



Episode #216

**Slow Processing Speed—What It Is
and How to Support Kids Who Have It**

July 7, 2020

Debbie: Welcome to the show. Ellen.

Ellen: Oh, it's great to be here.

Debbie: Today we're going to be talking about something that impacts many families in the Tilt community, processing speed, or more specifically slow processing speed. But before we get into that, I would love it if you could just take a few minutes to tell us about your background and the kind of work that you do as a child psychologist.

Ellen: So I started out actually right out of undergraduate as a special education teacher. So I taught special education for six years and then went back to get a degree in psychology and specialize in neuropsychological assessments. So my area of interest is in sort of the crossover between school problems and sort of like very real world kind of problems and neuropsychology, which is looking at how the brain you know, understanding how the brain impacts what we do, or getting information about our functioning in different areas of life like language and visual motor skills and problem solving skills. And that's what neuro psychology informed. So I've been interested in that area of education and neuropsychology.

Debbie: Very cool. So tell me then, I know that you work with the Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds, which looks like an amazing resource. And you're on, you're one of the experts@understood.org. And so kind of seems like you have a lot going on and you're working in a lot of different capacities with these great organizations.

Ellen: I do and one of the other things that I do at Massachusetts General hospital is direct a program, an assessment center, called the learning and emotional assessment program. So I have a little bit of I am able to do clinical work with families and kids and direct the program and then also have become very active in getting the information out to the public through Understood and through the clay center. So it's been great to be able to do that.

Debbie: Yeah, the Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds. I spent a lot of time on the site today. It seems like a fantastic resource and understood already. As well, that's one of our favorite resources. And for those listening, they specialize on ADHD and learning disorders, learning differences.

Ellen: Yes. And the Clay Center is a little bit more broad, where we look more at emotional issues and more sort of like, what's happening in the, in the media or in the world and how that might impact kids too. So they're, they're both great resources for parents.

Debbie: Yeah, I'm so happy to have them on my radar personally and to be able to share them with the Tilt community. So as an introduction to our conversation, I recently shared an article from understood.org on the Tilt Facebook page, it was

called *Slow Processing Speed and Anxiety, What You Need to Know*. And it got a lot of engagement on the Facebook page, but this post in particular generated a lot of discussion among parents, and it also raised a lot of questions. I got a lot of comments from parents saying, you know, this is the first that they had heard of slow processing speed, and that the article really connected a bunch of dots for them in relation to their child. There were others who were kind of going confused about the definition if it really applied. And I wanted to share a comment that one woman left that we had a back and forth, but I don't know that I answered her question sufficiently, she had said, What's the opposite of slow processing speed? This sounds like it's slow input for our daughter, the trouble seems to be slow output. She takes in processes fast, but then getting the response out, especially written, is slow and painful. And she said the anxiety loop is very similar, but not the underlying issue. And I think where we net it out was that it still sounds like slow processing speed. But could you kind of shed light on this forum? Tell us exactly what the slow processing speed is?

Ellen: Yes. So let me comment on that first. It is. They are one in the same in some ways, it's not just about taking in information slowly, or just putting it out slowly. Sometimes it's both, sometimes it's one or the other. So basically, you know, going back to what you were saying before about that a lot of people didn't know what slow processing speed was. It is a fairly new kind of concept. And it's one of the things that I was finding in, you know, I've been testing kids now for 20 years, one of the things I was finding is that there was this group of kids that regardless of the diagnosis, or sometimes they had no diagnosis, by that, I mean, they didn't meet criteria for ADHD or reading disability or dyslexia. They just tended to be struggling in school because it took them a long time to do stuff. So slow processing speed, and one of the most simple ways of defining it is, it's how long it takes you to get something done. And there are a lot of different aspects to that. So there's a part that has to do with us being able to process it, take it in, there's a part of us having to kind of come up with a response, and then it's the output. So for any one child, it could be one or all of those things, and very often, and I think in some ways, the person that you were commenting on that she said her child takes stuff in very quickly, that's very often, you know, they're very bright kids. And what happens is, they can take it all in. But the ability to kind of get it out on paper for many different reasons. Sometimes it's in the organization of information, sometimes it's a graphomotor issue. And so there are different aspects where that can break down for you. So again, we've got sort of like, it can be slow at getting process in slow and kind of working with it in the mind, and then slowly getting it out. But then there are also different aspects of that as well. You can have verbal processing problems, visual processing, motor processing problems, and just kind of general sort of processing just, you know, sort of like taking in information just in general. So lots of different things that we can talk about in this and unfortunately, it's not a nice easy little concept, and that's why people are confused. That's why I probably generated a lot of discussion.

Debbie: Yeah. And, you know, when you were speaking to the question that I had, I know that the woman's daughter is a very bright person. And, and I know that for many gifted children having a slow processing speed can actually drag their IQ scores down. Right? And then I've heard from people that we've interacted with

and when we had our son assessed that that disconnect between the intelligence and the processing speed can create a lot of frustration and cause a lot of problems. Is that what you see?

Ellen: Absolutely, it is and really almost regardless of what the cognitive ability is, in terms of like, verbal, intellect or problem solving, intellect or skills, we'd like to be in sync. So we like you know, it's much better in some ways to just be average and everything, because you're not going to be frustrated and most things because everything is going to be sort of like everything that you're that you interact with is pretty much the same. But when you're very bright and a lot of things come easily to you. And then your ability to actually execute the task is much slower. You're feeling frustrated. yourself because we don't like that feeling of inconsistency within ourselves. The other area of frustration is that people look at you and say, well, you're so smart. Like, why couldn't you get that done like that was really simple. And oftentimes, when we're talking about processing speed, we're talking about measuring it very simply. So when in the kinds of tests we used to measure it, it's your simple speed of being able to, for example, copy a code, or do a group of math problems. It's not measuring the depth of your thinking, given unlimited time at all. So you can have this wonderful ability to sort of think deeply about something. But when it comes time to actually write something quickly, or take notes or do a simple page of math facts, you're struggling with that and that's frustrating for you. And then it's frustrating for your teachers and parents who think like, Well, wait a minute, like this should be really easy for you. So the truth is frustration all around them, right?

Debbie: Yes. And I feel like I can relate to everything that you're saying in terms of what we've experienced with our child, and I know what a lot of parents in the Tilt community are also struggling with. And so as you're talking, I'm like, kind of jotting down words. And I'm thinking of asynchronous development, which I hear a lot about, I'm thinking of the out of sync child, you know, kids that are identified as having sensory issues. And, and then, of course, ADHD, which is something that my son has, there is a piece of that, whether it's because of being distracted easily, things take longer. So I guess I'm curious, how do you go about determining what's what in this? And does it matter, I guess even doesn't matter to be able to differentiate them all. If the core issues are the same.

Ellen: I do think that it does matter to differentiate between them all because you want to know where it's breaking down for your child. So for instance, going back again to the parent that you were just referencing before, she knows that it's not in the input, it's somewhere in the house. Put. And so in terms of being able to determine what kind of treatments are most helpful, getting a really thorough evaluation that looks at all of these areas of functioning can be extremely helpful. And so you want to know, rarely is a child delayed in all areas of processing speed, and it cuts across disorders. So you mentioned a few right there. We do find that a significant number of kids with ADHD have slow processing speed, but not all of them do. We do know that a fair number of kids with anxiety or reading disabilities have problems with slower processing speed, but it's not consistently across the board. So it's one of those traits that tends to run across

symptoms. And depending on whether it's there or not, you may want to change your approach for a child with ADHD. So you may want to know that, for instance, you don't have a child who's not going to be overly quick at doing things, but somebody who's To take longer for a child with dyslexia, for example, as slow processing speed, you may gear your reading tutoring or the kinds of things that you're using to treat the dyslexia a little bit of a different way, knowing that you have a child who's got slower language processing skills, versus a child who has slower graphical motor processing skills, we're going to see problems with getting, you know, sort of output stuff on the page, for example. So I do feel and of course, it's, you know, I'm kind of biased in this way, because this is what I do for a living. But I, but I do feel like getting a really thorough evaluation when you're really confused as a parent can be so helpful. And in those moments when you're thinking like, Oh, no, I just can't wait, how are we ever going to get through this day when we can't even get through breakfast? It can kind of give you a chance to sort of see the big picture and take a step back and kind of like, Oh, alright, yep, I knew this was gonna be hard. Now we can fix this and move on. Mm hmm.

Debbie: Is there a specific age range that these issues tend to become more evident? Or that you recommend people who are looking at doing an assessment that they do it within the certain age ages,

Ellen: You know, I find that this becomes a bigger problem when kids get into school, you know, if you got kind of a pokey three year old or you know, a five year old, who's you know, kind of slow to get ready and get going on things. There's a lot of leeway at that age. It's really when the academic skills become really, really important. And it kind of depends on where you live and what your school system is like, or what's your private school if you're in private schools like, but generally I find that this starts to become a problem, some time, between second and fifth grade. And, you know, for some kids who are really bright, they can kind of get by and people will just sort of say, Well, you know, they're just not very motivated or, you know, he just doesn't work hard enough or something like that. And that's rarely ever the case. I mean, your fourth graders are usually typically motivated to do well. They like to please people. So if your child is fine You know, if you're finding that your child's not doing that, there's usually a pretty good reason. So I would say sometimes that early elementary school time is a good time to do that. Now, some of these kids will already have been diagnosed with ADHD, or with a learning disability and the processing speed is just a layer of that or you know, to that, but what happens is sometimes you've got a child with ADHD, you find great ways to treat the ADHD, either medication or things in the environment that you're changing, but somehow life doesn't get that much easier. And sometimes it's the processing speed, that is the thing that's just that really makes life more difficult to get them to pay attention. You can sit them in the front of the class, all that sort of stuff, but when it's you know, when it's time to actually do the stuff that needs to be done. That's where it can get, you know, pretty difficult still.

Debbie: Yeah, I mean, I remember when Asher was in school, I homeschool him now but he spent his first three years in both private and public schools and the timed

Math, you know how many math problems can you finish in X amount of time and he's really good at math. He's stronger, stronger on the verbal reading side, but he still excels in math, but put time pressure on him and all bets are off like he did not go well.

Ellen: It's a very kind of typical scenario.

Debbie: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So what do you do then? So I mean, you said, you know, you can be treating the ADHD or you know, we have a lot of listeners whose children are high functioning autism and other things going on anxiety. So you can treat those things but you may not necessarily be addressing the speed processing issues. So how do you go about doing that?

Ellen: So I just want to reiterate, what you just said is that if there is another diagnosis, you want to make sure that you're doing everything you can to treat that underlying issue because anytime you can make life more efficient For your child, that is the key, just think of the word efficiency. How can I make life more efficient and more seamless so that the processing issues don't cause as many issues for us. So given that, so let's say you've done that, there are a few things that I think are helpful. One is just getting more information about what's going on. Sometimes I find for parents, that just getting a diagnosis or just looking at a child's profile can be so therapeutic in a way. And I've had parents say, okay, so I can't really expect him to be that fast at this. And I would say, Yeah, that's right, that that's just something that you just need to be aware of. And they're like, Well, okay, I can live with that. Then. Then the other things that we talked about in the book that I wrote about *Bright Kids Who Can't Keep Up* is that there's what we call the three A's of processing speed. So we want to accept it. We want to, you know, accept the problem. which I've already talked about, we want to accommodate it. And then we want to advocate for them. So acceptance is that, you know, like, I've already talked about getting that thorough evaluation, you want to document the problem. And you need to sort of, in some ways accept the fact like, it sounds like you have for your son, that you know what math facts are not the be all end all. And he's just never going to be the first one done with the one minute multiplication tables, and kind of let that go. In some ways that can be so freeing, then we want to make sure that we're accommodating a child and accommodating the number one things you can do is to give them extra time, extra time for everything, but particularly extra time on tests, extra time, for being able to get notes done in class, any sorts of accommodations that they can put into place for school to make, again, life more efficient, and to give them adequate time to do what it is that they need to get done is key. But then I also think there's a piece here too, about advocating and It starts with the parents to be able to say, you know what, this is my child's profile in today's world. And that's a big piece of this too. 40 years ago, this wasn't an issue, you could be sort of the last one done and it wasn't such a big deal. Now we have so many things to juggle, that it's so much harder to get everything done, even for people who don't have slower processing speed. So I think being able to advocate for your child, being able to educate your family, your child's teachers, and then also being able to get the teachers on board can be extremely helpful, and then eventually help your child understand this is who he is. And there's no shame in being a slower,

deeper thinker. In fact, it's kind of what a lot of us strive for in life. And I you know, I've said before many times, like you know, we all go to sort of like the yoga retreats, we go to the, you know, like the Zen centers, we go to, you know, our, our church groups or wherever to kind of slow down, we take you know, workshops on how to slow down, they already do that very naturally. So they, you know, we have a lot to learn from kids who are naturally paced in this, we just have a lot to learn from them. Mm hmm.

Debbie: It's so interesting. I love that. This is definitely something Asher struggles with and he also moves way too fast. And it's interesting to think of that disconnect too. Like, sometimes his mind is moving so fast, I can't possibly keep up with what he's saying to me. And then in these other situations, he I'd like that just kind of recognizing that he's self pacing, and just accepting that that's the way that he needs to process things.

Ellen: Yeah, I think it's just, you know, like, we all have a certain pace of in tempo of how fast we talk and how fast we walk. I mean, yeah, we can be pushed in one direction or another and taught to slow down or speed up but there's only so much room any person can really do. And so I think being able to accept that and in some By understanding who you are as a parent, are you one of those fast parents who kind of has a slower paced child? And is that causing problems in the family? Or are you both sort of slower paced? And is that causing problems because nobody can get anything done. So we think kind of looking at your own parenting style, the best kind of parenting style for kids with this slower pace is to be flexible. And truly, that's always the best anyway, in any parenting sound. I think sometimes that's why I think this topic resonates with a wider group of parents because everybody's sort of feeling frazzled. All parents are feeling like I can't get my child to get everything done, that he's supposed to get done. So there's a lot that's applicable to lots of parents, you know, regardless of what their child's cognitive profile is, like, but I think being able to be flexible and know sort of instinctively, okay, I need to slow down because I need to match my child right here at this time, or that Nope, you know what, at this time, I'm going to push them a little bit and we're going to have to figure out had to get that done. So not every day is going to be the same. At the same time you want to keep things as consistent as you can. Because you know, consistency breeds efficiency. But you know, but you can't be rigid so...

Debbie: Well, I like what you said too... the three A's that are in your book, I love them and you know, just touching upon the first one, the accept it you know, I've had other guests on the show, we've spent a lot of time talking about this idea of reality versus our expectations. And that is where so much of the struggle comes for us as parents. So just that piece alone I can see how that could change everything. When you just accept that your child needs, you know, 10 minutes to put on their shoes or whatever it is to get to get out the door. And that shift and not only does that help you as a parent, but our children don't feel the stress and the energy We're kind of putting out there.

Ellen: Right. Because they're constantly being confronted with the fact that they're disappointing us. And especially for those of us like, I have to say I have the same

sort of pattern as you. I have a son who's now 22. He's got the same profile. I didn't write the book about him. But I could draw from a lot of just what it feels like to be a mom with a child with slower processing speed, but I'm really quick and fast, and I'm always doing things. And as he's grown into adulthood, I found like, I've learned so much from him about just the simple joys of like, making a meal, as opposed to trying to get everything done on my to do list where, you know, he sort of like, you know, he comes home from vacation from college, and I'm like, Oh, we should do this. And this and this. He's like, Mom, I just kind of just like hanging out with you and cooking dinner. This is like an activity for me. And so it's, it's such a great way to sort of be if we can learn to value that.

Debbie: That's awesome. I love that. I had a question. And then I want to ask a little bit more about your book about accommodation. So I've had a couple educators on the show. And we've talked about different ways to ask for things in a school setting. But I don't know in terms of a diagnosis, do processing speed issues, give you the kind of diagnosis potentially, if you don't have a secondary or maybe a primary diagnosis of ADHD or something that would allow you to get either an IEP or a 504 or to get special accommodations in a classroom?

Ellen: Usually, it's not sufficient as it used to be when we had a different diagnostic manual. So the DSM four allowed us to have a category called learning disability in OBS or not otherwise specified. And many people like me would put that under, you know, that sort of processing speed issues under that. So right now, it's typically not sufficient to just say, Oh my god, You know, look at the like for the WISC, the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for children, they have a very, very slow processing speed everything else is at, you know, the average range or above. That's typically not enough now some school systems will allow that and get it you know like people who understand kids understand that that can be much more impairing than a mild dyslexia without processing speed issues. What I generally recommend is to find something in the profile where processing speed is causing real time real life difficulties. So for example, it may just be in just math fluency that really like you know, their reading is great and their reading fluency is fine, but their math fluency isn't so for example, I think you were talking about you know, your son being great at math but yet when he had to do math fluency skills, he was weakened those that specific learning disability in for example, math fluency skills does get most kids accommodations on Five, four, or if they would need it on an IEP. So yes, you want to get an evaluation that kind of digs deep into, you know, how does processing speed affect academics, that's the best way around getting services outside of also, you know, if they have also an attention problem, but to really look at how does processing speed impact, written expression, how does it impact reading fluency, math fluency, that's the best way to try and document.

Debbie: That's great advice. I you know, I know for some schools and this is another conversation we were having on the Facebook group, just this past week, is that if a child is especially if a child is academically gifted, but they have other things going on, such as processing issues, but if they're still kind of doing okay, academically, like if they don't see it as they get a bully impacting them too much, then it can be harder to get those comments. But sounds like with anything, the

more information you can have about your child and provide to the school and then with that advocacy piece will kind of put you in the best position to support your child in school. Yes, yeah.

Ellen: So if you get an evaluation, you want to make sure that they look at academic skills and how this impacts academic skills. Almost always it does, almost always you can find some kind of documentation.

Debbie: Great. So I would love it if you could just tell us a little bit more about your book, *Bright Kids Who Can't Keep Up* and I think it just came out in 2014. Is that right? So tell us who it's for and what you're hoping to or what you hope to achieve through writing it.

Ellen: So what I wanted to achieve in writing it is to kind of give a voice to the parents who had been dealing with this and didn't have a way of describing it. And I think over the years of evaluating kids, I noticed that the kids who just never seem to, you know kept coming back year after year and never seeming to live up to their budget. potential, they oftentimes that was the processing speed that tended to be the weakest. And so I wanted to kind of identify what the problem was and understand it better. So what I've tried to do is to kind of present it, look at how the brain what we know about brain research can kind of inform what's happening. Now, we don't know an awful lot about processing speed, it's really kind of a very new area of research, to be honest. And I and I think with today's ability to kind of look at the brain in terms of the kinds of imaging we're able to do. It's allowing us to see how the brain actually processes information, not just looking at it statically, but looking at it in real time. So I think it can be very helpful to have an idea that this is something that happens in the brain, that it happens based on how quickly your brain can process the chemicals that are going on. It's a much longer answer, but I think there's information in A book about that, that I feel like for some parents can be very helpful. And then I wanted to talk about how to help your child in daily life. How does it apply to social relationships to the classroom to your daily life? What are the emotional costs of processing speed? And as part of that, we looked at our own clinic at Massachusetts General Hospital, and kind of just looked at Okay, so what do these kids look like? You know, what, what kind of other issues do they have? And it was very interesting for us to find out that our clinical hunch was correct that a lot of these kids have problems with social skills, not all of them by any means. But your social skills happen in real time. And so if you're kind of slow to sort of process what's going on, sometimes social situations can bypass you. So we wanted to look at all of those sorts of areas and kind of give a little bit of information about each one of them. Not everyone will apply to every single parent. You know, some parents will say, Oh my gosh, it's too terrible at home, but school seems to be okay. Or, you know, everything's impacts everything except social relationships are great. But they're I think there's tips in the book for parents in any one of those areas, some strategies and some things to think about that I think could be helpful for them.

Debbie: So interesting. I hadn't thought about the social situations and makes total sense as you explain it, but I, I hadn't made that connection before.

Ellen: Yeah, I mean, it was kind of funny, because I would hear that a lot. And in fact, sometimes people were coming to me wouldn't really the issue was the slower processing speed coming to me saying, you know, like, my pediatrician thinks he might have autism or you know, like, because the social situations are difficult, but he doesn't seem that way at all to me, and sure enough, it didn't have anything to do with autism spectrum, but that the social issues are what got them into my door because that's where the biggest problem was for, you know, what the parents were reporting is it were just he's just having so much trouble with social situations. So when we looked at our own study group, we found that Yeah, there is a pretty high probability that you're going to have some problems with social relationships if you've got slower processing speed, and it kind of surprised us a little bit, but then at the same time, it didn't, because we do hear that a lot. Interesting.

Debbie: I was on the website for the publisher of your book, and I saw there's a downloadable processing speed checklist for parents?

Ellen: There is, yes.

Debbie: It looks like I'm just flipping through it as you're talking. And there's a whole section on slow processing speed and friendship. So you want to just as a way, a kind of a last question, explain what this is and how parents could use this to find out more about their child.

Ellen: So one of the things you can do is that there are a few questionnaires in there that you can do to kind of gauge first of all your child's processing speed. So you can kind of look at just verbal versus visual versus motor versus academic to kind of get a sense even just like being able to rate we're The problems are, we also have a checklist in there, that gives you the opportunity to reach your own processing speed, so that you can sort of get a sense of, okay, where's the match between myself and my child. And then also, because social relationships are so significant, we've got a questionnaire in there as well, to kind of look at what to look at at different ages, we're slow processing speed might be more difficult or might impair friendships and that sort of thing. And then there's another one in there too, that we haven't talked about is just the emotional cost of slow processing speed that a lot of times kids wind up getting sort of down anxious, depressed, because it takes a toll if this isn't something that's untreated, and that's unacknowledged, even more so than untreated, that there's a cost in one self esteem. So there are a number of different questionnaires that if they go on the website www.guilford.com that they can download to use to kind of just give themselves a little heads up on what's going on for their child and like I said, for themselves.

Debbie: That's great. And for listeners, I will include the link to that resource in the show notes for this episode, so no, that's fantastic. And just to touch upon what you said at the end about the emotional cost to the child, I think that that's a big thing that we we kind of believe in here at tilt is having no shame and being open and transparent with what's going on both within your own community as a parent,

you know, within your families and and how you move through the world, but also with your child and because oftentimes when they understand what's going on, it not only can take that anxiety away, but they can feel empowered and kind of understand the gifts and what's going on with them as well.

Ellen: Absolutely. I mean, I think it's what we all strive for in life, we all strive to understand ourselves better. I mean, that's it, you know, like for so many of us, that's our journey in life is to understand who we are, and in some ways, they get an extra headstart on that. That's great, so it's true. There isn't any shame in In fact, it's something to be sort of embraced and to be like, oh, phew, I've got a few of those things, you know, checked off already. And I'm only 12, for example, and I already know this much about myself, I think it can lead to a lot fewer problems later on in life.

Debbie: That's so funny. I always used to tell people, I think I know more about my child's brain than most parents, you know, would ever need to know. And consequently, I talk about all of it with Asher. And he's fascinated by brain science. And he Yeah, at 11 his self knowledge is probably what I had. Maybe by the time I was 30. I don't know exactly what I'm talking about. Yeah.

Ellen: Yeah. And, and, and you have to kind of find out about it the hard way too. But if you can teach, you know, children at an early age, like, you know, it's going to take me longer to get done with this and they can be honest and open with, you know, their teachers or their employers and, and figure out a way, you know, it's not like an excuse. It's a way of sort of saying, This is who I am and I, here's, here's what I'm capable of, and it can be very empowering.

Debbie: Absolutely. So if people want to follow your work and your writing, they should go check out your blog, I know that you've written for understood.org...

Ellen: So I do. understood.org is a good way. The Clay Center is also a good way to follow me. I'm on Instagram and on Twitter. Twitter is Ellen Braaten.. Yeah. And so I think those are probably the best ways to follow our work here.

Debbie: Well, thank you so much for taking the time to come on the show and share this insight as I said earlier, I know this is something that is really going to resonate with a lot of parents and I hope this has cleared up some of the confusion and certainly sharing some great resources. And again, I'll include links to all the resources we talked about in the show notes. But thank you again for coming on the show. Ellen.

Ellen: You're very welcome. It's been delightful.

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- *Bright Kids Who Can't Keep Up: Help Your Child Overcome Slow Processing Speed and Keep Up in a Fast-Paced World* by Dr. Ellen Braaten
- The Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds
- The Learning and Emotional Assessment Program at Mass General
- Understood
- *Slow Processing Speed and Anxiety: What You Need to Know* (article from Understood)