

## Neuroscientist Nicole Tetreault Shares Insight Into a Bright Mind and Life as a Gifted and 2e Human [Transcript]

Debbie Reber

Hello, Nicole, welcome back to the podcast.

Nicole Tetreault: 2:59

Thank you for having me.

Debbie Reber: 3:01

Yeah, I just was thinking of the last time you were on it was probably about a year ago. And we were kind of newer or just adapting to the realities of COVID. And talking about what our kids were, and us as parents we're going through. So hard to believe that was a whole year ago. But I'm so excited to be bringing you back to talk about your incredible book. And before we get into that, can you just take a few minutes, introduce yourself, tell us a little bit about your story, and maybe how you came to write the book that we're going to be talking about today.

Nicole Tetreault: 3:37

Okay, yeah. So how I came about the book really was kind of a journey to kind of take a deep dive in into what we have and treasured in our society, about intelligence and giftedness, and neurodiversity, and to kind of really provide the latest scientific information for parents and educators to really understand the complexities that goes on in neurodiverse kids. You know, My son was identified as gifted and in third grade, and it really reshaped my entire life of how I parented him because what I had to really do was step outside of myself, and see him and nurture him as a as his divine essence and kind of bringing who he is to light. And in that, you know, I know that often or diverse kids struggle with the ways that they don't fit into society's standard box. They're very unique and unconventional and I really wanted to give the scientific background of what's happening in the brain and the body of individuals. So really, we can have a more compassionate dialogue and greater acceptance for neuro diverse kids. And adults. You know, I mean, often it's not too far that when parents figure out they have a neuro diverse kid, they say, oh, my goodness, I've been dealing with all these different things my entire life. And another big piece for me was reading all the different work that was out there, starting with James, he Webb and Susan Daniels and your book, and the things that you kind of discover along the way that, Oh, I'm neuro diverse, too. And I've been kind of, you know, hiding pieces, you know, and being in this sort of shadow form. And so it was sort of an awakening for me to stand and say, Hey, you know, I'm dyslexic, you know, I've had a different wired brain my entire life, like your book. And it really was sort of a way that I felt like I could actually talk about it on a couple different levels.

Debbie Reber: 6:19

Would you mind sharing a little bit about your own journey with dyslexia because you know, your voice. This is such a unique book, first of all, in the way that it is so personal. And it is the neuroscience, but in such an accessible way, it to me was such an unusual and unique approach to a topic that could be really cerebral or really heady. And instead, it felt so inviting, and accessible. So part of that was you, you know, you as the narrator, you as the storyteller, so could you just tell us a little bit more about your own discovery of your neurodivergence?

Nicole Tetrault: 6:59

Yeah, so how I came into my own neurodiversity, and, and I actually, I want a lot of listeners to listen to this piece, because perhaps you have a number of aspiring writers. And in writing this, it was an experiment, you know, I definitely did things deliberately, where I kind of converged a lot of different forms, with kind of the inspiration between Lydia yovanovitch, her writing in the sense that, you know, kind of breaking certain types of form and inviting the reader in in a different way. And it was an experiment. And in that I had my very first editor, who said to me, this just isn't going to work, you're trying too many different things, what's your audience? What are you doing, and I had to really let go of that editor and find a new one. And when I found my new editor, it so happens that she has synesthesia herself. But she happens to be very good with words, grammar and things like that. And I had, you know, a neuro diverse editor, and she really said, we can get this to work and saw the experiment on the page and playing with the different forms. And so that's just a side note about writing that I wanted to really share with your readers that, you know, sometimes when you're taking a risk, you know, things may not work out, and things may work out. And as you talk about, you know, the piece where I really wanted to make neuroscience accessible, you know, having in this journey, I read over 2000 papers, trying to really figure things out. And in that my passion to really communicate science, and not totally make it, you know, so simplified that it was meaningless, that I kind of wanted the reader along the way to look up words if they didn't understand something. And if I didn't, you know, if there was something I explained, and they were really interested even further to take that topic into their own domain to investigate, I really wanted to bring light, also, what the latest neuroscience was, you know, and that really comes from the fact of when I became a neuroscientist, my mother had Parkinson's disease. And a lot of what I saw going on in the laboratory wasn't translated to the patients and the population that needed it mostly. And there was always this kind of seven to eight year lag between the two. And so for me, I really really wanted to communicate the science in an effective way where people were empowered. And they have the latest data where they can make informed decisions about themselves and their children and coming from a place of knowledge for their family. So that's really where that came from.

Debbie Reber: 10:18

So fascinating. Yeah, again, it totally works. And I love hearing that little side note story of finding that editor who really got it. That is such an important part of you know, as a writer, I know how critical that is. And it really, it really works. And so let's talk more about brain wiring. You know, why do you feel so important that people understand what's really happening with neurodivergence, with twice exceptional, with these fascinating differently wired humans?

Nicole Tetrault: 10:50

Well, I feel like it's the basis, right, I think that, you know, part of how we've come into this world is we have these neuro unique imprints we have this neuro individuality. And I think what happened when we think about the educational system early on was this kind of mass production, of having kids sit in the classroom with their hands crossed, you know, and doing the work and listening. And when you think about it, children's brains and adults brains were not meant to sit for extended periods of time, you know, taking in information and also producing, especially if information isn't engaging. And so the reason why the wiring and the different types of wiring are so important is that brains respond to information based on the way it's presented in two main ways, an emotional connection, and a level of engagement. So if you're teaching a child something and an adult, if you're teaching somebody something that they already know, their brain is going to be naturally less engaged. First of all, second of all, if the information is not meeting the level of engagement, either if it's too high or too low, you're going to get low motivation. So the point we look at, you know, different types of brain wiring and different types of the way the brain really responds, has to do with creating a high level maximal engagement. So for example, we know, you know, kids that are gifted, that if they are being taught rote information, and it's not meaning their level, they're not going to be motivated in class. Whereas if you give them work, that's meeting their level, then they are going to thrive. The other thing that I really think we do a major disservice to, is our children who are on the autism spectrum, there's so many different mistakes that we make in the fact that children on the spectrum, and adults have very different communication and production styles. And when we don't take that into account in life, not just in the educational system, we can really miss their natural gifts, talents and abilities, because they really communicate differently than us. And so we have to kind of step outside of ourselves and really enquire what's going on in that neuro uniqueness? How is that individual able to convey and share information? And how can we help them kind of nurture their natural strengths and show us what their gifts are. And so that's why the brain wiring really matters when we think about it. And even when you think about children who, you know, are diagnosed with ADHD, you know, they tend to be highly creative. They can manage a lot of information at once. And so when we kind of can look at the positives and the strengths in each of these different types of neurotypes, we are able to better guide them to naturally share their gifts in their, in their real strengths. And a lot of these different brainwave things as well tend to be really beneficial for society. And they're necessary, you know, and as you point out in your book, and and I do as well, it's, you know, it's one in five individuals. So I mean, we kind of need to really open up and help these individuals really share their unique ways of thinking because they can be the ones who lead us in the new direction for you know, solutions in our society.

Debbie Reber: 14:59

What do you think is getting in the way, you know, from these kids being able to support their gifts? What? What are kind of the misunderstandings or the misinterpretations? You know, how is society and educational systems really getting it wrong when it comes to neurodivergent kids and especially 2e kids?

Nicole Tetrault: 15:23

Well, I think there are a lot of complexities. I think, first and foremost, I think educational systems are inundated with meeting test standards. And so academic performance is really the greatest measure for the success of teachers rather than actual child's and the whole class's engagement. I think we also really struggle with the fact that when we're looking at these sort of standardized tests that we're putting pressure on for our kids, is that when we know the brain, and individuals develop asynchronously, meaning that their brain doesn't develop all at the same time, they may be very, quite ahead years ahead and reading but may take delayed time for written production, is that we can be totally missing their abilities, because the tools, the blunt instruments that we're using, don't measure their actual abilities. And then I think the third thing is, is that sheer education, I think, our educators get credentials, and I think they are talented individuals out there working. And at the same time, they're not equipped with the skills or the tools to deal with one in five kids being or divergent. And I think that, you know, when you have 30 kids in a classroom, you know, that can be very overwhelming to an educator, and they may not know how to handle that. And more often than not, you know, these kids tend to miss marks, they tend to think outside the box. But thinking outside of the box means that they could also have behaviors that are outside of the box, where they're not kind of seen by society as acceptable behaviors. And a lot of these kids get really deemed with being disruptors, or low motivation or bad behaviors, when it has to do with the fact that there's a misalignment in their learning and engagement. And there's a misalignment in really understanding how to motivate their unique mind because they're so centered on academic performance and achievement. And so there are kind of layers of issues that we're dealing with. And so that's why and I think the other thing, too, is that in society in general, when we talk about neuro diverse kids, you know, when we're talking about gifted, you know, so many look at a gifted kid, and they think, Oh, well, why aren't you getting straight A's, and they miss the piece about a child who could have a learning difference or a child who can, you know, potentially not be engaged because they may already know the material. And so I think as a society, what's happening is we're developing these schools that are secondary schools that focus on, you know, kids that are neurodivergent. But I think in our standard school system, there's really a miss within the system itself.

Debbie Reber: 18:54

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Debbie:

I'm wondering if you see opportunities here, you know, as we're recording this, it's May 2021. We have this idea that in the fall, most kids will be returning to some sort of quote unquote, normalcy in schools. And there are a lot of conversations happening about you know, We don't want to go back to the way things were and what can we take with us that we've learned about how kids think and process? And how can we change things moving forward?

So do you see opportunities in the traditional education model, as we, you know, re enter school life?

Nicole Tetrault: 20:19

Yeah, I do see that what educators and parents and kids really dealt with this year was a lot of adaptability and flexibility. And I think that the fact that kids went from in person where they really lost that social emotional connection, and have been on zoom, and had alternative learning styles, I think there's been kind of a window of opportunity for children and educators to see how each child kind of learns differently, and, and how certain things of the pandemic may have worked better, and how certain things may have been more challenging. And I think that there is a great growth opportunity for educators to kind of create a more inclusive environment, especially when it comes with, you know, the way children produce information, the way a child learns, you know, understanding. If you have a child who tends to be very into the mode of learning naturalistically, how are you going to, you know, bring that into the classroom, in their math? And how is there going to be this more holistic approach to education, rather than this kind of rote machine that I think, what has been practiced in the past years?

Debbie Reber:

Yeah, it's gonna be very interesting indeed. And I'm feeling cautiously optimistic that we're going to see some, some changes based on the learnings of the past year in more traditional settings, but I'm not going to ask you to solve the educational crisis and figure and come up with the perfect blueprint for how schools can really meet these kids' needs. But, you know, what have you learned are some of the best practices when it comes to, you know, even just us as parents and caregivers supporting neurodivergent learners?

Nicole Tetreault:

Yeah, I mean, I think the model of Dr. Susan Baum is really probably the primary mode that she teaches at Bridges Academy and Bridges Graduate School of Education for Cognitive Diversity really centers on the strength based model, that when you find where a child has natural strengths, you support it, and you guide that child through their learning based on their strengths. And when you do that, there becomes this more holistic approach where areas that they may be more challenged, they learn how to have these natural abilities develop concurrently. I think the second piece is, is bringing in supports when a child needs it, you know, if you have a child, who really kind of struggles with executive functioning and turning things in, you know, creating systems where they don't have to deal with turning in assignments, you know, My son was the type of kid in middle school where he would get all his work done, the kid who didn't write his name on his papers, and the teachers knew his writing, right? Because he was he, he had very unique writing. And the deal was his turning in his homework was such a challenge that we came to the conclusion that there's one folder, you know, when he was in sixth grade, where the first period teacher handed it off to the second period teacher, and so on, and so forth. And by the end of the year, he had one homework folder that he gained the skill to transfer it himself. And so sometimes, you know, kids just take a little bit longer to learn these sort of executive functioning skills. And I think it's really important that they're not shamed, or having points taken off or demonized for having really different types of modes, because he was a type of kid who was so excited

would go straight to his work and it didn't matter if his name was on the paper. And so when it comes back to it, when you give the child the room to really explore their natural talents and their strengths and you build from that, learning becomes automatically engaging. Learning becomes highly motivated for getting high levels of dopamine where it's rewarding, and they're in flow. And then on top of it, if they have areas where they need support, bring them in.

Debbie Reber: 25:12

Yeah, that's great. So your book is, you know, I think it's required reading for parents raising twice exceptional or neurodivergent kids, but I can also just see so many parents coming to this book thinking there. They want to read about how to support their child and really recognizing themselves, you know, their own 2e-ness if you will. So I'm wondering what thoughts you have for parents reading the book, who self-identify as part of their incorporating, you know, your words as like, Is there an onboarding process for, for parents who kind of come to these conclusions about themselves as adults?

Nicole Tetrault: 25:55

Yeah, I think that's often the case, I think, you know, with previous books in the past that have really delved into this area, that's always the case that you're in search to support your child. And along the way, you realize, oh, genetically, you know, they're half me. And, you know, coming into that, I mean, I think really stepping back and redoing your own blueprint, you know, that was what happened for me, at the time, when I finished my PhD, I was kind of lined up with a standard postdoc job, and it was a really exciting opportunity. And I had to decide at that moment to really transition my career and decide to become a science communicator. And in that, it took a lot of time and a whole new layer of skills and muscles to learn. But in that, concurrently, I was finding my son was twice exceptional, and I was twice exceptional. And, you know, a lot of compassion, I think, really, that that softening awareness of coming to the moment like this is it this is part of who I am, and this is okay. And this belongs, you know, I think there have been so many stories, you know, from our educational times where I, I'll speak for myself, I stuffed myself down, because I didn't fit in that box. And I thought, This is what it's like to be an adult, this is what it's like to be a scientist, this is, and it's like, no, be me, and whatever those parts come out. And so I think, in the exploration of this book, you know, really, I think the parents are coming to honoring their own personal story, and I'm working on a workbook to go with it right now, because I've had so many people with questions and kind of want that guidance. And so part of that is sort of exploratory journalistic writing to kind of identify your own story along the way. Yeah, I mean, reading it, that's what it felt like, to me, as I said, in the beginning, not just accessible, but you use the word compassion, and it really, that sense of compassion, of self compassion, and just a lot of grace and understanding for our own personal journeys really comes through and, and so it, it's just a different, it was so different in so many ways, because it isn't prescriptive. It's informative. And it's almost like a big welcome to the club book, you know. And as I was reading, and I was lucky enough to get an advance copy, as you know, thank you very much. And there were so many people, I instantly thought that I wanted to send this book too, because I think it would be very comforting to have that as a companion in their own journeys as adults.

Debbie Reber:

So, you know, listeners, the book is called insight into a bright mind and neuroscientists personal stories of unique thinking. It's a very unique book. And is there anything that we haven't covered about the book that you would really want listeners to know about today?

Nicole Tetreault:

No, I mean, I think we covered a lot of material and I just think what you've been doing for the community for the past, I don't know, seven, eight years, really supporting them has been an inspiration to me and has guided my way through it. And I think, you know, with your podcast and with differently wired your book, there is so much of that compassion and, and, and the advocacy piece of, you know, let's work on this together. You know, we may not solve everything at once, but we'll do it step by step. And I think, you know, I just have so much gratitude to, you know, spend this time with you and connect with you on our shared interest in passions in this.

Debbie Reber: 29:57

Thank you so much and, you know, listeners, you should just know that this is our third device, our third app. So if you hear different sound qualities throughout this interview, it's because we kept getting booted off of different systems. So Nicole has been very patient with my tech issues of today. But please take a moment and let listeners know where they can connect with you and learn more about your work.

Nicole Tetreault: 30:22

Yeah, they can visit my website [nicoletetreault.com](http://nicoletetreault.com). I'm on Instagram and Twitter at @awesomeneuro. And a lot of my writings are on my website, and my book is everywhere. So you know, I'd love to hear from you. And you know, Debbie, I'd have to say persistence, you know, is the through line of this podcast. And it kind of just shows what you have to do to be a parent of a neurodivergent kid is persistence. It was a very themed experience today, for sure.

Debbie Reber: 31:02

That's great. Well, thank you so much. And I really appreciate the words that you said at the end about tilde parenting. And just I actually wrote about this in my newsletter last week. As I have been interviewing folks for the summer season of this podcast, I've talked with Jonathan Mooney, who is an incredible advocate and just so many fantastic people. And it is really exciting when you think about everyone out there, right who's doing work and approaching this paradigm shift from different perspectives and we're all in this together. It gets me really excited. So thank you so much for your part in this movement and for sharing all of this with us today.

Nicole Tetreault: 31:44

No, thank you. Thank you.