



Episode #88:

**Jessica Lahey Talks About the Gifts of Failure
for Our Kids**

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Jessica: The big thing that *Gift of Failure* is about is about trying to get our kids back into a state where they're intrinsically motivated to want to do stuff, not because we're dangling carrots in front of them are making sticker charts, are threatening them or promising to pay them for grades, and one of the ways we can do that is by engaging them in the process because that's giving them autonomy over the details of their lives.

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 am so excited to bring you my conversation with Jessica Lahey. Jessica as an educator, writer and speaker, and she's the author of one of my most favorite parenting books, *The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed*. She's also in English and writing teacher correspondent for *The Atlantic* commentator for Vermont Public Radio and writes the parent teacher conference column for *The New York Times*. In our conversation, we talk about how we can best prepare our kids for an independent, successful adulthood in the way we practice autonomy, supportive parenting versus over-parenting, what it means to let our kids fail, to help them thrive, how we can help our kids learn how to sit with frustration and much more - so many great nuggets from this interview. I hope you enjoy it.

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And a few quick announcements before I get to our conversation. Next week, there will be no new episode of the podcast. I'm visiting friends and family in the U.S. for the next two weeks and I'm taking a week off for the holiday. If you're really missing the podcast, this is a great chance to go back and catch up on some of the previous episodes you may have not listened to yet. Two in particular may be especially helpful this time of year session 40 - What to do when close or extended family just doesn't get it with Margaret Webb. and session 34 - Navigating tricky dynamics with our parents and in-laws with Kanisha Baynard. Both of these episodes provide a lot of great strategies for dealing with the kinds of situations that are apt to come up over the holidays. I will include links to both of them on the show notes page and I'll send them out in next week's newsletter, and on that note, if you aren't already signed up for my Tilt Parenting newsletter, I'd love for you to join me. Every Thursday I send a short email, including a quick note for me, a link to that week's podcast and bonus after the show video and links to five must read articles from the news that week that are relevant to parents of differently wired kids. Just visit tiltparenting.com and sign up where it says join the Tilt Revolution. Thank you so much, and however you're spending the next few weeks and whatever, if any, holiday you're celebrating, I hope you have a wonderful time with friends and family and now here's my conversation with Jessica.

Debbie: Hey Jessica, welcome to the podcast!

Jessica: Thank you so much for having me.

Debbie: This is a conversation I've been wanting to have with you for so long, so I'm just thrilled to bring you on, but in case our listeners aren't as familiar with your story as I am, would you mind just before we get into the meat of your book, *The Gift of Failure*, could you tell us a little bit about who you are and your background and how you got into the work that you're doing?

Jessica: Yeah, sure thing. So I've been a teacher for almost 20 years. I actually went to law school to do juvenile law. I was, I had a job all lined up. I was positive that's what I was going to do. And then I was asked to teach a class and that was sort of it. I came home that first day understanding that teaching was what I was going to be doing. So I finished law school and went straight into teaching afterwards and about six years ago or so I've always been a writer, but about six years ago I started writing about education specifically and sort of the art and craft of teaching and that has just sort of over very slowly lead to, you know, writing for *The Atlantic* and a writing a column for three years in the *New York Times* called the Parent Teacher Conference. And the book, *The Gift of Failure*.

So it's been just an awesome ride. And it was funny when I first started reading about education. I thought it was really just for me to sort of record what I was doing in my classroom because I was fairly sure no one wanted to read about teaching. And I've been really, really happy to be wrong. And it's been such an honor to sort of be at the confluence of education and parenting and help both sides talk to each other. I was feeling like it was becoming increasingly adversarial. And so having a part in helping teachers talk to parents and parents talk to teachers and, and get the communication lines back open has been such an honor.

Debbie: It's such a valuable point of view too. I mean, I think as parents we often feel like it's a mysterious relationship and especially parents raising differently wired kids, we feel we don't want to have an adversarial relationship where we feel like we don't know how to navigate that relationship. So I really appreciate you kind of bridging that gap for so many of us.

Jessica: Well, I think it's just become, it's become something different than what it used to be. It used to be about learning and there used to be also teaching used to be a much more, respected tradition. You know, in some countries it's still is a very respected profession. You know, in some romance languages, like Italian for example, you refer to teachers usually as sort of a more honorific sort of voice. And in the United States it's become a bit of a power struggle. And that's been really hard to watch. It's also been very hard to live. And I think that leaves parents confused about the relationship and I think it leaves teachers confused about the relationship and that's been hard on both sides.

Debbie: Absolutely. Well, let's talk about your book, the *Gift of Failure*. I think I probably reference it at least every three to four episodes of my podcast. So if listeners, if you've been a longtime listener, you are primed for this conversation, but Jessica, could you tell us a little bit about the premise behind the book and

maybe even, you know, I love the story of how it came about as well. And then we'll talk more about the key takeaways.

Jessica: Yeah. So like I said, it was teachers and parents sort of confused about where the lines are between home and school and who should be doing what and how much rescuing should be happening and how much the parents should be, you know, interfering in the process of the grading and you know, all that kind of stuff. And I joke about the fact that, you know, my view from my high horse as a teacher was really quite lovely. You know, I had in my mind, you know, I was doing the noble thing as the teacher and this was about learning and blah, blah, blah. And increasingly I was feeling, for lack of a better way to say I was feeling really protective of my students. And I was also noticing that my students were becoming less and less interested in learning. And that was really troubling to me.

And at the same time I have the sneaking suspicion and I didn't have any evidence for it at the time that some of the things that parents were doing to protect their kids, to make life as wonderful for their kids as possible to, you know, it's hard to see our kids frustrated. And so we want to save them from that. And some of those things, I have this sneaking suspicion we're undermining, not just motivation to learn, but the actual ability to learn. And, you know, I wrote an article for the Atlantic in 2013 called *Why Parents Need to Let their Children Fail*, which was sort of the edge of this very big wedge that, I ended up researching for years and found out it actually is true that not only does the way we parent our kids, that sort of overly directive way of parenting kids and making sure they have everything they need and that they know exactly what the next step is going to be so they don't get frustrated or upset that that not only undermines motivation to learn, it does undermine the ability to learn.

And like I said, from my high horse that, you know, I got pissed off at the parents of my students. And, yeah, I had to realize that I was doing the exact same thing to my own kids. And I found out about that when I realized that my son Finnegan, who now is 14 but was 9 at the time, couldn't tie his own shoes. And that was because I had been doing it for him simply because, you know, at first I guess because they didn't want him to be frustrated and later on just because it was easier, so you know, as mad as I wanted to be at the parents of my students, I just couldn't because I was doing the exact same thing I was the parents of my students. And so now I've got to figure this out, not only for my students and help them get re-engaged in their learning, but also because I've got to turn this thing around for my own kids and nothing will, nothing will put a fire under you, like realizing that you're screwing up your own kids.

Debbie: Absolutely. So then you wrote the book *The Gift of Failure* and what is the reception been for that book and the community at large?

Jessica: It's been great. I mean, you know, I think so there was a lot of hype going into the publication of the book. I had written this article, like I said, in the Atlantic and that went viral and so there was a lot of interest around that being a book

and so, you know, so there was a high expectations and that was a lot of stress and when it came out I also prepared myself, you know, I had been a journalist for a while and I learned not to read the comments and I learned, you know, that not everyone's going to agree with you and that was fine. So I was really prepared for big backlash when *Gift of Failure* came out and believe me, there are plenty of angles to come at it from and some of them people have, you know, they see it as, you know, lackadaisical parenting or hands off parenting. And that's not at all what it is. It's sort of a misinterpretation. But I've been stunned by the positive reception. I mean, it's been incredibly gratifying. It's been odd and frightening and wonderful, but I get emails almost every day from parents or teachers or kids about, you know, the way the book's affected their life. And that's just insane to me. Like this thing that I wrote here at the table I'm sitting at right now, actually, you know, is out there in the world and people are using it and quoting it, it's really just bizarre to me. It's really the life of a writer. So weird because you're so secluded and then all of a sudden your words are like being quoted back to you. And that's just very, very odd.

Debbie: Yes it is. It is. But it's a, you know, I have to say the first time the book really came on my radar, I heard an interview you did for the *Good Life Project* with Jonathan Fields. And I was like, yes, yes, I just, you know, the message so resonated with me and it was so in alignment with the way that I want to raise my son Asher, he's 13. And so here's where I got kind of stuck and I would love to talk with you about this. I remember in the book you talk about, I believe it was your son had a paper or project that was due and it was left at home. And you were going to the school later in the day and you kind of had this internal tug of war about whether or not you should bring it in and maybe you could share that story and then, you know, I'll let you know what was hard for me to hear about that and how parents like me would work through a situation like that.

Jessica: Right. So Finnegan had had, and this is all stuff I'm allowed to talk about. Because realize there is a ton I'm not allowed to talk about my children. They have made that very clear. So Finnegan, really had major organizational issues, real executive function issues. You know, we had had a ton of meetings with the school. We, you know, I can't go into all of it but believe me, it had been evaluated and evaluated and we had tried solution after solution. And so at a certain point, you know, he's at the point now where he's starting to get teased by other kids for being the kid who forgets stuff and the teachers are mad and everybody's on us and why aren't we fixing this? And he's nine. And you know, I'm learning a lot about the brain during all of this and I understand that executive function is nowhere near fully cooked at nine.

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So I'm trying to be as patient as possible while being as supportive as possible. And in the meantime he's left his homework at home, his math homework and I, I know I can't take it to him mainly because, well there are a lot of reasons. Number one, I am trying not to undermine his progress. I'm trying his teachers know I'm trying not to undermine this progress of, you know, becoming more responsible and they're really helping by working with him at school and holding him to consequences, which is what I've asked them to do. And so I

don't take the homework that day cause I, I just can't wait at home. And it turns out that I'm so glad I didn't take the homework because so many positive things happened that day in particular because I didn't. Finnegan came home, reported that he had to stay in from recess because he had to re-do the homework, which is a whole thing that drives me crazy in and of itself, keeping kids in from recess for disciplinary stuff, but he had to stay in from recess.

He had to do the homework again. He also, his teacher said, you know, frankly, we're not done here. You can go back out because you got to come up with a strategy for figuring this out. And so a lot of really great things happen. He came up with a strategy that day that has been the strategy that has worked for him for the past five years. He had to talk to an adult about stuff and self advocate. I mean, that was a huge thing too. He didn't like talking to people about what he needed, that he was scared to do that, you know, there were a lot of really good consequences that came from that, from not taking the homework that day. And if I'd taken the homework because it felt so urgent that one day, because I could save him from the teasing and I could save him from the wrath of his teacher and I could save him from another zero on homework. It would've felt really good that day. But man, it feels really, really good. Now I'm five years out now that I'm, you know, I know that that day paid off in so many different ways with the system. He continues to use

Debbie: Well that's something that I really love that, you know, the stakes are not so high when they're younger and the stakes get higher and higher. And so it is, this is the time, you know, and I say things like this to Asher all the time, this is the perfect time to be figuring that out. Like I told him this morning, there was no heart in the cooler, like no one's waiting for an operation at the moment. So you're all good, you know, but here's my question. Or just love to know your take on this. I know for so many of us especially are a lot of differently wired kids have or are just on a delayed schedule and they need a lot more scaffolding. So do you have thoughts about how parents raising kids who are struggling more with executive functioning and organization and things like that, how to support them while still giving them opportunities to fail?

Jessica: Yeah, so I think the immediate thing I want to do when my kids are screwing up or when my kids are not understanding a concept, you know, if especially with writing, like I could just fix it for them and you know, I could help them in that way, but I think I have to rely a lot as a parent on what I do as a teacher. And I think about OK, if this were my student, not my kid and I, there was this, you know, wasn't this emotional issue about my wanting to just fix it for them. How would I handle this? And the way I would handle that is by asking questions like, well, you know, read the instructions to me and tell me what you think the teachers trying to get you to do, or you know, before you leave the house in the morning, ask a question like, now could you pause for just a second and go through your mental list of things you need to take with you today.

Are you forgetting anything? You know, you're, you're the training wheels for their executive function. And that's why frankly the heart of this book is middle school because you know, so much of the good stuff happens there with

executive function, all that really amazing development. Even kids on a delayed schedule. And believe me, I've taught tons of them, you know, amazing things happen in middle school with executive function in terms of growth of the frontal lobe and making new connections and stuff like that. So as a teacher, I know my main job is not to solve problems for my students, but to help them figure out how to solve the problems themselves and to give them prompts to be what's called an autonomy supportive teacher or parent. I'm supporting their ability to figure it out for themselves and not solving the problem for them. And when it comes to training wheels, you know, some kids are on training wheels longer than others.

Jessica: And, and believe me, especially having a kid that had executive function problems, I was constantly going back to certain books I loved like *Late, Lost and Unprepared* and *That Crumpled Paper Was Due Last Week* by Ana Homayoun. And those are books that I totally worn because I was using them over and over and over again. And I just needed support. And I think using the teacher side of my brain and realizing okay, if I was not so emotionally invested in my kid, not feeling bad about himself or my kid not being so frustrated or us being mad at each other because I'm nagging again. How would I handle this as a teacher? And I think, you know, over and over again, that's sort of bailed me out and it's the reason actually that the, the middle school chapter and give to failure really is the executive function chapter because you can't look at executive function stuff as one, it's not one big skill, it's you know, an umbrella over lots of different skills and some kids are good at some stuff and some kids are good at other things and very rarely can kids do all of that stuff all the time. So I break each of the executive function skills into their component skills and then offer ways to help be the training wheels for those particular skills instead of trying to do it all at once because you can't do it all at once. It's like that Marie Kondo Tidying Up book, she doesn't have you tidy up your whole entire house all at once. She has you to do clothes first and then the kitchen and that kind of stuff because it's just too overwhelming to do all at once.

Debbie: Absolutely. You mentioned autonomy, supportive parenting. Could you tell us about what, a little bit more about that concept versus over parenting.

Jessica: So I think the best, there's a couple of books by this woman named Wendy Grolnick and she writes about it in a book called something like anxious parents, stressed out kids and sort of more wonky book called the psychology of parental control. And in that she does some really cool extra experiments where she looks at how kids who have been directed of like overly directed and how kids who have parents who support their ability to figure it out for themselves instead of just telling them how to do it. How those kids then handle things when they're, the parents are not around. And it turns out that the kids who have really directive parents who tell them each new step and teachers do this to, you know, like when you're teaching the quadratic formula, it's really tempting to say, OK, do this now, do this, now do this. No, no, no. Don't ask any questions about why. Just do it this way. When kids have overly directive parents or teachers, they get used to being told what all the steps are and then

when they're by themselves they get frustrated really easily and they give up more easily.

And kids with autonomy, supportive parents and teachers, those kids are going to have a little bit better emotional wherewithal to stick with something and be frustrated so that they can figure out the next step for themselves. And that's really, really important. Mainly because two of the most powerful teaching tools we have as teachers are these things called desirable difficulties. And this other thing called formative assessment and desirable difficulties are like this magic way of moving stuff from short term to long term memory, and coding the information. And that doesn't work with kids who can't be frustrated. It doesn't work with kids who can't sort of persevere and push through and look at it from another angle. The kids who just give up - can't - benefit from desirable difficulties. So that's sort of the key equation there, you know, in terms of why over-parenting, directive, parenting, controlling parenting, whatever you want to call it, why it undermines learning, all those little things we do to help our kids that make us feel better because we're saving, rescuing, supporting, loving those things, render our kids less likely to be able to push through and persevere and stick with frustration long enough to benefit from things like desirable difficulties.

Debbie: Well, so many differently wired kids and so many kids in general perfectionism is a huge issue right now. I see it a lot in our community, especially with highly gifted kids. Absolutely. On top of that first, you know, frustration with ADHD and other diagnoses and just other ways of being is also something that a lot of these kids struggle with. So how do we help kids who already have maybe a lower threshold for tolerance or a more fixed mindset, how do we help them foster more of a growth mindset knowing that it might look different for them than it would for a neuro-typical kid?

Jessica: Two things: I did an article for the *New York Times* called something like, when kids say I can't and parents know they can, and one of the really great pieces of advice I got in there, it was really about, learned helplessness. It turns out that our sort of default mode as human beings when faced with long-term hardship, hardship whether that's frustration or pain or whatever, is to kind of go helpless. And it is a learned thing as well. I interviewed Katie Hurley for that article. She's a, she works with kids, especially kids who have been newly diagnosed with learning disabilities. And one of the things that she told me is that it's so important for the parents of kids with newly diagnosed learning disabilities to not let the fact that they feel bad about their kid having those learning disabilities not let the fact that they feel guilty or that they, they want to make sure the kid isn't feeling bad about themselves, to underestimate what their kid's capable of and sort of do more for them.

That stepping back, even with kids who have learning differences, that stepping back and sort of taking a breath and saying, OK, well, if I think my kids threshold for what they can do is here, let me just stick my toe over that line and just assume a little tiny bit more and help my kid see themselves as less helpless. That that's really important and it's something that Katie sees a lot in her

practice is sort of this fostering learned helplessness and kids who have newly diagnosed learning issues because we feel bad about it.

The second thing is that for all kids, not just kids with learning issues or whatever that are differently wired, one of the things that we can do with all kids, especially kids who have a tendency toward being obsessed with perfectionism, is to focus more on the process of whatever it is the kid is doing as opposed to the product. Perfectionist kids tend to be overly focused on the product. What is the end result of this? What does it look like? Is this final draft perfect? Does this quiz perfect? Is this answer perfect? If we can focus on getting off the grades as the end product thing and saying, well, what are you going to do to make that happen? What did you do to study for that test? What are you going to do next time? What did, what worked and what didn't work? You know, you say your friend got an A on that test and you got a D. well, what did your friend do that you didn't do? Have you talked to the teacher to see what you could change about the next time you do this? And if you did well, what, that's interesting. What are you going to take away from this as a successful part of what you did?

Jessica: You know, schools these days are so incredibly focused on the product, the grade, the score, the points that we tend to lose sight of the process. And the process is really focusing on processes really what's key in helping all kids sort of back off from their need for every tiny detail to be perfect all the time. It's a way for backing off on anxiety and stress and really getting back to what's important, which is supposed to be about the learning process to begin with. So process over product and take a cold hard look at whether or not you're slightly underestimating your child and we, I think we all tend to do it as our kids get bigger, it's hard to see them not needing as much and even if we're desperate for them to not need us as much. There's certain things I still kinda sorta want my kid to eat maple, especially since my youngest is, you know, getting to the point where he doesn't need me as much anymore in it's nice to be needed. I liked that, but I also want him to find his competence and especially in the areas where he's particularly weak and so it's been incredibly gratifying for me anyway to see that these places where he had huge deficits are slowly becoming huge areas of pride for him. Like he, every once in awhile we say, oh my gosh, do you remember how you would've handled this a year ago? Do you remember how stressful taking this shirt into a store to return it would have? You wouldn't have been able to do it a year ago. You would've just wept and look at you, you're, you're going and doing it, you know, that's. I'm so proud of you for that progress. You know, we tend to lose sight of that progress.

Debbie: There's so many things that are popping through my mind right now. You know, and this idea of a slightly underestimating our kids. One of the things that I'm just realizing I'm guilty of, I think I do a pretty good job with all this. I'm just going to say however I'm recognizing it. Even just hearing you talk that sometimes just to avoid disturbing the peace. I let things go. I homeschool my kid, he can be volatile at times. It can be an intense person and when we're having a good day, it's really hard to then, you know, push on something that,

you know, sometimes I take the easy way out and that's really more about me being comfortable I'm realizing,

Jessica: Well, and what's, what's difficult about that is that sometimes it's the quiet sort of calm moments when it's the best possible time to approach something that is otherwise really a flashpoint. So, you know, the last thing you want to do is bug your kid about the fact that they've been forgetting their books every day when everyone's upset about the fact that they're forgetting their books every day. Right? So having that quiet moment when you're able to sort of, everyone's happy and you've had a little snack and everybody's blood sugar is where it's supposed to be in, but don't, you know, not talking about something in terms of nagging, but talking about it in terms of problem solving, you know, I really want to help you with this thing. What do you think would be helpful for me? You know, you're having trouble remembering your books when you leave today. So I want to stop nagging you about that. So let's talk about some ways, some systems that we could put in place, some things that you. How would you picture a way that you could remember these things or you know, we're constantly fighting about homework and what would a perfect home work day look like for you? How would you do it? Where would you do at what time would you do it? That kind of stuff. Asking kids for their input on helping you solve problems is like revolutionary because they're not used to being asked. But I totally get it about not wanting to disturb the peace. I'm completely guilty of that.

Debbie: Yes. It's all too easy. Even just hearing your answer to that question, we recently had Dr Ross Greene and the podcast who wrote the book *The Explosive Child* and it sounds like so much of this is, is really about being proactive and problem solving together. So I love that it connects with that conversation as well, is getting ahead of the problem and engaging our kids in figuring out how to solve it.

Jessica: Well and also that the big thing that *Gift of Failure* about is about trying to get our kids back into a state where they're intrinsically motivated to want to do stuff, not because we're dangling carrots in front of them are making sticker charts, or threatening them or promising to pay them for grades. And one of the ways we can do that is by engaging them in the process because that's giving them autonomy over the details of their lives. You know, I make the analogy when, when it's cold outside, you don't say to your toddler, do you want to wear a hat? You say, do you want the red hat or the blue hat? And that gives them some choice and some autonomy while you're still guiding smart choices and making kids part of the process of okay, well we have trouble getting out of the house every morning. So let's write down what you think could be really helpful. What would be helpful for you in the morning so that you can get out the door? That's not only solving the problem that's giving them autonomy, which is one of the three big parts of, of inspiring intrinsic motivation.

Debbie: Well, I'm glad you bring intrinsic motivation up. That's one of the things I wanted to ask you about. When Asher was younger, and I know this is the case for a lot of, of neurologically atypical kids, so much of it is about behavior modification, and the classroom, teachers have to maintain control somehow and have a system and so much of that turns out to be earning points or stars or Asher used to collect little things from his teacher had kept in his pocket and if you had a certain amount by the end of the day, you know, and I really struggled or cause I read Dan Pink's book *Drive* and I'm like, I want him to be intrinsically motivated. So what are your thoughts on that? He's not just for the record. We weaned Asher off those systems four years ago or so and it's just not a part of our world anymore. But is there a time and a place for those behavioral modification systems in your opinion?

Jessica: Yeah. You know, I get this question a lot because most parents I know use a sticker chart at one point or another, some sort of reward thing at some point or another. And so here's the thing about extrinsic motivators and you mentioned Dan Pink and I totally recommend Dan Pink obviously, but what are the book I really love is the book where he got a lot of his research where it sort of where *Drive* starts, which is with a guy name Edward Deci who wrote a book called *Why We Do What We Do: Understanding Self-Motivation*. And Dan, I actually got a chance to talk to Dan about this recently and he was saying, you know, we have 40 years of really, really solid research and not just that solid research we have metastatic studies about the studies to show that extrinsic motivators are disaster when they come to long-term focus on things and creativity.

Jessica: So when it comes to learning, obviously extrinsic motivators are a nightmare because learning should be a long-term endeavor and creative. But the exception is that extrinsic motivators can work really well for tasks that are like put these blocks in this box or you know, be quiet while I'm on the phone for 20 minutes and you can have this lollipop or whatever. That works fine. The problem is that extrinsic motivators won't work over the long-term. So if you're trying to motivate a kid to be a part of the family and do household duties to really want to be a responsible part of the family, then extrinsic motivators don't work. Which is why, you know, just about anyone who talks about how chorea should work. If you read, um and allowance, if you read Ron Lieber's *The Opposite of Spoiled*. One of the things we know is that, you know, chores should not be tied to money. Like if you're going to give kids an allowance, it should not be tied to household duties should be about learning about money. So I, you know, I am torn on those things because that's how we've always done it and they seem to work in the short term, which is true. They're kind of a deceptive that way, but the problem is if you go to schools of character, like, so the character.org, there's this organization that nominates and sort of awards these, this title of national schools of character and you look at those schools and how they get kids to do the right thing for the right reasons. There aren't a lot of sticker charts involved. There's a lot of conversation about why we do these things, you know, the sort of know the right and do the right, that kind of idea if you want kids to be participating in the family dynamics, in the family duties because that's simply the right thing we do. That's what we do have for each

other. Then you have to have a lot of conversations about that. When kids are super, super little, that's where you start it. You say, look, you know, you're a part of this family and you eat food too and mommy prepared the food or daddy prepared the food. And so, the way it works in this house is that everybody helps clean up. And that's sort of just part of being a part of a family. So yeah, I'm torn. Most parents I know are torn on them. They seem to work in the short term, don't really work in the long term. There's a whole bunch of apps for school stuff that are based on these sort of sticker charts, systems and I personally don't like them, but again, am I just being a Pollyanna thinking that we can get kids intrinsically motivated to do just about anything and the way we do that is to not use extrinsic motivators. You know, I have to look at that a lot and well sometimes no. Sometimes when a kid is really little and they can't make a song with a violin yet, you have to sort of help them get over that hump. And maybe the easiest way to do that is with extrinsic motivators. So this isn't a black and white kind of thing. I think if we can get off extrinsic motivators as much as possible, great. If you want to use them intermittently for short term goals or laser focused sort of tasks, then go for it, but the goal should be to get off of them.

Debbie: Great. Thank you for answering that. Yeah, that was, you know, it ended up for us. We weaned off them pretty organically and I was, I had to look back and be like, oh my gosh, we're not using that anymore. It just kind of happened that I was so relieved.

Jessica: But I see it most of mostly run charts and then I get there question a lot having to do with like potty training, you know, like do you give them an M&M every time they pee in the toilet and you know that that stuff is so hard. You know, I handle, I handled it differently, but that doesn't mean that giving them an M&M every time they pee in the toilet isn't gonna work? I, you know, I don't know. I know what the research says and the research says no, don't use sticker charts. Is that practical? Not always.

Debbie: Yeah. I guess we do what works until it stops working too. Right?

Jessica: Yeah. The problem is with extrinsic motivators, they will stop working, you know, inflation happens and, you know, there's all sorts of reasons it'll stop working.

Debbie: I wanted to ask you before we head off this call, you've taught for many, many years and statistically there's four or five differently wired kids in every class. And so I'm just curious if you have any kind of best practices that you use as a teacher with, you know, knowing your kids probably had many different types of differences. What did you find most successful?

Jessica: Patience. So I don't mean that facetiously either. You know, I've taught in a lot of different schools. I've taught in hoity-toity private schools where everyone's really well supported. There are a fair number of kids on the spectrum, but for the most part, you know, lots of support at home, plenty of books at home, that kind of thing. I currently teach in an inpatient drug and alcohol rehab for kids.

And because we know that some of the biggest risk factors for addiction later on in life are things like academic failure, learning issues, aggression early in life. Those kinds of things, I have a lot of students who have spent most of their life in the foster care system and, you know, patients has never, ever been a bigger part of my toolkit than it is now. It's extensive motivators. Also, generally speaking, just don't work with these kids. What does work with the kids I teach now is rules that are based on their safety, knowing that I care and that I'm not-- that I'm going to keep my word. That's sort of a big, big part of what I do now. Um, I tend to be because they've had most adults finally just get frustrated and walk away and say that's it. I'm done with you. That's the one thing I can't do. Mostly because my students will look at me and say, oh, watch this. I'll, you know, fulfill this sort of prediction that all adults leave me by making, by making her life a misery and watching her walk away. And so that's the one thing I can't do. And like I said, I have to always keep my word because they've had a lot of adults not keep their word. So and consistency.

Jessica: I mean that's the other thing. It is so hard to be consistent as a teacher when you've got 20 or 30 kids running around the classroom and you know, there are special circumstances all over the place and then you have a parent really coming down on you hard to make an exception for this and an exception for that. And you know, while it's really, really important to give kids the benefit of the doubt and to give kids a break when they really need it. Part of that is teaching them to self advocate and to help, so that I can help them be able to tell people when special circumstances or warranted. But in general just being consistent. I remember there was a teacher that I used to work with who I respected so much and the students really, even though she was really strict and even though she was really tough, the students knew they, she was predictable that she would always follow through. She always meant what she said and that was really comforting to the students, especially for neuroatypical kids, consistency and predictability can be so important. So when this teacher always meant what she said and always followed through, even if that meant that you took points away or whatever it was or kept you in at lunch because you know, you didn't do something that's a consequence that makes sense to them. Rules that make sense. Again, you kids are a lot more likely to follow rules if they know that they're being made because that has to do with safety. So that kind of stuff and patience is just the biggest part of that, knowing that the kids aren't always going to do what I need them to do the first time I asked, but maybe they need to hear it differently from me. So yeah.

Debbie: OK, well we're close to wrapping up here. And just along those lines of the teacher parent relationship, do you have any maybe advice or tips? I'm always trying to support parents and knowing how to advocate for their kids in schools. Like from your perspective, what advice you have for parents who want to support their kid and they want to have a positive relationship with their child's teacher.

Jessica: So there's a great piece of advice that teachers give each other about how to have positive relationships with parents. And I think it flows the other way too. Try to make the first interaction a positive one. You know, as a teacher I try to

find some positive thing I can, you know, call home I can make to say, you know, your kid did this really great thing today because I think, you know, we tend to only get in touch when things are going badly, so know the best way to get in touch with the teacher, know their preferred method of being contacted and then make it really clear from the beginning that you're on the same team and that you really value and honor the teacher as a professional. And even if that may not be 100 percent true, at least try to get yourself on the same team with them. Because negotiating, that's going to inevitably come up over the course of a year, it's going to be so much easier if your shared interest is in learning and your shared interest is in the kid. If a teacher senses that your interest is in a grade and not in the learning, we know that right away. So if you're first contact can be positive and if you know the best ways to get in touch with someone and you sort of respect that, you know, calling a teacher at home, you know, while they're having dinner, maybe not the best way to, you know, get in touch the first time around when you're angry about something, but respecting them as a professional is, you know, I can't tell you how much that will grease the wheels for other things down the road. And I know how hard it can be to go into. Especially, you know, parents talk, teachers talk, we know who the problematic parents are. You know who the problematic teachers are. Just a little benefit of the doubt is really great because people change over time. You know, we as a teacher, I love to not hear all the terrible stuff about the kids coming up into my classroom because kids can change over the summer and be a very different kid than the one I heard about the spring before. And so sometimes a fresh slate, you know, a clean slate can be a really important way to start a fresh with a new class of kids and new teacher, a new parent and have actually had the learning matter as opposed to the grades.

Debbie: That's great. I love all of that advice and thank you for sharing that. And before we go, where are you on social media if parents want to follow what you're up to and read more about your work?

Jessica: So because teachers are the largest profession as a profession teachers of the largest users of twitter. I'm on twitter quite a bit. I love, you know, people say, oh, isn't twitter a dark and horrible place? I say not a few follow 11,000 teachers, which I do. So I'm on twitter a lot and you can always find me at JessicaLahey.com all of my articles or at least links to sort of my most popular stuff is there all of that parent teacher conference column for three years in the New York Times. You can find me there if you can just google me and New York Times, It'll all come up. And then I have a podcast that I do with my former New York Times editor about writing. So if you're a person who likes to talk about the process of writing, freelance writing, you know, getting an agent, getting a publisher, you know, promoting your writing. We have the podcast called #amwriting with Jess and KJ and we have, you can find that also on itunes and all those places where podcasts usually are awesome.

Debbie: And you also speak a lot all over the country, right? So there's that chance listeners will be able to, to track you down and see you live.

Yeah. And if you go to JessicaLahey.com under events and you can find that schedule. Oh, and actually under speaking at JessicaLahey.com, there's a button that says download speaking bibliography, and there are, that's the bibliography that I sort of let people know about when I'm speaking because all of the articles, in fact, everything I talked about today is there. There's a book for neuro for parents of non neurotypical kids, neuroatypical kids called *Ungifted* by Scott Barry Kaufman. That one's on there. Most of the articles I've talked about are on that bibliography because those are the ones that tend to reference the most.

Debbie: That's such a great resource. Thank you. And Yeah, I'm trying to get Scott Barry Kaufman on the podcast. He's so busy since his TED talk.

Jessica: Yeah. And he's working on some new stuff right now. This really exciting. He's, I, just *Ungifted* for me was a revelation. I just, it opened my eyes to a lot of, a lot of things that I hadn't thought about, since I didn't grow up as a special ed kid. I mean, he has this unique perspective that hardly anyone else has. As a special ed kid growing up and now a kid, uh, the kind of professional who has impact on how we perceive intelligence and how we, how we measure intelligence, he's, he's just amazing.

Debbie: That's awesome. So many good conversations to have. This is one I just need to say thank you. This was fantastic. So fascinating and just fun to be able to chat with you about stuff I've been thinking about for a couple years now. So thank you so much for this.

Jessica: Well, and I do have to say that there was a chapter and Gift of Failure on parents of kids with special needs and the chapter got so big that it became like four times the size of any other chapter in the book because there's so many exceptions to every rule and so many different types of wiring and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. But it is a topic I love to talk about because I don't want parents of kids that have learning differences to think that I'm only talking to parents of neurotypical kids because I'm absolutely not.

Debbie: No. Well, this was so insightful and helpful content for all of us, so thank you so much for your time and for coming by the podcast.

Jessica: Thank you so much for this.

Debbie: You've been listening to the Tilt Parenting Podcast for the show notes for this episode, including links to Jessica's website, her book, *The Gift of Failure*, and all the other resources we discussed. Visit tiltparenting.com/session88, and don't forget to check out my after the show short video where I share my top takeaways from my conversation with Jessica. You'll find a link on the show notes page, or you can go straight to tiltparenting.com/aftertheshow. If you enjoy this podcast and would like to help me cover the costs of producing it, please consider signing up for my Patreon campaign. Patreon is a simple membership platform that allows people to make a small monthly contribution

as little as \$2 a month to fund the show. If you want to help visit patreon.com/tiltparenting.

If you like what you heard on today's episode, I would be grateful if you could take a minute to head over to itunes and leave a rating or review. And lastly, if you're looking for a little bit of extra emotional support over the holidays, you might want to try my Differently Wired Seven Day Challenge. I'll send you a short video each day for one week aimed at helping you shift your experience one thought and action at a time. Sign up at tiltparenting.com/7day. Thanks again for listening. For more information on Tilt Parenting, visit www.tiltparenting.com

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- [Jessica Lahey's website](#)
- [Jessica Lahey on Twitter](#)
- [*The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed* by Jessica Lahey](#)
- [*Why Parents Need To Let Their Kids Fail* \(The Atlantic article\)](#)
- [*Pressured Parents, Stressed-Out Kids: Dealing with Competition While Raising a Successful Child* by Wendy Grolnick](#)
- [*The Psychology of Parental Control: How Well-Meant Parenting Backfires* by Wendy Grolnick](#)
- [*Practical Parenting with Katie Hurley*](#)
- [*Dr. Ross Greene Talks About Collaborative and Proactive Solutions* \(podcast episode\)](#)
- [*The Opposite of Spoiled: Raising Kids Who Are Grounded, Generous and Smart About Money* by Ron Lieber](#)
- [*Am Writing* \(Jessica's podcast\)](#)
- [*The Explosive Child: A New Approach for Understanding and Parenting Easily Frustrated, Chronically Inflexible Children* by Dr. Ross Greene](#)
- [*Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* by Dan Pink](#)
- [*Why We Do What We Do: Understanding Self-Motivation* by Edward Deci](#)
- [*Character.org*](#)
- [*Jessica Lahey's speaking bibliography*](#)
- [*Ungifted: Intelligence Redefined* by Scott Barry Kaufman](#)
- [*When Children Say 'I Can't,' But They Can, and Adults Know It* \(NY Times article by Jessica Lahey\)](#)
- [*That Crumpled Paper Was Due Last Week: Helping Disorganized and Distracted Boys Succeed in School and Life* by Ana Homayoun](#)

- *Late, Lost, and Unprepared: A Parents' Guide to Helping Kids with Executive Functioning* by Joyce Cooper-Kahn