



Episode #113:

**Psychologist and Author Dawn Huebner Talks
About Her New Book, "Outsmarting Worry"**

June 19, 2018



Dawn: Children and parents kind of trigger one another, so a child's anxiety sets off a parent's anxiety because anxiety is a really uncomfortable feeling. So often parents are learning the skill set along with their child and a part of it is learning how to tolerate the discomfort rather than immediately giving into it.

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 very excited to be bringing the prolific Dawn Huebner to the podcast. One of the coolest things about making this podcast is that I continue to get to connect with people whose work I have not only been following for years, but people just work and books have literally impacted my family in such a meaningful way and then I get to ask them everything I want to know and hopefully I covered the same things that you would ask if you were sitting in my chair too. Today is one of those conversations as we have owned and have been using Dawn's books like, *What To Do When Your Temper Flares* and *What To Do When You Grumble Too Much* for many years and if she isn't already on your radar, Dawn Huebner, PhD, is a clinical psychologist, a parent coach and popular speaker specializing in the many faces of childhood anxiety. She recognized the need for lively, easy to read materials to help children practice the strategies they were learning in her office. So she created a format effective for 6 to 12 year olds, the What To Do Guides for Kids which teach complex psychological concepts using language and humor easily understood by kids. Her newest book, *Outsmarting Worry*, maintains her distinctive voice while adding a layer of detail and sophistication appreciated by older children and teens, so that's the book Dawn and I are talking about today, *Outsmarting Worry: The Older Kids Guide to Overcoming Anxiety*. I really loved this book because Dawn has a real gift for creating practical, doable interactive toolkits, for lack of a better word, for kids to feel empowered to take control of their emotional experience and make changes that can make the way they're moving through life just feels so much better.

Debbie: I hope you enjoy our conversation and before I get to that, I just have to say, wow, in the best possible way, I am just overwhelmed by all the amazing responses and the support of this community for my book *Differently Wired: Raising an Exceptional Child in a Conventional World* which came out last week and just seeing all the proactive steps everyone's taking to share the book with their groups both online and in their cities. It's just been really humbling and wonderful to see the way everyone's resonating with the book. So thank you so much. And if you did pre-order the book, I really hope you're enjoying the bonuses, I'd love to hear your feedback on those and there's still time to sign up for the book tour locations. Tomorrow, June 20th, I will be in San Jose, California, then onto Washington D.C. on Thursday, June 21st, then in Naperville, Ohio on Saturday the 23rd. And then next week I'll be in New York City and Maplewood, New Jersey. So I would love to meet you in person at one of these events. To get all the details, you can go to tiltparenting.com/tour or go to the TiLT Parenting facebook group and click on the events tab. Thank you so much. And now here is my conversation with Dawn.



- Debbie: Hey Dawn. Welcome to the podcast.
- Dawn: Hi. Thanks for having me.
- Debbie: Well, I'm excited. I'm always excited for talking to any of my guests, but as we were just discussing I'm a little bit of a fan-girl with your history of writing just such great books, useful, practical books to go through with your kids. We have—I'm just going to say I have a bunch of my shelf, but I've actually realized I've lent them out and I haven't gotten them back. So Charlie and Mark, if you're listening to this, I want my books back. But you've written so many great books and I'm excited to talk about your new book, *Outsmarting Worry*, which came out in 2017. But before we dive into the book, would you just take a minute to tell us who you are and how you got into this work, what your sweet spot is in the work that you do?
- Dawn: Sure. I am a clinical psychologist. I have a private practice in New Hampshire in the U.S. and I see children aged 12 and under and their parents and I'm also the author of eight books at this point. And my specialty area is anxiety. I kind of fell into that, it wasn't really by design. I fell into it by having an anxious child. And I had an anxious child at a time that I was a psychologist, but I didn't really know much about treating anxiety. And I parented in the way that seemed logical and loving to me, not realizing that I was inadvertently feeding his anxiety and the more I accommodated him, the worse things got. And we were a ways down that road before I realized that I needed to understand something differently. I needed to do something differently and I kind of newly discovered cognitive behavioral therapy which had been out for awhile. I just hadn't been exposed to it in my training. And we went down a very different path with our son and I became hooked on cognitive behavioral therapy and started learning about it to use it professionally and started writing books that taught cognitive behavioral skills to kids and things kind of grew from there.
- Debbie: That's great. Yeah. I, as you're talking, you know, my first exposure to therapy, a client was in my twenties and I went to the Albert Ellis Institute in New York for therapy and he was the founder of rational emotive behavioral therapy. And I think that's why when I discovered your books and the first one that we had was *What To Do When Your Temper Flared*, which was just a lifesaver for us. And I think that's why I resonated with it so much, that cognitive behavioral approach and just, uh, it just really, it's such a respectful way to support humans and, you know, and especially kids to discover who they are and how they can actually have control over their experiences. So, so that's great. And I think, I think it can be a really powerful tool for parents.
- Dawn: Right? You know, the really exciting thing is that kids are eager to learn and they can be taught that feelings are okay, all feelings are okay and that there are things that they can do to manage feelings more effectively, to cope more effectively in ways that are really transformative. And that's exciting. Yeah.



- Debbie: Yeah. Especially at a time in your life, you know, so many kids just feel like they have no control over any aspect of their life. And so to help them see actually you can, you know, you can actually learn a lot and, and, and think about it, and just move through the world differently and it's very empowering.
- Dawn: Right, right. And you know, I think especially anxiety is a tough feeling for kids. It makes kids feel weak. It makes the kids feel scared. And so for kids to learn that they can turn that around, I think is important and great.
- Debbie: Yes, it's very appropriate that there's an alarm,
- Dawn: Yep emergency emergency. That's a good segue into what worry does.
- Debbie: I've planned that everyone. So well, why don't you introduce us to your new book, *Outsmarting worry*, tell us who it's for and what you hope to do through the book.
- Dawn: So *Outsmarting Worry* is for older kids, it's for 9 to 13 year olds and it's written in a way that children can read it and understand it independently, but it really will be most effective if a child is doing it with a support person. If a parent or a counselor or supportive adult is, is reading it along with the child. And it teaches children about the mechanics of anxiety. Why anxiety happens, why we feel the way that we do in our bodies, why we feel the way we do in our brains, and then really importantly how we can begin to push back against it, how we can begin to challenge anxiety and take control in a different way. And it turns out that the more we challenge our worry, the smaller the worry become. So the book is teaching kids a very specific skill set that they can use to challenge their anxiety.
- Debbie: Right. Right. Yeah. I really liked the way that you, you do spend time in the beginning of the book really just explaining, you know, what is happening in your brain, why this is happening. And, and I do think that especially at that age, kids are so interested in brain science, at least my child is, I know many kids are, you know, they're curious about this stuff. And so I think that's a great way to get them engaged in it. I actually just wanted to even ask you to take a step back. Is there a difference between anxiety and worry, you know, or do you consider them to be one in the same?
- Dawn: Yeah I use the words interchangeably. So there's, there's a technical difference between worry and fear or anxiety and fear. Fear is typically about something that's actually happening and worry or anxiety is about something that you anticipate happening, something that might happen. But for the purposes of my books, I use anxiety and worry in the same way.
- Debbie: Okay. Yeah. I just wanted to be clear on that. So before we talk more about the practical strategies, because I really do want to spend time going through some of the ways that you explain to kids what they can do in their lives and how they can reframe their experience with worry and then also what parents can do to support them. But let's just again, to take a step back, what is normal when it



comes to worry? Like how do we know if our child is anxious or if this is just typical behavior that's going on? What are some signs that let us know Oh this, we need to be paying attention to this?

Dawn: Yeah, so worry is really a perfectly normal phenomena. It's the sign of an active, creative brain that's taking an experiences and trying to make sense of them. So it absolutely is not our goal to do away with all worry. What becomes problematic is when kids worry about something so they begin to think about something that might go wrong or might be problematic or dangerous in some way, and they immediately assume that that's accurate just because they're thinking about something or anticipating something. It is an actual danger, and then they start acting based on that assumption. That's where the problem comes in. So it's not as if kids who have trouble with anxiety necessarily have more anxious thoughts, it's more that they believe them and they act on them and that's the part that's problematic.

Debbie: Right, because some level of fear or concern is appropriate in certain situations, right?

Dawn: Correct. Correct.

Debbie: Okay, so as a parent, would we recognize it that are tiled seems to be perseverating on certain ideas or maybe responding in a way that just seems inappropriate to the circumstance?

Dawn: Yeah, so what parents will notice is that kids are really repetitive in their concerns. Anxious kids often do lots of reassurance seeking or avoidance, and typically have trouble doing things that come more easily to other children. They have trouble doing those things because they're nervous about them, although sometimes they'll say that's boring or I just don't like such and such rather than directly linking it to feeling afraid.

Debbie: So how do we know that some of them might be really good at deflecting and coming up with other reasons? Are there other signs that we would be like, hm, I think there's something else going on here.

Dawn: Yeah. You know, most typically it's, if a child suddenly dislikes something that they used to, like, you know, they used to be okay going to an activity and then they're not okay anymore. Or they start asking lots and lots of questions, or they developed stomach aches or other physical symptoms before they need to do something. I think parents are often very much aware that their kids are feeling anxious even when the child isn't necessarily aware.

Debbie: Right, right. Yeah. I think for some of us, this was the case for me too years ago. It may take us awhile and then when we realized that we're like, oh, all the signs were there and I just was thinking it was something else. Or trying to downplay it and then there can be guilt associated with that realization.



- Dawn: Right, But it's common. I mean he, yes, parents often feel bad after the fact, but it's really understandable, you know, we want to take what our kids are saying as if it is fully accurate and true and we want to support our children. So it's understandable to kind of walk for a ways down the road with the child before you realize that's what you're doing.
- Debbie: Right.
- Dawn: And that leads to something that's really important that I touched on when I was talking about my own situation with my son. And that is that the kinds of things that were inclined to do as loving and supportive parents. So things like reassuring or allowing our children to step out of uncomfortable situations. Those turn out to be the things that strengthen anxiety, that fuel anxiety as well because they bring so much relief.
- Debbie: Why is that?
- Dawn: So let's say, let's say you have a concern about germs and so you start becoming very careful about washing your hands and about touching things and about making sure that everybody else touches their hands. And so, you begin policing the rest of your family about hand washing. And so let's say you're a child in that situation and you see your mom preparing a meal and you asked her, did you wash your hands? So it seems normal for a parent to reassure, yes, I did wash my hands. But by answering that question with a reassurance, you're strengthening the anxiety by stepping into this notion that it's important for you to be monitoring. And so I'm going to answer and there really is a danger here. And so I'm going to engage with you about this content. So when you're kind of accommodating and overly reassuring, it ends up empowering the anxiety and that can be hard to understand because when parents reassure or accommodate their children's anxiety right in the moment their child feels relief. So it seems like the right thing to do, but it's really stepping into this loop and maybe we can talk for a moment about what this loop is. That's part of what feeds anxiety and keeps it going.
- Debbie: That sounds great. Let's do it.
- Dawn: Yeah. So anxiety always begins with the perception of danger and danger is really broadly defined. So anything that seems like it could be problematic or uncomfortable or scary or hard or not go well is a danger. And when you perceive danger, you then feel nervous or afraid and that makes total sense. And so because you're feeling nervous or afraid, you begin to do things called safety behaviors and safety behaviors are a whole constellation of behaviors designed to help you feel less nervous and to protect you from the danger. So safety behaviors are things like asking reassurance questions, washing your hands, not touching certain things, needing to be told something over and over again, avoiding, those are all safety behaviors. And safety behaviors make you feel better. That's their purpose, to make you feel less anxious, but they're problematic because they prevent you from ever seeing that the thing that you



thought was dangerous was not actually dangerous, that the whole thing was a false alarm. And so when parents step into this like they accommodate their children's safety behaviors or they accompany their child in doing the safety behaviors there, they're keeping their child or they're not doing anything to get their child out of that loop, that anxiety loop where you feel nervous, you feel in danger, you do a safety behavior, you feel relieved, but you feel like you have to do that safety behavior that in order to stay safe.

Debbie: So it's a vicious cycle and we're kind of jumping in there by advocating for those safety behaviors.

Dawn: Right. Right, now, it's not the case that parents can just refuse to do the safety behaviors or ignore their child's requests for reassurance because kids come unglued when we do that, you know, that just seems mean. So it's important for parents to have a different way of understanding what's happening. It's not that they're withholding from their child, it's that they're trying not to feed or empower worry. So one of the things that's really important for both parents and children is to do something called externalizing anxiety. Externalizing anxiety means to think about your worry, kind of like it's a little creature like it's a little bug or past or bully something separate from you. And when you listen to your worry and you obey it, you follow the rules that it sets up, your empowering it. And when you challenge it or push back against it, you're ultimately reducing it. And when both parents and children have that basic understanding, it becomes possible for parents to say things to kids like, you know, if I answered that question, I'm going to be feeding your worry or I know your worry wants you to think x, but your worry is not the boss of this. So it gives them a way to still be empathic with their children without inadvertently feeding the anxiety.

Debbie: Yeah, I love that. You know, we used to have, I think when ash was like four, we had the Mad Monster. That was our externalization of the anger. And now I talk with them, you know, about his Lizard Brain, you know, tell that guy to simmer down. Like he is feeding you a line of crap right now. But I'm. So I love that, you know, just calling it for what it is. And I think that can be such a powerful tool. My question for you, I'm wondering just what has been your experience in the kids that you've worked with in terms of how do they actually go from reading your book and learning these things too? Then to actually making the a part of their life. Because even for adults it's so hard to do this kind of work. I think too in the moment to be able to access those tools, what does it look like?

Dawn: Right. So kids definitely need support to do that and that's one of the reasons why my books are most effective when a parent is doing them along with a child, so kids get some benefit from the intellectually understanding the kinds of things that we're talking about, but they get substantially more benefit from actually implementing them and the books kind of walk kids through how to do that or if kids are in therapy, they often get walked through how to do that, but ultimately they need someone like a parent who's there in the moment reminding them, okay, this is the time to use a strategy. This is the time to talk back against your worry. You don't need to let your worry be the boss of this, so



kids need help figuring out how to do it in real time. I find that once kids have had some amount of experience with not immediately capitulating to what their worry is telling them things kind of click for them and they're able to see, oh yeah, this is just a feeling that I have or this is just a set of thoughts I'm having right now and I don't need to obey this or I don't need to do whatever my worry is telling me. And then they begin to be able to be more independent in terms of using the skillset or using the strategies on their own.

Debbie: When you talk in the book about this idea of looking for evidence and you know, if we look around we probably won't find much evidence to prove that our worries actually valid. Um, and so it sounds like likewise, the more evidence, you know, if they tried this with the parents or someone else's support, lots of reminders and they start to have little successes than they're actually creating contrary evidence to show them that indeed your worry is a making a big fuss for nothing kind of thing.

Dawn: That's right. So looking for evidence is a really useful strategy, but it's important to remember that worry wants certainty. So you know, if you think of this little externalized worry bug sort of thing and it's, it's constantly saying, are you sure? Are you sure? And often when kids are seeking reassurance, they're wanting their parents to promise a bad thing's not going to happen. You're not going to get sick. I'm not going to forget to pick you up. You're not going to mess up and what you're doing. You know, kids are wanting certainty and we can't have certainty. And one of the things that is important for kids to learn is that the idea that we have to have certainty is kind of a myth. That's not the way the world works and we need to go based on what's most likely. We do all kinds of things based on most what's most likely, and that's fine. It's only worry that's telling us we have to be sure.

Debbie: Yeah, as I'm listening to all of this, this is so great for our kids and it's also so great for all of us listening to this as adults. So I imagine you know, is part of your work also helping parents kind of get in touch with their own worry because I mean all parents worry about their kids. For those of us raising differently wired kids, many of us have some pretty substantial concerns about just the future unknowns and we are wanting certainty. So how does your work, I'm just curious, overlap with the parents that you work with.

Dawn: Parents are really a really important part of the work that I do. I do a lot of parent training, parent education, parent guidance, often anxious children have anxious parents. Not only the kind of worry that you talk about about worry about a neuro-atypical child, but also parents have trouble with anxiety more broadly and children and parents kind of trigger one another. So a child's anxiety sets off a parent's anxiety because anxiety's are really uncomfortable feeling. So often parents are learning the skill set along with their child and a part of it is learning how to tolerate the discomfort rather than immediately giving into it because it turns out that if we tolerate the nervous feeling or tolerate the uncertain feeling but still move towards whatever it is that's giving us that feeling, the feeling dissipates and we see that really nothing bad happens or we are capable of handling the situation and that's a real revelation. Like to



see that just because I'm nervous, it doesn't mean that I can't do whatever the thing is. I talk to kids about things that are scary but safe and help kids to be able to identify that there are lots and lots of things that are scary but they're safe for us. They're not dangerous. Just because we're afraid doesn't mean that we're actually in danger.

Debbie: Right. And I would also, you know, before the call we were talking about the work I used to do and writing for teenagers and tween-agers if that's a word. And a lot of what I, especially for this particular audience, the age of 12, 9 to 13 age group, taking safe risks and knowing that you can survive them is actually such an important part of their gaining confidence for becoming teenagers. So there's so many levels for how doing this work at this age can benefit kids, right?

Dawn: Yes.

Debbie: So I have a couple kind of random questions. I've been thinking how do I connect these? But one of my questions is I would imagine that an instinct for some parents, if they are noticing their child is overly concerned or anxious about a situation that the parent might feel doesn't warrant that level of concern, that we might just downplay it or dismiss it. So you talked about help, too much reassurance or pulling them from an activity can be harmful. What is the result when a parent just kind of dismisses the child's concerns?

Dawn: I think we always want to acknowledge and validate and empathize with our children's feelings regardless of what those feelings are. That doesn't mean that we have to agree with the feeling, but I think we want to recognize them. When you do this externalization, it becomes easy to talk to a child about, your worried like your externalized worry is making you think x making you think you can't handle this making you think it's going to be disastrous making you think this is a big deal, so you're kind of putting the strength or the intensity of the feeling off on the worry rather than being dismissive of a child's experience of something and that turns out to be a helpful thing. It's tricky because it doesn't work particularly well to force a child to do something. You know? We all know that some kids get really explosive when they're forced to do it or they completely come to pieces or some kids will kind of white knuckle it, you know, they'll do something because they have to do it, but they don't really benefit. They don't really take from that the experience of being capable and so kids really gain the most, in terms of confidence, when they electively step towards difficult situations. And one of the things that's really useful is it doesn't have to be an all or none sort of thing. So there's a metaphor that often gets used about jumping into a swimming pool and when you jump into a pool, you're getting used to the cold water so you can jump into a scary situation, you can kind of thrust yourself into the situation to get used to it all at once, like jumping into a pool. Or you can go in a step by step way, same way that you can gradually lower yourself into a pool, and when kids are nervous about something, it's often possible not to like, you know, push them or force them into the full situation, but to help them work out kind of a hierarchy where they're gradually moving towards that situation and learning how to do that is important and



empowering kids to gradually approach something that's scary for them or hard for them.

Debbie: And then our job as parents is to recognize and notice and reinforce, you know, I imagine just kind of, Hey, I noticed that that was really hard and you did this anyway, or I saw you did this, you know, how did it feel? How did you do that? You know, I imagine that's kind of our biggest job in that moment.

Dawn: Absolutely. And when your child is having specific difficulty with anxiety, I think it's helpful to slip in the language about the worry, so to say something like, you didn't let your worry be in charge of that or you took control of that even though your worry was telling you you couldn't go to. I really want children to understand that they don't have to let their worry be the boss. And so I'm always looking for ways to underline that. Underline when a child has acted in that way.

Debbie: Yeah. That externalization of worry and just making it something else. Something that's not fused with you. I can, I mean just that act I can imagine just has huge repercussions for kids.

Dawn: Yes.

Debbie: So you mentioned resistance. I'm just wondering what about kids who are avoidant of even looking at this book or you know, kind of going there or they think it's not going to work on them. Have you had experience with kids who've been reluctant to do this kind of work on themselves and any strategies?

Dawn: Yeah, you know, it's interesting, interesting because there are numbers of reviews on all of my books that talk about kids being angry at the start and then quickly getting pulled into the book. I really make an effort in all of my books to completely normalize whatever the topic is, whatever it is that a child is struggling with and trying to use some humor and just helping kids not feel ashamed of whatever's going on with them. I think for kids that are really hugely resistant or, and that often comes from being scared, you know, kids are just so under the thrall of their anxiety that it's hard for them to imagine challenging it in any way. And for kids like that, I think that parents can be educating themselves either with my book or with something that's written specifically for parents and parents can be starting to use the skill set or to do things differently themselves. And that, in and of itself, changes things. It requires a child to manage in a somewhat different way and that can still be really useful.

Debbie: Yeah. I imagine if we even talk out loud about our process, right? Like I was really concerned about this, but I, you know, just even at the dinner table talking to your partner about something and modeling what we want them to do that will over to will wear them down.

Dawn: Right. But even more directly, like you can talk about sort of family goals or what you want for your child, you know, you might talk about in our family, we



don't let our fears stop us from doing things or in our family, we feel like our world is too small if we just stay within our comfort zone. And so we really value taking chances. We really value challenging ourselves. And then talking to kids about how to do that and it's okay to carve the challenges into tiny, tiny steps because we want kids to feel successful. You know, we don't want them to feel like they're facing a challenge that is just so overwhelming to them and they're not going to succeed. So I work with parents a lot about how to make the steps small enough so that their child can succeed and succeeding feels good and then you take the next step and eventually you get where you want to go.

Debbie: I love that and I love that language of just saying, you know, we value taking chances and that's beautiful. I love that. For parents who are listening, who don't have your book yet, and they're feeling inspired to tackle and the anxiety happening in their home with their child, can you give us one takeaway? I mean, there's so many takeaways already, but it was like one thing they can do right now that they can start making an impact or supporting their child in this way.

Dawn: The most important thing is the externalization piece to start thinking about, worry a separate from you are separate from your child and there's this question about who's going to win, is the worry going to win or is your child going to win and you're helping your child learn how to be the one to win.

Debbie: That's excellent. Well thank you. This has been super insightful and just a pleasure to chat with you about all this. The book really is. It's just really beautifully written and all of your material is so accessible for kids and you just break things down and talk about them using normal language but not in a condescending way. It's just a really. You have a really nice balance and it's very accessible for kids. So. Well done. Thank you. And for listeners who want to connect with you and find out more about your work and your books, where can they reach you online?

Dawn: I have a website, www.dawnhuebnerphd.com/ and there's information about my work and there are articles for parents, kind of self help, tips for parents, brief tips, descriptions of my books and things of that sort.

Debbie: Perfect. And listeners, I'll leave links to, to Dawn's and add to all of her books because she should check them all out. She's got a great collection. I'll leave those on the show notes page. So, Dawn, thank you so much again. It was a pleasure to connect with you and to share your work with the TiLT audience and hope to have you back sometime.

Dawn: Thank you so much for having me.

Debbie: You've been listening to the Tilt Parenting podcast for the show notes for this episode, including links to Dawn's book, *Outsmarting Worry*, and all of her other books for website and the resources we discussed visit tiltparenting.com/session113. If you like what we're doing at the Tilt Parenting podcast and you'd like to support us. There are a few easy and meaningful ways you can do this. One is to join my Patreon campaign, just like listeners Christine



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