



**Episode #78**

**Changemaker Jess Weiner on  
Becoming a Successful Advocate**

October 10, 2017



Debbie: Hey Jess, welcome to the podcast!

Jess: I'm so happy to be here with you.

Debbie: I'm excited to have you on the show. This is a conversation I've been wanting to have for awhile and you're the perfect person to talk about advocacy. This is something that a lot of parents like me, parents raising differently wired kids find ourselves in situations where we are having to advocate for our kids and it's really uncomfortable for us and so I thought this would be... You're not the typical guests, a lot of our guests, our parent experts, but I just appreciate what you do in the world and your experience and I know that it's going to be really helpful for parents.

Jess: Well, thank you. I'm very happy to be here. I think advocating in any way, shape or form, like you said, it's really uncomfortable and anything we can do to get people more empowered to speak up, that's what I'm all about.

Debbie: That's awesome. Well, just as a way to introduce you would you mind, I know you've evolved and grown through many different phases in your life and career, but could you kind of give us a little bit of the highlights of your backstory so we understand where you're coming from?

Jess: Yeah, sure. I've been, as you know, I've been a social entrepreneur for 25 years, which I, my focus, has been on women and girls and confidence. That's really been the key area of my research and empowerment work and consulting work. And I think over the course of these 25 years as you mentioned, you know, you go through various stages as an entrepreneur trying to solve for me a social problem which was for me representation of a girls and families and the media and how do we create an atmosphere where everybody's really represented so that you feel seen. Because we know that when people feel seen, they feel acknowledged and loved and accepted and valued, and that's the world that I want to create, but it's interesting because now I tell people I'm in the business of empowerment because really at the core of what I do, I run a consultancy that works with brands and organizations and helps them to better understand the issues that impact women and girls and so I've had great opportunities to work with campaigns like the Dove Real Beauty campaign, which had been an ambassador for for the last 13 years. And have helped in recently in the last year to change Barbie's body to make her body more diverse and different skin tones and body shapes and hair textures. And so all of the work that we do is about moving our culture forward. Which is why Debbie, I was so excited to be able to share a conversation with you on your amazing podcast because an issue that really does impact women and moms and dads and families is handling and navigating through a culture that doesn't often acknowledge differently wired kids in a way that can feel empowering.



- Debbie: Yeah, absolutely. I mean everything you've talked about in that deep desire to feel seen. It's something I talk about a lot that we want our kids to be seen and appreciated for who they are. And as parents we often feel that we are kind of kicked out of the club. You know, our experiences isn't validated. It's not understood and there doesn't really seem to be any interest in understanding what's going on with us because it is uncomfortable for, for parents of neurotypical kids often to really acknowledge what's happening with us because, this is my opinion, but then they'd have to take a closer look at what's happening with their own child and realize that the system as a whole is really not working for most of us.
- Jess: And I think too, you know, I wonder to some times if a lot of the lack of desire to look and to be seen and to really acknowledge also comes from, you know, a lot of parents needing to look within and recognize what they thought parenting was going to be like, or what their dream or vision of what they thought their family was going to be like. And you know, when you are dealing with your own family or somebody else's, I think it's often very reflective of your changing ideals or you know, well this wasn't what my family was supposed to look like or be like, or what will this mean if I have to, like you said, like look deeper within my own. I think a lot of it is about a self reflection of ideals and values and expectations and doing that kind of self reflective work is so important. Not just for our children but for ourselves. But you know, it's just, it's not what gets prioritized in this culture at all.
- Debbie: Well, it's work. And it can be uncomfortable. And I think a lot of parents, especially if our kids are neurodiverse, our kids are biggest teachers, right? So they trigger, you know, we, we don't really have a choice. We can either lean in and go there or we're going to be struggling in really understanding who our kids are. But yeah, I think it is hard work. And so if you, if you can avoid it, then I think that's the easier. Not as fulfilling, but it's the easier path at least, initially.
- Jess: Yeah. And it always comes and bites you in the butt though. You can't really avoid the truth for very long.
- Debbie: That is a good point. I want to talk about this idea of bravery. That is a word that I would definitely look at you and you are someone, I would consider to be brave and the way that you've shown up in the work that you've done. What is your definition of bravery and what have you learned about stepping into your own bravery?
- Jess: That is such a good question. I think it's something I've learned to really love about myself is that I do have a pretty high tolerance for my own fear, and what I mean by that is I define bravery as much like I would courage, which is like feeling fear and doing it anyway. And I have really developed and cultivated the bravery muscle for myself in that I'm connected to my fear. I even have a name for it. I have like my fear voice has her own name and I get to really get connected to that because my fears become my greatest teacher. And through that, that's how I've learned bravery. So I'll give you an example. If I'm afraid to



go into a meeting and asked for something that I want or recommend something to a client and I'll usually just get a little deeper into what is the worst thing that could happen or what am I really afraid of? I'm afraid of looking stupid. I'm afraid of not knowing something. I'm afraid of being vulnerable. You know? I'll go through the list of things and once I started putting names on those fear elements, the ability to actually challenge that became easier and easier because when my fear name didn't have a title and when I couldn't actually call it out that I didn't know how to combat it, and so my bravery literally was like a muscle that I exercise over time, which is OK, I'm walking into this meeting and I'm afraid of looking stupid or I'm afraid of not sounding right. All right, well, what's the worst that can happen? Somebody thinks I'm stupid. Well, guess what? People are going to think you're stupid whether you're the smartest person in the room or not. I can't control that. I can't control them. So what can I control? OK, I can control what I say. I can control how I say it. I can control the intention of which I share this information and when I pull all that back to myself, I think that's what actually fortifies my bravery is I'm, I've brought it back to me. What can I control and what can I do? And then I worked with myself and I say, OK, the best I'm going to do is show up and be vulnerable or authentic or genuine and I leave the rest on the table. And that's the kind of way that I've flexed the bravery muscle over time is I've looked fear straight in the face and I've just said like, not today. anyway. And um, you know, and it's not always been that simple, but it's definitely a process and a framework that I use.

Debbie: And you talk about that bravery is a muscle that you flex. So has your experience that it gets easier the more you do it?

Jess: Sometimes, to be honest, I immediately wanting to say yes, but you know, sometimes I think most of the time it gets easier. And then there's a new thing for me to learn as a human right. And I discover a new patch of fear that I didn't know that I had before or I fall deeper into a space of fear or concern that I didn't have before. But I love that acronym for fear, which is False Expectations Appearing Real. Have you heard that before?

Debbie: I haven't. I love that.

Jess: False Expectations Appearing Real, meaning that all this fear that's in our head are false expectations that we think are real. So we act as though they're really happening. And when I think about that again, it pulls me back into my body. And I get to recreate that moment. And so, you know, I think it gets easier when you have more experience, much like anything, right? I mean, parenting gets a little easier the longer you do it, I think business gets a little easier the longer you do it doesn't mean there aren't challenges, but you do get to see yourself master some things over time.

Debbie: Yeah, and what I like about this conversation is it's a reminder that fear isn't something we want to avoid. And there's a lot of talk out there about say no to fear. But really it's about befriending fear, getting to know fear, getting to recognize you have a name for your inner fear voice, but you know it is. I think of it as getting to know that that voice. I'm like, I see you, I know what's going



on, but I'm not gonna you know, today I'm, I'm to say this instead. And so I love that perspective on fear.

Jess: You know, it's actually one of the things that I think we're doing the biggest disservice to our kids about is not teaching them about their shadow selves. You know, my fear is part of my shadow self, my fear and how scared I can get of not appearing right or smart, or this or that, is the darker part of me, right? It's the part that causes pain and stress and anxiety and you know, negative thoughts. And I think sometimes with all of this sort of like Rah Rah empowerment messaging that is, well maybe well intended, but kind of feels hollow and fall short of actually giving our kids like a framework and a tool of how to look at that through your head to acknowledge it. Because it is part of us. We're never going to live a life where we don't have some element of fear that is an absolutely natural human and necessary emotion. But we don't have to let that rule our life and we don't have to let that rule our decisions. And so I think, you know, learning how to embrace the shadow part of ourselves is really important and I imagine for families who are embracing and looking at how to navigate in a culture that doesn't respect or acknowledge or appreciate what's going on in their family, you know, that's the fear that comes up of not being included and not being seen and how do we acknowledge that fear and not be afraid of it but not let that dominate our lives.

Debbie: So let's shift the conversation to advocacy because that's something I think we all need to know how to do. So many of us are having to perpetually advocate in schools and you know, being that squeaky wheel and fighting for our kids to get services, dealing with insurance companies. I mean it just goes on and on. So and, and again, that's a role that many parents are uncomfortable with. Many women that I've talked to in particular struggle with that role. And so when we talk about advocacy, what makes a good advocate? What do you see as being the key ingredients for being a good advocate?

Jess: Well, I think first of all, like you said, most of us, the advocacy or the need to advocate is sort of thrust upon us by a circumstance or an experience, right? You're a parent of a differently wired child, or in my case, I was growing up in a culture that wasn't acknowledging various body shapes and sizes in the media and I wanted to advocate for the ability for all girls to be seen. Sometimes experiences or situations get foisted upon us that make us an advocate, right? So I want to also acknowledge that I don't think we all wake up and were like, Hey, I'm going to go walk up stream today. Sounds like fun. I think you know, our life calls us to do that. But I think the key ingredient to your point is I'm obviously a deep passion, but I would actually say more so than passion. It's an intention. It's an intention to have changed something, to have a vision and to know exactly specifically what you want. Because I think nobody is successful as a general advocate. People need to be very specific, right? You need to be able to know exactly what you're asking for to understand how to measure impact or success or what do you want to, what do you want to have happen? And I think sometimes there's a lot of complaining, but that's not advocacy. I think advocating is part education, part negotiation, it's a part inspiration, you know, there's lots of tactics that advocates have to use to get their point across and



oftentimes when we're hurt, when we're upset, we use anger as the biggest piece, right? I'm angry I wasn't included in this or my family wasn't included in this or I need to fight for my rights.

Jess: So we, we, we feel angry because we have to fight, right? And we feel fearful. But anger is a great fuel for advocates. And I actually think it's a great tactic, but it's not the only tactic. You know, sometimes if you're talking about the education system, you know as much as you may not want to as an advocate, you're going to have to become part know, educator and inspiration in chief to get people on your side to understand and see your point of view. I look at these tactics very similarly to I look at a marketing or PR tactic. You know, you're trying to change a person's point of view, whether they're your insurance auditor, whether they're your teacher, whether they're your neighbor, whether they're the parent of a friend, like your trying to change someone's POV and he's going to have to use many different ways to do that.

Debbie: I love that analogy to being a PR or marketing to push forward a campaign makes total sense. I never thought of it that way. What about when you get pushback and especially with schools, in fact I'm just was on a thread today and a facebook group that I'm in that's full of parents raising twice exceptional kids and you know, it's the first couple of weeks of school and the crap is hitting the fan and the notes are coming home from teachers and the refusal to give accommodations and these parents are feeling like they're constantly in this fight mode. Right? And so what advice do you have for parents who are there advocating they're, they're trying to do it with passion and with intention and with positivity and inspiration and all these qualities that you talked about, but they're getting nowhere. How do you encourage them to continue?

Jess: Well, first of all, I feel very much for the moments of that push back because I know that that can feel devastating for people, but here's what I would say. The way that I negotiate when I'm advocating is like I do when I'm going to buy a car. Like I know what I need to get and my job is to get you to give that to me. And so one of the things that I would say is like, even in the language that you use, so for instance like let's say a teacher has sent him a note and they're not offering the accommodations that you feel are necessary for your child to be successful in that class. You could handle this a number of different ways, but I would say one of the ways a tactic could be to come in to say, listen, my goal in having this conversation with you is that we're going to come up with a solution for my child to make them successful in this class. My ask of you is to work with me on that solution. Here's what I'm proposing. What do you propose? And the nuance for me there is the first couple of sentences, which was my intention in this conversation is to achieve x. we're going to achieve x. How would you like to work with me on that? So it's a little neuro-linguistic programming, but it also lets the other person know that there is no other option in this scenario, right? We're gonna get to a solution and we're going to work together and here's what we're going to do. And again, I know personalities aside, that's like one example to many possible scenarios, but some of that confidence in speaking clearly and intentionally not leaving a lot of room for the other person to kind of wiggle around is one way to be a successful advocate and that is devoid of emotion.



Jess: Like I said, all of that, you know, obviously without the packing of like feeling all the pain you're feeling for your kid and the frustration you're feeling for not being seen. But I think sometimes we, when we're advocating to an audience that isn't very familiar with our scenario or our plight or nuances, we automatically assume that they're maliciously not engaging with us because they don't want to help. And I just find that ignorance is like so deep and so embedded and it's so hard because logically you want to be like, don't you get it? Why aren't you helping me? And I just have to constantly remember, OK, they are sitting from where they're sitting so I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to get you to come to my side. What is it gonna take to get you here and listen that takes a tremendous amount of energy and I, I know you've done that many times over. I know your community of listeners that have done that many times over. You know, it's just, it's a, it's a game of attrition at this point. We have to wear people down to get them to change perceptions.

Debbie: I just want to say that where my mind when you were talking about that tactic and the language to use, which I love that and that's going to be really helpful for parents. It's almost like when Ben Kenobi is saying, these aren't the droids you're looking for moving along, you know, and you're going to see in my way soon enough.

Jess: I love that you have to jedi mind them for sure.

Debbie: So I'm wondering, your last response made me wonder, how do you keep yourself emotionally safe? I don't know if that's the right word, but how do you kind of take care of yourself in these situations where they may be really sensitive situations or you're so personally attached to the outcome? How do you regulate that?

Jess: Well, that's, that's tough. I still work through that. You know, I've been at this game for a long time and my advocacy comes in the form of talking to media companies and brands and entertainment professionals about changing the stories that we put out for our kids and the products that we put out for our kids. And so it's a different kind of advocating for children, but it is something that's also very tireless, like it's, it feels like it's never ending and my self care techniques have varied over the years and I haven't always done them so well. You know, I've definitely not taking care of myself physically. I've not. Um, can you hear my cat meowing in the background? So here's one of the things, while I'm trying to be all boss and professional on this podcast, I'm not like a yelping cat in the background, so apologies to all your listeners, but, uh, usually my self care will involve petting my cap but not today. So I think, you know, one of the things that I deal with in how do I kind of pick myself back up is I definitely have to take care of my body and my mind. So therapy is a huge resource for me. Um, you know, I box now, so I get out a lot of my aggression in a different form, which is really helpful. And but you know, the other pieces is that I have to create a council of like my esteem team, like people that I go to that deeply understand my plight, sharing the same base. And that's really important for me to go to, for support.



But you know, where I also have developed as I developed a group of people who don't know much about what I do and I go to them to actually do the celebrating because I find that sometimes if I go to a lot of other like media literacy people or consultants or you know, social justice advocates, we end up complaining about the same things and that's great in a bonding moment and we can share about our frustration in advocacy, but I often don't get some of the lift that I need in those spaces. And so I've cultivated a couple of friendships where I can go to them and they're less familiar with my line of work. And so when I tell them some of the things that I've tackled during the day, I get a different point of view from them. They kind of help me celebrate the smaller wins. And I found that that's actually been a good balance for me because I don't always want to talk shop at the same shop people like sometimes I just need somebody to be like, wow, you walked into that office and said that. Or Wow, you, you know, you made that beautiful presentation to say how passionate you are about that topic. Like that's incredible. And so I may not be looking at those things in the same way. And I think finding a lot of different voices to contribute to your journey as an advocate is very important.

Debbie: That's such great advice. I think that's something that a lot of parents in my situation, we really work hard to develop those connections with other people who get us, you know. But I love that reminder to have relationships with people who can just celebrate you and, and even just taking the time to acknowledge the victories because they sometimes feel like they aren't as frequent as the problems and challenges. That's a great reminder.

Jess: It's become a lifeline for me because otherwise. I lose sight of the small wins. And I think when you're, you know, look, when you're in the, in the fight and the journey of getting people to have a deeper understanding about something they don't know about, it's the process. And that's the other thing is I've had to develop more patience than I ever thought I would have in my life.

Debbie: Yeah. Big Change can, can take time. I mean just watching you push towards change. Especially you mentioned the body shape change and the changes that have happened to Barbie in the past few years that I know that was a long, that was a long journey for you.

Jess: Yeah, that was, that was a lot of. It was about six years of work internally and yeah, there's lots of days you come home and you think, I mean this isn't even a more recent example is I work with movie studios now and trying to get them to change their representation of women in front of and behind the camera and whether it's in Barbie or in studios like that, you know, you'd come home and you're like, this is never going to happen. This is never going to happen. This is never going to happen. And then something happens. And then you realize that for me, the long game and my intention is on the long game is changing a system. And I imagine Debbie is very similar to what you and your community are talking about as well. You're trying to change not only a cultural system and educational system, a parenting system, medical system in how we treat, acknowledge, engage differently wired kids. And so it's a systemic change and



that is not a short term play. That's a long-term play. So I have to also pull myself off of my own expectations at times. And I understand there's different immediacy when you're talking about your child versus talking about like an element of, of, you know, entertainment culture, they're not the same. But I think elements are similar in that for me as an advocate and as a fighter, I've got to modulate my energy around that. I've only got so much energy in the day to be irate about everything and my God living in the world that we're living in now, every day of a news cycle feels like 10 years. So I've got to, you know, you got to do the self care, you've got to do the different kinds of input in your life. And you've got to also think, you know, be very honest with yourself about what you expect to accomplish and manage expectations in that way.

Debbie: Yeah, it definitely is a long game. But what I love about it, and I'm sure you see this in your work too, is that I feel like for every parent who advocates for their child to get the accommodation they need in class to get acceptance into this after school program or, or whatever it is, they're paving the way for other people. Like I say this in my manifest, and we're all in this together and the more of us that advocate and use our voices, we cannot be ignored. There's too many of us as 20% of kids are differently wired. So if we all really stepped into that and did our little piece, I think the effect could be pretty incredible.

Jess: Yeah. And I have to say, somebody who is, I'm not a parent of human children migrating, but had been advocating for children for many years and knowing you as long as I have and watching your journey with Ash and, and your deep challenge of shame, of vulnerability, of guilt, of acceptance, of advocacy and activism, of creativity, of collaboration. Like I really, I'm so excited that you have leaned fully into this role in your life and are able to share what you share with people because even as somebody who is not as directly relating to the exact parenting experience, I learned very much from you and watching your dogged determination in watching your extreme creativity and how you, whether it's like, how you're choosing to homeschool or how you're choosing to handle a hard moments. Like I read about the trips that you guys have on social media and I'm taking away lessons because sharing vulnerably helps everybody. And I think in a world where parents have, you know, I love twice exceptional, differently wired. I love all of this language, like amazing children. Right? I feel like when you have leaned into the gift you've been given and the challenge you've been given and you share vulnerably from that, everybody can learn from that. And so I think so many people that are listening right now are already trailblazing new paths for people in their lives and they just don't know it. And you've certainly done that for so, so many people.

Debbie: Thank you. I so appreciate you saying that. Well listen, I want to ask you one more kind of big question and then I'm gonna let you get on with your day and your cat. I'm just curious. So I'm hoping that this conversation has been inspiring for parents and their, they're feeling their advocacy of muscles are starting to flex. Maybe they're doing some stretching and getting ready to go in. Do you have any advice for parents who who are finding themselves in this space? They, they want to do something and they're facing some resistance but they're kind of ready to, to move forward, like any words of wisdom for them?



Jess: So two things I would say. I would write a letter to yourself in a moment where you're feeling great when you're like super high on what you're doing and how you're feeling about things and in that letter some and all of that courage and that wisdom and that bravery to talk to your shadow self, to talk to your fearful self, to talk to yourself that may have some doubts about the road ahead in advocacy or, you know, just the ones that doubt about the success of what they're doing. Because I do that for myself. I read that letter when I'm in a lower point and because it's in the voice from me at a higher point, it just reminds me of what I'm capable of doing. So give yourself a kind of reminder in that way when you're feeling great.

And the other piece of this is I would say is I do this kind of when I get anxious or I get nervous or I feel a little out of my body when I'm getting ready to go advocate for something that I care about or I want to connect with somebody. I do this five senses exercise where I just asked myself, OK, what am I, what am I seeing? What am I smelling? What am I tasting? What am I hearing? What am I touching? What am I feeling? And a just brings me back into my body. It just reminds me like even in those moments of tension, even those moments of fear, like I'm here, I'm alive, I'm present, I've got this, like I'm connected to my body. I'm going to get my thoughts together and I'm going to go forward. And these are two tactical things that I do that keep me in the advocacy, fighting mood, right? Because I need to remind myself that have got the ability. So I use my own words to do that. And then when I'm in this space, I have to remind myself to stay in my body so that I can be fully present for my life.

And that's how I use the five senses. So I think, you know, for those folks that are listening that are in the middle of a battle or really struggling with how to even get started, just keep some of those tools handy so that, um, again, like, like, you know, like an athlete, like somebody who's going to flex this muscle, these are your practice tools, this is your strength conditioning and your training and I think most of all knowing that you're not alone, that you are part of a larger community and that we sort of all stand behind you and support. Try to imagine what that looks like. You standing in front of a school board or, or a teacher or another group of parents. But imagine that there's thousands of us standing right behind you.

Debbie: Those are such practical, strategic tips. Thank you so much for sharing those. I think we could all benefit from doing them. And before we go, I want to make sure people know where to reach you and where to find your podcast. So would you mind just letting us know the best places to connect with you?

Jess: Sure. So my podcast is called Talk to Jess and I am in all places that you can listen to podcasts, but you can definitely get it through my website, which is [www.jessweIner.com](http://www.jessweIner.com).

Debbie: Excellent. And listeners, I will leave links in the show notes. You can check out Justice podcast is awesome. She has really authentic, vulnerable, honest, fun, funny, irreverent, sometimes conversations with really interesting people. So



definitely check that out. And just as always, I just love speaking with you and I learn something every time. Thank you so much for coming to the podcast and sharing this with us today.

Jess: You are so welcome. It's my pleasure. One of my favorite people.

Debbie: I feel the same. I wish we could hug.

Jess: I know virtual hugs from Amsterdam to LA

Debbie: You've been listening to the Tilt Parenting podcast for the show notes for this episode, including links to justice website per podcast. Talk with chess for books and all the other resources we talked about. Visit [www.tiltparenting.com/session78](http://www.tiltparenting.com/session78).

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- [Jess Weiner's website](#)
- [Talk To Jess](#) (Jess's podcast)