



Episode #244

**Dr. Michele Borba on How to Help Kids Thrive in an
Anxious World**

March 2, 2021

Debbie: All right. Hello Michelle. Welcome to the Tilt parenting podcast.

Michele: Oh, thank you. I'm so glad to be here.

Debbie: I'm so excited to talk about your amazing new book. It's so good. And it's so timely for right now. But before we get into that, I always have guests, tell me a little bit about their story. And you have such an incredible career and an incredible body of work. But I would love to hear about your personal why for the work that you do in the world.

Michele: My personal why is probably 40 years back, I started out as a special education teacher. And I always worried as we all do about some kids because they were facing such adversity. But I kept seeing that some of them were struggling a little less, even though they all seem to have very much difficulties. And along the way, I worked in almost every grade level. And I began to see the same thing. But Debbie, I knew I had to write this book when I started doing interviews of teens, just prior to the pandemic. And I asked them point blank 100 of them on one on one interviews, I hear you're the most stressed out generation on record, what's causing it. Every kid said we are and every kid said we feel like we're running on empty. I said why? And many of them said, it's I think it's because we feel like we're being raised as products, not human beings. And we're missing the skills on how to be humans. That's when I realized they're missing the skills on how to thrive. And that's what our kids need.

Debbie: Yes, so much. And just this idea of resilience seems to be this elusive quality I think that we're all chasing we're talking about it so much now. Because we're wondering what, what does this pandemic mean? Is it going to result in a more resilient generation? And that's why again, I just feel like your book is so timely. And I will also just say that you had said you were done writing books when your last book came out, so this book just had to be written.

Michele: This was such an extreme pressing need driven by kids that I had to. The other thing I kept seeing Debbie is that this thing on resilience is really being touted to us as a myth. It's not scientifically based. And so we're going the wrong framework. We all want a resilient kid, there's no doubt about that. But what I saw was what the science says on how to produce one based on what we were doing were just at odds. And the second thing, probably most important is we weren't realizing that it's not tied into IQ or GPA. It's not part of your DNA, resilient children are made not born. Then when I broke it down and looked at these incredible longitudinal studies, I mean, phenomenal studies that have looked at the same kid for 40 years who overcame obstacles, they, what I began to do is pull all the character traits they had, I've looked at really about seven, the most amazing studies, and I began to see Wow, they have some commonalities here. So I zeroed in on, here's the seven most critical traits, they seem to be the seven ones that our kids right this moment need, and then figured out the three abilities in each one that are teachable, and then found family friendly ways to weave them into our home. So we're not going to overwhelm ourselves. So we all raise kids who can thrive without us someday, that's the goal.

- Debbie: Well, and what I loved about your book, too, was you know, as the parent of a differently wired child. And I know my listeners will relate to this. So many parenting books that are kind of more mainstream, they weren't written for parents whose kids are a typical, we often feel as if they're not speaking to us, or, you know, what's suggested it would not work for my family, and I completely did not have that experience reading your book, I just felt like yes, this, this all speaks to me. I love that you talk about the fact that these kids are made, not born. And you know that this is something that we as parents can have so much influence over, really helping our kids move forward from that strengths perspective and really know themselves well, and so it just fits in so nicely with the philosophy of what I do.
- Michele: That's exactly what I was hoping. I was really also hoping to prove that we can make a difference that every child has the ability to shine in their own way. My favorite thing was, was not only going into classrooms that are doing it and finding I proved that you can so each chapter starts with a story that I'm really there from the most amazing story was a Beirut refugee camp, and I'm going oh my gosh, they can do it. We can do it. But also finding stories about real kids who had enormous obstacles like Jim Abbott, Michael Phelps, who has ADHD but his mom found them a swimming pool and that's where he said he could shine. If we keep going about breaking those myths. Say, Hey, we can do it, we've just got to go the path of where our child is, figure out who they are. That's how we're going to make the difference, and then help them learn a few of these little skills along the way. That's the real takeaway here.
- Debbie: Mm hmm. Let's talk about the term thrivers. Even so I'm just going to recap here, the book is called Thrivers: The Surprising Reasons Why Some Kids Struggle and Others Shine. And you use this term thrivers to describe kids who have what it takes to do well in the world. So how would you define a child who's thriving,
- Michele: I think it's a kid who's really got that kind of, I got this kind of a kid, he's got agency, he can go his own way. He's kind of ready for life, whatever gets him down, he can pick up, you know, brush himself off, pick up the pieces and keep on going. And the only way you're going to get there is with two things. He's got some protective factors, those abilities that thrivers have, and also that parent who says you do have this, I'm there for you, but you go sweet Bye, you put those two together, that's the win win formula.
- Debbie: Will you walk us through these seven traits, you know, we don't have time to go into depth on each one, but even just kind of share, because I think they are all critical. And I think they are all things that we, as parents, no matter how our child is wired can play a really active role in helping our kids develop.
- Michele: And at any age, that's the other thing that makes no difference. So don't you say it's too late or it's too early. Neither one works in terms of thrivers, I picked seven, the seven traits also worked to help kids develop strong hearts, minds and will. So number one is self confidence. That's a child who knows who he is, who his personal strengths are what brings him joy that needs to be instilled. The second one is empathy. Because what we now know is the single greatest way to help our kids have strong mental health is relationships, which is tough in a

social distance world. So we need to cultivate that one up a little bit. And there are ways, then comes the qualities of mind self control, we've got to figure out how to help our kids buffer that stress, manage the anxiety at the level they can, that's doable, then comes integrity, because I am so concerned about making sure regardless of these other strains, if you don't have integrity, that's the strength that's going to help a child know I can't do this, or I can do this because that's my code that Mom, it's instilled in me, that's going to take a lot of pressure off if you can put the path curiosity. I love that one, because I found that that's the strength that gives our kids and open mindedness not only to people, but to ideas, and helps them keep on going, that builds that strength. The final ones are perseverance, so you don't stop, you keep on going. And then the one that every kid needs and adult needs right now is optimism and hope. The key that I found fascinating is that every parent always said so which is the most important strength. It isn't. It's the one that really drives your child. But the key to keep in mind is that there's a multiplier effect. If you add any two strengths together, it increases the odds of success. So if you put perseverance plus curiosity together, oh my gosh, you got a mindset of an innovator. You put self control plus perseverance, he's not going to quit, he's going to keep on going. We've made resilience too often as a one trait program, when in reality, there's a multiplier if you put them together, boy, that just boosts the odds.

Debbie: And it really is like building a muscle, right? Like, these are things that we can get momentum over time. So you know, I think so many of us, you know, we might be listening to these traits, and like, Oh my gosh, like this does not describe my child at all. And how do I get them from where they are now to where they are? But this is something that we can cultivate.

Michele: Exactly. You did. You said one thing over time. That is a fabulous phrase. Because the other thing, it's not a one time lecture at six o'clock, but I told him to have empathy, why isn't he doing it, you keep stretching your child. The other part is in the introduction before you even get going. It has a three page checklist so you can identify who my child is, which of his strengths does he already have, which abilities does he need. And then each of the strengths is broken down into the three skills that science says are teachable, with dozens of activities throughout thrivers age by age they start to instill.

Debbie: It is so practical, and that's one of the things I loved about it. I am one of those people and you may know this because you know me a bit that you know I'm really good at like with the check sheets and following instructions and filling out charts and like you know, to do lists like I love a good plan. But I love that you do equip us with so many ideas and strategies for working on these. All of these traits. And I'm wondering, do you have a favorite of these Seven strengths? Is there anyone that you feel like it's a great place to start or that you think can pack the most punch?

Michele: We're in a pandemic generation, I'd say hope. Because I think what happens is, when hope and optimism goes down, kids see the world as a mean and scary place. And there goes their strength reserve, and what are they seeing right now the most dismal news you could possibly imagine. And if it's not a pandemic, and it's not a capital rising, it's going to be something else along the way. We do know that hope also was one of the best ways to reduce depression, and reduce

anxiety. So maybe the simplest little thing you can do right now that I love, is helping your child see the good news. It's the Fred Rogers idea. Look for the helpers instead of the bad stuff. Let's look for the news that's usually in the back page is hidden, you can cut out that news. That's fabulous. The best ones are also stories about real kids, because that resonates with a child and inspires them. Paste them on just index cards, put them on your news on your dining room table. And every night or read before your child goes to bed, review some of them. I have many stories about kids find the ones that resonate with your child, even better have your child find the story, Mom, I found one, and then sit down together, because that's going to give hope and it's so important that we can all find that right now.

Debbie: I wanted to ask you about the assessment with the character strengths as I was going through that. My hunch was I was thinking my bet, you know, many of my listeners might go through this and score, you know, their child quite low. And a lot of these areas. Yes. And so do you have any thoughts for how a parent could feel more optimistic about their child's ability to develop these traits, even if it feels like Gosh, we are so far from where we want to go?

Michele: Remember step number one is no matter what you do with your child, I don't care if it's trying to help them learn to play tennis, swim color, you scaffold it. So where's the child at and you gently, gently, gently take them up a notch, I always tell parents to think of a rubber band, your goal is to gently stretch your child, but don't you dare snap them. And that means we've got to figure out where our child is, what their capabilities are, and keep on going. Second, one of the most amazing studies was by just Brazil and Brazil. And what they did is look at 700 of the most highly gifted and talented individuals. In our century, we're talking about the leaders of the world, one quarter of them would have been in a special education classroom, they were identified with learning disabilities. But what did they have the gift of a parent who said, but here's what you're good at, sweetie pie, go this way. I was very concerned about how much the research was saying. Too often what we do as parents is focus on our kids' weaknesses. He's not so good at that area. So I got to get him good on that one. And we overlooked the strength area, which is where he's going to shine.

Debbie: Yes, love that. And that is, you know, that's very much a part of what I talk a lot about is the strength space lens. And, it can sometimes be hard to find those strengths. But it really is about helping our kids know themselves so well. And understand who they are, what they need to move through the world so that they can create what they want. And that's where I guess that is almost what resilience is. Right?

Michele: It is. And maybe your first step that's the easiest one is just to pack an index card and a pencil with you for the next month. And watch your kid. And every time you see where he's interested, what gives him joy. What is he working on? He doesn't want to quit? Sorry, mom, I can't go to dinner. I'm really on this. When you keep looking at those and writing them down without him noticing that you're doing so it will be very often an aha moment. And then your next aha moment is okay. Now I figured out this profile of this incredible child of mine. Who am I going to pass it on to? We overwhelm ourselves trying to do this all ourselves? Well, he's got other caregivers in his life who adore him. The

grandparent, the other partner, the aunt and uncle, the teacher, the more we partner together, and at least with somebody who's your child's champion, the more likely your child is going to be reinforced for that trait. And there goes another ability to stretch her, right?

Debbie: Yeah, I really loved it when I printed out the assessment. I think it's available for people who want to check it out. And it was so insightful because as you know, so many of us are taking assessments all the time for an IEP meeting for you know, an intake for other assessments and they tend to focus on the trouble areas, the challenging areas. And so to take this and really think about all these different types of strengths, and not just kind of creativity, and you know, they're all these little buckets, it was so interesting to me to recognize them.

Michele: You know, because the other thing we seem to do is that we put all our time and energy into the GPA and the test score. That's one element of your child. And we overlooked the whole kid of who this child is, an incredible human being, that we're going to help. And I love that when I hear from the kids, it's like raises for who we are not for what you want us to be. Yeah, that's a great takeaway for a parent 100%.

Debbie: And we know that these kids, their success, and ability to live self fulfilled lives is going to be finding work and finding a way to to move through the world where they can really lean into those strengths. So to help them discover them and grow them is so important. So let's just talk about the pandemic for a few minutes. A little more specifically, because I think, again, I've said a couple times, I think your book is so critical right now that we are so concerned, right? And we've talked about this offline as well, just what our kids are experiencing, what does this mean for them? How is it going to change them? And I'm just wondering, you know, what, insight or advice you have right now, for parents who are, who are kind of going to that despair place, and aren't sure if their kids are going to be able to come out the other end of all of this, with their mental emotional well being intact.

Michele: I think the most important piece of advice I learned from working in war zones, and I point blank asked some kids, how did you make it through the unbelievable horrors course. I mean, unbelievable. If you imagine going through a war, the best takeaway that I kept getting was that my parents just were always calm. It's like during the Blitz, I remember interviewing a journalist. And I asked her, how did you get through nightly bombings like that? And she said, I don't know. But for some reason, I don't remember the bombings. I remember my grandparents pulling the blinds, so there was a blackout, and we played Ring Around the Rosie and sang games all night. They were calm. So the first thing is we've got to stay calm and take care of ourselves, because that mirrors down to our children. Second of all, we've got to realize, I've got three kids, they are as different as night and day, watch each child because each is going to respond a little differently. We do know children who had pre existing issues if they were fearful before the pandemic, if they had stress before the pandemic, it only amplifies. So here's your if there's a silver lining moment to tune into your child and say, this is a problem. So how am I going to help remediate that particular issue? Every child needs to feel safe, they need to feel accepted. And they need to be in an environment that has trust. That means us so I think that's your reoccurring.

Little, we're gonna get through this. We're okay. Find soothing activities. And what I learned from me Warner's research on resilience was mind boggling. The children who had the adversity who overcame first had something to go to, in its place. For instance, hobbies kept coming up over and over again. I go read or I go do woodwork, or we do puzzles, Ruby Bridges, unbelievable. That child who endured every day going into a school during desegregation all by yourself with angry mobs screaming and screaming and yelling at her all by yourself as the only black child who had to be in a first grade classroom alone, because nobody else would allow their children to be in the class. How did you survive it? Well, I prayed, because that's what my mother taught me to do. We need to teach our kids some kind of coping skill, not through the pandemic, but also starting here, that they're going to use the rest of their lives, because let us know it is an uncertain world that will continue.

Debbie: Yes, this is true. And I think about this too, as we come out of this and, you know, vaccinations are more widely distributed and we kind of start to resume normalcy. I think it's also important for us to, to know that it's not going to be a snap of the fingers and our kids are going to bounce right back. Like they're going to need ongoing support and coping strategies and tools to reintegrate right?

Michele: Well, I think you've got immunization against the pandemic. Now. We need to immunize our kids against stress. What are you going to do to teach your child how to cope because every time you turn on the TV, it's something else? There's some unpredictable event on, and predictability that continues to boost the stress. So your first thing if a family if you could do one thing just for the next two weeks, watch your child and every other family member and figure out how they respond to stress because it's different for each And then acknowledge it. It's not a timeout. It's a time in, I noticed that every time you get a little stressed you're the one that has your hand in a fist, or you're the one that starts to move your feet back and forth. You're the one that starts to do that rapid breathing. Have you noticed?

They'll start pointing out your stress. Have you noticed mommy do that weird thing with your eyes? How great it is that we all sort of acknowledge each other. And then that I think a wonderful next step is, so what are we going to do about it now that we know or we can point our signs out to each other, because that's that strength of self control. Now, what you could do maybe is put together in your house, a calm down corner, and your kids can help you build it. It's nothing you have to buy. It's maybe the beanbag chairs or the pillows in a corner. And then you ask each tribe, what do you need? One kid will say, I love books. That's what I need to go back. Okay, then stop it with books. One kid, a child told me as a teen, I just load my iPad with music. And I love it. She told me that my generation was far better because we have less beats in our music. So I loaded with your kind of music at all, we finally got some credit for something, because it helps me sooth bubble blowers. For some kids, it makes no difference. But what will happen is when your child needs to really calm down, set up a calm down, just signal in your family, in your family, like an umpire signal. Don't say a thing, because some kids are verbal. But that means I need space, you use it as well go to the calm down corner, reduce the stress. And pretty soon after the

pandemic, you can make sure that each child has one of those in their own bedroom, a place where we can all just de-stress and relax.

Debbie: That's great, great advice. So there's a quote that I pulled out from your book that I loved, it says a thriver feels we've got this, they meet the world on their own terms, because they know they can control their own destiny. And so they keep trying despite challenges and are more likely to rebound from those challenges and overcome adversity with confidence. And I just read that I'm like, this is what we want for our kids. And this is you know, to really feel equipped to launch to be self actualized adults. So just as a maybe as a way of wrapping up for parents who crave this and who feel like this. I don't know that this is possible. How do I get from where I am to where I'm going? What is one thing that they can start with even today, right? When they're done listening to this podcast, how can they begin to develop this baby steps?

Michele: The first thing is you will never be able to make a change, no matter what you try, unless you buy into the fact that thrivers are made not born. Once you realize you have power and control over this mom and dad, it means you're going to change your whole parenting outlook, because you realize, my gosh, what a gift that can give my child the greatest gift, because he's going to use this the rest of his life, read the book, or start looking at research or start talking to other people about thriving. That's really what we're all about. And when we do that, I think that's how we're going to make the major difference in our kids lives, little baby steps.

Debbie: And I would also say to and I'd love your thoughts on this, you know, I believe so deeply that every challenging situation we have with our child. And however challenging it may feel to us as well, is an opportunity. Like they're all learning in all of it. And so you know, leaning in right leaning into all of it.

Michele: Yes, I'm so with you. I think the other thing is we are so lonely trying to do all this ourselves, find one person who you can Zoom with, or you can start a little book discussion with or you can just talk about it. Because the more you get feedback with one another, what you'll see is I'm not alone, she may be doing it slightly different than me. And so what you're not going to tailor it to Mrs. Jones next door, you're tailoring everything to your child. But you just keep taking little steps along the way. And that's what we'll do. And that's what we've got to do. Because that says how we're going to raise a generation of kids who can thrive and not just struggle, because this is a new world for them. And for all of us.

Debbie: I love that you offer so much hope and I just hope that listeners are feeling that as well. Again, I think that many parents with differently wired kids, we feel like this is not going to work for our kids. And I'm here to say I dispute that deeply. And I think this is possible, very much possible. This is work that we as parents can do. We can show up for our kids and they can become resilient. It's really about them understanding who they are and us really reaching Expecting who they are right?

Michele: Oh, I love that. I think that's exactly it. Tap into who your child is because that's how we make a major difference in their lives. And I am convinced on this only because I've had the joy of working with so many kids who, over the years

overcame I remember in severe learning disability kid, I kept tracking him and tracking him and Scott, what happened to Scott 30 years later, the quietest kid in my classroom is now a DA in Florida. Go figure out what that could be? Another one? Donnie? I remember asking another kid every time I was on the Today show one of these kids would call up 30 years later go Hey, Barbara, how are you doing? Donnie? What are you doing? This is a kid who never ever Shut up, you know, is one of the classic put a bandaid on it. He was on his mouth. He was just wonderful. What is he doing right now? He's a DJ Oh, and oh my god about greatness that perfect. There's so many stories about those kids when you track them later on. But the commonality they had is a parent who went with their strengths and figured out who the child is and never gave up on that child.

Debbie: So good. Thank you. Well, listen, Michelle, thank you, first of all, for writing this book even though you swore off writing yet another book because again, your body of work and listeners, definitely check out the show notes. I have links to all of Michelle's books in there, and you should check them out. They're powerful, they're relatable, your writing style is super accessible and just warm and you feel like you're having a chat over coffee with someone that you really want to hang out with. So definitely check that out. But is there a place where listeners can learn more about your work or connect with you?

Michele: Oh, thank you. My website, micheleborba.com. It has all links to today's show segments, but also little three minute clips on how to raise thrivers. Everything is there. There's also a book discussion guide, a PDF, just download everything and everything. I'm a one l Michele, that's all you need to remember Michele Borba.

Debbie: Excellent. That's an important distinction. All right. Well, Michele, thank you so much for swinging by the podcast and sharing your billions with us today. I really appreciate it.

Michele: Thank you.

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- [Michele Borba's website](#)
- [*Thrivers: The Surprising Reason Why Some Kids Struggle and Some Kids Shine* by Michele Borba](#)
- [*Helping Children Thrive in Uncertain Times* \(Michele's video series\)](#)
- [*Unselfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About Me World* by Michele Borba](#)
- [Michele on Twitter](#)
- [Michele on Instagram](#)

