



**Episode #158:**

**The Self-Driven Child with  
Dr. William Stixrud and Ned Johnson**

May 21, 2019

- Debbie: Hey Bill and Ned, welcome to the podcast.
- Ned: Thanks for having us.
- Bill: Nice to be here, yeah.
- Debbie: So I just have to say, I just have to have my little moment here where I thank you formally on air for writing this book *The Self Driven Child*. It is one of those books that changed fundamentally how I parent my child. And there've only been a few of those along the way. *The Explosive Child* is one of them, *Positive Discipline* is one of them, and this is one of them. So I'm just thrilled to be able to share your insights with my audience, I think it's so relevant. And also to talk about how your approach and philosophy really applies to parents who are raising kids who are in some way neurologically atypical. So as a way to get into the conversation, would you both just take a moment to introduce yourselves and I'm curious to know how you got paired up together or how, how your relationship to write this book came about?
- Bill: Well, I'm Bill Stixrud and I'm a clinical neuropsychologist and I make a living by testing kids if they're having learning problems or attention problems or emotional problems or there's some concern about autism, they're struggling socially, and I try to figure out what's going right, what's going wrong and how to help them.
- Ned: And I'm a, I'm a test prep geek. I've spent 25 years helping kids combat an alphabet of standardized tests like the SAT and ACT, and figured out pretty early on that while test are standardized, kids aren't. And so had the opportunity to work in one, one on one with kids to really try to figure out what, what a, in a situation what it revealed about the student as much as it revealed about the test. And then tried to work on ways to bend and weave and, and kind of meet kids where they are and try to teach them in ways that fit their learning needs rather than my, uh, my default approach.
- Bill: I think somebody introduced Ned and I several years ago and thought that we thought a lot alike, and I got to know Ned, and I love the fact that Ned is so brilliant at getting kids to perform better on tests because he used the principles that are in our book. You know, he has kids rest more. He has, works on lowering their stress level, putting the tests in perspective so it doesn't feel like that big a deal. And the stuff that we talk about in *The Self Driven Child* is something that was intuitive to him, intuitive to me. So we started lecturing together and eventually decided to write a book about the most useful stuff that we know.
- Debbie: Hmm, that's great. It's such a great collaboration and I think you both bring such unique perspectives and strengths to the work. So it's very successful in my opinion. So let's talk about control, because that's really where your book starts. And that was kind of the first piece that really resonated with me was how

important it is for kids to have a sense of control. Can you talk about why that is so critical?

**Bill:** So this is Bill, you know what I noticed very early in my career, and I've been a psychologist for 35 years, that I do therapy and I've worked with young adults and it was very common for them to say, um, you know, I, I'm 35 but I spent the first 35 years of my life trying to live up to other people's expectations. And I'm trying to figure out what's important to me. And I think I started thinking that, but that doesn't make sense. We really, we could be talking kids that are much younger in age, you're giving them a sense of this is really their life. And when we, when we discovered the science of of control is this sense of control. You know, we knew from early research on learned helplessness that the sense of control is usually important.

We knew, we had known for several years that a low sense of control is arguably the most stressful thing in the universe. And one of the things that Ned and I are so concerned about is the huge degree to which anxiety and depression are affecting young people. And these are stress related disorders. And we figured that if a low sense of control is the most stressful thing you can experience, and we have all these stress-related problems, it must be a really big deal. And then we looked at some animal research that showed that if you had the experience of being able to manage a stressful situation successfully, it changes the brain in ways that make you an effective copier and minimises the extent to which you experienced the harmful effects of stress.

**Debbie:** So can you just define or describe examples of what control looks like then at maybe different ages? Cause I think when people hear this, that they need to give their kids control, they're not sure are you talking about giving them a choice, like you can either do this or you can do this? And or as they get older, is it really giving them control over their choices academically and otherwise? What does that mean?

**Ned:** Well, it, you know, having kids have a sense of control isn't putting the toddler in charge of the household. Because in some ways giving kids responsibilities that exceed their capacity to handle them isn't a gift, it's a curse. Because it'll overwhelm them by the stress of that. But exactly your point, Debbie, you know they're, when kids are toddlers they can choose what book they read or what clothes they wear, even if they don't, you know, meet contemporary fashion standards. And as they get older, you know, what language do they want to study? Do they want to study an instrument? If they do want to study an instrument, which one do they want to play? Right. You know, there are choices in high school, choices about friends, choices about how they spend their time after school. And even within that context it isn't that that parents have no say whatsoever cause that's not at all what we're advocating for. We really want parents to have an authoritative approach rather than a laissez-faire or an authoritarian approach.

But as much as we can, if kids have more control, some say over their lives, they're much more willing to go along with things when maybe they just kind of have to go along with them. But also some of that control is even if I as the parent

am the authority, and I'm sort of saying this is the broad framework and I say, this is what it's going to be, if my kid strongly disagrees with me, he can say, well yeah but, but, but, but. If we're willing to be collaborative we're willing to have a respectful relationship with them, which means that I'm willing to be overruled. You know, my daughter, you know, makes a really strong case and I say, well, it's a good point. You know, I might see it differently, but her thinking is not crazy and if it's not crazy, it makes a heck of a lot of sense for me to go with it. Because it's, we're, again, we're trying to help kids develop intrinsic motivation and greater and greater stress tolerance. And so yeah, you start with very simple choices when they're toddlers, but you need to have them have as much autonomy as they can possibly handle as teens. Because we're really trying to prepare them for going off into the adult world and making all the choices for themselves.

Bill: This is Bill and I'll just add that, you know, you, you see this showing up in kids by the time, certainly by the time they can talk and they say you aren't the boss of me. There's this desire to have a sense of this is my life and I get to make choices about my own life. And the way, the way I've worked with parents, often I say, the goal is for your kid to be able to largely run his own life for six months before we send them off to college. Now let's work backwards. Let's think about the kinds of things that he can be increasingly become responsible for that will enable him to basically run his own life for a while before he goes off to school. Uh, so yeah, I agree with what Ned said and I love the, I love the fact, Debbie, that that you put our book in the same sentence as *Explosive Child* and *Positive Discipline* because I have so much respect for that work. And Ross Greene's saying, who wrote *The Explosive Child*, saying to parents to tell your kid I'm not going to use the force of my will to try to make them do things, is just such a powerful thing. One of the things in our book is you really can't make a kid do something against her will. And so this idea of supporting a sense of control so kids aren't constantly fighting us is really a useful thing.

Debbie: Yeah. I mean I'll just share that for me, you know I have, I have a 14 year old son who I homeschool who is twice exceptional, a complicated human and I changed things really instantly after reading your book. Even in terms of those battles over getting work done and, and you know, it is a balance because you know with a differently wired child they need more scaffolding than a neurotypical child would need and more supports. But just recognizing that ultimately he has to be the one to to make this happen. Like if I'm sitting over him saying, oh, I notice you're, you switched to comics on your screen, get back to marine bio or whatever it is, that wasn't working. And it was creating so much conflict for us. And I, I even started using that idea of me being the consultant and that language of, you know, I've got office hours and here's when I'm available. So that was a huge shift for me. Can you explain what you mean by that terminology of a parent being that consultant? What does that actually look like? Because I think a lot of parents get really anxious about school, especially. Homework, grades, especially in middle school and high school when it feels like the stakes are really high.

Bill: This is Bill. And there's two, I had two experiences early in my career that got me thinking about this consultant idea. The first was that I would, I would see a lot of underachievers; kids with ADHD or learning disabilities and they wouldn't do their work. And I'd ask them, if you don't turn in an assignment who's most upset? And invariably they'd say, my mom. And then I'd say, who's next most upset? They'd say, my dad. And I'd say, who's next most upset? My teacher, then my tutor, then my therapist, you know, the kid was, the kid was never on the list. And that seemed like something fundamentally wrong about that because I want kids to have an understanding, a clear understanding, of who's responsible for what. Also at that same time, one of my close friends who was being trained in a certain kind of psychotherapy was told don't work harder to help your clients solve their problems than they do cause you're going to weaken them cause you're going to make them think the solution to the problems is within you, not within them. And I've trained hundreds of tutors over the last 30 years to work with kids with learning disabilities and ADHD and I always tell them, don't work harder to help your clients on their reading or their math than they do. You'll weaken them. And when we make sure the energy is not mostly coming from us, kids usually step up to the plate. Ned, do you want to add?

Ned: Yeah, I mean one of the people, Edward Deci is one of the founders of what's called self-determination theory and it's a model of intrinsic motivation and he makes this really important distinction between autonomous motivation and controlled motivation. Controlled motivation is the classic carrots and sticks where autonomous is an inner drive. And he makes this point, and I think it's really important one, that the nature of the motivation, the 'how' things get done matters fantastically more than 'that' they get done.

So we, as parents or teachers or educators, it's so easy to think, well gosh, at least we've got this done. The total motivation is really high. But if 90% of that is external in carrots and sticks and only 10% is, is intrinsic, it's a terrible, terrible trade-off. And if we lean in with more, you know, parental angst or or tutors pushing, or parents, whatever, the kids will put even less energy. They'll do it because they have to. And if for us the most important outcome of childhood and adolescence is having the brain you're going to have for the rest of your life then golly, you sure want a brain that's motivated to set and pursue goals that are meaningful to that person themselves. Otherwise we as employers or teachers or parents or whatever, will spend our lifetime trying to apply carrots and sticks to get kids to do what's in their own best interest rather than wanting them to do what's in their own best interest.

Debbie: See, I think this is revolutionary, you know, because I think that we hear so much, especially with kids with ADHD, which my son has, that they need these external reward systems. And I hear from so many parents about this concern that their child is not motivated and if they weren't there with the carrot and the stick or you know, leading the charge, their kids would just fail out. So I hear you talking and you know the word that popped into my head is risky. I can assume that parents are thinking this is, this sounds risky to kind of step back and play, let my child have more of this controlled motivation and let them figure it out. And again, feeling like the stakes are high. So how do you recommend parents kind of

walk that tightrope of letting go of that sense of control, not knowing if their kid's intrinsic motivation is going to be there to catch them?

Ned:

Well, this is Ned, and a couple of thoughts jump to mind for me. One is that we work on the assumption that kids want to be successful. They have brains in their heads and they want their lives to work out. The challenge is they may just not do it on the timescale that we want because we know that there's such an unevenness in how brains develop. And the other question, to the point of being risky, well what's risky, that you're choosing getting, you know, terrific grades in fourth grade, seventh grade or tenth grade or twelfth grade or getting into the most selective college versus having a brain that's wired to want to do things for himself. Right? And to Bill's point, an accurate model of how the world really works. I mean, cause both of us have seen so many kids, this kid I'm working with right now who his mom has a tutor coming to their house four days a week, three hours a night.

And I, and I sort of gobsmeared and I said, well, uh, and she said, well, if the tutor doesn't show up, he won't do any work at all. And I said, with all due respect it looks like he doesn't do any work at all even with the tutor because he's got you know he's got what a 2.8 GPA. And the question is whether he's getting that grade point average with support or perhaps in spite of the tutor. And I, there's a story in the book, my son is, he's not been tested but I'm sure he would come out, you know, is inattentive. Not hyperactive, but you know, ADD and in the middle of middle school he was working on some assignment. My wife was helping. My wife's a really serious academic and a teacher herself, so she's great at this stuff, but you know, she's a parent and she's a human being too.

So she got a little frustrated with some assignment that hadn't been handed in or done and what have you. And she turned and, sort of eyes flashing a little bit, at my son and said well why didn't you hand it in or do whatever? And he immediately got defensive and shot right back at her, 'cause you didn't remind me'. Now I'm watching this whole thing like, oh we have both been dealt a losing hand here and I said, listen, first of all, don't throw your mother under the bus. That's a bad long term play. And then I looked at her and I said, sweetheart, you can understand why he thinks that you didn't do this, you always do remind. My wife is one of these people and probably a lot of people listening, you know who, who runs our household. She's incredibly sophisticated in terms of all of those logistics, all those executive functions.

So she can run her schedule and my son's schedule, my daughter's schedule and my schedule, you know we can outsource to you Debbie if you need a little bit of help. Unbelievable. But just because she can do it for him doesn't mean that she should. So for all the parents who have kids who do have ADHD, who do have anxiety, we really want to have confidence that they want to be successful just as much as you want them to be successful. But it might be for different things and most importantly it may be on a different timescale. So for me, we watched our son dial up 52's on quizzes and tests through middle school because he'd done things like study the wrong chapter. But what it did give us an opportunity when it didn't go well was to say, you know, do you know why that didn't go well?

And rather than 'why didn't you?', it was 'do you know why?'. And it just totally changed the energy. And now, I mean, he's doing beautifully in high school. Actually I was, the counselor was telling her in rehab that he's been three months clean and sober. I'm teasing. He's doing, he's doing great. And I'm still able to say, hey, would you like some help with that? And most of the time he'll say no. But then half the time he'll come around and say yeah, could you look over this for me? I'd really appreciate it. Or I've got a question on this. And it's so, it's so lovely as a parent to be able to offer help and if my kid doesn't want it, have him say no and I'll step back. But when he does want help, he comes to me willingly and to my wife willingly rather than our being on top of him all the time, which is lousy for him. And it's also allows a, you know, role to play as parent.

Bill: I'll say too that, what I noticed early on in my group was how often it looked like parents or adults or other tutors would be spending 80 units of energy, 80 units of energy trying to help a kid get work done. And if the adult spent 80 the kid would spend 20. As adults got more anxious and ratcheted up to 90, the kid would spend 10. I used to think it was developmental, well the kid will grow out of it. And it turns out, my experience is that it is not developmental. It doesn't change until the energy changes. And there's a woman who we mention in the book who, who has the first program that I'm aware of for ADHD kids, teenagers, that focuses on promotion of autonomy. Because as you said that all the research is on use of rewards, very, almost no attention to the development of autonomy, which is so crucial for internal motivation.

And what this clinician says is that in her experience, 40% of parents who have kids with ADHD, by the time you get to 16 are kind of burnt out and you're on your own buddy and I've done what I could. And then another 40% are still micromanaging the kid's life with a lot of pushback. And that only 20 really, have kind of really been focusing on this development of autonomy. And I had a, my son was a kind of a late bloomer, a kid with ADHD and learning disabilities and no academic pressure. I never fought with him about schoolwork. And I felt so lucky that when he was five I was, I was advising people to set the title of the second chapter of our book, which is I love you too much to fight with you about your homework. And that's where I introduce this idea to be a consultant.

I consulted with him, I was available to help him but I didn't want to force my help on him. I didn't want to work harder than he did. I didn't want to put in more energy than my son did. And he got through school and eventually as with that great burst of frontal lobe maturation that happens in young adulthood, went on, got a PhD in psychology. And I just think that if we think about who, whose responsibility is it? And it couldn't be a parent's responsibility to try to make their kid work. Because all the kid would have to do is flop to the floor and we couldn't make them. And I think recognizing that and changing the energy is healthy and it's effective.

Let me add one thing about rewards. As we say in the book, we aren't opposed, with kids with ADHD, to using rewards in a particular kind of way. In the sense that we know kids with ADHD sit down with a boring assignment and if they don't have enough dopamine in their prefrontal cortex to focus on it, let's do

something to promote the dopamine. And I'm okay with, with explaining to the kid about his brain about the, this insufficient dopamine. And if a reward might stimulate him a little bit, produce the dopamine, I am, I'm willing to do it. I just don't think that we want to basically be bribing kids, do it for me. This is what you need to do and I'll reward you to do it. As opposed to using rewards to help a kid accomplish his own goals.

Debbie: Right. That's a good distinction. I mean, that's something, you know, a book that I wrote for teens years ago, it's called Doable and it's about how to accomplish just about anything. And I talk about that. Knowing if you are someone who is motivated by personal rewards, like I'm gonna get to watch an episode of The Office after I turn in this homework assignment or whatever. That's a totally different thing than, than bribery as you say.

Bill: You know, I'll, I'll say that this is a very different kind of idea for many parents. One of our, one of my clients about a year ago when the book came out, she emailed me and said, I just told my eighth grade son, I love you too much to fight with you about your homework. And first he smiled and then he hugged me and then he said, is something wrong with you, mom?

Debbie: That's awesome. I love that phrase. And I use it. I use it probably once a week. I haven't gotten that kind of reaction from my son. But, I think that the language and the communication styles that you offer in the book are so powerful. And just to tie it back to, you talked about the effort the parents are putting in, you know, it does not feel good to be a parent, whether you're homeschooling or or not, to be nagging your child, to be playing that role, to get the pushback, to have your child annoyed with you. And there's something that just feels really calm and peaceful to just say as you said, how can I help you? Or you know what I'll say to Asher is I've got time between five and seven. I'll be in my office working. If you want to pull up a chair and join me, I'm here for you, after that I won't be available. And just those tweaks in language that you offer just changed the energy in our whole house. And it changed the dynamic between the two of us in such a powerful way.

Bill: That's great. You know years ago, sometime in the 1980s, a book came out called How To Deal With Your Acting Up Teenager. That also takes this approach of not trying to force, not trying to control your kids all the time. And one of the parents of a kid with ADHD said, well this doesn't apply to my kid. And I called one of the authors of the book who is probably in her late seventies at the time. And I said, do you folks think this applies to a kids with ADHD? And she said, Bill, we think it's a matter of treating kids respectfully. And that really hit me, as Ned said, we think that kids want to do well, they've got a brain in their head, they want to be successful and that we don't do them a favor by working harder than they do. And we certainly don't do them any favors by fighting about the same thing over and over again.

Ned: I'm always amazed by the number of kids with whom I work, who have ADHD, but they have no idea what it really means.

Bill: Interesting.



Ned: And so I asked this kid who, I just adore him, but he's as is typical with a lot of boys, especially boys with ADHD, does everything at the very last possible moment. In part because there's simply not enough activation, you know? And that looming deadline, that approaching deadline, perhaps the panic of the deadline that's half an inch away activates him. And he's super sharp but really ADHD. And so I explained to him, I said, look, you can't see the paper, but one side of the paper I put here's you, and at the other far end, here's a goal. And I said, you know, people like, I don't know, maybe your mom can sit and go, oh, that's an important goal. It's really far off, but she'll sit there and work on it consistently from point a to point b. And I said, you'll go, oh, that's really important. And you'll start walking towards that. But then you go, oh, squirrel. Oh shoot. Darn it. ESPN. And you zig and you zag and you back back and forth across. Your mom has a straight line from, from here at the goal and you're all over the place. And it's just the way your brain works, that you don't have enough dopamine kicking through your head or your brain process it very inefficiently. And he's like, you've just explained my entire life. And I'm like, but here's the great part. It's going to get better, it's going to get easier.

Debbie: Wow, that's a great story. Yeah. I was wondering about specifically, you know, a lot of parents with differently wired kids believe strongly that our kids need us, right, to tell them what they need or that they're not capable of making decisions. I think so many of us from an early age are, you know, finding therapists and programs and we're so used to kind of running their life. And oftentimes they're not even having that conversation and really explaining to their child what's going on with them. And I think next thing you know you've got a teenager and you're still operating under these assumptions and so it's time to kind of, I guess make that shift. And that's a hard thing for parents to even recognize they need to do.

Bill: Right. I was at, I was in a meeting at a Catholic school recently on an eighth grade student who I had tested who had language disorder and learning disabilities and was really struggling in eighth grade. And one of the learning specialists there said it takes two learning specialists, the tutor and the mom on the kid all the time in order to get him to do any work. You know, and predictably I said stop immediately because this won't change until the energy changes. And I think that part of the reason I started to think like this is because I saw so many kids who went off to college without any experience at all running their own life, you know, making their own decisions. And I also found early in my career that even little kids, if you say let's think this through, let's think through the pros and cons, even six and seven year olds make good decisions for themselves.

And part of the, part of our point in the book is we want kids to make good decisions. As Ned said, kind of informed decisions, you know, where we, we often think with pros and cons or we get other people to consult with us about what the right thing to do is. We want kids, including kids who are wired differently, as much as possible to be making decisions for themselves, especially by the time they're teenagers because that's how you become independent. That's how you become a good decision maker, is you practice.

Debbie: Right. And you say, you know, I don't know if I got the language exactly right, but you know, I trust you to make decisions and to learn from your mistakes. And I, I say that little phrase a lot too. I'm trying to train my husband in using it as well, who, who is still often giving advice. And I'll often just say, you know, I trust Asher to make this decision and to learn from his mistakes. And I think that, again, is such a freeing thing and it feels really good for a kid to know that, that you trust them and that it's okay to screw up. It's, it's exactly as you said, that is how we learn.

Bill: Right. And often parents say of a kid who is underachieving and there's a lot of adult energy trying to get him to work harder and they're afraid to pull back. And I often say, well, how much worse would it be if it takes a bit, three months to kind of get the idea that this is his life, he's going to have to work harder. Would that really be such a huge profound setback? Remember how destructive it is for a kid to continue with all this bickering and fighting and all this attempts to force it. And I just don't like it when, when adults spend, when adolescents spend an awful lot of their energy trying to resist other people's attempts to get them to do what's probably in their own best interest. It just doesn't make sense.

Debbie: It doesn't make any sense. You know, you talk about that a lot of our pressure on our kids is rooted in fear, which I very much believe as well. I talk about fear a lot within this community and on this podcast and in my book. So do you have any ideas for how parents can flip that switch so they can kind of release some of that fear and hand over control without, you know, I guess as you talked about shifting that energy?

Ned: There's a lot of points on that. One of them would be taking the long view, right? And we happen to have in the, in the book the story of the parable of the Chinese farmer, right, who's a very poor man, right, and his neighbor comes by and looks at this poor man, he's only got, he has so little money he can only have one, one child, he can't afford any more and he's got this broken down horse and he sort of shakes his head and you poor man, you have so little. And then one day the horse escapes and he says, oh my gosh, you had so little, now you have even less what, what terrible bad luck. And the, and the farmer says, well maybe yes, maybe no, life is long. It's hard to say. And the guy shakes his head and walks away.

And then a couple of weeks later the horse returned and somewhere along the line, it had run into a group of wild horses, a heard a wild horses, and brought two back with it. So now they went from one horse to no horse to three horses. And he says, oh my, what luck. And again the farmer gave a philosophical answer. Maybe yes, maybe no, life is long. It's hard to say. And he gets to the business of breaking the horses. His son is out there working on breaking a wild horse and gets thrown and breaks his leg terribly. And again, as you can imagine, oh what terrible luck. You know, maybe yes, maybe no. And then finally word comes around that the emperor's looking to raise an army to, to go and fight the Mongols. And every household needs to send one son, but his one and only son cannot go because he's broken his leg.

And so, so we know that, you know, from all of us our own experiences, I mean I have all sorts of things in my background that were really hard and I'd really rather not relive that. But I also would not want to have not lived that because you know, the scars that I have from my difficult childhood and adolescence I think are very much what make the best of me and how I deal with other adolescents who are sometimes having a hard time. And I think if most of us thought about that as adults, you know, we, we have all sorts of scars from life and they're, and some of them are, they make us sad to reflect upon, but they also make us who we are.

And so if we knew that, I mean, you know, Bill especially is 35 years as a psychologist and even me 25 years as a test prep guy. We've seen so many kids who struggle and struggle and they're a mess when they're 10 or 12 or even 22 or 28, who eventually come around and live lives that are remarkable and meaningful and successful. And if we knew that these were simply the ups and downs of kids and if I could tell you with complete confidence, Asher is going to be a great human being. He is going to be a great adult, he's going to have a life that's successful and everything along the way would just be part of the process. And you could sit back and say, okay, this is a disaster, but what's the learning that we're going to take out of here? Rather than what we as parents so easily do, is save this one data point and we draw, two bad episodes and we make, we make a straight line that goes right into this.

And I would, I would submit that for us as adults who have a much longer view on the world than to our children, we should work really hard to take the long view on our kids and help our kids even when they're struggling, particularly with kids who are going through rough spots with anxiety and depression. Just say this is part of your journey right now, but this is not who you're going to be. We have to get through this and I'm going to help you with it. If we can have that confidence that somehow things are going to come together, it makes it much easier to have kids keep working hard on making it come together.

Bill: Yeah. Over the years I've worked with a lot of families who have, we talk with the parents and they're telling you about a kid's problem and one of them, usually the mom but sometimes the dad will break into tears and say I just want him to feel good about himself. And after they stop crying I say I think we can more convincingly help him feel good about himself if we aren't so worried sick about him. And there's a chapter in our book called A Non-anxious Presence, and our view is that it's really in kids' best interests if the parents move in that direction of being a non-anxious, not overly reactive presence. And in this chapter we talk about some of the ways that parents can get past some of the fear we have as parents. As Ned said this taking the long view for many people is really powerful.

And it's also true that some kids are just, have more limitations and they have a harder time. We talk about in the book about the wisdom of insecurity is making peace with our worst fears. If my kids never get to be independent, could I still love him? Would I still do everything I could to support him? Could I still have a meaningful and successful life, happy life? Could I enjoy my kid and love him the way he is? And almost everybody, if they really think about it, they say, yeah, I

would. I could. And I think that, that in itself, looking at what's my worst fear, virtually all our fear about our kids, it's about as, as Ned was saying, it's about the future. It's that they're going to get stuck in some negative place and never get better.

That's why taking this long view for many families is really helpful. And having done this so long, as Ned said, we can say, look, I've seen dozens and dozens and dozens of kids like this who struggle and then they do a lot better. And I think your kid is likely to be one of those. And for kids who are, kids who are intellectually disabled or kids who have really severe autism, where they may not be fully independent, then I think that this idea of, of looking at our worst fears, making peace with it and really practicing your kids, accepting kids as they are. We want them to accept themselves. We want to work on our own fear and our own anxiety so that we can accept that.

Debbie: Absolutely. I love that. So I do want to just touch upon depression and anxiety, you know, Ned just brought that up, and you say that if a child is seriously depressed, that all bets are off. Can you talk a little bit about that? Just, if parents are listening and they are concerned well I don't know if I really, my kid, I don't know, they might be depressed and if I kind of pull back and give them autonomy, they might never leave their room or, you know, refuse to go to school or. How can parents know if their child is in that space and what should they do?

Bill: And we talk about this in the third chapter of our book, which is about kids as decision makers. And as we talked about earlier, our view is we want to encourage kids to make decisions for themselves. And we want to require adolescents to make most of the important decisions about their own life. And I just, the caveats are there are kids who are, very rarely, are incapable of really thinking clearly. And those include kids who are significantly depressed. By definition, depression involves disordered thinking. And there are times where our kids are, if they're depressed, if they're seriously drug involved, if they're sleep deprived and they really just don't have the capacity to think rationally, then there are times when we have to override. And if they don't want to be in treatment, they don't want to go to therapy, we insist. We override their decisions.

So we want to do that cautiously because every time the kid says, I think I should do it this way and the parents say, you know, I think it's better you do it this way. Every time we override the kid, part of what we're saying to a kid is don't trust yourself. Don't trust your own judgment. I know better than you do. And there are times, as I'm saying, where that's, that's the case and where we have to do that. But I think they're fairly, they're fairly limited. And they really, really involve these cases where kids, they can't think straight. I'm just working with a 16 year old now who is, who has had a lot of psychiatric issues and is now 16 years old and he's going to school quite infrequently. And his thinking is just a little bit out of touch with reality. And I'm encouraging his parents, we don't just go with his decision, uh, because he's not capable right now of really making an informed, clear decision.

Debbie: Thank you. That's helpful. So this has just been such a great conversation. There's so much more we could talk about, but I think this is a great introduction and I'm sure it's gotten parents thinking differently about the amount of control their child currently has and, and changes they might want to make to start developing or helping their child develop more a sense of agency and autonomy. And I love, love the long view thinking, I mean I think that's something we talk a lot about also on this show is the importance of keeping our eye on what we want. You know, we want to raise adults, we're raising adults here. And adults who know themselves and have a sense of agency is really what we're after. So before we say goodbye, I just want to give you a chance, any kind of parting thoughts or something that you would really want, you know, knowing who our audience is for this show, really want them to take away as a key idea from this conversation?

Ned: Well, I have a daughter who's now a freshman in high school and she's a complicated character. She ended up being, almost the entirety of middle school, not having friends, she's not really socially intuitive and ended up in full on school refusal for the last three months of eighth grade because of anxiety that then became depression. And it was pretty darn hard. You know, when dad's a guy whose entire career has been helping kids get into college, I'm thinking, holy smokes. And so we got a lot of time cause she wasn't in school for three months. And I remember going on this long walk and she was just beside herself and so upset with herself and life and everything else, I looked at her and mustered the best long view, you know, courage that I could have. And I said, look, you know, you are a terrific person.

You're kind and you're curious and you're thoughtful. You're really funny and you're really sharp. And I said, you're going to have a great life. And she said, she said, well sure it doesn't seem that way. And I said I know it doesn't. And I said, at least on this one, I want you to trust me because I have a little more experience than you. And so the thing that I did made a really conscious effort during that time, and I would suggest this to any parent who has a kid where like, school is harder, life is harder, the hand that they've been dealt is hard, to make it your highest possible priority just to love the kid you got where he is, where she is right now. Because if we think a little bit about, you know, this constantly, this slowly developing prefrontal cortex and those executive functions that we want to come online.

The great Adele Diamond makes the point that if you're sad or lonely or tired or stressed, those executive functions are impacted first and impacted most. And so we can't really help our kids grow up faster than they grow up. And there are a lot of things that are hard to solve but we can certainly tackle that of helping them not feel sad, and not feel lonely simply by giving them the assumption of our love. And that does all these things, wonderful of course for our relationship also for the executive functions. And thirdly, really to help them have the energy to go off and develop the life for themselves that they want to have as much as we want them to have.

- Debbie: Thank you for sharing that. And I think that's just what so many of us need to hear and just even how to be in that space with their child if they're in, if they're experiencing what your daughter was going through. So thank you for that. Bill, did you have anything you wanted to share?
- Bill: Just add onto that, that probably 30 years ago I consulted with this young adult, who I think was 21, who'd had a tough time in high school and then some chemical drug or alcohol problems. He'd flunked out of college a couple times. And I asked him, is there something that your parents could have done differently when you were in high school that would have helped? And he said, I think it would've helped if they'd have been happy to see me sometimes. But I always screwed stuff up and they always felt that he had to be disapproving of. And I think one of the greatest things we can do for our kids, as Ned was saying, really the same point, is just enjoying them as they are as much as we can because then they perceive themselves as a joy producing organism. And when I talk with, with educators, even experienced educators, I just remind them that that's the maybe the best thing we can do for a kid is to simply enjoy them as they are. And one of my major motivations for writing this book is I wanted, I wanted to have in writing something that would help that parents can keep referring to, to remind them that it's safe not to worry about their kid all the time and not to be on their kid all the time.
- Debbie: Ah gosh, that's so powerful. And I think especially as kids are in adolescence and become teenagers and you know, it's that hugging a porcupine kind of thing and you know, they still need to feel that we light up when we see them and uh, it breaks my heart that, that former client of yours experienced that. So. Wow.
- Bill: I do see kids where parents they, if the kid's not doing well and the parents understandably feel, well if I act nice to him, if I just like just enjoy him, then I'm giving the message that it's okay for him not to do any work or it's okay for him to be screwed up in this way or it's okay for him to be staying out past his curfew. So it's hard. I mean I think that uh, the book gives ideas about how we deal with aspects of kids' behavior that's not ideal. At the same time we remember how important is to enjoy them as they are. Love them as they are.
- Debbie: And to show them that we can actually still enjoy our lives as well. You know, it's okay for us to be happy even if our child is unhappy at any given time.
- Bill: One of my relatives is one of the first people I know who 40 years ago did a 30 day outpatient treatment program for a pot addiction. And one of the things I remember was one of the counselors during families session said to parents of people who are addicts, he said, one of your main goals is to learn to separate your own happiness from whether your kid chooses to use or not. And it was so powerful to me and I just, I think that if for something that, a problem that severe, and we can apply the same thing to lesser problems.
- Debbie: Yeah. Wow, okay. So thank you so much. Listeners, as you can tell, Ned and Bill are totally our people. You know, their book is very much in alignment with what we believe at Tilt and I have the book in audio and hard copy, because I refer to it

a lot. So it's The Self Driven Child. I highly recommend you check it out and Bill and Ned, thank you so much for the time today and just for this generous conversation. I really appreciate it.

Ned: Thanks for the work that you do.

Bill: Yeah, yeah.

## RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- [Dr. William Stixrud](#)
- [Ned Johnson / Prep Matters](#)
- [\*The Self-Driven Child: The Science and Sense of Giving Your Kids More Control Over Their Lives\*](#) by Dr. William Stixrud and Ned Johnson
- [\*Conquering the SAT: How Parents Can Help Teens Overcome the Pressure and Succeed\*](#) by Ned Johnson and Emily Warner Eskelsen
- [\*The Explosive Child: A New Approach for Understanding and Parenting Easily Frustrated, Chronically Inflexible Children\*](#) by Dr. Ross Greene
- [\*Positive Discipline: The Classic Guide to Helping Children Develop Self-Discipline Responsibility, Cooperation, and Problem-Solving Skills\*](#) by Dr. Jane Nelsen
- [Self Determination Theory // Edward Deci](#)
- [\*Doable: The Girls' Guide to Accomplishing Just About Anything\*](#) by Deborah Reber