



Episode #213

**Dr. Abi Gewirtz on How to Talk to Kids When
the World Feels Like a Scary Place**

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Debbie: Hello, Abi, welcome to the podcast.

Abi: Thank you, Debbie. It's a pleasure to be with you.

Debbie: Well, your book kind of landed in my lap at the perfect time. And, you know, your book is published through Workman as well, which is who did *Differently Wired*. And so I know your publicist, and she sent me a note, I was like, oh, my goodness, this is the book that all parents need right now. So I'm so excited to get into all of it. And before we do that, I always ask my guests to just take a minute to do their own introduction. I've already read your formal bio, but just take a few minutes to introduce yourself and what you do in the world.

Abi: Thank you, Debbie. Well, I am a mom of four. My kids are older. My youngest is 17 years old. My oldest is 26. It's hard to even say that. But like every other parent, my husband and I gave birth and no one had told us what to do. I happen to have a professional advantage which was I was a psychologist by training but that conferred no personal advantage of bringing up our kids. And, and it was thrilling it still is a thrilling and exciting ride and sometimes an impossible ride. And it's, it's really the best job I've ever had. And when, in about the mid 2000 to 2015, 2016, I began to notice referrals to my private practice increase, specifically, with anxious children and very anxious parents. I began to sort of look around and think about the state of the world and I was doing more international work as well. And I looked at the numbers and I just saw skyrocketing increases in anxiety and depression among kids in teen suicides. And at the same time, the world seemed to be undergoing a really high degree of tumult and you'll recall 2016 very divisive time at home and abroad, politically with huge numbers of migrants migration at a scale not seen since World War Two, horrendous school shootings in the beginning of lockdown drills in school and then increasing awareness of climate change and that existential threat. And I began to think, my goodness, my kids were out of diapers, but by then they were all beginning to be in their teens. And I just wondered how it would be to be a parent of a young child then. And that's when I decided to write the book in late 2016. So it wasn't a book that I started thinking about just when the pandemic hit, but boy, it was hard to think that things could unravel more and they have. So I'm very glad that I could write this book.

Debbie: Yeah, again, it's so practical and covers so many issues and including the pandemic. You know, the book as we're recording, this comes out tomorrow. So I love that you were able to address that because I think this year has been a rough one. I know it's been a rough one. And it's been very confronting and really challenging parents to kind of up their game. And we need tools about helping us to talk to our kids about these things. So I wanted to actually just start by asking you about our role as parents in shaping our kids point of view. So, you know, you talk about this in the book, we are kind of their first exposure to difficult subjects, and the way that we talk to them is going to shape the way that they think about all the issues that are so important and divisive. And so I'm

wondering if you could talk a little bit about the importance of us having these conversations and are there right versus wrong conversations to have.

Abi: Right. I would argue that parents are their kids first and best teachers and we knowingly intentionally or unknowingly unintentionally shape the way our children not only think about things, but really engage with the world. Most of us do it unintentionally. I think parenting can be so overwhelming that just making your way through them every day is a significant accomplishment. To be intentional about the values that you want to transmit to your kids is another level still, and I certainly, as a parent of young children, just focused on survival. I mean, I had four kids under the age of nine. And it was just organizationally, it was a huge struggle with two working parents, for young children and just juggling everything. So in the book, I urge parents to do a simple exercise that helps them think about what it is they want to transmit to their children. And it's just a really brief exercise that encourages parents to think into the future and think about how their children talk about What the parents have taught them? So how do we teach our kids? Well, we teach our kids through 10s of thousands of conversations that we have every day that mostly we don't plan that sometimes are sparked by our children bringing something or by our children's reactions to something, and sometimes they're sparked by us. And they occur over the dinner table, or they occur when we're helping them with their bedtime or morning routine. And sometimes they're at the bus stop. And sometimes they're in the car and they're in lots of different places. And I argue that most conversations, the conversations that parents would want to have, because if we think about how we want our children to learn about the world, wouldn't we rather they learn it from us than from the school bus, or their friends, or their friend's parents or their teachers or other adults and certainly their huge contributions that other adults can make to our children's growing up, but If it's an important issue, I would argue that it's really something that we parents want to talk about with our kids, preferably first.

Debbie: So it sounds like being kind of ready to seize on moments. So what I heard you say is that many of these are unplanned, which I agree with, I think I used to think that I would have these, oh, we're gonna have this talk right now. And that this very kind of Brady moment where we'll sit down or an after school special moment, and let's discuss this, but really, it is about being prepared when things come up, right, a little mention of something that was said at school or our child brings something up at the dinner table, like you said, is that right?

Abi: That's exactly right. Often, it's not our dance to lead. It's our dance to follow or to match our child's footsteps. And there's, we want to be really careful not to be intrusive in the way that we have conversations with our kids and often parents find that when they are available, when their children want to talk, that's a much more powerful opportunity for a conversation than when we choose. And we try to force the issue.

Debbie: And also, again, that you said, this is many, many, many, many conversations. It's not a once and done kind of thing. This is ongoing, especially, you know, the audience for this podcast, which is differently wired kids who, often whether

they're gifted or they are very strong willed or maybe a little less flexible in their thinking, they often require a lot more evidence to, to think about things than your neurotypical kid.

Abi: That's right. That's right. And in the book, what I urge parents to do, and I imagine that many of the listeners of your podcast do far more than this, but I urge parents just to take 10 minutes a day to have an essential conversation and it doesn't even know it mostly might not even feel like an essential conversation. But the reason I suggest that is because I was shocked when I looked at the results of the American Time Use Survey which asked parents and people how they use their time. And one category of time use is talking with children. And what I found that was so shocking was that 80% of parents didn't even list talking with children as a category by which they spent their time and I'm sure that's not because they don't say anything to their children. But it's because mostly, you're talking with your kids when you're trying to get them to eat or to school or to, you know, get ready for bed and things like that. But the good news was that of the 20% who did report, time spent talking with their children, they reported more than half an hour a day. However, on average, that comes to three minutes a day across the population of parents. And I think if everyone took just 10 minutes for an essential conversation, maybe not when you're doing something else, primarily, we might, we might find that we're getting better at We're more able to respond to our kids, strong negative emotions or, you know, intense urgency around an issue that's causing them distress, for example.

Debbie: Yeah, that makes total sense. Well, I want to get into some of the essential conversations, especially bearing in mind what's happening in the world as we're recording this. And before we do that, could you spend a few minutes talking about what our goals are and having these conversations, maybe thinking about the different ages of our kids? So what would our goal be in having conversations about difficult subjects with our younger kids versus our teenagers?

Abi: So our ultimate goal would be to help our children ultimately, maybe this is a mission and not a goal, but ultimately, to help our children grow up to be engaged, confident, and compassionate human beings. And of course, that's a massive, really a big goal and of course, that can be broken down into multiple small steps. But the reason I mention it is because the small steps that we need to take in every individual essential conversation, that's the term I use for these conversations about difficult issues like climate change, or violence or social justice, or divided society is that we need to be able to understand how this issue affects us parents. Because what we want to do in this conversation is listen to our children and our children's concerns and not have them be clouded by our own worries, and our own preoccupations with the issue. So the first thing we need to be able to do is regulate respond to our own emotions about the issue so that when we're sitting with our kids, we're truly able to hear them, to listen to them to hear what are truly their concerns, which aren't necessarily the things that we think they're worried about, and then to respond to those concerns in a way that empowers our kids. So for example, using our problem solving process whereby, together we would brainstorm solutions for whatever the issue is, whether it is your child's worry about going back to school, for example, or

whether your trials upset that he or she can't see his or her grandma, because of COVID-19. And the idea would be then to have this conversation in a way in a place that enables you to really frame it very positively and have your child and end up feeling that there are things that they can do, rather than feeling overwhelmed and helpless, which is so much so easy for us to feel in the wake of these huge issues.

Debbie: Yeah, I wanted to ask you about that. I was just thinking about a conversation we had with, I have a 15 year old son and talking the other night just about so much of what's going on and we've been going out to protests and you know, living in New York City, which has been very shut down more than many cities from COVID-19. And it's just felt like a really hard time. And, and, you know, really it was about creating a space for him, he really just wanted to share the hard things, you know, the hard feelings and how rough this is. And like I didn't try to put a positive spin on it too, because it didn't feel appropriate. I really just was empathizing in that moment. So is there you know, especially when you're dealing with older kids who may be more, you know, they're just, it's maybe having more existential crises and thinking about these things and trying to make sense of it all. Is there a desire also to just hold the space for them and to kind of feel neutral or engaged without necessarily trying to solve some of these problems we know that we can solve right?

Abi: Well, I'm so glad you said the words positive spin because I want to really make sure that what I was saying before was not that we need to put a positive spin on scary things at all. So I'm really glad you gave me the wants to clarify that actually what you just said in terms of holding the emotions is really important. And so when we listen to our kids, what's most important is to acknowledge, identify and validate how they're feeling. That's most important why? Because we want our children to understand and learn that their emotions are important signals. So by saying to our child, you know when and I don't know whether you want to give a concrete example with your 15 year old we can use that but when a child for example says I'm really scared to go outside, because I'm worried I might get Coronavirus, a parent, the opportunity to focus on the way that child's feeling allows a parent to really validate that child so I might say to that child if it was my child, and when you feel scared, I can see that you have your eyes are wide. And you look scared in your face and I wonder how you feel scared in your body? Does your stomach have butterflies? Because I know when I get scared, I feel butterflies in my stomach. How about you? And I can see you look like you're kind of hot. Um, so sometimes people's hands get sweaty when they get scared. And that gives the opportunity for your child to connect their feelings with the sensations they have inside their bodies and later with the way they're thinking, I'm scared. And I don't want to go outside because I'm scared that I might get coronavirus. So that's the first real step when you listen to your child to be able to identify and validate their emotions, and the problem solving and actually, thank you also for raising the question about whether we need to problem solve all the time, not a tool. There are quite a few examples in the book where there's no problem solving. However, I do think it is important to end a conversation about a scary event with hope. Because when we get overwhelmed and we feel powerless, we can easily get sucked into a cycle of just feeling worse and worse,

and feel so helpless. And the reality is that there are many things that we can't do anything about. But there are there's always something that we can do. And I think the power of instilling hope is that you show that wherever you are, there is always something however small it is that can be done. But the tricky thing is making a space for the emotions and not doing what as parents, I think often we have the instinct to do which is saying, it's not as bad as you think. So it's a tricky balance, Debbie. And does it look different for different ages 100%. So teenagers can tolerate more of this, this is really tricky and they understand and you can't pull the wool over. There are highs, they want to talk about existential questions and they can tolerate it. They can understand more. But whereas with three to five year olds, you're going to have a much more concrete conversation. We can't see grandma, because she is one of many people. So some people who really can get very sick from the corona virus and so we don't want to give it to her by accident. But let's think about some of the things that we can do for grandma. Right? So you've had this conversation, whereas with 15 year olds, of course, it's far more nuanced and complex.

Debbie: Can you connect the dots for me? You talked about connecting the feelings to what's happening in a child's body and helping them recognize that you know, are your hands sweaty or you feeling hot? You talk about why that's such an important thing to do.

Abi: So as parents, and it's not just parents, it's the world. I mean, we, you know, nevermind, we don't get an education and parenting, we don't have to pass any test to become a parent, we don't have to get any license, I have to renew my dog license every year. But I never, I never got a license to be a parent, but also, in our society, we rarely talk about feelings. I think in schools, they're doing a better job with social and emotional learning curricula. But it's not something I think comes naturally to most of us. And so we tend to deal with emotions in a variety of different ways often, depending on, you know, who we are and how we've been brought up. So, we certainly have parents who really talk about kids' feelings and, and, but we also have parents who, unknowingly you know, they say, they're there, don't worry, there's nothing to worry about. And the message that gives the kids is, my emotions aren't important signals, or their things to be sort of brushed under the carpet. And what we know from the work of John Gottman and Lynn Katz and other really wonderful researchers, Nancy Eisenberg, is that when we as parents ignore or dismiss or worse punish emotions, you know, when we say, Don't cry, big boys don't cry. And those kinds of things, we send messages to kids that cause them to try and bury their emotions. And that puts them at higher risk for things like depression and feelings of depression and anxiety and things like that. So emotions are really important to pay attention to.

Debbie: Yeah, I guess it just builds their emotional IQ, which is something as you said, we, we all need. So in your book, you have these three questions that parents should ask themselves when they're looking to have a difficult conversation. I loved those and I as a way to kind of get more into some of the conversations. Could you walk us through those thinking about what's happening right now with us A lot of parents are wondering how do I talk to my child about what's happening about George Floyd's murder about what's happening with the protests around

the United States? Could you maybe use that as an example, as you walk us through these three questions?

Abi:

So, thanks, Debbie, for pointing that out. Really, I sort of suggest that parents ask themselves three questions before they have this essential conversation with their children. And you asked me to give the example of the horrendous killing of George Floyd. So the first question you want to ask yourself is, when's the best time to discuss this and we don't always get an opportunity to choose the best time. But one of the things we need to think about is when is the time for me to discuss this, where I won't be distracted and maybe even more important, I will be at my calmest, I will have had an opportunity to think this through myself. So, you know, often I'll suggest to parents when there's a time after the rush of the day, maybe after dinner, you've cleared away the dishes. There's a little bit of a lull before bed, but it's not too much. But it's not right before bed so that your child doesn't go to bed thinking about this, things like that. The second question is, how can I put my feelings aside to make this about my child's needs and not my own? And that really gets at what I was talking about before in terms of thinking about what can I do to address my own concerns about this issue. So take some time, whether it's a walk, a few deep breaths, run yourself a bath, just take a little bit of time to reflect on how you yourself are feeling. And I find that when we have a chance to reflect on how we're feeling even if we don't spend a long, long time on it, we're much more able to be in the moment and focus on our children rather than having our own preoccupied thoughts rushing through our heads. And then the third one is, what and how much information should I share with my child and Debbie, we've been talking about kids of different ages. And of course, how old your child is, and also who your child is, is going to determine this. So in general, the older your child is, the more they understand, the more they will likely have already heard. Whether it's from media, from their phone, from other children, but thinking also about your child's needs. Is your child, a more anxious child or a less anxious child, a child who can deal more with ambiguity or less with ambiguity? How engaged is your child? How much will your child care about this? And so that those are all things that you might want to think about. So for example, with the murder of George Floyd with a teenager, you would probably assume that your child's heard a lot, certainly by now. But teens really like to engage in, are able to engage in discussion about quite complicated issues. You are going to talk about discrimination and racism, maybe and you're going to talk maybe about police brutality and then alternatives. You know, what are alternative ways with the votes? The vote most recently came out of Minneapolis city council last night about dismantling the police department. What does all that mean? What is peaceful protesting and why are we seeing riots and looting and things like that? Those are all things, discussions you can have with a teen but to have those kinds of discussions with your very young child runs the risk of really, you know, disturbing them and also introducing ideas that they really can't understand. So for example, a five year old child doesn't understand that death is irreversible, which means that when people die, they're not coming back. That's a complicated concept as any adult who's lost someone close to them, and then, and then subsequently, you know, seen them or done a double take in the street when they thought that they were sort of hearing the voice or seeing the person, it's a very difficult thing for us to

understand. And so that's just one example of something that three to five year olds really have a hard time understanding. So when you have a very young child, you want to really tailor your explanations for them to be very, very concrete. So it could be for example, a bad thing happens and somebody got hurt when he wasn't doing anything wrong. And with a very young child, you want to really hear your child. I mean, with every age child, you want to hear concerns, but with a very young child, often kids just want to know whether they're going to be safe. And so helping them to understand how that relates to their own safety is very important. And in the book, actually, I have a conversation that was really guided by my dear friend and colleague, Dr. Bravada Garrett-Akinsanya of parents of African American parents of an eight year old boy, in a situation where a black boy was, I believe, hurt by the police, and how they discuss that with their child in relation to their child's own worries about safety, could provide some preliminary guidelines for parents.

Debbie: Yeah, I appreciated that. That whole section part two of your book is essential conversations and you've got chapters on talking about violence, talking about natural disasters and climate change. The perils of technology, talking about social justice, talking about our divided society. So you really do give some nice frameworks for conversations, including the example you just gave of having the talk, which I know is something that families of color have to have the talk with their kids, that white families don't necessarily have that same talk. And I think it's really helpful to, for all families, for families with white kids to have a talk about the talk with their kids so that white kids are aware of the plight of their friends who are black and brown.

Abi: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Debbie: So can you talk with us about some of those other essential conversations that I just mentioned, I'm curious to know, how you researched those or how you kind of honed in on what you thought were the most important conversations that we need to have with our kids.

Abi: I focus on five classes of what I call scary world events. And they really emerge from both my research I've, I've, I've spent almost all my career studying children's exposure to violence and what parents can do to buffer children from these kinds of scary events. And in that chapter about violence, I, I talk a lot about violence in schools, but not only about violence in schools, also racial violence and prejudice against religious minorities. Obviously, lockdown drills have become a huge issue, and it's terrifying. And I've spent a lot of time talking with school personnel about lockdown drills. And so I'm actually in my first meeting with my editor. She told me that they had just received that their son was in kindergarten. And they had just received an email the day before from the school, telling the parents that the first lockdown drill was going to be held the next day. And the editor said to me, What do I tell my child? And that became the basis for the conversation about lockdown drills. So in addition to violence, of course, climate change has become a huge topic of concern for parents for everybody, really. And so I talk about some examples related to climate change both in terms of climate change as an you know, as sometimes a hot button topic

of discussion for teens, for example, and for people of different different political persuasions, but also the very reality the very harsh reality of the huge increase in extreme weather events here in the United States, whether that's fires or tornadoes. or severe storms, things like that. Then there's the SU of social media and never right and even when I was my oldest, were young. Have we ever been exposed to such intense 24-7 news coverage and the fact that now and I'm sure it's younger than 10. But at least at last look, the average age at which an American child got a cell phone was 10 years old. And something like, you know, a huge minority of nine year olds have cell phones and so kids are seeing things on their cell phones from you know, weather warnings to amber alerts that may or may not be during the school day or certainly if they're, if they're if their schools are looking away their cell phones to and from the school on the bus or even after school in their bedrooms that parents don't have a chance to filter at least at first glance, but also with seeing more and more horrendous incidents of things like social media because And as parents, whereas we can monitor our children's activities when we can see them, we often do not see what happens online or on social media, certainly in instances like Snapchat, where the messages disappear really quickly. So that was the rationale for the social media, the social media chapter. And then social justice. I think it's pretty, pretty self evident, sadly, now in this era of the murder of George Floyd, but divided society, I think, over the last, you know, 10 years or so, but certainly, intensely over the last five years, we have seen such divisions in society, such hot issues, people not being able to sit around the Thanksgiving table and talk about much because of the divisions even within families around issues like immigration, or the you know, political issues like climate Things like that. So that that was the rationale.

Debbie: I mean, it's very thorough, again, I just appreciated the range of conversations that you have in their eye and that you, you share a full conversation, which is, that's how I learn is by really observing and seeing how this might play out. So I just really appreciated the language. And it was kind of like eavesdropping on some conversations, but it's just great tools and language that I think all parents could use, and just get us thinking about, okay, how can I be more prepared for when this comes up and be more proactive?

Abi: Well, that was really the goal -- to give parents a full script, but I think and I hope this will mean that parents won't take it to heart that that but that you know that this is supposed to be a play by play, you know, a word by word script, not a tool. I mean, the idea for the full scripts was simply to give examples that are Apply principles for parents rather than parents feeling that they're going to fall down if they can't do it exactly as it's written. So hopefully, the intent comes across that the goal here is to apply principles rather than that word for word.

Debbie: Right. So I want to ask one more question. I'm just wondering, what do parents often get wrong? When talking about these things? You know, are there things that you've seen mistakes, common mistakes that parents make when looking to discuss sensitive or difficult topics?

Abi: That is such a great question. The two mistakes that parents most frequently make and I'm a parent, too, are really driven by our desire to protect our young,

which is sort of what we all have to do, right? But what that translates into, especially when we feel passionate or worried ourselves or preoccupied with an issue, whether it's, we saw a post or a picture of a child on Instagram that is that we worry in 10 years time when he or she wants to become a politician, we'll bring them down. Or whether we are just so distraught by something that's happening, or we're so sad about our own child's distress about something that happened to them with friends or in school, that what we do is we get caught up, and our distress at our child's distress or our own distress at what's happening in the world completely clouds, our ability to do what ultimately if we were able to take a step back, we would value is the right thing to do. So I think these are unintentional mistakes that parents make and I give a lot of examples in the book. And believe me, I've been guilty of them, as well. I think what happened is where, you know, my dear, dear colleague used to say, families are the crucibles for strong emotion. And what happens is there's no place other than our family where our emotions get so caught up. And sometimes it's so hard to just step away, or just recognize it. Before we say the very thing that we didn't mean to say,

Debbie: Well, I imagine that just like when we screw up with our kids, that we can go back and repair that we can do the same thing, right? Just if we've said it wrong one time, we always can go back and have a do over and re engage in that conversation in a different way.

Abi: Thank goodness for that, right? And yes, I mean, I think your message is implicit, and I hope it's implicit in the book as well is forgiveness right? Let's not be perfect. Let's also instill in both ourselves and I talked about gratitude, but I think that's also related to the ability for us and our children to forgive each other.

Debbie: Yeah, such an important lesson right now. So before we say goodbye I would love if you could share where people can reach you where they can learn more about your book and then if there is I'm just putting you on the spot is there kind of one last takeaway one thing you really hope people listening to this podcast will leave with?

Abi: Thank you, Debbie. So first of all people can reach me on my website, which is www.abigailgewirtz.com and you can also find a sample conversation about Coronavirus there. Um, I think there's one last nugget I'd want parents to think about. It is what you messages about the world and about the things that are going on now, on messages that you want your child to take in. And when you think about that, that will set you on the path to being more intentional about the kinds of conversations you have and go have those conversations more and more and more over and over again and try and have one a day. And don't feel that you have to predetermine the topic and don't feel that you have to set the time. Follow your child, pick up on what they're saying, and grab that as your opportunity.

Debbie: That's great. Thank you. Thank you so much, and listeners, I will have links to Abigail's book on the website, When the World Feels Like a Scary Place: Essential Conversations for Anxious Parents and Worried Kids. It's really wonderful. And

again, just so needed right now. So I really appreciate you taking the time to share with us today and have this conversation.

Abi: Thank you, Debbie. It's really been a pleasure.

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- Dr. Abigail Gewirtz's website
- *When the World Feels Like a Scary Place: Essential Conversations for Anxious Parents and Worried Kids* by Dr. Abigail Gewirtz:
- Dr. John Gottman / The Gottman Institute
- Dr. Lynn Katz
- Dr. Nancy Eisenberg
- Dr. Bravada Garrett-Akinsanya