



Episode #199

**A Conversation About Raising
Good Humans with Hunter Clarke-Fields**

March 10, 2020

Debbie: Hello Hunter, welcome to the podcast.

Hunter: Thanks, Debbie. So glad to be here.

Debbie: I'm happy to have you on the show. Your work is so in alignment with Tilt Parenting, what we do and your new book is such a great fit for this audience and I know you actually reach a much larger audience, not specifically parents have differently wired kids, but your work is so relevant to my community. So as a way to get started, would you mind telling us a little bit about yourself what you do, who you are in the world, both in your professional life and as a parent?

Hunter: Sure. As a parent, my daughter is as we record this on the cusp of 13, my oldest daughter, and I have a younger daughter who's on the cusp of 10. And when my oldest daughter was younger, when she was like two I was really really struggling. I come at all the learning that is in *Raising Good Humans* and in the work very honestly in that I was, I was pretty bad at all of these things. I felt like I was failing at parenting. when my daughter was too. I was really struggling, I was yelling at her. And it was just so much harder than I thought it would be. And she's a very precocious kid, and she's really intense. She's like, you know, a highly sensitive person. And she was just letting me know very clearly that the way I was doing things was not working. And so I had to really dive into like a whole bunch of learning. And I had been studying and reading about mindfulness since I was a teenager for myself, because I happen to be a highly sensitive person, go figure. And then I'd been practicing for a few years before she was born. But I knew that that was the really the sort of, the key to like lowering my reactivity lay in that realm. So I had to really kind of dive back into that, but also then diving into the parenting world and learning about what are the best practices and, and realizing that these two worlds needed to talk to each other. And that is where my work comes in. And that I bring these two worlds together where, because sort of in the, in the parenting world there, there would be all this wonderful, like great advice of how to respond. But there's a whole bunch of things that you just can't do when you're losing it, because you just can't access that part of your brain, literally. And then in the mindfulness world, there is this kind of idea that once you come down, you know, just sort of everything will be okay, but no, I discovered that that wasn't quite true. I could calm down and then say something that might have come out of my parents mouth and, and then it was like, boom, a whole explosion would happen again. So really, it's about bringing these sort of two worlds together, like how to be less reactive and more calm. self aware and self compassionate, and then also then how to communicate and respond to our kids in a way that's just, you know, more compassionate, but also just more effective as well.

Debbie: I'm curious to know about when you became a parent, because I think you know, listening to you, I can certainly relate to that feeling of like, Oh my gosh, I'm not being the parent I thought I was going to be...this is a lot harder. I'm not showing up in a good way. And you write very honestly about that in your book. I'm curious if going into parenting, especially knowing that you were studying

mindfulness from a younger age, did you feel like you've got it covered? Like, did you go in thinking I'm going to ace this or what was that realization?

Hunter: Totally, I totally thought it was going to be amazing, because I started reading and studying about mindfulness when I was a teenager. And then, a decade later, I finally started practicing. I was 27 I when I began my first regular practice, there was a life changing for me, I had, you know, I had been falling into these pits of despair, that a pretty regularly pace in my life, like every couple of weeks, I would just when I was a teacher, I had panic attacks in the parking lot. And so the meditation practice for me was a huge life changer. It just eliminated these pits that I would fall into every week or two. It was amazing. For me, it was a big life changer as far as bringing me more equanimity, etc. And then so then I was when I was 29, two years later, I was pregnant with my first daughter, and I can definitely remember myself, sitting with my big pregnant belly in my meditation group. And just thinking, Oh, yeah, I got this. This is gonna be awesome. She's gonna be so calm. Look at we're just sitting and meditating together as you know, and Yeah, and then I just got hit with the hard cold truth, parenting, which is that it's really like, it's incredibly intense, it's psychologically intense, it's physically intense. There's just so much it's so demanding of us in so many different ways. We may or may not have support in those realms and the physical, psychological, all the those things and so, it really was a big shock to the system, how difficult it was, I mean, even from the very beginning, my, I had my daughter at a birth center, you know, so natural childbirth. So I had this crunchy community around me and my birth center mama friends, some of them just seem so blissed out. And my daughter was like, kind of intense. And I was just wondering, you know, what's, what's going on? Why, why am I not having that experience?

Debbie: Yes, that sounds very familiar to me. Yeah, yeah. And it's, I think it is such a shock to the system, as you said that it is that we, we all go through. And I don't think anyone gets to escape that maybe there's like 1% of parents who, it's just easy, but I always think it's when their kids get older, that's when their fun's going to begin. So we'll see. So I wonder if you could maybe give us a definition of mindfulness and also tell us what meditation for you looks like because you know, I've done a few episodes on mindfulness. And I think there's a lot of myth around what it is what it actually looks like. And I think meditation as well people have this idea in their head of that it has to look like you know, sitting in quiet for an hour and turning off all thoughts you know, what is a realistic view of mindfulness meditation or or both together or separately?

Hunter: Those are great questions because they aren't the same thing. And so mindfulness can be defined as, you know, the intention to pay attention to what's happening in the present moment with an attitude of kindness and curiosity. So there's a couple parts there, there's creating, setting that intention, I will, I will be here in the present moment with what I'm doing. There's your attention, you know, our minds wander enormously, our attention can be really broad, or it can be really narrow. So it's about sort of shaping and practicing flexing that muscle of attention. And then in the present moment, we use them, usually some kind of anchor, because our attention is very much like a little puppy and likes to wander away. And so we have to make it heal many times. And so we can use an anchor

of, for instance, the breath is the most common and then also with that attitude of kindness and curiosity. So important. Curiosity is the opposite of judgment. It's about what is happening right now. What are the sensations that I'm feeling? What are the emotions that are rising? And can I hold all of this with kindness. So it's about cultivating a real loving awareness of what is happening. And this is very different from the way we are normally in our lives and that our minds are, you know, we are planning the what's happening for dinner, and we are, you know, engaged in our work or somebody is talking to us and we're thinking about how will respond and, you know, we're, we're very distracted in our lives very often. And sometimes we don't even see that until we start to sit in meditation and, and meditation is just a there are many different kinds of meditation. But for the purposes here, this is one of the best ways to practice mindfulness and mindfulness is a type of meditation where you're practicing to Be present in the moment with kindness and curiosity. And so you can do that by bringing your attention back to the breath again and again and again. And, and the goal is not to clear your mind. That's that's going to happen when you're, maybe if you're enlightened, probably when you're dead. So really, the brain is, you know, we think of it like this, the mind thinks just the same way, the ears hear, right? We're not going to stop our ears from hearing things. And we're not going to stop our brain from thinking, but we can have more control over where our attention is going and what is doing and it's just, it's basically about building a muscle of attention. And what's exciting about it for parents is that it helps us to be less reactive, it literally makes changes in the brain as we as we Practice bringing our attention back to the breath 6000 times during meditation. As we do this, this practice as frustrating as it is an impossible as it feels in the very beginning, it's actually changing the brain to make your stress response areas of your brain your fight flight and freeze response areas of brain to actually make shrink them and actually grow more connectivity and more density in the prefrontal cortex areas of the brain, which is where your, your empathy, your higher order learning, your verbal ability, your all these wonderful things are right, so which we really want to access as parents. So it is really, really powerful. So basically, mindfulness meditation is a gold standard for practicing mindfulness. But there are other ways to practice as well. I think I've said a lot of things about that. I want to just pause here and offer space for questions, your thoughts.

Debbie: Well, that was a very thorough answer. So and it did bring up a question for me. Because I think something just clicked in me that is new. Because what we ultimately want, right is to be able, as you said, to not be reactive, and you know, for parents, and especially parents who are raising differently wired kids who often feel like there are just opportunities to practice those moments, you know, multiple, multiple times a day. You know, what I always hear from people, a guest that I talked to and experts that I connect with is it's all about in that moment, being able to, to pause, right. And so what you're saying is, and tell me if I'm wrong, the more we can practice this mindfulness, that will actually strengthen our ability to in those difficult moments, be able to more call on that ability to take that pause. Is that what you're saying?

Hunter: Yes, absolutely. So it gives us this bit of space between stimulus and response because in a meditation, we're practicing To become curious about what these spaces are, right? We're practicing to look at the spaces in between the thinking, to just practice that awareness. And then also what happens inevitably, if when one sits down for meditation is that you notice, it's not terribly blissful. If you've ever tried, dear listener, you probably know this. It really feels like you, you get lost in thought, or even emotions arise. discomfort can arise, all these things can arise and we practice to sort of sit and stay nonreactive through that with this attitude of kindness and curiosity. So something may arise for me in meditation, like a thought may trigger and anxiety. And so then I sit with that experience and I look at what does that feel like in my body and I can feel my chest constrict a little I can feel my shoulders tighten, and I breathe and I practice just being with that just allowing that to be there and giving it that space and also Practicing to allow those difficult feelings to be there is practicing non reactivity basically. And so then when we're in a difficult moment with our kids in it, it feels difficult and you know, our normal response to, to things that are uncomfortable is to change the situation, fix it, make it different, you know, and what our kids often need from us. Yet, however they're wired, what they often need for us to be able to, they want to be able to ground with us right to be able to use our stability, to give it some to them to offer them that stability. And when we can sit with a feeling that's uncomfortable, then we provide the space to sit with them and their uncomfortable feelings. And that is like magic for kids for really, for anybody to be able to hold space for something that's hard for somebody else. is really, truly grounding and it makes it so that difficult moments of difficult feelings are accepted. It's not saying that you're wrong, you know, sometimes when we're reactive, it gives us the message that you shouldn't have these feelings you're wrong or bad for having these feelings. And the truth is everybody has every range of feelings and when we can sit and practice being nonreactive with them, we give our kids the implicit message, that it's okay, that this is normal. This is human and I'm still here for you, which is incredibly valuable. It's really unconditional love, like I'm here for you no matter what is happening, which is really beautiful.

Debbie: Yeah, it's so powerful. And as you were explaining that reminded me of Susan Stiffelman talks about being the captain of the ship, like having that leadership energy and that's just such a good reminder, you know, of that role that we can play and how desperately our kids especially when they're going through a difficult moment, they do need us to be that grounded person, the anchor for them. Yeah. And you, you have a chapter called taking care of difficult feelings. And you know, you just touched upon this a little bit, you say that there are two kinds of default reactions that most of us fall into with our emotions or hard feelings, we either block them or we become flooded. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

Hunter: Sure. I think this is just pretty natural, right? Difficult feelings. They don't feel good. That's why we call them difficult feelings. And so, culturally, it's hard to say what's kind of hardwired or culturally but we tend to just want to not feel those feelings, right. We just tend to, we want to block them. And so we can block them by just kind, you know, ignoring the feelings, mentally pushing them away. We

also block them by numbing them through different substances, you know, alcohol, shopping, Facebook, whatever you're doing right to distract yourself from the difficult feelings is kind of a form of blocking. And so we're trying to push it away. But the problem with that is that I think I like to think that our feelings are like little toddlers, like three year olds, like our feelings are like three year olds, and they are like, you will feel me or I will not go away, you must pay attention to me. And I think that's really true. Because when we block the feelings, it's kind of like trying to push a beach ball under the water, it pops up in some random place even higher than it did before. It hasn't been dealt with. And so so then we can often then go to the opposite side of the spectrum and become flooded, we become overwhelmed, we're in tears, or we're yelling or angry, etc. So those are kind of the two ways that we deal with things often in our world. But the beauty of the middle path is that actually when we can just take a moment to mindfully feel the feelings right so if we can say hello Frustration...Hello frustration I see you there old friend. Okay, I see my frustration. I'm going to help myself take care of this right? I'm going to help myself take care of this or, or Hello? Hello sadness, right? I see you there. And yeah, it's here because this thing happened. And this is what it feels like. And as we can start to sit with and feel the sensations from that emotion, you know that emotions bring up in the body, we realize that we have the strength and the capacity to be able to feel these things. And we actually have a lot more capacity than we think we do. I think often and as we can sit with some things, then it's they the feelings become like the, you know, a dark cloud that comes and then rains for a little while, and then it goes away. And without all that resistance and trying to push it away and things like that. It just kind of can go away more quickly. In fact, if we can really give ourselves time and attention to really, really pay attention to those feelings and Maybe even let ourselves cry and all that things can move through our bodies as quickly as in 60 seconds. It's really pretty amazing. But when we try to block it does end up you know, coming back in some awkward time you know, they say our, our issues are in our tissues, I think it sort of goes into our tissues, right? So it really becomes this skill that we need to learn so that then we can, you know, our kids can learn from us so it becomes a two for one deal once read, sort of train ourselves how to take care of our difficult feelings.

Debbie: I love that beach ball metaphor. I think that's such a good visual of what happens when we try to push things down that they just resurface bigger and what you said about 60 seconds that emotion cycling through I'm remembering learning from Martha Beck, she talks about grief like when you're in having those crying jags that you just feel will consume you and will never end if you really allow yourself to experience that it don't remember exactly how many minutes, but it's a it's a very small number of minutes, then you will get a break from that. And so allowing yourself to really experience them. Yeah, I think you're absolutely right. It helps you process it in a more healthy way more quickly. And then also modeling for our kids that this is survivable. We can all feel these big feelings and it's okay.

Hunter: Exactly, yeah. And it is scary. It's brave work to do that. And sometimes, it is more skillful to have a glass of wine and watch six episodes of *Grey's Anatomy*,

like maybe that's more skillful sometimes, right? Like, there may be times where it's skillful to numb a little bit, right? But there are as we begin to build in and trust our capacity, to be able to hold things with loving awareness, our capacity grows, and it really becomes this gift for your family, for your friends, for anyone you touch, to be able to have this capacity to be with those those things becomes this This real anchor for for anyone you're in a close relationship with.

Debbie: So for parents whose kids are in that time in their life where they are having those really big tantrums, and, you know, I hear from parents all the time, and you probably do, too, who are, they're really in crisis mode, you know, they're dealing with really challenging behaviors. You know, when, when my son was younger, there were just months at a time where we just felt like we were walking on eggshells, and, you know, it was just living with an explosive person really was difficult as a parent, because you just felt the feelings were too big and you couldn't even get a moment's peace. So can you talk about your advice or thoughts for parents who are really kind of in the thick of it and how they can kind of apply what you're talking about to get a little piece or just even have the time to catch a breath, which often they don't even feel like they can do?

Hunter: Yeah, I think I think that one of the most important things to remember when we're in the thick of it is that, that your needs are just as important as your child's needs, and that you taking care of your needs, whether that's need for alone time, space, time with friends, sleep, all those things that we truly need as humans. Those needs are really some of the only things that are going to help you parent. Well, skillfully and many, especially moms feel guilty for having time away from our children, for arranging for care through, you know, by hook or by crook, and we shouldn't because it is not this the self. The idea that self care is selfish is really frustrating to me, because it's actually a responsibility. It's self care is not selfish, it is your responsibility. And it's our responsibility, you know, as adults to take a moment to step back and say, This is incredibly hard right now. This is so challenging, and I need help. I need space and time to myself, I need help, I need to call find means of support. And it's very frustrating for me to give this advice, because I know how unsupportive our society in general. And our resources as far as services in the United States particularly are on this. But I really want to also say that you don't have to do it all alone and trying to do it all alone is a recipe for crazy times, and unskillful actions and choices on your part if you're completely drained and depleted. So I think it's really, really, really very important for us to support each other in making space and time for ourselves beyond parenting as well. So that is my number one most important, I think piece of the answer to that question. And then when our kids are in those incredibly difficult times, and we're suffering through that, one of the things that we want to remember is that it is normal and it is safe for our kids to have big difficult feelings. One of the big things that often happens to us and happens in societies that when somebody has difficult feelings where we try to fix it or change it in some way, that may be your default mode or your partner's default mode. But it actually is much better to allow our kids to have these feelings. One of the best parenting moments I ever saw on social media was it was some celebrity and he had a toddler daughter, and he and his family members were just standing around, keeping her safe in a public place while she was on the ground, losing it

completely. And it was so skillful because there's nothing you can do in that moment when that when that child is completely losing it except for be there for them and keep them safe and show them through your as best you can if you're able to if you're not getting triggered yourself that this is okay that it's it's okay, it's safe. And I'm going to keep you safe and you're not wrong or bad for feeling those things. So those are a couple important pieces of that conversation for when it's that really difficult time.

Debbie: Yeah, no, that's, that's really helpful. And I love the priority of taking care of yourself. And I know from personal experience and from so many parents that I hear from that many of them just feel like they can't like that's not an option right now. And so that's part of this ongoing conversation is helping those parents recognize that it isn't an optional thing and nothing really is going to get better until we can kind of take that time for ourselves, whatever that is. And you know, I'm not talking about spa days. I'm talking about moments of peace or groundedness and getting that support. And I also like, you talk a lot about self compassion, I think you have a whole chapter about it in the book. And I think that's also such a critical piece of this. So many of us raising differently wired kids, you know, we go through this either period of regret where we realize maybe later than, than we think we should have that our child's a typical, and maybe we didn't, maybe we felt guilty about things that we did or ways we responded, because we thought it was bad behavior as opposed to just how this child is wired. And then there's that sense of, you know, this is my fault, or I'm a failure as a parent. Can you talk a little bit more about self compassion piece and why it's so important in showing up for our kids?

Hunter: Yeah, thank you. Absolutely. I mean, it's so foundational, and in research back then it really makes a lot of sense. So when I had lost it at my child and I was crying on the floor, and when I told myself, I was a terrible parent, that message to myself was not helpful. Go figure. It left me feeling debilitated and helpless. And it kept me in a downward spiral. And the research shows that that's true because it makes a lot of sense if you tell yourself, if you berate yourself if you're harsh to yourself as that inner voice is really mean and hard to yourself. And that's the voice you come back to when you are inevitably human and make a mistake, because we all will, then you're not going to want to step out of your comfort zone and take steps to grow and change that may be different and may be difficult, right? But if you can practice to offer yourself compassion, when you have those inevitable moments when you are human, and you mess up, because we all do So when I started to respond to myself like, Okay, this was terrible. This was hard. What can I learn from this? You know, this was tough. This is a tough moment. But I can begin to new and I can learn from this. And then when I started to take these challenges and see them as my teachers and say, What can I learn from this? How can I, how can I grow from this, that's when I started to really start to to make change.

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And then actually research shows this so Kristin Neff from University of Austin has all this wonderful research on self compassion, showing that self compassionate people actually are much more able to make changes and to take steps to grow and change old harmful habits. Because that voice that they come

back to is a voice of this was hard or what you might say to a good friend, right? And then with that softer landing, you're able to then Try again. Right, you're much more able to try again. So it really becomes a very foundational piece. And when if you're listening to this and you're like, oh my goodness, my inner voice, she is me, me, me. Don't worry, you're normal and you can change it. This is something that can change with practice. So what you practice grows stronger, and it is totally okay. If it feels really corny and weird and strange at first. That's totally fine. But if you can start to practice to recognize when you are inevitably human, as we all will be, and you inevitably make a mistake. And if you can then imagine, okay, well, help first. The first piece is that mindfulness, what are these thoughts that I'm having? What am I telling myself and start to bring this curiosity to what is the script that happens when I make a mistake and start to interrupt that and question that. And then offer yourself, you know what if my best friend was feeling this way, what would I say to her? How would I talk to her and then offer those words to yourself as if you're there's two parts of yourself in that moment. And then it's also really, really helpful to remember that you are not alone. We have what 7 billion people on the planet at any given time, there's guaranteed to be at least a million people feeling exactly how you're feeling. So if you tell yourself Oh, parents like Debbie never yell at their kids or parents like Hunter never yell at their kids, and it's just me and I'm a terrible person. Like that is not the message that's going to help you move forward more skillfully, but if you can remember, actually, yeah, Hunter still yells at her kids sometimes. And Debbie, she makes some mistakes. Everybody has had problems. You know, there are plenty of people at Right now who are suffering in this moment, the way I'm suffering because this is really hard, then that is also something that can help us come back, get back on our feet, but it really is about offering ourselves that soft landing. It will help us grow and change and also you really want to it, doing it for yourself isn't motivating enough. You can practice this and remember to practice this by doing it for your kids, because you want you need to know that who you are as a person is much more important than anything else as parents, and that inner voice over the at least 18 years of living with your kid is going to come out at some point and it's definitely it's certainly going to come out at some when I was young. My mom struggled. And I remember I remember seeing her in the mirrors just saying to herself Oh, I'm so ugly. And it was heartbreaking that I just watched this and But lo and behold What did I do when I was in Young 20s and late teens, I looked at myself in the mirror and I told myself I was so ugly, because I absorbed that inner voice from my mom, and so that your inner voice is going to come out sometime. And so maybe you can make that motivation to start to practice to change that for your kids. Because, you know, if you're like an orange, right, you're not going to squeeze an orange and get some beautiful pomegranate juice out of it. Like when you squeeze that orange, you're going to get orange juice, because what is inside is what will come out eventually. So we can start to shift and change that bit by bit.

Debbie: That's great, thank you for that. And I love that. Remembering the legacy that we're leaving for our kids and how their inner voice is going to sound like and that is really all the motivation we need, you know?

Hunter: Yeah.

- Debbie: Before we say goodbye, you know, we've been talking around your book. So you wrote this new book. It's called *Raising Good Humans: A Mindful Guide to Breaking the Cycle of Reactive Parenting and Raising Confident Kids*. So can you just tell us what your hope for the book is and what parents can expect when they read it.
- Hunter: I know it's funny when you write a book for parents, because parents are like, I don't have time to read a book. Well, so what this brings together it brings together mindfulness and self compassion, with skillful communication in the second half. And so this book brings together the inner workings of how to start to shift and change your self and grow yourself so that you can become a parent, as well as how to respond and talk to your kids so that you can get more cooperation over the long run. And what I'm hoping for in the book are a lot of practices and a lot of practical ways for you to make changes and tools to help kids with their strong emotions, how to sort of say the right things and I like to structure it as a guide, here's what to practice. Here is how to do this. I remember as I was in my intensive modes of studying and learning and going to trainings, I remember I was very inspired by certain speakers, but then I would say, how, how do you do this? What are the steps and so *Raising Good Humans* is about the how. It's very much a how-to book.
- Debbie: Absolutely, yeah, there are a lot of very practical tips and strategies in there, which again, especially when talking about mindfulness and these topics, I think it can be hard to get really in that practical, it can feel very idea based and so I appreciate everything that you share and their listeners. I'll have a link to that in the show notes page. So you can check it out. And then Hunter, where else can listeners connect with you?
- Hunter: Sure. I host the Mindful Mama Podcast which is anywhere podcasts are found and you can find me at mindfulmamamentor.com.
- Debbie: Awesome. Well Hunter, congratulations on the book and it's lovely and also the cover is beautiful. I just have to say I really love it. And thank you so much for just sharing your work with the world and with my audience. We're very lucky to have had you stop by today.
- Hunter: Thank you so much Debbie. I really appreciate and thank you for doing what you're doing with Tilt and all this it's so wonderful. So glad we got to connect.

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- Hunter Clarke-Fields' website Mindful Mentor Mama
- *Raising Good Humans: A Mindful Guide to Breaking the Cycle of Reactive Parenting and Raising Kind, Confident Kids* by Hunter Clarke-Fields
- Raising Good Humans book website
- Mindful Mama Mentor on Instagram
- Susan Stiffelman on Parenting Without Power Struggles (Tilt Parenting Podcast episode)
- Dr. Kristen Neff on self-compassion