

Episode 55: Devon MacEachron Transcript

Debbie Reber:

Hey, Devon, welcome to the show.

Devon: 1:50

Thanks so much, Debbie. I'm excited to be here. Well,

Debbie Reber: 1:53

I am excited to have you on the show. And also I know you've been super busy since the new year. So I just want to thank you for making the time to talk with us today.

Devon: 2:01

Pleasure.

Debbie Reber: 2:02

So before we get into this, and I want you know, this is kind of a hot topic, I posted on the tilde Facebook page that I was going to be speaking with an expert in twice exceptional assessment and education. And I got a lot of comments and questions. So we'll see what we can get through. But before we get into that, would you mind just taking a few minutes to walk us through your background, tell us a little bit about who you are, what you do, and maybe how you got into doing this work. Of course, I'm

Devon: 2:34

one of those moms who was inspired by her children's challenges. So I got my college degree and an MBA and happily went off into the business and government worlds and was plugging away, they're enjoying my work. And then my kids came along. And as things started to come out for both of them, I was getting increasingly frustrated with the lack of resources, the lack of knowledge about kids who are bright, and who have learning issues that are impeding them from achieving. And it was extremely frustrating. We probably had, I don't know, four or five, six assessments for each child and still didn't have a clear picture. So I was reading everything at Barnes and Noble and reading everything online and realized that I basically needed to go back to school and get a PhD in it and really understand. So I went back to school at Berkeley and my, I guess I was in my early 50s at that point. And my kids were then in middle school, so it was perfect. I dropped them at school, went to Berkeley to study, come back, pick them up, and we'd all do our homework together.

Debbie Reber: 3:36

Wow, that is commitment. Can I just applaud you? I mean, some of us buy a few books, but I don't think I've spoken to anyone on the show so far, who's decided to get their PhD to become an expert in this so well done?

Devon: 3:50

Well, I think it also may help to not focus quite as much on my own children, because you can just, you know, go crazy fixating on helping them. So with a focus on a broader population, I want to help other parents not have as much difficulty going through at all as we did. So that's my goal. And I've been doing this now for I guess, about 1012 years, and I am a specialist in gifted and twice exceptional learners.

Debbie Reber: 4:17

And in terms of your day to day work, then is your focus doing assessments or kind of can you tell us how you work with families?

Devon: 4:24

Yeah, I do focus on assessment. Although I'm also happy to talk to anybody on the phone. I don't charge for that. I'm just happy to help people find out where they can go to find resources. So if people email me and schedule a time, I'm very happy to talk to anyone about their child and sort of give them some my two cents worth on what might be a good step to take next, because assessment is not always the next step. But my main focus of my practice is assessment and Educational Planning. And so typically I'll see a child for two or three days of testing which I make really fun. And then I write a report and meet with Parents and then I follow them through to help them implement the recommendations on both sides on the weakness side and on the strength side because I'm a huge believer and enrichment in areas of strength as being perhaps more important for most kids than working on that weakness side.

Debbie Reber: 5:18

Definitely, I love that strength spaced approach. We've had other guests talk about that. And that's something we very firmly believe in here. So I love that focus for you. Okay, I already have a lot of questions that are my list of questions to talk with you about but let's start by even just defining twice exceptional, I think you're the first guest I've had on the show. That's where we've specifically talked about this, it's come up, obviously, because a lot of our audience, their kids are twice exceptional. My son's twice exceptional. And a lot of differently wired children are so it's come up a lot, but could you give us kind of a just simple definition of what it means to be twice exceptional?

Devon: 5:59

Sure. And what and what I think it means is, is perhaps a little broader than what some people think, I don't think a child has to be identified as what I would call globally gifted to be twice exceptional, and somebody who's globally gifted might have an IQ score of whatever the cutoff is 125 130, whatever the program considers to be gifted. I don't think that encompasses all or even most 2e kids, I think a lot of 2e kids are a little uneven. So they

might be really strong in one area like visual spatial skills or verbal reasoning, but be weak in other areas. And so their total IQ score might not be beyond some cut off. But they're either still definitely gifted. In my mind, what I think of as twice exceptional is a student who has a very strong aptitude in one area that relates to learning. And then who has weaknesses in another area are usually multiple areas that impact their ability to demonstrate what they've learned. So it can be ADHD, it can be a learning disability, it can be Asperger's, I don't consider to be to encompass gifts and things like musical talent, because I consider to be more of an intellectual and more of a cognitive processing thing as opposed to a broad like Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences kind of concept.

Debbie Reber: 7:24

Got it? Well, so as you're talking about that, I wrote down the word Enigma, because I think that for so many of us, it's really hard to really understand what's going on. And I can imagine, you know, if a child is very clearly demonstrating a super high IQ, because of, you know, something remarkable that they're doing at a very young age, or, you know, just being Uber precocious. Their gifts are sometimes masked by these other things going on. So how, how does this even start for so many families? I just have to believe a lot of families are our kids are slipping through the cracks, right? They're being missed. So what do you look for? What are some of the signs that parents notice when they bring kids to see you?

Devon: 8:10

Absolutely. With kids slipping through the cracks, I think it's more common than not. And sometimes you have a child who has been diagnosed with a disability of some kind, and the giftedness has been totally overlooked. Or you have a child who is diagnosed as gifted where the disability is totally overlooked. But often you have a child who just seems to be plodding along. And the analogy I like is it's like a duck. You see a bunch of ducks in Central Park paddling along the water. And it all seems very calm, but the one at the back is paddling fast and furiously to keep up with the rest. You don't see it. But they're working that hard to try to demonstrate average kind of performance. But so how does it start with parents, I think parents are really the best at figuring out when there's something a little bit off. Teachers, I think are not quite as experienced at this, but parents generally know that they see how bright their child is, how capable they are. And yet they're not able to, you know, write papers or or memorize math facts or do things that other children are seeming to do without as much effort. And so I think parents can be really, really helpful in early identification before the child gets really really frustrated and starts to turn off from school and learning.

Debbie Reber: 9:22

What age about is it that that happens in your experience when our parents usually bringing kids in

Devon: 9:29

sometimes as early as five but usually not until school age until they start having to try to perform in school so usually they breeze through you know, breeze through unless there's an issue behavioral ADHD or Asperger's or autism. You don't see as many issues in

preschool and kindergarten but first grade once there starts to be academic demands, children are expected to sit still in their at their desk, then you start to see a disconnect between how bright the child obviously is and what their what their demands are. strating that sort of a typical age, although I've had, I've had people come in at 26, who were undiagnosed, and were struggling in law school or wanting to go back to medical school or, or something, and there was they were so capable that they and worked so hard, that they kind of kept it underneath all that time. But it was very much of an issue that they were fighting all along.

Debbie Reber: 10:22

Wow, what do you do? What is your assessment process like? Do you do a number of different tests? Or what is that process like?

Devon: 10:31

So actually, I've just, I don't want to get too technical. But when you said something, oh, Enigma for twice exceptional kids that really made me think of how a lot of people don't understand how you could be simultaneously really bright and not perform. It's like, wait a minute, you're either smart, or you're not smart, you either don't do well in school. But actually, it's really easy to understand that conundrum, when you realize that there are many different aptitudes and abilities and skills that are involved in school learning. And what I find to be the most useful way to sort of picture that is that there's a theory of intelligence called the qatal horn, Carol theory, the CH see theory, and it's the dominant theory of intelligence across the world. And it's, in fact, so well accepted that it's become the base for most of our intelligence tests. And many of our achievement tests have all been restructured to conform to this, basically, Encyclopedia of different kinds of human abilities. And there are about 30 or so that really are involved in school learning. So if somebody assesses all of those 30 abilities, which is what I typically do, you can tell Okay, well, this child's having difficulty with handwriting because of its either visual spatial, or its motor, or some other issue that's contributing specifically to that academic skill. So you can tie people's different abilities to academic skills. And I come up with a profile that shows where the strengths are, where the average skills are, and where the weaknesses are in all of these different abilities. So you can be and where to eat kids their profiles, if you do a bar chart, what they look like, if they have some really high abilities. And then they have some really low abilities and have diverse abilities. I very rarely see anybody who is consistently low in all of these areas or consistently high. We all have very abilities, but two weak kids have pretty dramatic ones typically.

Debbie Reber: 12:27

And is that disconnect between the super high abilities? And then the perhaps unusually low in comparison abilities? Is that where a lot of the challenges come in for these kids?

Devon: 12:41

Yes, although it can be interesting, because sometimes the child's strength is in a different area from their weakness, like you might have a child who has really great math, aptitude and ability. And just as charging along really well in math, and has a disability in reading.

Well, it doesn't impact them in math at all. It's only impacting them and reading. So it depends on where you are. I'm sorry, I lost track of the question. Where were we? Well, I was asking about that disconnect between the high level of ability and then having a lower than average, another area, if that kind of asynchronicity is one of the core challenges? Absolutely. And it's extremely frustrating for parents, for teachers who don't understand typically, because they haven't been taught about these types of children and for the child themselves. And we often have secondary effects, anxiety, depression, behavioral challenges, because of the frustration of habits like having a Ferrari brain and having to drive in the slow lane all the time to school is either too hard or too easy. It's rarely at just the right level. Because of that synchronicity.

Debbie Reber: 13:57

I got a question about this on the Facebook group. And this has been our experience. I'm curious how prevalent this is this idea of slow processing speed being a common thing that you see in twice exceptional kids,

Devon: 14:12

we do see that quite often. And often as well, we'll see low working memory or average working memory. Typically the areas that are strongest in the twice exceptional kids are either verbal abilities or fluid reasoning or visual spatial abilities. You know, I only once or twice seeing a child who had really strong processing speed and really low ability in the other areas, and I probably wouldn't call them too weak. They're just really quick. That's so interesting, because it's the fluid reasoning, the verbal reasoning, those are really higher, higher orders, higher things and skills, they have impacted your ability to understand concepts and reason, whereas the processing speed is just how fast you are.

Debbie Reber: 14:53

Right? Oh, that makes so much sense the way that you said that. Interesting. Okay, so I wanted to ask you about this book I sent you when we were emailing back and forth. I mentioned this book on dual diagnosis of gifted ADHD and Asperger kids. And I'm wondering, first of all, have you read that book? Are you familiar with that book?

Devon: 15:15

Absolutely.

Debbie Reber: 15:16

Okay, I figured I figured, but I just had to ask. So for me, you know, when we were trying to piece together what was going on with Asher? It was so confusing, right? Because you're getting initially, maybe preliminary diagnoses. And I remember when we first got his diagnosis of pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified, and ADHD when he was maybe five, and you know, again, preliminary diagnoses, but we also knew that he was ridiculously smart. But they said that IQ isn't actually factored into any of the tests that go in for ADHD or autism. And so I started getting really just confused, like, how does this all fit together? And so I got that book. And what I felt in reading it is that if you look at the criteria

for highly gifted children, or highly gifted people, and the criteria for ADHD are traits of ADHD and or markers maybe is the right word. And then markers are traits of people with Asperger's. They're kind of all the same thing, in many ways. Yeah. So what is your take on that? How can parents kind of make sense of these sometimes either complimentary or contradicting diagnoses? And at the end of the day, does it matter if we know that exact label?

Devon: 16:35

Yeah, I think it often does really matter. To really understand where your child's needs are and how to meet them. I think it does help to really understand what their strengths and weaknesses are and what the accurate diagnosis is not from a label standpoint, but just from an understanding standpoint. The book was very helpful. I agree there are other books on the same topic that are also really good that were kind of written around the same time. There's one called Different Minds. And then there's another one called Bright Not Broken.

Debbie Reber: 17:05

Yeah, I have that one, too.

Devon: 17:07

And the idea is that, you know, the mislabeled child, Brock and fernette. It did that one. So there's a few books that are quite helpful in this. There are ways of teasing out what the issues are. And I'll give you an example from my own family. So my son was diagnosed with ADHD. And I thought I knew he was bright, I thought, could it be his giftedness? Or is it ADHD? So I thought, Okay, well, he'll do a gifted Summer Program at Johns Hopkins. And let's see if he's ADHD there. And sure enough, he wasn't because it was the environment that he was in, that was making him display those ADHD like behaviors in his regular school. Whereas in an environment where he was more challenged, he didn't demonstrate those behaviors. So you, I think, you have to look at the child and look at the environment they're in before you make, try to make any determination of whether they have something or they don't, and then also really factor in the views of different people, because a lot of these diagnoses are based on behavioral scales. And I just had a case where eight different teachers provided feedback on a child, four of them said, This child had autism and ADHD, and four of them said she was perfectly fine. So you end up with varied opinions based on the teacher's perspective, the way the child is in that class. It's a complex interaction of the person and the environment. That makes sense.

Debbie Reber: 18:33

It does. So when you're assessing kids, then do you? Are you looking at kids who may already have these diagnoses? Or are you also assessing for those specific neurological differences?

Devon: 18:47

It depends, I end up with a lot of people who've been who come to me because their child has been mis diagnosed, or they haven't gotten good recommendations from the

assessment. So often, I see kids who have been seen before multiple times. But then sometimes I have people who've never been assessed before. And I think it's not that difficult. If you do a thorough assessment, and really look at the child's history, and observe them in different environments and get feedback from a lot of different people to get a handle on what's really going on. Or at least that's my mission.

Debbie Reber: 19:18

So is there you know, we talked about age, but in your opinion, is there an ideal age for this assessment? Because I know, you know, when they're so young when they're four or five and six, so much of it can be just a developer, you know, a late bloomer developmental things going on. At what age would you say you can get a really clear idea of what exactly is going on?

Devon: 19:42

Basically, six is a tad young, but I do assessments at age 6 7 8 9 10. That's great. This sort of an optimal age would be in that range. I think when you should do it though, as a parent is when you need to, so if you're needing to know because your child is frustrated or unhappy. You're looking for a new school and you're moving, there might be motivation to do it at an earlier age. For those reasons or a child who is so gifted. I had one actually, he was Dutch. I had a boy who spoke eight languages and was doing chess when he was five years old. And he was really bored. And he needed to be assessed at that point, they didn't know what was going on. So sometimes it's there's a need that presses to make it happen earlier, but it is more accurate. And also if you do it before you're in school, you don't really get the academic piece of the puzzle, you only can see the intelligences and abilities and, and challenges there. You don't know how they're doing in reading, writing math and oral language. So it's better if you wait until they're in school age to get it got to handle if that

Debbie Reber: 20:50

makes sense. So how would you then describe different needs of twice exceptional learners versus kids who may just have ADHD or or another neuro difference, but without the giftedness? Like what is it about this particular population that presents its own unique challenges?

Devon: 21:11

Okay, well, Number one, there is rarely going to be a good school for that, because you might find a school for gifted kids that doesn't address the weaknesses or school for kids with autism or dyslexia doesn't address the giftedness. So there are very, very few schools in the world that attempt to address both sides of the equation. So what ends up happening is, if the parents are really wanting to be on top of it as much as possible, they end up having to take up one or both sides. What we decided to do as parents was to have the disability side addressed by professionals who could do reading, remediation, or ADHD coaching, all of those things. And we took on the giftedness side, and did you know summer programs figured out what their interests were, and really provided loads and loads of enrichment and interest areas. And I think if parents are going to pick one area to become to really put their focus, it would absolutely be that. I mean, you can usually find an expert to help remediate or

find accommodations for some of the weaknesses. But it's the strengths of these children that are going to carry them into their adulthood and be their passions and probably their careers. So that's what really needs to be enriched, we had one son who was a Lego boy totally into building things. And he's now a rocket scientist. And we had a daughter who was into telling stories and making things up and creating plays, and she's now a journalist. So I think you can encourage confidence, which is really key, because these are children who might if they're going to school might be feeling that they're not very good at it. They're usually not at the top of the class in all areas. Sometimes they are when they get to high school in college, but usually not in elementary school. And so they need to gain their confidence and sense of self outside through some extra curricular activity or some interest that really they can excel at.

Debbie Reber: 23:06

I do need to circle back for a second and say, how cool is it that you get to say that my son is a rocket scientist? That's so awesome. And my son who wants to be a rocket scientist is going to want to talk to your son after he listens to this episode.

Devon: 23:21

Okay, that's awesome.

Debbie Reber: 23:23

And, you know, just going back to that school fit, you know, just hearing you say the words, there rarely is a good one. It just, uh, I felt this pain in my heart a little bit, you know, because I think that's certainly been our experience. I mean, living in the Netherlands has complicated things further, which is why we're homeschooling but it has been such a great fit for Asher. But what is it? Like? Why is it that there are not good school options? I know in the US, I know all of the schools that are just for twice exceptional kids, because I've researched them, and they're not very many at all. Why are there so few options? I'm just curious if you have a take on that.

Devon: 24:03

I don't think it's always going to be that way. I definitely think it's the case now. But I think it's new, relatively new to be thinking about the needs of twice learners. And then the people who have founded the few schools that exist, most of them were motivated by wanting to find a school for their own child. And so they created the school to meet the needs of their child. And that's great, but they might not fit the needs of all twice children. And if you think about it, that would be awfully hard to do. Because you have some kids who would need dyslexia remediation, others who would need behavioral support and learning about social skills, others who might need coaching for attention, it can be so varied the types of needs that the children have on the learning side. I think it is easier to provide the challenge to all of them together on the intellectual side. I think that can be done but unfortunately, so many schools for gifted kids seem to also be schools for high achieving kids. And if you aren't just sort of a regular kid who stands in line neatly and marches along, often they don't they don't want you. They don't want the differently wired ones who are, I think, the most fascinating

and interesting ones around. But I'm hopeful that will change. I think education in general is due for a lot of change.

Debbie Reber: 25:22

I completely agree. I hope that we're a part of that change, then. Yeah, I mean, as you explain that, of course, it would be incredibly challenging to meet the needs of all these kinds of divergent learners. The challenges and and I'm sure this is what a lot of parents are experiencing is that the behavior is what is kind of so challenging or disruptive for the school. So if the school is trying to make a classroom more manageable, they're going to focus on the behavior and not on the giftedness. And so often these kids end up going to schools or classrooms that are designed for behaviorally challenged kids, and then they're, you know, that just has a trickle down effect of killing someone's joy of learning.

Devon: 26:07

Absolutely. I think it's horribly sad when that happens. And I admire many parents who decide to homeschool because it's, it's just possible to really structure it to meet your child's needs so much better. But I think the key is really keeping the love of learning alive and keeping the intellectual challenge keeping the child in a state where they're excited about learning.

Debbie Reber: 26:29

Yeah, so that was one of my questions about what parents can do within the school system, you know, say they're in a school system? And this was a question also on the Facebook page, if you're in a school system that doesn't have a gifted program, and you're recognizing that your child isn't really thriving is any suggestions on how to work with this school. I mean, I love the idea of investing in sparking their interest in home and in summer programs and through camps and that kind of thing. But is there any advice in terms of how they can work with the school to better support their kids?

Devon: 27:05

Absolutely. And it really depends on the school district, and often the state that somebody is residing in or the country, how willing the school is to work with parents. But what I think is helpful to do is start by assessing how the principal stands on this issue, if you can get the support of the principal behind you, they then communicate to the teachers what the teachers can do to help. But often, the principal might not be interested. So then the parent is in a position of having to sort of get to know each teacher individually and try to work with them to support the child. And that can often be very effective. There are many teachers who are really willing to learn about me and want to help, I think much can be done at that level. I think also parents do need to accept that certain level, they're not going to get everything at school, I see parents who spend years suing school districts trying to get their child's needs met. And it just makes everybody unhappy. And there's a long drawn out battle that sometimes isn't worth it. Sometimes it is, but sometimes it isn't worth it. And I think at a certain point, parents can make a decision, okay, I'm going to get what I can get out of the school. And the rest of it, I'm going to try to do on the sides. And it doesn't always have to be expensive, like a, you know, a \$3,000 summer camp, it can be going to Barnes and Noble

and pulling books off the shelf and spending two hours at the table, looking through books, or finding a mentor at a science lab who will work with your kid in an area of interest. It's not always a matter of throwing money at the problem. It's being resourceful and really listening to what lights you're seeing, what lights your child's fire, what really excites them, and finding ways to pull that into their life more.

Debbie Reber: 28:44

Great. Thank you for that. I wanted to before we jump off the call, do you have any favorite resources that should be on the radar of parents raising two kids? Absolutely.

Devon: 28:57

There are a number of mostly web based sources. There's the twice exceptional newsletter, which is published by Mark Bade, and that sound, I think once a month, which has nice articles. There's the dyslexic advantage website and books if the child has dyslexia. And what I love about them is they're one of the few organizations that really emphasizes the strengths. And we didn't even talk about that each. Each area of weakness has strengths that come with it, maybe the next one Hoagies, the wonderful gifted website has chat groups, there's one called GT special for 2e parents to talk about their kids and get advice from each other. And there's several other chat groups like that, mostly private Facebook groups that one can participate in. There is SENG which is for the social and emotional needs of the gifted. That's a website and they have lots of publications, mostly focusing on social aspects. And then there are various places that do research like the Belen Blanc center in Iowa and then the day It's an institute has fellows programs, they didn't use to take two week kids, but now they do. So that's a resource for some kids. And then Johns Hopkins has great programs if your child is willing to if you're willing to take a task to participate in them, they have sleepovers at museums and summer programs, and so on. And then, of course, all the books we've made mentioned so far. And parents can support each other more than anything, I think, because you have to find a community of people who, with whom you can share the challenges and get advice.

Debbie Reber: 30:33

It is such a unique kind of population, you know, the challenges are unique, a lot of us end up homeschooling, and there are some really great homeschooling communities as well, or subgroups within kind of the gifted homeschoolers forum that a lot of a lot of us in there are also raising twice exceptional kids. So that's a nice reminder about that community aspect. And these resources are great for listeners, I will share all of them on the show notes page, so you can access them, they're all ones that I also highly recommend. And it's nice to have them on this list. And now before we go now, I do want to circle back about strengths. Yeah, let's talk about that for a minute. I mean, you know, we talked about earlier in the show this strength spaced approach to these kids. So can you say more about that, and how we can, you know, support our strengths or even recognize those strengths through the difference?

Devon: 31:30

I'd love to, I think most of these children who are differently wired who struggle in elementary or high school would choose to stay differently wired as adults, because it provides

advantages to them that other people don't have. It's very real. So with dyslexia, the ideas have written a great deal about the strengths, but there tend to be your high visual spatial skills and really good big picture thinking, interconnected reasoning. It's very real. I see it very, very clear. I'm not dyslexic. And when I go to the dyslexic advantage conference, and I'm around all these interesting Dyslexics, they can think circles around me because of their, I call them superpowers. It's these strengths that are literally part of being wired differently with dyslexia. Same is true of all the other areas of weakness, ADHD, is associated very strongly with creativity, which makes perfect sense, because creativity is all about having flights of fancy and pushing the limit and letting your mind wander. And many successful people with ADHD credit their success to their ADHD, many entrepreneurs have ADHD successful ones. Same is true with autism, Asperger's an amazing ability and strength to narrow in on a focus of interest and become a true expert in an area at a level that most of us aren't capable of. And I just think being differently wired gives us a lot more opportunities for success for these children and diversity in the way people are attacking the problems that society faces. I think these children offer a lot of hope for all of us. I

Debbie Reber: 33:05

could not agree more. I love the way that you said that. And, you know, Asher would be the first to tell you that his Asperger's and his ADHD is what makes him who he is . He would never want to be different. He loves his gifts. He thinks it's awesome. You know, he recognizes the challenges that come along with it, but he's totally up for doing the work to push through those. And as you were describing all these gifts, you know, it just reminds me or makes me think of the fact that this really is for those of us raising these unique kids. It's about surviving the school years, because so much of the challenge with who these people are as young children comes because they don't neatly fit into the systems that are designed for them. And so yeah, when they become adults, suddenly those things yeah, of course, they still need to learn certain life skills and you know, learn time management in some way, or coping skills, but it really is about getting through these years.

Devon: 34:13

Absolutely. With as little damage as possible.

Debbie Reber: 34:15

Yes, exactly. That's the key. Well, listen, one last question. Where can people reach you or learn more about you?

Devon: 34:23

Thank you, I have a website. It's www.drdevin.com. And Devin is spelled t v o n, and then I tweet and I'm on Facebook and my hashtag is at two he gifted. So I'm active in those various places. And I really am happy to talk to anyone. It's an area that I'm very passionate about and I really want to help people.

Debbie Reber: 34:48

Fantastic. Thank you. And I'll again for listeners, I will include links to all of this all of David's contact information on the show notes page. And I just need to say A huge thank you for coming on the show. This has been such a great conversation. I think we covered a lot of great topics. I know there's a lot more to discuss with regards to E and twice exceptionality. So perhaps we can have you back on another time. But thank you so much for being here and sharing all this with us today.

Devon: 35:19

Thank you, Debbie. You're doing a terrific job with us.