



Episode #233

**Rupa Mehta on Social Emotional Learning & Learning
the Subject of Self**

November 3, 2020

Debbie: Hello, Rupa, welcome to the podcast.

Rupa: Thank you so much. I'm so excited to be here.

Debbie: This is a really interesting conversation we have for parents today. And it's kind of a new topic. And we'll be talking about lots of different things that I think are very relevant for this moment in time and what's happening in the world. And this kind of close up view that so many parents are having to their kids learning process right now. But before we get into all of that, would you just take a few minutes, I've read your formal bio, but I'd love it if you could talk us through a little bit about who you are in the world and tie that into the work that you do.

Rupa: Yes, I think my journey into mindfulness or social emotional learning started about 20 years ago, I started a fitness studio called Nalini Method. And I where I taught adults, you know, a killer physical workout. And I named it Nalini Method, I named it after my mom because she was the healthiest person I ever knew. And the reason wasn't because of a six pack or because she could do a marathon, it was more that she had a buoyancy in her body and an openness about her spirit that I always looked up to. And so I really wanted to create that environment for adults, because I always felt like working out in a group setting was a very vulnerable thing. And over time, I saw that my clients always said, I wish I had had this when I was younger, I wish I knew the skills, this particular skill set. And so I decided to volunteer and teach at a middle school in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, I taught 13 middle school boys a physical workout. And at the same time, I started playing around with this idea of emotional workouts, the idea that we have emotional weight and physical weight. And sometimes, workouts tend to lean just toward the physicality of a person's being even though someone might be weighed down or lifted up by the word that they use. And so I combined physical and emotional workouts and created Illini kids about 10 years ago. And it led me on a journey with social emotional learning, and discovering kind of how these tools really helped students focus in and out of the classroom and kind of building these lifelong habits.

Debbie: Such an interesting journey. I love hearing people's stories, but yours has taken such a cool, organic turn. I love it.

Rupa: Thank you. I mean, it's funny because when I first started out teaching fitness, I didn't think I would end up writing children's books or getting into emotional weight, more so than kind of physical weight, but they are so connected and interlinked. To us naturally, we can't separate our body from our heart. So it kind of makes sense that they go together.

Debbie: Yeah, so interesting. So I actually want to look at social emotional learning just as a concept, you know, SEL, social emotional learning, these are words that we often just say and read all the time. And I don't know if we actually all have a good sense of what that actually means. So could you define that for us?

Rupa: Sure. Oh, God, I could answer this in so many different ways. I think I have the same feeling you have where it's like, there's so much you know, is it self regulation? Is it management? Is it self control? I think simplicity. Simply I say it's the subject of you, you know, how do you overcome barriers in your life to connecting to yourself and others? And do you have the tools in place to understand the subject of yourself? One, one thing that is an organizing principle for me when I think of social emotional learning is, so often we ask kids what they want to be when they grow up, or a goal that the head of them, and I think social emotional learning should be if it isn't already asking students and our children, who are you now and what can you teach us? And just that simple question can lead to so many answers and student voice and coping mechanisms and their own perspective, which I think is the key to studying you.

Debbie: I love that question. Who are you now? And what can you teach us? So what happens when you ask a kid that question versus what do you want to be when you grew up?

Rupa: Well, you can get such great answers. I mean, you can get things like, I am a person who loves to take care of my cats and dogs, I can teach you how to take care of your animals. I'm a person who's lost right now. I'm in high school, but I have faith in this. This is a new organization I heard about. I want to be an activist. You know, it just opens up this idea for mutual dialogue and power sharing, which I think is so important, you know, and the authenticity of the conversation just increases.

Debbie: And by power sharing, you mean that respectful communication that we're communicating with kids more as peers, right, not as this authoritative presence in their life.

Rupa: Exactly. I mean, I think everyone is a teacher in their own way, whether you're young or old. Teacher or student, you know, your ability to have life experiences that you want to share. And you want to have an audience that listens that that can happen in any conversation. So I think power sharing when it comes to social emotional learning is really important. And I see that as a void. Sometimes in the field that there are programs that might be more preachy, like, Hey, this is how good character is, or this is how happiness looks like. And it doesn't feel authentic to the recipient. And so I think making room for the student voice and sharing that power dynamic is really important for successful social emotional learning.

Debbie: So you talk about studying yourself. So what do you mean when you say that, and I love that even as you answer that, if you can think about specifically differently wired kids and kids who may have particularly lagging social emotional skill development, as well.

Rupa: And you know, I love your terminology, I love all the terminology you've used. But um, when I think of differently wired, I think of kind of applying that concept to, we're all wired to connect differently, but we are all wired to connect, it's an

innate thing that we have. And so I think that creating physical and emotional tools in our toolbox is important. So when I say studying you, I kind of separate that out a little bit that usually why you're lacking focus in learning or being in a moment is a physical factor, like you might just be hungry or tired or not comfortable, or an emotional factor, you might feel like you don't have the tools, you might feel that you're bullied or you're overwhelmed. And so coming up with workouts, or regimen that can help you work through those emotions. So you can be physically in the moment and emotionally in the moment is the point of studying yourself. So how are you wired to connect physically and emotionally and understanding that will help you learn better in general?

Debbie: So how do you do that? To me, and I will be honest, this is not my area of expertise, you know, the specific work that you do, but it feels breakthrough to me the curriculum that you've developed, and what you are creating for educators and now for families. So talk us through a little bit about your Subject of Self curriculum.

Rupa: So I'll give you an example of a physical workout. So instead of calling workouts like jump squats, or jumping jacks, we would call that power or energy. And so the idea is to make a mind body connection feel super practical. So we have in the Subject of Self curriculum, we have physical workouts that are a compilation of three minute workout videos done with various professional fitness instructors, but they're all one word workout. So you have the happiness workout, the perseverance, Workout, the worry workout, the anxiety workout. So you're able to see how did these emotions physically manifest in my body? And how can I move, and especially for differently wired children, I think it's incredibly beneficial, kind of this idea of if you can name it, you can tame it, and seeing how like, Oh, my hands are sweaty, my face is getting red. Oh, I want to do the angry workout and just making that connection, no judgment on the emotion or the feeling. It's more about how does that energy move within my body. And so that's how the physical workouts work. The emotional workouts are kind of all over the place. In terms of options. We have drawing prompts, we have written discussion prompts, but I'll give you an example from elementary school. So we'll tell a story of an ant and an elephant. They're called Muki, and Gore. But these are like a couple of our famous characters. Muki is an ant that's weighed down by life. He's best friends with Gore, the elephant that's bright, buoyant in and vibrant. And they both weigh 20,000 pounds, this Ant and this elephant and they're trying to figure out how is it possible? So how can it and an elephant both weigh the same, but look so different? So they go on a journey, and they discovered Gore, but the elephant needs to learn how to move, and Muki the ant needs to learn how to eat lighter words, it is morning cereal. And so the students in the program end up drawing what these characters could look like Muki What does he look like? What are the words he's using? What does his day look like? What colors does he like? And so you're able to give that student voice to your children and see what Muki looks like for them, and it's a safe way to access emotions, because you're talking about these kind of third party characters. So there's the drawing that comes in the discussion prompts. And obviously this kind of lifelong lesson that's embedded in these stories. On a high school level, you'll see something like a worksheet about authority ideas. Where do your

views of authority come from? So we'll give different prompts to encourage students to think my views of authority come from my parents from the news from my own dynamic with my sibling. And so we ask these thought provoking questions, which are also aligned with illustration and discussion prompts, that there's no right or wrong answer. It's just a structure and an outlet to dive deeper into the subject of themselves.

Debbie: I want to talk about both the emotional and the physical workouts a little more, I watched some of the physical workouts, I thought it was such a cool concept. And I just want to be sure I understand the idea of that mind body connection. On a personal level, that is the work I am really focusing on right now just trying to get more in tune with what's happening with my body so I can better show up to my child, you know, and I think for so many of us as parents, right? In this moment, we're struggling with our own overwhelm, or this ambiguous loss that I've been reading about. So that mind body connection, I'm really starting to understand the power of understanding what's happening in your body and how that's connected to emotions. So when we're teaching this to kids, and then you've got these workouts, and I watched a couple of them, is it the idea that doing the workout is a kind of a physical manifestation that they would do to just make that connection deeper? Or is it a way to actually process that emotion? Can you explain that a little, a little more deeply?

Rupa: Yes, um, I think it could be both, you know, I think fundamentally underneath it, is that it's supposed to be fun, it's just kind of an easy way to get into talking about emotion, you know, the idea that if you can, you know, let's say we were to meet right now, you would meet in person and just do like a workout together, we're definitely going to have more fruitful conversations after I'd be like, Oh, my goodness, that was a hard push up, or a hard jumping jack. And just that movement of the body helps you move your mind. So I think kind of the baseline for the workout is that and then on top of that, if you're able to isolate the emotion and how it's moving in your body, to help you kind of focus and help you concentrate on how that feeling outside of movement manifests, I think is important. So let's say you're doing the angry workout, and it's like a chair pose, and you're isolated, and you're sitting down in this deep squat and your thighs are burning. Okay, now, outside of that, let's say you get angry in general, somewhere else outside of this workout setting. What are the clues that are coming up for you? What could you do, it's a, it's a kind of giving yourself a coping mechanism, outside of even the workout. And I think that's when a real Mind Body connection really flourishes.

Debbie: And then let's talk about the emotional workouts as well, I had a chance to look at some of those too. And I really love the way that you're talking about it. I looked at one for high school students, because I'm raising one of those. And, you know, just the way that you are encouraging this inquiry about topics that aren't necessarily you know, that can be more ambiguous or things that are very topical right now in the world. So can you talk more about that, even how that works for what we're experiencing what so many kids are grappling to understand as we move through this time of such division in our society, and there's racial unrest, and it's a very complicated time, I think, to be a kid.

Rupa: I agree with you. And I think that, you know, going back to what I was saying earlier, in terms of that question, like, Who are you now, what can you teach us, like every single person on the planet right now is having a very unique experience. So to the best of our ability, if we can set up structures or curriculum in place that allows for that voice to be heard or to take the time to marinate and make sure that before amplifying your voice that you actually understand your voice? And that's kind of the core of the emotional curriculum? Like, is your view of authority or globalization? Is it fixed? Is it movable? How did it come about? And just asking these very simple questions about abstract concepts can actually make them feel more manageable because I think the more you understand your feeling and the roots of it, the better you are able to understand a bad piece of news that you might see or disheartening piece of information you might hear, or better able to handle a real conversation with someone who doesn't agree with you.

Debbie: Well, and what I like about this, too, is so often I think, a lot of us here social emotional learning, and they're thinking about reading social cues. And yes, the emotional regulation piece but this idea of really, truly understanding how you move through the world and the things that you feel deeply about or you know, what are your views on these things? These are things that I imagine, just have great repercussions for a child's future development.

Rupa: I think so and I think it taps into your more authentic voice, you know, so many times, I've seen, like, tracking kindness, you know, or kind of creating rules and regulations about being kind of being empathetic. But if they're not coming genuinely, or you're not really understanding yourself, or having empathy for yourself, it's very hard to get to that next level. So I think it's really important to understand the subject of you, before you start adding layers on top of it, just to kind of share a quick tangent here, one of my biggest partnerships for this curriculum is with the Department of Education in New York City. And my initial partnership with them started with the stem department, you know, the science, technology, engineering math, where you wouldn't typically think of like social emotional learning kind of going in, but it was their big, big focus. And I think that many times when you think of STEM or you think of kind of learning, you think of multidisciplinary things. And I think when you think of social emotional learning, you have to apply that same mindset. How do you make social emotional learning feel hands on, and it's only going to feel hands on when you feel like it reflects your voice, even as a teacher, you know, parents are struggling with this, and teachers are struggling with this. How do I talk about biases or viewpoints, or authority or globalization or innovation without getting my own biases in the way? How can you do that? And that's what the curriculum hopes to solve?

Debbie: Yeah, I mean, going back to what you said before, that power sharing, this is a curriculum that respects the individual experience, as opposed to a one size fits all solution.

Rupa: And I think that when you do that, you're it's like, you can't even predict where the conversation is gonna go. And I think giving students the opportunity to teach you, and then impact what the learning is going to be for the next day, the next week, the next year, I think, is really important. I think, you know, to a certain extent, had we had this type of understanding more generally across the world, then I think we would be better equipped to handle something like this, like the pandemic, because I think our ability to navigate our own routines and our own selves would have increased. And I think it could be very simple, you know, it only requires like, 10 minutes a day, or creating a routine, it doesn't have to feel like oh, my God, I have to do this humongous training, or I have to dedicate years to this, you know, it's quite simply like asking someone, how are you doing? What can you draw a self portrait of yourself? Could you draw a self portrait of the United States? What are some questions that would inspire you to do that, and that it's as simple as that curriculum, but it creates such thought provoking conversation.

Debbie: So you have created this curriculum Subject of Self and you've made it available for parents to download for this school year, correct? Yes. So maybe give us a little more details for parents who are listening who are interested in engaging with the curriculum, what they could expect, you know, you mentioned could be just 10 minutes a day, but tell us a little bit more about the curriculum itself and how they would actually use it with their kids.

Rupa: Sure, the curriculum, we have it laid out by four different grade bands, kindergarten through second grade is early elementary, late elementary, three to five, middle schools, six to eight and high school nine to 12. And we've laid out 35 weeks of curriculum, and how it started. And the way we suggest you would start is let's say on a Monday, you have a handout that you can either download, and print or you could use virtually online, whatever your kind of your back end looks like. And if the handout that is your children will be given prompts and they spend the whole week filling it out. And they have five daily prompts and five daily emotional and physical workouts that help them complete this weekly worksheet. And so we have 35 weeks for each grade band. There's a training that once you sign up, it's a free curriculum. Once you sign up, it's about a 15 minute training and you'll learn how to navigate the site. It's really user friendly, easy to access, and you don't have to go in chronological order we suggest you do. But if you have to dip out for a week, have something come up. We know that parents need that flexibility. And it requires just such a little commitment as little as 10 minutes a day, the physical workouts take up about three to four minutes of time and then the emotional workout could take up about five minutes of time.

Debbie: So you've really done all the work for us. It sounds like this is kind of one-stop shopping for social emotional learning that parents can easily incorporate into their routine.

Rupa: That was the goal. The goal was to kind of take that thinking out so that you could really enjoy as a parent possibly filling out these worksheets alongside your children, and enjoy the conversation and not have to worry about what's next. You know, we even have a checkbox, you know, above each worksheet so

you know which one is done, where you can pick up where you left off. It's, it's, it's really easy to use that is for sure.

Debbie: That's awesome. And I'm wondering what the response from kids is, you know, just curious to know how it's been received, if you've tested it with kids and how they like it?

Rupa: Well, I've tested the recent curriculum with students over the past, I guess, three months, and you know, just the backstory, we've been working on the foundation of this curriculum for over 10 years now. So we've, we've tested it in so many different settings, whether their homeschool settings, public school settings, private school settings. And I say that the number one thing I hear from students is just that it's fun, you know, they, they actually enjoy getting to learn about themselves they feel like physically working out is accessible. They feel like they have coping mechanisms in place. You know, I had a student who was on the autism spectrum, who voiced to his teacher, and to our organization that felt like he had a filing cabinet in his brain, and that he knew where to file certain things when they came up, and he had a go to physical workout. That's huge. He felt like he was able to understand his emotions, he was looking forward to middle school as a result, and to making friends because he hadn't experienced that before. You know, putting characters or stories or their own drawings around these emotions, makes a huge difference for both children and adults. And I think that, at least for parents, you'll be able to understand your children on even another level, once you see their take on their artistry, and how they, you know, gravitate to the one words in the workouts, how they want to discuss things, if you put them in the role of teacher, you'll enjoy being the student.

Debbie: So cool. So anything else that you want to share with our listeners, something that they, you know, maybe the best way they can get started right now? But any other, I guess, insights or thoughts about how parents can support their kids social emotional learning and development?

Rupa: You know, I think it's as simple as just dedicating a little bit of time every day, you know, if you can, if you have somehow as a parent taught your, your child to brush their teeth a couple minutes a day, you can teach something like this, it feels overwhelming, and there's so much going on in the world. But you could just ask a thoughtful question, give room for an answer. And it only takes a couple minutes a moment of the day. And it could really change the trajectory of your home and the emotional well being of your family.

Debbie: That's great. So tell listeners then where they can find this curriculum and any other places they can engage to dive deeper.

Rupa: Sure, so to sign up for the free curriculum, go to subjectofself.org. And you can sign up and you'll immediately get a training video, that's about like I said, 15 minutes, and you can start right away and choose the grade band you want. And if you want to find out more about our organization, in general, and all the kind of various programs we offer, you can check that out at andnalinikids.org.

- Debbie: Awesome. And listeners, as always, I will have links in the show notes page for this. And I did, as I said, get to interact with the curriculum, and it's very easy to navigate. And I really appreciate it as I'm sure all parents do. The fact that the lessons are short and sweet, even just at the training video is like 15 minutes is probably the most than any parent has in terms of bandwidth right now. So I love its accessibility.
- Rupa: Thank you so much, Debbie. And I think that in terms of setting your children up to learn whether they are learning virtually or otherwise, I think this is great to be done as a morning routine. If I were to give that added suggestion, just start your morning like this. I know a lot of people do morning announcements or Pledge of Allegiance or whatever they do in their school and making a pledge to yourself to be able to navigate this funny world we're in right now I think could really go a long way.
- Debbie: Yeah, I love that suggestion. I'm a big fan of intentionally starting the day. I for a long time, my son and I used to do something called the Miracle Morning, which was a little routine. So I think that makes a lot of sense. So Rupa thank you so much for creating this and putting this out in the world. Again. I think it's really unique and so needed, you know, now more than ever, to give our kids these tools to better understand themselves. But also your generosity and sharing this with parents everywhere so that we can actively play that role. So thank you so much for explaining it all to us today.
- Rupa: Oh, thank you. So it's such an honor to be on your podcast and I really appreciate it.

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- [NaliniKIDS \(Rupa's website\)](#)
- [Subject of Self Free Curriculum](#)
- [NaliniKIDS on Facebook](#)
- [NaliniKIDS on Instagram](#)
- [NaliniKIDS YouTube channel](#)

