

How To Help a Complicated Child

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SPEAKERS

Debbie Steinberg-Kuntz, Seth Perler

- S** Seth Perler 00:00
Here we go. Hey everybody, what's up? Today I'm here with Debbie Steinberg-Kuntz, and she runs the Bright and Quirky Summit. We'll chat about this in a minute, but for you parents and teachers watching today, what I really wanted to ask Debbie, because every Sunday, as you know, I put out a blog and I really try to give something valuable to parents and teachers, and I thought what would be the best thing to ask her? So what I'm going to ask is, Debbie has been in this education world for a long time, and I wanted to ask, what were some of her biggest takeaways from the Bright and Quirky Summit, but from her advanced mindset, she has been in this world so long, not sort of beginner stuff, but what some stuff that really hit her. So hi, Debbie.
- D** Debbie Steinberg-Kuntz 00:43
Hi, Seth. How are you doing?
- S** Seth Perler 00:44
Good. What's the Bright and Quirky Summit?

D Debbie Steinberg-Kuntz 00:47
Okay, the Bright and Quirky Child Summit is an online free conference where we're bringing together 29 of the world's experts for bright kids with ADHD, autism, learning differences like dyslexia, anxiety, and depression. And this year, our theme is 'Tame the Overwhelm.'

S Seth Perler 01:06
Tame the overwhelm, because we've been through a lot. Awesome theme, awesome theme, people are overwhelmed, kids are overwhelmed. So you said bright, and with ADHD, and this that and the other? What's that called for those who don't know that?

D Debbie Steinberg-Kuntz 01:24
Yeah, we call that twice exceptional. So if you think about a bell curve, on one end we've got kids with advanced abilities, sometimes they're called gifted, they can have any sort of advanced abilities. Then on the other end, they have brain-based challenges as well. And what's tricky about this is you could put them in gifted classes that don't necessarily help them support their challenges, or you can put them in special ed, which doesn't help them accelerate with their advanced abilities. So it's a very niche population that has trouble finding ways to get its needs met. So we have a lot of parents, teachers, clinicians that come to the summit, use it for professional development, and it's been very helpful. This is our fourth annual summit, it's a lot of fun.

S Seth Perler 02:09
So for those of you that register, you can register right here, you can go check it out at Bright and Quirky, but I'll put the link below. But this is an intensive, incredible way to invest your time in your teaching or your parenting. Just saturate yourself in everything, and you're gonna walk away absolutely overwhelmed, and absolutely grateful for learning so much. So tell us, what's one of your big takeaways, an aha-moment that you had from this one?

D Debbie Steinberg-Kuntz 02:37
Well, I had so many. I have to say the talk with Kristin Neff probably stuck with me the most.



Seth Perler 02:45

Is she a mindfulness person?



Debbie Steinberg-Kuntz 02:48

She's a self-compassion person. She did research that said, you know, you can have a child with severe challenges or mild challenges. And you would think that your degree of stress or angst would correlate with how severely that child is struggling. But actually, that's not the case. The case is that you will struggle less if you become an ally to yourself, and your self-talk becomes the way you would talk to a friend. So if my child's melting down, or you know, they haven't started their homework when I know they have 10 assignments, and I just be like, "Ugh, how do I do this? Or how do I do that?" I'd say like, "This is hard." I would talk to myself, like I would talk to a friend, "Maybe it's time to go for a walk, maybe it's time for some deep breaths. This is hard, and it's time for a cup of tea." It changes the whole conversation in your head. There's a lot of research to say this really works.



Seth Perler 03:52

Awesome. I love it. It's super simple. It's super powerful. I actually use that in my coaching with kids. You know, if you were your own friend, what advice would you give yourself? Or some iteration of a question like that. So awesome, thanks. And then what's another one?



Debbie Steinberg-Kuntz 04:07

Okay, I had the privilege of interviewing Stephen, Dr. Stephen Porges, the originator of the Polyvagal theory, he's doing actually two talks with Mona Delahooke, who wrote 'Beyond Behaviors.' I mean, together, they're just the dream team. They are really shifting the whole paradigm of how we deal with kids and behaviors. And we've got a 15 minute talk for dads and a 15 minute talk for teachers. Because I do coffees every week with families, and one of those weeks a month are just with dads, and I was in the session and the dads had questions all along a certain theme. "When my child does X, whether they're not complying, not doing homework, or you know something, melting down. What should I do?" The dads really didn't know. "Should I escalate things and make them do it? Should I walk away?" So that's exactly what I asked Dr. Porges and Dr. Delahooke. What they said is, if you treat the behavior, then you are only treating the symptom. That's like, you know, treating a fever when there's a root cause. So when we look at the root cause, we really want to look at the nervous system. And Seth, I know you know this, think about it as green zone, red zone, blue zone, green zone, is when you're calm, you're ready to learn, you're engaging with other people. Red zone is when you're in fight or flight. And blue

zones, when you're shut down, that typically comes after the red zone. The teenager stuck in bed, they don't want to do anything, they don't want help. They're in the blue zone. So if we think about our kids who, you know, classically we think they're misbehaving, and think instead, "Oh, they're in the red zone, my next step is to help them and me get in the green zone through breathing, through different things that will calm the nervous system." Getting exercise is a huge one, self-talk. Just taking this paradigm shift of thinking about the nervous system rather than the behavior, is huge. It just changes everything.

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Seth Perler 06:27

Awesome, I love it. And so Porges is my number one person who I am most excited about seeing, because I love Polyvagal theory. So for those of you who follow me, if you don't know how much I nerd out on Polyvagal theory, it's a lot. It's one of my top three sort of models that really influenced me. But I talked about Polyvagal theory a lot. It's not as inaccessible as it might sound like, for example, using the red, blue, and green zones. There's also something called the Polyvagal ladder, just really accessible ways to understand that you are always speaking to your child's nervous system. So we have these words and these stories, but we're often not even hearing each other. And we have to really, and I work a lot with my families on this. How do we see what the heck is going on in their nervous system right now? And in your nervous system? Awesome. Awesome. Awesome. Awesome. And I'm super excited to hear Mona too. So yeah, so what else was a big takeaway for you? I'm kind of jealous that you got to talk to them8.

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Debbie Steinberg-Kuntz 07:28

I'm happy to introduce you guys. I also talked to Ellie Lebowitz who is out of Yale, he designed the space program, SPACE, I'm going to forget what it stands for. But basically, it is a program that works with parents of anxious kids on what parents can do differently. The treatment does not at all involve the kids. So you know, when you have an anxious child and you might decide, you know, not to take a weekend away or not to do a certain thing, and you feel like this anxiety has the whole household captive. He helps you really change that dynamic and help your kids recognize that they actually have the strength to navigate the anxiety. Oftentimes, it's not about making the anxiety go away, because anxiety is good in certain situations, it's about helping to give kids confidence that they can handle the anxiety. So what we do as a parent, when our kids are anxious, makes all the difference. Actually, what feels intuitive to comfort and soothe when they're anxious, can actually make them feel more anxious. So his talk is really interesting.

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Seth Perler 08:40

So good, and so related to the other two things that you mentioned, because it has to do with, you know, us doing our own adult work, our work on ourselves or self-care. It also has to do with the nervous system.

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Debbie Steinberg-Kuntz 08:54

Yeah, absolutely. I then did a talk with Michael Delmon and Dr. Clifford Sussman on motivating kids and managing screen time. I really enjoyed that talk because I think in my mind, if I could just, I'm not a very technical person, if I could just figure out how to stop the router, or put the curfew on the phones, or like what technology am I missing? Dr. Cliff actually said, you know, if we're thinking long term, what we really want to do is have our kids internalize what those boundaries should be through a lot of really rich conversation. He talks about low dopamine and high dopamine activities, and that being on screens is high dopamine and it works a lot like addiction. You need a higher and higher dose to get the same effect. So many of us are and our kids are just getting so much screentime right now, and he's got some suggestions, to weave in some lower dopamine activities to moderate.

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Seth Perler 10:04

Awesome. And are there any others?

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Debbie Steinberg-Kuntz 10:08

I also really enjoy, I've got a few more, I enjoyed talking to Dr. George Nicola, he's a functional medicine Doc. Now, I was a counselor in private practice for 10 years working with twice exceptional kids. I don't know if you hear this Seth, but I would hear all the time about gut issues. And if you look in the DSM-5, our our diagnosing manual, it doesn't say anything about stomach aches and ADHD, or autism, or anxiety. But when you talk to a functional medicine doctor and you realize how integrated the gut and the brain are, and there's a crazy percentage of serotonin that comes from the gut. So gut health is so important to brain function. He talks a lot about nutrition, and it's actually a talk, this is something we're doing new this year, we've got five talks that we did with kids, for kids and teens, so that's exciting. And then I also interviewed Christy Forbes, we talked about PDA, which a lot of people in the US don't know about is Pathological Demand Avoidance. You've probably known kids or adults like this, who just don't want to be told what to do, they're hypersensitive to any sort of requests. It's very delicate how we need to talk to them because of that highly sensitive, high sensitivity to perceived criticism. So Christy's got a lot of great tips for that. And then I also talked to Thomas Brown, Dr. Thomas Brown, he was with Yale for many years. And we talk about ADHD and co-occurring diagnoses.

We have a lot of kids that I work with at Bright and Quirky that have ADHD plus, and I had a client who called these the 'cocktail diagnoses.' You know, plus autism, plus anxiety, plus depression. When you get a diagnosis like that, as a parent, the diagnosis of your child, it's like, "Where do I start? What's the order of operations?" because then you have different treatment plans that they're handing to you to follow. And it's so overwhelming. I really like how Dr. Brown breaks it down when you do have multiple diagnoses, where do you start? What do you focus on?

S Seth Perler 12:29
Awesome. Where do you start is a question I get so much as well.

D Debbie Steinberg-Kuntz 12:34
Yeah, yeah.

S Seth Perler 12:36
But these are complicated human beings, so cool.

D Debbie Steinberg-Kuntz 12:39
Exactly.

S Seth Perler 12:41
Is that the last one?

D Debbie Steinberg-Kuntz 12:44
That's the last one I have written down. I'm kind of curious because you said Polyvagal was one of the three theories you go back to time and time again. What are the other two?

S Seth Perler 12:54
Yeah, so I guess the way that I would word it is Polyvagal theory is one of the three. Number two would be Attachment theory, which has to do with relationships, but also has everything to do with reading each other's nervous systems. And number three is what I would call somatic approaches in therapy. So that can include Polyvagal theory, but then

it also includes all sorts of other what's called 'body-centered.' If this is sounding woowoo for any of you, this stuff is not woowoo. This is incredible, powerful stuff. But for me, kind of how you started off your conversation when you were talking about the first expert, you said if you're not addressing a thing, you're saying you can't just address, the symptom. And with somatic stuff, there's so much going on in the body that's impacting and influencing us and our kids. What we do is we go into the story of "This needs to get done. Your chores need to get done. Your homework needs to get done," blah, blah, blah. And we're not even noticing that they're having an actual physical manifestation, experience, right in that moment. Their nervous system is communicating things to them, and we're not addressing it or working on it. I mean, we just don't, it's not really part of how we approach things in our culture. But when we learn to do that, kind of what you alluded to a few times here is, when we can learn to do that we can respond as parents, or adults, differently, and does do what we're trying to do, which is help the child rather than feel like we're not gaining any traction, and we're having the same conversation million times over, and we're not getting anywhere and things are not changing, and we're still on a downward spiral, we really need to back up. So those are my three, Somatic therapy, Polyvagal theory, and Attachment theory. For those watching, I like Alan Robarge with Attachment theory on YouTube, Stan Tacktin, those are probably my two favorites. And then with Polvagal theory, Dana's Polyvagal theory and therapy book, which she's taken so much of Borges' work, but she's made a book that says, 'For therapists,' but it's so accessible to parents. It's so phenomenal. And then as far as somatcis, you can look up EMDR, brain-spotting, somatic experiencing, Peter Levine, and blah, blah. I mean, there's just lots of cool stuff with that for any of you who are nerding out on "Where do I go," those are some of my go-to's. But those are my top three that I think when we're trying to help with executive function, it's not just executive function, there's so so many more layers, we're really going to help these kids.

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Debbie Steinberg-Kuntz 15:41

Just to bring this into a real world example, as a parent. Have you heard of Jessica McCabe or Brendan, I can't remember his last name.

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Seth Perler 15:54

Brandon Mahan.

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Debbie Steinberg-Kuntz 15:54

They did a video on the 'Wall of Awful,' and that's when kids have so much stacked up that they look at this huge wall of everything they have to do, and they're like, "What's the

point?" and they just check out. And in my mind, as a parent, before I knew about Polyvagal theory, where I was going with this is, what is the tip or trick I need to reengage them? But now I know that we have to calm the nervous system before they're even ready to learn that they're in red or blue mode. How do we get them into that? You know, green, calm, interactive, ready to learn, green? So it really shifted where I look for solutions.

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Seth Perler 16:34

Yeah, and it's hard because when there's an urgency around the things we're trying to get our kids to do, because we know they might fail class or there'll be consequences. But yeah, so I had both of them on my summit, Brendan and Jessica. And yeah, and in that video, it's easy, just like a Wall of Awful, but his model, it's just, again, so understandable so that we can change the conversation we're having with our kids. But it's not a quick fix. Like, again, we have urgency. This does not solve your urgent problem. Sorry, this stuff takes a lot of time and energy, but it works. And it's worth so worth it.

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Debbie Steinberg-Kuntz 17:13

So true. So true.

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Seth Perler 17:15

Thank you, Debbie.

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Debbie Steinberg-Kuntz 17:17

Yes, Seth it's always great to chat with you. And by the way everyone, Seth's talk is with Debbie Reber, we had a really nice conversation. Actually, we talked about a lot of this stuff and how important relationship is, and small wins, and how success begets success. And once you have little micro-successes, the snowball takes over and you get that snowball effect of more successes. So I think that is a really good talk to listen to, too.

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Seth Perler 17:45

Thanks. And you guys can click the link below, free registration for Bright and Quirky. It's free to go to, I think it's five days right, through March 12. And yeah.

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Debbie Steinberg-Kuntz 17:58

That's right. It's gonna be a lot of fun.



Seth Perler 18:00

Leave a comment below, give a thumbs up, subscribe, do all the things. If you like what we're doing, support us here. Have a great day, everybody. Take care.



Debbie Steinberg-Kuntz 18:08

Thanks.