

Tilt Parenting Podcast: Alison Bower on When School Isn't a Fit: What to Expect and How to Handle it [Transcript]

Debbie: I'm so excited you're a part of TiLT and, as I probably remind you most every time we talk, you've been a huge part of my personal parenting support team so I'm excited to share you and your brilliance with our community. But first, a little introduction. You're an educator and a parent coach based in Seattle. You have more than sixteen years' experience in teaching, administration, curriculum planning, management, and professional development for early childhood elementary and middle schools. You have taught parenting classes or presented at companies like Starbucks HQ and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation as well as many public and private schools. And you have a new responsibility as the communications manager at the ed tech nonprofit Enlearn. You've also got three amazing boys, and you are a stepparent and I know being a stepmom is part of how you identify and being a blended family.

Alison: That's right.

Debbie: I know there are so many things we could talk about regarding raising differently-wired kids, but for this conversation we're going to talk about schooling and, more specifically, how parents can best navigate figuring out where their children can thrive when it comes to school. And a little disclaimer—Alison has been advising me on my homeschooling journey with Asher since the beginning and has also been there through our many challenges in finding a school fit.

So, speaking of school fit...I think one of our first conversations around school was back when Asher was in preschool. And it's at that time where many parents with differently-wired kids, when their child is three, four, five, that they're really starting to realize—

Alison:—*something* is showing up here that doesn't look familiar to other people.

Debbie: *Exactly.* For me, I was starting to get notes home from the director of the preschool or you know, I'd get notes or calls...

Alison: ...or handwritten notes from Asher.

Debbie: Yes...complaining about his lunch. But I do remember starting to feel very stressed because I didn't have any rulebook for what to do and I was really concerned. I remember you came over one night and I was like: *Can they kick him out?*

Alison: Yeah, I remember that.

Debbie: I didn't know what it was going to look like. I didn't know how I should be addressing it or what I should expect the school to do. You've been an administrator in several schools. So, could you tell us—what does that situation look like from the school's perspective? You know, when a school starts to notice “something's going on?”

Alison: So, there are a couple of things that happen. The first thing is, you're often dealing with preschool and preschool parents. From the administrator and teacher's perspective,

often what you're dealing with is parents who have never had children before. I mean, yes sometimes you're getting the parents' third child or fourth child, but regardless you're dealing with young families and people who don't have a lot of experience being parents. And as we know there's not a lot of training out there in general for parents raising typical children let alone somebody's who's differently-wired.

So, I think that what starts to happen is the administration starts to see that the child is suffering on some level and that their program isn't able to serve the child. And that's the language a parent is going to hear. The language they're going to hear is, "We're not sure we are able to serve your child." And really, that's a euphemistic way of saying we don't think you should be here. That's a euphemistic way of saying, "This isn't going to work out and you might want to start getting your little ducks in a row to figure out what's going to happen next."

Now, that said, you have to remember that if you're in a little private school and they have a culture of community, there are a bunch of other children there as well. And it can be really hard to remember that when your own child is suffering and you want your child to be included and have a good experience. The responsibility of the *administration* is to make sure that every child in that program is experiencing something positive.

So it's a really strange balance that has to be built by the teachers and the administration. A lot of times what will happen is, there will be a child who has really intense gifts. So, they have some things that they do that are wildly beautiful and amazing. You know, your eyes start sparkling when you see this child learning and thinking and speaking and contributing in certain ways in class. And sometimes that's coupled with things that are either really challenging for other students to attend to and understand or for the child themselves to understand. You know, *I'm behaving in this way and nobody seems to want to be around me* or the teacher doesn't know what to do because it's a new situation for the teacher. And that's when things get really tricky because you're managing fourteen or fifteen different kids and if, say, two of your kids are differently-wired, that's *a lot* of work and *a lot* of managing. And then you have all the *other* parents saying: *Why are those 2 children getting so much attention? We're paying to be here as well.*

Debbie: Right.

Alison: It's *really* tricky for administrators. And so there's a discovery process and it can't really be rushed. It's really hard. I don't know if you remember Deb, but when Asher was little it was like, he's fine in *these* situations but in *those*...you were still learning what his triggers were. And Asher's super social, so kids were really drawn to him. He didn't have typical antisocial behaviors and he wasn't physically hurting people. But he required a *lot* of extra attention for other reasons, and those other reasons are always that the child's needs are not being met.

And when a child's needs are not being met, they will react. They will hunt around and search and fight to get what they need. Not to punish anyone, but because they're upset, they're sad, they're feeling isolated, they're feeling misunderstood, or they're being punished. And when they're really little, they don't understand why. And so it's our job as administrators to guide the parent and it's really hard for parents of children this age to hear what they're hearing.

Debbie: Really, really hard.

Alison: I remember another situation that was really telling. So, you're this very self-aware, mindful parent and you and Derin were both working really hard trying to figure out what was best for Asher. He had been in a couple different school situations and you and I were going to get together and have a conversation where I was going to say I think it's time for Asher to be homeschooled. I had it all set up, you were going to come to my house—

Debbie: —yeah, I remember...we were having tea.

Alison: And I had this folder of information and I was thinking, *This is the day. She's going to get it, she gets it* and I was thinking that because there are few people as self-aware as you. But when you have a child who you love to distraction, it's really hard to see everything that's going on around you. And when society is telling you, "No, this is the path every child is supposed to take," it's really hard to hop off that path.

So, you came over. I was ready to say: Okay, here are some leads. Here's a nice home schooling community that you can become a part of. And that was when you were said to me: "Do you think that we could move him over to Giddens?" which is the school I was the assistant head of at the time. And I realized, "Okay she's not quite there yet." To be honest, I felt like Asher would be a wonderful addition at any school, so I didn't really have a problem with us looking at that. But just to show you, as someone looking from the outside in, I thought you got it.

Debbie: Yeah, and that was after years of challenges in school. I mean, preschool was rough and then we started at a private school, which didn't work out so well. And it was after a year-and-a-half of that when the "tea intervention" happened. But I still wasn't ready to consider homeschooling. I still was thinking that we didn't know exactly what was going on with Asher, and I still wanted to find a fit. I wanted the "easy" solution.

Alison: Well, you weren't ready to do that much work and you also didn't have anyone in your immediate community who had taken this other path. And whenever your child is moving through something that other people's children don't seem to be moving through, it feels like you're failing somehow. Even though you look at your child and you're like, "No, no, no—this child isn't doing anything wrong. There are so many systems, there must be a school, there must be a way, there must be a place." Well, the reality is that institutional learning is not always the right fit. And what we're learning more and more is that institutional learning is *really* not the right fit for quite a *lot* of people. Even children who aren't differently-wired, even children who are quote unquote "typical" kids—they have a lot of challenges relating to institutional learning.

So, yeah. It's unusual for a parent to say, "Yeah, you know I was just thinking I would pull my child out of the very typical, normal, centuries-old method of pushing my child through school and do it myself!" That's just really unusual to expect of any parent to deduce on their own.

Debbie: I'm well aware that homeschooling isn't an option for a lot of people, and I don't think it's the magic answer for everybody. So when parents are starting to get feedback that maybe a school isn't a great fit, how can they best navigate this road of trying to find the right spot for their child? What should they be looking for? And maybe this will help guide your

answer, but we didn't have a concrete diagnosis at the time. And so I always had that issue of *Do I tell them? Do I not? What do I reveal?*

Alison: That's right. Because you feel like people will say "no" if they know the truth about the child. This is a common fear: "Well, I don't really want to apply to this private school and then show all my cards about my kid, because if I show all my cards, then that might just not even get us in the door and then we'll never know." They know that a school will just decide, *I can either take this child who has a series of things going on or I can take this child that has absolutely nothing going on. What's going to be easier for my school?*

So, what I tell parents is this: A school that does not want your child as your child is, is not somewhere where you want your child going to school. Because it's not going to work out. You cannot hide the true nature of a human being. So if a school knows what's going on with your child and does not want your child there, your child will not feel welcome there. I mean energetically, it gets really weird really quick when a school realizes that not everything has been revealed to the school about the child. Because they can't attend to the kid properly. And schools *want* to do that. Schools *want* to do a good job. There's not a school that I've worked in, and I've worked in a ton of schools, where people are trying to avoid anything. They want to do a good job.

As an example, I have worked in schools where the parents have not told the school what's going on with their child, and then their child gets there and everybody is completely unprepared for how to make that child feel safe and have a sense of belonging and a sense of significance and to feel seen and heard.

Capacity for schools to handle more and more differently-wired kids is only going to grow when more of us let people know that our children are differently-wired. For example, one of my clients is a family with two differently-wired kids. They're moving from out of the country and they really want to be upfront about what's going on with their children. And for very good reasons I had them look at a specific public school in a specific neighbourhood because I know that school has amazing resources for that family. And so that family will be well taken care of and that child will be supported and there won't be any secrets.

Imagine the feeling of having a secret, and the secret is your child who you love and who's just learning how to navigate a world that isn't set up for them. But I believe it will be. I believe it's getting closer and closer as more of us speak up and let people know that there are all these benefits and that amazing learning happens when everybody is at the table.

Getting back to your original question of "How would you tell a family to navigate this situation?" I would say *definitely* make sure to keep your eye on the ball. And keeping your eye on the ball remains to be this simple fact: If your child is *accepted* in a school as they are, that's where your child will have the best opportunity to learn. And by learning I mean learning about themselves, learning about how they learn—all the meta stuff. Which is really the *big* learning that goes on in school. If the family feels they're not accepted and the child feels *they're* not accepted, it all spills down to the child. It just spills down and it doesn't work out and the kid ends up having to leave. And then there's all this time and energy spent on protecting the child from the school that's trying to serve them.

Now, that puts parents in a really tricky spot, right? Because what if a child doesn't get accepted anywhere? The answer to that is there are schools that will let you have other things happen. I've worked in schools where you're allowed to have a paraprofessional come in for your child. I've also worked in schools where your child can be at school for a half day. I would say the best thing to do is to ask a lot of questions about accommodations. *Is there any way we can accommodate this so my child can be a part of this process for part of the time or is that not something that you do?* Some schools do. Actually, a lot of schools do. A lot of schools will say, "Yeah, we'd be willing to give that a try."

I'm finding more and more that many of the schools that are more willing than others to try these things are Catholic schools. Catholic or religious schools tend to have more of an open mind around inclusion. I know it can sound like that wouldn't be true because for a lot of people when you hear the Catholic church you don't think about inclusion. But the reality is that, at least in Seattle, a lot of Catholic schools are willing to say: "You know what, this is a child and this is a person that needs to go to school and what can we do to make this happen?"

Debbie: I think one of the challenges is that a lot of parents don't even know that they can ask these questions—they're not aware that they can create something different.

Alison: That's right.

Debbie: As I was creating TILT, I talked with a lot of parents of differently-wired kids and the number one stressor for most families was access to and affordability of alternative schooling. So it's interesting to hear that even within a public school system it's possible to figure out alternative solutions. I'm sure it varies by city and also how accustomed a school system is to looking at things differently, but it's empowering to know that you don't just have to go down this one path. You can ask questions.

Alison: You can ask questions *and* you're allowed to advocate for your child more than you probably realize. So, specifically in public schools, there are some very vigorous guidelines around special education. Basically a child's IQ has to be a certain low level to test into special education. And what happens in a lot of cities is that all the special education students are put into one classroom. In a city like Seattle that's also the case for some schools, but it's not the case for all schools. And in some instances what you can do is you can request accommodations for your child within the regular classroom.

And so, you would ask for what's called a SIT meeting. And basically that brings all the teachers and administrators that come into contact with your child together, including the counsellor and anyone else you'd like to bring to the meeting—a parent coach or an occupational therapist or a speech therapist or whomever—to find out if accommodations can be made in the classroom for your child. A lot can be accomplished in that meeting. Maybe you say it's going to be really important that my child not be in a group or he shouldn't play highly competitive games for example. You can just lay out all this stuff.

I had a SIT meeting for my son because he didn't really do well with a lot of papers and things like that. He had a 504, which is a number of the kind of document that you get if you have some sort of physical diagnosis and he had some attention stuff going on. So the millions of papers his teachers would give him were kind of pointless because they were just going to end up at the bottom of his backpack, and not just because he has attention stuff

going on, but also because he happens to be a child who's twelve. So, we had a SIT meeting that got rid of all that. He got to do everything digitally. And a lot of times teachers want to help and see what they can do. Most teachers care about the kids that they're teaching.

One thing you can do before a SIT meeting is talk to an educator and find out what kinds of questions you should ask. Have a list and don't let them throw you off your list. Just say, "We're going to get through these questions." If something isn't acceptable to you, you're allowed to tell them that it's not going to work.

Debbie: I know that for many differently-wired kids, homework is an issue.

Alison: Homework is *huge*.

Debbie: Especially for elementary-aged kids. When Asher was in school, I was pretty much like, "Yeah, this homework is not going to happen."

Alison: And even at the high school level, it's really problematic. At the local high school here, there are five different student-led groups right now helping kids at the high school deal with anxiety.

Debbie: Wow.

Alison: Because they're trying to come at it from all different angles and the administration is really worried. And one of the things the administration is most concerned about right now is homework and the amount of stress it places on these high school students.

I was very strict about the homework thing when my kids were little. I just told their teachers that they wouldn't be doing homework. So, I was like, "You can just give them a check-minus for the year in homework because they're not going to do homework," and teachers just looked at me like: "Okay..." A couple of teachers thanked me and said they didn't like giving out homework, and a couple of teachers were not thrilled about it. And then starting in like fourth grade, I would say a little bit of homework was okay, even though I don't actually agree with that and none of the research backs up that homework is helpful at all. Except for moving into high school or for kids who love to do work.

Debbie: I hope to interview someone specifically about IEPs (individualized education plans) because I think it's hugely important for parents to realize that they can have a voice in these conversations and that they're allowed to ask questions. They're allowed to advocate and be that noisy parent.

Alison: There's this feeling of having everything put upon you and that this is just the way that the system works. But what I've learned is, if you ask, a lot of times people will say: "Oh, okay. We'll try that."

Debbie: When we as parents are in the thick of it, we don't necessarily know what's going on with our kid, either. So I think it's also realizing that maybe the school doesn't have all the answers. Asher spent second grade in public school, and he had an IEP and a great young teacher who would frequently ask me for insight into how to support Asher. I even had Asher's therapist meet with him and he did what he could to do to make it work. But I

realized that I had to stop waiting for the school to fix things and instead I was going to have to play a more active role in figuring out how to make school work for him.

Alison: It's so time consuming and this is the other thing that's so hard for parents is, the amount of time that you have to spend attending to getting a differently-wired child's needs met is just higher. It just is. Whether public or private, it doesn't matter. You're either going to be negotiating the problems that your child is causing at a private school—and I say that with all the love and respect in the world—or you're going to be negotiating how your own child's needs are not being met in some way at a public or private school.

You learned when Asher was in second grade. So, you know, you were dealing with a seven year old at this point and that's a lot of years of trying to make stuff work and looking for his space and looking for his community and looking for him to land and hoping and hoping and praying and praying and doing everything right as best you could. And, you know, that's a tired parent at that point. And one of the reasons you were so tired was because it wasn't working. And that's not a rejection of your child. It's about turning this on its head. It's this idea that you're saying, "You know what? We don't choose to do this anymore because this isn't working for my child. We're going to create something different because this is unacceptable." It's a mental paradigm shift.

Debbie: It's hard to get there.

Alison: And frankly the money situation...I have no idea what to say about that. It's a *huge* problem. When are you supposed to be making these calls? When are you supposed to be going in to talk to the teacher? When are you supposed to be hiring the therapist to go to talk to the teacher if you're a person who doesn't have that access to time or money? I don't know. It's completely backwards.

Debbie: Absolutely. And then those kids who don't have someone who's able to make all those meetings get more and more marginalized.

Alison: That's right. It's a huge equity issue. It's a huge, huge equity issue and you know, your child has a right to education and it's supposed to be equal. And it's not. And so, the more we talk about this and the more we raise the issue and the more we acknowledge the fact that there are a lot of people out there trying to make it better both in public and private schools, the better. But there's really not a solution yet.

My sister's son has Asperger's and he goes to a special school that costs \$35,000 a year. And I mean, she can do that, but only fourteen other people go to that school and it's an amazing place. Why? Partially because it's run by somebody who has Asperger's who understands the whole process. But, without that school, she went through the same kinds of things you went through. She was like, I just have no idea where this kid can be. And he's delightful, he's such an awesome, hilarious guy. He has the best sense of humour. He's kind to within an inch of his life. He also has triggers and things that make it so he can't be in a typical institutional setting. It's just too much input.

Debbie: What you just said is a big reason why I wanted to create TILT in the first place. There are just so many aspects of raising differently-wired kids that need to change and education is a huge part of that.

This conversation has been so insightful—thank you for sharing all this. Hopefully parents reading this who are starting to get the input that school for their child may not look the way they expected have some ideas now about how they can be in choice. And also just to remember that our kids deserve to be in a place where they feel good about themselves and get to learn the way that they best learn.

Alison: Yeah, they do deserve it and parents deserve to be freed from that cycle of wanting their child to fit in. Which is such a normal desire. I have it too. But the more and more children I see, and the more and more parents I see, the more and more I know that there are not that many typical kids. If everyone were to raise their hand saying, “Yeah, I have a typical kid,” it wouldn’t be so many hands up.