

Tilt Parenting Podcast: 11-year-old Asher Shares His Challenges and Strategies Surrounding His Social Life [Transcript]

Debbie: Let's start by talking about who you are right now, your age, and who your closest friends are and how you met.

Asher: Well I'm Asher, I'm eleven, and my best friend is called Seb.

Debbie: And how did you and Seb meet?

Asher: We were in class together when we were four-years-old. So, as you may guess, we've been friends for the majority of my life.

Debbie: You guys have been friends for more than half of your lives and, for the past three years that we've been living in Amsterdam, you've maintained a strong friendship through magic of Skype.

And your other close friend, you met here in a social skills group in Amsterdam. You guys totally hit it off and although he no longer lives in the Netherlands, you have stayed connected through FaceTime.

I thought we'd talk about this particular relationship because having a relationship over FaceTime has had some challenges. You guys are really interested in the same games, but you're both very intense and sometimes those FaceTime game sessions don't go very well. So we've had to actually work quite a lot on that, right?

Asher: Sometimes we're playing and either he or I get really annoyed that something happens in the game and then one of us quits unexpectedly. By doing that we kind of strand the other person.

Debbie: We've had a number of situations where you guys were playing and then things went downhill really quickly and the call ended kind of abruptly with you being really upset. That's challenging for a friendship, wouldn't you say?

Asher: Yeah.

Debbie: So I bet that other kids listening to this maybe have been in similar situations where there is a friend that they really like but they find themselves getting angry with something and then having a big reaction. And then that can create challenges for that relationship.

I know we've worked a lot on coming up with some strategies to help you because this friendship is really important to you. And we didn't want either of you getting upset about the way things were going during your playdates because we didn't want it to negatively impact your relationship. I have a hunch that if you were to share the strategies you used in that situation it might be helpful for some of the kids listening.

Asher: Well, we, meaning me and Mom, wrote down a list of all the different bad things that can happen. And then we planned solutions for each of them. Things on our list are things

like “running out of time” or “feeling abandoned when the other person gets mad and leaves the game.”

Debbie: Yeah, they were situations you had encountered in the past that had been upsetting to you. And then we strategized solutions. Some of them we’re really about your personal mindset, right?

Asher: Yes! One solution was to remind myself that the friendship was more important than the game.

Debbie: Another thing you did was when you were about to start another game session with this friend, you would talk with him to let him know that certain things have been hard, including the issue of you not having as much screen time as he does. And then you’d ask if there were things you could do differently this time.

Your closest friends have all been around you when you’ve had a meltdown or, in some cases, many meltdowns right? Can you talk about what that’s like for you? How do you feel if you have kind of a meltdown in front of a friend?

Asher: Usually, I feel a bit embarrassed and I apologize, because sometimes I take out my anger on things that aren’t really related , such as friends.

Debbie: I know that those meltdowns or explosions can be so emotionally-charged—it’s hard to always control it in the moment. When you’ve had a meltdown in front of a friends, what happens after you’ve apologized to them? Have you ever had that go not so well?

Asher: It’s usually fine. They sometimes take a little bit of time to forgive, particularly if I yell right at them. But it hasn’t ruined any friendships.

Debbie: You’ve been really lucky—you have some very special friends in your life. But you also work hard at your friendships. What do you think makes you a good friend to other people?

Asher: Oh there’s the obvious, *I’m me*. (laughs) But usually I think it’s because I’m really genuinely happy to see my friends when they arrive.

Debbie: That’s true. You do make your friends feel like celebrities when they show up.

One question I got from a lot of parents is about *mean kids*. Have you ever been in a situation where kids haven’t been kind to you?

Asher: Sometimes they were mean to me in school.

Debbie: I noticed that sometimes kids like to push your buttons. How do they do that?

Asher: They do things that get on my nerves on purpose. And keep at it until I explode at them. And then I usually get in trouble.

Debbie: My hunch is that there are some kids who find your big reaction interesting, intriguing, or entertaining, and so some kids want to see it again. Do you think that might be true? How has that made you feel about yourself?

Asher: Annoyed. I try to not let them push my buttons and just walk away instead.

Debbie: Is that strategy kind of hard? What has been your experience if you ignore them?

Asher: Well, if I ignore them usually nothing happens. They typically try to push my buttons more, to try to get me to come back, which sometimes works. But sometimes not.

Debbie: How are you managing to not get sucked in? That sounds really hard. What do you tell yourself?

Asher: That they don't matter. *What matters is what I do.* If I get really annoyed at them, then I am the one to get in trouble.

Debbie: I remember that happening a lot when you were younger. Your reaction would be so big that you would get in trouble, but often no one looked into what had led up to the explosion.

It is a big problem in school. We're homeschooling now, but when you were younger, your reaction would often be deemed inappropriate because it was so big. It often outweighed how bad what the other kids did to make you react like that. And then you'd get in trouble, and often they would not. You used to struggle to stand up for yourself in those situations. You would tell me the story later and I would always say, "Did you tell the teacher that that happened?" and you would say, "No, I forgot."

At the time, that was really tricky, we were trying to help you learn how to advocate for yourself. If someone was picking on you, we were reminding you to remember that your teachers were there to help you. And that if you could, it was always a better choice to get help instead of engaging.

What's your strategy now that we're homeschooling? We have a smaller circle of friends and we don't have that kind of daily interaction with a lot of different kids, and as a result, you also don't get a lot of practice with kids who might push your buttons—you're not getting to practice not getting sucked in. So what do you do now if someone is being rude to you or trying to push your buttons?

Asher: I try to ignore the person and maybe try to tell them to stop.

Debbie: What I noticed you doing lately is kind of like this fine dance. It's like you kind of want to have a relationship with these kids but you also are standing up for yourself in that relationship. So it's kind of almost like frenemies, which makes me a little nervous because I feel like just one little thing can push it over the edge.

Asher: Yeah, it's like they're teetering on the brink between nice and mean.

Debbie: But I have noticed that you've been okay in that space most of the time.

I have another question from a listener that I thought you might have a good answer for. It's from someone who had a hard time in school last year, and now they've moved to a new town and a new school system and they want to know if you have any advice about making friends in new situations and adjusting to a new school.

Asher: Well, you want to kind of learn about how everything works at that school. That's a top priority. Like when they have lunch, favorite teachers, who everyone is. You want to try and find people with similar interests.

Debbie: How did you personally do it? Because you went to three school in three years.

Asher: I found people talking about topics that I found interesting. I just butted in the conversation. That's a really easy way to make friends.

The key thing is to be nice to people, even if you don't even know them. When you're nice to someone who doesn't know you, they will know you as the person who was nice to them. And that makes them more likely to be nice to you.

Debbie: Has that ever backfired for you?

Asher: Sometimes I've been nice to people and they've been mean to me and then I'm just like, "Okay, I'm not wasting my niceness on you again."

Debbie: Yes...you are definitely someone who will always give someone the benefit of the doubt. You don't discriminate against who you could be friends with, and you're open to being friends with everyone. You go into new relationships assuming people are nice and friendly. And it's only when you they've shown you otherwise—

Asher: —if they are not nice or friendly to me, then it's like, "Okay, they're off the potential friend list."

Debbie: I imagine that when you assume everyone is nice and you put yourself out there a lot, there are times where it hasn't worked out so well. Does that hurt your self-esteem or your confidence?

Asher: No. Because I'm confident.

Debbie: So when other kids don't see you or respect who you are, is it that you know not to make it about yourself?

Asher: Well, they obviously can't see how amazing I am. (laughs) They are the ones missing out...

Debbie: So any other advice for starting a new school? Everyone doesn't have to be best friends with everyone else, right?

Asher: Yeah, it's fine if they don't particularly want to be friends with you, but you can still be nice to each other.

Debbie: Another listener wanted to know how you feel about group activities versus doing things alone. What is your ideal social situation that you thrive in?

Asher: Well, I like to be able to do my own thing not have anybody judge me for doing that. But I do like group situations because it's a way to do something with a lot of people at once.

Debbie: I know that you like group activities in theory, but they seem to be really challenging for you.

Asher: I like them in theory, but I am also someone who needs a lot of time alone.

Debbie: One of the things that has helped in group situations is to always make sure the person leading the group knows you might need some time to separate and do your own thing, which in your case usually means reading. But when you're about to be in a group situation, sometimes you get anxious or nervous. How do you get through that?

Asher: I usually just say, "It will probably turn out to be better than I'm imagining it." Because I'm imagining the worst possible scenario, probably imagining even worse than the worst possible scenario.

Debbie: In some cases where we knew you'd be in group situations and you were feeling anxious, we talked beforehand about what your plan was if things don't go well. So if you always go into it knowing that there's a plan, you don't have to be as anxious about it.

Okay...one last question: If you could give a message to other kids out there who are struggling with friendships and social situations, what would your message be?

Asher: Everybody out there is unique and awesome in their own way. Everyone will eventually find their friend who is suited to them.