



Episode #163:

**Dr. Mark Bertin on Resilience,
Executive Function, and Mindfulness**

June 25, 2019

Debbie: Hi Mark, welcome to the podcast.

Mark: Thank you so much for having me, Debbie.

Debbie: Okay, well, as a way to get started today, can you introduce yourself, just give us a little bit of background about your work. You have a lot of experience that's very relevant to my audience of parents with differently wired kids. So tell us a little bit about what you do and the books that you've written.

Mark: I'd be happy to start with that. So, uh, I'm a developmental pediatrician, which is a subspecialty of general pediatrics that works just with kids with difficulties and differences in school behaviorally. You know, a lot of the children I see have ADHD or autism, learning disabilities. So clinically, professionally, that's what I spend all my time doing. But I also, many years ago, was introduced to the practice of mindfulness and um, that's a whole other story. So initially that was kind of in parallel and I kept it to myself and just had my own practice going. And then as the science around mindfulness expanded, I realized it was kind of silly to be keeping it separately. So in my writing in particular and my work for anyone who wants it, I also integrate mindfulness. So I've written two books that integrate mindfulness into care of ADHD and one book that integrates it into general parenting.

Debbie: Yeah. It seems like kind of a unique voice in this conversation, you know, to be marrying those two pieces. They're both things that we've talked about on this show, but I've never had someone who comes, you know, through both of these different lenses and integrates it. It's so interesting.

Mark: Yeah. I feel like, personally I feel like it's totally natural. You know it's really, for anyone who's familiar with mindfulness, you're the, you know, there's a lot of stereotypes and cliches and you know, there's almost, it can feel almost intimidating. Like, how can I, you know, be so perfect and calm all the time, except that mindfulness is really the opposite of, uh, or the intention is really the opposite of that. The intention is recognizing that things in life can be pretty challenging and uncertain and we're never going to be perfect. So the practice of mindfulness is really about managing real life. And a lot of the premise of mindfulness to me is, is really exactly what most parents would benefit from or need. So the core assumption is that things are going to be uncertain and challenging, which is really true for all parents. And you know, on some level, a lot of our day to day resilience relies on our just helping build the traits that help us manage that real life situation.

Debbie: Yeah, I mean, I think that's why your work resonated so much with me. That's a lot of what I personally believe and what I share with my community so often is, especially when you're raising kids who are moving through the world differently, so much of it is about our own experience in that and how we choose to feel about it. So I really, you know, as I was reading your book, I was like, yes, yes. So much of the language just really spoke to me.

Mark: Thank you. I'm glad that's true. And I think the, I mean first of all, on some level the practice of mindfulness is as much about just seeing, you know, seeing our lives clearly so we can, you know, live as well as we can. You know, it's not about being quiet and still all the time. And you know, that may seem abstract. I mean I feel like even as I started this interview, I've been a little abstract in describing mindfulness because it's all meant to be just very real. It's just meant to be recognizing that when life gets challenging we tend to sort of be on our heels and in reactive mode and really feeling stressed. And, and as a parent it's so easy to get caught up in fear and you know, get really wrapped up in all the hard decisions we need to make. And a lot of what I am, you know, teaching, advocating for with mindfulness are skills that just help you manage that so that you can make choices easier. You can, you know, feel more confident in your own parenting and maybe let go of a lot of the stuff, the extra stuff that's causing more stress than you need in life.

Debbie: So you're bringing up so many things that I want to talk about. But before we get into that, I'd love to even just have you take a few minutes to tell us about your new book. It's called *How Children Thrive: The Practical Science of Raising Independent, Resilient, and Happy Kids*. So just tell us a little bit about why you wrote that and what you're hoping it offers readers.

Mark: Well, the reason, I mean, those are, I think there's two things to look at. The 'why' I wrote it is because I think in our sort of information saturated, pressured, perfectionistic online world, I mean, I think a lot of what's going on in the internet is just, really pushes parents in ways that aren't realistic. I really wanted to write something that kind of simplified things for parents, that allows parents to really trust that if they just can connect with the basics of what we know helps children be resilient, develop healthy lifestyles and routines, you know, sort of step out of the chaos that we're all living in right now. I want to provide a, you know, some resource that would allow parents to navigate all that easier.

And, and I think so many parent books pressure parents to be one particular way or do things one exact way when, you know, life is, life is kind of simpler than that sometimes. Like they're, you do your best knowing what you think is going to work best and, and you have to trust that that's going to work out. And so I wanted to provide something that just cut through a lot of the, you know, the extra. I made things really more straightforward. So what has kind of in a very fortuitous way kind of come together for me as a developmental pediatrician is there's all this new research developing around how children can become resilient. And more specifically a developmental path called executive function, which you know, may sound wonky but really is just how children manage their day to day life. And it turns out, different than I was even taught in medical school, that this, this aspect of development starts in early childhood.

It really matures into your mid to late twenties and really explains a lot of what you can expect for your kids at different ages, how you can set kids up for success in school. And you know, again, I don't want to imply that it's the only

answer, but it does tie together a lot of real core foundational concepts that parents can know about, how you can set kids up around like getting sleep and homework done on the one end. And then because executive function ties so into managing behavior, managing social situations, managing school, if you can really understand it, again, I always feel like, you know, don't get caught up in the language of it, just understand the concept. If you can really understand how children manage their lives at different ages, it really allows you to focus on the kind of core skills that children are going to develop so that they can navigate things on their own one day. Um, and, and that ties back to mindfulness again. So it's, in my field, it's this one developmental path that sort of really can help you stay grounded in a sort of, um, basic core focus on as, I mean sometimes I call it the modern science of back to the basics parenting. You know, here, here's what we can focus on that really matters and maybe you know, let go of the rest.

Debbie: Oh it's interesting to hear you describe your vision for the book in that way. Because you know, in reading it too, it did feel like you just presented things in such an accessible way and really did cut out a lot of the noise if you will. Or, you know, it was just, here are some things to think about, here is kind of what you need to know, and you offer lots of simple ways to view so many of the concepts that you're sharing. So in the subtitle is the word resilience. And that's something, you know, I get a lot of requests from parents who want to talk more about that on the show. We know that that's really important for our kids. We also know that a lot of differently wired kids that's a lagging skill or something that they may struggle with because of, of other things happening in their lives. Can you define resilience for us and tell us why it's so important?

Mark: Well, resilience, I think the simplest way to look at it is, you know, resilience is the capacity to bounce back from and persist through difficult times. And as a parent, as hard as it is to, I mean it's one of the things that's often stressful for us, is recognizing we can't and shouldn't manage everything for our children. We need to set them up to do things on their own over time. And, um, you know, there's a great quote, I don't remember where it's attributed to originally, along the lines of you can't cover the road ahead for your children with leather, but you can use that leather to make a nice pair of hiking boots. So, you know, we, we can provide children with, over time, the ability to, you know, to take care of themselves as they get older. And I mean there's so many nuances to that.

I think sometimes there's a disconnect of just recognizing that at any given age that does mean something slightly different. It doesn't have to be sink or swim because a lot of the skills that go into resilience are pretty immature like in early school age so that students require, you know, that it's okay to get a little involved then as a teaching point. It's almost like instructing kids in how to manage a hard situation. And it can be conversational and you let them take the lead and it's not, it's not being an over-involved parent, as long as you're always aware of, of uh, you know, providing opportunities for independence and sort of giving them more and more opportunity for that over time. And this

does tie back to that same message of when you really look at what goes into resilience, it's that same sense of just foundational things, you know.

So one of the biggest ones for example, is consistent relationships. And that may seem trivial except that as life gets busy and challenging, I mean, two things happen. One is, it's easy to just lose touch of that time. And you know, when you look at like research in teens for example, just having consistent family meals is considered protective from a lot of stuff you're trying to avoid in your teenager, with your teenager. You know, so teens who have consistent family meals tend to, you know, have less risk for behavioral and emotional issues, for example. And then on the other hand, I think it's important that when you, you know, I mean I'm sure this has always been true, but I can only comment on the culture we're living in now. You know, in this sort of media, internet driven culture, there's always this pressure that we have to be doing more and more to help our children when we can just reassure ourselves that if we have like a solid family life, that's a big thing, we've already accomplished a lot there.

So one foundation is relationship. Another foundation has to do with, I'm, I'm gathering, you probably have talked about something called mindset, which is a belief that our own effort matters. And again, that's a simple thing to focus on and we can do that. And then when you cross over into populations where kids are having difficulties, the other two foundations do become something that's a little more challenging and we have to focus on. A third is similar to mindset, but I think slightly different is just having a sense of our own strengths and what we're good at and trusting in that part of our lives too. That's particularly important for kids who are having difficulty, say in school or difficulty in their social lives. We want to help them find that true success. I'm not a, you know, I think sometimes there's, you know, kids see through, I think when we're trying to reward them for things that aren't real.

So it's really trying to find their true successes and things that they connect with. And then the last piece to resilience, which I think is not emphasized enough and does have a lot to do with, with ADHD, with autism, learning disabilities, is executive function itself. Because we haven't really defined executive function yet today. So executive function is a cognitive skill set that just has to do with life management. It's like the CEO, it's the part of the brain responsible for coordinating and organizing and planning everything. And you're not supposed to have a lot of those abilities, you know, in early childhood. You have some and then it's supposed to keep maturing so that by the time you're an adult you can manage really complicated situations well. But executive function includes attention and behavior but also organization and time management and managing our emotions and and persistence and planning.

So that, one of the things I sometimes think gets overlooked is that if we want someone to be resilient, to you know, encounter something difficult and recognize what's going on and set up a plan and manage that plan and stick to that plan through to the end. You know, those are all executive function based skills. So there's a skillset that is required to be resilient, in essence.

And that I think is a, is a nuanced part of childhood that's often underestimated, particularly when kids have ADHD specifically. Because ADHD is a developmental delay practically speaking in executive function. So in our school system nowadays, actually in the United States at least, there's a big emphasis on self advocacy and problem solving yourself and problem based learning. And all of that's wonderful for the kids it works for. But if you have poor executive function, if you're behind in executive function, you know you're behind in those specific skills and we have to meet you where you are developmentally and kind of lead you forward to more of those skills as opposed to just expecting you to suddenly, you know, develop them out of thin air.

Debbie: Yeah, I mean, you know, we've done several episodes on executive functioning. We've done I think three just with Seth Perler who's been kind of our executive functioning guru on the show. Unofficial title, but he has played that role. But I'd never heard, um, I also read that in your book about ADHD being a developmental delay of executive functioning. I'd never heard it that way before, but it totally made sense as the mother of a child with ADHD. So I'm just wondering, and there's, you know, a lot of other things I want to touch base on about your book, but any best practices or resources on executive functioning for those of us, most of us listening, who have kids who have lagging executive functioning skills? Any kind of favorite resources or places that parents can start?

Mark: Well, I mean there's, truthfully there's a lot and I have a whole ADHD page on my website of just related resources. And that, I mean to be uh, I'm never comfortable with sales honestly, but you know, that is the whole premise of the ADHD workbook I have is how do you work with ADHD as a delay in executive function. But Thomas Brown has great books on that. There's, there's several other books on it as well. I don't want to just, you know, promote myself in any way. But the, but the core premise, which I think is more important, is if you're a parent living with a child with ADHD, it's really important to me that executive function feels like, you know, it doesn't feel like some sort of academic abstract concept. It really is the nitty gritty of how you help someone with ADHD catch up.

And it really, as a parent, will make your life easier to understand the nuances of it for many reasons. Like you know, for example, when you look at the cliché, you know, the sort of the stereotype of ADHD, it's about a short attention span. You know, when you look at it through the lens of executive function, you recognize that it's about managing attention, which means it can have moments of hyper focus where you can't get yourself out of something that's really easy and enjoyable. When the, you know, demands go up, you can't focus and that can get mislabeled, poor effort. And then really on a day to day level, the fact that you can't transition attention is, you know, a heart of living with anyone with ADHD. But it can come across as defiance or I'm being ignored when quite often it's just that it's somebody with ADHD who is really engaged in playing or reading or watching TV. You know, they really can't hear you if you try talking to them at the same time as they can't shift their

attention. And that's the level you want to begin to understand executive function on as a parent because that's where a lot of the solutions come from.

Debbie: But there are solutions?

Mark: Oh yeah, yeah, definitely. I mean, kids with ADHD will do great if you understand it fully. It's just that, you know, I'm, I'm happy to go whatever direction you want in terms of topics today. But you know, I think in order to manage ADHD thoroughly, you really need to acknowledge just how wide ranging and challenging a condition it is. So that as a parent you have a child who's behind in the skills that allow them to be independent. So they're going to require more of your support longer than their peers. You know, it's emotionally difficult when kids are struggling, as a parent. It's, you know, there's so many levels to look at it. So I think one of the things that's under acknowledged about ADHD, it is the premise of why I started integrating, why I initially was integrating mindfulness into ADHD care had more to do with parents needing support and parents being swamped than their children specifically.

And then from a child side, ADHD is a chronic and long term disorder that initially may come across as a school or a behavioral difficulty, but over time affects anything potentially that requires management in life. So I was just reading an article before we started talking today, another study looking at ADHD for example in driving accidents. You know, it's been shown to affect health. It's been shown to affect stress and anxiety. So all of that is important to acknowledge because if you can see it that way, it certainly I think in the short run often becomes more overwhelming. But in the long run, if you see it for what it is, um, which is mindfulness, if you see it with clarity, you can manage it, you can take care of all, I mean it takes a lot of work, but you can do it, you know, kids with ADHD do great when they get full supports.

Debbie: Well as you're saying all of this it's just striking me that I think, you know, this is the case for me personally and I imagine for so many people listening, is that we have kids who are moving through the world differently. We get to know and understand, you know, who they are based on how they've been identified as you know, what's going on with them. And then I think over time, so many of us, we focus on certain behaviors or things that we're addressing, but we forget that it's all that all behavior is somehow related to what's going on with them. So I don't know, something that you, you just shared just really struck me that I think we can be very solution oriented and we forget to always step back and look at the big picture. That all of these different pieces, the emotional regulation, you know, all of it, things that might just seem annoying or little behavior things that we think we've already addressed, that it's still really just a part of, of how they're wired.

Mark: Right. I mean, I, you know, I think clearly in the big picture, especially in the midst of challenges, you know, we're all gonna, you know, we all would, I mean sometimes it can take work to just focus on what's going well in the bigger family picture. You know, that overall big picture of just, you know, happy, resilient families. And yet I do think when it comes specifically to kids

who have struggles in different parts of life, you know, sometimes we do need to sort of pause. And when it comes to ADHD in particular, I sometimes call it like looking through the lens of executive function because sometimes you have some chronic difficulty that just seems entrenched or like a quirk or just, you know, like you're just struggling going around in circles over it. And if you pause and sort of look at it and say like, oh, like what part of this could be, you know, related to the, to their ADHD? Or the same thing could go, you know, even for any other learning disability or high functioning autism, you know, you, you sometimes can step back and say like, oh, wait a minute, you know, maybe that has to do with social pragmatics when it comes to autism.

Or maybe that has to do with executive function when it comes to, you know, some real subtle nuances like executive functioning involves emotion so that kids who are struggling as they get older with something as subtle as like frustration tolerance, just giving up too easy, you know, it can be important to recognize that, oh wait a minute, you know, that's something to work on. But it's not necessarily their fault, that's executive function again. Or the inability to realize like in high school students who otherwise are doing well, they just, you know, may not recognize the need to or how to study. And it's like, you feel like it's easy to get caught up in fighting over it and struggling over it and come on now, you know, if you just studied. And then sometimes you have to step back and say like, okay, wait a minute. What if potentially, hypothetically, what if, what this came down to was somebody who just can't see life that way yet? They don't see time that way yet. They don't see long term planning that way yet. You know what if it was a skill we have to work on and not someone sort of wilfully not studying.

Debbie: That's such a helpful reframe. So I want to actually shift to the parents because we've been talking about how to support our kids, but really so much of your work, and again, why it really resonated with me is that you are supporting parents in living more intentionally and just having a different experience in their day to day life and how that can support the whole family. So I wanted to actually just talk about this idea of emotional resilience in parents. You talk about that in your book. Can you share with us how we can develop emotional resilience ourselves?

Mark: Yeah, thank you for that question. I think it's a great one and it's easy to lose touch with it. You know, you get, obviously as a parent, your priorities shift a lot and you know, quite often your kids needs do have to come first. But there is that reality that, you know, if we're going to be at our best for our children, we need to take care of ourselves, at least some. You know, we have to find that core of time we're going to prioritize and activities we're going to prioritize that let us stay at our best more often. And um, I mean there's, there's a few different things to think about. One is in the big picture, it's not that I think everybody has to practice mindfulness. That's obviously not true. I mean, I happened to find it useful and a lot of, you know, and obviously a lot of the people I've worked with do. But more importantly, it's each of us individually finding what helps keep us healthy and strong and really, you know, not letting go.

One of the best pieces of advice I often come back to you is something someone told me going into medical school, which you know, is nothing, you know, I don't want to, you know, everyone has their medical school, whatever it is that they go into, that's, you know, really, really challenging. And the advice I got was find one thing that helps keep you, one activity that helps keep you sane and don't let go of it no matter how crazy and busy things get. And I think the same basic sort of foundational like no matter how many, how busy things get, I'm going to find time for this is important as a parent too. And then in the, um, you know, when it comes to being a resilient parent, I mean there's, there's a few different things that are important to know. One is even in an adult, relationships are part of what keeps us resilient and both within our, within our marriages, if we're married, with our friends, with our kids. You know, just remembering that as busy as life gets, as pressured as life gets, you know, that's something that's really valuable and we don't want to let go of is really important.

And in some, you know, for some people that actually may be a pretty significant step to take at first. There's a second piece of resilience in adults that's just like with kids, which is recognizing our own strengths and effort. Because you know, in a perfectionistic world, you know, when for the, when we look at mindfulness, we often talk about this very self critical voice. I mean in psychology, I shouldn't even say mindfulness. In the field of psychology there's also, when it comes to resilience, we often have this very habitual and demeaning inner voice that, you know, most of us relate to in some way. It's that voice that as soon as you screw up kind of says you blew it again, you can't manage this. And you know, that begins to affect our resilience over time. So we can, you know, we need to value our own effort and really work on that too.

And then, um, you know, the third thing, which for anyone who chooses to do it, are, you know, really working on this, the skillset, I mean, really executive function is a concept that goes all through life. All the skills that help us manage life more easily. And, um, and that's for me what comes back to mindfulness again because really the broader premise of practicing mindfulness is we're working with being more, you know, getting out of autopilot, getting out of reactivity for longer stretches of time. Because when we're just caught up in the autopilot and stress of day to day life, we tend not to be seeing things clearly. We tend to be making the same decisions we've always made and saying things the same way and managing things the same way. So that being clear sighted, you know, giving ourselves the opportunity to make changes starts with enough self care that we can basically be settled and, and take that new step.

Because a lot of the time I think the answers to challenges aren't, it's less that we need more information and it's less that things are so complicated. Although clearly sometimes, you know, there are complicated situations, but quite often we just need to catch ourselves long enough and then, you know, either trust our own instincts around it. I think, you know, one of the things that, in modern life, is quite often tied to that is like managing screen time and

kids is a, is a good example of something where the cart gets ahead of the horse and things get really crazy and sometimes if you just pause long enough you can recognize that you know, your gut sense that maybe you need to reign things in is probably true. So a lot of the times if we can pause long enough, we do know what we want to be doing, we've just kind of kind of lost touch with it.

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And then you know, another piece of it is that we can learn to manage our own emotions and stress more skilfully because, not that we've ever done anything wrong, but because the, we can develop that as, as a trait almost. Because really in any situation, and particularly within families, quite often the only thing we can directly manage is what we're adding or not adding to a particular situation. So we can just on a day to day level make that a practice without expecting perfection. But just make it a practice so that over time, you know, we're able to navigate all the, you know, the intensity that comes up in families more skilfully.

Debbie: Yeah. I mean, I, I love that you talk about getting off autopilot and I think that is so important and just being intentional and also just knowing that it doesn't look perfect. It's more about the intention, right? And making that choice every day. Just how we want to show up for ourselves, for our family. And then knowing that some days we're going to get it right and some days we're not. And then we start over the next day.

Mark: Yeah. Though, I mean, the whole, just, we can talk about perfectionism and parenting probably for, you know, a whole hour because it's such a, I mean, there's, there's so much pressure to be perfect, to raise kids a particular way, to, you know, meet these, you know, crazy, intense goals nowadays. You know, when I think, in schools in particular, to get into colleges, you know, and then pressure as parents, you think you never can make a mistake. But of course quite often our own inner take on things is way different than we would, you know, advise our closest friends or our kids. You know, perfect is impossible and there's often a sort of a mis-assumption that perfectionism is what keeps us motivated. It's actually, it's way more nuanced than that because when you look at it from a psychological point of view and Kristin Neff has done a lot, a lot of really great research around this idea.

If we're always aiming for perfectionism, really it may feel like that's motivating us, but in the end we're always going to fall short and it actually in the long run undermines our motivation, undermines our ability to problem solve and think flexibly because it doesn't leave us any room for just doing as good as we can and then figuring out how to correct ourselves when it doesn't go as well as we wanted. Which is, you know, much more what real life is like. Much more like we would tell our own children to be living probably. And if you can let go of perfectionism, there's a concept Kristin Neff talks about called self compassion, which is, you know, can sound a little, I don't know what, it's kind of a little new-agey almost, but it really is very straight forward. It just means that we're often way harsher on ourselves than we would be to anybody else when it comes to you, you know, just the perspective we're taking to our own efforts.

And when you can shift that so that you are motivated, working towards goals, working to improve, you know, self compassion doesn't mean it's all good, we all have flaws. But it means, it really just means that we can bring to parenting a much more realistic sense of, like you said, being intentional. I've just, I'm gonna settle myself as best as I'm able, I'm going to look at the situation and try to figure out what I need to do and then I'm going to sort of allow it to happen as best as it's going to. Without that sense of needing things to be exactly one way or that sense of perfectionism.

Debbie: Yeah. I mean when I think of perfectionism, I definitely relate it to that need for control, trying to control who our kid is, trying to control the outcome of any given situation. And there was something that you wrote in your book that I really loved. You wrote whatever your image of mindfulness is, it's nothing more or less than a direct way to handle the uncertainty of life. And I just read that, I'm like, wow, you know, I had never heard mindfulness described in that way before and it seemed so freeing actually to read that sentence.

Mark: Oh, I'm, I'm glad you saw it that way. And, and uh, you know, that often is, um, I think the quickest way not to practice mindfulness is to approach it, you know, with that view that it's going to fix things or I'm going to be calm all the time. And that's, that's the heart of it is that things can be pretty uncertain and challenging and all we can really expect of ourselves is to navigate that as well as we can.

Debbie: So I have one more that's a little bit of a new topic, but it's something I wanted to cover before, maybe for personal reasons, but I hope that it resonates with my audience too. You write about the negativity bias and attention and so many of our differently wired kids have very kind of negative outlooks. They can be very glass half empty kind of guys and gals. Um, they can really focus on the negative. So I'm wondering if you have any thoughts on how we can help our kids shift away from their negative thinking, whether that's using mindfulness or other strategies.

Mark: Right. Um, so the negativity bias refers to the fact that, you know, probably for evolutionary reasons, things that are unpleasant or off or dangerous often grab our attention and then they're just really hard to stop thinking about them and let go of them. So, and that's on a basic level of what the, you know, what that bias means and what most of us are probably familiar with on some level. And so we don't want to get rid of it completely because you know, that's part of what keeps us safe in everyday life. Um, but when it comes to kids, you know, I think there's two or three things to focus on when it comes to helping shift that perspective in life. One is, you know, first of all, I mean, just to set something aside because I think it'd be useful. In many ways what mindfulness is talking about is just building, intentionally trying to build a bunch of traits in life that help us manage life easier. So it's not about stillness, it's about a lot of different things. So it's about working with the negativity bias if we choose or working with the inner critic. And I just want to start by saying that only because for anybody listening, a lot of these things I'm talking about, you can work on however you want.

I mean, mindfulness does it very directly, but these are things that don't necessarily have to do with mindfulness specifically. Um, when it comes to anything related to perspective, to mindfulness, to traits like that, some of it often just starts with our own take on life and how we're living ourselves. Um, which is why mindfulness practice in particular, you know, in any family starts with parents. So part of shifting that in kids is just touching base with our own relationship to it and how we're working on ourselves. Because just in day to day life we can begin to shift the negativity bias if we can, in a very, you know, realistic unforced way, help label and note and, and show gratitude for, and appreciation for all the things that are going well even on a challenging day. So certainly some of shifting the negativity bias can just be looking at as a parent or as a family, how much are we focusing on that.

And there are specific activities you can do like a gratitude practice that, um, which just means in, you know, at, at dinner once a week just showing appreciation for something that's really to be appreciated for. And I think that's so important to me that, you know, for any of these things I talk about, they just, they need to be very reality based. It's not doing it in a, you know, forced way and being thankful for things you're not really thankful for. But most of us have stuff we can really note. So some of it has to do with just family environment. And then a second one I think that's really important to recognize is that children are very much wired to learn from experience. So that one of the most profound things that can shift their perspective when it comes to the negativity bias or similar mental traits is really making sure we have the supports in place so that they actually do succeed.

And I think that can be a little frustrating sometimes, but it's, you almost have to, you know, get the right supports in place and then watch and wait a little bit. But for example, if you have someone who has ADHD and is having a hard time in school and then you get a really, you know, treat their ADHD in essence, get a really intensive school plan in place and maybe some of your homework supports and whatever else you do to manage ADHD, through that shift so that over a year or two they are more successful, you'll usually see their attitude change. So that's, that's the second part of helping them see their experience well. I already mentioned a third, which is if someone's having difficulty in one particular place in life, we often need to really do, you know, expose them to lots of other activities until they find some other activity that they really thrive and get positive feedback from.

And then, you know, as part of that overall picture, we can come back to mindfulness practice specifically, because with mindfulness, over time what you're doing is you're beginning to, um, the deeper practice has more to do with how we're living and how we're relating to, you know, both our, how we think and also how we live. So that one of the things you're working with as you start practicing mindfulness is recognizing as you're starting to settle, as you're starting to see things that we have a lot of thoughts all the time and a lot of them are valuable, but a lot of them are just random and a lot of them are habitual. And part of the practice is beginning to create a little space from that. So you can begin to really, in other words, talk about, oh yeah, that's,

you know, that's that habit, you know, that's that, there it is again, you know, I'm caught up in that again.

And then with mindfulness practice, what you're practicing is just coming back. It's just recognizing like oh, there I went again and I'm going to let go of it. I'm going to create some space from it because I know that's my habit and I'm going to focus on, you know, really, you know, real life right in front of me again for a little bit. And what you do, so what you can do with that piece of things is really begin to be much more discerning of which thoughts we have that actually require our attention. Like, because certainly, you know, that's, that's real too, and which are just habit. I mean, a lot of anxiety for example, is just, uh, not, well, I don't want to minimize anxiety, but I mean a lot of us feel anxious a lot of the time, but a lot of what happens with anxiety is that it has more to do with attention and sort of related to the negativity bias than it does to do with overreacting.

I think most of us can recognize this as a parent. So like something happens that triggers our parenting worry and even long after we've already managed the situation, or even if there's absolutely nothing we can do about it, we can't stop thinking about it. So it's not that we're overreacting. The problem may be real, but it's an attention issue. It's like our attention is caught up in it. And that's part of mindfulness practice is just practicing, oh right, I'm caught up there again and now I'm going to focus back here and, and you know, I'm just, you know, making dinner now. Um, so, so that's the last piece of working with the negativity bias, you know, is to say, you know, when over time mindfulness is like a gym program. Like over time you sort of establish it and start working with it and over time you can start saying, okay, that's my habit, but I'm going to recognize it as something habitual that I can change.

Debbie: It's so helpful. Wow. I feel like we covered a lot today and there's so many little nuggets that, that listeners are going to take from this as I have. So before we say goodbye, is there anything that we didn't cover or any kind of last thoughts?

Mark: Um, well I, I think there's just one thing I want to touch on briefly is that one other thing that comes out of this sort of more developmental understanding of executive function of self management skills is it often cuts through a lot of the stuff that just makes day to day living easier. So it's very practical on that level of just understanding in terms of sleep habits or homework habits or things like that. You know, cutting through expectations is often, you know, like maybe my five year old does need me to be more directly involved. Or really just cutting through and then recognizing that that's only gonna change gradually over time is often a way to de stress situations, you know, so that I just want to, you know, I want to make it clear that this isn't all about mindfulness. This isn't all about ADHD. Any parent can just begin to understand, you know, where their children are developmentally really allows for a lot of freedom. And I think, you know, this is something all parents can take advantage of and hopefully allow themselves to feel more resilient and happier in their kids too.

Debbie: Yeah, I think for so many people whose, whose kids are really struggling with executive functioning deficits, they may likely have never heard of executive functioning. I mean for me it's, I feel like it's something I've spent a lot of time reading and learning about it and focusing on. But it is something that everybody has. It's a part of everyone's life and everyone has, correct me where I'm wrong, but their executive functioning is in their own unique developmental space. You know, there's kind of traditional but, but everyone's got kind of strengths and areas of weakness over time. Right?

Mark: Oh absolutely. And it's, yeah, and this is like you said, this is a develop, this is something, you know, I think at this point in time most people are aware of a lot of development. They know what language develops like typically and they know, you know, maybe what play develops like on some level, like you have this intuition, you know, what play often looks like. But you know, people often label executive function, you know, like you should be more motivated, you should be more this, you should be more that, when in the end it's a skill set. And it has to, you know, for some kids it takes time to evolve. And like you said, you know, it's just something we need to be aware of because everyone has their strengths and then some kids need a little more support in catching up.

Debbie: Right. That's great. Well, thank you so much for taking time, this is a, we're doing this interview first thing on a Monday morning. My voice is a little croaky cause you're the first person I've spoken to today, but I appreciate you starting your week with this conversation and I'm just looking forward to sharing this with my audience. So thank you so much.

Mark: Oh, thanks so much for the invitation to be here. I hope people found it useful.

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- [Dr. Mark Bertin's website](#)
- [*How Children Thrive: The Practical Science of Raising Independent, Resilient, and Happy Kids*](#) by Dr. Mark Bertin
- [*Mindful Parenting for ADHD: A Guide for Cultivating Calm, Reducing Stress, and Helping Children Thrive*](#) by Dr. Mark Bertin
- [*The Family ADHD Solution: A Scientific Approach to Maximizing Your Child's Attention and Minimizing Parental Stress*](#) by Dr. Mark Bertin
- [Seth Perler](#) (executive functioning coach)
- [Dr. Mark Bertin's suggested ADHD resources](#)
- [Dr. Kristin Neff](#)
- [Thomas Brown](#)