



the manifesto



Right now, at this very moment, millions of children are growing up in a world that doesn't respect, support, or embrace who they inherently are.

That's because millions of children today are neurologically atypical, or what I like to call "differently-wired," and the world just isn't ready to accommodate their unique way of moving through life.

According to a March 2015 article in *Psychology Today* by John Elder Robinson, studies suggest that 20 percent of high school students are in some way neurodiverse. "That makes neurodiversity (in total) more common than being six feet tall, or having red hair."

***20 percent of today's kids.***

20 percent struggling to fit in at school and society because their neurological differences—whether it's ADHD or anxiety or giftedness or Asperger's or sensory issues or dyslexia or OCD and so on—are treated like deficits; inconveniences; things that need to be fixed, instead of part of the essential fabric that comprises these creative, complicated, awesome beings.

If you're reading this, my hunch is you know exactly what I'm talking about. You yourself are raising a child who is in some way differently-wired.

I am too. And I'm on a mission to change the experience we as parents have in raising these kids so that they can go through their lives and interact with the world around them in a way that will help them *thrive*.

**The big-picture vision for TiLT is to foster a generous online community where parents raising atypical kids can tap into resources that will help them feel informed, inspired, optimistic, and supported.**

In this TiLT Manifesto, I share my personal story of raising a differently-wired kid and lay out my ideas for the TiLT Revolution—a plan for how we can create a new parenting paradigm, one that embraces difference and uniqueness in children, says no to fear and guilt and isolation, and celebrates and supports our kids, and us, in our experience.

I hope you'll read on. And more than that, I hope you'll join me.

When our son came into the world eleven years ago, we set off on the same journey many new families do. We had the parenting books, the baby carrier, the freshly painted nursery, gifted copies of *Goodnight Moon*, *The Snowy Day*, and *The Giving Tree*, and a healthy dose of cluelessness blended with a trace of confidence. My husband Derin and I knew it would be challenging, but we were determined to rock the hell out of the whole parenting thing.

## We knew early on that we had what some books referred to as a “spirited” child.

As it turns out, Asher was colicky from day one. Nothing could settle him, his sleep patterns were hellish, and he generally seemed, for lack of a better description, *pissed off*. I imagined he was an old soul, annoyed for having been thrust back into such a useless, tiny body and into a life where he’d have to wait a good, long time to get to the juicy stuff.

We survived year one, grateful for relief from the colic and ready for things to get a little easier. But instead, things stayed hard, just in new and different ways. The kid was intense. Stubborn. Sensitive to loud sounds. Fairly accident-prone. And also delightful. And fascinating. And super chatty.

By his second birthday, our little guy was regularly turning heads, both with his ridiculous vocabulary and his apocalyptic conniptions. Anyone who spent any time with Asher couldn’t help but notice that he talked in complex sentences pretty much nonstop. And the tantrums? They just seemed somehow *bigger* than typical toddler fare. When other parents witnessed an Asher tantrum go down, I’d see shock and awe in their eyes.

## We began to ask ourselves: *Is there something going on here?*

At his three-year check-up, Asher was precocious and pleasant, showing off his self-taught ability to read, which delighted our pediatrician. “But he’s really intense and strong-willed,” I explained. “Is that normal?” The seasoned doctor assured me it was and sent us on our way with a “everything looks fine to me.”

Still, things didn’t feel fine. Notes home from preschool teachers about problems in class, on the playground, with other kids, and with authority, were becoming a regular occurrence. Tried and true strategies used by experienced educators were proving futile when it came to my kid.

Derin and I didn’t know what to think. *Was there something “going on” with him or not?* Were we overbearing, paranoid parents with ridiculous behavioral expectations or were we in denial of something everyone around us already knew?

For the next four years, we scrambled—to find a school fit, to find answers, to keep our relationship intact, to survive the daily onslaught of difficult behavior. We endured lengthy waiting lists for evaluations, forked over money we didn't necessarily have for assessments, and skeptically listened to specialists lay out their various, sometimes conflicting diagnoses of things like sensory processing disorder, giftedness, ADHD, Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS), asynchronous development, and even Asperger's. I thought labels would be helpful, but instead, they left us more confused than ever. Nothing seemed to truly fit. And the therapists' professional opinions didn't actually solve anything.

## I kept searching for some sort of “quick fix,” but we eventually realized we were headed down a road for which there was no map.

Though I'm a resourceful person and a researcher at heart, I was floundering. *Where was the community of families like us? The concrete strategies? The path? And why did my husband and I constantly feel like we were the only parents struggling with these issues?*

I won't mince words. Primary school was a bit of a nightmare—we plowed through three schools in three years. And though we piled on support in the form of a social skills group, a cognitive therapist, and an ABA therapist, we saw little in the way of improvement. The emails from teachers (oh...the *emails*), the calls for early pick-ups, the meetings with principals, the meltdowns, the regressions—we couldn't seem to catch a break.

For my part, my job as a writer and consultant was being replaced by a new role in which I spent countless hours advocating for Asher, carting him to appointments, attending meetings with teachers, explaining his behavior to others, and having to drop work at a moment's notice because of a situation at school, all while struggling with a fierce sense of personal incompetence, guilt, and failure.

## Frankly, we were lost.

What I really wanted to know? How the hell we'd become members of this club anyway, the club housing emotionally-tapped parents and the kids schools referred to as “challenging.” I mean, I *really* wanted out of the club. I most definitely wanted to be in the *other* club. The one my friends were in, the one for parents whose kids could go to art camp, birthday parties, and playdates without worry of a phone call for an early pick-up because, well, “it's just not working out.”

## I wanted someone, *anyone*, to tell me exactly how to fit my square peg of a kid into the round hole. Whatever it took, I would do it.

By the time we wrapped up second grade, our family was in full-fledged crisis mode. Traditional school, even in a public gifted program with a decent IEP, a patient principal, and a committed teacher, wasn't really working. Asher was bored and disruptive most of the time, sneak-reading his Kindle at his desk, belligerently boycotting assignments he didn't see the value in, and launching a side-business selling "origami Pikachus" which led to a "rival" company forming and sparking an all-out corporate (classroom) war.

I also came to realize my son was perpetually anxious—his poor little fingernails and the skin around them were gnawed into oblivion. At home, his intensity meant living in what sometimes felt like a war zone—explosions were big, frequent, and unpredictable.

## Something had to give.

We knew Asher deserved more than being shoved into a system that wasn't designed for him. By continuing on this path, we knew our actions (or perhaps inaction) would likely lead to even more dysregulation, anxiety, insecurity, bullying, and challenges for our family. We were tired of feeling like our options were limited, like we couldn't be in choice about what our life looked like since we were so busy reacting to the shitstorm of our daily existence.

## It was time to craft our own playbook.

We decided to stop trying to fit Asher into the round hole of what existed and instead asked ourselves the question: *What would best serve and support Asher in tapping into his unique strengths?*

Around the same time, Derin was offered a job in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. We leapt at the opportunity to move abroad. By saying *yes* to the move, we were very clearly saying *no* to what hadn't been working.

By breaking out of our routine and stuckness, we could do what we should have done all along: *Toss out everything we thought we knew about parenting and education and forge our own path.* We knew this meant homeschooling Asher.

There's no other way to say it. Those first six months in our new life *sucked*. Adjusting to Dutch culture and a new language was nothing compared with trying to becoming fluent in Asher.

Luckily I had two lifelines: my close friend and educator [Alison Bower](#), who served as my soundboard and curriculum advisor, frequently helping me make sense out of my crazy, and parenting coach [Margaret Webb](#), who showed me how I could take care of my needs while still supporting Asher in his. Alison and Margaret helped me embrace the messiness of parenting unique kids. They encouraged me to get comfortable being uncomfortable. They reminded me to breathe.

The most important thing I learned in those first few months, besides how to cycle through a bustling city with a fifty-pound kid on the back of my bike, was that my biggest source of conflict was my relationship with myself, more specifically, my thinking about what my life as a mom “should” look like.

That realization was a biggie. Because once I figured that out, I could surrender to what my momhood actually *did* look like. And *who* our child was. And what his life *could* look like. It was only after I started the hard work of surrendering to *what was* that my energy began to shift. More remarkably, and I'm sure as a direct result, Asher's did too.

Don't get me wrong. Even as things were improving, I still struggled—a *lot*—mostly with things like jealousy of my friends raising “normal kids” or panic over what the future would look like. I also struggled with truly accepting that we weren't screwing up Asher if his childhood looked different than his peers'.

Still, there was no denying that this forging of our own path, this questioning everything approach, was working. Because Asher? He was THRIVING. The kid was *happy*. Joyful. Light. He loved school. And his anxiety was gone. I'm talking, *I had to cut his fingernails*.

Rejecting the current parenting paradigm, the same one that forms the foundation for most everything today's parents accept is true about raising children, isn't easy.

Because it's a paradigm that runs rampant in nearly every school in every town of every state.

It's a paradigm that embraces sameness, fitting in, and conformity.

It encourages labeling differences, prescribing medications, and implementing quick fixes for any way of being that appears to be "outside the norm."

It thrives on guilt mongering.

It leads with headlines like "10 Ways You Are Already Screwing Up Your Child."

It's a paradigm that's suspicious of anyone who chooses to forge their own path.

**TRUTH:** The current parenting paradigm is outdated and broken. It doesn't even come close to serving the millions of parents raising children who are wired differently. Hell, it doesn't even serve those raising "neurotypical" kids.

Today, Asher is anxiety-free, his tantrums a rare occurrence. Over time, he's become more and more present. With presence has come connection and growth. And because he's no longer in chronic fight or flight mode—because he is able to just *be* the awesome human being he is without being told he's bad or screwing up or doing it wrong—his beautiful qualities like empathy and compassion and a dogged desire to stand up against inequality are flourishing. He's secure and confident. And it's been the most incredible thing to witness.

So what made the difference? Was it expanding his diet to include freshly-made Stroopwafels and stamppot? Holland? Homeschooling? Sure, these are all aspects of his life today.

## But the **real** key is this: *I let go.*

Of control. Of what other people thought of my child or my parenting. Of what the future “should” look like. I tilted my perspective and started truly living in the now, noticing the gifts that are here every single day. It was scary at first, but damn if it hasn’t paid off.

And here’s the thing—you can do this, too. *We all* can. Every one of us has what it takes to become fluent in our children’s unique language so they can thrive.

## We Are Not Alone

I’ve talked with enough parents to know my story isn’t even close to unique. I know parents like me are literally *everywhere*, all moving through the unmarked journey in their own way, coming to terms with unexpected detours and roadblocks that have emerged on the path they assumed they’d be on when they first brought their children into the world.

Though our individual experiences are different, we share many commonalities.

## On the outside, our kids might look like any other kid.

They go to school and do things like play soccer, take dance classes, spend hours watching YouTubers and building intricate worlds on Minecraft. But because of the way they’re wired, day-to-day life is a little tougher.

## On the inside, our kids are often having a hard time.

Since our kids can often “pass” as “typical kids,” it’s not always easy for teachers, other parents, and sometimes even our own families and parents to recognize, acknowledge, or respect what is especially hard for them, or what we’re experiencing in raising them.



## But as parents, we're often struggling too. Sometimes a lot.

We might be struggling because we can't get through a week without an email or call from a concerned or frustrated teacher, or because the looks we get from other parents when our children behave inappropriately make us feel judged. We might be struggling because people think twice about inviting our kid to their child's birthday party, or because we can't always send our kid to a playdate without first prepping the family about our kid's triggers and coping strategies. We might be struggling because our marriages are hurting as we sometimes feel conflicted with our partner over what our child needs and how to make it happen. We're often struggling because we're feeling alone in what we're going through, which is ironic considering our kids are in *every single classroom*. And while we're on the subject of education, finding schools where our children can learn in a way that is positive and natural to them is incredibly difficult, not to mention often financially or geographically prohibitive.

I know these struggles. I know how overwhelming it can be to feel like it will always be difficult, that there is no way through it, that there's no light at the end of the tunnel. I know that like me, you want your child to thrive, to be accepted, to be seen by the world for the brilliant, amazing little person he or she is. Maybe you feel like I used to on a daily basis—exhausted, isolated, scared, and misunderstood, desperate for some sort of instruction manual to guide you in making the right choices, backed by a guarantee that it's all going to be okay in the end.

## It's Time for Something New

But I don't believe there is any one way to be okay or "normal" in today's world. If anything, our uniquely-wired children, with their sensitivities and gifts, are the new normal. So, I have something I'd like you to think about:

Imagine what would happen—for us, for our families, and for the world—if instead of our children's differences being treated as flaws in need of fixing, they were appreciated, embraced...even celebrated?

Think about it. What if fear and guilt were no longer part of our parenting equation and we could support our children from a place of security, confidence, and genuine peace? What if instead of feeling like an outlier without a compass, we had the comfort and collective strength of a supportive community? What if we could feel empowered, informed, and inspired to be in choice with every aspect of parenting and educating our child?

## I believe everything would change. And, I believe it's possible.

It's what can happen when we connect with each other, trust our instincts, question everything we thought we knew was true about raising kids, and relentlessly surrender into the wonder of who our unique children are.

Listen, I know this isn't easy stuff. I know that sometimes you might wish you could wave a magic wand and suddenly be a member of the *other* club, the one full of neurotypical families, the one whose manual is so much more straightforward.

And I also realize there are many people outside of our experience, from educators to parents of neurologically typical kids, who might be afraid of accepting a new definition of "normal" because it would mean they would have to question and reject a status quo that for the most part works for them.

But I'm here to say that it's possible. And if we're willing to own and give a voice to our experience, compassionately educate others, and stand up for what we and our family need from a place of strength, confidence, and peace, the whole damn outdated, ineffective, intolerant parenting paradigm, the one society and the traditional educational system has supported for decades, is going to come *tumbling down*.

So now that we know the WHAT, the big question becomes HOW? I don't have all the answers for making this happen. But I do know this:

*It begins with us.*

In order to take the lead in shifting this paradigm, parents like you and me have some work to do. We've got to stop trying to transfer out of the atypical club and instead embrace our glorious, messy, extraordinary lives. Here are 10 things we can start doing right now to pave the way for something new.

## 10 TILTS TO SHIFT THE GAME

### 1 Connect

Because we can't do this alone. We need to support each other in tangible ways. We need to reach out when we need help. We have to be willing to lift up those who are new to the club.

### 2 Open Up

Because we can't do this if we're all caught up in our own private struggles. We have to be willing to honestly share what's real in our world.

### 3 Let Go

Of what everyone else thinks about how we parent our child. Of the vision we had for the way this parenting thing was going to look. Of the belief that we can control the outcome on any given day.

## 4 Speak Up

For our child. For our family. For the cause. There is no shame in who our child is, no secret to be kept by hiding the reality about the way they are wired. When we give a voice to our experiences, others will have to listen and change their way of thinking.

## 5 Question Everything

There is no one way this parenting journey has to look for *any* of us, and especially those of us raising children with neurological differences. Every aspect of what we thought we knew about raising kids has to be up for consideration.

## 6 Be Brave

Doing whatever is necessary to support our child takes guts. People around us will question our choices, doubt our chances of success, and judge our willingness to take a different path. We have to be willing to ditch the fear and lean in to our courage.

## 7 Be Relentless

Finding the schools, resources, and people who will *see* our child and help them reach their potential won't be easy. But the more of us who refuse to accept half-assed solutions, the more necessary it will be for the current paradigm to shift.

## 8 Show Up

We're going to have good days and bad days. We're going to have days where we have the patience of Ghandi and others where we just can't hold it together. That's okay. The most important thing is that we're committed to showing up for our child, for our family, and for ourselves, every single day.

## 9 Choose

To learn more about ourselves, to learn more about our child's unique needs, to fight the good fight, and to be a better person, as a result of who our child is.

## 10 Parent in the Now

Focusing on the now let's us be present for the good stuff. (Yes, the bad stuff too, but that just makes the good stuff all the better.) Parenting in the now removes the "what ifs" of future spiraling. It keeps us in the only place where we can effect the most positive impact on our child and ourselves—the present. It helps us notice and embrace the gifts.

*It's time for the paradigm to change.*

It's time our culture of parenting shifts to one that **embraces difference and uniqueness** in children, **rejects fear- and guilt-based parenting**, and **supports parents** like us raising atypical kids so we can parent from a place of confidence, feel connected and supported, and have options for accessing an education that supports our child's way of being.

This is my vision. And I'm launching TILT to help this vision become a reality. I have big ideas for what this revolution will look like down the road, but for now, I'm starting with one simple question.

*Are you in?*

As I said, I don't have all the answers for how to shift the outdated paradigm. But I'm committed to doing what it takes to find them and pour all my energy into making it happen. And I can't do it alone.

I'm asking you to raise your hand and join me. Because the change has to start with us—one beautiful, unique, kick-ass family at a time, led by parents who know our kids deserve to live in a world that celebrates who they are so they can get on with the business of leading creative, connected, and crazy-awesome lives.

I'm proud to be a member of the club made up of parents raising a generation of differently-wired kids. Are you?

To stay connected to developments at TILT as the revolution gets underway, please sign up [here](#).

And would you do me one more favor? If this manifesto has resonated with you and you know of other families in your world who might connect with its message, please share it widely. Click on the social media icons below for quick sharing:



The kind of change we're looking for is going to take a lot of us. But I believe we can do it. I hope you do, too.

With gratitude,

*Debbie*