

The National Indie Excellence Book Award Winning Author Michele Sfakianos Is Interviewed By Author Ethen Carrell

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The 4-1-1 on Life Skills:

Ethen: What was the driving factor behind writing "The 4-1-1 on Life Skills?"

Michele: Remember when you were getting ready to leave home for the first time? Do you think your parents were worried if they had done everything they could to prepare you for the world? As a parent, I wasn't sure I had. After extensive research on what was being taught in school (and what wasn't), I realized that I needed to write this book to help the current and future generations. If they don't have any type of role model and certain life skills are not being taught at school – then how are they supposed to learn these skills?

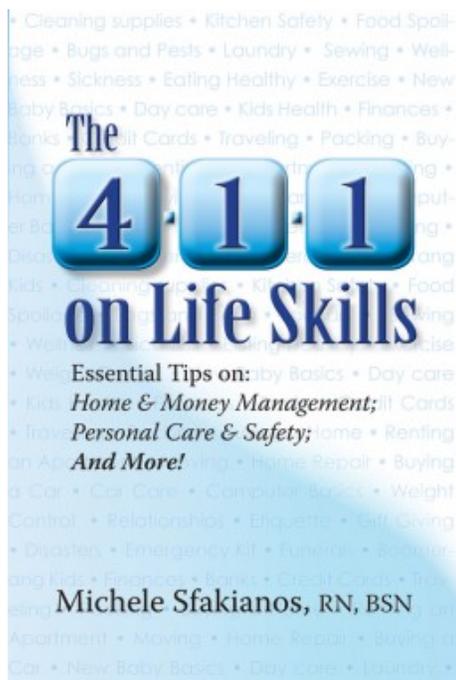


Author Michele Sfakianos

Ethen: First impressions can make or break you on a personal level or in business...where are first impressions learned?

Michele: A messy house is not just a messy house. The so often over looked "first impression" can make or break you both personally and professionally. First impressions are learned at home. By being aware of the impressions you make, you will recognize how to deal with the real issues – those beyond what they appear to be – as you become prepared with new choices and new options.

Ethen: Are we talking about the traditional values that somehow we have forgotten?



The book cover for The 411 on Life Skills

Children • Differences • Myths • Parental Roles • Grief • Communication • Active Listening • Values • Bullying

Michele: When you read *The 4-1-1 on Life Skills* you will realize your benefit. The result from following the easy to read and understand techniques to help you develop well prepared and responsible lifestyle is your reward. As parents, we take for granted that our children are watching our every move. Not so true anymore. We need to put into practice those age-old, tried and true methods, that we used in the past and teach those to our children. We need to keep them focused and on target every day and bring everyone back to good clean basics.

Ethen: There are some big “do’s” and “don’ts” when cleaning. Can you share some of them with us?

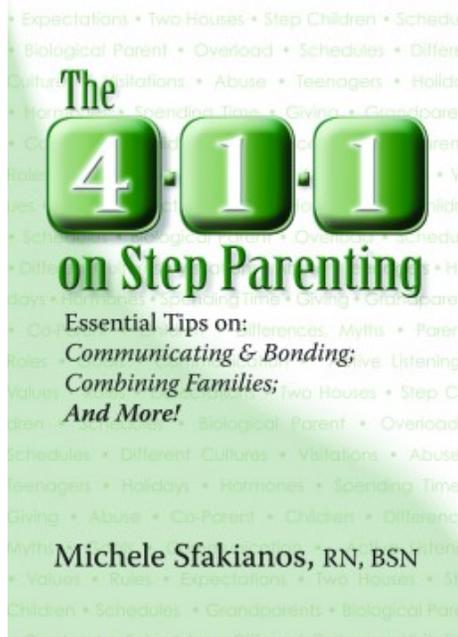
Michele: Many cleaners have several uses, so check labels to see if you can utilize the product for different types of cleaning. Do not use more than one product at a time, as they contain harmful chemicals that when mixed together could be fatal. Use gloves when cleaning with strong chemicals because your skin will absorb the chemicals.

Ethen: You have a chapter on Finance. What type of advice can you give to those struggling with their finances?

Michele: The finance basics include the following: 1) pay yourself first – when you get paid, put 10% of your paycheck into a savings account or other account that you do not have access to. 2)

Keep a good credit score – make sure to get your free credit report every year and check each creditor to make sure it is correct. 3) Borrow only what you can afford. 4) Always know what you owe. 5) Balance your checkbook once a month – do not rely on the online balance as there can be fees that you are not aware of. 6) Save your spare change in a large container. You will be surprised how quickly it adds up.

Ethen: The information on travel is very helpful. What can we do to not only protect our home when we travel, but also protect ourselves?



The book cover for the 411 on Step Parenting



Author Ethen Carrell

Michele: Make sure to travel in comfortable clothing and wear shoes that are easy to slip on and off through security checkpoints. Be aware of people who offer rides and not are driving commercial vehicles. It is best to arrange for a taxi in advance. If you travel overseas, make sure to bring some type of language interpreter. For your home: 1) Unplug appliances (except for refrigerator). 2) Arrange for mail pickup or put it on hold at the post office. 3) Put a hold on your paper delivery. 4) Arrange for someone to mow your grass if you are going out of town for an extended time. Tall grass is a sure sign that you are out of town. 5) Notify your alarm company.

Ethen: Purchasing a home or renting an apartment is a big part of life. What type of information should everyone know before taking that big step?

Michele: The largest part of preparing for buying or renting a home is knowing what money you will need up front. Deposits and/or fees can be expensive. You need to contact each company (electric, water, sewer, phone, cable, trash/recycling, etc.) to see what they require. You also need to be aware of any application fees and/or homeowner association fees that may be required. Make sure to get pre-qualified before you look when purchasing a home. If you decide to rent, make sure you understand the lease and what is required of you (such as repairs and utilities).

Ethen: Since you are an RN, let's focus on safety aspects as I'm sure you have seen a lot of people in your nursing practice that could have prevented injury if they would have known some of the basic skills in the 411 on Life Skills. For example---- food poisoning----How can we prevent it?

Michele: Check expiration dates on food items monthly (cans, boxes, bottles, spices – basically anything you consume!) When you reheat food, make sure you see steam rising from it so that any bacteria are killed during the heating process. When you are thawing your food, use only these methods: Refrigerator thawing, Cold water thawing or Microwave thawing. Setting your food on the kitchen counter, in the garage or on the patio as these methods can leave your foods unsafe to eat.

Ethen: Many accidents happen in the kitchen. What are some ways to prevent these from occurring?

Michele: Do not cook in baggy clothes. By doing this you take the risk of your clothes getting caught in the handle and pulling the hot contents on you. Keep an ABC rated fire extinguisher in the kitchen or a nearby room. Enforce a three-foot kid-free zone in front of the stove. Turn pot handles towards the wall. Never plug a small appliance into an extension cord as this could cause a power surge and start a fire.

Ethen: What other life skills are important for safety?

Michele: Make sure to change your air conditioner filters (and vacuum filters) once a month. Dust and dust mites are one of the leading causes of allergies. Make sure to check expiration dates on medications before taking. Never take a medication prescribed for another person especially if you are taking other medications as they may not mix well. Each medication can be prescribed based on height and weight or other criteria and may not work for you.

Ethen: You have a chapter on Keeping You Well that includes Wellness, Sickness, and Smoking. A lot of people smoke in their homes. What are the risks associated with second hand smoke?

Michele: If you have small children in the home, second hand smoke has the same nicotine and other toxic chemicals that you are taking in. Children exposed to second hand smoke are at an increased risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), acute respiratory infections, ear problems, and more severe asthma. Smoking by parents causes breathing (respiratory) symptoms and slows lung growth in their children.

Ethen: We are seeing a lot of kids moving back home after college because they can't find a job, or sometimes they have a job, and then lose it. How do you recommend that parents deal with their "Boomerang Kids?"

Michele: Set clear expectations. Talk about obligations regarding expenses and household chores. Discuss whether dates over for dinner or event to spend the night are acceptable. By setting and enforcing expectations, your parents will help you to learn the skills you need to live independently. Set a time limit and stick to it. Experts say it is best for everyone to be on the same page in order to avoid the resentment that might arise from unspecified assumptions.

Ethen: I love chapter 20 on Taking Care of Yourself. Many people, especially women, focus on taking care of other people and putting themselves last. What is the harm in doing that?

Michele: If you do not take care of yourself, how can you take care of others? By not taking care of yourself, you can become overwhelmed and suffer from stress, depression and other illnesses.

Ethen: Thank you so much for writing the chapter on Simple Etiquette. It seems that a lot of kids and adults alike never received any basics in manners. I am especially shocked at cell phone usage. What are your most important tips for simple etiquette and why do you think so many people don't possess these essential life skills?

Michele: Like other life skills, etiquette is usually learned at home. If you do not have a good role model, it is hard to know what you should or shouldn't be doing. You need to know simple things like: 1) hold the door for others; 2) don't use your cell phone in public places (bus, train, doctor offices, etc.), so that you are considerate to those around you. Most people have enough going on in their life that they don't need to hear what is going on in your life! 3) Make sure to dress according to the situation you are in. If you are at work, your shirt should be tucked in. Your clothes should be clean and hair combed. Same for if you are going for an interview. It is not wise to show up in shorts or flip flops.

Ethen: You have a chapter on emergency preparation including everything from Earthquakes to Tsunamis. What should everyone have on hand to prepare for a natural disaster?

Michele: You need a plan and an emergency kit. The main item on the plan is to establish a contact out of town that everyone has the number to. Once the disaster is over, everyone needs to call and check in with the contact to account for family members. The emergency kit contains things such as: water for at least three days; 1-2 month medication supply; batteries; flashlights; blankets; canned food (non-perishable) for at least three days; can opener; battery-powered or hand crank radio; first aid kit and baby food (or pet food) and extra water for food preparation.

Ethen: In chapter 25, you talk about a topic that most people put off until the time happens---making funeral arrangements. Why is planning ahead so important?

Michele: By planning ahead, you take the burden off of your family. You make your wishes well known. You can also pre-pay for many items thereby releasing your family from financial troubles. Families tend to take comfort at the time of death, simply from knowing their loved one's funeral reflects his or her wishes.

Ethen: Your book should be a part of everyone's library, because it covers essential tips on home and money management, Personal Care and Safety and is very easy to read and use. Where can we purchase The 411 on Life Skills?

Michele: You can purchase The 4-1-1 on Life Skills at all major online book retailers such as Amazon, Barnes and Noble and Google Books. You can also purchase directly from our website at www.my411books.com.

The 4-1-1 on Step Parenting:

Ethen: With so many divorces today, what is it that parents should think about before getting into another relationship?

Michele: Parents need to consider the wants and needs of their children. Divorce or separation is hard on everyone. It can be similar to a death in the family depending on where each parent decides to live. If one parent moves out of state, the children may feel abandoned. It is not fair to bring in another person into their lives immediately. They need time to recover. When a person brings a new partner into their children's lives, it can take as long as two years for them to accept that new person.

Ethen: Tell us about the roles of step parents.

Michele: You must first understand what your role is NOT – you are not their mother or father or friend. They have enough friends. You must first be yourself. You are now a role model – providing a moral compass and discipline that was decided upon by you and your partner ahead of time. You want to actively support the relationship with the other biological parent and this sometimes means being the “go-between” or the facilitator to make sure everything goes smoothly with child pick up and drop off.

Ethen: What are some tips you can give to help with communication issues?

Michele: First you must let the kids know you and your ex-spouse will continue to love and support them throughout their lives – just from separate homes. You need to let them know that your new partner is not a replacement but another person to love and support them. Everyone must listen respectfully to each other. Active listening needs to be incorporated into everyday life. Active listening is a communication technique that requires you to understand, interpret and then evaluate what was said and felt at the time. The children tell you something while

you listen without interrupting and then you repeat back what they said to make sure you understood. This will help to clear up any misunderstandings before they escalate. Never lecture and be flexible. As parents, you need to communicate the acceptable behaviors by setting family expectations (moral and value expectations about how people in the family should behave and treat each other); personal expectations – achievement based goals; relationship expectations (socially based).

Ethen: How do finances play into planning a new step family?

Michele: When deciding to commit to each other the financial discussion is left for last. It should be one of the first things you discuss! You need to know each other's financial obligations before the "I do's". Often times, most do not find out until later the other person was basically drowning in debt. Knowing what you are getting into before you take the marital step is vital. Not only does it help with communication, but also helps with trust. If you cannot trust your partner to come clean about their finances before the marriage commitment, what else might your partner try and hide from you?

Ethen: How does one go about introducing the new person to your children?

Michele: Whether it is early or later in the relationship, the first meeting is an important event. Advance planning is key. A successful experience is an experience where everyone walks away feeling more comfortable, not less comfortable. Ideally you want the first meeting to be casual and avoid pitfalls. You want to invite your new friend to dinner at your home but make sure to let him/her bring gifts that you don't usually have around the house – like candy. Make sure to keep a time limit on the activity. There should be no overnights until the children become comfortable with the new person.

Ethen: What problems can differences in family rules and discipline cause and what is best way to handle this?

Michele: Having two homes can usually mean two sets of rules. Children catch on to this pretty quickly and can use it to their advantage. You have no control over what goes on in the other household so make sure that the kids know the family rules and values for you home. A disciplinary approach works best when both partners are in agreement. If not, the kids will play you off one another. You need to establish family rules so that everyone knows what is expected of them while they are in your home. You will need to explain these rules in an age appropriate way. Being consistent is the MOST important thing you can do. When speaking to kids, lower your voice. This will force them to listen to you. Always stay in the present. This alleviates family grudges.

Ethen: I imagine privacy is a real issue when blending a new step family. What suggestions do you have to keep your marriage together with this lack of privacy?

Michele: Your marriage will be affected by the lack of privacy. This is part of having kids in the house. Not only are the children there physically, but also emotionally. Communication plays a key part in keeping the spark. The first year or so is the hardest on your sex life, when the honeymoon hormones are flying at the same time you are doing all of this adjusting. It will be important to establish a couple of house rules: 1) everyone must knock on closed doors before entering and must wait for an answer; 2) assert your need for private time; and 3) respect their personal space and the children will be more apt to return favor.

Ethen: Introducing a new baby into a step family can cause many different issues, both good and bad. What are some of these issues and how can you deal with them?

Michele: A relationship breaking up is one thing, and a remarriage is another, but having a child with another person makes it final the former relationship is over. It is best not to tell anyone about the pregnancy until after the first trimester. You need to include the children in the planning, naming and caring for the new baby. The children's reaction to the infant is not always warm and welcoming. The eldest child may feel her family position is threatened, as here comes along a new eldest for the blended family. The youngest child may mourn his lost position as family baby as he moves to the middle child position. Younger children tend to revert back to baby tendencies, and this is normal. Be patient and firm. Reassure the children nothing will change in the way you love and care for them.

Ethen: What impact do children with problems have and how can you tell if a step child is having a problem?

Michele: Divorce, separation, death, remarriage, a new family configuration – these are all hard things for a child to adjust to. Children of divorce are at risk for depression and stress, and this can sometimes turn into self-destructive behaviors, violent behavior, failing in school, and addiction. There are several key signs that indicate a child is in trouble: school problems; peer relationship problems and problems at home. If the step child does not reside with you, it may be difficult to tell if they are having problems. This is where communication is so important with the other biological parent.

Ethen: Teenagers - do they have special adjustment issues?

Michele: Teenagers are beautiful, angry, sexual, sassy, messy, moody, and often lethargic. Hormonal changes (moodiness, lethargy and so on) begin about two years before the outward physical changes can be seen. You can make life around your household easier if you try the following: 1) Do not take any personal – think of your step-teen as hormonally impaired. Try to be tolerate and give it time. 2) Do not try to compare or compete with the other biological parent. Be yourself. 3) Spend time alone with your step-teen doing activities which interest you both. 4) Be neutral about your partner's ex-spouse. If provoked by the step-teen about him, take five deep breaths and take the high road. 5) Do not push for affection, attention or a response.

Ethen: Adult children – are there adjustment issues? If so, what can be done?

Michele: As a step parent of an adult step child who is your age or older, keep these things in mind: 1) You may have a problem of being taken seriously as a person and as the biological parent's partner. 2) Your motives may be looked on with suspicion. 3) If you have moved into the family home, you may have difficulty asserting yourself as an adult. 4) Your partner's child may feel threatened his territory is taken over by the relationship. 5) Legal issues – wills, power of attorney, etc., may become more of an issue. When people get overwhelmed, most tend to withdraw and get resentful. Part of making the transition and commitment to step parenting involves making a firm attempt to know each of your step children individually, and apart from your partner. Like other step children, it may take time, work and respect for the adult step child to come around.

Ethen: What are some things to consider when searching for a new home for your blended family?

Michele: When step families begin discussing living situations, past living arrangements and money issues often come up, especially when couples who have uneven financial situations come together as a family. Perhaps she has been used to a middle-class house in the suburbs with a pool and a large mortgage, and he is fresh from a small urban rent-controlled apartment downtown. How much rent or

mortgage can you afford? How much do you want to afford? Keep the lines of communication open to prevent resentments from building up. Make sure each one is comfortable with what the other can commit to.

Ethen: Many families today are cross-cultural. What are some ways to make everyone comfortable in this type of situation?

Michele: As in same culture families, whenever you have a relationship in a cross-cultural situation, you have to make sure to communicate effectively. Intercultural communication requires things such as: respect, tolerance, flexibility, empathy, patience, and humor. Your cross-cultural communication will be improved by your willingness to know yourself and to understand your reactions. Your perceptions of the world and your values affect your interpretation of what other people are saying and doing. You have to understand yourself and what you are bringing to the step family (good points, old baggage, values, expectations, and beliefs) to understand the others. No matter what religion you are, what socioeconomic background you have, or where you came from, it is important to give each other respect and space to get used to the differences. Everyone was not made from the same mold!

Ethen: There are other people to consider when blending a family and that is the extended family. What is an extended family and how do they affect your new family?

Michele: To extend means to enlarge and to reach out. An extended family is both larger and more encompassing of other people. The extended family are the aunts, uncles, grandparents, adult friends, teachers and other members of the community. Not to mention the ex-spouse and his/her family. You must be respectful of others, despite how you might feel about them. It is important for everyone to present a united front on what is best for the children. You have to set realistic goals of what is expected of everyone and adhere to those goals. You and the others must let the children know: 1) you are there for them; 2) you are not trying to take over the parenting role; 3) you will put aside disagreements and put their interests first; and 4) you will make yourself available to talk or correspond any time he/she has anything to discuss.

Ethen: Holidays can be stressful just as they are! What are things to consider when making holiday plans? Who all should be involved in the planning? What if there are conflicts in the scheduling?

Michele: When making holiday plans, you need to consider who is going to spend the holiday where. You must also take into account the religions of those involved. It is important to keep family traditions alive with certain cultures. If the holidays are taken up with stress and other people's claims (Thanksgiving is mine!), you can always select another day to become an annual blow-out holiday. (Cinco de Mayo, Arbor Day, Step Parents day). Give gifts – decorate the house – throw a party! You must acknowledge that you are starting from scratch. There is a new excitement about having the opportunity to create holidays as you would like them to be. Then create a few new family rituals, things none of you have done before. Aim for creating your own holiday spirit (with additions) and welcoming the kids into it. Do not try to re-create another's rituals. You cannot make it as it was, you do not want it as it was, and you will only make people unhappy if you try.

Ethen: What is one of the most important papers that you need when caring for your step children and why?

Michele: Being a step parent means you have no official legal status and the medical community may or may not allow you to authorize medical treatment for your step child. And because, legally, step parents have no authority, care providers

have developed policies to deal with these issues. You can get around this system partially if you have your partner grant you power of attorney, or if your partner, and your partner's ex, has signed a form authorizing you to represent them when consenting to medical or dental procedures. Power of attorney forms and medical consent forms vary in their language from state to state. You can get free blank forms at office supply stores, local hospitals or doctors' offices. These forms need to be notarized.

Thank You for all those who read the article. Check out more interviews with Author Ethen Carrell!!

About the Author

MICHELE SFAKIANOS is a wife, mother and grandmother living in Fort Myers, Florida. In 1982, she received her **AS Degree in Business Data Processing/Computer Programming**. In 1993, she received her **Associate in Science degree in Nursing** from St. Petersburg Junior College, graduating with Honors. In 1999, Michele received her **Bachelor of Science degree in Nursing** from Florida International University, graduating with High Honors. She has worked her way through the different areas of nursing including Medical/Surgical, Pediatrics, Oncology, Recruitment, and Nursing Informatics. She is currently a **Certified Legal Nurse Consultant** and the owner of Medical Matters, LLC a Legal Nurse Consulting business. In 2009, she received her Real Estate Sales Associate license. Michele has been previously published in both Poetry Books and a Nursing Journal. Michele is also the owner of Open Pages Publishing, LLC offering quality self-publishing. Her first book "Useful Information for Everyday Living" was published October 2010 and was later changed to "The 4-1-1 on Life Skills" which was published June 2011. Her latest book "The 4-1-1 on Step Parenting" was released October 2011. She is well respected in her areas of expertise. Her years of experience as a Registered Nurse, Mother and Life Skills Expert have given her the knowledge and wisdom to write her books.

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