

Tilt Parenting Podcast: Simone Davies on Strategies for Staying Calm in Difficult Situations [Transcript]

Debbie: One of the things I learned about you when we first met is that you're a Montessori educator. I feel like I'm still learning about the world of Montessori, and I have a hunch I'm not alone here. So, would you mind giving us a brief overview of what exactly Montessori is?

Simone: Sure. Montessori is an alternative education system. So, instead of a teacher standing in front of the classroom, you have materials laid around the room in different subject areas and the children can actually choose for themselves what they want to work on. It's actually empowering children to learn because they're interested in something not because the teacher says 'this is what we need to learn.' Montessori is basically encouraging curiosity in kids and empowering them to stick at things, concentrate, and follow their own development. And then you usually have mixed-age groups in the classroom, so the older kids can help the younger kids and the younger kids are observing the older kids. Amazingly it works and it's not complete chaos. Everyone is really busy working. The freedom to choose is amazing because then they actually want to learn.

Debbie: I love that. In learning more about Montessori through you, I've realized there's a lot of overlap in the ways we're trying to raise Asher. Especially because a lot of our focus is on developing his executive functioning skills and independence and doing things on his own—things that for Asher and a lot of kids who are differently-wired might be more challenging. So, I'm really interested in that aspect of Montessori, too. When I think of Montessori, I always envision little kids chopping vegetables and working in the kitchen at a young age. That's a big part of it too, right...independently doing "jobs?"

Simone: Yes, totally. It's not like saying 'You have to grow up and do everything yourself' and taking all the fun out of childhood. It's actually that they're interested in doing it and working alongside and being part of the family. Think of a toddler who can cut an apple and is really proud that they made their own snack. You're not forcing a child to eat an apple. They *want* to sit down and eat the snack they just made. So, it's just including them in daily life and all those kind of skills are so useful. And they're learning a lot of processes and steps so they can build concentration. A toddler is actually getting fine motor skills from these kinds of activities and daily life. So, that's really cool.

And then once you move into school age, the materials that they use in the classroom are all concrete. So, you don't learn math by someone writing on the blackboard—you actually handle materials they can concretely see. It makes so much more sense than having to do everything abstractly, so this hands-on learning is such a big part. It's just not passive learning. We often talk about in Montessori that the hand is connected to the brain. So, we don't want to just passively learn things through our brain. If we actually touch things, we'll learn better.

Debbie: Something you said earlier that jumped out at me is this idea that every child is on their own timeline. That's so important and I think that's another way the principles behind Montessori are so in alignment with what works for a lot of kids who are differently-wired.

Simone: Yeah. Kids learn in so many different ways, even my own two children. One my children is an observer and the other one has to repeat and repeat and repeat to learn

things. Observing is also a valid way to learn, but in the traditional classroom that doesn't often work. Because they're like, 'Do your worksheet now.' And it's just like, 'Well, actually I'm just taking it in.' And then when he writes it down he just has to do it once. And then you have other kids who like to practice. There are so many different ways of learning. Sometimes a kid is really fast at speaking and another child is more busy with motor skills. But they'll get there on their own timeline to the place they need to be.

Debbie: That can be a hard thing to remember because there can be so much pressure. For example, we live in Amsterdam and little kids are riding their bikes literally *everywhere*, yet Asher still sits on the back of my bike and he's eleven. And I'm *sure* people are like: 'What the heck is that big kid doing on the back of her bike?' But he's not ready to navigate the chaos of Amsterdam on his bike yet and I always have to remind myself that he's on his own timeline. He'll get there. He doesn't have to do it when everybody else is. So I think that idea extends beyond academics and to life in general for kids.

Simone: Yeah, I think it's really difficult to not compare but just to trust that your child knows they will develop beautifully as their own person. Each child is an individual and I love that instead of trying to get everyone to fit into the same hole it's just actually, 'No, we're all different and we can have different strengths.'

Debbie: I think kids also notice when their peers are doing things differently and it's our responsibility to remind them that, that's fine everyone's working at a different pace. I know that when Asher was in kindergarten and first grade he was—for someone who's not socially observant in some situations—very aware of kids whose handwriting was much neater or kids who answered something more quickly than him. Those things were on his radar and were real source of frustration for him. And so I think it's important that parents remind their kids that there's no wrong way to learn things, that we're all on our own timeline, and not adding additional pressure. Because a lot of kids do notice where they fit in with their peers.

Simone: It's one thing for us to drop the labels and another for them to drop their own labels. Super interesting.

Debbie: So, you and I meet most Thursdays for coffee and then we each spend a few hours on our own work. And I'm not sure if you remember, but last Thursday you mentioned that a parent at your Montessori school had struggled that day because their child was having a very difficult moment. And we talked about how hard it can be to know how to handle it when a child's having a difficult time, especially in public.

Simone: Yeah. What can happen very easily is, say a child snatched something of another child or something like this. And in doing that, they're just saying: 'Oh, I'd like to have a turn with that.' But instead the mom intervenes and gets wound up and wants the child to give it back and then they're *both* getting stressed and that can feed this energy in both of them. What we want is for the parent to look at the situation from a place of, 'What is the child struggling with right now?' and think about what they can do to support that child through it.

So parents can kind of be a *rock*. They can be supportive so their child doesn't feel abandoned, but at the same time, not take their child's energy on. They're thinking, *What can I do to help him get through this difficult situation?* 'Oh, it looks like you'd like that toy. Yeah, I see that you'd really like that toy,' and they can empathize with them and talk them

through that. Sometimes that's enough and other times it's looking at a situation and thinking, *It looks like he's trying. Does he need some help to calm down? Maybe I should get a tissue for him.* So, you're not solving the problem for him but you're standing there and not taking over. You're letting them have their difficult moment and maybe come to calm and then maybe they can make amends for what went wrong.

I'm not saying be completely uncompassionate. Being a rock is a really nice visual thing. You're strong and steadfast for your child, but you're not emotionally getting reacted yourself.

Debbie: Yeah, that's the key though. It's something I've had to learn over time—I've had a *lot* of opportunity to practice not getting emotionally involved. But I think when you have a child whose reactions are considered bigger—and a lot of differently-wired kids do have much bigger reactions to the point where it's inappropriate for the situation or you might be getting looks from other people—as a parent it can be so hard to not get emotionally involved. It really triggers something in you and that's something I find so challenging. I've seen you in tricky situations, and you're pretty calm and cool. Do you have any strategies for not getting triggered?

Simone: I like the sportscasting technique. You know, think of yourself as a sportscaster for a race and you're just kind of commentating about what's happening in the race. You know, who's in the lead and that sort of thing. You can do the same thing with your child. For example, 'Okay Asher, I can see that you're getting kind of frustrated at that,' and just talk him through what might be happening. 'I can see that you're really pulling that really hard and you look really frustrated.' And then you're actually just remaining quite calm. The sportscasting technique kind of gives you a little of bit of distance.

It's also really useful to think about after the fact, 'Well that went wrong and I'm going to apologize' and then think about how to do it better the next time. Preparation is a big part of it. For example, there's no point going to a doctor's appointment and expecting a toddler to wait patiently. Have your snacks in a little bag or pull out a little toy to play with or step in if you need to before a situation has gotten out of control. I think sometimes we're like: 'Okay, I'm going to be laid back and just let them keep doing their thing,' but sometimes they need some guidelines and limits.

So, if a child is playing with water and that's making you feel uncomfortable, step in when it's starting to make you uncomfortable and not when there's water everywhere and it's gone too far and you've been triggered. Maybe say something like, 'Oh, I see you really want to put the water all over the floor, but water's for pouring. Do you want to pour it into the vase or are you done with the water?' And then maybe set a limit and decide that the water's finished for the day. If you did that, you would never get to the space where you got so out of your comfort zone.

Of course, if your child is already melting down and it's not something to do with you, sometimes you can step in quite calmly because it's their situation. Realizing it's their problem and leaving it there is big thing to practice but it really pays off.

Debbie: It's a huge thing. Yeah, it's definitely something we work on a lot and that my husband needs a lot of reminders about. I get a lot more practice because I'm home with Asher every day doing homeschooling and I spend a lot of time working on these things. But

I think what you said is key—recognizing that it actually has nothing to do with us. That's huge because if we're having such a strong emotional reaction, it's because of something we're telling ourselves about the situation, whether it's 'This shouldn't be happening right now' or 'My child's behavior is out of control' or 'People are going to think I'm a terrible parent' or 'I don't deserve to be spoken to this way.' Any of those thoughts are going to make you feel worse, right?

That's what I work on too, just reminding myself this has nothing to do with me. It only has something to do with Asher in this moment not having the skills he needs to cope with his intensity. But it can be really hard to not get sucked in.

Simone: Yeah, and if you're in a social situation, trying to remove yourself from that situation so you can feel safe to just be with them as they go through their very emotional rollercoaster. They might start with real anger because they're frustrated at the situation and then they go through sadness and then it's grief and all told it can be a forty-minute process. If you have to stay in a room with other parents, just stepping in and saying 'I can see that you're not coping,' you can model calmness and leading the child. Other parents aren't going to judge you—they're going to think, *Wow, she is so supportive of her child and is there for him no matter what is going on.*

Yeah, so I think we've got to lose the worry about the other parents and instead model great parenting for them. Just be like, 'I've got this under control.' Some people like to use the analogy of a captain. If you're on a ship and something happens, you'd want the captain to step in and calmly take control. So, if you can be like a captain—'This is okay, I know exactly what I'm going to do. I'm going to just stand here and hold you and keep you safe, you're melting down'—that could be a useful thing for people to visualize.

Debbie: I like that and I like the idea of having a plan, too. It's important to think about where the child could get triggered or upset and then also knowing what your plan would be in that situation.

Going back to something you said earlier, I actually love that sportscaster technique. I'm going to use that. Breathing has worked for me at different times, too. In fact, parenting coach [Margaret Webb](#), who's been a guest on the TiLT Podcast a few times, really helped me learn a specific breathing strategy that made an instant difference in the moment and helping me calm down. And I've certainly found that if I can be that rock, it really turns down the volume of Asher's reaction right away. But it has to be from a genuine place. I can't "fake" being a rock—I have to *be* the rock. But if I can stay in that place, he will often come back down to my level.

I think a lot of parents who have kids who react intensely are taught to recognize when their child's about to blow. Because once they've blown, forget about it, you're in damage control. So, we're always trying to watch for problems: 'Oh, they're creeping up into the yellow zone and we're getting near the red zone...let's see if we can stop this from happening.' But I like that you're reminding us that it's about noticing those things in ourselves too. That is a great way to model it for our kids who are learning how to recognize when they're about to lose it.

Simone: I've also been playing around with meditation for the past year and practicing it in neutral moments so that I can try to get that little drop of peace when I'm feeling a little

agitated. So, practice when times are easy and then when times are hard, think 'I'm going to try and see if I can bring this little drop of peace back in,' and that can also be really calming.

Debbie: Earlier you mentioned practicing empathy with our child. Can you say a little bit more about that and how empathy can help diffuse a situation?

Simone: Yeah, totally. It's how you interact with adults, too. If you've explained to a friend that you've had a really difficult day and they say, 'Oh, that sounds like it was really difficult,' I feel like I'm heard instead of having them just rush into some of the problem, give advice, or deny my feelings, like 'Oh, you shouldn't worry about that.' It's really about being heard, and then practicing the same thing with your child. For example, 'Oh, I see that you really wanted that toy,' or 'Oh, that didn't work out the way that you expected.' Or say a child falls over. Instead of saying, 'Don't worry about it, it's fine,' you just say, 'Ow, that was a shock and it really hurt.' And just allowing them to have big, ugly emotions and accepting them instead of trying to push them away. Because I think if anyone has tried to lean into an ugly feeling, they know that it goes away more quickly.

And if you get the feeling wrong, that's okay, too. Because then they can say, 'Oh, I wasn't disappointed. It just wasn't what I was expecting,' and it helps them clarify their feelings. I don't think they get angry if you get it wrong.

Debbie: Yeah, and you're also respecting their right to have an emotional response. I grew up in a household where anger was an emotion that really wasn't okay to exhibit, and I know I'm not alone here. So I think for many of us, anger and other really big emotions can make people feel uncomfortable. And as parents, when we see our child exhibiting those emotions it can trigger that same uncomfortableness in us. But you're right...just acknowledging it with something like, 'You are really upset right now. I can tell you're really sad about this' can work.

Empathy is one of the strategies that Ross Greene talks about in his book [The Explosive Child](#) and when I started using it with Asher it was amazing how just recognizing and acknowledging his experience could stop a meltdown or almost jolt Asher out of it instantly. That's a great reminder about the power of empathy and I agree—it's something we can practice with *everyone* in our lives.

Before we wrap up, you said something earlier about making amends and circling back after the fact.

Simone: Yeah, I think it's really important part of it. I think there are some preconceived ideas that Montessori is about letting children do whatever they like and some people wonder if that means they can go and do something wrong to somebody else and not take responsibility for it. But that's actually not what Montessori is about. Montessori is also about teaching kids to take responsibility. So, when they're enraged, there's no rationale to saying, 'It's not okay to do this.' Because they're not hearing you at that time. But when you have helped them calm down, that's when it's time to make amends. So it's about helping them find a way to take responsibly for what they've done. I have a story about this if you'd like to hear it?

Debbie: Yeah, bring it on.

Simone: So, a few years ago, my son was feeling a little bit upset because my daughter was having a friend sleepover. So he set the alarm to go off at four in the morning in their room and they were *furious* in the morning. And so, I walked into this rageful room and I said, 'What's going on?' And when I understood the situation, I said to him, 'Okay, so they're really upset and you see that you've done the wrong thing here. So, how can you make it up to the girls?' They ended up deciding that he was going to cook them breakfast, so he made them French toast and he was really proud of himself. So, it's about making amends. I didn't have to come in and say, 'You're never having a friend over and you're grounded,' because that would be a punishment and he would have hated me for it. And it's also not saying, 'Oh, don't worry about it girls, it's just sleep.' It's actually saying, 'That was really not okay, but let's find a way that you can make it up to them.'

Debbie: I love that. We call those restitutions around here and it was a big part of our life for a year and a half. We're not big into punishment because it doesn't seem to be very effective, but restitution is taking responsibility and making amends. So for us maybe a restitution would be Asher helping me do laundry or helping me make my bed or something. Some way to kind of acknowledge and make amends for something that he did. But in a way that feels great for everybody. That's a great reminder.

And now it's time to say thank you so much for sharing all of these useful strategies for staying calm and cool in the midst of chaos, and for being one of my very first guests on the TILT Podcast! I hope you'll come back again...

Simone: I'd love to!