



**Episode #137:**

**Susan Shenk on Using Technology to  
Support Learning Differences**

December 4, 2018

Debbie: Hey Susan, welcome to the podcast.

Susan: Yeah, thank you Debbie for having me. I'm excited.

Debbie: Well, and we, I feel like we connected early on, at least early on in, in my Tilt Parenting journey, so I feel like this is a conversation years in the making at this point. So I'm excited to do this too. So just as a way to get started, can you tell us a little bit about yourself, you know, tell us some of your story and, and, and through that, how you got involved in the work that you do today.

Susan: Sure. Okay. My story, it's um, basically I think it starts just like you Debbie, it sort of starts when you have children and you go, you learn a lot from them. And um, as I had children, I was an occupational therapist in the school setting, so I was working with a lot of kids, doing my assessments and those types of things. And I knew I viewed things differently in terms of what kids needed. But then when my children were starting to, you know, go to school and I started noticing some struggles, not big ones, but just struggles, I started to reflect on myself and I, I started to think, you know, maybe I need to look at my school adventures and, and my learning so I can really help my kids. So that's sort of how it started. And then as I started getting more and more passionate about what kids needed to help them learn in the school setting as an OT, I started tapping into technology a lot because for me, I started thinking this is a tool that I would have loved to have had in my hands.

So I started, you know, trying to do as much as I could in the school setting. And from there I thought, you know what, I think I need to step out because there was, there was boundaries in what I could do. And that's when I started my own business to support parents, mostly. Um, surprisingly enough I stepped out and started training OT's on how to use technology to develop skills. So you never know where you're going to go when it comes to the business world. Um, and then from there I thought, you know, I really need to share my story when it comes to why I'm doing what I'm doing and that's when I wrote my book. And yeah, so I, that's kind of my backstory of why I'm here. It's really, I started to acknowledge my own learning difference and I felt like I needed to empower myself so I can empower others and then help others through the same journey. Similar to what you're doing Debbie, just, you know, helping parents and professionals.

Debbie: Well can you tell us a little bit, I'm just curious to know, we don't have to have your whole childhood story, but I, I'd love to know a little bit about, you know, you said you were reflecting on what you had experienced in school, can you share a little bit about your own learning differences?

Susan: Sure. Um, I actually, that's why I started to write my book because I didn't plan on actually sharing it. I started writing to actually get out what I had denied if you can imagine. And I think many adults are in this sort of same situation, where like did that really happen to me, did I really shove all that shame and impact down so far that I'm not even going to acknowledge it even when it comes to my own kids. So I started writing and it was like there was a lot of information

I was missing, like I couldn't remember all my teachers. And I started saying you know, what was going on, but I remember thinking I couldn't do things as well as other people, I knew I couldn't read as well as other people. And so I just kept writing about my experiences and basically today that would probably be, you know, dyslexia.

Here the diagnosis more so is learning disability right now, but hopefully that will change. But it really was sort of managing language and being able to get my ideas out and be able to read and, and that type of thing. So that was my struggle. But you know, I coped through through school by using my strengths and you know, I tapped into my physical abilities, which I think a lot of people that have a learning difference have definite strengths and mine were in my physical abilities, my athletic abilities, and then also my artistic abilities. So I tapped into those and then I amazingly enough decided to carry on with my ability to run and became a fitness instructor, and love the human body and then became an occupational therapist and completed my degree. Still hiding the fact that I couldn't learn the way other people can.

Debbie: I hear that from so many parents who just send the emails that in listening to an episode, whether it's on sensory processing issues or processing speed or a learning difference like dyslexia or dysgraphia, you know, they share that because of their child's journey or looking at resources for them. They've suddenly realized, oh my gosh, like the dots have connected and this is something that I probably have been struggling with or dealing with my whole life. And I just find it really interesting. I think there is a whole generation of adults who, who are just coming to terms with this.

Susan: Yes, for sure. And it was amazing in my book launch, there was a man that was there, I was setting up for my book launch. And it was in a cafe and he heard me talking about my learning difference and he walked over and he, he kind of whispered 'that's me' and he was in his sixties and I'm like, well you don't, you don't have to whisper. That's okay that you learned differently. And he ended up taking my book that night and he came to the book launch and it changed him. He was so, he was so not ashamed anymore about how he was learning and he wanted to share it with his grandkids. And again, that generational sort of acceptance I think is going to be empowering in itself. So yeah, I think it's cool that everyone is starting to be aware of what's happening to them as adults too.

Debbie: Yeah. I always wonder if it's just the people I hang out with or if it's, if it's actually a growing awareness. But I do feel this sea change happening in, in general, um, with this generation and certainly your, through the work that you're doing and sharing your story and through your shift your thinking and, and all of that work which we'll get into, you're on the front lines of that revolution, which is really cool. So before we move on, I want to make sure that we mention the name of your book and maybe just give us an overview of what readers could expect were they to pick it up.

Susan: Sure. It's called *Beyond OK: From Invisible to Invincible*. That's sort of how I felt. It's really, each chapter is about a different stage in my life. So I take people from being a child in school to high school to university and then stepping out as a

professional, ironically back in the school setting, and what that was like to walk through. And then stepping back into being a parent, um, and empowering my kids. And then my final mission is to empower other people and children to be okay with how they learn and actually to accept it and be empowered by it instead of seeing it as a negative. Yeah. So that's the invincible part. I still feel like I'm pushing through that. It's amazing how, how many years it takes to actually walk through that shame, but that's where I'm heading with the, with a book and you know, in life in general to empower other people. So yeah. So that's the experience and it just talks about being a professional in the school setting, which I think some people like to see what it's like inside the school setting as a professional and working with teachers and what that looks like as well.

Debbie: So when you decided to pursue being an OT, I mean it sounds like you chose that career maybe at a point where you hadn't fully acknowledged your own story. Is that, I mean, what was it a conscious choice like, this is my, my story and therefore I want to go out and help other people? Or was it, were you kind of moving in that direction and then you realized, oh, there's a reason why I'm here?

Susan: Yeah, I, I just moved in that direction, not knowing that that would be my mission in the end. But I picked OT because of the fact that it looked at the whole person. That's what drew me into the profession. So I thought, I like that. I like that we're looking at every aspect of the person and that's why I stepped into that, that field.

Debbie: So let's talk about the OT field then. We haven't actually talked a lot about OT on this show. We have touched upon it in terms of kids who have sensory processing issues and how OT can specifically help with that difference. And I'm just wondering, can you talk a little bit about how an OT, different ways that that may be you specifically worked in schools or with kids who have learning differences?

Susan: Sure. Um, as an OT we tend to look at skills of the child or the person. So we're looking at their strengths and their difficulties and we're also looking at what are they asked to do and also what's the setting, what's around them. So that's basically what an OT is going to do, no matter where they are. They're looking at all those aspects. And for me, when it, when it was in the school setting, because it's work for the child, that's their occupation is school. So we're looking at what's the best way to help kids get the job done, simply. So if I was looking at a child who had what we call in our lingo, fine motor delays, then we would be saying, well, what's stopping a child from being able to do what they need to? If the fine motor issues are stopping them from showing people their ideas and thoughts, what can we do to help them?

So we could help them with their printing. But then we could also help them by using technology so they can get all those great ideas out. And another way is if we were looking at visual perceptual skills, which is looking at how a child sees and interprets information visually, then we would take that and we'd say, well, because they're having difficulties with that, they're also going to be struggling with reading and spelling and that type of thing. So how can we help them with

those skills? We might just look at tracking exercises, but I would take it one step further and I said, you know what do they need? What's the outcome that they need? Well, they need to be able to read in order to be able to start their activity. So that's when I, again, I would tap into the technology piece and that's why it was very powerful for me when it came to kids that had a learning difference. Because they needed those tools to help them step over some of the barriers, but then they also needed technology to help them learn in a way that fit them.

So if they needed to repeat seeing and hearing a word over and over so they would know what it was or phonetically to figure it out. Then technology was allowing, allowing them to be independent, but it allowed them to do it in a way that didn't give them shame. So that's kinda how I used my training as an OT to help kids that learn differently. I said, what are the barriers, how can we help them be successful? And then put that at home and in the school setting and empower them. That's sort of a quick nutshell.

Debbie: That's very cool. And I want to talk more about the technology piece because you know, you have a website, Technology and Tools for Kids, and it's just a conversation that I haven't had with other guests is, is about how technology can be a force for good, you know, and so much of it is about screen time and too much of this. And you know, I, I did have one guest on a long time ago who created an app to help kids with dyslexia take notes in the classroom. But, but other than that, I don't really even know what's out there. So can you tell us a little bit more about that aspect of your work? Um, I'm so curious to know, you know, even just how you find technology and what, what makes technology a good tool for kids? Do you have criteria for defining that?

Susan: Okay, well, when it comes to technology, I do have a criteria which of course I wasn't aware of until I started teaching other people. So it has to be multisensory, meaning that when a child engages with it, it actually gives them back what they need. So if you just have like a word processor, so you're just typing information on a screen, that for a child may not be any different than writing on paper. So they need, depending on the child, they need to have that feedback of what am I putting on the page and you know, is that what I want? So it allows them to see and hear or to repeat over and over so that they can, they can actually learn something. So an example is there's an app called Letter School and um, it basically allows a child to see and hear a letter over and over.

But it also shows them how to form the letter. And it will actually show them the first time and then the next time it takes away the visual components so that they have to actually remember the formation and then it takes away all cues at the end. So that is like being the ultimate teacher without having someone standing there. And it helps the child with motor planning and it gives them the feedback when they're not doing it correctly in a very subtle way. So it allows children to start gaining skills in a way that they couldn't with paper and pencil. So if I went back to that app again, if a child couldn't pick up a pencil because they just didn't have the skills, the app still allows them to learn the letter and form the letter without him having to hang on to the pencil. So they can still work on their pencils skills without worrying about that part of it.

So that's kind of the criteria and it depends on each child. I kind of look at their strengths and and see what they need. But mostly it is the feedback that a child can get from their writing. Or the fact that they're able to see a word being highlighted and it's being read to them so that they can start figuring out like letter sounds. Letter sounds may not make sense when you have dyslexia because they just get all garbled together. But when they actually see the word and hear it, then some of those phonetics start making sense.

Debbie: What about the use of technology as an aid in the classroom? So not just learning or working on specific skills, but do, what are your thoughts about kids bringing in specific programs or applications to help support them in their, doing their classwork?

Susan: I think it's, again, it's a tool that some kids need to do, to use to complete their, their classroom work. Without it, it would be difficult for them being able to get their ideas down. So if they have dysgraphia, being able to type and get those, those ideas down. If they didn't have that, then they would go back to their notes and they wouldn't be able to read. So I think having the tools in the classroom is really important. And in classrooms where everyone has a laptop, that allows kids that learn differently to fit right into that setting. And there's also what's called your technology literacy. Because technology is what we're using now for so many aspects, if you don't expose kids to a certain amount of skills, which I think most people are, but there's still some people that actually it's the reverse. They don't have enough exposure to technology so they actually are behind in those skills. So I am biased to technology, but I do see where too much of it or using it the wrong way is not what you want to do. You want to be using it as a tool, not as entertainment all the time and that type of thing.

Debbie: Right. What have you found with schools? I'm just curious, you know what the scene is like in Canada in terms of how open schools are to, to allowing kids to use technology if they have learning differences, to use it maybe in different ways than their other students might use it.

Susan: Yeah. I think using technology now is, I mean it's, they're making gains in that in that way. They used to use technology in a separate classroom and so it was very isolating for a child to use technology. But now slowly they're starting to use technology in the classroom and for the accommodations that are needed. Is it completely successful? Not yet or I wouldn't have stepped out to do what I did because there are limits to the programs that are inside the school settings. You know, they can only offer so much. They only buy so much software and if that doesn't fit your child, then that's where it ends. In terms of, so that's where bringing your own device, having somebody help you set up the device is beneficial because then your child gets exactly what they need to help them with their learning. So it is changing, but it is a big ship to turn in terms of the changes that we need. But it is, it is happening. Yeah any recommendations I seem to put in place for parents, once the teachers know what's needed I haven't seen a lot of resistance in the work that I've had. It's not saying that that's not out there again, but, but it's, we've been fairly successful.

Debbie: Oh, that's great. That's great. So, and I know that you work with OT's and supporting them in this, but you also work with parents. I'm just wondering if you could talk a little bit more about how you would work with a parent who wants to be able to better support their kid at home. You know, um, a lot of parents aren't experts on these things or even would maybe not know where to start. So what does your work entail when, when a family comes to see you, for example, and their child has a learning difference and they want to support them at home?

Susan: Yeah. What, I, I sort of work two ways. I do have a satellite office where I'll meet people face to face and so that's a little bit different because I can work with people one on one, but I'm also working with people online and what they do is they send me all their documents that they have. So it might be samples of a child's work, the IEP, any assessments, and that gives me a big picture view of the child and some of the concerns that they've been dealing with. From there what I do is I sort of outline what areas we might start looking at and where they might need support. And then I work with the parents to make sure that we're on target with the priorities. Like what are their concerns at this point? Is it writing, is it reading, is it math, is it social, what is it?

And then from there we start looking at what kind of tools would, would help their child and how to set that up. Um, and we just take one step at a time to see sort of how it works for them. So for one child that might even be just giving them ideas of a visual, being able to look at a visual model when it comes to math and then being able to use their google docs and use the tool for, for, the voice tool to talk into to get their ideas down on, on Google docs. And just the process of doing that, because all these tools are available but what's really going to fit your child? So we kind of go through that and then we just, we follow up and see what's working, what isn't, and I write a document that they can take to the school so that there's better understanding of what their child needs. And that's then they can start communicating with the teacher like this is, this is what's needed and why it's needed and they have a better understanding so they can start advocating better for their child. So that's kind of how it, it generally unfolds when they're working with me.

Debbie: And then what kind of learning differences do you work with it? As you were talking, I'm thinking that, you know, writing is something, because of processing speed and task initiation and so many other reasons, it's, it's a tricky one for my son in particular. And I've tried different things, I've tried having him record himself talking and I don't really know what I'm doing, I'll be honest, when it comes to that kind of thing. But I'm just wondering what are the kind of, the range of learning differences that, that you support parents through?

Susan: Um, well I, I work with different sort of learning styles like dyslexia, learning disabilities, attention deficits, Asperger's, autistic children. Um, so those are sort of the ranges that I'm working with, but I also, you know, I, I don't turn down anyone that needs my support. So I don't base it on diagnosis because some families may not have a diagnosis. It's just they just need support and their child

is just struggling to do their schoolwork and they don't feel good about themselves. So I don't limit it to diagnosis per se.

Debbie: But, so if a parent comes to you and says, my child is really struggling with executive functioning and, and organizing and that kind of thing, that's the kind of thing you could say, well, here's some, here's some tools that would be worth looking into and you can help them come up with a plan?

Susan: Yeah, based on their child's age and, and what they need. And we generally start in the home setting because you can control that setting and we see what tools are working there before we ever move into the school side. And then I sort of help them coach through how you bring those skills into another setting as well.

Debbie: Uh, so, so interesting and such a great niche, and I would think so needed, you know. Our kids do spend so much time using technology and I think the potential is so great for, for supporting them through so many of their, you know, their areas of lagging skill. So, um, it's really cool work that you're doing. In terms of the ages, are they ever too young to start doing this work and are they ever too old?

Susan: I would say no. I have worked with university students just again looking at what do they need and how can we help them get their learning, um, sort of lining up with what they need it to do. And sometimes you know, their struggles only show up at university because they are able to compensate the whole time. Kind of like me, I understand them. Right. So, and then for younger kids, I think that's a beautiful time. If you are starting to notice, let's say they're just heading into kindergarten and there's just skills you're seeing that just aren't fitting like they maybe they're not eating at school, they're not using the washroom at school. Some very subtle things, you know, they're just not able to remember their name. That's key right then to say what kind of support can I look at, what's going to help my child so I can figure out how they learn now? I think that's key. Yeah. But it's never too late ever.

Debbie: No, that's good to know. So if parents are listening to this and they're, they are interested in tapping into technology and don't really know where to start, do you have any favorite resources or even maybe some questions they should be asking themselves or considerations to think about when vetting possible technology to use?

Susan: Resources. There's so many, like I said, to tap into, but Google docs is a good start. It's free. There is the option of having a free voice to text option. It doesn't work on specific skills. So when you start looking at specific skills, then it's good to, you know, look at your apps that you can use on iPads or tablets. So there's, there's a lot of resources. Um, I do have a list inside my iPads at School course that I have. But also some of these things we're going to be sharing inside Shift Your Thinking, which is a new community for parents. That's something that we're offering right now is being able to offer different resources when it comes to technology as well as experts. So that's another resource. I hope I answered the question, but it's hard, there's so much to pull from and I, I tend to pull the resources based on, on a child's needs. So it's, it's hard to just throw out different

um, I do have lists of apps that I have used. But again, it would sort of depend on, on what a child needs for sure.

Debbie: Yeah, it's so individualized. I was talking with a group of parents yesterday here in the Netherlands whose kids have ADHD and one of the moms just said, could you give me, just give me like a roadmap? And I said, no, I wish, if I could, I would have built it already. But it is, I know these things are so individual and every child is so unique. So that makes sense. Um, so my, the second part of that question, and again, if there isn't an easy answer for this, just tell me, you know, it, any specific criteria, you talked about the multi-sensory piece is really important to you, but any other things that parents should be considering when they're exploring different technology? Something that they should keep an eye out for?

Susan: Yeah, for sure. I would say you really have to watch your child and what they're engaging in. So sometimes people want to put children on, let's say laptops, but that's not the tool that they're actually engaged in. So let's say they're using their tablet or their iPad all the time, that's a pretty good clue that that's actually probably where you should be going when it comes to technology support because kids will just navigate to what they need. So then you know, you want to look at how can we use this iPad for sight words or help them to do their math skills, those types of things. And then you can start investigating what apps are out there for their age and for their grade. And again, make sure it's multi-sensory as much as you can. Jump on YouTube. YouTube is wonderful. Um, you can see an app usually an action and that'll tell you if it's multi-sensory, but yeah, go with what the child wants.

Susan: And then if they're heading into high school and they start saying I need a laptop, they're generally saying not for a reason because they want to be able to use the keyboard efficiently and be able to now use a different tool for a different setting. Or it could go the opposite way. They don't want anything in front of them except their phone because they're heading into a very socially changing dynamics that were, you know, they want to appear like they're learning like everyone else and they don't want to draw attention to themselves. You just have to be aware of what they want and how they want to use it and then just adapt what they need for the setting.

Debbie: Yep. That makes total sense. So before we go, you mentioned Shift Your Thinking and I know you just had an event. I'd love to hear about that and maybe tell us a little bit more about the community because I know that something listeners will want to tap into.

Susan: Yeah, Shift Your Thinking is our nonprofit organization that I have with Sperry Bilyea and our mission is just to change how we view learning differences and approach them. So we have an annual summit and that was just this past November. So that was great. We had speakers covering different topics, but from that we are now moving into a parent membership community and we're actually working on the beta right now with, uh, a number of people. And that's basically supporting parents going through the process of figuring out what their roadmap is basically. What do you need and how can you support your child?

And then bringing experts in to answer some of those questions and um, and also, you know, look at different tools, like I was saying, you know, what, what's gonna work for your child when it comes to different needs in terms of social or emotional or physical or you know learning when it comes to technology. So that's, that's something new that we're creating and it's going to be available in January 2019.

Debbie: That's exciting. Will it be available globally or is it going to start in Canada? What's the plan?

Susan: Well, it can go globally, it's online. Yeah. So we will open it up to whoever needs the support and the resources. In terms of the money that we're giving back to our communities, it will be Canadian based. So we're taking a portion of what's coming in for our membership and it'll go back into the Canadian community to support people that need resources when it comes to learning differences.

Debbie: That's very cool. Well, I look forward to checking that out and uh, and I'll share that with the Tilt community when it goes live. And maybe just before we go, tell us where people can find you and connect with you in social media and if they want to reach out, what's the best way to do that?

Susan: Well, they can find me at [shiftyourthinkingld.com](http://shiftyourthinkingld.com). I'm there quite a bit. And my business is [technologyandtoolsforkids.com](http://technologyandtoolsforkids.com). You can reach me there as well. So those are the two places I'm at mostly. So you should be able to find a contact information there to be able to reach me directly.

Debbie: Excellent. Alright. And listeners as always, just go to the show notes page if you want to not write those things down right now. I'll have direct links to Susan's websites and to her book as well. And Susan, thank you so much for sharing this. It's again, such an interesting area that we just haven't covered and I think the potential is so great for how we can use technology to support our kids. So I really appreciate the work that you're doing in the world.

Susan: Oh, thanks Debbie. I love what you're doing too, and it's great to connect with you again.

## RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- Susan's website [Technology and Tools for Kids](#)
- [Shift Your Thinking](#)
- [Beyond OK: From Invisible to Invincible](#) by Susan Shenk
- [Invincible Mama Program](#)
- [SYT Parent Community](#) (launching January 2019)