

Autonomy-Supportive Parenting with Emily Edlynn

Emily Edlynn: one of the goals of autonomy, supportive parenting in general is increasing a child's internal motivation across their areas of functioning. That is including what they do at home and what they're doing at school, etc. So how this all fits together is in the motivation research, external rewards.

And so, kids are not internalizing the meaning or purpose of a behavior.

So, it's really important with these autonomy supportive strategies that we're engendering this sense of why we do behaviors, why it's important, how it's Meaningful to you as a person.

That was Emily Edwin on psychologists off the clock.

Yael Schonbrun: We are three clinical psychologists here to bring you cutting edge and science-based ideas from psychology to help you flourish in your relationships, work and health.

Debbie Sorensen: I'm Dr. Debbie Sorensen, practicing in Mile high Denver, Colorado, author of ACT Daily Journal, the Act Daily Card Deck, and the upcoming book ACT for Burnout.

Yael Schonbrun: I'm Dr. Yael Schonbrun, a Boston-based clinical psychologist, assistant professor at Brown University, and author of the book Work Parent Thrive.

Jill Stoddard: And from Coastal New England. I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard, author of Be Mighty, The Big Book of ACT Metaphors and the upcoming Imposter No More.

Debbie Sorensen: We hope you take what you learn here to build a rich and meaningful life.

Jill Stoddard: Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off the Clock. So all three of us, co-hosts Debbie, Jill, and me Yael are here today to introduce an

episode that I'm super excited about. It's an episode about parenting, but specifically about something called autonomy, supportive parenting.

Yael Schonbrun: But before we get to talking about the content of the interview that I did with the author, Emily Edlund, I actually wanted to pause and make an announcement, which wow. I'm like really nervous to make this announcement, but at the end of September, I'm going to be retiring from my cohost seat at psychologists off the clock.

And this was a super hard decision and I'll be talking a lot about it with Debbie and Jill in our goodbye episode that we'll be airing in September. I'll be sharing some lessons that I've learned through podcasting, through interviews, with the amazing authors and thought leaders that have helped actually to guide this really difficult decision for me.

But I just wanted to share that with our audience, you all have been such amazing supporters and it's been an incredible honor to be in this role. And it was really not an easy decision to make.

Debbie Sorensen: We've known for a while now that Yael was leaving. This has been something that, um, she, she let us know pretty early on in her thought process and so we had time to prepare and I still found myself getting a little sad when you just announced that because we are gonna miss Yael so much.

Jill Stoddard: It feels so official. I hate it. But of course, we completely support Yael in her decision and all the reasons for her decision. And we are gonna have a, proper sendoff when we do a full episode at the end of September to celebrate Yael's time at the podcast and her contributions, and to say goodbye and to talk a little bit about what we have coming next. We do have some new co-hosts that will be joining us, that we will introduce you to after we officially say goodbye to Yael. So lots of changes that are both very, very sad and also joyful, but we will miss you so, so much Yael.

Yael Schonbrun: I was gonna just add that often there's breakups of , TV shows or boy bands and people wonder like, is there something happening behind the scenes, but it's actually pretty uninteresting. There's nothing interesting happening behind the scenes. We all still love each other and support each other and are dear friends, which is part of what makes this so terribly hard.

Debbie Sorensen: And the show must go on. I mean, to, to reiterate what Jill said, I think we took a moment where we all reevaluated. You know, do we

wanna continue this? What are we doing? And we're moving into a new chapter that I'm getting excited about. And I do wanna reassure our listeners that we have some exciting things on the horizon.

You'll learn all about it in October. So stay tuned. We're doing a little. Teaser for you. and the show will go on and I think it will be fun to take it in some new direction. So stay tuned for lots of, lots of change and transition and goodbyes and hellos on the podcast ahead.

Jill Stoddard: And I know that Yael will be writing more books in the future, so you can bet we'll have her back on guest some point too.

Debbie Sorensen: yes.

Yael Schonbrun: Well, I have to say, I'm looking forward to being your most loyal fan president of the POTC fan club. So let's move on to talking about our episode, which is I mentioned in the very beginning is about something called autonomy, supportive parenting. And I have to say, I love this author, Emily Edlynn. She's so brilliant and humble and warm and share so many great stories as well as tips.

So there's so much content in this episode. And I was curious for you, Debbie and Jill, what stick out for you as some of the ideas that you're chewing on after listening

Debbie Sorensen: I think the piece that really hit home for me, I mean, first of all, she's amazing and I love her approach. I just love how she thinks about parenting because it is very compassionate, very non-judgmental. And also it kind of alleviates some of the, responsibility that we take on because the idea for this is for our kids to be a bit more independent, and I think there's some ways in which I'm really seeing that happen more and more with my kids. They were home this summer and there were a lot of times when they weren't in camps, they were kind of in camps on and off. And there were weeks when my husband and I were working and they were able to really be pretty independent and autonomous.

And yet, I think for me, the gut punch was when Emily talked about how so often it's easier in the short term to just do things ourselves and to kind of let our kids just loaf around while we're buzzing around doing everything. And I thought, oh, there's so many times when I do that, it's like, do I wanna gripe at them about doing a chore or doing the dishes, or I could just do it myself in five minutes. And this, I think, inspired me to take a look at that, you know, where

do I wanna get a little bit better at, at instilling independence in them and getting them to be more active participants. And I loved how she approached it.

I think I feel more empowered now to make some of those changes. So loved this conversation. So helpful.

Jill Stoddard: so I listened to this episode. Not once, but twice already. Like have listened through two, two full times, taking copious notes immediately pre-ordered Emily's book. You know, Yael has had the opportunity to read an advanced copy, but it's not out yet. So Debbie and I haven't read it yet.

You haven't read it yet, have you, Debbie?

Debbie Sorensen: Well, I cited it in my burnout book, because part of her thing is that this approach Reduces parental burnout. So I actually got a sneak preview too,

Jill Stoddard: okay. So you gotta see, well,

Debbie Sorensen: and I think I'm still gonna need to buy it so I have it on my shelf so I back to because it's that good.

Jill Stoddard: Well, as Yael has said, bef before that, like we don't buy all the books that we hear about on the podcast because there's just too many. Our houses would be full and we would never be able to keep up. And this was a book that I. Pre, and I don't usually pre-order. I like to see a sample before I commit.

And I pre-ordered this book because this interview was so incredibly impactful for me. And I feel like there are a million things I could talk about. And really, I would just say, I hope people listen to the whole interview because you'll get so many helpful tidbits about chores, about whether to give allowance.

I loved, loved the conversation and the answer about allowance, so listen to the end for that. But I think the thing that stuck out to me most is, I keep realizing that the more people we talk to about all different things, including I do an interview with Michelle Dropkin about motivational interviewing, that these topics that seem like they're different from one another, they all have this thing in common.

Which is relationship. So you and Emily talk about self-determination theory and the importance of the relational aspect of the way that we parent and

interact with our children. And I don't know, I feel like it should have been like a well duh moment, but really it was kind of this mind blowing like, oh my God, so many things boil down to a solid quality relationship at the core, and if you work really hard on that one thing, that it will have so many positive impacts and whether it's parenting or behavior change or in your relationship as a couple or your friends or in therapy, I just, that like really, really stuck out to me and I feel so motivated.

I'm so aware that my own fear for my kids' safety, my fear about how they'll turn out as kids, and the worry that that's a poor reflection on me as a mother. Like I need to learn how to let go of so much of that and really focus on what is gonna make for a good relationship between us. And that is a starting point, I think is gonna have just a really important impact on my relationship with my kids.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. Well, I agree so much with what both of you are saying and Jill, to your point about it, being about everything coming down to relationships and where autonomy supportive parenting fits in. I think this is really interesting because sometimes we lean into controlling because we want to manage the relationship, but there's a paradoxical thing that we need to realize, which is when we tried to control people. It does the opposite of what we're intending to. It actually erodes the connection. It doesn't build it, but as you said, there's so many reasons that we want to control, you know, because we're concerned about our kids' safety, because there's so much uncertainty with what's happening. And those efforts to control ultimately are really well intentioned.

But if we can come back to the science of what's good for relationships and what the science really unequivocally says is that supporting people's autonomy, even younger children supporting their agency, their freedom of choice. It ends up being good for their growth, but also really good for our relationships with them.

And so what I love about what Emily offers is that she shares really on the ground tools with how to do that with kids of different ages who have different needs and different family situations. And so i think this is a very powerful toolkit from parents and families in so many different ways

Jill Stoddard: Yeah,

Debbie Sorensen: And one more perk is that I feel like my husband and I can finally agree on a parenting approach because I dunno if you remember episode

2 41 with Mindy Solomon, which was using skills from emotion-focused family therapy. She gave this metaphor of parents like animals and how sometimes so, In my marriage, for example, I'll be the kangaroo, right?

I'll kind of have the kids in my little pouch and sort of cuddled close and, and sometimes I can be a little bit of a softie and my husband can be the rhinoceros, right? Where he's just a little bit more like, you know, we need to stop spoiling and cuddling these kids. And I think sometimes when you have that dynamic, you get further and further apart over time versus kind of coming together and finding this middle ground. I feel like this book is the middle ground because it is both encouraging autonomy. So getting the kids out of the kangaroo pouch, but , it the second word is supportive, and I think it's because it's not just like tough love, you know?

Just deal with it kids life is hard. It's, it's, it is supportive. And so I think to me, I'm like, this is the parenting book I've needed just to find that middle ground. I think Mindy said, I believe it was a dolphin where it's like you're flexibly, you know, you're kind of in between. And to be that flexible parenting style and for us to kind of have both of our values, which mostly align as parents, but there are moments when they don't.

But to find a, an approach that can kind of honor both of those sides of things in this flexible way.

Jill Stoddard: I definitely had the thought I am going to strongly encourage my husband to listen to this episode. He does not listen to the podcast, nor will he read an entire book, although he just read three books in four days. It was 1200 pages. Apparently my husband, who I've known for like 20 years. Is a speed reader and I had no idea he doesn't normally read.

Yeah. But anyway, that's an absolute tangent, but he won't read a parenting book, but I think I can get him to listen to this one hour episode so that we can get on that same page too. I had the same thought,

Debbie Sorensen: When, when we first had kids, you know, because I'm a psychologist, I would bring these parenting books in and sticky note, read this chapter and he, let's just say, was not a fan of my

Jill Stoddard: your

Debbie Sorensen: suggestions there that, well, this book says this, so therefore I'm right. See, here it is.

Jill Stoddard: 'cause he needs autonomy. Debbie,

Debbie Sorensen: exactly

Jill Stoddard: to control his behavior. That was coercive control and it.

didn't work very

Debbie Sorensen: No it not.

Right. She has to write the book of autonomy, supportive partnering.

Jill Stoddard: Yes. But first she has to write the book for the neurodivergent kids. She said she might write a whole separate book and I like that plan. So then maybe autonomy supportive parenting can come

Debbie Sorensen: We have lots for her to do.

Okay. So before we set Emily off on her next several books, we hope that you all tune in to this awesome episode with Dr. Emily Edlynn about autonomy supportive parenting.

Yael Schonbrun: Hi, everyone. I am here today with Emily Edlynn, who I'm very excited to introduce to everybody. She is a clinical psychologist with an academic background who aims to infuse science and common sense into the landscape of parenting guidance in all sorts of ways, with her blog, The Art and Science of Mom, with her parenting advice column, Ask Your Mom, that is published in parents.com, writing for national outlets like Washington Post, Scary Mommy, Motherly, and being featured as, as an expert across parenting articles in outlets such as the New York Times, CNN, and BBC. Emily works with children, teens, and families as the director of pediatric behavioral medicine at a private practice in Illinois.

And we are here to discuss her new book *Autonomy Supported Parenting, Reduce Parental Burnout and Raise Confident Children*. Welcome Emily.

Emily Edlynn: Thank you so much. I'm really excited to be here and talk to you today.

Yael Schonbrun: Well, full disclosure, I'm pretty excited because we have been friends and writing partners and I'm just really excited to introduce our audience to the wonderful Emily Edlynn.

Emily Edlynn: I'm blushing and it is very surreal since we have spent many hours on screens together without recording anything.

Yael Schonbrun: It's our first time recording our conversations.

Emily Edlynn: Yeah. So it's really exciting to be here, especially as you have been such a cheerleader for this book all along the way.

Yael Schonbrun: Well, I'm a cheerleader for the book because the focus of the book itself is something that I feel very passionate about and I know it's something that is really mission aligned for you. I do want to start with the mission of this book, which is to translate evidence from parenting research into a digestible practical guide. So if listeners caught in your intro, it'll be obvious that this really is a running theme of your professional work. And I just, I wanted to invite you to share a little bit about why this mission is so important to you and how it sets your book apart.

Emily Edlynn: So I decided many years ago, probably about 10 years ago, that I wanted to write a parenting book. And I had no idea what it would be about, but I had this impulse after becoming a mother myself that what was available to us for guidance was very flawed and not only flawed, but leading to feelings of shame and guilt and failure that were really undermining us as parents and mothers, especially.

So a lot of what was out there was so not informed by evidence and science. Which I knew was a trained clinical psychologist that I felt this ambition to become part of a more common sense, evidence based, empathic, compassionate part of parenting guidance.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. And, and I think what's so cool is that this book really is. research backed, and you help readers to get a sense of what the research says, but you do it in such a friendly way, which I think takes a special skill. And I'm always really amazed at the warmth of your voice and how you make some of these really sciency dry topics come to life using vignettes and personal examples and just your friendly language.

So it's, for me It's a really powerful example of how we can make research more accessible for people who can really benefit from the research and otherwise

wouldn't be able to access it because it is often written in these ways that feel inaccessible.

Emily Edlynn: Right, and what busy, overwhelmed parent is going to pull out some academic journals

So how I kind of stumbled upon the topic is I realized my style of parenting was not consistent with the style of the day, which is more intensive, which I'm sure we'll talk about. And I was just exhausted. I had three kids, five and under. I was working in academic medicine as was my husband.

And so we were just completely overwhelmed and exhausted all the time and couldn't do intensive parenting. And so I started to think about, well, why can't my kid just play on their own? Why do I have to always entertain my child? I don't get a lot out of it. I don't think it's necessary. And so I just started questioning the premise of what was really popular.

And I started to call it lazy parenting. And I wrote about it for scary mommy. And But then I started to look into it when I, you know, was getting close to writing a book and I I mean, I knew autonomy supportive parenting, but I hadn't really dug into it. And I realized, no, this is quote, unquote, lazy parenting, but not.

But it's the idea of we don't have to be so hands on all the time. And in fact, it's not good for our kids or for us. And so that was really the inspiration for taking on this whole literature that really isn't represented in mainstream parenting guidance. And so I took it as my mission to translate, dozens, hundreds of pages of articles that no parent needs to read and distilling it in a way that is accessible and related to real life and applied to real life.

Yael Schonbrun: I love it. Yeah, and I want to dive in shortly to talking exactly about what autonomy supported parenting is. But before we do, as you said, like we live in this culture of intensive parenting where we're constantly prompted to like do more, make sure we're enriching our kids, make sure that we're always engaging with them, make sure that they're always happy, make sure that they're always safe.

And that's partly our cultures. fault. But there's also another piece to it that I think is important to talk about. And it relates to sort of why we might engage in controlling parenting. And you talk a lot about that in your book. So I wanted to, , have you share with us a little bit about why we might step into this really

intensive parenting in ways that are prompted not just from outside, but also from inside.

Emily Edlynn: Yes, was really committed to not communicating any blame for parents. That we are products of our culture, we are struggling in our own right now in terms of stress and anxiety, which is well documented in surveys, how stress and anxious parents are more today than ever before. I am very transparent, I think, in my book about my own struggles with controlling tendencies.

And so it's really not meant to divide parents into categories or, you know, point fingers or shame anything. It's more a place of empathy that we can hopefully become more aware and in tune with what's going on internally in a way that helps us parent. More aligned with our values as parents, , and so that's kind of the context of how I present controlling parenting in the book, and I want to be clear about that as we talk about it too. , so controlling parenting in the research is defined in two ways, psychological control and behavioral control. And psychological control are using strategies if you want to call it that, like shame, guilt, Love withdrawal, such as the silent treatment, things like that, that are meant to control a child's inner experience, including how they should feel, what their identity should be, what their aspirations should be.

So that is very damaging and that is clear in the research. And I think by common sense. And then we have behavioral control, which is a little trickier because there's actually a healthy version and an unhealthy version. And so a healthy version is clear and consistent limits, a good structure, kids need that developmentally to thrive, whereas unhealthy behavioral control are things like using threats and punishments and coercive rewards to control how a child is acting.

Yael Schonbrun: , can I just interrupt you for one second, ask you to define what are coercive controls? Cause I think that's a really important.

Emily Edlynn: yes,

Yael Schonbrun: the way, like we all do some of this, as you said, like we all do some of this some of the time, you know, it's helpful to be aware, but you know, there doesn't need to be any guilt or shame, but these are important things to be thinking about.

Yeah. So what is coercive control?

Emily Edlynn: rewards is,

Yael Schonbrun: of rewards.

Emily Edlynn: coercive rewards is using a reward to make a child do something. You can get a donut if you go to your dance class this morning. So you're using the donut to control the child. But rewards used effectively. So this is where there's nuance in parenting because I've heard this sort of, don't use rewards, it's controlling.

But there are positive ways to use rewards, and I do it all the time as a parent, and I even work with parents in my practice to use with their kids in our therapy. So there are very effective ways to use rewards, which is more as an acknowledgement and celebration of a positive behavior. So, after you go to your dance class today, which I know is really hard for you because you are not in the mood this morning, we could go celebrate with a donut.

So, it's a lot in the framing. And, but I think it's good to check in with yourself of how controlling you're feeling in that moment and how you're coming across.

Yael Schonbrun: I love that it reminds me of like the distinction between bribe and reinforcement and I think it has a lot to do with how you frame it

Emily Edlynn: yes. So, I do want to... Talk more about what makes us controlling. So as I mentioned, parents are stressed and anxious in ways that haven't been recorded in the past. So, you know, these surveys are showing these high rates of parent stress and anxiety.

We could go into all the reasons systemically with.

I'm going to talk about what could be happening. internally and in the home that would contribute to more controlling responses to kids. So our stress and anxiety is something to really pay attention to when we are stressed and anxious. Well, first, the stress really narrows our attention and we don't have the energy and bandwidth to take our child's perspective.

I mean, it just takes more mental bandwidth and attention and energy. And when we're highly stressed that it's very hard for the brain to do that. And then when we're anxious and the pandemic did not help this situation, we are operating more from fear and worry. And that is putting us into a protective stance to guard against threat in our children, which then leads to controlling behaviors that we are feeling is protective, but is undermining their growth and

independence and competence. The other factor that's really important to mention is our child. And I think especially for parents with more than one child, you could be doing the same exact parenting and each child is responding differently.

So the research shows that there are definitely some children who are kind of wired to be more naturally autonomous. Those are easy to parent. I mean, quite frankly, they, they pull for autonomy support. You feel good about yourself. It's like this positive loop. Parenting is so easy. , I don't know why anyone needs a parenting book, but other kids who may have this kind of wired need for more control are feeling like they're it. They're being thwarted, they're not wired to be as naturally autonomous, , they're going to experience their parent or other authority figures like teachers as more controlling and this is borne out in the research.

It's important to note that kids with, , neurodivergence like ADHD and autism, there are studies showing that because of their brain wiring and experiences, they are more likely to elicit controlling behaviors in parents and teachers. And of course, those still have negative impacts, and then they end up feeling more controlled, and then they act out more.

And so it's this really tough loop to break out of. So I do have a chapter in my book, and it could be its own book, but I do have a chapter around kind of how to accommodate and modify autonomy support in a way that meets needs of kids with executive functioning weaknesses and, , ADHD and autism specifically.

Yael Schonbrun: I hope you do write that book because I, I think that is. It's an area that is extremely, extremely challenging because you can imagine like a parent who has a kid with impulsivity, you're more concerned about their safety. It's harder to get out the door. It's harder to help manage their social life. And so you might be compelled to get into more of that management controlling kind of behavior .

And your chapter does provide a lot of great tips, but I do think that it is such an important area. I want to sort of, , segue into talking about, autonomy, supportive parenting using this quote from your book, because I think it sort of captures a lot of what you're trying to get across. And it is, it goes as follows.

Parenting presents a control dilemma. Our children are other people. So by definition, they are outside of our control. But parenting shapes our children. So

how do we accept our responsibility to actively raise our children while trying not to control them? In other words, while trying to be autonomy supportive.

This kind of gets us into this question of like, what is autonomy supportive parenting? Like, how do we understand this approach to parenting as a way to step away from controlling behavior, but without giving up the responsibility of engaging in parenting that helps to shape our children in healthy ways.

Emily Edlynn: Right, and this, I will admit, I think is a constant dilemma and question that I probably ask myself every morning when I wake up. So, but what I love about Autonomous Supportive Parenting, and I will admit as I was writing it, It was a huge self awareness exercise and self growth year for me as a parent.

, but yes, let me give the framework of what autonomy supportive parenting is, which it is a framework. It's not a prescription like other parenting models. It has been researched for over 30 years. So as I mentioned before, there are just, there's a treasure trove of studies from toddlers to teens in all different ways of studying parent child behaviors, interactions.

So there's a really robust evidence base for this framework, and it is both a mindset and a set of evidence based strategies. So the mindset piece is to be autonomy supportive is to approach your child and parenting with an open and curious mindset and kind of having this perspective, what's going on here?

And, , then to use that in implementing the actual tools, which have been shown in the research as supporting autonomy. And I realize I haven't mentioned self determination theory. , let's start by going back to what is the foundation for autonomy, supportive parenting, which is this whole theory that in psychology that predates this parenting guidance. So it, this applies across humans and it's called self determination theory, also very well established and well researched and the.

The bottom line is that all of us, regardless of our age, where we live in the world, need three things for fulfillment. That is autonomy, competence, and relatedness. And if we feel like those needs are fulfilled, We have greater life satisfaction, stronger psychological health, a greater sense of self, all these positive outcomes.

So that's the foundation. And then in the literature on parenting, autonomy, supportive parenting actually began as a foil to study controlling parenting. And it was the contrast to controlling parenting where controlling parenting was

consistently linked to negative outcomes in kids. Autonomy supportive parenting became linked to all kinds of positive outcomes.

So the larger picture of autonomy supportive parenting is this idea that you are nurturing your child's sense of self and sense of agency in the world. So this idea that they have agency over how they live and who they are. So that's the big, long term goal that is not going to be evident in every day of your parenting life.

But that is the guiding light for approaching your children in an autonomy supportive way. But how does that look day in, day out? It starts with perspective taking, empathy, using that open and curious mindset to really try and understand who your child is as a person, what their experiences, why they're acting that way so that you can be more connected and effective in your response.

So that is part of building the relatedness piece, which is really important as the foundation for the autonomy and competence to then be. Nourished. so within the context of relatedness. Strategies such as offering choices, having rules in the house, but being very open about the rationale for the rules, as well as flexible with your child's input as they grow for those rules to shift and change, involving your child in those decisions in collaboration, problem solving together on dilemmas that come up, that is a huge part of being autonomy supportive because you are showing your child that you regard them as a worthy person who has opinions that matter and a voice that matters. , The other big piece is this idea of values and approaching problems in your family through the framework of how does this connect with our family values.

And in that process, you're teaching your child how to live by values, which is another piece of being autonomous. is behaving in alignment with personal values. So I think, I, I always like to say that autonomy supportive parenting is not easier. Even though it leads to better outcomes and there are certain ways that it can make daily life easier when your children are more independent and doing more for themselves, there are times where it does take a lot of energy and thought and it does not mean there's not stress or conflict because you are working through things like values and behaviors that aren't aligning and why aren't they aligning and how do we address that as a family.

So there's so much to say about autonomy support parenting. There's a whole book. So it's really hard to do the nutshell version. I'm still working on it.

Yael Schonbrun: No, I think you've given us a lot of the flavor. And I think your point that, , ultimately we're aiming towards doing less as parents, but sometimes it can take a lot of effort at the front end. You know, like when you're getting your kids out the door, it is easier to pack their lunch to help them get on their shoes and to kind of push them out the door gently but in the long term, it'll be easier for you if you put in the effort at the front end to help them learn how to do many of those things in developmentally appropriate ways by themselves. And we're going to talk, because I'm sure that if you're a parent and you're listening to this, like, it's well and good if you have a kid who sort of responds well, but you have a lot of really great tips for some of the trickier situations or some, for some of the kids who might resist , this autonomy supportive approach to parenting.

So we'll get to that, , but I, I do want to sort of pause on this, , question of like, it's good for our kids, that, that makes intuitive sense, it's good for parents ultimately and that makes sense, but I want to talk a little bit about why it's good for our relationship with our kids to foster their autonomy, because I think that's really important.

Emily Edlynn: Yes. So I actually. I have a personal story that I think really illustrates how powerful this can be and how it really can affect the relationship and communication and openness between a parent and child. So, my daughter, around age 12, Had some falling out with a friend and we heard about interactions through some third party.

And when my husband and I heard about it, we were really upset and heated and felt like she didn't behave by values that were important to us. We didn't raise her to treat a friend like this. And we've had all these interpretations and this whole narrative and because it's very important to us to treat people with respect and kindness.

And we feel like we model that and are constantly talking about that with our kids. It felt almost personal to us that we hear the story of something so opposite. So as we were heated and, you know, getting ready to lecture, my husband says, well, what would your framework say about this?

Yael Schonbrun: Oh, your husband pulled it out of the bag.

Emily Edlynn: Not that he knows what the framework is, but I was like, Oh, what would my framework say about this?

It helped me step back and it actually helped me to say, what would I counsel another parent in this situation? And so I said, first, we need to calm down. We can't have this discussion when we're in this state of arousal. So we need to like, take some time, eat our dinner, relax a little bit. And then when we're ready to talk, we really need to use open ended questions.

We need to start with, tell us what happened. and get her perspective and experience before we're diving into how could you act like this and, you know, et cetera, et cetera. So we were able to do that. And when we sat down with our daughter. Who is a really conscientious, wonderful person, which is why I think this caught us off guard too, as it seemed out of character. We started with the opening of questions and getting her perspective, and she shared so much with us that was illuminating about the situation and helped us really understand what she had been going through and we realized the account we heard was such a surface third person account that it just triggered our own issues rather than us really thinking about what is this like for her and what is more to the story. She was very open. She was emotional. We learned a lot about her. And I think in the process, instead of feeling lectured and judged and criticized, which would have happened, she felt like we really cared and wanted to support her, and we were there for her.

And I think especially at age 12, when there's this transition into separating from the family and doing more on their own and relying less on parental guidance, it was really important to have that experience of Support and trust between us so that I feel more confident that as things arise, she can continue to come back to us for that.

Yael Schonbrun: So can I ask you for a twist on that situation? Like, what if when you had asked those open ended questions, she had responded by saying, saying something that didn't explain it. That, you know, she was, for example, this is obviously not the case, but it provided you with evidence that oh, she's sort of developing some character traits that really are out of line with what you and as a family would support and, be proud of.

And maybe that You know, she wasn't interested in collaborating with you or being receptive to your thoughts. She really just kind of wanted to do what felt good in the moment, even if it meant being unkind to somebody, or, doing something otherwise that felt unsavory for your family values.

How might you have used the framework of autonomy supported parenting in that situation?

Emily Edlynn: So a lot of it would be similar in the sense of really asking open ended questions, refraining from judgment and criticism, approaching them with how much you love them as a person regardless. But I think it would also include some more coaching around how could treating someone like that, um, end up backfiring?

I mean, you could ask different questions about what does it feel like to you if you were on the other end of that, where you ask more exploratory questions to help them develop more empathy. You might see that as, okay, here is an empathy blind spot that we need to work on. And in those situations, I think there is. a degree of this is not going to be one conversation and done, right? Like realizing, okay, this is something we need to be hands on about as parents and look for opportunities where we keep sprinkling in that it's important to treat people this way and using our values as a framework and continuing to have this dialogue with your child and also trying to understand what's at the root for them of treating someone in an unkind way.

Are they feeling like they don't belong and this is a way to be part of a peer group? What is driving this behavior for them? And the only way you're going to get to that is to keep this open dialogue.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. Well, I love that because it's sort of, it's getting curious about the function of a behavior, but with benefit of the doubt in hand that you have some faith in the goodness of your child. Even if in the moment you see a behavior that would suggest otherwise, it's, it's helpful to kind of remember, like, in general, I do think my child is good inside. Let's get curious about why this behavior, what, what role is it serving, what function is it getting to emotionally, what's going on. And having that open curiosity, compassionate curiosity, makes it much more likely that our kids are going to want to share more with us if they feel like we're going to be receptive to what's going on with them.

Emily Edlynn: Right, and as they go through different developmental stages, they're going to test out who they are as people and where they fit in the world with their social groups. I just want to tell parents, they will disappoint you. You know, it is part of growing up to try on things that Really aren't going to be who they are, but they're testing it out.

And I think as parents, it's keeping that relationship connected to allow for your influence. You know, you want to stay influential as best you can as they're going through this. And really being there for them as both a sounding board to help them work through it when things may fall apart with how they're trying

things out. but kind of realizing it's part of growing up and I think what happens is parents take it as a referendum on their own parenting. As my husband, I did in that moment. And

Yael Schonbrun: Where did we go wrong? I

Emily Edlynn: So if we can flip that and be like, okay, this is what our kid is supposed to do right now in middle school, for example, which is the time where most of this stuff happens. How can we show up for our kid in a way that is more of the long game?

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah, and I love the autonomy supportive parenting framework, too, in that When your kid tries something out that doesn't work that it is seen as like an opportunity for them to learn and grow and you're trying to foster that. So rather than saying, well, sometimes when you disappoint me, like, you know, let's talk about how not to do that.

It's actually, oh, you disappointed me, but it sounds like you disappointed yourself. And what is there to learn from that? If they were disappointed or if it worked well, what is there to learn from that and what might the consequences be down the road? So to see opportunities, however, they may feel in the moment as opportunities for growth and learning, because that's such an important part of becoming who we are.

And at the end of the day, that is really what autonomy supported parenting is trying to help our kids do is like help them become who they are.

Emily Edlynn: Exactly.

Yael Schonbrun: Okay, so we're sort of already starting to talk about autonomy, supportive parenting in action, and there's so many different directions that it could go in and that your book covers. So we'll give people a flavor, but there really is a lot in there. One of the questions that came from Psychologist Off the Clock co host Debbie, , is how can we get our kids engaged in chores like weeding, cleaning up, if they are resistant, because most kids are.

Should we make them? Bribe them? How much should we sort of push the issue if they are not internally motivated, which they are unlikely to be?

Emily Edlynn: I love this question. And I think. Childhood chores is a huge area of growth and opportunity for autonomy, supportive parenting. For one, I just recently read this statistic. It refreshed my mind that I knew this, but

something like over 80% of us parents had chores growing up and it's now our kids, about 28% have chores to do at home. so I mean, something has gone awry here and there are a lot of reasons we could get into, but I will say I make a very strong case that kids should be doing chores for all sorts of reasons. and you're right, if especially if they've already been growing up without having to do chores, what would be the motivation?

I mean, if I would love to have someone picking up after me all day. That would be fantastic, right? Why would I be motivated to do it myself?

Yael Schonbrun: does sound pretty good.

Emily Edlynn: So I think first the caregivers whoever's in charge of these kids needs to be really committed like needs to have their own motivation that this is really important for our family for these Bigger reasons than just having a cleaner kitchen floor like it's more about values and character Traits And how we function as a family.

So that's important to have that strong motivation going into it. But there's all kinds of ways to make this very autonomy supportive, even if at the beginning kids will not be motivated, most likely. I will say the younger kids will be more motivated, like the early childhood, because

they

Yael Schonbrun: just that you have to redo whatever the thing is.

Emily Edlynn: Yes, they love helping.

Oh, it's not really help, but they love quote unquote, folding the laundry.

It's a big mess,

Yael Schonbrun: Oh my god.

My youngest loves to help me bake, and every time he does, I'm like, it's gonna be so much cleanup.

Emily Edlynn: So messy. I know for those of us who don't like mess, it's, it's a real challenge,

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah.,

Emily Edlynn: I will say though, it's never too late. Like however old your kids are, it's okay, you know, and get on board and you can do this. So here's how I approached it in our family, and it is again the long game and it's been years in the making and it's definitely a part of the routine now, and we don't get any pushback from the older kids. So the suggestion is to approach chores and autonomy supportive way. Start with making a whole big list. If you think about it, there are all kinds of ways to help around the house. I mean, more ways than the kids are going to take on.

But the good part of that is that they will have a lot of choices and that is part of autonomy support is offering choices. Okay, you can talk to them about the rationale. Let's say your family hasn't done chores in its history. You're going to talk through why it's important to your family the reasoning being we all take care of the house together.

We are a team. We are responsible for our space as a unit. Not one person should be responsible for this whole space that everyone uses or however you want to frame it. So having a huge list of choices and having them choose, I mean, this is where scaffolding comes into if they've never done chores, they don't want to have 10 right away.

So you need to kind of start small and expect to work up to More tasks and greater responsibility. So you start where they feel the most comfortable. So whatever they like to do, if there's anything like my four year old, when he was four, he used to love wiping counters, you know, just give them the rag and some spray, whatever they have a kernel of, well, I kind of like to vacuum.

Okay, great. You know, pick a room. So starting with anything they like, even a little bit, and then they get to choose when they do it. And what we have is a visual schedule with the days of the week and they write down in their row when they do what, and of course we have to remind them, but it's a very clear expectation.

So then the consequences. So there has to be like, but what if they just say, I'm not doing it? You know, I don't want to, I'm not doing it.

Yael Schonbrun: I liked it the way we did it before, where you did everything. Yeah,

Emily Edlynn: When you did everything, that was awesome.

Yael Schonbrun: let's go back to that.

Emily Edlynn: So there does need to be, you need to work that out with, with your kids ahead of time, and this is another area that you can get their input before it's the heat of the moment where they're not going to have much input. But when you're kind of coming together as a family, and we're having a new plan, they're probably gonna be more likely to participate in that idea.

So to ask them, what do you think would motivate you to do this even on the day you don't want to do it? Like what would help make this happen even when you're not feeling like it? So maybe it's they do it first thing in the morning because they're tired after school. Maybe it's they can't Do their iPad time until it's done, whatever kind of external support can be put in place.

Yael Schonbrun: I'll interject that my oldest likes to listen to music while he does his chores, and I used to give them a piece of gum while they had to do a thing that they didn't like, and they would like chew while they did the thing, and it just made it more pleasant.

So, like pairing something that is fun with a thing that is less appealing.

Emily Edlynn: exactly. And that is another point of collaboration. Like, what would help make this more enjoyable. My kids are the same, you know, the ones that hate cleaning their rooms, they'll turn on music while they clean their room and it just helps it go by faster. They have seen me watch Real Housewives while I fold laundry to help my motivation. So then they'll say, well, you watch TV while you do that. Okay. You're right. So I think there are all kinds of ways to approach this where it doesn't feel like it's a punishment or it's such hard work. I mean, there's a lot of ways to make this just part of what we do in our family.

Yael Schonbrun: I love it. So values, trying to make it more fun. Giving them agency over picking what the thing is that they do and when and how they do it. and establishing some consequences or, or some motivators but that they're that establishing. So that gets to the question of why is it so bad this, this is sort of like at the heart of self-determination theory, but why is it so ineffective to approach things with consequences that, or, or rewards that are really parent driven. Like, you gave the example of, if you go to your class, then I will give you a donut. Another example that comes up a lot is, if you improve your grades, I will give you money.

Right?

Emily Edlynn: Right.

Yael Schonbrun: Why, why is that so problematic? What does the research say about that?

Emily Edlynn: So this is where the whole field of motivational research comes in, which is a huge part of autonomy supportive parenting because one of the goals of autonomy, supportive parenting in general is increasing a child's internal motivation across their areas of functioning. So that is including what they do at home and what they're doing at school, etc.

So how this all fits together is in the motivation research, external rewards.

And so, kids are not internalizing the meaning or purpose of a behavior. So there are kids that are going to get all A's because they know that's what their parents want. That's not internally motivating or meaningful to them. And those kids are more likely to flame out and not do as well in school in the long term.

So the evidence in motivation research is that the more internal motivation that kids have, the better they perform over time. So, it's really important with these autonomy supportive strategies that we're engendering this sense of why we do behaviors, why it's important, how it's Meaningful to you as a person.

So it may not feel meaningful to sweep the kitchen floor twice a week, but you are adding value to your family. You are a worthy person in your family that is helpful. And that needs to be important.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah, I love that and I love how you describe the research findings because it sort of makes it a lot easier to sort of explain like the, we don't want to, undermine our kids internal motivation by doing the motivation for them. But we want to sort of gently guide and the values can be a really helpful way to do it.

And I really do love this idea of, of highlighting that you're inviting them to be a contributing member to the family, that we actually talk about that in my household, that it feels really good to like help the family system. Like you're a part of it. And even though they might not love doing the chores, this is something very human.

It feels good to matter, to add value.

Emily Edlynn: Absolutely. And there's a lot of research to support that, that I don't fully get into in my book, but there's a lot out there. I don't know if we can talk about school because I think that is a huge area.

Yael Schonbrun: yeah, let's talk about school.

Emily Edlynn: I'm just taking over the interview.

Yael Schonbrun: I love it.

Emily Edlynn: So I think school is a real pitfall and academic achievement, especially has become a real pitfall for controlling parenting.

And there's a lot of reasons why around social comparison and what it means to succeed in today's world and keeping up with peers and getting into good colleges and all of that is wrapped up in this kind of general focus on external motivators for school performance and kids. But I see in my therapy practice, how damaging this is, you know, in addition to all the research that supports it, but it's really important as we're approaching school with our kids to be focused on the idea of internal motivation, and school is unfortunately full of external motivators that are not encouraging internal motivation. Grades are external motivators. I know we can't get rid of grades. That's not what I'm suggesting.

But just being aware that grades and test scores and parent expectations are all external motivators. And I think We as parents for the health of our children really need to pay attention to where their internal motivation is with school and be more flexible around how they're approaching school, what it means to them and aligning more with where they are with school instead of imposing.

I mean, this is a huge area of imposing our ideas of who they are on them.

Yael Schonbrun: So what might be some language that you might suggest for parents who are trying to help their kids connect more with internal motivation as opposed to being driven more by the external motivators in, in academic settings?

Emily Edlynn: So. I've listened to so many podcast episodes. I know that you talk a lot about growth mindset and so it's helping the conversation around academics in your house be focused more on process, what it feels like, what it's like for them to learn, how it feels for them to struggle, how it feels when they triumph, you know, when they do better than they expected. What it's like to

work hard and be prepared versus not study and not do well, but getting more their experience of it and what's important to them.

In my therapy practice, I always ask kids, are grades important to you? Like, I don't care about your parents, but what about you? Do you care about

Yael Schonbrun: do you think? I love, I love that question, , it seems so obvious, but as parents, we can ask our kids that. How important are grades to you, and and, and I do think though that there is some nuance to this and you get into this in your book, but you actually don't sort of in a black and white way discourage paying for things like chores.

So talk a little bit about allowance in the context of autonomy supported parenting. What, what's the thinking there?

Emily Edlynn: So I actually devoted a whole chapter to money because if you think about it, that is a huge part of autonomy. When you are conceptualizing autonomy as freedom money gives us freedom. It's not about the cash itself. It's about having more freedom in our lives in general. However, money also involves skill and things like budgeting and saving and making decisions. And so there's a lot of skills that go along with having money. So I really strongly promote the idea of all kids having money to work with and allowance is the most straightforward way to do that and it helps. Kids practice with making choices and understanding value and setting them up to be more financially responsible adults.

That's kind of the big picture.

Yael Schonbrun: Then there's sort of this follow up question, which is, should allowance be payment for contributions, or does that undermine the internal motivation?

Emily Edlynn: So I really combed the literature on this to see if there was a science based answer and there really wasn't. So I am going to say that this is more knowing your kids and how they operate. I know my kids would find other ways to make money and just say, I'm not doing chores. So I think that's the downside.

if you have a kid, let's say who loves Roblox or Fortnite, and there's the Roblox or the V bucks. Oh my gosh, it's so much to keep up with, but. That might be incredibly motivating, right? Even though that's a tangible, somewhat reward

that may be a huge motivator. And speaking of kids who are neurodivergent, that is often, they need a lot more rewards.

A lot more immediately to keep up, behaviors that they do not enjoy and they find boring. So that's an example of where you would give more rewards more often to kids that really do struggle neurologically with boring tasks.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. One thing that I think is helpful though is that it doesn't necessarily have to be either or. And I think that's maybe why the answer is a little bit nuanced. I mean, we can feel motivated at work and get paid and we ideally want both, right? So maybe we can support our kids in having both. Like if we're giving them rewards or celebrating the contributions that they're making, we can still foster a sense of meaning in the doing itself that is.

Emily Edlynn: Well, and a lot of what's been misconstrued in the media about the motivation research around rewards. The studies are with tasks that people already enjoy and then get money for, and that decreases enjoyment. So that is different than a task that is unenjoyable and undesirable and I think there's a sense of kick starting a behavior with external motivators to just help it become familiar and a habit, and we have to kind of start somewhere, especially with certain kids.

They need more of that external structure.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah, and then the more familiar you are and the more habitual it is, the less aversive it is, too. And that's where you can sort of open up to attach meaning and more internal motivation once it doesn't feel so awful to do the thing. So there's flexibility and nuance and lots of paths to building internal motivation and to supporting our kids autonomy. We're running out of time, but I really wanted to make sure that I got to this question, because this is something that I think about a lot and that I know comes up for a lot of parenting peers, which is, The tension between supporting our kids independence and autonomy and privacy and our concerns about their safety.

So this can lead us to doing things that are distinctly not autonomy supportive, like checking their texts or, um, their search history on the internet, you know, if they've been perusing, or calling parents and asking, you know, what happened or a teacher. And so how do we sort of navigate that from an autonomy supportive parenting perspective when we might be concerned about their safety?

Not necessarily their physical safety, although possibly, but like their emotional safety, their psychological safety, their developmental safety. And yet, you know, again, there's that tension.

Emily Edlynn: Yes, absolutely. And I think being in touch with the idea that our fear and worry may be. Magnifying the actual risk. And so I know that when my first child entered cell phone land and I felt almost like I was a bad parent if I didn't constantly check what was happening on her cell phone and then it created a lot of disruption.

And conflict in our relationship, which I actually address in the book. And I realized this isn't working. And I'm having these visions of horrible things happening to her with zero evidence that anything bad is happening, and she was feeling very not trusted, and that was a bigger problem than my hypothetical, abstract, these bad things could happen.

And so, every kid's gonna be different, and there are absolutely kids that, I mean, you know your kid best, and there are some kids who just generally have poor judgment, or are vulnerable to peer pressure and influence, or more impulsive. And some kids are going to need more oversight. I think it's more tuning into where you're coming into it as a parent.

Are you coming in anxious and full of what ifs? Or are you entering in with evidence of your specific child's risk for certain things happening and that you need to keep an eye and remembering that this is another area for scaffolding where you may need to be having more monitoring and supervision in the beginning and as they grow and get more skills. You can back off on that and, but have conversations with them about, I really admire how you are very responsible with your phone or how you use Instagram or whatever it is. And I see that you're handling this really well. I mean, it's good to give them that feedback. , But I think it's important to just be really tuned into where the actual risk is.

For example, I mean, we know there's a difference between conflict and bullying. It's easy for parents to hear about conflict and call it bullying, but it's not. And kids really need to navigate that without adults most of the time.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah, I talked about this a bit with Lenore Skenazy on our episode where we, discussed her book *Free Range Kids* and there is all sorts of cognitive biases that really grow quite intense when we're concerned, when we're operating from that fear based place where we start to overestimate the risk and do a lot of what if ing and, and get very black and white and, and.

It's not just costly for our psyche and like our stress levels, it actually interferes with our children's ability to learn and grow and have those experiences that are really critical for learning how to navigate conflict, as you know, in the example that you gave. So, I think that this advice is so powerful.

I just want to finish with a quote from your book that I really loved, which is the penultimate goal of parenting for autonomy is to raise a child to be who they are, not who we think they are or who we want them to be. And I think so many of the practices that you share, the personal examples, I want to give this huge round of applause to like the age specific sections and the scripts for various ways to give language in being an autonomy supportive parenting.

Compared to being a controlling, a more controlling parent in all sorts of specific circumstances. As you mentioned, like from allowance to social life, to digital life, to specific topics in parenting. Like when your child is struggling with anxiety, depression, or other behavioral issues. It's a really rich book for parents and kids across developmental spectrum and in so many areas of life.

And I hope people pick up the book and I just wanted to invite you to share where else can listeners get more from Dr. Emily Edlynn.

Emily Edlynn: Thank you so much, Yael. It's been such an honor and pleasure to talk to you today. People can find me at my website, emilyedlinphd.com, and I have a blog there, as well as a sub stack where you can find me. And I have a weekly newsletter about autonomy supportive parenting in real life. I call it the Autonomy Supportive Parenting Diaries.

And then I am on Instagram and Twitter and LinkedIn at Dr. Emily Edlynn, and then on Facebook, you can find me under art and science of mom, which is the name of my blog.

Yael Schonbrun: Awesome. thank you for your amazing work and thank you for sharing this time with me. I really appreciate it.

Emily Edlynn: Thank you.

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