



Episode #211

**Parenting Scripts for Stressed Out Moments
with Kids, with Dr. Adele Lafrance**

June 2, 2020

Debbie: Hey, Adele, welcome to the podcast.

Adele: Thank you so much for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

Debbie: My pleasure to have you. I'm so glad that you reached out to me and you were kind enough to share your book with me, which I can't wait to get into because I just absolutely loved it. But can you take a few minutes before we do that? just introduce yourself to us. Tell us a little bit about what you do in the world?

Adele: Of course. Yeah, so I'm a psychologist. I'm originally from Canada, and now living and working, practicing in the United States. I have a history of researching emotion and family based healing for a number of years. So yeah, this book is basically the fruit of many years of putting together tips, tricks, scripts for parents who I've met in different contexts too, we're looking for some concrete strategies to kind of get through the toughest moments at home.

Debbie: So you just spoke my audience's language concrete strategies to get through the toughest moments in our home. Yes, that's music to our ears, which again, would when I got your email, and then I had a chance to look at your book, I read it very quickly. I get a lot of books. But I really flew through your book. And I wrote right back to you. And I said, we need to bring you on the show. So your new book is called *What to Say to Kids When Nothing Seems to Work*. So you know, you just said you've been collecting these tips and tricks and scripts, tell us a little bit more about why you really wanted to get this book out there. And then what you do in the book.

Adele: Thanks. So I've worked as a psychologist for over a decade now and mostly with parents of kids who were struggling in one way or another. So I've worked in the school system and pediatric rehab and hospital settings, mental health and I would try to distill the best of the neuroscience that I was learning into simple tricks. So that parents could bring the more calm to the home environment. And over and over again, they would say that they'd wish someone had taught them these strategies long before or even in the actual sessions, they would ask me like, write down what you just said, Can you just write that down? And so we thought, okay, we actually need to write a book with all of these things that we write down so often for parents of need, because they really work. And they don't work all the time. They don't bring the situation from total chaos, total calm. But many, many, many times parents have said, Wow, this was different, or Wow, we avoided some unnecessary suffering at the very least. So in honor of those parents, step parents, foster parents, all the people that we've been working with over the years, you know, we wanted to bring the best of what we've learned to the everyday family, including you know what to say to kids when nothing seems to work?

Debbie: Well, I think it makes sense that the parents you're working with had that reaction. And I used to say that to people all the time, like, Okay, tell me exactly

what to say, because it is not knowing, right, it's not having a plan and then being in these situations, when we have our worst parenting moments, at least I do, you know, if I'm not prepared, I let my emotions run the show. And I say things I regret, I make parenting decisions that are, you know, ramping my family up to a higher level. And so I that's what I think is so powerful about this work. So one of the things that I loved about your book is that, first of all, it's a very organized approach. As someone who's written a number of books on how to do things and trying to convey what could be complicated concepts to people in a way they can get it. I thought your book did such an excellent job of breaking down an approach that we can apply really to any situation. So you know, you talk about presenting the situation then there's the knee jerk reaction. That we have then you know, you talk about building a bridge, putting it into words. And then you offer these practical considerations, you highlight pitfalls, and then you encourage the parent to reflect. So I just those are the things you do for every situation. What I would love for you to do, if you're up for it is just walk us through that approach in a common scenario that listeners in my podcast would be familiar with. Would you be up for doing that?

Adele: Absolutely. Yeah. With pleasure. I can use one that I've used very frequently, both in the school system in my clinical practice, but also at home. So one of my kiddos has a learning disability. And so you know, when I write some of this content, it's not just as a professional, it's also as a step parent. And one of the scenarios that I really like to talk about is when a kid comes home and says, I hate reading or I suck at reading Or you know, something along the lines of homework. But if we use reading specifically, we can move through those different steps if you think that's a good example to start off with,

Debbie: Yeah, sure. Sounds great.

Adele: Okay, so let's imagine a child who is differently wired comes to us and says, I hate reading. We want to build a bridge. So building a bridge is a mental exercise, it can take half a second, it can take 30 seconds. But the idea is to imagine the child in their world saying these words, where is it coming from? When I put myself into the world of a child who's in elementary school or in high school, and they are differently wired and they say, I hate reading. What I've learned, what I've come to hear is, this is really hard for me. It's very frustrating. It doesn't give me pleasure, confidence, self esteem. I wish I would be doing other things. And so from there, building a bridge, we would then want to put it into words. And some parents and caregivers, even professionals are hesitant to put into words, some of those ideas in case it reinforces in the child a dislike for reading or academics in general. So that's one of the kind of myths that is still alive and well in our culture that if we put things into words, it can make them true, make them worse, or make them sticky. But what the neuroscience shows is that if you put into words your child's experience, and you do it with sincerity, you know with heart by speaking what's going on inside it actually calms the emotional center of the brain. So the idea of feeling heard works because the brain registers that experience that says, okay, we can cool our jets now we can calm down the environment hears us. So we've built a bridge. We Imagine why it is that a kid might not want to read, we put it into words. And we use a pretty specific script

to help parents get their feet under them. So it would sound like this, I can understand why you would not want to read today because reading is not one of your favorite things to do. And because some of those books just don't reflect your interests. And because I know that other kids are reading at a level 24 and you're reading at a level 16 right now, and that probably doesn't feel good either. Just making those three statements can do wonders to bring down the activation in the limbic system and the emotional center of the brain. It's almost bizarre at times to see the effect and so what's happening is when you're putting into words, their experience, the hypothalamus, releases calming neuro chemicals, and those calming neuro chemicals go to the emotional center of the brain, and they, they put out the fire a little bit. And by doing that, what happens is there's more flexibility now, for them to hear your perspective, or for them to be guided by you in a way that is redirecting them back to the task, or problem solving or even accepting your practical support. So you built a bridge you, you kind of thought like, Okay, this is what might be going on for my kid in a way that, you know, puts him in a good light. We're putting into words in a way that I just described. And now we can get practical. Now we can offer reassurance, now we can offer togetherness, belief in the child's capacity, or practical support, Here, let me help you get started. Why don't you read one page, I'll read the other. So when we put it into words, first we create that brain flexibility, which makes the child more amenable to taking in our emotional support to accepting our practical support.

Debbie: So let me ask you a question then do you plan this in advance? Like, because I imagine, knowing what to say, on the fly, you know, can be difficult. So do you recommend that parents get a sense of the typical scenario where, you know, they may not know what to say or that that end in conflict and kind of work this all out ahead of time?

Adele: Well, there are a couple of ways of approaching it. I love that question because this is a new language. When we look at the way we're conditioned in at least North American culture, for sure in other countries as well, but when a child is upset, we're conditioned to either offer reassurance, redirection or problem solving as a first step. And so naturally, things are going to escalate and blow up in those toughest moments. Because when you lead with reassurance, or distraction or redirection or problem solving, when emotions are high, you can actually make things worse. So, to answer your question, I would see it in three different ways. One is to just familiarize yourself with the scripts in a way that gives you permission to try something different. You know, just reading them a couple times, can create that kind of flexibility for the next time. The other tip that I would suggest, is thinking about this little catchphrase that we use to move from *but* to *because*. Oftentimes, when our kids are struggling, and we want to help them to feel better, either because we feel their pain, or we have to get out the door, for example, we might lean into their emotion a little bit and say, like, Oh, I can understand why you wouldn't want to put those socks on, but you have to. So what I found is that parents have really appreciated this little catchphrase moving from *but* to *because* I can understand why you wouldn't want to put those socks on because they make your toes feel funny along the line. And because you really wanted to wear the pink ones. Because you don't like the

ankle length. And so moving from but to because we'll create more flexibility in the moment, which then will make your child more amenable to then getting in the car, you know, putting the shoes on going outside. The third way is practicing writing out sample scripts a couple times. And then the best way actually is getting it wrong. And circling back to give it another try. And you mentioned that earlier when you talked about, you know, parenting moments that you may not be proud of. We actually dedicate a whole chapter of the book to that because, first of all, we don't want parents to have to live with those memories. And having said x, you know, that was like not the best in that situation. No one needs to live with that. And those situations can be fixed so easily. And so we'll say to parents. okay if you have a moment where things don't go so well go back to the structure, work it out on your own. And then you can go back to your child the same day, the next day, a week later, years later and say, Hey, remember when you said this? And I said this, I've been thinking about it. What I could have said was, geez I can imagine why you wouldn't want to go back to school tomorrow. Because one because two because three, I believe in you, I'm here with you. Let me help you develop a plan. So that doover, it can be just as powerful as getting it right the first time because you're telling your kid I really care about being my best parent self for you. I really care so much about that interaction that I thought about it. I went back to it. And here I am, you know, trying again, and that means you can too.

Debbie: That's great. I love that. And it seems like that word because I've never heard that before I've heard changing, but to and, but I really love the but to because, because we are validating their experience. And that's like, every time we do that, it really does help their defenses just come down and down and down. Right?

Adele: Exactly. I couldn't have put it better myself and, and what we're doing is a form of validation. I do hesitate to use the word validation, not because it's not 100% accurate, though. Because there are so many different definitions out there of what it means to validate that in the early days when I was working with parents, and I'd say like, Oh, yeah, try validating their feelings. They would say to me, oh, I do that all the time. And I was really confused because I thought, gosh, it goes against our culture to do this, you know, in such an ingrained way. It's kind of surprising to hear that. And then what I learned was that they were saying something like, I can understand you'd feel sad, but Or they were cheerleading. And so I actually did a Google search recently on the word validation. And I looked at Google Images, and there's an image where a woman says to a man, the parking lot attendant, and he says, will you validate my parking, and she says, You did a great job evenly spaced at just the right angle. And I thought, okay, yes, this word. No wonder It's so confusing for people. Because culturally, we have so many different definitions. And so for me, putting into words is exactly what you said. It's a way to validate your child. And the sentence that I use to kind of help parents to get there in the way that we're talking about is, I can imagine why you might feel, think, want X, because one, because two, because three.

Debbie: Yeah, that's great. So I actually wonder if you could give us a few other scripts. So I love the example that you used about breathing and I think that will totally

resonate with a lot of our listeners. Some of the other scenarios, you know, as we're recording this, we're in the middle of this COVID-19 pandemic. And so there's all kinds of stuff going on right now. Reluctance to do schoolwork, not wanting to do homework, not wanting to attend or pay attention to the online classes. So maybe even just taking one of those, you know, I don't see what the point if I'm, this is me being a kid. I don't see what the point of doing school is. Anyway, I don't I never I didn't mean like school before. And now I've got to do it online. So I just don't want to do it. Could you give us a script for that sort of scenario?

Adele: Absolutely. In fact, I just communicated a script like that at home in the last seven days, because school just started again. And so it was so first, you know, we want to build the bridge. So put ourselves in our child's shoes, think of them in their best light. Why they might be saying this. Well, you know, for some people It's hard enough to pay attention in a classroom. Never mind that an online environment where you don't have all the structures in place to support you. So that's one thing. The second thing is that there are a lot of potentially fun distractions at home, you know, you have your toys, your games, or maybe your siblings, maybe when your parents are at home. And so, you know, I could imagine that the online learning environment would be especially difficult. So that's my first step is just really, what's the best version of what's fueling this response for my kid. And then the next step would be putting into words and I would say, with a little energy, a little bit of energy, because energy can actually help the depth to which the other person feels validated. And so I might say, you know what, I do not blame you for not wanting to do that online schooling. I could imagine that there are 300 things that you would rather do at home. And I bet it is hard to focus when you have to have your video off and you have to be muted and you just have to sit there and listen for such a long time, and you probably just would rather hang out with us and play cards or do some family time together. And sweetheart, I totally believe that you can get through this. It will not be forever. I hear your pain. And so why don't we go into your bedroom and sort out a nice little nook that will at least make it easier for you to get through these next couple of hours of online schooling.

Debbie: That's good. I hope your listeners were taking notes on that. Yeah. So you go through this again, I love this. I can imagine that that's just great language and really helping them feel heard, even if they haven't expressed but kind of building that bridge. And then I love the transition then to problem solving. It's very gentle and more of like more coaching, right, more helpful than directive.

Adele: Exactly, yeah. And it's a balance of both. So You know, some parents are really, really good at the validating piece, but they struggle a bit more with the limit setting or the problem solving. Other parents are excellent problem solvers and re directors. But the validating piece is a bit more of a challenge, you know, because of the way they were raised or what they believe about emotion processing whatnot. And so this process keeps us all in a structured path towards creating the balance between validation, emotional support, and getting things done with practical support. So those three pieces really do work together. One of the analogies that I use is like an elevator. So if your kid's elevator

emotion, elevator frustration, elevator is on the fifth, sixth, seventh floor, and you're trying to reach them with reason or problem solving or logic. That's the kind of stuff that can happen on the main floor. Well, they're on the sixth or seventh floor, so it's not going to work right. It's like throwing a tennis ball against a brick wall. There's no opening yet. And so those because statements help bring the elevator down to the main floor, so that then you can engage with your child in a more productive manner, so to speak.

Debbie: That's a great visual. So it sounds like that logical framework when they're not ready is a pitfall. I know that within each section, you talk about potential pitfalls, what are some of the other more common things that get in our way from executing this in a way that would be most productive?

Adele: Well, I think that, in my experience, both personally as a parent, but also professionally, we are so deeply conditioned to lean away from emotional pain, that even after over a decade of doing emotion focused research and practice, I still find myself wanting to reassure my child's pain. Like it's so amazing to watch it happen inside of myself, that it's no wonder, no wonder we are a culture that first tries to reassure people's pain. The problem though, is that if someone's feeling sad, mad or scared, and we lead with reassurance, it can actually deepen their sadness, their anger or their fear. And so I can just demonstrate it for a second, okay? So if you put yourself in a steel resistance, because resistance is something that is frustrating for everyone to deal with. So if you put yourself in a resistant body, like I don't want to do this, okay? I don't want to, you know, put the dishes away. And I'll respond to you in a way that's perhaps more typical, and you just tell me what happens in your body below the neck, okay? So put yourself in that resistant body. Okay, sweetheart, you have to do the dishes. It's your turn and everyone is contributing, you know, in this household and so I think just want you to get it done. It won't take well. So do you feel that contraction that might happen?

Debbie: And yeah, tension.

Adele: Yeah, exactly. Okay, so now put your body in that same resistant state, like tight. And now see what happens in your body, below the neck once more. I do not blame you for not wanting to put away those dishes. It probably does not feel fair after everything else you've done today. And I can imagine that you're just really looking for a break to connect with your friends on social media or even just read that book you really want it to read. So do you notice in your body what happens?

Debbie: Yeah, just started breathing and yeah, totally relaxed and yeah, very different.

Adele: And so one of the things is that in our culture, the way we have taught to respond to resistance or emotional pain, actually can increase that resistance or that emotional pain. So that's probably going to be our biggest pitfall is just the way we have been conditioned and that's no one's fault. There's no one to blame, you know, for that, in fact, one of the greatest sources of influence for that kind of pattern is world war two in the aftermath of World War Two, when we really

needed to suppress our emotions, either on the front line, or in times of crisis to get through to survive. But the problem is when those events were over, when the crisis was over, as a culture, no one was there to say like, okay, now that you've suppressed your sadness, anger, shame, you know, to get through this crisis. Now, we have to attend to these feelings again, so that we don't end up increasing our rates of PTSD or substance misuse or all these other problems that came post World War Two. And so this military mentality of emotion processing, bled into the parenting context. And it's still it's still here today, and so I really want parents listening to Do not feel bad if you find yourself engaging in knee jerk responses, or having interactions that are, you know, not so productive. There's deep conditioning that has been fueled by trauma that has made it so that we lean in, or we lean out rather, from our children's pain or resistance or so on and so forth.

Debbie: Wow, that is fascinating. I thank you for sharing that example. And I think, talking about that, in the context of our experience with our parents, or just in World War Two, it just makes so much sense that this is, you know, I wouldn't say that this is the natural human experience, but a conditioned one for sure. So interesting. Wow. So I'm just looking at the table of contents for your book and the whole Part Two you kind of introduce the approach and then Part Two you really tackle. I love the way you again organize that you tackle some of the most common things that we might hear as parents, you know, they I don't want to's, I miss, you love my sister more, you know, I can't decide, I hate my life. So you tackle some of the bigger themes but a lot of parents are going to be dealing with I'm wondering, I just even want to know what your I don't know favorite is the right word. But what are the ones that came up the most for you that tend to be the most powerful?

Adele: Well, there Okay, so there's probably two or three that are my favorite. I got a terrible mark. Now we divide that chapter into two sections. The first section, the child actually earned a low mark. But in the second part of the chapter, we have another scenario where the child actually earned a very high mark, but they felt like it was a terrible mark. And we wanted to include this chapter because kids who have perfectionism tendencies, or who are gifted, have a different experience of what a terrible mark is. And oftentimes they are invalidated. Because it doesn't necessarily make sense compared to the average in the classroom. So a kid might say, like, Oh, I got a terrible mark, I only got an 89 out of 100. And what's the knee jerk response that's most common to that? It's like, Oh my gosh, are you kidding? That's an awesome mark. So many kids would be so happy about that. Well, those kids, you know, they don't get to have the experience of feeling understood quite often. And trust me, I have said those words you know, for so I'm just as guilty as anyone else. But instead, imagine if they could hear like, Oh, I totally get why you'd be disappointed by that mark. Because you are a kid who works hard to get as high marks as you can. And that is really something that you value. It's part of your identity. And I know that your dream is to get into one of the best universities. And so it totally makes sense to me that you might be disappointed. And sweetheart, now we're gonna move into emotional and practical support. I totally believe that this mark is not going to define you. And if you want, we can look over what you didn't capture or even

ask your teacher for some extra help. So I really liked that chapter because it kind of gives some love to you know, kids who have those perfectionist tendencies where the knee jerk responses might be more of what they experience more of the time.

Debbie: Mm hmm. Yeah, that's great. I love that too. So, okay, I want to make sure that listeners know how to find you. But before we get to that, I don't know I hate putting you on the spot. But if there is one kind of big takeaway for listeners who are getting a lot out of this and listeners are often like digesting all these podcasts and then trying to have that takeaway that they can really apply in their life with The one thing you hope that they take from this.

Adele: I think that you know, the *but to because* strategy is far and away the strategy that the most parents have come back to say like, thank you. I couldn't remember all the other things that you said or that I read. But I was able to remember to move from but to because, and even though I couldn't think of three reasons why my child might be having a meltdown, because of the snack that I gave her, I was able to come up with two and I saw that decrease happen. So that's the first kind of major takeaway. The second major takeaway is about circling back about doing over. You know, when we were writing this book, I, generally speaking, you know, I was like worried about being one more voice in the parenting world about this is what you should do. And parents are stressed out enough by being the best they can be. Especially in our current circumstances, and I want parents to know that do overs can happen. And they can be just as meaningful if not more meaningful than getting it right the first time, and that there is no time limit. I've done do overs with parents 30 years later, and they have been absolutely transformational.

Debbie: No statute of limitations on do overs. Exactly. I appreciate that reminder, I'm a big believer that our mistakes, our parenting fails, of which I have many, are opportunities to learn, and I've learned not to beat myself up for as long anyway, and when I have those, but I really just appreciate you reminding us about the do overs and also that it's never too late. That's really important.

Adele: Absolutely. And the truth is, our children don't want us to beat ourselves up, you know, even in the toughest moments. Their love for us is unbelievably unparalleled. You know, it's so huge. And so the more we can have patience with ourselves, compassion for ourselves, the more time we take for ourselves to kind of get back to baseline, the better it will be for everyone.

Debbie: That's great. Before we go, then again, listeners, the book is called *What to Say to Kids When Nothing Seems to Work*. I will have links on the show notes page for that. But where else can listeners connect with you on social media or where else you hang out online?

Adele: Well we do have a website, and it's called mentalhealthfoundations.ca and there's a section for caregivers and in that website, we provide all kinds of free resources, videos, scripts, so that parents can interface with the material in a different way. that's available 24/7 at no cost instead of www.mentalhealth

foundations.ca. There's dozens of hours of video segments available there. We're also on Twitter, What 2 Say to Kids with a little 2 instead of to. So I imagine those will be in the show notes as well. And so yeah, we we welcome parents to reach out to connect, and to use the resources that are available there.

Debbie: That's fantastic. Thank you. And yeah, listeners, I will have all of these links, including the MentalHealthFoundations.ca That sounds great. I love watching. The more that I watch and listen, the more it starts to sink in. So that's awesome that you have that resource. So I just want to say congratulations again on the book. I'm so happy to be able to share this work with my listeners. And thank you for coming by today and walking us through it all.

Adele: It's my absolute pleasure. Thank you for everything that you do to connect parents and their kids with resources. We really are needing to work together. So I really appreciate it.

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- Dr. Adele Lafrance's website
- *What to Say to Kids When Nothing Seems to Work* by Dr. Adele Lafrance
- Mental Health Foundations
- Adele Lafrance on Twitter
- what2say2kids website