



Episode #240

Heather Boorman on Supporting the Unique Needs of Gifted and 2e Learners During Covid

February 2, 2021

Debbie: Hello, Heather, thank you for joining me on the podcast. Welcome to the show.

Heather: Thank you. I'm so excited to be here, not just on your podcast, but just to get to talk to you again.

Debbie: I know I was thinking it was Texas in July, I believe for SENG. I don't know why we went to Texas in July. But we did go for a SENG conference where you were being honored. And it was really lovely to get to hang out with you.

Heather: Thank you. Yeah, it was good, too. Because we had talked, I think, Well, yeah, you had been on my podcast, and then it was good to meet you in person. I always love seeing people in real life after I've known them a little bit online.

Debbie: Yeah, and now we're not seeing anybody in real life again. So...there you go.

Heather: And we're all scared what it's gonna be like when we do see people.

Debbie: It's also true, also true. Well, you know, I would love if you could just take a few minutes and tell us a little bit more about kind of who you are and the work that you do in the world. And then we'll get into the content for today.

Heather: Sounds great. So yes, I am Heather Boorman, I am a licensed clinical social worker who works in western Wisconsin. And it's somewhat of a rural practice. I've had my practice for 11 years. This is, actually my office manager just reminded me today is my 11th anniversary.

Debbie: Happy anniversary.

Heather: Thank you. Yeah, so I started out as just kind of general mental health. And then my oldest son, I have three kids, my oldest son, who's 15. Now when he was three, he started to ask me questions that I couldn't quite answer. So I went to a gifted conference, to just learn more about how his brain was working. And at that point, the whole world of the psychosocial needs of our gifted and two kids opened up to me. And from that point on, I have been trying to raise awareness and understanding of giftedness as being a neuro diversity and it's just being the smart kid in class, and that there's far more that we as gifted individuals need in terms of support emotionally, cognitively relationally, then what really most of the population understands. So from that, I now have a general we specialize in working with gifted and 2e kids and adults and their families. And in trying to muddle my way through raising my own gifted family, and 2e family. And then I have written and podcast at The Fringy Bit. And, you know, 2020 has happened, but I just got another plug out. So we're, we're shooting for a more consistent 2021.

Debbie: I love that. And I also, I can just imagine that your, your business like... It's so hard to find therapists and support right now. It's what I'm hearing everywhere, you know, both for adults and for our kids to like, so how's your work been

impacted? Maybe that's why there haven't been many blogs, like how has your work been impacted by COVID?

Heather: Yeah. So back in March, we, you know, as soon as the schools closed here in Wisconsin, we went to all telehealth. And at that point, then we weren't seeing kids, which had a big impact. I mean, we all have experienced with Zoom fatigue now, but providing therapy over any kind of tele video, it makes it a lot more difficult for us as therapists, because so much of what we do is based on, like the energy in the body language, and just the feeling that's in the room and being able to provide a safe space for people. And when that gets kind of taken away. And it's been challenging that, you know, every therapist I talked to, it's very exhausting to be providing support and holding anxiety for people when the support and anxiety they need is based on exactly the same trauma that we're experiencing, too. And so in some ways, yes, the blogging and whatnot has gone to the back corner as I just do try to practice more of what I preach and doing some self care and setting boundaries for myself. In other ways, it is extraordinarily challenging, also, just I mean, there's been such a high need, and you know, there's only so many hours in a day that anyone can offer. So, yes, business has been booming and I am in a business where financially that works great, but on my heart level, I hate it. So yeah, yeah. So that's kind of where we're at. We did go back to seeing some in person and then again, the Fall, we went to all telehealth with the exception of children. So we are still seeking children in clinic because, I mean, they need our neurologies to be lined up in the room, and you just can't do that very well over a screen. So yeah, but we're doing that with masks, which then, you know,

Debbie: Right, presents its own set of challenges.

Heather: Right, right.

Debbie: Yeah. I just have to say, like, I don't even know what I can say like, I wish I could give you a hug right now. Because, you know, I have many friends who are therapists right now. And I, I know how much they are giving of themselves to support their clients, and what an incredible need there is for the work that you all are doing. And you're all living this too. So I'm glad that you're taking time to, to practice what you're preaching as much as you can. And thank you for sharing all that. And yes, when I see you, I will give you a big hug. So we'll have to just shelve that for now. But what I would love to talk a little bit about today is, you know, specifically what's happening with gifted into week kids, I haven't talked about this population in the time of COVID. We've certainly talked about differently wired kids generally. But I do think that there are a couple of, you know, areas of consideration that are unique to gifted kids, in terms of what's happening in the world right now. Both, you know, cognitively, and socially, emotionally, mentally. So I'm just kind of wondering, you know, if you could speak to a bit what you're seeing, you know, where do you see gifted and 2e kids particularly struggling right now?

Heather: So I'm going to frame this within the broader conversation of this collective trauma that we're going through, in terms of we are all as a world experiencing existential threat in all of the areas that existentialism is concerned with. And so, you know, as I speak about existentialism, it's just those concepts of what's the

point of existence like those bigger questions. And, you know, when we think about it, there's four different areas that are existential questions. And usually, these are big questions that don't have very clear cut answers. But the first question is the question of life and death. What does it mean to die? I mean, we have clearly a lot of death that's around us. So that is poking at that aspect of existential threat. The second is community versus isolation. How do we feel a part of something and part of a group and make those connections? I mean, we're being asked to and COVID is demanding that we isolate, which is a really difficult thing for us to figure out and how to balance. And so that's one aspect of the existential stuff that's coming up. The third concern is the question of freedom, which again, we can see that being played out within. I mean, I'm in Wisconsin. So as I said, before we started recording, like my state has made the national news and international news for not so great reasons. And because we see that concern of like, freedom when what determines how we're free, who's free? And just those questions of like, Is it a personal freedom to wear a mask or not? And how do our freedoms infringe on the freedoms of the community? And how do we balance those? And then the fourth area is purposefulness and meaning and how do we create meaning and recognize what our own purposes as we're walking this planet. And so when we look at those, like, all four of those are directly pushed on this year, and not just from the pandemic, but from, you know, the systemic racism that's bubbling up. And we know that at least 40% of adults in the first five weeks of COVID, identified that they were experiencing more mental health issues and more substance use, I'm certain that those numbers have increased, domestic violence has increased. And again, in the first five weeks, it increased by 10%, and in new households. So we're being hit and all of these big existential areas which is traumatic for all of us. And when we look at that, and specifically our gifted, gifted individuals, whether kids or adults, we do know that existential questioning and existential depression is bigger and more prevalent in this population. And so, you have a time where all of these questions are being bubbled up for everybody. And then you have kids who were asking these types of questions before, there is a threat to them back when they were even five, right? Like, I've had five year olds come into my office before 2020 and be like, "Hello, I don't really know what the point is like, I wake up, I have breakfast, I go to school, and then I come home, and I play and watch TV and go to bed. And then I lay in bed. And I think, well, I'm just gonna do that all over again, tomorrow. What are we doing here?" And I'm like, "I don't know. I haven't had my coffee yet, kid." So to have those minds that are already asking those questions, and then to have direct threat to them, it's been really challenging for this population. And I certainly see, you know, all the things that we that you typically would think of when there's anxiety and are intense kids. So some kids are literally afraid to go outside at all. And there's a lot of trying to help them take some risk, which doesn't come easy to these kids. Some of it is increased behaviors, increased aggression, because their emotions are just so dysregulated a lot of those questions of their purpose, a lot of depression and hopelessness. I'm hoping that's turning the corner as we start to get, you know, some bigger changes happening and vaccines and all that. But they're, they're struggling, I mean, these kids feel things more intensely than the average person. And so all of the things that we are feeling, they are feeling at an intensified level. And some of them are cognitively able to understand what's going on, but emotionally at a younger developmental stage, so they can understand it, but they can't cope with it. And this isn't a time when it's hard to cope with all of this

anyway. I mean, and then, you know, then also throw four or five intense people in a family in closed doors. And those intensities are gonna be really bouncing off of each other right now. So yeah, it's a rough time. It is.

Debbie: It is a rough time. And I, as you were walking through that life and death, community versus isolation, freedom, purposefulness, and meaning. I was like, yeah, check, check, check, check. And I had just read somewhere that gifted children experience a heightened awareness that is qualitatively different from the norm. And I think that that's something that we can't just forget. And it's important, like, it's not just like, Oh, yeah, they're more intense or more sensitive, like it's a real thing. A way of interpreting, of experiencing a lot of these kids struggle with sleeping at night, because they're just thinking about all of this and processing and that hopelessness, that what are we doing here is really amplified right now.

Heather: Yeah, and add to that the helplessness of it too, you know, I mean, we as adults feel helpless, but at least I could vote, right, or, you know, there's, there's certain pieces that I can do, just having the privileges of being an adult. But these kids are, they're just kind of thrown into this and want to help but don't have a way to help. And honestly, you know, as parents, we are at the end of our limits, too. So, you know, I'll be the first to admit that my little guy, so I have a 15 year old, a 12 year old and an eight year old and my daughter is in the middle of my other two are sons, a daughter has autism, some other things, and it's to eat. And then my two sons are gifted as well. And my youngest, has just pretty severe anxiety right now from some personal changes that are going on and from just the life that we're all living. And I'll be honest, when it comes to his bedtime, and he is having a panic attack and can't go to sleep in some room. But I, but I have less than nothing to give. I can't do this anymore. Just go. Right and so he doesn't get the best of me, either. And, you know, I say that not with any judgment of myself, because we can't shame ourselves right now. We, you know, it is hard because their experiences are so much more intense. And you're right. That's something that we, I mean, it's hard to keep ourselves in the perspective of other people. So we forget about that.

Debbie: Yeah. And it's, you know, as you're talking about the bedtime, it's like, that happens one night, and then you're like, Okay, got through that, and then it starts all over again. So, right, it's an ongoing issue. It's not like we were going to solve this or have one really great conversation or one great meditation, and then we're good to go.

Heather: Oh, shoot, you just dashed my hopes. I've been holding out for that one great meditation?

Debbie: If I find it, I'll let you know. Okay. So what are we to do? Like, what are some of the strategies or ideas or ways that we can be supporting our kids? You know, I've been talking just a lot about empathy right now, presence, lowering the bar, what are your go to strategies either as parents or things that we can be supporting our kids doing themselves?

Heather: Well, the first thing, probably like a broken record from everywhere, is really to be taking care of ourselves as best as we can. Because we do impact the

environment around us and our kids are gifted kids and to eat kids tend to have an increased sense of empathy. And they tend to feel the energy in a room. So they're going to feed off of where we're at. And we're not going to be able to help them regulate if we're not regulated ourselves. So whether that looks like just taking a walk outside, whether that looks like putting yourself on timeout for five minutes. And even though they're banging on the door, you see the little fingers underneath the door. Plugging in and listening to a calm song. I personally have created a lot of different playlists for this time, music can make a huge difference in modeling to them how to set your own boundaries, because our kids learn how to take care of themselves by watching how we're taking care of ourselves. So set your own boundaries, both in terms of having those mommy or daddy timeouts. Um, but also in terms of like, it's okay to not pay attention sometimes. Meaning to all of the news and everything else that's happening. I personally haven't actually watched the news for probably about 10 years. And yet I still, you know about the COVID thing. And I still was aware of when there were protests in my backyard and Minneapolis. And I mean, you still can gather information without having to engage in the fear mongering and the visual impact of the news. And so setting those boundaries for yourself paying attention to what, what works well, for you. Mm hmm. And then that will help you again, be more regulated for, for your kids. And, and as part of that is really building and working on self compassion. That kind of said, hopefully, you heard my own compassion, not that I want to not have energy to help my son through an anxiety attack. But when I'm less than perfect, that's okay. He just needs me. And however I show up, while I want to show up as best I can, there's going to be times when I'm when I can't, because I am human. And I can't, I can't be everything to everyone. So being self compassionate, is really something that I have seen in my practice make the biggest difference in terms of mental health in general. And I use Kristin Neff, her work on self compassion, and her definitions of it. And she has a book out I think called just Self Compassion. But what she describes it, there's three different aspects to it. And one is mindfulness. Being aware, we can't be compassionate towards something if we aren't aware of it. So whether that's being aware of something for somebody else, or being aware of something for ourselves, and mindfulness is, you know, being present in the moment without judgment. So that can be practiced through a sitting formal meditation, or it can be practiced just throughout the day, you know, every once in a while, as I'm walking up the stairs for the 500th time, I'll just pay attention to what it actually feels like to be moving my legs up the stairs, right? Or just take three deep breaths and pay attention to just check in with yourself how you're feeling. What are you doing, am I judging myself for that mistake that I made. And then the second component after mindfulness is recognizing our common humanity. So I know that I am not the only parent that has had a hard time being present for their highly anxious child. I know this because I have the privilege of being able to see behind people's public selves in the therapy room. But also because I just know humans and we're imperfect and If we can remember that we're part of a collective and that our experience is unique, but it isn't isolated. That helps us with the third component of self compassion, which is being kind to ourselves. And so responding to ourselves in a way that we would respond to a friend, I'll have parents come into my office and they'll be, you know, parading themselves because they yelled at their child the night before. And I'll just kind of sit back and be like, Okay, well, let me tell you something. Last night, I completely flipped out because the toilet clogged again, and I yelled at them that they could

only use three squares ever in the future. And then I may or may not have duct tape the toilet shut. And this may or may not be a true story. And then I just like, okay, so let me have it, like, tell me, because if, if you should have social services called because you've yelled at your child, like, I was depriving them of toilet paper, so. And of course, they will not say to me what they say to themselves. And so be thinking about what you would say to somebody else in that situation, and then work on trying to tell yourself that, and I will do this verbally, to model for my kids also. So I will, you know, I might say, Oh, yeah, this lasagna didn't turn out the way I wanted it to. It's kind of soupy. And I might be like, Well, you know, I remember that time I was at my mom's house and, you know, kind of overdone and I didn't love her any less like, that just happens. You know, we can't get it right all the time. And then I'll say, yeah, so you know, I bet it'll taste good anyway. And if not, we'll just cut it up and make a stew, right? So I'll verbally do these things in front of my children so that they just can start to intuitively pick up on that and start doing it for themselves. And I can't think of a time when we need more self compassion than right now.

Heather: So true. Thank you for bringing up Kristin Neff. I had her on the podcast a while ago. But I'll have the link in the show notes. Because, yeah, you're absolutely right. That is just such a critical thing for us to be thinking. And focusing on right now. If ever there was a time, as you said, so thank you for walking us through that. And yeah, I'd love to hear if you have some more specifics.

Heather: Yeah. So specifically with our children. I think the first thing after we're regulated and taking care of ourselves is to, to validate, validate, validate, validate everything that they're going through. And as a therapist, that's easy for me to do in the room. As a parent, that can be a little bit trickier, because it's hard to watch our kids struggle. But if we can sit and just validate what they're experiencing, and say, Yeah, that makes sense. I can see that, like, you're really worried about this. And of course, you're feeling lonely, because you haven't been able to connect with your friends. And this might be coming from a kid who was just starting to make peer relationships anyway, right? Like to really validate that to validate their big existential questions of, you know, the five year old, that's wondering if the world is going to actually end, instead of doing what we tend to do, which is just placate and be like, it'll be fine. Don't worry about it. That's a grown up worry. Don't worry about it. He's gifted. Those are their real worries. And so to sit with them, and have the conversations and help them learn to grow and tolerance of the unknown, because really, these existential questions don't have an answer to them. So being descending in that conversation being like, yeah, this is hard. And it's hard, because we don't really know. And because we don't really know, I choose to have hope about it. And I choose to find joy in the day today. Anyway, right?

Debbie: As you're saying that validating the big existential questions. I totally agree with that. And I know that I have at times joined right in on that, right. And so I love that reframe. I choose to have hope, or, you know, I like to focus on what I can control and that kind of thing. But I think it's important to that, sometimes because our kids, we almost treat them as peers, because they may intellectually be superior to us, and no matter how young they are. And I think that's important, too, to make sure that we don't kind of jump in the bathwater with them.

Heather: Absolutely. Absolutely. And again, that's where prioritizing your own wellness has to come first. Because then we can't do that, then we're more likely to jump into the bath with them. Yeah, I'm not laughing about that because I've been there too, where it's like, oh, gosh, yeah, I don't know. Or their anxiety feeds my anxiety and my anxiety feeds there isn't it goes and goes. And I think that's, you know, how we interpret things is what determines how we're going to feel about them. And so if we, because we don't have an answer to a lot of these things, we really do have the freedom to interpret them however we want to. So one of the ways that I personally have gotten through all of this, is to really rely on Dobrowski's theory of positive disintegration, which talks about that in order for enlightenment to come, in order for the next level of development to come, everything has to fall apart first, it has to be painful, and it has to be anxiety producing, because we can't do something new if we're holding on to the old. I mean, if ever, there has been a disintegrating, 2020 has been it. And yet I do I have to believe that. And I know from my own experiences, personally, in the past, and even right now, I know that it's setting the stage for good to come. And that provides us with some hope, as we're going through the disintegration and the discomfort, and helps us focus on Okay, what are we going to do with this? Where are we going to move to next, this isn't the end of our story. And again, you know, like systemic racism, it had to bubble up like this, and it's probably going to have to bubble up more, because, again, I think, you know, enough time has gone, there's getting to be some complacency again, so it's gonna have to bubble up again. And it's hard, because for some people, it feels like that's a new thing. But it isn't, it's just shining light on what has already been there, that we haven't been willing to do the work to fix. So having that mindset of, we get to choose how we're going to interpret this. So I'm going to interpret this as this as a positive thing. That doesn't mean that we're going to feel good about it all the time. Like, we have to be willing to feel pretty crappy. But in the long run, it's for our evolution, it's for our community's growth, it's leading us towards positive things.

Debbie: Yeah, and at a time when none of us feel as though we have much control over much of anything, especially our kids, you know, knowing that we do have control over our thoughts can be really powerful.

Heather: Right. And that's something that, you know, we really need to teach our gifted kids and to eat kids, because their thoughts often are going 500 million miles a minute. And they can think of all the different interpretations, but there is a higher rate of anxiety among gifted adults. So I have to assume that there's a higher rate among gifted kids, which is what I see also, and anxiety like, sends us to the worst case scenario as far as how we're interpreting something. So to model that and to help our kids choose how they're going to think about something is really helpful for them too. Because it's hard to just come by that naturally, there has to be some intentionality with it.

Debbie: Well, yeah, and as you're talking, I'm thinking that a lot of gifted kids also have, you know, more than maybe the general population, more of a fixed mindset, rather than a growth mindset. So there may even be more resistance around this idea that actually, you can control how you think, you know, because a lot of kids

are like, nope, this is what's going on. It's objectively true in my head, therefore, you know, so there may be extra work to do there.

Heather: Absolutely. Have you been talking to my kids?

Debbie: I'm coming by this honestly, in my own world. So yes.

Heather: Absolutely. I mean, and I, it's actually some of my most fun teen sessions are when they're only able to see one option. Yes. And it just kind of getting into that conversation with them.

Debbie: But it is possible, then you're saying, you're giving me hope that it is possible to create that idea that maybe there's another thing that could be true?

Heather: It is possible, I think, you know, especially with our 2e kids, if there's any autism as part of the second "e", it's an added challenge. But I do know, one thing that helps me also is to remember that this parenting thing is a marathon. It's not a sprint. And so it's doing all of the work at whatever age your kid is at and knowing that it's gonna take some years before we see the payoff, but it will come and I have the advantage of having a 15 year old and that sounded weird. I don't know it's always an advantage having a 15 year old. But, but somebody who, you know, I've been working on having more of this growth mindset being able to see and and tolerate the grayness of life. I do see the payoff of that. It's just, we need to be persistent. And remember, we're doing this leg, slow marathon, and we'll get there. But yeah, it's not something that's just going to happen overnight.

Debbie: I'd love if you could talk a little bit about your workbook, I feel like it came out maybe two years ago now, right? So it's *The Gifted Kids Workbook: Mindfulness Skills to Help Children Reduce Stress, Balance Emotions, and Build Confidence*. And I've just been feeling like this book is more relevant now than ever before. And so can you talk to us a little bit about that book and how it can support kids with everything that we've been talking about today?

Heather: Absolutely. And it's written to, say, seven to 12 year olds is kind of who I was writing to. It is written to the kids themselves. And it includes, I mean, it's a workbook. So it includes 27, or 28 activities that begin with a way where I provided information about what it is to be gifted. And a lot of times we throw that word around, but we don't ever explain it to children, that being gifted means that you're perceiving the world differently than the norm. And in I tried to cover all of the topics clearly can't cover them all. But that were really baseline as far as helping gifted kids feel well about themselves, feel okay with their differences, and, and embrace that. So there's pieces of just understanding themselves and their personalities. In terms of the intensities, there's pieces of depression, there are activities about existential questions, perfectionism, anxiety, and then around peers and social support, as well. And how do you? How do you make healthy social choices and engage effectively with other people, because that isn't always a top skill, for our gifted and 2e kids. And there's a parent's guide that goes along with it that's online. It's written so you could just give the book to your child and they could go through it. I find it most helpful when parents and children go through it together. And I've heard

feedback from a lot of parents that they've learned as much as their children and it helped them not only understand their children better, but also understand themselves better. Because whether we want to admit it or not giftedness comes from somewhere. So most of us can usually relate to what our kids are going through too. So that's, that's the book I have really received very positive feedback about, that kids are just understanding themselves better and coming to a place of acceptance and self compassion towards themselves, which just makes my heart happy. Because that's, that's what I wrote it for.

Debbie: That's great. Well, before we wrap up, just wondering if there's, you know, for parents who are listening to this, who are worried about their gifted or too weak kids, in this moment, worried that they're, you know, especially isolated, especially struggling, um, you've shared so many good things to be thinking about, but is there kind of one thing, you want to make sure they leave this conversation remembering or knowing.

Heather: I might be slightly gifted or intense myself so I'm gonna blur that a little bit and do two things. First is, it becomes really easy to lose our playfulness and our joy. And so intentionally finding things that will have a higher likelihood of triggering joy, I think is crucial right now. So whether that's playing games, whether it's being silly and singing, you know, embarrass your kids. And, and just find those ways. Just one way every day where you can bring a sense of lightheartedness and frivolity and joy, even if you're not feeling totally yourself, like it's so important because we get so bogged down in all of the heaviness that we forget to play. And then the second piece is to be aware, you know, really, I think, with good support and good guidance, our kids will make it through this and I really firmly believe that they will come out the other side stronger, more compassionate towards other people. And this life experience will be good for their growth. I really do believe that if you're seeing any more extreme signs of coming out of their room or being extremely isolated and withdrawing, intentionally withdrawing for more than two weeks if they're having trouble sleeping, if they're having, you know, chronic panic attacks. Teach them now that it's okay to ask for help. And to help them connect with a resource and a therapist that will keep them safe. Don't hide away from asking the tough questions. I've had to ask my own kids like, okay, have you thought of hurting yourself? Alright, have you thought of suicide? Because you asking that isn't going to make them think of it. But if you don't ask it, they might not feel like it's a topic that they can talk about. So it'd be willing to call it and help. And be willing to ask those hard questions and also take some breaks and just find fun.

Debbie: Thank you. This feels really great. I love your optimism, like this is a hard conversation. And I agree with you that our kids are going to emerge from this. It's going to impact them, it's going to shape them, but they'll emerge from it in a way that, you know, hopefully, they're going to take these lessons, whether that is more resilience, or just leaving their lives in a different way, a more intentional, conscious way. So I am hopeful about that too. And I love the reminder, to intentionally trigger joy, like trigger always seems to be used in a negative context. So I love love that. So I wrote that one down. So Heather, let listeners know where else they can connect with you and check out your podcast and your occasional blog post.

Heather: It's become more the occasional podcast, but we're doing a Fringy Bit reboot. So we will get there. Yes, so I occasionally podcast and blog at thefringybit.com. And you can also connect with me through our practice website which is Boormancounseling.com. And yes, please do not hesitate to reach out there's connections to either schedule a consultation if you want something more formal or even just send me an email and I would be happy to help however I can. So yeah, I look forward to connecting with you.

Debbie: Thank you. Thank you so much for all of this and taking the time today and we're recording this before the holiday even though listeners will be hearing it afterwards. So I'm just gonna say I hope you have every store and have a restful holiday.

Heather: Thank you...you too.

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- [Boorman Counseling](#)
- [The Fringy Bit](#)
- [*The Gifted Kids Workbook: Mindfulness Skills to Help Kids Reduce Stress, Balance Emotions, and Build Confidence* by Heather Boorman](#)
- [Kristin Neff](#)
- [Author and Self-Compassion Researcher Dr. Kristin Neff's on the Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself](#) (Tilt podcast episode)
- [Dabrowski's Theory and Existential Depression in Gifted Children and Adults](#)

