

## Tilt Parenting Podcast: Julie George on the Role of Executive Functioning in Differently-Wired Kids [Transcript]

**Debbie:** I'm so happy to be able to share you with the TiLT community, as you're one of my go-to people and are absolutely brilliant when it comes to supporting differently-wired kids. Before we dive in, can you briefly describe for us the kind of work you do and your areas of specialization?

**Julie:** I currently have a private practice in Seattle, and I work with kids from around ten years old up through high school who are struggling with social skills, executive functioning skills, and emotional regulation. I started off working primarily with kids who had autism, but that's morphed into working with kids who are twice-exceptional. So, a lot of gifted kids paired with autism or ADHD or other kids who don't have a diagnosis at all but are struggling. I also work with girls on the spectrum—that's my other area of interest.

**Debbie:** Studies have shown that autism is more common in boys than girls, but I've been reading lately about how it also shows up differently in girls. So before we get into our conversation about executive functioning, I'm curious—what is it about working with girls that is unique?

**Julie:** When I talk about the autism spectrum, kids who are twice-exceptional make up a subset—they're kind of their own little group and they're very different. And as a result, I also have to work differently with them. Girls subset out differently as well, and one of the main ways that they subset out is that their autism *looks* different. Most of the girls I work with are also twice-exceptional, but they don't present the same way as boys. You wouldn't necessarily pick up on the fact that they have autism.

One of the big differences between the boys and the girls is that the girls are socially curious. That's the trait we look for in boys as being an indicator of autism—they're doing their own thing, they're by themselves, they're not making friends. But the girls aren't like that. They *do* want to make friendships. They're socially curious and they're initiating those relationships, although they might not be successful. The way I describe it is, it's almost like autism takes the male and female personality traits that everyone has and just exasperates them. So, that's what I see in my girls. Girls can be really bossy and demanding and say whatever they think, you know, the kind of know-it-alls. So, they tend to be looked at from a *behavioral* lens as just girls who are difficult or are behavioral as opposed to seeing where the autism is showing up and realizing that they actually have a social deficit. And while they might be interested in social relationships, they still don't understand the social environment and the social rules enough to be successful. And then they're not having those successful interactions. That happens all the time.

I've started with a lot of the girls I work with when they were eight or nine, and I love working with them because they have a very strong "*I don't care, I'm doing it my way*" way of thinking, as a lot of kids on the spectrum do. But it's really fun to watch them hit middle school. That change is really profound for them. Their internal motivation kicks in in a nice way, because all of a sudden they might have a boy that they like or they might meet some girls they like and they have this real, nice desire to start changing their behavior because

they see something that they want that might benefit them. And so there's a lot of introspection of like: "*How can I be nice now when I've been this kid who's always been different all these years in elementary school? Won't people think that's weird if all of a sudden I'm being nice?*" It's like, "*No, that's actually a good thing. Middle school is a great time to change who you are. Everybody is doing that.*"

I feel like girls are really misunderstood. I feel like I work with a lot of teams trying to get them to understand girls and where the deficits are even though they don't appear the same way as boys or what we traditionally think of as autism, right? That's what everyone has in their mind—what autism is and what it's not. And it's not kids stemming in the corner anymore, right?

**Debbie:** Right. It's not *Rain Man*. I love that. We'll need to have you back to talk on the podcast another time to specifically about differently-wired girls.

Before we dive into the content for today's show, I wanted to briefly share how you and I met. What I remember is that I went to a talk at the [University of Washington Autism Center](#). And it was several years before I had any formal diagnosis for Asher, but someone had told me about this talk happening on inflexibility or emotional regulation in kids and since I was looking for any kind of insight I could find, I went. You were one of the presenters that day and I remember being blown away by the stories you were sharing about these kids you'd worked with who used to be incredibly inflexible and intense, and then after working with you and implementing the approach you were using, they were starting to be able to catch themselves before meltdowns occurred and calm themselves on their own and I was like, *Sign me up! How do I connect with this woman?*

A few years later when we did get a formal diagnosis of Asperger's and ADHD through the University of Washington, the woman who assessed Asher said if there was one thing I should put my energy into right now it would be supporting his executive functioning development, and she gave us your name.

At that time, I didn't know what executive functioning was. I knew we wanted to work on it, but I didn't have a clue about what exactly it was. So, I'd love if we could start there. Could you explain to us what executive functioning is?

**Julie:** It's so fascinating because I feel like executive functioning has come up a lot in the last ten years. I remember when I moved to Seattle and started teaching middle school, that was my first introduction to executive functioning. Not that anyone told me what it was, but I had all these middle school kids who were leaving all their stuff everywhere and couldn't turn in an assignment. I was seeing this theme. *What was going on?*

So, executive functionings are basically brain-based skills required to effectively execute and perform tasks and solve problems. It helps the processes that help to regulate our behavior, to help us set goals, to be able to meet those goals, to balance the demands and our desires and wants and needs and have-to's. It's your working memory, emotional control, response inhibition, being able to organize or time management, planning and prioritization, sustaining attention, being able to start a task. So, all of those things.

**Debbie:** It sounds like it's everything!

**Julie:** It is. We use them every day, all the time, right? We can't get through a day without using executive function skills. Everybody has executive functioning skills they have strengths in and other areas where there is weakness. So, they tend to be divided up. There are eleven executive functioning skills, and I don't ever see a kid who has deficits in all eleven. Usually kids have some where they're doing really well and others that are more challenging.

**Debbie:** So, it sounds like executive functioning is something every kid could use work on, not just atypical kids.

**Julie:** Definitely. Executive functioning skills like our emotional control and our attention actually start as young as six-to-twelve months old; our flexibility develops between twelve and twenty-four months. Higher level skills like task initiation and organization and time management start improving in preschool and elementary. But where we see executive functioning *really* come into play with differently-wired kids is in third and fourth grade. That's when we'll start to see some issues pop up and generally teachers will say: "*Oh, everyone is going through this right now, it's fine.*" But in adolescence, which is a critical development time, our brains are just pruning everything out. And so whether you're differently-wired or have a diagnosis or not, it doesn't matter—you're going to struggle with those executive functionings during adolescence. Period. Because that's just what the brain's doing at that time and needing time to work on that.

When it comes to helping kids develop their executive functioning, I like to think of our role as a facilitator or a coach for our kids. That should be the role of a parent. That's definitely the role I play. I don't come in and say, "You have to do this, this, and this." It's more about bringing some awareness around what's going on and getting the kids to recognize their strengths and their weaknesses and think about what they can be doing differently.

In early childhood and the elementary years, as adults and specifically parents, we spend a lot of time prompting kids and doing things for them. For example, an infant's mom has her diaper bag and what you put in the diaper bag is everything that's gone wrong in your past outings, right? You put it and you're like: "Okay, I've got everything I possibly need." You're always thinking four steps ahead. We also tend to do that as adults for kids and then what we don't recognize is: "Are these kids shifting and picking that up for themselves?" A lot of times they're not and it's in middle school that this really hits parents because all of a sudden the kids are really struggling. That's because that shift hasn't happened.

Let's say a kid always forgets to bring his homework to school. Parents will come in and we'll put a system in place. But when they go through the checklist of doing their homework at night, they need to say their checklist. You can't be prompting the checklist. Because if you say the checklist, you're working on *your* working memory and not *their* working memory, right?

I think parents put a lot of pressure on ourselves to make sure our kid turns up and hands in their homework. But that doesn't allow for a child to develop their executive functioning skills. What we want to do is think about what kind of routine we can put in place for the child so they get a cue from the environment or a visual that helps prompt them to go: "*Oh, yeah I need to pay attention to this.*"

Here's the example I always use for parents: When I'm driving my car, I'm paying attention to everything. I know exactly what street I'm on, I'm paying attention to all the landmarks...I know where I'm going. But if I'm the *passenger* in the car and the person driving says to me, "Hey, do you remember what road we turn on?" I'm going to be like, "Not really," because I'm not really paying attention. Because I didn't turn on the part of my brain that said: *Pay attention to this*. Because I said to myself that somebody else has it. That's what our kids do. They're thinking, "Somebody else is going to remind me to do that, so I'm not going to file it the same way in my brain that I need to."

**Debbie:** I'm trying to do that in my day-to-day life with Asher now, especially when we run errands. Yesterday, we had to go to the *slager*, which is the Dutch word for butcher, and when we walked outside the apartment, I asked him, "So, where is the butcher anyway?" He had been there before with me many times, but when we are running around, I often tend to just grab his hand and make sure we safely cross the street and get where we're going. I'm in charge. But this time I asked him to lead me there because I wanted to know he was paying attention. I'm trying to do more of that...not just let him be the passenger.

Have you read or heard about Jessica Lahey's book, *The Gift of Failure*?

**Julie:** No, I haven't. That sounds amazing.

**Debbie:** It is—I highly recommend it. It's all about how important it is for our kids to fail, how important it is for our kids to, for example, not have us always making sure that they bring their homework, even if it means they'll get a bad grade. The premise of the book is that it's critical that kids are allowed to fail in those situations and that we're not always rescuing them.

So, when you share that homework example with middle school kids or I listen to interviews with Jessica, as the parent of a twice-exceptional kid, I'm often thinking, "Yes!" and "What is the balance? Where do I support and where do I let go?" Because our kids are on a different timeline and it's going to look different for them.

**Julie:** They *are* on a different timeline, and I think the other important thing with gifted and twice-exceptional kiddos is that one of their big traits is a deep desire for perfectionism, and failures can really set them off course. So I do think it's a balancing act. We want them to have these moments where they're figuring things out, but we also don't want them to get to a place where they think, *I can never do it. I'm not going to try again.*

When it comes to executive functioning skills, we have to provide support. You want to make sure you don't pull the support too soon, because kids will stumble and fall. So for example, we have kiddos who go between two houses and have to get homework turned in, and the homework wasn't getting to our house. Well, I don't think it's necessarily a parent's responsibility to make sure that happens. So how do we get a system set up? Maybe it's a folder system. Lots of parents do folders and they say folders don't work, but remember—there's got to be a routine that goes around the folder.

The goal is to put a routine in place so no matter where the kid is—where they're sitting, what room they're in, what time of day it is—none of those variables matter. What matters is the routine...the visual steps and the folder and the steps we're teaching to remind kids: *This*

*is my routine. I'm going to get into the habit of filing my homework in this folder every single time.* For instance, with our kiddo, he can do his daily homework fine, but where he struggles is the reading log he has to turn in every week, and that's because it doesn't have its own place. It gets pulled out, gets set on the desk in the bedroom, and then somebody has to remember to get it back into the backpack. There's not a routine of putting it into the folder and making sure it always stays in the folder and the folder is always in the backpack.

I always feel like there are several steps to executive functioning. We have to first identify what the skill is that we need to work on and then we need to create a routine. People who have really great executive functioning skills have strong routines—that's the correlation. For example, it's not that my memory is better than anyone else's, but I put such strong routines and visual supports in place that prompt me to remember to do things.

So, figuring out what that skill is and then creating the routine around it and making it visual for the kid is really important. And then it's about providing support—checking in on that until the kid has done it enough and we've seen enough success that we can pull back. We want to provide that support, but we also want to pull back. *“Okay, you've got this down when you've had five successful nights of getting this into your backpack and keeping this routine. I'm going to be putting that a little bit more on you now and this is something you're going to be in charge of and I'm not going to check in daily anymore. I'm going to check in maybe once a week and see how you're doing.”*

The next step that's really critical is motivation. What is that reinforcement, what is that motivation? If you were looking at a visual of two hills, the motivation hill needs to be higher than the task hill, because if the task hill is higher than the motivation hill, we're going to have a lot of problems. Kids are going to have a real difficult time in engaging with that.

Some kids just need the routine and the visual support created for them and then they can really take off. For kids that don't take off as much, I find that the motivation piece is crucial. So, then what are they earning to get through this? Because younger kids don't understand how important these executive functioning skills are for later on in life in the same way I start to see in my teenagers. So, when they're younger, we'll kind of dangle that carrot.

I like to set it up in a system of, we all do our work, and then we engage in our fun stuff. And so, if you want to play video games, here's your job. Your job is to be a student and part of being a student, part of living in our house, is maintaining these certain skills. And as you do those, you get access to the fun things that you want to do. Because that's how it's going to work when you're an adult. Sometimes our kids are very impulsive—they tend to think, *I want this right now and I can't put off pleasure to get through a task first.* That's an important skill to develop: *How do I get through this and know I'm going to access something fun later? How can I squash the need to do the fun thing right now?*

I have a teen I'm working with whose mom is so great about it. This teen is really into video games and they let him have an Xbox in his room. She said, “I could easily monitor it. I could easily be like, ‘Nope, we're taking it away and you're not having access to that.’” But as she told me: “In four years he's going to be nineteen and someday he's going to live on his own. So when does he learn how to monitor his video game playing, you know?” And I thought: “That's so true.” We have to go through the bumps of it, right? And the bumps are he's late for school because he started playing video games and he didn't keep track of time and so

then he comes to see me and I have to get him to think about the problem. I try to have him identify some solutions and then go try them out. Then he comes back in and tells me how it went. So that's another piece of it. We want don't want to tell them the solution, but rather we want to allow them to come up with an idea on their own. We need to be open to trying it out, even if in our mind we believe it's not going to work.

**Debbie:** Yes. When you were talking about the homework packet—that was one of my questions: Do you sit down with the child and work on that together or are you creating the plan for them?

**Julie:** It depends on their age. When they're younger, I might create the plan. But by the time they get to fifth and sixth grade, we're doing it together. Because the reality is, my brain is wired differently than their brain. I might see organization in a certain way that their brain is never going to see, so it will never be beneficial for me to give them my system or make them do it the way it makes sense to me. It has to make sense to them. And a lot of our differently-wired and twice-exceptional kiddos have some very strong thoughts and feelings about how things should go, even though they've never had an experience. It's important to give their ideas a try.

Late middle school and elementary school are the practice years—things don't count the same way they do in high school. In high school we have to get things more under control. But in middle school and elementary school, we can have lots of flexibility to try things and see if they work. They can come back and say: "That didn't really work." And our job is to say, "Okay, let's talk about some other options then." Then we can go through the different ways to look at a problem and the way it makes the most sense to you as a parent, which helps the kids because a lot of the time they only have their one way of thinking about it. And they don't step back and look at it in different layers. So, that's a great skill to work on—*let's talk about different solutions*. That helps with their flexibility and their emotion regulation at the end of the day.

**Debbie:** Yes...developing self-knowledge...

**Julie:** Right. It helps them to learn how they operate. What are those areas of weakness? How does that come up and how did they do that? Because what I find when I work with adults is if we don't do an intervention then they have their one way of solving a problem. And then when they go to solve a problem that way and it doesn't work, they end up feeling bad about themselves. Then the next time a problem comes up, they feel like they don't have any other strategies and so they do the same thing again, telling themselves that this time it's going to be different. I don't know how many twenty-somethings have said that to me. *I'm just going to do it differently this time*. I always ask them, "How are you going to do it differently?" And then they go away and use their same tools and they still don't have success. So if we're not coming in and doing a lot of coaching around other ways to approach a problem, the feedback loop tends to stay negative. It's important to explore questions like "How can you be successful? What are some of the consequences?"

Twice-exceptional kiddos are very unique this way. Because they're so strong academically, they're not building their executive functioning skills at the same level that we see in typical elementary school kids. Because twice-exceptional kids can often easily memorize what they're supposed to do, they don't need all the practice that typically happens in schools.

**Debbie:** That's interesting. I never thought of it that way.

**Julie:** Actually I find with my twice-exceptional kiddos that it hits them harder come high school, not even middle school. In middle school, they can often still get by. They're still able to get their fifteen missing assignments done right before grades are due and they'll still get an A, right? So, then the feedback they're getting is: *This works. I'm still getting straight As. I don't see any reason to do it differently.* And so it's important to make sure that when those opportunities hit where it *does* make a difference, we're in there and we're really coaching them. And I like the word coaching because it tends to keep it positive. What we're doing is helping them with what needs to happen as opposed to telling them all the ways that they're doing it wrong.

**Debbie:** Can you share any other examples of what executive functioning deficits might look like in twice-exceptional or differently-wired kids? Where do those deficits tend to show up, especially as we transition from late elementary into the middle school years?

**Julie:** The three main causes to pop up with executive functioning are ADHD, autism spectrum, and traumatic brain injuries. Children with autism spectrum disorders are going to have a lot more of those flexibility, emotional control, and metacognition issues. For ADHD kids, it's about inhibition, attention, time management, and working memory. So, I find that most kids who have any kind of executive functioning issues also tend to have some sort of emotional regulation issues. They just go hand-in-hand.

And so we see that inability to be flexible pop-up, especially in late elementary. And at that point, it's going to be looking really big now in a way maybe it didn't when kids were younger. Or people may have been more accepting of it when kids were younger and when they're older it shines through a little bit more brightly. I see that big-time in late elementary because that's when schools typically start doing projects. So, now kids have this big project due in two months and they have to break it down into parts. And they have to be able to not only chunk that out, but then they have to be able to look at the calendar and time manage those parts: *When am I going to do these activities?*

So a lot of times kids will announce two nights before it's due: "I have a project due and I have to get it all done," when it was really a six-week project. And with our gifted kiddos, they're perfectionists, so they're going to want to do incredible work and detail all around it, even when it isn't even necessary. They don't really know how to prioritize. This is a big thing I'm working on with several of my kids. They have major anxiety about their homework, but it's actually not because their homework load is super large—it's that they do every single assignment at one-hundred-and-fifty percent and they don't know how to realize this is only a five-point assignment. They don't know how to bring it down a few notches—they want to do everything at A++ status, which can be really hindering for projects, because then they tend to get stuck in: "I want to do *this*. And I want to do *this*. And maybe I should go research *that* thing..." And their project just grows bigger and bigger and bigger.

Kids need to learn how to scale it down and take teacher feedback. I just had this happen with one of the kids I work with. He was doing a history paper and finally I had to say, "Your teacher gave you feedback. All you're going to do is the feedback." And he would say, "But now I want to add..." And I'd say, "You don't get to add anything; you only get to address the teacher feedback." Well, his school had a competition for this project and he got first place

and so now he's going to States with it. So he said, "The judges gave us feedback—I wish I had more than this weekend to work on it because..." And I had to remind him that he has a first place paper already. I told him, "The judges gave you a little bit of feedback, but it should not take you more than an hour to implement that feedback." But his thinking and mind is so big, he doesn't realize that him barely showing up is already an A compared to most other kids. But that's part of being twice-exceptional—they want to do a *really* good job. So, working on projects like these tends to be challenging.

Task initiation is another thing I like to work on with kids because it's interesting to see what the thing is that holds them back from starting a task. I use this example all the time: There are certain activities in my private practice that I have no problem doing and there are other activities that I have a harder time with. So, when it comes to writing reports and especially doing presentations, I will drag my feet and procrastinate. So I decided that all of my presentations would have three sections or themes and I made a graphic organizer to help me walk through the development of that. Now as soon as I get asked to do something, I just pull out that sheet and start brainstorming ideas and think about where they fit into the three themes. Once I've identified my three themes, it's easier to sit down and stay focused on creating the presentation.

So it's important to help these kids recognize how they like to work. Do they like to tackle the hard stuff first or do they like to do easy stuff to get into the flow of it and then tackle the hard stuff.

**Debbie:** Yeah, task initiation is definitely something we work on a lot here, so I relate to most of what you're saying in terms. It's been really interesting to work with Asher on that overwhelm he experiences when something new is introduced. My most recent book is called *Doable: The Girls' Guide to Accomplishing Just About Anything*. It's written for teen girls, but Asher and I go through some of the strategies in the book so he can learn how to break big projects down into smaller, doable chunks. It's been really interesting to watch. Truth be told, I actually get excited now when I introduce a new school project that seems really big and notice that the resistance isn't there as much. He has more of a willingness to dive in and not feel totally overwhelmed.

**Julie:** Yes, that's big. Another thing I will see with these kids is their having trouble doing things that they don't want to do or aren't appealing to them. And it's funny because I've had some high school kids the last couple years who've said, "I'm just waiting to like it before I actually do it." And I'm always like, "Oh buddy, here's how this works—there is *always* a whole list of things that you have to do that you don't actually like to do. Forever. Like for the rest of your life. And he was shocked. He was really under this impression that at some point in adulthood he would hit a switch and like everything he had to do. I was like: "No, no, that's not how this works."

So the question then is, how can these kids learn to persevere through something that is more challenging for them? I think what's nice about your example with Asher is that kids want to show up and do their best. So, when they don't, that means there's a skill lacking. They've got to get the skill down first, and once they do and they start to understand they have options, we'll see the behavior shift. Because at the end of the day, what keeps us regulated with our emotions is our ability to recognize them as well as our ability to come up

with solutions to obstacles. And a lot of the time our kids don't have those solutions. They are not great problem solvers. And so they get stuck and build up resistance and that comes through in behavior.

I always try to say to teens and parents, if they could do it they would—they'd just engage in it. So, if they're not, it's because they're stuck and they don't always know how to ask for help even though they've got these really high IQs and they're these really smart kids. They're not good at being able to identify what the problem is and then ask for help. Or maybe they see asking for help as a weakness, right? They don't feel like they should have to ask for help because they know they're really smart and so there's all kinds of internal chatter that can hold them back from seeking out assistance in ways we would expect them to.

**Debbie:** I love that. If they could do it, they would do it. I believe that.

**Julie:** I just had a twice-exceptional client who was having a hard time in art and I was saying to his mom that, you know, if he likes something and he knows what to do, he always jumps in. But in art, he's not doing anything. And the teacher emailed the parents and said, "Well, he needs to ask for help." But that teacher forgot that he has autism and part of autism is it hits both the social and the communication domain of one's brain. So, while it sounds really simple to ask for help, it's really hard for him. He doesn't know how to do that. And generally with our twice-exceptional kiddos, if we asked them to try something, they're only going to try it once. And if they aren't successful or they don't get the response they expected that first time, they won't try that strategy again because they'll say it didn't work for them.

We have to be mindful that if we're asking kids to do something different, we need to make sure they access what they want through the new strategy those first several times so that they sync that up as "this is an effective way to do this." Otherwise, they make their own conclusions. They can say, "Nope...I did raise my hand that one time two months ago and the teacher didn't call on me. So, I'm just going to keep blurting out because blurting out works for me."

**Debbie:** I can tell we could talk about executive functioning issues in kids for a very long time! I believe it's such a relevant topic today, and as I mentioned, is an underlying theme of many popular parenting books right now, including Jessica Lahey's book *The Gift of Failure* and *How to Raise an Adult* by Julie Lythcott-Hains. It's definitely something that is on many parents' minds, and as parents raising differently-wired kids, it's worth putting a lot of focus on supporting a child's executive functioning skill development when they're young. So, thank you for sharing this great insight.

**Julie:** Absolutely. Thank you so much for having me.