



Episode #101:

**Children's Show Creator Angela Santomero
Talks About Her New Book, "Preschool Clues"**

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- Angela: Just like the food labels and nutrition labels are so important that we read them on food, the idea that sometimes a show might say that it's educational, it might not necessarily be educational. The truth is your kids are learning from everything that they're watching or doing or seeing, and you just want to make sure that what they're learning is what you want them to be learning.
- Debbie: Welcome to the Tilt Parenting podcast, a podcast featuring interviews and conversations aimed at inspiring, informing, and supporting parents raising differently wired kids. I'm your host, Debbie Reber, and today I'm bringing it back to the podcast my dear friend, former colleague, and creator of many popular television shows for preschoolers, including *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood*, *Super Why!* and *Blue's Clues*, Angela Santomero. She's kind of like the Shonda Rhimes of Preschool TV. Angela is also an author, and who I had the chance to work very closely with over the past two years as she asked me to be her co-author for her new book, *Preschool Clues: Raising Smart, Inspired, and Engaged Kids in a Screen Filled World* which comes out a week from today. *Preschool Clues* shares the secret sauce behind Angela's shows powerful, transformative results in the form of 11 research based foundational CLUES to ensure that preschoolers flourish academically, socially, and emotionally during this critical time.
- Debbie: So today, Angela are going to talk about the book, what it's about, who it's for, and how it supports parents in parenting their preschoolers and beyond. And though the book isn't written specifically for an audience of parents raising differently wired kids, the clues way share are relevant for any parent of any child and actually of any age. I was surprised at how much of this I'm still using today with my 13 year old. And I was also able to bring my unique lens as the mother of an atypical kid to the project. So we took special care to ensure that the book is inclusive of every type of child. As an FYI, you can pre-order the book *Preschool Clues* and learn more about it as well as get some pre-order goodies when you visit Angeles website which is angelasclues.com. And I'll also include a link to the book in this week's Thursday note from me. So if you're signed up at Tilt Parenting, you'll get that later on this week and if you're not, you can just go to tiltparenting.com to sign up.
- Debbie: Lastly, I wanted to give a shout out to a few new supporters of the podcast, Julie Miller and Maria Ma. Thank you so much for helping me cover the production costs for this show as well as enabling me to offer transcripts for every single episode as I'm now going back and tackling nearly two years worth of episodes to make those available. If you want to join Julie and Maria and helping me, please consider supporting my Patreon campaign. Patreon is an online platform that allows people to make a small monthly contribution as little as \$2 a month to support the work of an artist or a musician or my case, a podcaster. It's super easy to sign up for it. Just visit patreon.com/tiltparenting. That's Patreon is - p a t

re on or you can find a link on the Tilt Parenting website. And now here's my conversation with Angela. I hope you enjoy it.

Debbie: Hey Angela. Welcome back to the podcast.

Angela: Thank you. Thank you so much for having me.

Debbie: Of course. I'm excited about this conversation because this means, first of all, that this book is out into the world, which is a pretty exciting thing to share. It's been quite a journey. But, before we get into talking about the book, you know, this is your second time on the podcast, but the first time was a while ago. We have a lot of new listeners, so if you could just take a few minutes to tell us who you are in the world of kids TV and you know, where your passion stems from.

Angela: Sure. I'm a mom of two girls and I am the co-creator of *Blue's Clues* and creator of *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood*, *Super Why!*, *Creative Galaxy*, *Wishenpoof*, and *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood*. And I just have this passion to embrace the positive impact that television and media and screen time has on preschoolers and put that out into the world.

Debbie: And I will just say as someone who worked with Angela, many years ago when she was working on *Blue's Clues*, you're kind of involved in all aspects of these shows from the writing to the bigger picture themes and the stories and the research and all the pieces that go into making them so successful. Yeah?

Angela: Yeah. So I love to look and see what the need might be in media or what it is that, that we really want to say to kids. For instance, in *Daniel Tiger*, it's all about socio-emotional skills and bringing Fred's legacy to light and use those skills in a way or portray those skills in a way that parents and kids can actively use them. And so I have a background in child developmental psychology and instructional technology and media. And so the idea of research and curriculum is thread through all of the writing that I do. And then of course, bringing the writing to life as an executive producer to make sure that the show comes to the screen, you know, in all its glory.

Debbie: Well, and I'll just say personally we're going back to the late nineties here, but when I joined the crew at *Blue's Clues*, that was something that struck me so much was just the thoughtfulness that goes into the show and how research based everything was and it was one of those jobs where it's like, I feel so good about working on this because it really is, I believe is putting so much good into the world and it comes from a really strong foundational place.

Angela: Aww thank you. I mean I feel like it really, it's about the kids at the end of the day, so when we use research, we're using it to make sure that our messages are really reaching kids in a way that they can use it in their lives and not about us right? A lot of writers will write like, it's literally about them in terms of making them laugh and having that ego boost and we of course have that, but at the end of the day, I think what we do that's different is that it is about - It's always

about the kid. You know, if we're. If we're arguing about something creatively, at the end of the day, it's about our child audience.

Debbie: Right, right. Let's talk about the book *Preschool Clues*. I would love if you could share what the impetus was for this book. Like what your initial goal was when you thought, you know, I want to create a book that can bring what I know about creating kids tv to parents.

Angela: You know, it was always so surprising whenever I would go and do some blogs or talks or do some talks in general, keynote speeches, that people were not aware of the level of thinking that we put into every moment of every show and the process that we go through in order to make sure that all of our shows are hits so that kids want to watch them but also are chock full of all this educational theory so that kids master whatever skill that is that we want to put into the show. And so I felt the need and also the desire to talk to parents because I talk to kids all day. To talk to parents about all of the all of these "Clues" that we call them and basically turned my shows or turn our shows inside-out and look at that first. And then of course as we were writing it, the idea that all of these Clues that not only do we put into our, our screens, that actually it relates to our parenting and the philosophy about conscious parenting and the philosophy about speaking to kids in a respectful way and Clues like that.

Debbie: And you know, just for listeners, a little backstory as I said in the intro that this is something that I had a chance to work with Angela on this book. And when was it that we initially planned out this book? It was a number of years ago...

Angela: I would say at least five. Yes?

Debbie: Yeah, I think it was 2011 - 2012 that we started imagining what the book could be and we knew it was going to happen. (Laughter)

Angela: (Laughter) We've had a lot of patience.

Debbie: We did, but the timing was right and we got really lucky to be working with Touchstone, who was, has been, a really great partner on the book, but you know, I'd love the audience to be able to hear from you kind of what the big idea is behind *Preschool Clues* and what you hope it does in the world.

Angela: That's a big question. I think first and foremost, you know, I really want to address the elephant in the room. This idea that, do I need to feel guilty about putting my preschoolers in front of the television set? Do I need to feel guilty about the amount of screen time that I use with my child and I want to scream from the rooftops - No. There is no need to feel guilty when you're choosing high quality media for your kids. And so, you know, the whole book surrounds us idea of a healthy media diet and the idea that you are using a food analogy because we do that all the time. Even when we're writing our shows. Everything's yummy and we're constantly marinating our people and our philosophy. But the idea is that you'll fill your cupboards with all of the good

food, right? With everything that you want your kids to be eating and then they can eat, you know, whatever it is that they want. The idea that you can overeat on broccoli is not something that you ever hear parents talk about. And so if you're putting your child in front of shows that you know, have a creative vision, you know, has the curriculum in it's through line, has a point of view that meets your morals or values then you can feel great about that because literally media can help compliment your educational goals for your preschooler.

Debbie: It's such an important thing to be talking about because screen-time is especially, you know, for all parents, definitely for parents of differently wired kids. Screen time is kind of, it's really loaded a loaded concept. You know, how much is too much. There is, as you said, so much guilt involved. There can be a lot of judging in the parenting community about who is watching and who isn't. And you know, one of the things that you have always said is that all shows are not created equally. Can you tell us what are some of the aspects of what you consider to be kind of a higher, higher quality show? Like what kind of ingredients would we be looking for?

Angela: So the first ingredient is education, right. The idea of being educational and it doesn't have to be traditionally educational. It could be thought provoking, it could be innovative, it could open the door to let you see a place that you would not be able to travel to. It's this idea that it's, it's when you come to the screen, you, you're better off for it when you leave. For preschoolers, you know, I've done everything from kindergarten readiness skills specifically all the way down to socio-emotional, the idea of how to share, you know, when you're, when you're so mad that you want to roar, take a deep breath and count to four. So, you know, education can run the gamut. But knowing that you feel that it's educational for your preschooler is also what's important because just like the food labels and nutrition labels are so important that we read them on food. The idea that sometimes a show might say that it's educational, it might not necessarily be educational or the truth is your kids are learning from everything that they're watching or doing or seeing and you just want to make sure that what they're learning is what you want them to be learning.

And the second is another big idea is Interaction. This idea that kids are actively participating in the shows and I do that very literally in many of, in many of my shows that we're, we're asking kids to identify certain shapes or numbers or clues or repeat a strategy, but there's also this idea of just knowing that the preschooler is there and that you're motivating or stimulating them in such a way that they want to go out and play out what it is that they just saw or in dramatic play or pick up an art material and create crafts. Like this idea that it just enables you to do and put something great out into the world is really important when you're choosing media.

And then the idea, like we talk about the sweets in a green smoothie, right? This idea that you do need the protein, and you do need the educational greens, but you also need to add some fruit that will make it sweet so that your kids will want to watch it or want to drink it. So the idea that it makes them laugh, it has characters that they want to invite over that they want to have at their birthday

party that you know, those are the kinds of things to really look at to make sure that a show sparking a passion in your preschooler.

Debbie: I'm just curious, do you have guidance of shows that would be that - I'm not asking you to name names, but you know, I guess reactions in our kids, like what kind of reactions really be keeping our eye out for, to know that something isn't a good match for them or isn't furthering their growth.

Angela: So in our, in our Clue chapters also we talk about what to look for and what to look out for. And so some of the, some of the more simple things would be that sassy talk or talking back, you know, the, the way the respectful communication might not be done in a way that you, it's not respectful basically the way that the characters are talking to each other, the way the characters are talking or depicted, showing them, talking to their parents, like things like that as well as lyrics to songs. Not necessarily I'm teaching them something that you would want them to be to be learning, not sparking their interest in something new. Not taking them to another level. There are some shows that are funny for the sake of being funny or there's some shows that have I mean funny for the sake of or at somebody else's expense is what I meant to say. As well as violent behavior. We do need to look out for violence, with regard to modeling behaviors that you don't want your kids to be doing. Standing up on chairs, jumping off of buildings, you know, all of those kinds of things that we wouldn't obviously want our kids to do in real life. We talk about the research on that so that we can, we can look out for that.

Debbie: One of the things that I personally really got into as we were working on this book is that there, as we talked about earlier, there's such a strong research foundation behind all of your shows. That was certainly the case with *Blue's Clues*, I know that's the case for *Super Why!* and *Daniel Tiger* and all the shows that you do and what I loved about it and what I think readers are gonna really enjoy is that, you know, your shows are so sticky. Your shows have really captured the imagination of preschoolers and also they've responded in a way where they're learning and growing from the content. And what you're doing here is basically saying this is why these shows are so successful. This is the research behind it. This is how we do it. And now here's how you can do the same thing at home.

Angela: Yes, exactly. I think that, I tell a little bit about my story as coming through the backdoor when it came to creating media for kids. And I think that research background and that background and understanding who kids are paid off for me because again, I can make a four year old laugh. I might not be able to make adults laugh all the time, but I can definitely make a four year old laugh. But I also, I know what they're interested in, what it is the, how we can scaffold the information so that we're taking them or holding them to take them to open their mind up to some new situations and new things that they might not have thought that they could even do. You know, I remember when we were doing *Blue's Clues* and we started with colors and shapes and by the end of the season we weren't doing physics and literacy, you know, on a much deeper level, you

know, we went into the solar system and they understood not only the order but attributes of the solar system.

Angela: So kids are so interested, as you know, and so invested. And I think the stickiness of the way in which we tell our stories is one of those things that keeps our viewers coming back for more and more and more, and then it's by no mistake that they can master these concepts because we don't want, at the end of the day, we don't want them to be able to just recite back what it is that we show on the show. Right? You want them to own it, we want them to be intrinsically motivated. We want them to master these concepts to be able to take over the world, change the world.

Debbie: Both. Yeah. They're gonna take over whether we like it or not. Anyway.

Angela: And I'm very proud I have to say of my *Blue's Clues* generation, who if I will age myself, it started in 1996, but these are the kids that have such a strong voice and as far as I'm concerned are going to be and will be shaking things up.

Debbie: Absolutely. That's really cool. I mean, yeah, so it ages us a little bit, but it's a how cool to know that that the kids that you were talking to through Steve and Blue so many years ago are now on the forefront of what's happening in the future where we're heading as a country and our world.

Angela: I mean not to overstate it, but the idea of giving kids a voice as young as two years old all the way up is a really big important piece for me. This idea that kids know that they're smart, that they can be. They are intrinsically motivated and little scientists and so curious about things and I think this interaction, this is the piece that I believe in so strongly. The idea that we know kids are watching and so everything that we do when we script it to talk directly to the home viewer and leave a pause for them to think and then sometimes to share and to talk back to the screens. You know, it's all practice. It's all practice in either in either learning the cognitive skills or the socio-emotional skills we want them to know, but also practice for them to realize that they have a voice and we're listening to them.

Debbie: Yeah. Well I think this would be a good time to go into some of the Clues, so the book is broken down into two parts. The first part where we talk more about the Healthy Media Diet and looking at your story, which is a great story and we won't spoil it here now for readers, but it is really interesting to hear how you personally became so invested in this kind of work, but the majority of the book is these clues where we take different foundational tenets of your shows and we basically, as you say, share the secret sauce of, you know, of that tenant, why it works, why kids respond and then how parents can actually apply it in their own lives. So, you know, before we got into this interview I was looking through to see which ones are kind of more relevant for my audience. You know, parents raising differently wired kids and they really like. I couldn't even find any that weren't, which I think is a good sign, but maybe we could talk about one or two of the Clues and give some examples of how you're encouraging parents to, to

take this information and then use it in their own world. So you just talked about the Pause. Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

Angela: Yeah, I think that the Pause is one where it is probably the most sticky to the sauce, to the secret sauce and I think it's one that's been tried to be modeled in a lot of other shows and I think it's great- only because I think it's so important and it is also the reason that we, you know, the idea that you're giving a Pause in your everyday life so that you can really take an almost uncomfortable amount of time when you're talking to your preschooler, depends on where they're at they're out of course. But that idea that when you wait after asking them a question, you'll get some really brilliant, interesting answers. And a lot of times we just don't wait. You know, we, we either want to fill the silence or we want to give them our point of view and that we find is, is so invaluable.

And we got, we were early on with *Blue's Clues*. We've got a ton of letters from, from parents of all in the differently. Why are community and we got one from the deaf community, from this woman whose son was deaf and said, have you ever heard a deaf child scream with joy? Because because of our pacing and because of how visual we are when we're speaking about something, he really believed that Steve was directly talking to him. And so it's those kinds of things that I think the pacing of our shows allows kids to be thinking in their own time. And I think it really, it really does wonders for them from an educational standpoint.

Debbie: And so in the Clue chapter about the Pause, we talk about what that actually looks like at home. And just as a side note, and I'm sure listeners know this already, like this is not exclusive to preschoolers. This is something that Dr. Ross Greene, the author of *The Explosive Child*, talks about, you know, a lot of guests that I've had on how important it is to, to wait, you know, when we ask our kid a question. What do you ask people to count to Angela to four?

Angela: Yeah to four, a four beat pause.

Debbie: And you just kind of wait and it's getting comfortable in that silence. But sometimes, and this is something I've been practicing a lot lately with my teenager who is not being as communicative, I'm doing a lot of pausing and it is in the pausing and then the waiting, that's the good stuff comes out and so I think that that's a really great one and then that in that chapter there are examples on exactly how to do that. So there's a lot of practical tips on how to apply that and what that looks like in different situations.

Angela: Oh yeah. And I think it really works with my husband as well. And even in my own choices, right? Like I literally have said, if I'm putting something in my, in my online cart, I pause and I wait because if I'm still thinking about it tomorrow, then maybe I'll check out. (Laughter)

Debbie: That's funny. So another one that I wanted to mention, again I think this is something that is super relevant to parents raising differently wired kids is the importance of celebrating the small things and how that can grow, you know, it

grows preschoolers sense of optimism and intrinsic motivation and those are qualities that we want to be certainly nurturing in our kids who some who may be predisposed to being more anxious or just having more struggles in their day to day life so that celebrating the small things is so important. Can you talk a little bit about that Clue?

Angela: Yes. And mean I think that a lot of times it's almost seems like a frivolous ending to our shows when we celebrate. And, and I think it's important to say that we're not talking about like a huge marching band parade, a celebration it really is acknowledging the aspects that are really big to our, to our kids. Right? But things that they've been working on and then, and then finally achieve and also celebrating the, trying something new, celebrating a failure or celebrating, you know, creating these learning moments out of everything that they're going for. It just puts us back into their shoes from an empathetic standpoint to remember, you know, it's hard to remember when you were four. It's hard to remember when you might be going through some of the small things that they're going through, but remembering that they're, it's not, they're not small to them. And so was taking a moment to celebrate and even we talk about sitting down and having a snack with your preschooler without being on the phone without, you know, having something else that you're multitasking when you're literally sitting down and having a conversation that, that feels like a celebration to your child.

Debbie: Yeah, absolutely. And again, in talking about all of this, it's just this book is designed for parents of preschoolers, but it is so relevant to those of us with kids of any age.

Angela: Exactly. And I also always say, you know, my girls are teenagers now and it has been said in the, in educational research, right, that everything that we do at when they're, when they're at these ages between two and five, really, they just grow up and they're bigger preschoolers, right? Because the zero to five is so important and there's so many things that they're doing and that they're growing that if we can keep it the same level of philosophy, hopefully it just gets easier and easier as they get, as they get older.

Debbie: I mean, one of the things, again, that drew me to wanting to work on this project with you is it is in complete alignment with my personal beliefs around child rearing and it's very respectful approach to just seeing our kids for who they are, communicating with respect to them. And it just really felt connected to the way that we've raised Asher. But what I really believe does help kids grow up into people who feel good about who they are. And I did just want to say that one of the things I talk a lot about on the show is that sometimes it can be tricky reading these parenting books that are not written for us, right. You know, the community of parents with differently wired kids and a lot of the stuff isn't applicable. And so just on a personal level, it was really great to be a part of bringing this book to life because we took a lot of care to make sure that there are examples in here of if your child is developing differently, this might look different in this situation and making sure that it was inclusive. That was really important to me.

Angela: Yeah. I think that we really, we talk about developmental milestones, but we really, that's such a smaller part of our, of our book where we really do talk more about universal truths and we do call them universal truths of preschoolers. But the truth is they're really, they, like you said, they are in life and a lot of ways, right? The idea is to remember to play, and how repetition is the key to learning is in any, in any situation at any age, at any level. I agree with you. I think it's that idea of conscious parenting, of respectfully communicating, of wanting our kids to grow up as empathetic human beings. You know, all, all of those things definitely are not just for preschoolers.

Debbie: Absolutely. So I want to ask if you have where you can pick and choose. This is your choice of, of questions you want to answer. Either share a great piece or to have advice for parents who want to know how to create their best healthy media diet for their young kids. Or what is one thing that you hope parents reading this book to take away? Like how do you want them to be changed as a result of reading it or you can answer both up to you.

Angela: Well, I think that, you know, the idea of bringing media into your life more, embracing it as a parenting tool, embracing it as support, you know, using Daniel Tiger in an example to get your kids to try a new food. You know, what would Daniel say? What would Daniel do? You know, like those kinds of things. For some reason we, you know, we talk a lot about media for adults. We talk a lot about the negative impacts of media on violence, but we don't necessarily talk about the positive impacts of media. It's more of a surprise every time you know that someone might say, Oh, you know, my kid didn't learn this and the truth is, you know, I would just love to make sure that it is a conversation that we're constantly having and that we're holding media up to the same standards that we would in, in adult media or an education, right?

That we're talking about it with our preschoolers and we're also talking about it with each other and that, that would be the one piece of media to be part of the conversation.

But I also think, um, the idea of helping create your own media library, I just wanted to say that we're not, I'm not saying that you have to co-view everything with your preschooler. It's just about being involved and knowing what it is that they're watching so that you might have done your research, you know, what, what the strengths of this program are, what it's supposed to do. You've watched an episode and then you can put it as part of your Yes List. And then that's something that can be queued up and that you, you feel good about your preschooler diving in and watching.

Debbie: Yeah. It really is about just letting go of the guilt because yeah, when they're watching high quality programming, there are so many benefits. And you know, that's what we talked about in the last episode was specifically how Daniel Tiger and the social stories, a social emotional curriculum in that show has really benefited so many kids. But especially kids who are differently wired because it gives them an opportunity to see these, to kind of see social thinking out loud, if

you will. And those are things you can feel really good about and then they also give you a touch point and a strategy that you can go back and talk about with your kid or bring it up and then another situation like, oh, remember when this happened to Daniel?

Angela: Well, and I think animation is so wonderful to be used that way because we can either see the inner dialogue, like seeing the clues about Steve's head as he's trying to think through an answer or we can use it to reinforce facial expressions or you know, a very specific emotional need that Daniel Tiger might be going through. So animation, sometimes it's, you know, it's just a cartoon, but we use animation so that we can visually see things that you can't see in the regular world.

Debbie: Yeah, it's really cool. The magic of animation. So. OK, any last thoughts before we say goodbye? And also please share with us where viewers can connect with you, or listeners! Excuse me, *viewers* of your shows, listeners to my podcast.

Angela: That's right! angelaclues.com. Would be a place that I would love any questions, any thoughts, anything that I can be able to answer with regard to the book. There's so many different aspects to it. So it's one of those things that I really want to hear from people what it is that they will want me to dive into a little bit deeper. You know, I'm just, I'm just so excited that it's finally out in the world and I just can't wait to hear what everybody has to say.

Debbie: That's exciting. Well Angela, I want to thank you so much for coming by and talking with us about the book and it's such a fun project to work on with you and super honored to be a part of it and I'm excited to see what it does in the world.

Angela: That's what I was going to say. I was just going to talk about how fabulous it was and how much fun I had working with you on this book and forever indebted for helping me bring it to the world.

Debbie: You've been listening to the Tilt Parenting podcast for the show notes for this episode, including links to Angela's website, our book *Preschool Clues*, as well as the other resources we discussed visit tiltparenting.com/session101.

If you want to get a sneak peek of my upcoming book *Differently Wired*, you can now download the first chapter and table of contents. Just go to tiltparenting.com/differentlywired or go to any page on Tilt Parenting and click the book tab in the main menu and sign up and you'll have instant access to that. Lastly, this is my weekly reminder to head over to itunes and leave a rating or review or both if you haven't done so already. There are a lot of parenting podcasts out there and there's new ones coming out every week, and so those ratings and reviews help keep our podcast highly visible, which in turn makes it easier for me to land big guests. Thank you so much and thanks again for listening. For more information on Tilt Parenting, visit www.tiltparenting.com

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- [Angela's Clues](#) (Angela's website)
- [Preschool Clues: Raising Smart, Inspired, and Engaged Kids in a Screen-Filled World](#) by Angela Santomero and Deborah Reber
- [Blue's Clues](#) (Nick Jr.)
- [Super Why](#) (PBS Kids)
- [Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood](#) (PBS Kids)
- [Creative Galaxy](#) (Amazon Kids)
- [Wishenpoof](#) (Amazon Kids)
- [The Parent Show with Angela Santomero](#) (PBS)
- [Daniel Tiger Becomes a Boy with Autism's Guide to Social Life](#) (article from *New York Times' Motherload*)