. And if you are holding yourself to the modern Instagram perfectionist standard, you are going to walk around feeling like a failure 24/7.

And so, I tell people who are thinking about parenthood and they're overwhelmed by it. You are going to do it badly. You are going to fail by our modern society standards. But I think you can really count on the fact—if you genuinely love your kids and love your family and just do the best you can each day whatever that looks like—I truly believe it's all going to work out.

Jamila: And talk about isolation, being in this pandemic, especially for new moms, like that had babies in this pandemic and, you know, have toddlers and they didn't get the experience of having a community, you know? So, I'd love to talk to

those parents right now, or just parents who are now thinking about having more and it's stopping them because they're thinking this is such a lonely road, right?

Jen: Yeah. I always tell people: that depression and anxiety that so many parents are wrestling with, it's not your fault. And I just know so many moms, I hear from a lot of moms, and they're beating themselves up every day. They're saying, "We did Cheetos for lunch again. And I yelled at the kids and you know, the couch was wet, and I didn't even find out why today." I always say like, "Look, this is your A game right now, living in a pandemic." And so, I always want to make sure that parents understand how hard this is right now. If it feels hard, it's because it is hard and that kind of isolation, it's very unnatural in human history. It really wears on you psychologically.

And so, you know, yeah. If you find that you're spending a couple hours a day scrolling social media, like maybe it's not that you're lazy or bad, maybe you're searching for that community that you desperately need and are not finding.

Jamila: You know, that really resonated with me when I was looking through your work. Because oftentimes as we're scrolling, there's this guilt: "Oh, we should be doing something different. We should be crafting and baking something for the kids." I'm like, "I don't want to do that."

Jen: Oh yeah. 100%. And I think it's time for all of us as parents, especially as moms to say, "Look, I'm only one person and yeah, there might be some things lacking, but that's not my fault. It's because we're living in isolation. And so, the best thing I can do right now is to just bring my best self to each day and just accept that these standards that I'm holding myself to are just not realistic for someone who's living in the isolation that we all live in."

Jamila: Yeah. And that even just perfectly blends into the financial aspect of raising kids. Because with those communities came shared economies, of someone can watch your children while you work, and that's just different now. Right. So, I would love to talk about that. Cause that is a barrier for a lot of people...

Jen: Yes.

Jamila: ...Who are thinking about children, is the cost of children. So, what do you think?

Jen: I'll start by saying boy, are there no easy answers? I don't know anyone period, but especially people raising kids, who aren't stressed about money.

I mean, this is something that we all wrestle with, but one of the decisions that we made relatively early on in parenthood was to shift, you know—if you have a pie chart of what you spend your money on—to shift away from housing, and we have an expense that I really thought of as recreating the village expense.

So, we actually still live in a 1900 square foot, three-bedroom house. Which in Texas is like, I mean, that might as well be a postage stamp. But for us, we decided to minimize our housing expense and stay in the house. We bought it very, very cheap, many years ago. And so, to stay in that house, keep that expense pretty low. That enabled us to afford childcare. Eventually we found a gal who—she's kind of our house manager now. And I know some people see that and they think, "Oh, Jen must be rich. She has this gal who helps her." If we lived in a bigger house, we would not be able to afford that expense. I don't think that is an optional expense these days. I would say that, put that right up there with electricity and grocery.

Jamila: And you shouldn't feel guilty as a parent for needing and wanting help.

Jen: Yeah. Do you feel guilty for having electricity? Like, I mean, technically you could live without it, but we categorize that as a necessary expense and I'm kind of on a one-woman mission here to get people to rethink their family finances and start categorizing some sort of help in some form as a necessity and not as a luxury for rich people.

Jamila: And that's why it's so important to understand what works for your family, because in the age of social media, you see the big houses and all, like, the coordinated kids. And I'm like, first of all, I can't even get my kids to...if they were coordinated, by the time we took the picture, someone would be messed up. Right?

Jen: We have done Christmas cards where more than one kid did not have shoes on because it was just, it was a bridge too far. I couldn't do it.

Jamila: It's like I'm done. I'm good. This is what you're going to get. But in the age of social media, where things are distorted, how do we break through that noise as parents, or would-be parents, to see what's the right path for us?

Jen: Yes. Yeah. I am just going to be really honest. Uh, I don't know. Let me know if you find out. I've just recently been struggling with that because I have my own insecurities and questions as a parent.

I mean, I think having six kids, you know, ages 8 to 16 has only taught me how little I know. And so, I am susceptible to this and I even have a social media presence. I know that you are not seeing the full picture, but I'll see someone

else's family and I'm like, "Well, my entire life is wrong. I have made nothing but the wrong decisions. I should live in a house like this. My kids should be dressed like this. I should have done their education like this..." So it's, a big struggle for me. And all I can do is take it back to: let's look at what are the fruits? how is this working out for us? And do my kids seem to be okay? Do we seem to be okay? Is there harmony in my family? And if so, then I don't need to worry about what that influencer is doing that I follow. I can trust that this must be working out okay for us.

You know, there's some really fascinating studies on decision fatigue and how it really saps you emotionally and mentally to just decision, decision, decision all day, every day. And this is what we're faced with when we're in the social media landscape, where we constantly say, "Oh, this person's kids have violin lessons. Oh, this person, they have a Latin tutor. They do this. Oh, they homeschool seems like their kids are great."

And so, I have to work every day to consciously reject that second guessing every single thing, what you feed your kids, you know, how much time they spend outside, what sports they're in. If it wouldn't impact our family 20 something years from now, then I'm going to try to let it go.

Jamila: When it comes to your work, is there some misconception that you're trying to demystify or prove wrong or just educate people on when it comes to parenting?

Jen: There 100% is. The environment that I grew up in, the social cultural environment, said to women, "If you have kids, get ready to let go of all of your talents, all of your passions and get ready to be boring." There was almost this feeling of like, if you're having too much fun, you are probably not doing this the right way. And that was so much in my mind. One of the reasons for a long time, I didn't think I wanted to have kids is, I don't know, to say it bluntly I thought, "Well, I don't want to have a boring life." And I've found that the exact opposite is true. I mean, you know, when I did my standup comedy tour, I mean, my kids came with me to a lot of the tour stops and because I planned this whole thing myself, putting it on personal credit cards, I didn't have staff traveling with me, so my 10-year-old daughter would do the sound check. And my 12-year-old daughter would bring the rider about the lighting and be like, "I don't know what these words mean, but my mom said to give it to you," and, we've just done so many cool and interesting things, thanks to the fact that we have kids. And so that I think the single biggest misconception that I would love to transform in the minds of not only my fans, but society as a whole is that life can be even more fun and just interesting when you become a parent.

Jamila: What I've also discovered as a parent, as I've leaned more into my interests is bringing them along. What people tell you is that your life now revolves around your children and it's almost like you should have your children revolve around you and your interests; that makes your life more enjoyable, which makes you a better parent.

Jen: Yeah, I think that's also just good leadership. I mean, we've mentioned that I'm really interested in how people were made to raise kids. If you look at all of human history and mothers were so busy with just the work of survival—like getting water was something that took hours a day in a lot of human history—so, mothers did not have the time to have everything revolve around the moods of their kids and what was going on. And I think it's actually a healthier environment for a family, for the parents to really be leaders and say, this is what we're doing. This is the culture of our family. And I've noticed that kids really—I think it's comforting to them when they have parents who are leaders and saying, “Yeah, get on board that this is what we're doing and it's going to be fun and we're going to do it together.” And I think that actually brings a lot of peace to everyone in the house.

Jamila: It's interesting because I think as working moms we're going out into the world, we're making a living, but then we still have the responsibilities of being the mom and our kids still want us as like mom. And so that balance for you, how do you maintain it, like, how do you maintain that autonomy as being the Jen before the kids and now.

Jen: Okay. I will say I don't always do it well. I want to get that out there. Like that tour I mentioned. Everyone hears the success story of the tour and it's fun to talk about. And it was great; I don't regret anything with the tour, but I had a daily radio show, two hours a day, live every day, while I did that tour. And I looked back and I say, “Okay. I was gone too much.” In a way the quarantine and everything was—of course it's a horrible situation—but there was the side benefit of like, I needed to be off the road, and I needed to reevaluate and reconnect.

And that's actually when I left that job because of that because I realized my life has been really out of balance for a long time. A friend of mine who has eight kids said that she thinks of balance as like, if you're trying to balance on a balance beam, if you've ever watched someone who's never done that before, try to balance, they lean too far to this side. Then they lean too far to this side and then they go back and forth. And that's what balance looks like in a family. You will have times when you look back and say, “Yeah, I was working too much like that wasn't good.” And then maybe there are other times when you say I wasn't working hard enough; I was using family stuff as an excuse, not to move forward in this project that I'm blocked on. And the name of the game is to just keep reevaluating, be honest with yourself, check in with your family. And again, take it back to, “Am I close to my kids? Do they feel like they can talk to me? Do they feel

like they're my number one?" And if you've got that going on and you can eventually come back to that, I think it'll all work out.

Jamila: Yeah, I think that's perfect because what I've started doing too, as I've been going out—my kids, they're pretty young, but I started to tell them, "You know, I'm going to work and I'm excited about it." And I make sure to show that in my face, because I think so many of us do grow up with parents who did not enjoy what they did. And I think like how beautiful is it that your kids get to see you doing something that you enjoy?

Jen: Totally. I often think one of the greatest gifts we can give our kids is the gift of a happy mom, is the gift of a happy parent. Cause I think all of us saw growing up kids who were parents who were just unhappy. They were unhappy with their work. I think it's a real gift to your kids to take joy in what you do, bring them into it. And I want to speak to this perspective of this can be so fun and you can have a fun life and an interesting life and a joyful life, in case there are women like me out there who just, they've never heard that, they didn't know that they don't know it's an option.

Jamila: Okay. Jen, tell us what you're up to now. What are you working on?

Jen: I am back on tour. So, we're watching very closely to see what local recommendations are in terms of doing events. So, in theory, I am back on tour, but I tell my fans like this is changing on a day-to-day basis, so keep checking back. For anyone who has had their life dramatically changed by quarantines, by lockdowns. I think you have to take whatever work that you did previously before COVID and say, "Is there a way to translate this in this new world, in this new economy?" And so, for me, I went through a couple of months where I was in abject despair. When I realized I would not be touring anytime soon, that was our financial plan. That was my income. That was a big deal. But then I realized, well, I can still do comedy. Just on social media. And now I am so grateful for this because my fan base has, I mean, it's like five X what it was. I mean, it is growing really rapidly and that wouldn't have happened if I had never been locked down and I were just touring. So, I think for anyone who has struggled with, they used to do one kind of work, it's really impacted by all of this. I think that they can say, you know, is there a way to translate those skills in the new world? And you might be very pleasantly surprised by what you see.

Jamila: That's such good advice. Thank you so much, Jen, for joining us.

Jen: Yes. It's been a pleasure.

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