



Episode #149:

**Educator Kelly Hirt Shares Strategies
for "Boosting" 2e / Twice-Exceptional Kids**

March 19, 2019

Debbie: Hi Kelly, welcome to the podcast.

Kelly: Hi Debbie. Thanks for having me.

Debbie: Oh my pleasure. I'm looking forward to talking more about the topic of educating or boosting 2e or twice exceptional kids. And even before we get into more of the meat of that, I just want to let listeners know that though the book Kelly wrote and a lot of our conversation is focused on these strategies that parents can implement in supporting their 2e kids, so many of these are really relevant to parents of all differently wired kids, parents of all kids total. But I think there's a lot of relevant takeaways for our audience. So I just wanted to encourage you to, to listen, even if you're feeling initially that this might not be especially relevant for your child. So Kelly, before we talk more about our topic today, could you just introduce yourself, tell us a little bit about your story and how you came to be doing this work.

Kelly: Absolutely. I was a elementary teacher for 14 years before I became a parent. I had a son who, um, the people around me were telling me, wow, you know, he's advanced. Have you ever wondered if he's gifted? You know, being a school teacher, I was thrilled to hear that he could be bright. He started meeting early milestones and then when he went to school, things kind of changed suddenly. And, um, I realized that typical school was not going to be a good place for him. I couldn't figure out why. So I went on a fact finding mission and I found out for the first time, even after being a teacher for 14 years, what the term twice exceptional meant. Um, I hadn't heard of the lingo and I started thinking about some of the past students that I had had that really looking back, probably fit the label.

They were really good readers, but they couldn't write. They were very verbal, but reading was hard. Socially, sensory, there were things about school that just were unexpected. And so I started finding out about twice exceptional children. I found out really quickly through social media, mostly Facebook, that I was not alone. And I started a blog, My Twice Baked Potato, to try and connect parents and educators who were all having similar experiences. And also I wanted to share what I had learned. And then quickly I realized that my son would be better off homeschooled and I turned to Gifted Homeschool Forum and between Gifted Homeschool Forum and myself, we created this book, *Boost*. And my colleagues, now I've been teaching 27 years, and my colleagues like it. I'm getting good feedback and I'm excited to keep advocating for twice exceptional kids.

Debbie: And you ended up homeschooling your own child, correct?

Kelly: That's correct. Which was really hard for me because as a public school teacher, I believe in public school. I still believe in public school. But I do know that for my particular son and for some others it wasn't necessarily the learning but more the big school, the echoes in the gym, all of the um, social interaction and sometimes the needing to be reading the same book. There were just intellectual

issues and social issues and boredom that started to come out in ways that just were not favorable. And so very reluctantly and jumping in terrified, we did start homeschooling and that was about six years ago.

Debbie: And you're still homeschooling now?

Kelly: Correct.

Debbie: So one of the things that you say, I mean I love this perspective and I think it's a unique one. You know, I've had guests on the show before talking about the challenge of these kids in the classroom and how do we advocate for them. And one of the things that you write is that your family's decision to homeschool has made you a better classroom teacher. That you understand parents who advocate for their children and now consider the many ways students can be successful. You also say that it's your job, not students, to change your awareness and increase your strategies. So, I love that and I'm wondering what thoughts you have on instilling that level of understanding into teachers in the public school system who don't have a differently wired kid? You know, you have this unique vantage point. What's the way in there?

Kelly: Yeah, I kind of, I always tell my colleagues, especially around conference time, I know what it's like to sit on the other side of the table and I know what it's like to be a parent who's worried. And when, even if you have a first grader, you're not necessarily just worried about first grade, you're worried about middle school, you start to worry about high school, you think about college, your fears kind of get away from you. And so I always tell my colleagues that parents are people who are really worried and they just want answers. One of the reasons why I wrote *Boost* in the fashion that I did is it's short. Because when I've been at staff meetings before and I see a book and I think, wow, that looks interesting, it might be 300 pages long and I'm thinking there's no way that I'm going to sit down and read that on the weekend.

I really wanted something that was short that really was about best practices. Going through this experience has definitely made me a way better teacher because it's my job to shift things around. I'm far more aware of signals than I used to be. Signals such as, you know, when you start to have a student going to the bathroom all the time or you have a student that's complaining of stomach aches or you have a student that gets mad and it seems to come out of nowhere. Those are little signals that before I would've just brushed them off and now it's like, wow, those behaviors are telling me something. Whatever we're doing right now isn't working. And so a couple of the things that I've talked about with other colleagues and other educators is that it's really, really important to know your students as individuals. Know what their currency is, know what they value and really create individual relationships with them because relationship goes a long way.

And when you find out more about your individual students, it really helps you learn more about how to help them as students. I have far less behavior problems in my classroom now when I don't group my students together all as one. We are very deliberate about having two different snack and choice times

where I can connect to the kids. I can sit down with kids who want to do math facts with me, who want to show me the art that they're doing. I can also give a little bit of time for kids who are feeling nervous that they're not finished with their work. So those are some things that we have done. We've done more brain breaks, we have more fidgets in the classroom. We try really hard not to have the kids on the carpet. You know, I teach first grade, so I try really hard that the kids aren't on the carpet longer than 15 minutes. Um, those that need wobble stools, uh, we have those. So I think just looking at individual students and knowing that the things that I talk about in my book, they're not that hard and they're not expensive at all. It's basically just having a shift in thinking about us having a responsibility to all of our students when they walk in the door.

Debbie: Yeah, I love that. All right, I'd love to then talk about some of the themes that your book is *Boost: 12 Effective Ways to Lift Up Our Twice Exceptional Children*. And so, you know, I've read through it and I do appreciate it's, it is something you can just dive in and just get takeaways pretty quickly. So as someone who's a slow reader, I really appreciated that. But um -

Kelly: Or a busy person.

Debbie: Yeah, or both. Yes, exactly. Um, I tend to give Asher books that I want to read and I say, here, give me the Cliff's Notes after you're done. But, so there are a couple of themes I wanted to just go into a little more in depth. One of them is communication. You know, I should say that all the themes you talk about, you cover from many different angles. So you know, appropriate for different situations, for different readers. One of the things that I'd love you to share with us is regarding communication between parents and other adults in their child's life, whether that's teachers or coaches, camp counselors. I know from personal experience and from what I've heard that this is something a lot of parents struggle with because of that concern that maybe too much information is putting a target on our kid's back or setting them up for more problems. I'm just wondering what advice you have for parents and caregivers who are trying to figure out best practices when it comes to communicating about their child's needs and about their differences?

Kelly: Yeah, so in my experience, some of the kids that typically would be struggling most in the classroom, because I know them well and I can adjust things, the places that could still be hard will be places like recess or PE or the lunchroom. Sometimes that's because of the social demands. Sometimes that's because of the sensory, you know, the, the echoing of the lunchroom or the smell of all the food. My experience has been that when support staff, music teachers, paraeducators or EAs who are out at recess or in the lunchroom, they have such a greater empathy when they really know what's going on. I think sometimes when you're dealing with so many kids, we have 740 kids at our school, and when you're dealing with so many kids, sometimes you forget that they're kids with feelings, you're just trying to keep them all safe.

Crowd control really when you're talking about things like the lunch room and recess. And my experience has been that when the support staff understands where the behaviors are coming from, it's never a bad thing. I completely

understand hesitant parents. Initially I was very hesitant about sharing some of the information about my son and I only think that the people that are really pertinent to the day to day schooling or activities really need to know. But I think it changes the way that the adults look at a student if they know, hey, this isn't naughty behavior, this isn't someone trying to get your goat and really cause you a challenging day. Kids don't typically, not many kids, at least that I've experienced over 27 years, purposely try to annoy the adults. Usually there's something else going on and, and I think when there's so many kids that when the support staff better understands what it could be, they just take the situations from a different point of view. They don't always take what the other kid says as face value and they listen a little bit more. And my experience has also been that they, they help the student problem solve in a way that they may not have taken the time to do so if they didn't know the information.

Debbie: Yeah, that's great. I mean it makes sense and it's again, just good, good to hear from your perspective. And you know, just curious as a teacher, how do you prefer to even receive that communication? Are you someone who is open to having those meetings over the summer with anxious parents or just how do you set up a healthy communication dynamic?

Kelly: Well, I think starting off with the understanding that if everyone comes to the table knowing we're here to support the student. We are all busy. We all need to have certain boundaries. We're not going to expect to meet on the weekends of course. Or even maybe do emails on the weekend. My experience has been if you meet and set up those guidelines face to face, it goes way better than through email. I just think sometimes tone can be lost and that intention can be lost through email. So if I can't do a face to face, I try to at least do a phone call. Um, one of the things that I think is really important about ongoing communication with parents is that it's a balanced approach. I think that parents who parent a child who has had struggles, they don't necessarily need to know everything that's gone wrong every day. I think it's really far more valuable if you focus on a few things that you're going to work on and communicate on and to make sure that the communication is balanced with what is also going well. Teachers are often very busy and sometimes we forget to communicate the news of successes. And I think if we made a point of doing that a little bit more, especially with these kids who have struggled, there wouldn't be the anxiety that sometimes there can be when parents are communicating with teacher.

Debbie: Yeah. Just a little note from a teacher goes a long way. You know, just I remember the teachers who did that when Asher was in the school system would be like, just wanted you to know that Ash had a really great day in music. I mean that can go, that could go a long way and -

Kelly: Yeah, especially if it was something that, that he or other students were working on. I know it takes me three minutes to send an email that says I was so pleased and the student felt so proud when they accomplished something that in the past had been hard. And so if I'm going to send an email like that, I try to do those on Fridays but I try to keep any positive communication on Fridays. Try not to send the negative ones on Friday. That makes for a really, really hard weekend.

Debbie: Definitely. I love that. One of my favorite chapters was the chapter about accommodations, and again you applied the idea of accommodating for our kids to various scenarios. So one of the things I wanted to just bring up today, you know, if students are in the US school system, you know, who are 2e or, or any sort of differently wired kid, they may or may not have a 504 plan or an IEP.

Kelly: Correct.

Debbie: Of course we also have listeners from around the world where that they have their own systems. So what suggestions do you have for how parents can push for accommodations for their child if they don't have that kind of plan or qualify for that plan? And you know, a lot of 2e kids, what makes it more complicated is that on paper they may look like they're doing just fine, you know, they may test fine. Whereas we as their parents know that either they're not being challenged or they're having other challenges socially or otherwise. So what ideas, suggestions do you have for parents who want to know how to successfully push for support for their child?

Kelly: I think partly what happens, um, I'm, I'm talking to my colleagues a lot about trying strategies even if you don't know that a child is 2e. If you don't know for sure that a child is 2e or that you don't know for sure that a child has a disability, what in the past has worked well or what could work well? There are some families that feel very uncomfortable sharing that type of information. And again, I can only speak from my experience, but my experience has been when I know information, it's power. It helps me do my job. But I know that some people have had situations where they didn't feel like that. I try to tell parents to acknowledge that teaching is a hard job and that it is difficult. And for me to say that it's not, I mean that's a lie.

It's a hard job. But our job is to accommodate for individual students, our job is to make it easier. So I try really hard to talk to my colleagues about, even though you may not know on paper that the student has ADHD or that this student is highly gifted, maybe none of the testing has happened here's some things that I think you should try. Try doing some more open ended activities. Look for more creativity. Are they a really, really high reader? Do they have passions that they're nonstop talking about? Can you somehow make that a plus instead of an annoyance where you're trying to get them to write about one topic and you want them to write about a different topic? Apply some of these strategies where, you know, freedom of choice, let them choose their topic. So I try still to talk to my colleagues about, I don't care if you have a quote unquote diagnosis.

There are still accommodations that we can do that are in the classroom. You try them, you don't try them for just one day. Uh, if I have a student that seems to be struggling on the carpet, they really are having a hard time sitting still, I'll try a wobbly stool. I'll try it for a week or two. If the wobbly stool doesn't work, I'll try to do more heavy lifting work. So there's just almost like an ongoing checklist in your mind of okay, this, this works, this didn't work. We have to be on fact finding missions always. I think parents worry sometimes that they're going to be known as the difficult parent and so they're hesitant to ask for

accommodations. As far as I'm concerned, if parents have things that work well at home and some of those things can be adjusted to the classroom, I want to know about it.

I want to know about the kid that needs to eat more frequently or move more frequently. That kind of information is helpful for me. I know in certain areas it's hard to get kids who are twice exceptional to qualify because many of the guidance teams or the support teams will say, but they're doing so well at school. And I always think it's interesting when I hear a parent say, well they're spending all their energy at school, they fall apart at home or um, they might be doing really well but the anxiety behind it is really crippling. So I think we have to listen really hard to parents. And then I think parents also have to understand that if you are going to be in a public school, your child is one of a group. And so to make sure that the accommodations that you give could be realistic and adapted to the classroom. I think if you have a teacher who understands that not everybody learns the same way, not everybody's in a box, hopefully they listen and they're willing to try. Um, I know a lot of my colleagues value the information.

Debbie: I so appreciate this perspective. It's uh, it's kind of like peeking behind the curtain a little bit.

Kelly: Like a secret agent.

Debbie: Yeah, it's really just helpful because those relationships can be so challenging and I certainly can identify with that feeling of not wanting to be that parent. I think so many of our listeners can identify with that. And I also appreciate the fact that there are some accommodations that just simply wouldn't work. You know, given the parameters of a classroom in a group setting. So good food for thought. And just quickly in terms of a child then or a parent accommodating for who their child is at home. Any tips on how we can supplement then and to support who they are?

Kelly: I think, I think the mistake that I made when I started homeschooling was I tried to replicate school. I tried to do a schedule from 8.30 to 9.30, I tried to do different subjects. We sat at the table a lot. I had a grade book that looked very similar to the one that I was trying to run at my school and I realized that that for at least me that did not work well. When homeschooling parents really think about why they've taken their kids out of school, or maybe they've never had their kids in school, mostly it's because they really value the individual. And so I think it's really important, especially when you have a twice exceptional student, that you lead with interests and that you lead with strengths. And I think it's important that, not to ignore the areas that need support, but to try and make sure that in the day there's something that can be successful and that brings joy to your child. And then to support the areas that are harder with a little bit more compassion that sometimes you can do at home better than other places.

Debbie: And I will say too, you know, for parents who are listening who aren't homeschooling their child, so many of the opportunities for diving deeper into subjects or you know, through the Gifted Homeschoolers Forum and other online

virtual classroom kind of programs, there are lots of kids who participate in those who are going to school. You know, they could even join those classes, you know, just as a way to kind of dive deeper.

Kelly: I think the other thing is I, I think the beauty of homeschooling is it isn't done at your table. It's done in your neighborhood. It's done in your community. It's done at the library. It also doesn't have to be the seven and a half hour a day of a typical school day, at least here. And so I think the flexibility is something that is really wonderful, but I know that not everybody can do it. I know that not everybody can homeschool financially. And so I wrote this book with the idea that if you are one of the people that are homeschooling, great, if you can do that, great. If you can't, there are still things that are out there for you.

Debbie: So the last *Boost* theme that I wanted to talk about today was fascinate. I really love, I love that word and I love that you include that. So can you tell us about what you mean by that strategy of fascinate?

Kelly: Um, I love this one too. I think so often when we are in a classroom and we're thinking about schedules and we're thinking about deadlines and when we're supposed to finish activities and move on to new units. Sometimes again, we could forget about the individual student who is either struggling, who either knows the information, who either is just for whatever reason is having a little bit of a harder time staying focused. Um, I can think of past students where once I knew who they were individually and I knew what their currency was, whether it was Minecraft or Pokemon or hummingbirds, I was able to do something that I call a fly by. Where when I see that a kid is starting to kind of de-focus or kind of struggle a little, I'll walk by and I'll whisper or get real close and I'll say, you know, when you're done with that, I have this great book about hummingbirds. I picked it out just for you. I can't wait to share it.

Something that gets them over that challenging hump. So when I implement the fly by people in the past have said, well, doesn't that take them off topic even more? My experience is it doesn't. It gives them just that boost to get through something so that they first they know I know them, they know that I have a personal relationship with them and I wouldn't do something like that if I didn't know what really sparked their curiosity. Um, and also it just gives them a, it's like a little life preserver, a temporary life preserver that helps them through a challenging rocky time. I think in terms of any kid should really have opportunities where they are fascinated by something new and parents work hard. But um, if they can find times and really connect to things that are high interest, I think that goes a long way.

Debbie: Yeah, absolutely. And actually that leads me to one last question I wanted to ask. You have a chapter about participation and in that you talk about the importance of finding mentors for our kids. You know, sometimes parents we don't really even get our kids' interests or we can't, we don't have the capacity to go as deep as they want to. And I also, I just was hearing this from parents on a call I was on, you know, last week that a lot of us struggle to know how to even begin to find those mentors. Do you have any ideas on where, where parents can start if

they're looking to connect their kid with someone who can go deep on their interest with them?

Kelly: Yeah. Mentors, that's a hard one. I find it very important. I find it that that's where when you have kids who have the high interest, just like the mentor, that relationship is really valuable, especially the twice exceptional kids. I have seen people have successful mentor relationships that they find through high schools, from colleges, from either coaching or sometimes, I don't know if everywhere does this, but sometimes there's such a thing as a junior coach who is more accessible. I know high school students who of course, you know, make sure they're all checked out and safe and of course, but I've had colleagues' children who have had a shared interest in things like nerf or video games. Mentors can be found in classes, older brothers, relatives. There's lots of different places. Consistency is important, but also availability can be hard depending on who the mentor is. I know sometimes schools have programs where high school students go into other schools and act as mentors. I think it's really important to have those people and I think sometimes friends of friends will find out, oh my brother in law works at the computer store, he knows a lot about technology. And whenever you could set up those situations, I think it's really positive.

Debbie: Yeah. Great. Thank you for that. So, okay. I would like to wrap up, but before we do, first of all, I just want to thank you. This has been really insightful. Again, I just so appreciate your perspective and I think it's helpful for, for parents who are navigating this and just trying to figure out how to have that positive relationship but also best support their child and who they are. But before we go, could you just tell us where people can find you? You mentioned your blog earlier. What's the best way for people to connect with you?

Kelly: Yeah. So I have a blog that I started to connect with families and also educators and it's called My Twice Baked Potato and I'm also on Twitter and I do a lot of Twitter gifted chats. So those are really the best places to find me. My book is on Amazon and this month we are celebrating the book one year anniversary. So that's very exciting.

Debbie: Awesome. Congratulations.

Kelly: Thank you.

Debbie: So listeners, I will include links to Kelly's social media and her blog and also to the book on the show notes pages. And Kelly, thank you again for just coming by and sharing all this and just for being such an awesome force in the classroom. I'm so glad you're, you're doing what you're doing in the world.

Kelly: And thank you. And I just want to say to parents, make sure that you are implementing some self care. It can be really exhausting to put so much energy into another person. And I think we have to kind of remind ourselves of that old saying where you, you know, you have to put the oxygen tank on first because parents are working really, really hard. And I just, I hope parents feel that.

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- [My Twice-Baked Potato](#) (Kelly's blog)
- [Boost: 12 Effective Ways to Lift Up Our Twice-Exceptional Children](#) by Kelly Hirt
- [Gifted Homeschoolers Forum](#)