



**Episode #141:**

**Therapist Debbie Steinberg Kuntz on Easing the  
Struggle for Bright & Quirky / 2e Kids**

January 22, 2019

Debbie R: Hello Debbie, welcome to the podcast.

Debbie K: Hi Debbie. Thanks for having me.

Debbie R: Yeah we're the two Debbies...the D & D in the 2e space. But I'm happy to be doing this. We were just saying that you're usually the one behind the interviewing chair. So how does this feel being on the other end of this?

Debbie K: This is definitely different for me. Um, it's great. I mean we're the two Debbies sort of leading the same charge, living very similar paths, so I'm excited.

Debbie R: Yeah, me too. Well, let's, um, before we start talking about the meat of our conversation, tell us a little bit about your path so listeners who aren't familiar with your work can get a sense of your story and how you got to be doing this.

Debbie K: Yeah, so I'm a mom of two teen boys, 16 and 13, and about a decade ago I became a licensed marriage and family therapist doing general family therapy. And as I had my kids and learned that they were twice exceptional, uh, both bright and with ADHD and one with a learning disability, I sort of did what I do when I want to understand something which is doing a lot of research. And as I did the research to get more familiar with how to help my own kids, I kind of became known in the Seattle area as a therapist who understands 2e and sort of built my practice on it. And then saw individual clients, um, kids, parents, couples, you know, right here in Seattle. We've got companies like Microsoft and Amazon and no shortage of bright and quirky people. And I love working with this population. Ended up having a couple of parent support groups.

And then, um, I used to be in high tech and I thought maybe I could take these groups online and started researching, doing some online 2e parent groups. Started talking to the experts who, uh, many who you have interviewed who I just have learned so much from and um, all of them wanted to participate. This was last spring and so it turned into a virtual summit called The Bright And Quirky Child Summit that ended up going viral. And I was just shocked at how many people there are in the world who are craving this information about twice exceptional kids and how few resources there are out there. Not just in the US but all over. So, um, and that's how I learned about your work also. And I was really happy to learn about all the amazing work that you're doing.

Debbie R: Yeah, I was sad that our paths hadn't crossed while I was living in Seattle. Um, and then when I was there this summer we didn't get a chance to meet. But yeah, I really like your approach and your, just, your, your voice and vision for the work that you do even down to your website, it's just so beautiful. So I think I really like the way that you're, you've entered this space and it's such a great value for parents like me. So thank you for doing this work.

Debbie K: Thank you.

Debbie R: So I'm curious to know this wasn't, I didn't prepare you for this question, so. But anyway, I'm just wondering in the work that you do with families who are struggling raising these kids, what are some of the biggest challenges that you see, the most common challenges parents in our situation are facing today?

Debbie K: Yeah, some challenges that rise to the surface and I hear about a lot are um learning challenges, emotional challenges, social and behavioral. And a lot of the diagnoses that I see are ADHD, autism, with sort of the Asperger's profile, anxiety and learning differences like dyslexia. Those are usually the common ones that come up. And then for 2e kids they often get - one of my clients calls it cocktail diagnosis - where um, they don't fit neatly into one diagnostic box. And that's why in my approach I really focus on challenges rather than diagnoses because it can, it can be so unique for each child what solutions will work.

Debbie R: And for those parents who have those kids with the cocktail diagnoses, I like that, what are they struggling with most? Is it where to get information? Is it the school fit? Is it just kind of family dynamic stuff or how to manage the intensities that some of these kids come with?

Debbie K: It's so many things. I think the thing I hear the most when people come in is what is going on? You know, I see my child either struggling in school or our relationship is tense or he's so different from his peers and he's having trouble connecting with other people and it's just hard to know what is going on and what will help. So sort of the first stage is always, um, let's really look at the patterns and even keeping a log. What are you seeing that are challenge areas? And then we can really pinpoint where do we want to do our work because everybody is so unique.

Debbie R: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. It's, it's overwhelming. It can be really overwhelming to know. I always talk about where are we going to get the biggest bang for our buck, you know, where should we be focusing our energy and then where do we start? So let's start then talking about more nitty gritty into the work that you do. You have created a six step strategy for helping a parent create a great life for their child that really fits who they are and the way their brain is wired. So and today you are offering to walk us through that strategy, which is great. Let's just start there. Can you tell us what the first step is to your six step strategy?

Debbie K: Yeah, absolutely. And I just want to say before we dive in that when families first come to me, I think one thing that so many parents are grappling with it is, is it my parenting? Is it something that I'm doing that is creating these challenges? And I think that's a really important thing to say that every brain is uniquely wired and every child needs to be parented differently. So just sort of acknowledging that guilt, that can be part of the process. And am I doing enough? Um, even after, I find even after parents find a good solution they're second guessing, oh my goodness, I should have done this three years ago. So, so important to be gentle with yourself, you know?

Debbie R: Yeah. I couldn't agree more. And you know, just as you were saying that I was reading up on ODD last night, oppositional defiance disorder and I'm just, you

know, before we even get into these now, I just want to ask you, that is one of those diagnoses that seems to go hand in hand with a lot of other things. ADHD in particular. I think I read like 60 percent of kids with ADHD at some point also get that secondary diagnosis and that may be the wrong statistic listeners, but that's what I'm recalling. But I'm wondering just about diagnoses like that in your experience because that is one that seems to kind of put the onus on the parents that you guys have gone down a wrong path here in some way that you've created this dynamic that has resulted in this oppositional behavior.

Debbie K: Well, it's hard to know. I mean, it could be from some parenting and that, you know, especially strong willed kids. They're just tough to parent and they might have really great leadership skills that can be honed over time, but when they're young they are really difficult. It's just a difficult personality to parent, for anyone to parent. And whether you meet criteria for ODD or not, the approach is really going to be the same, which is again, honing in on the challenges and then running different experiments to see what will work. But ODD is very tricky, especially when it's meshed in with an ADHD diagnosis and it really requires peeling the onion.

Debbie R: Okay. Alright. So I need to do a separate episode on that because it's something I hear a lot from our listeners. It's something that's come up in our family as well in the past. Okay. So, so let's, let's get into your process then. I know that the first step is to discover a new lens and I think that's kind of what you were saying. You know, even part of that probably is giving yourself a break and shifting the way you're looking at it. But tell us more about what that means to you.

Debbie K: Yeah, so I developed these six steps over time as I figured out sort of the journey that a lot of parents of bright and quirky kids go on. So the first is to discover a new lens. And Debbie, you've done such remarkable work in this area, but when families come to me, they have interacted with the traditional medical and school systems who, um, take a deficit model and that's sort of how the diagnosis world works. That the big question that we're asking is what's wrong? What is the problem that needs to be fixed with this child? And while a diagnosis can be very helpful, it really tells just part of the story. It looks at what needs to be fixed. But for a 2e kid, I think a much better question is how do we help this child be successful?

Because then we're going to look at not only challenges but what their strengths are because we need to boost both the challenge areas and the strengths. And what happens when we look through a lens of just deficit, kids can really feel that they're, they're broken, they're not enough, they need to be fixed and they can internalize this feeling of being broken. And you know, there's so many 2e people who grow up to be so successful and their secret sauce is their uniquely wired brain. And I've seen this time and time again with the adults that I work with. So really taking a whole-child approach and looking through a lens of how do we create a beautiful life for your child that works for the way his brain is wired for me is a much more effective and helpful approach than looking just at what challenges need to be fixed.

Debbie R: Yeah, I mean I think that it's such an important shift and, and I agree it's where we need to start and I just wonder if, how do we even help future generations of parents to kind of skip that first painful place, right? Because there's something inherently wrong with our parenting culture if, if our instant default is fix it mode, there's a problem, we need to fix it, you know. It would be so great if we could think about how do we even change the way that parents start the journey with their kids. So they're starting with that lens right. They're starting with that lens of, okay, I really, my job here is just to understand who this child is and what they need to thrive.

Debbie K: I think what happens is you're looking for solutions at school maybe with a psychologist or a doctor and they are set up, you know with the best of intentions, to try to pinpoint what's wrong and remediate it, but we start using language and we get sort of in this web of deficit mode because that's the way things have been for a very long time. And then with this birth of positive psychology where, you know, now we're truly looking at mental health, not just mental illness or you know, what the deficits are. It is a huge shift and I think it's a conversation that, you know, through doing things like this we can start to move the needle.

Debbie R: Yeah, absolutely. So the next step then is to identify the challenges because we do need to know where kids are getting kind of hung up. So tell us more about that.

Debbie K: Absolutely. So there's a saying that goes 'a problem well-stated is half solved' and I completely agree with that. So the second step here is to make a list of your, your child's challenges. And it can be really helpful to keep a log even just in the notes of your phone and start to look at patterns. You know, what's happening, what are you seeing, what sort of feedback are you getting from teachers, relatives, friends. As I said, the four areas that come up a lot are in learning, social interaction, emotional regulation and behavior. And a really important point in this step is to ask your child, you know, I think a lot of times in the diagnostic process we don't get the child's opinion. So if we can ask, you know, when everything's calm, maybe in the car or a trip to Starbucks, I, you know, I notice that, you know, when I volunteer at school, you're sitting alone at the lunch table. Or I notice that it's really hard for you to engage with your homework. Or I notice when you get upset it's really hard to calm down. You know, what's up? And um, to really involve your child as a team member collaborating in identifying the challenges is really important.

Debbie R: And are we looking for a list of categories of challenges or really specific situations that, that trip our kids up?

Debbie K: Really specific and it, and an easy way to get at it could be um, okay, tonight when you go to sleep, we're going to wave a magic wand and when you wake up things are going to be much easier. What's different? And then list. Yeah, list really specifically what are the things that are just really stressful? Really um Ned Hallowell calls it, you know, what are you bad at? Let's just put it out there. We're all good at stuff and bad at stuff. What are the things that you're bad at? And this list can be not only about your child, but about yourself. Where are you getting

triggered? Is it around grades? Is it about homework not getting done? Is it about the food they're eating? You know, looking at our own triggers is a really important part of this.

Debbie R: That may be a longer list, in fact.

Debbie K: Right! Exactly.

Debbie R: Speaking from personal experience. Um, okay. So then once we have identified the challenges in detail what's the next step?

Debbie K: The next step is to identify your child's strengths and interests. And this can be a really new step for a lot of families because of the traditional system we've been talking about, but with the 2e adults that are thriving that I've worked with, they usually find their groove when they focus on something that they enjoy and they're good at. So pouring energy into strengths and interests is an absolutely vital part of the journey. So here we can make another list what your child's interested in, what they enjoy doing at school or out of school, what they like to talk about, what they're good at. And you know, if you have a child who they just haven't identified real strengths and interests, then you could really go on a journey of exposing them to things. Going to the museum, going sledding, checking out a sample class. You know, in our family we said you need to always be doing some sort of sport and an instrument because my kids are very musical. I don't care what sport it is, I don't care what instrument it is or maybe even another after school class, but we've always made trying things for enrichment not optional.

Debbie R: Okay, great. And again, the goal of this and, and I would imagine that these strengths and interests change, maybe the strengths don't change so much, but the interests would certainly change over time. So it's important to kind of refresh this list from time to time?

Debbie K: Absolutely. And what I hear from a lot of parents as well, it's all about video games, you know, interest is, you know, 24/7 about video games. And what I would say to that is you can take that interest and springboard it into, let's say a drawing class to draw video game figures or playing in the park, acting out Minecraft. Um, there's a lot of different ways you can extend an interest.

Debbie R: Yes, absolutely. Okay. So tell me what step four is because this is something I'm not familiar with and I'm very curious.

Debbie K: Okay. Step four is discovering Kaizen. And Kaizen is a Japanese term and it's the process of continuous improvement through small steps. So I've worked with families for a long time and I think what is really challenging is when we read a parenting book or we seek help from a professional, often the next steps are vague. They're murky. So we really want to hone in on what is a tiny step you can take to move the needle forward. And lasting change really happens with tiny steps, much more than large, sweeping steps. So you've got your list of challenges, you've got your list of strengths and interests. And now we want to

think about what small steps we could take to boost the challenges and also boost the strengths and interests.

And um, in our summit that's coming up, I did an interview with Collin Diedrich who's just an amazing guy. He, his story is about LD to PhD, how he had severe learning differences and ended up with a PhD. And he really talks about how taking small steps has really helped him. And this sort of brings us into step five, which is running an experiment. And his whole secret sauce is trial and error and getting really comfortable with the idea that failure is part of the journey. Whether, whether you're neuro-atypical or neuro-typical, this idea of becoming a self scientist and taking small steps forward that are very calculated based on your challenges and interests. There's going to be so much trial and error and just knowing that we're going to need to do a lot of pivoting, because some experiments work and some don't, is such a helpful mindset.

Debbie R: So. Absolutely. And now I'm thinking of the Friends episode where Ross says pivot like 30 times in a row. But I do love that word. I think it's something we need to do with our kids a lot. Um, can you give us an example of applying step four, just an example of a kid with a specific challenge? Maybe the challenge is struggling with follow through on homework or something like that or why don't you go ahead. You can give us an example. I just want to know how to kind of apply that process of that continuous improvement through small steps to a specific challenge and strength.

Debbie K: Yeah, absolutely. So I'll talk about my son Jack. He was having trouble sort of initiating with his homework, getting started on homework. And in general getting homework done was very difficult and if we focus just on getting homework done, that's too vague. So we really had to look at what part of getting homework done is really hard. And when we looked at it, we looked at the patterns, it's the getting started part of homework and he realized it is really hard to get focused on getting started. So we sort of brainstormed, okay, what small steps could we take and run different experiments to see what would happen. And he tried different things and the one that really worked was when it's hard to focus, to get his heart beat up. And he would go out in the driveway and shoot hoops. He also tried jumping jacks, running down the hall a few times and it worked. So what a valuable lesson to say, you know, when I'm having trouble getting focused, I need to go get my heart rate up and now that's sort of in his repertoire.

Debbie R: That's great. So when you're thinking then for that step five, running an experiment and doing this trial and error, I'm just curious even with this example, was this something that he came up with on his own? Are you going online or reading articles to see what other people do to support this? How do you kind of brainstorm those ideas?

Debbie K: Um, yeah, there's all different kinds of ways. I find learning from other parents can be so important, researching online. Now there's a deeper story here. So what we did was we were working with a private executive function coach and she had lots of good ideas and you know, my poor kids, they were being parented by a therapist, and one day Jack just said, you know, hold on, enough, I'm, I'm

tired of people working on me. I'm, I want to try it my way. He, he was just sort of done with it. He said, I want to do it my own way. And I said, okay, let's run this like an experiment. Let's take the next 30 days, let's give it a try your way. And he said, great. And he started to experiment with a lot of the tools that we had been talking about, with shooting hoops, with setting a timer and doing something called a pomodoro where you set it for 25 minutes and then give yourself three minutes of fun after your 25 minute chunk. He was doing pomodoros, he was doing the driveway stuff and I can't remember what else he tried. But when he decided that he was going to be his own self scientist, it was a huge shift. And he was 12 at the time and I'm so glad. I'm so glad he did that. It was a really important shift for us.

Debbie R: Yeah, I bet. I'm just wondering what advice you might have for parents who are listening, who are thinking, I love this idea, this trial and error, but my kid has such a fixed mindset. They really struggle with failure. They are a perfectionist. It's really hard to move the needle. So. And because what you're really talking about is having more of a growth mindset, right? And, and learning how to be bad at things and figuring out what works best for you. So any tips for parents whose kids are really, really fixed mindset and even running an experiment might seem like mission impossible?

Debbie K: Right. I think really naming it as flexibility. That, you know, we need to run some experiments on flexibility. And um, I did an interview with Rachel Busman from the Child Mind Institute in the upcoming summit and she talks about this probably much better than I'm going to recap it, but you can almost make it a game that, uh, you know, we're going to work on flexibility and let's think about, let's just brainstorm how we want to do that. Let's have, you know, a morning where we're going to do random things and I'm not going to tell you what they are before we do them, but you know, it might include, um, a trip to get hot chocolate. It might include a trip to a museum or maybe thinking in terms of Kaizen, you know, we want to make the steps so small, you know, if your child is, is really rigid, you can talk about, you know, what would, what would feel like an okay experiment to you? Would it be wearing a different pair of shoes, having a different breakfast, having a different parent pick you up, you know, you, you really can't slice it thin enough. You know, if your child is resistant, I would say slice it even more thin and go for a smaller step.

Debbie R: Okay, that makes sense. Alright, so let's move on then to the, the ultimate step, the last step of your strategy. Can you tell us what that is and how it works?

Debbie K: So step six is really about looking at how the experiment went. And it really helps if when you start your experiment, you start with a start time and an end time. And one question I get a lot from parents is, you know, my child is in this class, they're taking piano or dance classes and they want to stop, you know, should I force them to finish it out or pull them, I'm not sure what to do. And what I would say, let's set it up as, okay, you want to try piano. Let's agree that you'll do six lessons and after six lessons you can decide if you want to continue or not. And then let's say you've set it up like that, in an ideal world. We can't always do that, but that would be ideal. Then let's look at how did it go? Are you enjoying piano? Do you want to try something else?

Or let's say we're trying the example of focusing on homework. Okay. Wow. Getting your heart rate up, really worked to get your focus up, that's fantastic. So if the experiment didn't work so well, maybe you choose another one, again, do a pivot. If there are parts that did go well, we want to celebrate those. And again, thinking about failure, you know, really you're either making progress or you're learning. There's that quote from Einstein that, you know, he says, I haven't failed, I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work. Every way that doesn't work is a step closer to what will work. So having this mindset of being a self scientist where, okay, this worked, this didn't work, what do we want to do differently? What new experiments do we want to try, what part of this do we want to celebrate, is a super important part of the process.

Debbie R: It makes total sense. And so, so if we look at this as a whole process, these six steps, is this something that the parents that you work with that it's kind of an ongoing thing? So we have to go back to step one sometimes just to remind ourselves of that new lens or we need to go back and refresh our challenges list. Like, how do we put this into practice in everyday life?

Debbie K: I would say this is really a way of life. It's a self hacking lifestyle that, you know, I've heard from so many successful 2e adults that they came upon this naturally. They said, you know, my brain works differently than other people in the world and I don't know where to go to figure out how to get the manual for how my brain works, so I'm going to have to figure it out on my own. So this is a framework that takes what they have done sort of organically that a child can learn to use as a way of thinking about their life. So yes, you can sort of formally revisit the steps. Absolutely. I think we sort of do that every quarter. Just sort of taking stock. How are things going and, you know, really anybody can benefit from looking at what am I strong at, what am I interested in, how do I want to develop and where do I need to get help with, what I'm not good at. And um, it's just sort of a self scientist way of life.

Debbie R: Yeah, makes sense and I agree that we can all, we can all benefit from doing this. I mean I feel like I've learned so much about my own process for productivity, like how I actually work in the world, my own emotional regulation strategies, like that is all learning that's come because of who Asher is, so it's fun for the whole family.

Debbie K: It is and I think one thing that I name for families that might be helpful is when your kids are young, you organically come up with a way of doing things that might not necessarily be the best way of doing things because either it's hard to get out the door or there's too much head butting. So to just name that, hey, we can sit down and have conversations about the morning routine is tough, how you know, and it just sort of came to be organically that way. Let's look at it and see what points of that routine we want to be different. Is it hanging up the towel that's hard? Is it getting up from the table after breakfast that's hard? Like we can just turn the microscope on what we want to tweak to make it go smoother. And that's a thing and we can do it and make life easier.

- Debbie R: Now you have teenagers so I'm just wondering, is there a point when our kids reach a certain age in adolescence where they're, in your experience, less interested in doing this kind of work or having these kinds of meetings with us?
- Debbie K: Well, I think what happens if you're using this, this way of thinking, is that the child over time internalizes it. So I would say with my 16 year old, we very rarely have these conversations, but he speaks this way now. He, he took a big step this year, he's driving, he's doing part time running start. So he's doing sort of half high school, half college and um, I'll say, you know, hey, I noticed you have this one grade that's, that's pretty low. What, what are you thinking about that? And um, he came back and he said, well, I really looked at it and I need to be getting in bed earlier, I need to be doing my homework in between classes and not late at night. And he initiated the conversation about at what points he needs to do a pivot and I have to say I was really proud of him that I'm like, wow, okay. He's been listening and has now internalized that as a way of thinking about himself.
- Debbie R: Yeah, I mean I think that's the goal. That's amazing. That's inspirational for me to hear and I'm sure for many listeners, so something to work towards. Very cool.
- Debbie K: And then I think also being transparent as, as an adult and narrating what is difficult, you know, I, I still do that. Putting on a huge summit we've had lots of challenges and so there's a lot of dinner time conversation about, huh, you know, I, I thought it would work this way, it's not working this way. I need to pivot. What do you guys think? And you know, being vulnerable that hey at, at any age where we're thinking about things this way.
- Debbie R: Yeah, that's a great reminder. Okay. So you've mentioned the summit a couple of times. Um, I'm familiar with it, I have participated in it and I am again. And can you just take a few minutes to tell listeners about The Bright and Quirky Summit and what they can expect?
- Debbie K: Yeah, absolutely. So on January 28th, our Bright and Quirky Child online summit is going to begin. It's absolutely free and it goes for seven days. We've got 28 speakers. Oh wait, no, we have 30 speakers. We have 30 speakers and um, it's really the who's who from the fields of giftedness, ADHD, autism, anxiety, learning differences. And my goal is to give parents really usable strategies and insights from the leaders in the fields to really help move the needle for their child, help do all the things that we've been talking about. Just interviewing these people, I don't know if you ever feel this way, but my heart just gets so full and I feel so grateful that there are so many experts that, that just want help and have so much great information to share. So that's, that's my hope that we can connect parents no matter where they live in the world with this great information.
- Debbie R: And I will just say yes, I feel that way on a regular basis. And uh, and you do have a great lineup and you're a great interviewer too. I know that it's, it's a lot of pressure, I think sometimes to be interviewing these super high profile thought leaders, Temple Grandin and you know, these people. So I think you do a fantastic job of really bringing out just kind of fresh, fascinating information from them. So, so that starts on January 28. Listeners, yes I will have links in the show

notes pages, so definitely check that out. And is there anything else that you wanted to share with us before we sign off Debbie? I know you've got one thing you're brewing on. Do you want to give us a little sneak peek of, of what you're working on?

Debbie K: Yes, absolutely. So we've got the summit and I think it's going to be really informative and then we've got something new in the works which is based on what families are telling me that they want and how I work with families. We're calling it the Bright and Quirky Idea Lab. And in the Idea Lab, people can do Q&A with the experts, they can do, um, online breakout sessions with other parents. And really it is a place to learn this self scientist lifestyle and how to sort of embody and live and practice this process of experimentation because really what works for one 2e child doesn't necessarily work for the next one. So if parents are feeling like they're alone on this journey, that they aren't getting the information or the strategies that they want, this is a place to really play with the ideas, to connect with other parents on a similar journey and move the needle forward. So I am super excited about it. It is in itself an experiment. So if parents are up for experimenting, I think we'll have a lot of fun in it.

Debbie R: Awesome. Well listen, Debbie, thank you so much. This has been really insightful for me and given me lots of food for thought even that I can apply as soon as we get off this call. So thank you for, thank you for sharing. Thanks for the work that you do for this community and thanks for coming by the podcast.

Debbie K: Oh, thanks Debbie. I, uh, I'm grateful for the work that you do. I like being part of a 2 Debbie team on the 2e battlefield. So, um, thanks so much. I really appreciate it.

## RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- [Positive Impact Family](#) (Debbie's website)
- [Bright & Quirky Summit](#)
- [Child Mind Institute](#)
- [Ned Hallowell](#)