



**Episode #136:**

**KJ Dell'Antonia on  
How to Be a Happier Parent**

November 27, 2018

Debbie: Hey KJ, welcome to the podcast.

KJ: Hey, thank you so much for having me. I'm excited.

Debbie: Good. Me too. I am excited to talk about how we can be happier parents. You're the perfect person to have this conversation and you know, just as a way of introducing you, would you mind just taking a few minutes and just tell us a little bit about your backstory, who you are in the world, who you are as a parent and we'll start with there and then I want to hear about why you wrote this book.

KJ: Okay. Um, I am professionally the former editor of the Motherlode blog at the *New York Times*, for five years I was the lead writer and the editor and did all that. Basically if you saw it on the Motherlode blog or if you read it in the Times and it had to do with parenting, pretty well. If it's on the Motherlode blog it's definitely me, if it was in the *Times* and it had to do with parenting it's a decent chance I had some kind of a hand in it, depending on what it was. And I was really focused on parenting policy and culture and society and the ways that we deal with each other as parents, the ways that things are good, the ways that they are less than good. It was, it was not a personal writing experience, but as an editor I was editing a lot of personal writing.

So what was happening is that there's sort of, things just kind of crashed into each other. There's all this research going on while I'm doing this and that I'm responding to that's all about, you know, how parenting robs parents of all joy, how having children robs parents of all joy. That's one of my favorites, wasn't a Times headline. It's just like, ah, geez. Um, we, we answered, we were answering survey questions in ways that led researchers to write things like parents would, would prefer doing laundry to being with their children. There was the book *All Joy and No Fun*, which was written by a friend of mine and you know, it's just this moment that I'm watching and responding to professionally of, it wasn't just the things that are obviously hard. I mean, yeah, we don't have family leave. Um, yeah, this country we talk a great game about supporting families we don't do diddly.

And so there's, there's all of that out there and yes, you know, school hours don't match work hours and summer, don't get me started, but there's also, there's this feeling of like that the things that even the things that are pretty good are also a slog. So the minivan is a slog and the sippy cups are the slog and dinner is a slog and everything is just feeling so painful. And this is not me criticizing my fellow parents because I was right in the middle of it. I have four kids. They are now 12, 13, 14 and 17. But you know, as I was getting started in this, it would have been more like 8, 9, 10 and 13. And you know, we were living it. We were right in the middle of this sort of feeling that what we thought would be our family life had turned out to be an additional full time job. And I, I wrote the book because I wanted to figure out why that was happening and how we could make it stop.

Debbie: Wow. So, lots to talk about. And actually as you were talking and telling us about the impetus behind the book, I was thinking, I do remember there was, there were a couple of articles trending that were specifically about that, that people with children were kind of the unhappiest adults around.

KJ: Yes. It was a thing.

Debbie: It was a thing. Yeah, I forgot about that. And you know, so part of my mission for Tilt is to help parents raising atypical kids find more joy, that's in my mission statement, in their journey. Because you know, this is what we're doing, we're raising these kids and when we can be happier in that process, everyone's going to benefit, our kids, our family. And you know, I am the first to admit that joy can feel like a far stretch from where we are, especially when we're in those kind of earlier elementary school years or you know, when things are most challenging. So I know you did a ton of research for this book. You know why is, in your opinion and from what you found, being happier a worthy goal? Why, how do we benefit when we as parents can be happier in this?

KJ: Oh we, we, we so benefit and it is, it's so important to just make the effort to do this and not just for yourself, but you know, it benefits others as well if, if, doing it for yourself isn't enough. And I like to start by saying look, happiness is not a pie. So it's not like if you're happy someone else has to be less happy. A lot of the times we look at the world and we think, how can I be happy when things are still bad or you know, how can I be happy when my child is struggling or how can I be happy when I'm unhappy about the political situation or you know, an international problem. It's just not fair for me to be happy and that, that is so wrong. And actually since you're living in the Netherlands, I will point out, people in Denmark don't have that mental conversation.

People in Bali don't have that mental conversation. It's a kind of an American thing to think, well, if everyone else is unhappy, it is my responsibility, to be also unhappy. It's just crazy. You can be happy and actually happy people are more helpful in, in difficult situations. They're more likely to give to charity. They are more able to be helpful to other people who are struggling. They're you know more pleasant for everyone else to be around and on a family level, happier people have stronger relationships so they have stronger relationships with their kids. They're able to be more, more supportive when times are challenging. They're also healthier and you know, there's just, there are so many benefits that accrue from looking at the things in your life that are great instead of looking at the things in your life that are not great. It's, it's, it's a long list.

Debbie: Yeah. You know, I was having this conversation with a friend recently that I often feel embarrassed to say how happy I am. I, you know, and generally I have my bad days, my dark days, but it is almost something where I'm like, it's an embarrassment and maybe that is an American thing. I didn't think of it that way.

KJ: One of the experts that I spoke to said sometimes when I interview Americans I feel like they're afraid to be happy. And I just thought, oh man, I don't want to be that person. You know, we just, I don't know. It's our, it's our national focus is

sort of on the work-y things and the challenging things. We don't, we don't think about the good stuff and that's crazy because we have, we have so much. We really, we have lovely modern lives of such abundance and that doesn't have to mean that you're, you know, a rich person toting around in a helicopter. We, we're better off than historically people have ever been. Especially if you live in the western world and there's no reason not to treasure and savor that. There's no gain in not.

Debbie: It's so interesting that, I mean, yeah, I don't want to get all philosophical, but it is interesting.

KJ: It is philosophical!

Debbie: Why, why we're drawn to that. You know, and so many parents with atypical kids, and we talk about this a lot in the podcast, is that we often lead with their deficits when we're introducing them to people, when we're discussing them or just talking about our lives as families. We do tend to hone in on the hard stuff and that of course shapes our experience, it shapes how our kids feel about themselves. It, it shapes how others perceive us and it's just a good reminder that what we focus on is what we experience.

KJ: Yeah. And it's, it's really. I mean, it's hard not to honestly. It's, especially when you have kids that are different, and I do, and you don't want to be judged for what's going on. You want your child to be welcomed for what they're bringing to the party. Uh, so you know, you want to lay out, you sort of want to set things out and that is completely understandable. But you know, to also just have in your, in your own mind and ability not to be always dwelling on those things, but to, you know, I think sometimes it can be really annoying to have people say, well, you know, appreciate the positive things and be grateful. And that's really, that's not what I'm saying, it's more just that our brains are really designed to focus on the negative stuff so we don't need to give in to that. Like our brains want to like look for the tigers, right.

That's, that's our, our natural makeup. It's what has felt important throughout our lives and for us to shift our mental mixtape to more of a positive one is difficult. But once you get it rolling, you know, it, it becomes an ear worm. It repeats. So yeah, we, we're all sort of playing those negative tunes all the time. And shifting out of that is, is huge. I mean there's in, in my book and and and when I talk and everything, there's all kinds of practical sort of things that you can do to make life be, make it easier to be happier, but honestly deciding to be happier is the biggest thing you can do.

Debbie: That makes total sense. I mean -

KJ: Doesn't make much of a book though. Just decide to be happier. It's funny how hard it, it's ridiculously simple to say and ridiculously hard to actually do.

Debbie: Well, that's a conversation I have a lot because a lot of what I'm trying to help parents do similarly is change the way that you're perceiving your situation and notice so that you can start shifting the way that you're thinking because the way

that we're thinking controls our feelings and it just kind of goes from there. But, and people always want to know, but how exactly do you do that? Like, well, you start noticing, you know, there's, there's only so many ways you can break it down. It really just takes that intentional conscious effort, I think, to decide I'm choosing to, to focus on being happier, to work on this and to notice when I'm maybe being more negative.

KJ: Well, and when I talk about, about our brains, you know, if there's nothing immediately negative to do, then they often go to sort of the negative future. Well, what's my child going to be able to do? You know? Oh my gosh, if she can't complete this addition sheet without getting up and twirling around six times, how is she ever going to have a job later in life? How is she ever going to have a partner? It's just, we want to sort of, we want to jump to the many, many, many terrible, terrible things that could happen which are not happening now and may well never happen. And we spend a lot of time torturing ourselves with those things.

Debbie: Absolutely. So in terms of then, what's getting in our way? So we've talked a little bit about this and you know, even just the science that we do tend to dwell on negative things and that we're wired to, to be concerned about potential dangers. What are some of the other barriers that you found in writing this book and researching it, that get in our way when we're pursuing more happiness in our families?

KJ: Well, truly there are objective things that make our lives as families, our modern lives, lovely as they are, challenging. There's mornings when everybody has to be somewhere earlier than anybody wants to be anywhere. There's the sort of stressful end of the day when, so there's a lot of expectations to be met or if you're thinking about sports and activities, there's, there really is a much, they really are more intense. I mean you can, this is, it's an objective fact. You can look at the ways that something like soccer has changed over the past two or three decades and and see there's more practices, there's more possibilities, there's more individual coaching. There's all, there's all kinds of sort of things knocking on our doors and asking for our attention and our time, digitally and, and in the real world. So those are hard. So, so taking a look at whatever area of your life is stressing you out and recognizing that some of that is stuff you can control and some of it is coming at you from the outside.

I think a lot of the time we blame ourselves for everything. Um, you know, we say, oh my god, I'm the only person who can't find a good daycare. You're so not the only person who can't, nobody can find a good daycare. It's catastrophic how difficult it is to find a good daycare. Um, and you know, you might be entitled to a subsidy, but and everybody else is getting it, but then there's no places. And I mean it's, there are things that are making this hard. So going, okay, those are the cards that I've been dealt, the things that are making this hard. Now I have to work within that framework. So sort of giving yourself a little slack because things are challenging. That's an important step. And then going ahead and taking on, all right, well what can I change? You know, I can't find a good daycare, but I could, you know, talk to my boss about that 4:15 meeting that means I'm never out of the office until 5:05, that means I'm always late. I'm always paying

the \$5 a minute penalty and I'm always stressed while I'm driving across town. You know? That's a constant. Is there something I can change about that? So looking for the things that you can change.

Debbie: Do you have thoughts or suggestions for listeners who are wanting to change something but feel as if they have limited options? You know, in your chapter about the morning routine, you tell a great story about how you thought you found the right solution by bringing somebody in and that turned out to be the wrong solution. You know, there's a lot of parents I think who feel that they don't have a lot of choice and I'm always trying to encourage parents to get creative and think outside the box about what might be possible. That you may have more choice in this than you think. But any advice on how parents who feel like, I don't have a lot of wiggle room here, these are the cards I've been dealt and I don't even know where to start in terms of changing my experience in this?

KJ: Well, I have two thoughts and the first is that if you want to think about trying to change the experience, something to think about is what is your real goal there? So one of the things for me in the morning is that I went from thinking that my goal was to get everyone out of the house and where they needed to go on time to deciding that no, my goal is actually to have a pleasant morning and give everyone a decent start to their day. That, that changed everything. So that was, that was big. So if you look at, you know, what's, what, what's the bigger thing that I want? That's one of the things that you can do. And I. What was the other one? Oh, also you can, maybe you can shift the goal or you can shift how you think about it.

So for example, my kids all play travel hockey, they just do. And that means that we spend a lot of time in the winter on the weekends driving them places because we live in rural New Hampshire and it's not like all the teams are right here and you can go play the game in the morning. And so a lot of the time we're on the road. And what I needed to do was go, okay, look, really, I do have some choice here because you know, most of, we do a lot of carpooling but a lot of the parents just go to the game so it doesn't feel like you can sort of really choose not to go to games. But really I could, you know, I could pay a teenager or I could just always ask the other parents to take my kids. Certain parents are always going to go.

Would they feel like I was mooching? Maybe, but they're going to go anyway. You know, I do have a choice here and I'm not making it and the reason that I'm not making it is that honestly I want to be there, at least some of the time. My kids do this sport and they love it and I want to be a part of it and I don't want to miss their whole weekend or not be there if something goes wrong as has happened a couple times. So let's shift my thinking from, 'oh my god I have to spend my weekend driving to Concord', to 'I really want to take my kid to Concord to play in this game'. Given the situation, this is where I want to be, this is what I want to do. And you know, we sort of pretend in our minds that we'd rather be on a beach having a fizzy cute beverage with an umbrella or something. But really you probably wouldn't. Not if your kids are going to be there driving to hockey. So changing the way you think about this thing that you have to do, that can go a long way.

Debbie: I absolutely agree. I do that with my birthdays now. Instead of lamenting, you know, how old I'm getting, I say, wow, I get to turn this age this year, you know, and even just that little language

KJ: So much better than the alternative.

Debbie: Yeah, exactly, exactly.

KJ: And language is important. I don't use, I don't use the word busy because I don't like it. It feels negative. Realistically, if I really step back and look at my time, if I want to do something, I'm gonna find the time for it. If I don't want to do it, I'm not. I'm not too busy to do your thing. I just don't want to. Occasionally, you know, you ask me to have coffee and I have a meeting. I mean that. But that's a different, then we're gonna find a different time. Um, yeah. I don't, I try not to use negative language around the things that are really either choices or things that, and sometimes there's no choice, you're going to do it. Maybe it's not what you want to do, but complaining isn't going to help. Just to channel your mother here and mine. Really, you're going to do this anyway. It's up to you how you feel about it while you do it.

Debbie: Absolutely. So you have a chapter in your book about screen time and that is something that I think all parents are just trying to sort out.

KJ: Yeah it's a tough one right now.

Debbie: It's a tough one. And it's particularly challenging I think because parents with kids who have ADHD or some other neuro differences going on, we're also getting some serious conflicting messages about, you know, is this exacerbating issues, you know, but a lot of our kids, kids on the spectrum, are really drawn to screens and technology. I'm just wondering, could you give us some, some bigger takeaways from that chapter about what you found can be helpful in creating more happiness, if you will, around the area of screen time?

KJ: Yeah. This, this is so hard and the reason that it's so hard is that we have absolutely no example for how to deal with it. And yeah, you're getting conflicting messages and the reason that, everybody's getting conflicted messages, the reason for that is that no one knows. And we're really not going to know. There's not a way to do studies on this. Plus it's a constantly changing thing. It's not like you can say, well, you know, seven years of consistently playing Minecraft is going to, because your kid's not going to play Minecraft for seven years, they're gonna switch onto the next thing, they're going to switch to the next thing. You know the the phone is going to be super appealing and then all of a sudden you're going to upgrade your operating system and all of a sudden the phone says, I'm going to tell you how much time you're spending on me.

It's a constantly changing target, so we just have to wrap our head around the idea that there is actually not a right answer. There is only what is going to work for you and your family right now, and that might change tomorrow and that's annoying, but that is the technological world that we live in. So given that,

usually when I talk to parents about this, I sort of divide it into two groups. And if your kids are young enough that you own the things through, to which they access the internet or television, you know, if it's your TV or your phone or it's your iPad, even if they think it's their iPad, then you should be, you should be in control. There shouldn't be any question in anyone's mind who decides when the screen time is and what the rules are around it. And if there is, then it's time to take that back and maybe make a rule that any whining if you want it turned off, means it's gone for the next day. Or you know, and, and make whatever rules that you want to make liveable for you.

So my rule when my kids were younger and for a very, very, very long time was weekends, yes, go for it. Have as much screen time as you want until I tell you that your head's going to explode and then you have to stop. Weekdays, no. And the reason for that was almost entirely, because when I set the rule we weren't really having a problem, my kids younger and, it was almost entirely that they were making me crazy by asking all the time. And so that solved that problem. You don't even ask. If it's Thursday, no. Just no. And that was so beautiful and it went for a long time. But then we got to the point where three of the four have phones and the fourth one has a laptop and you know, they, they can - for me to monitor that...and also it wasn't even just that.

It's like, well what is screen time when you're in high school and all your homework is on the computer? Is texting screentime? Is Snapchat screen time? And you know, you, I'm not going to tell you you can't, you're 16 years old. I'm, not going to tell you you can't snapchat your friends Monday through Friday. So we, we, we let that go. And when you get to the point of wanting to let whatever rule that you have go, now it's time to look at the big goal for your teenagers. And the goal for all of us with screen time is pretty much the same. And it's not what we think. You don't want to raise a kid who can follow your screen time rules. You want to raise a kid who understands the need to moderate their own screen time. And that is so hard and I don't, I can't like say, here is how you do it.

I am sorry. I wish that I could, you know, I can tell you that our experience has been a shift to that. And then a panic around the, the amount of screen time that one kid began to just, oh my goodness. I was like, this is a terrible idea. And we were just having these constant conversations. All right, how many hours is that? Would you want to tell your teacher about that? Would you want it to, is that really what you wanted to do with your day? You know, or in the morning I how, how many hours are you planning on spending? Well, if you don't know, you know how that's gonna work out. And over and over and over again. And finally after like six months, we're starting to see some, some shift. And what what I was going to do, if I'm not telling you that there was shift I was probably going to say, all right, this child is not ready for this move to moderation and we're gonna, you know, it's going to have to be the phone gets checked in at night or what I, we, we, we would have gone on to something else. But we are starting to see some movement and some boredom with it. Because the important thing to remember is that we're all as adults dealing with this. You know, the, the, the conversation around how hard it is for us to put down our phones and how hard it is for us to

moderate our social media time and how, you know, if you want to be a writer, you got to turn off your Netflix and, and just, it's all.

This is like a larger national conversation. And our teenagers are having it too. Like they're having it at school, they're having it with each other, they're coming up with ideas to put their phones away when they get together. They're, this is gonna be their problem. So we, we can't feel like we're going to solve it for them.

Debbie: Yeah. It's so interesting, I think. And it depends on where, you know, how old your child is and where you are with things. You know me with a, a 14 year old in the house who, you know, we've, we always are modifying the screen time rules, but I'm at that place where you are where I'm really just like, listen, this is something you're gonna have to figure out. And just trying to help him notice, oh, how are you feeling after being on the computer that many hours, how's that head of yours? But you know, and I will say I think a lot of parents across the board, I always have to qualify. I think this applies to everybody but especially my audience, we can get really fused also with our kids experience with their emotions. Emotionally we're very tied to them and you know, I have just found as I've stepped back more that I'm able to not get so wrapped up in his moods or you know, his emotions and that has helped me feel happier and it makes me want to speak to something, um, that you also talk about which is that we should be happy even when our kids aren't.

That's something I've been thinking a lot about. You know, we were talking earlier, we're in the middle of this relocation back to the US kind of right in the middle of it as, as we're having this conversation and there's a lot of emotions happening in my house right now. And we're both kind of taking turns who's happy and sad on what day. But I find it, you know, balancing this like, is it okay for me to feel really happy or to be in a great mood when he's having a really bad day? Can you talk about that? You know, how can we separate ourselves and how does that benefit our kids if we can actually be in a happy place, even if our kids are having a really tough time.

KJ: Yeah. The thing is that it's not just okay, it's important. It's really good for them to see that their parent can be okay even when they are having a tough time and that does not mean that, you know, we're dancing around going, ha ha ha ha ha I don't have a Spanish test and you do! You know it's not like some sort of weird gloating thing. It's just that you know, we are our own emotional people and they are their own and we are together and we are sympathetic and empathetic to each other and aware of one another's moods, but we don't have to absorb one another's moods. Because our kids actually don't want to make us unhappy. Unlikely as that may seem at certain moments, they don't like it. So one of the things that happens if we're too responsive, if we get, you know, if when they're upset we're upset, is they start to come home with a problem and they tell you about their problem.

They say, oh, I wasn't invited to the birthday party, I didn't get invited, didn't make the team. And you get really upset and a couple things happen for them. And one is, oh wow, I didn't think this was that big a deal. But apparently it actually is. And the other is, oh, you know, when I tell my dad about this sort of

thing, he gets really upset. So maybe I just shouldn't tell him because that would be easier. I'll just keep it in. I'll just pretend to be happy even when I'm not, so that he can also be happy. That, this is so not the goal. So we don't want to put the burden of our happiness on our kids. We don't want them to feel like they are, you know, they are in charge of that, that, that, that is their problem. Because I mean, we can relate to this as adults, if you are an adult and you know, maybe you're going through, you've just lost your job, the last thing you need is for your mother to implode over it.

Right? But some of them, some of our mothers do that. You know, so then there you are and you've lost your job and you're sort of putting an. And you have to deal with everyday your mother's calling you hysterical because she's worried about how you're going to get on with your life and what you really need is for your mom to be like, oh, that's really hard. You know, call me anytime you need to talk about it. But I've got a tennis game so you know, I am going to get off the phone in 15 minutes. That's, that's what, that's what you want. And when we respond to our kids' challenges with that kind of empathy with that, oh my gosh, that is really hard. What are you thinking? Is there anything that I can do for you? Uh, you know, what are you going to do next?

Or just or often more likely just tell me about it. Do you want to tell me any more? Wow, that sounds like it really hurts. Then what they're seeing is this probably isn't that bad because my parent's not losing their mind. My parents are okay and therefore I will be okay. Like this is going to pass and that's the thing with most of their stuff, we know, we're grownups. And this is, this is a consistent pattern among parents who call themselves happier; they know that most of the stuff that panics our kids, that's not a tiger. It's not really a bad thing. It's not really a threat. It's not really terrible not to get into the same second grade class as all of your friends and have the hard teacher on top of that. You know, it's not really terrible not to make the fifth grade soccer team or to fail a Spanish test or to lose your girlfriend or even not to get not to get into your top choice college. Because we know we've all had some of those experiences and we know it works out.

Debbie: Right. So it's holding that space. It's empathizing.

KJ: Yeah. It's giving that gift, giving that to our kids. And also, I mean some of the time too, we just, sometimes they're just dumping. And we go in there and we get all in on their emotion and we're all worried about what we're going to do to help them out with this thing and then it blows right over and I'm sure you've had that experience. So many times I've had that experience and finally this past weekend I was at a thing of my own and I was in a room with a lot of other people when we were doing something fun and I get my phone rings and it's my daughter and I will always answer for my daughter, and I could, it wasn't rude. And so I answer and my daughter has had to go to a hockey game away with another family, which that's not at all unusual, but anyway, something has happened.

I can't tell what because she's crying far too hard for me to tell what happened. But eventually I'm able to figure out that she's not physically hurt. She's upset

and part of her upset and I can't. I can't, I'm in a loud place so I can't really hear her. Plus she sobbing. So I, I have, I couldn't even, if I wanted to tell you this probably private thing that happened to her, I couldn't because I have no idea. I gathered eventually that it had something to do with one of the people she was going to have to drive home with, but all I could do was sit there and go, oh man, that's terrible. That sounds really hard. Yeah. Yeah. Wow. Because I can't even understand her. So I just sat there for about 10 minutes repeating that, repeating that and listening and listening and eventually we get to {Sobs} ok, ok, ok, bye.

Then she hung up and the phone didn't ring again. And a few hours later she came home and I went out and I came in later than she did and I found her and she's like, yeah, it's okay now. I was like, okay, I don't even know. I don't even need to know. So, you know, I could've spent sort of the afternoon panicking, could've called the parent, you know, that she had ridden with. The fact that my daughter is a teenager, so it has something to do with the reason that I wouldn't, I just didn't. If it had needed that kind of response, she would have kept calling. It would've, it would've escalated. Something else would have kept happening. So I just, not only did I not, I really completely forgot about it until, uh, until, until she came home. So.

Debbie: So I just have to ask, is that something you had to teach yourself how to do?

KJ: Yes, absolutely. Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. I mean years ago, and even with my older child, so it's not, it hasn't had to do with the child's age. I would have called that other parent. I would have tried to figure out, you know, I, I couldn't hear her. I would've, I would've gotten up and very inconveniently to everyone else involved managed to leave that room and gotten to somewhere where I could hear her. You know, I would have gotten to the bottom of this and seen what I could do and maybe even gotten in the car because you don't want to have to ride home with people that are bullying you. Right. I think pretty sure she pulled the bullying word. She's not being bullied. That. Yeah. No, I definitely did. I've had to, I've had to have the experience multiple times of trying to take action and then having it turn out, as it often does, that the kid didn't really want you to do anything or that you've embarrassed them by doing it or.

And then you sort of start to turn in and ask yourself, well, when I'm telling somebody stuff like this, do I want them to fix it? I mean that's like a classic thing, right? When you have the, you tell your partner all about something and they're like trying to give you answers for how, what you can do about it. And you're like I don't want answers, just listen to me! So your kid doesn't necessarily want answers and they don't necessarily want your full buy-in. I think it's very comforting to them when we don't lose our minds over this stuff.

Debbie: Yeah, agreed. Agreed. So I'm wondering if you could leave us with just a couple specific strategies for how listeners, me, anyone who's listening to this podcast -

KJ: Me - I use these strategies! It's not like I was born with all this, I learned it researching this book and it's been great.

Debbie: So what are just a couple of strategies for parents listening who are saying, okay, this sounds good. I definitely want more happiness in my day to day life. What's, what are some little things I can start even paying attention to, to make that happen?

KJ: Well, one great little thing that you can do is just to start training your brain to go down that happier path. So it's, it's putting a stop, when you're spinning, spinning what I call like the sadness spinner. Think of, think of your brain as having a fidget spinner inside of it and the fidget spinner kind of goes like this: oh my god, he didn't get into fourth grade math, extended math and if you don't do fourth grade advanced math then you don't get to do pre-algebra. The spinner is spinning really fast now. Right? And if you don't do pre-algebra then you're not in time to do geometry when you're in eighth grade.

And if you don't do geometry in eighth grade, you don't get to calculus. And if you don't get to cal-. Yeah. And then you don't get to Harvard and you don't become, you know, a consultant at a big consulting firm where everyone is super unhappy and xeroxing things and working 60 hours a week. That's what you don't get. Poor, poor child. But, and you might get that anyway because come on. So we we're constantly spinning this. So stopping that spinner, that's big. And one of the ways to stop that spinner, and I this is, this comes from a lovely neuropsychologist that I talk to, is to take that deep breath and look up at the horizon. Because apparently something about looking at the horizon resets your brain to see the bigger picture, which is kind of beautiful because you're looking at the beautiful picture, but it's apparently a real actual thing.

And then take a minute to soak in that really for you at that moment, even though your child is perhaps not in advanced fourth grade math, everything is fine. Everything is actually good. This is what you wanted. You have your happy life. So take a moment to soak in, soak in what's good about where you are at that minute. And I'll bet that there's a lot of it. People really argue with that because we are afraid to soak in the good because it seems like we're inviting the bad. Bah, you know, if I, if I stop worrying that the plane will crash, the plane will crash. Like we have this like crazy magical thinking idea that we're preventing all this stuff from spending all our time worrying and strategizing over it and we're not. So to just let yourself have the good stuff that's out there. That's really huge. It's really big.

Debbie: Yeah. I talk about looking for the bright spots because that is, that alone can change everything, you know? And there are bright spots even when you have to work really hard to find them. You know.

KJ: There are. Well, and then there's the practical side of this, like, okay, first of all, one thing everybody should notice is you're probably fine in some area, like there's nine chapters in my book. There's mornings and there's chores and there's meals and their screens and there's this. So you're probably fine in at least one or two of those. So you know pat yourself on the back for that. Um, if it's screens, please don't tell the rest of us because that would just be annoying. But. So you're probably doing fine about something and then pick an area where

you're not. And like pick some little thing and try to figure out some practical, simple strategy. So I talked to someone recently, I thought this was so awesome, she found that everyday when she picked her kid up from aftercare, the kid was having a tantrum in the car. And you know, it's a transition thing.

So my, oh my gosh, the transition tantrums that I have lived through, I get it. So instead of asking them, you know, instead of sort of going down this oh my god, my kid's still having tantrums, he's too old for tantrums. And she was just like, what can I do to fix that tantrum at that moment because I just can't deal with it, you know, on Friday at 5:00 as we're heading home or whatever. So she did, took the kid aside at a, at a moment when they weren't having the tantrum, you know a quiet moment. And she said, I've been thinking about how you always have a tantrum when I pick you up and that timing isn't working for me. It's very inconvenient. So I was thinking, what if we changed the schedule a little bit? Like what if we got home and we'll make dinner and then you could have your tantrum and then we'll have dinner and then it'll be bedtime. And you know, the kid cracked up and now they have this new way of talking about it. So he gets in the car and she starts to and you know, and she's like, no, no, no it's not time yet. This is on the schedule for later! And some of our kids really love schedules, right? And it was this huge success and I just loved it because, you know, and it actually ended up helping with their tantrums overall, but that was just a bonus. So it's not like some, yeah, sometimes you can't solve like a huge thing, but maybe you can just try to poke at some little tiny piece of it and make that better.

Debbie: I love that. Creative and bringing in unexpected humor always works, at least in my house because it throws them off and then sometimes they can just see the inanity of this situation. That's awesome. So okay. So the book is, for listeners, is *How to be a Happier Parent: Raising a Family, Having a Life, and Loving (Almost) Every Minute*. So can you just let listeners know where they can find the book and where they can connect with you?

KJ: You can connect with me at [Kjdellantonia.com](http://Kjdellantonia.com), or [howtobeahappierparent.com](http://howtobeahappierparent.com), both of which will take you to exactly the same place. The book is available pretty much anywhere, but if you go to my website, there's this fun quiz you can do about like which parenting mantra you need at any moment. Because one of my things in the book is that sometimes it just really helps to have something to say to yourself like, soak in the good or you don't have to go in there, which is one of the ways that I talk about not getting emotionally involved, you know, got, getting crazy with your kids' emotions. And we made this little quiz where you can find the one that you need at this exact moment.

Debbie: That's awesome. Okay, so listeners, I will leave links to everything that we discussed, to KJ's book, her website and where you can learn the best mantras for your situation on the show notes pages, so definitely check that out. And KJ, thank you so much for this fascinating conversation. I'm, got some new inspiration for approaching my evening here as we're going to be getting back into homework and other things that need to happen tonight. So thank you so much.

KJ: Thank you. This was really fun.

**RESOURCES MENTIONED:**

- [KJ Dell'Antonia's website](#)
- [\*How to Be a Happier Parent: Raising a Family, Having a Life and Loving \(Almost\) Every Minute\*](#) by KJ Dell'Antonia
- [Motherlode](#) (now Well Family in the New York Times)
- [KJ's podcast with Jessica Lahey, #AmWriting](#)
- [KJ's tinyletter](#)
- [KJ on Facebook](#)
- [KJ on Instagram](#)
- [KJ on Twitter](#)