

Tilt Parenting Podcast: Parenting the Child You Didn't Expect While You Were Expecting [Transcript]

Debbie: As soon as I began developing the idea for the TILT podcast, you were on my list to interview because I believe in and have experienced the work you do in support of parents raising differently-wired kids. And I know how powerful it is. As an introduction, you're a Martha Beck-certified master life coach, a parenting coach, a nature-based coach, a former teacher, and a parent. Could you tell us how you personally came to be doing your work in support of parents?

Margaret: Yes, so I have a twelve-year-old son who is on the autism spectrum and I came to be doing this work because it was work I did with myself in parenting him. He didn't talk until he was five and early on it really rocked my boat. It was not at all what I expected parenting to be like. I used to be a teacher and so when we had him, I was kind of cocky and thought: *I've got this in the bag, I totally get kids and you know, I've had thirty-five kindergarteners in my class at one point, so I've got this.* And as it turns out, I was given one of the most amazing teachers ever in my son. I like to say he kind of came out with his middle finger up. Like, *Alright. Whatever you expected things to be like, I'm going to challenge that.*

At first it was a real struggle for me because I didn't have a community that was anything but a warrior mom kind of community, where it was: *Fix the child.* You know, *We've got to go in and figure out what's wrong and take care of that.* And I had done all of that stuff and sought help and got therapies. But, I didn't start to see a change in my parenting until I experienced coaching and got coaching for myself and realized: *Wow, there's so much of importance around my perspective and what I'm bringing to this relationship as a parent to this child.*

So I began utilizing the tools I was given and playing with them in my real every day life and things just started to shift. I began to find peace and joy in parenting...I began to feel more empowered as a mother. I felt like I wasn't always at the mercy of what was showing up...I could look at things in a different way. So I implemented all these things into my life and began to see how it impacted my relationship with him and how things started to improve. And the teacher in me wanted to share that with other people because it felt so much better. It felt like there was possibility again.

Debbie: You and I have been Facebook friends for many years, and about four years ago I saw you post something about a virtual class you were launching called: [Parenting the Child You Didn't Expect While You Were Expecting](#). And that really caught my eye because that was at a time when it felt like my world blowing up, or maybe imploding...whatever way you want to look at it. But the journey I was on with Asher was certainly *not* going the way I had planned. Could you tell us about that class and why you created it?

Margaret: There are so many expectations that parents have, whether you're expecting a child or you've adopted children or have come to be parents in an unexpected way. You know, when I had Andrew, I had those same expectations, but I couldn't stand by them anymore. And I realized that so many parents have experienced the same thing: they expect it to be one way and now it's not.

So, the class helps parents go through the process of letting go of those expectations. And it is a *process*, because we are human and there are hopes for what parenting is going to be like and it's important that we allow ourselves to process the emotions that come up. It's important to recognize there are thoughts we have about how things *should* be or how things *should* go and understand what to do with those totally normal thoughts. And it's also important to move through those thoughts and have a community where people don't feel like what they're experiencing is abnormal. Because we're all going through some sort of thing that might seem crazy if you're talking about it on the playground, but in this community? It's like, "Oh, yeah! You've dealt with that too?"

So there's this community support of realizing *I'm not alone in this* and then moving through that to, *How can I celebrate what it is that my child has to offer? And what are the lessons that my child is here to teach me?* I feel like our kids are here to teach us so many things. Personally, I was a total control freak and the more I tried to control my son, the more miserable I was. So, releasing that control has been a lesson that keeps coming up and up and up for me.

Debbie: When I took your class, it shifted a lot for me. Even though I wasn't able to make many of the live calls, I could listen to the recordings and hear stories from other moms. That community aspect was really important to me at the time because I felt so alone in what I was going through. Just hearing other women's stories about what they were feeling and the painful emotions everyone was struggling with really helped me feel like I wasn't alone, that it was normal to be experiencing these things. And that was hugely comforting.

But what you just said was the key for me. I think what changed everything for me was realizing that, as a control freak myself, I was so focused on, for lack of a better word, trying to "fix" Asher. *How can I fit this kid into the system? How can I fix these problems so we can go on our way and I can let this parenting journey look the way I want it to look? How can we stop the meltdowns from happening? How can I get him to be less disruptive in school?*

It felt so overwhelming and made me feel so out of control. And through your class I learned that it was within my control to "be" in that experience in whatever way I chose and that the only thing I could control was how I was going to be in relationship to what was happening around me. That was huge game changer for me.

Margaret: It's so empowering. I was part of so many Facebook forums and groups where all the energy was focused on "what are you doing for the *child*?" And that totally spiraled things out of control because I was like, *Oh my gosh, I've done all of that and I'm exhausted and I'm frustrated and I'm annoyed because it's not working.* To be able to have that shift and realize—*Wait, I can control my thoughts, I can control my experience of this and how I enter into it*—that was *huge*. It's so powerful and I'm still blown away every time I remember that. I still get tangled up once in a while, but the key for me is noticing that and taking that step back and being like, "Okay, wait hold on. What am I bringing to this?"

Debbie: I feel like that's the piece that's missing for a lot of parents. So many of us are looking for help. We're buying books that we think could give us some insight or we're following a school's recommendation on occupational therapy or whatever is going on, but so little of the support out there is geared towards supporting the *parents* emotionally. And I

think that is something that needs to change. I find it confusing that there's not more help like this for parents out there.

Margaret: And what's interesting is, I used to take my son to therapy to work on things like his perseverating and stimming on things and the fact that he was very controlling and anxious. And then they would send him home with me where *I* would persevere and *I* was controlling. Now looking back, I realize I was everything I was trying to help him to overcome. We have to be ready for it. We have to get to the point where we realize that it's not about the child.

One of the problems with our expectations is that we're expecting our kids to be different from who they are. They are who they are. We can exhaust ourselves and do all sorts of things to try and change them, but the peace came to me when I realized, *Hold on. He is who he is. Would I want someone coming into my life and changing who I am? And would that even work?* It wouldn't. So I had to place the focus back on me, which seems so counterintuitive to many parents who feel everything they do has to be for the child. But taking care of yourself and doing things like breathing and creating some distance to see what's actually going on is actually so helpful. It's allowed me to actually become the mother that I want to be.

Debbie: I love what you said about just *noticing* those strong emotions that we have when something is happening. Usually when those strong frustrations are coming up in me or in my husband, it's because Asher isn't doing something that we *think* he should be doing or he's not behaving the way we think he *should* be. And I'm constantly reminding myself: *Wait, he is doing this. So me being upset because he's not doing what I think he should be doing is a complete waste of time. He is who he is. He's doing the best he can.* And I always try to shift my thinking to: *What can Asher learn through this situation?* I try to remember that a situation is happening because he doesn't have the skills he needs to handle it. It has nothing to do with me—it's about him. Then I can shift my intention of figuring out what I can do in that situation to support him in learning or developing those skills while also taking care of myself. That's been really helpful for me.

Margaret: That's so awesome that you're able to do that because it's creating some distance from the situation. These situations can often be really intense and sometimes you can get tangled up in that intensity. So being able to get some distance and see what is actually going on is great. *What can I help him to learn that he's ready for? Maybe the expectation was a too big or too much of a leap, so how can I support him?* And part of that is thinking: *Okay, I know who he is and I know how he learns best.* And if you're at the point where you don't know how your child learns best, then play around and be a detective. Does he learn through audio stuff, is it through visual input, is it through actually moving things kinesthetically? It's about learning what works best for your child and helping to support them in that way so they can learn. That's where the empowerment is. It's no longer, *he's doing this to me.* It's just, *It is what it is. It's happening. How can I support him?* And that ends up supporting you.

Debbie: One of the biggest things you helped me learn how to do through your course is to *breathe*. The concept of breathing sounds so simple. *Oh, just take some deep breaths.* I think many people don't take it seriously as a strategy. I remember you were talking about

taking deep breaths, and I realized I was taking breaths, but I was kind of faking it. I was breathing, but I was still pissed while doing it. I wasn't fully committed to breathing and having the outcome I wanted it to have. So you suggested that I take a really deep breath and hold it for a count of five and then slowly release it and repeat that a couple of times.

Margaret: Yes.

Debbie: So I started doing that when I was about to blow up myself; maybe Asher was having a meltdown or something was happening and I was about to react in a very emotional way that I knew would be like tossing gasoline onto the flames. I remember the first time I tried it—it was hard to make myself do it but after repeating that cycle of taking the breath holding it and slowly releasing it a few times, my energy shifted. I was like, *Oh my god it's a miracle!* I was so excited because that little act of taking that moment for myself changed everything. Because as soon as I calm down and my energy shifts, Asher's energy diffuses. It's like magic. Why do you think breathing is so effective for parents like us? Why is that a part of what you do?

Margaret: Taking that deep breath and holding it for a few seconds and then slowly releasing it helps to reset your system. What you were describing before is that feeling of needing to take action, like fight or flight. Most of the time as parents we can fight with our energy, our words, our tone, and our emotions. So taking those deep breaths helps to reset that system calm things down. Even thinking about it makes me want to talk slower, it makes me want to create some distance and some space, it helps to relax everything, your heart rate goes down. And in creating that calmer energy, then you get untangled from whatever it is that's going on.

And that allows a different perspective. It's so important to allow yourself to take care of yourself first. When I'm ready to erupt—I call it the volcano feeling—I have to first notice when that I'm at that place. And in my family, there's no judgment if you do erupt. But the next time it happens, I try to recognize that feeling and when I notice it, I take a deep breath. When I first started doing this, I would have to go in slow motion and be so conscious of it. But as you got to see and as I've seen, when you do take care of yourself and create that space and that calmer energy, it's like magic. Because the child is kind of confused, like, *Wait...what just happened? I know she was going to yell at me and now I don't understand what's going on.* So they can become curious or wonder what just happened.

It's kind of like when I'm PMSing. There are times when I want to pick a fight with someone, but I don't necessarily know why. I just want someone to interact with me. But it's no fun to argue with yourself and it's no fun to fight with yourself. So as parents, if we recognize that, *Wait, this is their experience. They're not able to process their emotions and handle the hormones that are coming through. But all I have to do right now is take care of myself and just breathe.*

Debbie: I love the analogy of the volcano—I think a lot of people can relate to that. A lot of kids who are differently-wired, especially if they are more intense like a kid with ADHD or they're on the spectrum or are a perfectionist or gifted, can be pretty tightly wound and have intense emotional responses to things. But when we, as their parents, take care of ourselves and notice when *we're* about to erupt, we're modeling exactly what we want our children to learn. And the fact is that we as adults have so much work to do in this area. I often consider

that the emotional regulation strategies I'm trying to help Asher learn are things I probably didn't learn until I was thirty. But it's great to be transparent and open with your child about what you're doing. I try to say things like, "I need some space" or "I need to take some rest," so he can see that I also struggle with big reactions and here's how I'm working on it. So it's great for taking care of yourself, but it's also helping children see a process modeled that can work for them as well.

Margaret: What I love about that is that it lets them know that it's not just them who needs to work on this. Mom's working on this, too. At OT and through his school, my son learned a number system of where his body is and where his emotions are, and it's something that I use, too. Like, five is ready to have a total tantrum meltdown; one is not responsive at all, just kind of there; three is kind of humming along perfectly. So sometimes I'll say, "My body is at a four-and-a-half. I'm almost at a five." And he knows what that means. So it's great if you can find a language that makes sense for you and your child.

As a parent, I think it's important to have that language to say, "I hear you and I'm done," and to be okay with that. I think sometimes as parents of these differently-wired kids, we can put expectations on ourselves that we need to be supermoms and we need to be doing things all the time to help them. But it's important to be honest and say, "That's really annoying" or "You're really annoying me and I need to go in my room for five minutes" or "I need to take some time to take some deep breaths." Sometimes I say, "This is how I'm feeling...what should I do?" and have him do the problem solving. "Do you want me to yell at you? No, okay. So, what do I do?" And he'll say, "I think you should just go in your room and have some quiet time." Perfect.

Debbie: That's a great turnaround, because as soon as you do that, it makes them curious, shifts the energy, and catches them off guard, and that can stop what's been going on in that moment that's been difficult.

Before we go, are there any other tips you might have for parents who are in the thick of it and just realizing that their path is going to look different from what they expected? Maybe they're starting to get feedback from a preschool teacher or maybe they've been doing this for a few years and they've been feeling really tapped out and overwhelmed by kind of everything. Do you have any go-to strategies or pieces of advice for those parents?

Margaret: The most important thing is to take care of yourself and allow yourself to have time be okay with the emotions that are bubbling up. This is a huge part of what I help people with and it's something that I avoided like a pro at first. But then I allowed myself to process the emotions that were already there, the anger that I had no choice in this, the fear of what I was making it mean for my life, for his life, for everything. Once I allowed myself to process and release those emotions and to be honest with myself that there were things that weren't quite what I expected and we were going to be on a different path, it became okay to ask for help. And I started to have a greater sense of clarity that it's going to be okay.

Debbie: That's a whole other conversation that I want to have with you. I'm hoping you can come back on the show and we can talk about the emotional journey. When I worked with you one-on-one, back when I started homeschooling Asher and we had just moved to Amsterdam, you got me through some of the worst months of my life. You helped me to see how important it is to honor your own emotional response.

I absolutely love what your work is about—finding more peace and joy in parenting today. I love that vision and message, and it's completely in alignment with what we're trying to create here at TiLT. I'm grateful to be able to bring you into this conversation...thank you so much.

Margaret: Thank you and it's been so much fun. I can't wait to come back.