



Episode #83:

**A Conversation with Melissa Wardy About
Raising Anxious Kids**

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Debbie: Welcome to the TiLT parenting podcast, a podcast featuring interviews and conversations aimed at inspiring, informing, and supporting parents raising differently wired kids. I'm your host, Debbie Reber, and today I'm sitting down with a fellow parent-in-the-trenches, Melissa Wardy. Melissa is the author of the book *Redefining Girly: How Parents Can Fight The Stereotyping and Sexualizing of Girlhood, from Birth to Tween* and is the founder and CEO of Pigtail Pals & Ballcap Buddies an inspiring apparel and gift company for full of awesome kids. In our conversation today, we're talking about how Melissa has navigated the journey of learning how to support her own full of awesome kids, both of whom have anxiety disorder. This is an honest dialogue about the challenges kids with anxiety face the stigma surrounding it and lack of understanding in schools and in society and much more. And I wanted to share that Melissa has also just published a powerful article about her journey on the website Grok Nation, so definitely check that out too. I'll leave a link for that in the show notes page.

And after you've listened to the episode, don't forget to go over to tiltparenting.com/Aftertheshow each week, I share a one to two minute video where I share my biggest takeaways from my podcast conversations or tips about taking what you've learned and making it work for your family. When you go to my, after the show page, you can sign up to get new episodes of the podcast and after the show series delivered to your inbox each week. And one last thing, I have just revealed the cover for my upcoming book *Differently Wired: Raising an Extraordinary Child in a Conventional World* which comes out next Spring. If you want to check it out or sign up for my special book team to help me spread the word about the book when it comes out, visit tiltparenting.com/differently-wired. All right, I think that's enough announcements for one episode now. I'll get on with the show.

Debbie: Hello Melissa, and welcome to the podcast.

Melissa: Hello. Thank you for having me.

Debbie: Yes, this has been a long time coming and I've known you for many years and and I'm just really excited to bring your voice and experience onto the show today and just as a way to introduce you to our listeners, could you tell us a little bit about who you are? I'm always curious to know people's, you know, their family makeup, who your are, how old they are and what's going on with them.



Melissa: Sure. So I'm married to my husband Jason and we live in El Paso, Texas following a 10 year stint in Wisconsin and we have two children, Amelia, who is 11 and Benjamin who is homeschooled down here, which was an interesting experience being a liberal, secular family homeschooling in Texas. But we we're loving it and so when I'm not busy doing the mom thing, I work as an author and speaker in the girl empowerment and confidence community.

Debbie: And you, you have a book that came out in a couple... When did your book *Redefining Girly* come out?

Melissa: I think was 2014 and it's been a whirlwind ever since.

Debbie: Wow. Yes. I mean just watching you, you know, we've been Facebook friends. We met in person probably 10 years ago and we've been more kind of online friends since that time in your world has seemed like a bit of a whirlwind since your book came out. Do you want to tell us about your transition? Because I know you weren't always home schooling and you also had a very busy business and full time gig going on.

Melissa: Yeah. So in 2009 when my kids were three and one I started a t-shirt company that was originally just for girls and then we branched out to include boys, that it was called Pigtail Pals & Ballcap Buddies and it's been on hold since the move to Texas, but on my to do list of projects to start up again. And that led to a blog and that led to my book *Redefining Girly: How Parents Can Fight the Sexualizing and Stereotyping of Girls, from birth from Birth to Tween*. So that all happened from 2009 to 2014 and in that span of five years, while also trying to parent to children, and all of this kind of coming in and being very public and doing a lot of media, it was just sort of a whirlwind.

So when we moved to Texas, I really pulled back from all of that because this was when we started homeschooling. Dealing with my kid's having a really hard time in school with anxiety and then just kind of really trying to embrace the fact that it was parenting to kids. I wasn't very familiar with how they approach the world and needed to learn a lot about myself in order to parent them well and really had to learn about anxiety and how that works inside a child's head. So decided I could do work well or I could do parenting well, but I couldn't do both well. And so I decided to give up work for a short time in order to focus on the kids.

Debbie: Yeah. Would you mind sharing with us? I mean, I can imagine that was not an easy decision to come to. I went through, well just, I don't know if, if our journey was similar in this way, but when I really realized, Hey, wait a minute, this is taking up a lot of my time and I have a lot of other things working on. I definitely struggled with just personally feelings of resentment, jealousy of my husband who wasn't impacted in the same way. Like, what was that like for you?

Melissa: Yeah, you know, that's such a good, a synopsis of it. It was hard to pull away from work because I am very type A. I'm very go getter, you know, had had a



very public profile. I'm really since hitting the ground running and essentially when I started I was a stay at home mom from this little town called Janesville, Wisconsin and had hit, you know, the international stage just by making connections and working hard and aggregating this passionate community online, working from the corner of my dining room. So I had built all of this just from nothing, just from a few ideas in the palm of my hand. And it was very hard to walk away from. But what you know, like I said earlier, I could do work well or I could do parenting well, but if you mess up your kids, it's, you know.

Debbie: Yeah, you don't get a do-over.

Melissa: Yeah. You don't get that back and you can always return to work and it might never be the same. But I think that that's a good thing. We spend a lot of time hiking down here and so I've learned that sometimes taking a sharp right or U-turn in the trail actually leads you to a better place. So I just kinda had to let go and see where the winds took me.

You know, it was hard to walk away. I was really proud of what I had built. But so many friends had messaged me over the three years that we were dealing with the anxiety, mostly with my older child, Amelia, and they would say in private message, they would say to me, Oh, I wish I'd had a mom like you growing up who understood me and took time for me. And I could see them through the other side are like on the other side of this childhood anxiety. And the message was so clear that they really needed a parent to be present and really dedicated and devoted to them.

And of course I had the luxury. I had the option to step away from work. I didn't have to go to a nine to five job that my family depended on for income to keep the electricity on and food on and stuff like that and my husband was able to support the family. So we've been very, very tight. There have been times where it's been pennies between paychecks, but um, I think in the long run the investment in the kids has been worth it and uh, work will be there when I, when I returned, I can work till I'm eighty five, so, but I only have my kids for a few short years.

Debbie: Yeah. Well, and just being very familiar with your work and your, your energy and passion behind it. Yes. I have no doubt that when you decide it's time to get back in, that your voice will be heard loudly and clearly in and with this new perspective, which I'm sure is going to make what you do even more powerful.

Melissa: Yeah. You know, it really helped me...Thank you for those kind words. But it really helped me understand there can be different types of courage in different forms of leadership, which I kind of already knew, but I'm just with studying more about anxiety. I'm extremely extroverted, like golden retriever, extroverted, and my husband is not, my mom is not, one of my sisters, actually both of my sisters in law aren't really. So through your family dynamics I was trying to learn a lot about different personalities and you know, working on relationships that were important to me. But I, you know, I came to realize that maybe one of the reasons Amelia and I were butting heads a lot was because I

was trying to get her to look at things or approach things or, you know, Come on buddy. It'll be OK if we do this from the perspective of an extrovert.

And I really didn't know enough about the power of an introvert personality to be doing that well. And so I had to take a time out and read a lot about that. And that helped us a lot in, in a shifting gears and realizing that maybe when she's doing something it's not because she's chickening out and maybe she's actually being extremely brave and so it was coming up with different or maybe not different, expanded definitions of what, you know, courage and confidence and bravery can look like because it's not a, she's actually, she's reading the *Tale of Desperado* right now. Right. So it's not the, the needle through the belt turned into a sword and this mouse who thinks it's a night running headlong into danger. It's, it's not, it doesn't always look like that. So that helped a lot. And then, you know, with pulling away from work instead of writing articles or doing interviews for the *New York Times* or CNN or you know, like in the, in the good old days. I started to work very intensely with the girl scout troop that had some girls in it that didn't have a big exposure to the world or to professional women or higher education.

And so kind of really dived into that. So all the things that I had been doing on a big scale for the last, I don't know, whatever it was, seven years, eight years through the business and the book instead dialing that down to the local and the personnel and just really working intensely one on one with girls. I'm putting all of-- putting my mouth where my money had been for so long and really trying to work on all this stuff on a, you know, on a, on a personal level. And you know, mentoring a young girl who's a first generation college student, helping her get into college and even helping a neighbor through domestic abuse, that type of thing. Just, it was interesting that once I pulled away from work, all of the big issues that impact girls and women that I had talked about publicly for so many years kind of fell into my lap very personally through people in my life. And uh, it was interesting to then how that changed my marriage with my husband making us much stronger as the world around us, kind of got real, I guess. You know, we realized the strength and the fortune we had in each other and then what we wanted to model for the kids.

Debbie: Well, that's so interesting. I love hearing about people who take a leap of faith and you know, you certainly have made many of them in the past few years and it's just fascinating to me how they reliably improve your life and change your life for the better in almost the scarier and bigger the leap is the bigger the payoff can be. And I just love hearing you talk about those personal benefits for you and how you've grown in your life has become enriched because of really because of who your kids are and because of the way that you've had to adapt your life for them.

Melissa: Yeah. You know, I mean that's so true that the bigger the leap and the bigger the risk, usually the sweeter the reward. And, and even I think in if it doesn't work out how you thought or if it was a failure, I think that I think that our culture looks at those wrong. Do you what I'm saying? So that I don't think that there's

any wasted time. I think that we can always be learning and growing, you know, not to sound like some sort of cheap motivational speaker!

Debbie: No! I hear you though!

Melissa: We just, I don't know, I always go back to like the mountain climbing metaphor, but just we just do so much climbing and hiking in here and you know, there's times where I'm looking at this rock and I'm just thinking there is no way up this thing like that is 40 feet tall. There's absolutely, like I will fall to my death and my children are behind me and they're gonna Watch me die from a broken neck. This is going to be awful. And then I'm like, oh wait, there's a toe hold and OK, if I put my hand like this and wedge my knee like this, I can get up and I'm like 10 feet higher. And I'm like OK, now I'm 10 feet off the ground and there is no way out of this. But you just keep looking and I, like, I always tell my kids when we're bouldering like the rock has, the answer is just look at the rock for your answers and they'll come out to you and it just, it always comes true.

Like luckily we have not fallen to our death yet. So I think that there's just always a path, but you have to be willing to look at it even if it's not the path that you dreamt of or envisioned or I think this is the big thing is that you have to choose the path that is your truth and not the path that you know, the neighbors or your colleagues think you should take or that you need to take in order to keep up with them, you know, for appearances or for the rat race, that type of thing. That was something that, you know, again, was hard because, you know, I was in a small and competitive market. I was good at what I did in popular at it very quickly. And all of a sudden I had to pull back and be like, ope, nope, sorry, I have to go to this thing.

That's very difficult, like struggling on a sometimes hour to hour, day to day basis and there were, who reached out to me, but it's still, I mean, you know, with Asher, like it's still, you're still doing it largely alone and it feels very isolating even though people are reaching out to you because it's just hard, right? Like you're watching your kids struggle through the world and it's just not easy. So stepping back from that and just realizing that this is what I had to do to be a good parent to the kids and I mean my husband helped as much as he could, but he's gone, you know, during the day for work. And so it largely fell on me and I just had to have this sort of come to Jesus meeting with myself and be like, you know, you can do this right, or you can be selfish and continue to do the things you want to do so you can continue with that life you had had but your kids suffer.

And then once you're out of the equation, who's left to advocate for them and it was something too big for them to struggle with on their own right. And I totally believe in letting kids fail, letting kids struggle, working out their own problems, you know, all that good stuff that builds grit and these resilient kids that is like such a hot topic today. So like I totally believe in all that. But then sometimes it's like you realize that they're kind of running away from an attacking bear, but that bear is in their mind and you can't be like, Hey, handle that on your own. So you've got to. At least for me, that's what I found was, was kind of what



happened was just that I had to be very honest with what was in front of me and that there was just no other way around it. It was like this giant rock in my path and my path couldn't look like what I wanted it to or thought it would. It had, it had to change. So it did.

Debbie: Can you talk a little bit about what things used to be like? I mean, I know you mentioned anxiety, I think that is one of those differences that there is so little understanding about. I mean I think there's a lot of stigmas and misunderstanding about so many ways of being differently wired, but anxiety in particular, there seems to be so little tolerance for it. It's, and it's just not even seen or accepted. And can you talk a little bit about what that was like for you and what it was like for your kids that really got you to a point where you realize something has to change here?

Melissa: Well, so yeah. So in the beginning I didn't know it was anxiety, like I truly did not know kids could get anxiety. Because at the time my daughter was seven when it, when it became really bad that it interfered with day to day life. And like just day to day functioning of even getting her in the classroom was a battle because this is when we were still at public school. So it had started her second year of preschool. So what some communities, may call pre-kindergarten or like four year old kindergarten and she'd been a happy, easy baby, just the easiest kid. And then she hit four and it was like her brain just exploded with some really deep thinking. Just, you know, I, my mom was convinced she's gifted you know, but I just remember like her crying at night at four and five years old about if the Egyptians had comfortable underwear and how did the Bedouins make aqueducts in the desert?

And I just was like, oh my gosh, please go to sleep. I love you so much but stop talking. And she would just lay awake at night with these giant questions on her mind at an age that just seemed, you know, incongruent to what, what I thought she would be thinking about at night. And I think a lot of parents of gifted kids will recognize that. And so it was overwhelming because in the day to day, well you're a runner. So like, I think you'll understand that, but like you're running and you're just like trying to get that next breath and that next foot in front of the other and keep the pace and not break stride because you've got still this distance to go. And that's what I felt like early parenthood was, like, it was just, I never felt overwhelmed but it was like I just couldn't break pace and so all the days would blur together and then it, kinda hit me that like in first grade, because kindergarten she did OK.

But it was just the normal stuff like she wouldn't want to be in front of the whole school while she was singing her Spring Concert, whatever, which is pretty normal kid stuff. I didn't really think anything of it. But and she does have little quirks, like instead of singing happy birthday to her, we had to hum happy birthday to her because she didn't like everybody looking at her and just, you know, I have, I have girlfriends that will still write her messages on facebook for her birthday that, you know, we're there for her first seven, eight birthdays and they're like, I'm humming happy birthday to Amelia today. And it was just one of those funny quirks. And so I just, again, I just thought it was like normal kids

stuff, right? Because like kids are these crazy interesting creatures and you know, they're like, they're weird. So I just didn't think much of it.

And then first grade hit and it was like that pace I had been trying to keep, that stride completely fell apart and I was like sprawled like a yard sale on the road and just there was just no way like kindergarten. So I said kindergarten went well. She had dealt with a couple of bullies. Looking back on it, the school isn't what I had hoped and wanted it to be. There were a lot of problems. But you're, you know, you're a new parent to school and you don't want to be that like hyper vigilant helicopter parent so you're not sure what to complain about and what not to, but in the back of your mind you're like, this isn't right, this isn't healthy for the kids, that type of stuff.

So first grade came around and she had a very hard time with summer school that year. It's like a first grade warm-up summer camp that's like three weeks long for a few hours during the morning. That was, she'd cry and was very difficult, was nervous all the time and I just thought she was being ridiculous. Right? And I didn't know better. And then the first half of first grade went well and then the second half, I don't know what happened, but all of a sudden something and her just switched and turned off. And it was like this bright glimmer that had been in her eyes was gone and her eyes took this flat dead look to them. And that sounds like so melodramatic, but it's really true. Even when I looked back through pictures, the shape of her eyes are different. It was just so much stress in this tiny body, you know, looking back, I just sometimes I just want to cry. I just think about what she had to be going through and pushing through each day to try to make some benchmark of normalcy while she was in school.

And then she would come home and it would all fall apart and she was hellacious to her little brother, bless his heart, but he put with so much. And then so the second half of first grade it could take up to 90 minutes in the morning to get her into the classroom. And the average was about 30 to 45 of her having panic attacks in the hallway. She, I, that I had to start eating lunch with her the last six weeks of school. I had to eat lunch with her every single day. And if I was even two minutes late walking into the lunch room, I would find her sobbing at the lunch table. In the beginning of her friends were kind and tried to help her, but then, you know, as it happens in social groups like the herd mentality where everyone has to go along to get along and then that one person is different and so the herd separates from them because then they are a liability.

I watched that happen and that was hard. And then just to, you know, the, the look of scorn from teachers as you know, my Ben, the preschooler is standing there waiting to be walked down the street to his Montessori school and my first grader is having a complete panic attack in the hallway and be like, what's wrong with you? Why can't you get your kid in the classroom and, you know, put your spoiled child in the classroom and walk away. And it was just very, and you know, you're talking earlier about like how people don't understand anxiety and there's a lot of judgment and stigma. And like so much of it was they were



looking at her like the indulged child and that I couldn't say no to my child and it was so hard. But I mean luckily my personality was very much mind your own business back off.

Debbie: That, which I find so admirable because I feel like for me personally, I really cared a lot about what other people thought and that stuff would really, really deeply impacted me. I hated getting looks from people and I went and everyone to know, don't you understand what's going on here, you know, so you didn't experience that you were...

Melissa: I mean I did, but like, you know, like what I tell my high school kids when I'm doing speeches and stuff is that - what other people think of you is none of your business. So it, it, I mean it did, it bugged me that people weren't more kind, but it didn't bug me personally. Does that make sense? Then so for her first grade teacher the year before, she had been nominated for teacher of the year at the school and she must've been teaching for 15 years or something. So I was looking at her thinking you're the educational expert. Like I'm just, I'm just a mom, right? I don't have a degree in education or anything like that. So like, why aren't you helping me? I just remember thinking that like, why, like, why don't you know more and why aren't you helping me? Like this cannot be the first child you've ever encountered with anxiety.

It can't be. I mean, the numbers wouldn't be that, you know, the one in eight kids has anxiety now and it's higher in gifted students. So like there's just no way. And they looked at her like she was some rabid animal that they had never encountered before and should... the area that we're from it was very much like tough love, you know, buck up, you've nothing to cry about. And even, I remember one time Amelia was kind of cycling down from a panic attack and her teacher looked at her very sternly and kind of glared at her almost, it was just like I told you no crying this morning. And that's where I kind of like, I sucked in my breath and I took a step back cause I had some very strong words going through my head but probably should not be said in front of a line of first graders ready to go into the classroom.

And I just looked at her and I instead, I just, I just looked at her and it was just like I expected more from you. The worst part is that Amelia knew better because she's so stinking smart. Like she would come home from school and she would be like, you know, why, why does the principal and why do these adults not help me? Like she knew it should be better. So we found that the only way, and I still at this time I didn't know that it was anxiety. So we go through like first grade summer and it was to the point where she didn't want to go on family outings. Like we had this thing in Madison called crazy legs. It's like a 5k because it's in Wisconsin, of course at the end, the finish line, there's beer and so we, you know, we're going to be like a fun time.

We were going run and as a family it ends at Camp Randall Stadium at the University of Wisconsin. It's this great thing and she had an hour and 45 minute panic attack the morning of and we to take two separate cars. My husband was upset because it was a work event for him, so he's thinking like you're making

me look bad in front of my colleagues. And I just kept saying to him, I'm like, she's the only person that matters whether or not you look good or bad. You're her father, your colleagues can get over themselves. And so it took him a little bit longer to kind of adjust to that. And I don't know, let me, you know, me, I don't all that much believe in the difference that our culture puts up with a gender binary. But I wondered if it was maybe a different approach to it. Like masculine and feminine. You know, culturally, not so much a neurologically, but culturally, if there was, if that kind of changed our approach to this because he was very much, originally he was in the camp of she needs to toughen up, you know, that type of thing. And then he then realized that that's not what it was about.

So first grade summer came and went and it was another difficult summer, like she wouldn't want to go to friend's birthday parties didn't really want to try new things. She had a nice Girl Scout troop and that kind of kept her going and kept her engaged. She refused to play sports and the only sport or physical activity that she enjoyed was swimming because she was underwater so she could shut the world out. But, you know, the consequence of that is that now she has an amazing lung capacity and is a really, really great swimmer. She was really good at holding her breath and she loves kayaking and I think mentioned must be somewhere, some type of water spirit. Because the water is very soothing to her, but you know, and when she was in seven and a half was, she started kayaking and the second day of kayaking and she had the kayak like out in the middle of the lake and what we had to hop on another Kayak and go fetch her because she was just gone and totally happy and content. So it'd be something you would think that maybe a kid would be scared of, but she had no, no qualms about it. So again, that's where it was. It was, I remember that day too, helped me change my definition of, of bravery and courage because she just, she did it in a different way.

Debbie: So let me, before you continue with your story, you said you didn't realize that it was anxiety. What did you think it was that she was a highly sensitive person or were you trying to get answers at that point?

Melissa: Yeah, I was. So I was thinking like, um, I mean I didn't know much about it, but maybe it was like a sensory thing. Of course, like one of my first thing was like, she being bullied at school because it seemed to be that seem to be the reaction, just scared to go to school, crying at night the night before. Saturdays we're usually good days, but then Sundays we're bad because she knew that that school came the next day. You know, even my mind wandered about, you know could it be sexual abuse, but I was like, that's impossible because she's with me like all the time. They would just wouldn't have been access to it in the houses that she played at we knew the parents very, very, very well. It just, the percentage of that would have been zero, but I mean it did cross my mind, but it was like I was reaching out for anything and then I would facebook about some of these experiences at school and a couple of friends that kind of happened like all within, like the two weeks at the end of first grade they reached out to me and they're like, you know, it kind of sounds like your daughter might have anxiety.



I remember feeling this way as a kid, whatever, and then a colleague of ours, I'm Carrie Goldman reached out and said that her daughters were going through the same thing. So then I started researching a little bit more about gifted girls and anxiety because my mom was kind of pushing me in that direction. She'd been a gifted and talented coordinator for 17 years and knew way more about this than I did. And so that's kind of when I really started to let go and let other people guide me realizing that this was a field I knew very little about and really tried to learn so much from the experiences that they were very gracious to with me. And that's, I think that's really what saved our relationship and possibly even saved Amelia was their ability and willingness. I feel emotional saying this, but just to be open and giving with their stories so that another little girl didn't have to go through the years of judgment and misunderstanding and labeling and just all that crap that the special kids have to go through. Phew deep breath.

I mean, I know you've experienced it in so many other parents have and it's just, it's a hard to allow

Debbie: It's a lonely, lonely journey.

Melissa: The thing is like, once I had that word, my personality was like, OK, anxiety, like, all right, mother pumper, like let's take this on, like it's go time. Like I've got my game face on and you and I are going to war like you are done with my little girl. Like I'm getting her back. And so there were many mornings in many nights spent crying, but, you know, in the long run, um, it's not over like, oh, everything's great now. And like we wake up to rainbows because that's not true. You know, there's more, there's more sunny days now than there were like three years ago, two years ago. And it's been a lot of hard work, but, you know, we got there and it was a lot of giving myself permission to push out people who didn't understand or who weren't willing to understand or who had their mind made up about my daughter and didn't want to see her for who she was.

And just pushing that away so that in the end, that's what eventually led us to homeschooling, realizing that the school system as it was, as a system, as an institution, not talking about individual teachers, but as an institution was never going to work for her. And by first grade Ben was bored out of his mind and had taken to hiding in very small, tight spaces around school because he didn't want to be in his classroom anymore. And so, we just, we let him drop out of first grade and so I have a first grade dropout who's now a third grader doing fifth grade work and Amelia decided to finish her third grade year, but came home after that. So she's now in fifth grade doing very strong and all her courses and working know grade levels ahead in some grades. And just the beauty that homeschool can be, allowed them, to enjoy childhood again. So that was an important.

Debbie: So yeah, that's so wonderful. And again, watching this metamorphosis on facebook and you are someone you know, we've talked about on the show about facebook and the way that it can make people's lives look perfect and I, you are someone like me, you share the good and the bad, the ups and the downs and

that's something I really appreciate about you and it has been so inspiring for me to watch this evolution for your family and to see your kids and to see Amelia transform. So tell us a little bit about where she is now and I'm curious to know also what your relationship with her is like in terms of how that has changed. You said that you shifted how you perceived her, not through the eyes of an extrovert, but you really had to kind of get to know her language. So where is she now and where are you two together?

Melissa: So for her individually, you know, she's doing really well. So she the after second grade we did start medication, after trying everything else, you know, we started with a holistic approach and then we started to see a therapist and had just done everything and it wasn't working to the point that our family wasn't functional anymore. The marriage was very strained. We watched Ben suffer and she was just, it was awful. So I interviewed six psychologists. They all agreed we had done everything as far as we could go on to give medication and try and we did and I don't want it to sound like it's a miracle and I don't know if it's the answer for every child, but I will say that within less than a week we saw our daughter go from this unhappy, quivering, sad, angry, crying ball of unexplainable misery to a normal happy kid.

Normal, I guess should be in quotes, but it was like she could function again all of a sudden, like she had an oxygen tank. It was, it was just, I don't know, it was really. So I had to, I had to learn a lot about how the medication worked and that helped and so we've continued with the therapy. So today she still sees her psychiatrist really, so sort of a check in, check out for the prescription. But we do a lot of hard work with her therapist. We had one in Wisconsin, we have another one here and we've been very lucky to find a two women that just really work well with her and push her where she needs to be pushed and then show her understanding and compassion and patience in the areas where she's not ready yet. So she's worked really hard.

She's extremely active in Girl Scouts and she's going to Girl Scout summer camp, like sleep-away camp for a week this summer, which yeah, like, and if you had told me that when she was in second grade, I've been like, that would be my dream come true. Like that would be like, I would have never thought that possible. And like she, she cannot wait to go. Like, she's so excited and we took our, our neighbor girl on a college tour the other day and Amelia was like all ready to move into the dorms with her. But even like at one point she was like, skipping along with the tour guide and like talking to him, we're like, oh my gosh. And she would have never done that before. So just kind of seeing herself be comfortable with herself again instead of being worried and sad all the time or when she on the days or the moments that she is worried and sad, we now have the tools to say things or if she has a, a scary thought or something like that, she'll tell me what it is and she'll be like, but that's irrational.

Melissa: And so, you know, just with the help of the therapist, we now have the words and the tools to communicate better to each other. So instead of me saying like, Oh Amelia, knock it off, you know, that's, you know, whatever. And then just getting short with her and not having the patience for it and thinking that's

ridiculous. And, you know, I don't have the time for this because I'm a very busy, important adult in you're a kid and this is, you know, ridiculous. Now I can say to her in a more compassionate and respectful way, you know, I understand that might be a worry for you, but do you really think that saber tooth tigers could come back to life? And do you really think that like El Paso would be the first place they go? And just we've always talked about, uh, well our first therapist office about worry monsters and stuffing the worry a monster down and she and I always talked about I'm putting the right size worry in the right size jar.

So Saber Tooth Tigers could probably go on a pretty small size jar, but maybe something bigger like not wearing your seat belt when you're driving or making sure you're not riding him as somebody who's texting and driving, like the odds of getting hurt by that are, you know, hundreds of hundreds of thousands of percent larger than the saber tooth tiger fear So, you know, like in this kind of doing a risk analysis on, on life and things like that, so that, you know, I, you know, I do see her be more cautious than other kids if we're hiking and stuff like that, but at the same time, you know, she's the first one walking out into the dark at camp to lead the girls to the bathroom, you know, being able to hear like coyotes or Havalina in the background or something like that. So if she has courage in ways that it's interesting for me to see.

So I think she's in a good spot now. She's very expressive with her drawing. She's drawing all the time. She loves writing a, she has a nice group of friends. She's interested in starting piano, which is, that's interesting to me because that's something that you have to perform in front of, at least the piano teacher. So yeah, I think it's been, I mean there's still a lot of growth to do. It'll be interesting to see how puberty and adolescence impact this. And, you know, I don't, I don't know how many years will continue homeschooling, I guess it's on the books for next year. So we'll see. I'd love for her to get to the point where she's doing theater or singing in a choir or something like that, but you know, that has to be her path not giving up the dream of having children who were soccer players.

Debbie: And I did that too a lotta years ago.

Melissa: She can create an entire world from her imagination with very little resources at hand. And so I don't, you know, she may not be a star soccer player, but she has strengths in one direction than another kid may have an in an opposite direction. And so I think that is just so important for parents, whether they've got differently wired kids or normally wired kids or whatever it is, but to just see them for the person that they are and respect that and enjoy it and just have fun with it.

Debbie: Absolutely. I totally, I totally agree that as soon as we kind of lean into who our kids are and stop fighting that, everything changes. I mean, when our kids, as you say, feel seen, like really and truly seen and that you know, they have a parent who has their back and who really appreciates who they are. It changes everything, especially for kids who are more anxious. I mean, Asher, he, he doesn't have an anxiety disorder, but when he was in school, he was suffering

from extreme anxiety. I didn't know it at the time. It was a therapist who pointed it out to me and I didn't realize that he was kind of experiencing every day in that fight or flight mode. And it's been, you know, once he was out of that environment that his anxiety's pretty, you know, he still has his moments or certain things that he gets stressed about, but when they're out of that fight or flight mode, then they can really become who they are. And it's such a cool thing to see.

Melissa: Yeah. And that's, that's so important that you create a space for them that they get out of that flight or fight mode because it's not doable for every family to have one parent's stay home from work or homeschool. I get that, like I'm not saying that's the answer, that's just where our path took us and I did it very begrudgingly for the first two years, but the idea of creating a space for your child where they do feel safe and they can open up and that is what I really think saved a million. I was, I think me being brave enough to be able to go onto facebook and say, hey, I'm this girl empowerment expert and I have a kid who's falling apart. And then I, then I question like, what do I know? I'm not an expert in anything. Like I feel like this has all been a charade this whole time.

But then you know, it was the idea that it was easy for every other kid in her class to walk on stage and follow the herd. She was the only kid that made a break hard right. And in front of the entire packed auditorium ran into my lap and buried her face in my lap while everybody watched her do it. So in that, who was being more truthful and who was being the bravest kid in the room, I just remember thinking it's easy to stand up there and be a part of the group. It was hard for her to go out on her own and say I can't, I can't do this. Right? Because just like, you know, in the African nature shows like that wildebeest that banks right is always the one that the lions catch. So when you're going off on your own, you're making yourself susceptible to the judge.

Yeah. And the hurtful words and stuff and so we've just really focused on, you know, what other people think of you is none of your business, which is just the nice way of telling people to f off and it's just not it doesn't matter what they think because they're not you and they don't know your story and what you're struggling with. And if there are people who care about you, they will take to take the time to learn and then they'll take the time to figure out what's helpful and not helpful. So we've had great Girl Scout leaders that have done that and just being really open and honest with her friends saying, you know, right now Amelia's having anxiety and we just need a few minutes to feel comfortable and then we'll come play. And once you've explained it to kids for the most part, at the giant majority of kids have been very wonderful about it and just the same way, if you had a kid who said, I don't know, like cystic fibrosis and you would say, well we can't sleep over because at night we have to do breathing treatments but we'll play, you know, and we'll have a late night and then we'll come home.

Or are we even have like we have Mormon friends that don't allow their kids to sleep over. So we did the same thing. Well, how can we include you as far as you can go where you're comfortable and then we respect our differences. Right?

And so their kids come over and we have late nights where we partied till like 11, but then, you know, then they go home and then and that's fine. So the kids were ready to be accepting of it once they were able to understand or that they had a word for it. And then it was really cute when we would go somewhere, I guess for Girl Scouts would happen kind of more just because that's, you're always putting the girls in new situations and we'd be somewhere and sometimes Amelia would be quiet and if the tour guide or whatever, talking like, let's say something like, oh, what's wrong honey, just does the cat have your tongue, which is like a totally terrible thing to say to a kid with anxiety, but they don't know.

Right. And so instead of being like, how dare you, it was, you know sometimes I would say things for her or sometimes she would even say no, I have anxiety. I just feel shy right now. And I think the person recognizes how, how much guts that takes for a kid to say. But a lot of times her little Girl Scout sisters was able, you know, they know this is Amelia. She has anxiety. She needs 45 minutes to warm up. Adorable. It was so cute, but because they knew that inside that person was this great friend that they loved, they just had to work past this thing. Right. And it's no different than like a kid was food allergies, like, you know, this is Allison, but we can't eat peanut butter around her once the kids understand how to be respectful. It wasn't that hard.

And I think certainly in the homeschool community, because there are so many 2e kids here, it's been super easy to find people who are accommodating and understanding and the kids who get it and even kids who share strategies. So that's been nice. You know, I lay awake at night thinking about if and when we go back to school, will it be the same especially because El Paso is short on schools. So there's just this school populations are like 1,300 kids and I just have a really hard time believing that there's cultures of dignity that exists inside a campus of 1300 middle schoolers. But you know, so right now we keep the community kind of smaller. We keep her world big but her community small, if that makes sense.

Debbie: Yeah, that's what we do too.

Melissa: Yeah, of course. So it's been a hard journey and it's not anything I would wish on anybody and I try to help as many parents as I can who email about it and I feel like he had been told by a lot of people that this should be your next book, like this is what you should write a book on, but I don't feel like we're far enough in the journey yet. You know, I feel like somebody riding a trail guide for 12 mile hike, but you only did five miles of it.

I feel like maybe in the future that we'll do that. And I'd actually, like, I would prefer for Amelia to write the book and I. But I know that there are a lot of kids going through this and a lot of parents struggling to understand. In a culture that doesn't understand, especially in a culture that's trying to figure out so many things, but especially perseverance and tenacity and grit and all these things as we have, you know, 30 percent of adults still live with their parents and anxiety looks like a lot of other things. It never looks like anxiety. Um, which

makes it hard. Like I remember saying to my husband one time that it almost be easier if she'd been born without a leg because then you could get her a prosthetic or you could be in a wheelchair and people would look at you and be like, oh, you don't have a leg. And like, it's easy, right? Like, not that it's easy. I don't mean to be disrespectful, but...

Debbie: It's the thing with invisible differences. It's really, you're in a tough spot because people don't get it. And it's not really our job to have to explain to everyone who gives us a look what's going on, but there is so much just misunderstanding.

Melissa: There is, and it's, it's hard that the world is not a kinder place and maybe it never has been. But it is hard to watch your kids struggle, right? Because you're like, put it on me. Like I can take it, just don't make my kids struggle. But I also think that at the end of this she will be a better person for it. I know, like I said in the beginning that there's, there's no wasted time when you're living in your truth. And so I think that this is just the person she's supposed to be.

And just like any other family who is struggling with the childhood illness or a childhood difference. It's not what we thought when we were reading *What to Expect When You're Expecting* and you didn't know all this was coming down the pipe at you. But here it is. And so you just have to deal with it and it's unfair and it can be expensive. Like, thank God we had insurance because that's something that's a whole other podcast about the lack of access to pediatric mental health care and for people who don't have insurance, who can't even afford the copays when you do have insurance. And we definitely went into a little bit of medical debt helping her get the therapy she needed and we were able to do that. Like we were able to afford the debt and do that. So for families who can't, it's just, yeah, as a society we really need to look at how we're taking care of our kids on the whole.

And then looking at, you know, the beauty of it was that there were a lot of people that were willing to help and wanting to help, but we had to be open and honest about it first. I think if we had kept this quiet and let that stigma and those walls of stereotypes stay around us about mental health or you know, not having the perfect confident daughter when that's what I did for a living and it just would have been, am I allowed to say bull----. It would have just been just such bull---- having the perfect life on facebook while we're horribly struggling behind the scenes. And so I just decided to be honest with it and was rewarded greatly so, and I, and I thought about too, like was I violated her privacy, but I said to her, I think she was in second grade and I said to her, I'm like, buddy, I need help with us. Like I don't know what's wrong. I have to reach out to my other mom friends and help with this. And she understood it. We talked about being responsible digital citizens and that type of stuff.

So, but I think had I not done that, had I been intent on keeping false pretenses up, that would have really destroyed our family. And so I that one that, that tool exists because people were so gracious with me. It's my responsibility to pay it forward and help out other parents when and where I can. So I've tried to do that and



- Debbie: It makes such a difference. I mean, obviously that's a big reason why I created TiLT. I, you know, I'm so grateful for you sharing this story because we all do feel so alone and we're everywhere. I mean, that's what I, I just still find it so confusing why we're all walking through this journey feeling isolated or that we have to keep this a secret. And I, I believe like with everything that I am, that the only thing that's going to change this for us, but more importantly for our kids is openness. Our kids benefit greatly when we don't talk about things like it's a bad thing or you know, behind closed doors and they can just be who they are and that it just hearing how the community of girls in the Girl Scouts have really embraced Amelia and because she's open with what's going on and they see her now for who she is. And so I think it's keeping it hidden that we get into big trouble.
- Melissa: Yeah, yeah, definitely. The secrets and keeping things hidden is just never, never a good idea.
- Debbie: Well listen, it's been so just fun to catch up with you and hear your story and I want to thank you for sharing so openly your journey. I know this is something a lot of members of the community are dealing with in their world. Grateful for you to share your experience and I hope that it provides some insight and inspiration for other parents who are going through this. So thank you so much for sharing.
- Melissa: Well thank you for having me. And for the parents who are going through this, there is a way out. There is a path that's right for you and your child and it's hard to find but it's there and there's people willing to talk about it and help you so just keep loving them fiercely and just recognize that they're exactly who they're supposed to be. Oh I'm crying again, Debbie Reber. Darn it!
- Debbie: I've turned into Barbara Walters I think...
- Melissa: Haha but yeah, just just keep loving them like crazy and just a thank you to you for creating this great system of awareness and sharing and information. I have like a dozen of these saved for our drive home to Wisconsin this summer so I can tune out whatever movies the kids are listening to you and listen to these as I drive for 24 hours.
- Debbie: That's great. Well, thank you for saying that and yes, your words are so true. These kids are so worth it and I just appreciate you.
- Melissa: Thanks lady. I appreciate you.
- Debbie: You've been listening to the TILT parenting podcast for the show notes for this episode, including links to Melissa Wardy's book, *Redefining Girly*, her article *An Uninvited Monster* on Grok Nation, her website, and more visit tiltparenting.com/session83, and don't forget to check out my after the show, a short video where I share my top takeaways from my conversation with Melissa.



You'll find a link on the show notes page or you can go straight to tiltparenting.com/after the show and a quick invitation to try our free Differently Wired Seven Day Challenge. If you haven't gone through it yet. When you sign up our email, you a short inspirational video every dayfor a week with a tip you can incorporate into your life right away to shift your experience, you'll also be invited to join a private facebook group for people who've gone through or are doing the challenge. More than 800 people have gone through it so far. It's free, it's ongoing, and it's designed to help you find more peace and competence in your parenting journey today. To join, visit tiltparenting.com/sevenday. If you like what you heard on today's episode, consider subscribing or leaving a review in itunes. Both things help our podcast get noticed in the crowded podcast space. Thanks again for listening. For more information on TiLT parenting, visit [www dot tilt parenting](http://www.tiltparenting.com).



RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- [Melissa's blog Pigtail Pals Ballcap Buddies](#)
- [*Redefining Girly: How Parents Can Fight the Stereotyping and Sexualizing of Girlhood, from Birth to Tween*](#) by Melissa Wardy
- [An Uninvited Monster: Parenting a Child with Anxiety](#) by Melissa Wardy (Grok Nation)