

# School of Hard Talks with Emily Kline

**Emily Kline:** [00:00:00] I saw a funny, , TikTok reel. That was just a little a snap of a girl saying, strict parents make sneaky kids. and I think that kind of sums it up. , you know, there's, again, there are kids who sort of by temperament are eager to please and compliant. , but then there's everybody.

**Yael Schonbrun:** That was Emily Klein on Psychologist Off the clock. 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 [00:01:00] 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.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Hi everyone. This is Yael here with Jill to talk about an episode about difficult conversations, which I think is such an important topic and one that I, uh, think about a lot as a couple's therapist and then somebody who's in lots of relationships in my marriage, with my kids, with my colleagues and conversations can sometimes be really challenging.

So . It was really terrific to get to talk to Emily Klein, whose new book is called The School of Hard Talks, how to Have Real Conversations With Your Almost Grown Kids. And what I think is really important here is that even though the book is really focused on conversations with our adolescents, So many of the

principles that she draws and, and we go into [00:02:00] a lot of detail about this, but

these skills are widely applicable to all kinds of difficult relationships.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, I, well, yeah. I absolutely loved this episode. Like people can't see my, but you can see me, the, these are the notes that I was taking. It's a lot, it's a lot of notes. I mean, I was like doing my hair while I was listening and I brought my notebook upstairs with me so that I could take notes while I was listening.

And you know, part of that is because I have an almost 11 year old and these, these difficult conversations are starting to, Arise, you know, in this kind of like tween stage. But I, I found the, the, the episode just really applicable. You know, something that I can take and use. Oh, and I've already subscribed to her Instagram and spent like 15 minutes looking through.

Um, do you remember what it was? You, you, you say what it is at the end of the

**Yael Schonbrun:** The Instagram handle is learn about Milo, which stands for motivational interviewing for loved ones.

**Jill Stoddard:** Right. And I already started delving [00:03:00] into a bunch of their reels and I, I mean, I think this is gonna become a huge resource for me. And one of the things I wanted to ask is, as you just mentioned, These principles don't just apply to teens or don't, don't just apply to parent-child relationships, but to your couple relationships, et cetera.

But I was curious, you know, since you're a parenting expert too, if you think that the principles are the same even for younger kids or if there are things that would need to be modified. So one thing specifically, she talks about after going through several steps in terms of the, the best way to go about having these conversations, there's sort of a piece where she says something to the effect of, you know, ultimately this is up to you, or ultimately this is your decision because I can't follow you around all day. And she might say, you know, might express like what my concerns are, but kind of ultimately it's up to you. And, and I was wondering, you know, would that be the same tact do you think with someone who, you know, for example, I have a, a recently turned nine year old where it feels like [00:04:00] there needs to be a little bit.

Like, so you guys talk about the hygiene thing, the, the trying to get kids to, to have good hygiene. I have a hard time getting my kid to brush his teeth. And would that be something where I might say like, listen, ultimately this is, this is up to you. I can't follow you into the bathroom and hold the toothbrush for you. What are your thoughts on that?

**Yael Schonbrun:** So I think that that's a really great question and I do think that the way that we talk to a two-year-old is obviously gonna differ than how we talk to a 17 year old. And, and you know, obviously there's gradations in between with your nine year old and of course it depends on, on who you are and how you talk and the kinds of conversation that works well with your kids.

So there's all sorts of ways that we need to be flexible. But the fundamental thing that we're getting at is that we want to acknowledge that our kids, regardless of their age, right, like even in infancy, Humans have some agency and we're driven to want some agency. That is true at every age. And I just wanted to mention this terrific book that just recently came out.

The author is [00:05:00] Adam Ferrato. He's actually in, uh, a, a legal scholar. Um, but the book is called A Minor Revolution, how Prioritizing Kids. Benefits us all. And what was so interesting about this book, cuz it's not something I typically think about, like you think about children's rights as an issue of like the, you know, 19 hundreds, but he argues that it is still an issue and that we need to be more attentive to the reality that often we overlook children's rights that we.

neglect to see them as a whole person who has agency and, and desires that might differ than ours. So getting, and I just think it's a really important thing to be thinking about, and I really recommend this book . But to get back to your question, I think that we can acknowledge and and really be explicit about the agency and the rights that our nine year old has, just the way that we would with our 17 year old, but also maybe be firmer about the consequences. And Emily talks a lot about this, that the [00:06:00] goal of her book is not to say, oh, well you have agency and I can't control you, and therefore go do whatever you want.

That isn't at all her message. It's more to recognize that by. Being explicit about our recognition that our child, at whatever age they are, has agency, that we can do a couple of things. One is to foster the connection between us, right? Because when we acknowledge that other people have agency, it's actually good for our connection and that turns out to have a good amount of leverage.

So if I acknowledge to my partner, like, I can't control what you do, and I respect your right to, to make those choices, that makes them feel more likely to turn towards me. The same thing goes with our kids again at every age. So the other thought that I had is that it, your question reminds me of a conversation that I had with Zoe Chance on our episode about, , influences your superpower and she gave this anecdote of a two year old niece or nephew I can't recall now, which, um, and how even at that very tender young age little kids, [00:07:00] are really insistent on their agency.

If you tell them, we, you have to go outside, they're gonna dig their heels in, even if it's something that they want to do. This is just a fundamental, innate human drive, is to want to assert our agency. And so when we do that, the paradoxical thing is we end up having more influence with our kids often because we've nurtured that connection.

So it's. Recognizing their agency, nurturing the connection. And I do think as a parent, you know, it is about being clear about the consequences, both the consequences that they're gonna face in their own life, uh, you know, based on the choices that they make, but also that we have consequences that are established in the household.

**Jill Stoddard:** Right, and I liked the way she tied. Talking about consequences to the kids' personal values because, you know, some consequence I impose like taking away your iPad or something, you know, may not really be tied to whatever it is that we're talking about. But if I'm talking about, you know, maybe the consequences to your [00:08:00] relationships at school, and I know that's something that really matters to my kid, that that may be a more effective way to motivate behavior change.

**Yael Schonbrun:** A hundred percent. And I think that one of the things that's important there is to make sure that you're not getting into, , what can be experienced as manipulation with your kid or whoever your communication partner is because, you know, for example, you know, it can feel manipulative. In certain cases, if you use your relationship, like, if you don't do this, then I'm not gonna want to be close to you or to give you certain things for your birthday or what have you.

But, and that, that is why using the values instead can be so much more empowering cuz I know that this is important to you and implicitly you're both communicating consequences and you're communicating their. , like I see you as an independent person who has their own preferences that sometimes aren't gonna align perfectly to mine.

And I respect that. And again, if you, if you can sort of allow for that, it helps the other person wanna lean back [00:09:00] into the relationship with you, which is ultimately I think what we all want. I mean, we both want. our kids to behave in certain ways for their health and and success in life, but we also want to nurture a relationship, an ongoing relationship with them.

Those are both important things to be thinking about as we're having these hard talks.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, and it may not always feel like it, but our kids wanna have that with us.

**Yael Schonbrun:** That is a really important note to end on, so we hope that you get a lot out of this, um, conversation that I had with Emily Klein. Stay tuned to the, to the end because we go through lots of really relatable clinical examples and she offers language and principles that we can each use in the hardest kinds of conversations that we have in our close relationships.

Emily Klein is a clinical psychologist and assistant professor of psychiatry at Boston University School of Medicine. She is the author of *The School of Hard Talks, how to Have Real Conversations with Your Almost Grown Kids* and the creator of the School of [00:10:00] Hard Talks online.

She's published dozens of articles appearing in a range of peer reviewed scholarly journals, textbooks and popular magazines, and has spoken with audiences all over the world about mental health and interpersonal communication. And I also love the last sentence of her author bio in her book, which is that Emily lives with her husband and children who graciously beta test her experiments in family communication and a dog who can't be reasoned with at all.

Welcome, Emily.

**Emily Kline:** Thank you.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Your book is awesome. you asked if I would be willing to blurb it and it the request came at a time when I was extremely busy and so I was like, I'm not really sure. But then I picked it up and I couldn't put it down cuz it was so good.

So I just wanna start off with a huge compliment to making a real wealth of information so accessible and fun to. . And I also wanna note that even though

your book, the School of Hard Talks focuses on conversations with kids, I'd argue that it's really applicable for having conver hard conversations with anyone, partners, colleagues, friends, extended family [00:11:00] members.

Um, and I don't know if you get that feedback from others, but it really felt true to me as I was reading it.

**Emily Kline:** That's such a huge compliment. , thank you. And yes. You know, my husband is like, this could be like the Chicken Soup franchise in the 1990s. Remember that? It's

**Yael Schonbrun:** Oh

**Emily Kline:** can have hard talks with coworkers, hard talks with your parents. , you know, so maybe. Poured all of my, um, experience and my wealth of clinical, knowledge about working with teenagers and young adults into this book.

But that's true of course that these principles aren't limited to teenagers or young adults at all.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. They're just a really good example of a population that's hard to talk to, but it's the skill that can really be transferred to lots of different target audiences. All right, so the skill is based on this adaptation from the therapy room. So you take this treatment called motivational interviewing, and the skills that we build as clinicians, In motivational interviewing and adapt them for use [00:12:00] with adolescents.

And the guiding principles, and I'm gonna quote from your book, are recognition of your child's personhood and inner world, curiosity about their experiences and optimism about the possibility of meaningful conversation and mutual understanding. So I wanna start with this broad question. What if you don't believe those things are possible with your adolescent or with whomever it is that you're trying to have a hard conversation?

**Emily Kline:** that is a big question. I guess my own curiosity, , kind of swells at that question. Like, well, why not help me understand that? What has made it so that you feel so hopeless about this situation?

, and a lot of the times when I work with parents, , they grapple with their own ambivalence as we work through these ideas, you know, where they're like, . Okay, that sounds good, but there's no way I could pull off talking like that, or I



don't know if that would work with my kid. And [00:13:00] I just try and kind of model the skills that I talk about in the book in those moments, because I really do believe in them.

You know, I reflect their ambivalence. I say, sounds like you're, you're not really feeling it. You know, maybe this part isn't for you. And usually in the end they're like, well, I have you for x number of hours, so just teach me the thing and I'll, I'll, I'll try it if I feel like it.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah, and I guess the thing that I was specifically thinking about was this last piece of optimism about the possibility of meaningful conversation and mutual understanding, because if you've had this. You know, protracted history or an set of experiences with a child or anybody else where it doesn't feel like they wanna enter into that space with you.

It might, it, it's like a learned helplessness thing where you begin to feel this sense of, well, why would I bother to try if I'm just gonna get electrocuted? Kind of a metaphorically speaking.

**Emily Kline:** Yeah. And I do think that's kind of an important caveat, , to the skills and it's, it's a little bit of an odd place to start our conversation, but, , [00:14:00] there are relationships that are not necessarily worth repairing, right. . So, you know, I think of people who I've talked to whose parents, are abusive or who have, um, a spouse who's abusive.

And those, you know, or, or I work with a lot of, you know, my, my own specialization is, , in bipolar disorder, schizophrenia. So even though I work with a lot of families who aren't struggling with those conditions, the majority of my clients are, , not necessarily the. Struggling with those diagnoses, but they are coming to see me about a child who is, and sometimes it's not the right time to try and make conversation.

, if things have escalated to, you know, a level of volatility where safety is not assured, , or somebody is just so confused and in their thinking. You're, you're not gonna be able to reach them. It's okay to save the skills for later. Um, [00:15:00] and it's not, it's not always gonna be a good fit right now.

**Yael Schonbrun:** So it is kind of a funny place to start, but I actually had written down this great quote that I think is sort of, it's both disheartening and heartening at the same time, and it's kind of a long quote, but I'm gonna read it because it seems really important for parents .

Who are, are tuning into this episode thinking that they can gain skills and prevent bad outcomes. And that is not what you're saying. So the coco, this follows, do you want to know the big secret about , serious mental illness, the number one thing that parenting experts and gurus won't tell you.

Are you ready? Okay. Here you go. , it can happen to anyone. The most patient, present, organized, and authoritative parent in the world cannot prevent illnesses like depression, bipolar disorders, schizophrenia, eating disorders, or anxiety from taking hold of their child. I don't write that to scare you though.

The fact of it is terrifying. I write it because there are legions of experts, many of whom believe in their own bs, who promise that if you follow their program, buy their book or pay for their advice, then your child will grow up to be hardworking, em, [00:16:00] empathetic, intelligent, thin, and especially, especially.

Not mentally ill. So I wanted to include this quote and ask you why it's so important to start there when you are advocating for this particular approach to parenting.

**Emily Kline:** So, you know, in order to really explain it, it might be helpful to tell you a little bit about sort of where the book comes from. , so I've been working, , mostly in serious mental illness in my career in mental health. Um, so I've worked with. , older folks, younger folks, um, but I, I've treated so many people who have, mostly schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, major depressive disorder.

, that's really where I've lived for most of my career. And then I had, , this kind of, , revelation about. , the importance of the family. And there's, I'm not the first person to think this. Obviously, there's been a lot of amazing work that's gone into, , kind of undoing the, the decades of harm of, psychologists and psychiatrists who really thought that, these mental illnesses were caused [00:17:00] directly by, , parenting.

You know, Melanie Klein as like a waitlist, wrote about ambivalent, the ambivalent mother, the good breast and the bad breast.

, really thinking that some subtle behavior, present in a parent-child relationship on the part of the parent could cause the illness, to happen.

And, and that is so deep in our culture right now, I think. Um, . But what I realized through working with these families is that they're really nice. And if



you really look at the research, the big predictors of serious mental illness seem to lie in the realm of, , there's clearly genetic influences, there are environmental influences.

, but parenting style outside of sort of extremes of, abusive and neglectful parenting, , parenting style doesn't seem to be a major predictor at all. So as I worked with these families, the other thing I realized is that, , you know, I have someone in my office or on Zoom for [00:18:00] maybe 50 minutes once a week.

, . And often when I would do a, a check-in with the parents, what we call collateral call, , they would be just bursting at the seams with questions and information, , about, you know, sort of how do, how should I manage this? How do I get my kid to take a shower? , some days they take their medication and some days I'm not sure, what should I do about that?

Um, and just realizing that fa that parents and families in general are such an asset to treatment, , and that if we. Families more than, , the people themselves who are struggling to recover from the mental illness will do better. And, and the research really shows that. , and in particular, so many of the questions I would get from family members were about behavior.

How do I get my kid to blank? , you know, that was the big one. And, and I would say the big ones are like, come out of their room, take medication, stop smoking so much weed. , and then just the more sort of pro-social things like come to family dinner or, , you know, call their [00:19:00] friends. They seem really isolated, so.

**Yael Schonbrun:** I, I get a lot of, um, hygiene,

**Emily Kline:** Hi. Yeah. How do I get my kid to take a shower? To contribute to household chores? Absolutely. So I realized that if the person themselves was in front of me, I would use motivational interviewing. That's my tool set for this kind of challenge. Um, but I didn't have the person in front of me, and yet the parent was with them all day long.

So I thought, okay, can I teach the parent this skillset? and I got, um, a series of research grants to actually be able to explore that question through clinical trials. And, , it was really successful. The parents loved it. , they saw a lot of benefits and, , the more parents I worked with, the more they said, well, I really wish I had learned this, you know, for my other kids.

Like, these are just really useful. That you've given me and why did I have to go through this horrible experience of my child having schizophrenia in order to learn these basic [00:20:00] communication skills that are just so helpful in life. , and so I kind of ran with that and started working with the families with more typical concerns.

, and the book really grew out of that kind of , what would be helpful for everyone to know. , even though I had started kind of in what I call the deep end of mental health with these families really going through.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. Well, and so one more question before I move on to get into the particulars of what motivational interviewing and teaching that actually looks like, which is, um, this piece that is, what we call expressed emotion. So this is an interesting area of research that I think historically has gotten misunderstood.

And you talk about it in your book and I wonder if you could share what we know about expressed emotion and how that can actually empower parents. Would that, that the danger is in blaming them, but actually we can see this in a more empowering way.

**Emily Kline:** Yeah. So, , I don't know if your listeners will be familiar with expressed emotion. Some of them probably will be. , I often get really funny looks at a conference if I bring [00:21:00] up expressed emotion because, , it's seen as sort of retrograde like, you know, along like it got tossed out alongside the schizophrenic mother.

But what expressed emotion really refers to is a quality of communication, , that refers to communication. That is, , well negative expressed emotion is communication that is, high in criticism and high in over involvement. So those are kind of the two main facets of negative expressed emotion. And I'll give you, , some examples of what that might look like.

it's if somebody, you, you take your orange juice cup out of the. Out of the cupboard and somebody says, oh, don't use that one for juice. That's the wrong one for juice. And then you pour the juice and you go, do you really need that much? And then you just go, oh, it's so stressful just to watch you in my kitchen.

Let me just do it for you. Right. So it's very, it's, it's not necessarily mean, but it is critical and it's [00:22:00] over-involved, this inability to kind of distance oneself from the behavior. And I myself have a lot of expressed emotion toward

my kids. Like I'm not above this, , above this quality, right? Like if one of my kids is struggling in school, , I find it really hard to concentrate at work.

I, I find myself getting really emotionally, , um, over-involved with that. Like I cannot compartmentalize. , so I think it's a really natural state of mind, especially when your kids are struggling. , but what the research shows is that families who are high in expressed emotion, whose child is going through a major mental illness, and this research actually started in schizophrenia, but has been replicated in lots of different areas like anxiety, eating disorders, and even non-psychiatric illnesses like diabetes.

And, epilepsy shows that parents who are high in expressed emotion are more likely to have kids who struggle more, have a tougher course with recovery. . [00:23:00] And I think the reason for that is not any magical quality. It's that, , it's a stressful way to be. It means there's a lot of stress in the house.

And also that, , there may be a lot of power struggles going on between adolescents or young adults or even, um, all grown up adults and their parents. , and those are stressful and often don't bring out your most, your best thinking no matter who you are on both. . But the concept of expressed emotion really came to be associated with like the schizophrenic mother in other ways of kind of blaming parents for their kids' problems.

, but I, I have a more optimistic read of it, which is that if we can recognize our own tendencies toward expressed emotion, and learn to kind of check that, cope with it in a healthy way, and try and get a little bit more distance. Try and re-channel all of that energy into something else, [00:24:00] rather than, , you know, fixing everything your kid does.

, that, that is actually an empowering thing for parents to know and, and potentially an important thing. Parents to know. And if we choose to withhold this line of research from people in sort of a paternalistic way, , that's sort of just as bad as blaming parents for their kids' problems.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. And I really do think that it's much, it, it can be more bidirectional than we realize. Cuz if you have a kid who has a predisposition for illness of various kinds of schizophrenia, bipolar, depression, anxiety, it, you may be. to be more in that caretaker management role. And so it kind of makes sense that you would have higher expressed emotion.

I mean, the example that you gave is so apt because when your kid is having a hard time, that is when you notice your expressed emotion growing. And that's

certainly the case for me. Right? Or when I'm having a harder time, it's sort of my own emotions. Uh, Detach from my kids, my own emotions can sort of come out [00:25:00] stronger with them.

It's like this way of ma where our emotions kind of get out of our control and we feel like to get back in control, we, we sort of amplify and get into this more controlling managerial role and recognizing that that's happening and then making more deliberate decisions about how to respond to our own internal experience, I think is so helpful.

And that's why I really love how you frame it in the.

**Emily Kline:** Yeah, it is hard. I mean, when, when somebody's kid is in crisis, you really do have to take over, you know, I mean you, it's not expressed emotion to say. We need to take you to the hospital or you really need to take your medicine. , or, you know, the amount of drugs and alcohol that you're using is really unhealthy and we have to figure out how to, how to reduce.

I mean, that's not expressed emotion. That's being a good caregiver. . But then what's really hard is that, you know, eventually you do have to hand control back over.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Well that's a really nice segue into talking about [00:26:00] motivational interviewing and sort of the central core tenants that you're bringing into this space because, all right, so what is motivational? How is motivational interviewing helpful?

Should you have a child who, who might. Be doing things that are dangerous, taking substances, expressing suicidal thinking, um, not taking care of their bodies. In what ways does motivational interviewing help us in the face of the fact that we're gonna have big feelings and, and worries and a, a desire or an appropriate desire to really monitor the safety of our kids?

**Emily Kline:** So here's a conversation I've had a lot of times. Um, when parents know that their kid is doing something self-destructive or just unhealthy, um, they say, well, I just, you know, I, I can't have that. I'm just gonna have to put my foot down. That's a phrase that we say a lot in our culture.

And there's some kids who you can say, you are absolutely not allowed to drink alcohol. I'm putting my foot down, you know that this, , turn of phrase that we have and, , [00:27:00] the, the teenager or the young adult says, okay, mom,

that's not where I tend to live. You know, in my clinical practice, I don't, those aren't my families necessarily.

, and, but I know there, it doesn't mean that your kid has serious mental illness. It's just a lot of kids aren't necessarily gonna be that compliant just because their parent has strong feelings. , I know that in my own adolescence I was secretive. I knew that my parents would disapprove of a lot of my behavior, so I simply made sure they wouldn't find out about it.

So I always ask parents, okay, help me understand what that looks like for you. What does it look like when you put your foot down and you know, how has that worked in the past? Because the fact of the matter is by the time your child is 15, 16, 17 years old, actually a lot of the times there's very little you can do to control their behavior.

even when it's something that you have really strong feelings about, like using drugs or alcohol, [00:28:00] and that is a very tough pill to swallow. And at the same time, I think it's absolutely a necessary thing for people to grapple with so that they can really think about. Realistically, what influence do I have and how can I be more effective at trying to encourage my child to have healthier behaviors?

And when I say you can't control, that doesn't mean I think you should give up. You know, I wouldn't have written a book. About that. It's like there's not much to say about it. It's like, oh, let your kid do whatever they want. They'll figure it out eventually. , that's not my message. It's you have to recognize your lack of control in order to be more effective.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. In the couple's therapy room, I often, so I'm dealing with two consenting adults, so it's a little bit different than dealing with an adolescent. But what I always tell couples is you have to give up control in order to gain influence, and the science is strong. And I think that that's really what MI is all [00:29:00] about.

What motivational interviewing is all about is giving up control so that you can have more influence in these difficult. in these tricky relationships.

**Emily Kline:** Exactly. Yeah. Yeah.

**Yael Schonbrun:** So there's so many paradoxes in motivational interviewing. It it because it is really about giving up control in order to gain influence. And y I'm gonna. Read another quote and I, I want you to sort of help us understand

this paradox. So you write paradoxically, adolescents are often more willing to follow the advice and direction of supportive parents than those who demand, obedience. How can we understand why that's true?

**Emily Kline:** I saw a funny, , TikTok reel. That was just a little a snap of a girl saying, strict parents make sneaky kids. and I think that kind of sums it up. , you know, there's, again, there are kids who sort of by temperament are eager to please and compliant. , but then there's everybody.[00:30:00]

Um, and so kids, when they, when we become adolescents, it's just developmentally normal that we start questioning, um, rules and norms, you know, and start running it through our own sense making machinery. Um, and that means that just because I said so, doesn't really cut it anymore with. Teenagers and certainly with young adults who are figuring out their own way of being in the world, um, the norms that they wanna subscribe to and what is normal for their social group and what's gonna help them succeed and fit in.

so they may not accept parents' rules anymore, and if parents aren't willing to sort of have a back and forth conversation, what may happen to you is what happens to me often in therapy when I realize I'm being too pushy, which is that my client smiles nods and leaves [00:31:00] and that's it. I didn't, they didn't do what I said.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. And then they come back and if they come back they, they definitely haven't done what you said,

**Emily Kline:** but the real, but then, but as you, the real question is if they come back because, um, you know, we're not inviting people to continue the conversation when we insist that we are right and we know what's best for them.

**Yael Schonbrun:** So what, so maybe we can get. , I have a, maybe I'll sort of include a couple of clinical case scenarios and you can talk us through the what to-dos. But say you have an adolescent who is sneaking drugs, right? Who, and, and you've discovered that they have a stash of, I don't know, pot in their backpack, and you say, absolutely not.

Right? That doesn't work. They exit the conversation. Sure, mom, whatever. I'm gonna do it now. I'll just be more sneaky and sly about it. What do you recommend that parents do instead?

**Emily Kline:** Okay. So in, um, the book, I kind of lay out a [00:32:00] few foundational skills that you have to kind of become fluent in, but there's only a



couple of them, so it's really not very hard. Um, and then once you have those, You're pretty well equipped to go into a conversation, so I like to start a conversation with a statement of fact.

Um, I know I found drugs in your backpack, right? I'm not trying to catch you. Like, did you do drugs? Were there drugs in your backpack? Um, I don't like that kind of test to see if a kid is lying to me. Um, I like to just start with what I know, uh, and say it clearly. With as little judgment as possible. So there's, you know, there's weed in your backpack or there's a vape pen in your backpack.

Um, and just see what they say. Right? We'll just start there and then stop talking and see what they say, um, because they may. Say something interesting, , um, or at least, I mean, anything they say is gonna be inter should be [00:33:00] interesting to you because even though you have strong feelings about this and you really don't want them doing it, and by the way, um, I really don't want my kids to choose marijuana when they're adolescents.

That is something I'll feel strongly about. I know, I, I, I, this is another sort of, one of my research interests and, and I feel really strongly about it.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Wait, just, is it as a quicker side? Why?

**Emily Kline:** Oh, I mean, so, you know, I've done, I like, again, one of my sort of other research interests is, um, cannabis and, and psychosis and youth mental health in general.

And I think we're seeing, um, more evidence that, um, legalization is, is growing the market overall. It's not just displacing. Illegal market, um, that we're seeing higher concentrations of T H C and that people who use, um, often in early and high concentration products, um, are at very high risk for [00:34:00] serious mental illness actually.

And that's not something I think that the public really understands.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah, it's a little bit of a p s a right public service announcement cuz it isn't well known. Right. I think we start to believe that, you know, as we're legalizing cannabis, that it, it's some, it's a sign that it's perfectly safe. And

that's not the whole truth.



**Emily Kline:** Yeah. Or that people who have mental illness who smoke a lot are self-medicating. And that may be true, but it's a bidirectional relationship. And um, I think we have pretty good science at this point that, um, suggests that. There are people who have schizophrenia, who would have had a, a latent and unexpressed vulnerability for that illness if they had not smoked so much weed.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Hmm.

**Emily Kline:** that's scary

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah, it is scary. Okay, so you have strong feelings

**Emily Kline:** Okay, so you have strong feelings.

**Yael Schonbrun:** But, but just to sort of bring, so you start with the statement of fact rather than a question, and you try to make that statement a fact as judgment free as possible, and then you pause [00:35:00] and see what the other person's gonna say.

**Emily Kline:** And when you do that pause mentally you commit to whatever the other person says. I'm just gonna reflect. I'm just gonna reflect. I'm not gonna get into it. I'm not gonna get into my own opinion. Um, I am secure that this conversation will last long enough that I will have my say.

But the really important thing right now if I wanna have an influence is to listen. So you say your statement of fact and you stop talking and you mentally commit that whatever your kid or young adult says about this, I'm gonna reflect. So they might say, okay, so, you were holding it for a. You know, whether I believe that or not, or I say, okay, so for you, this feels really normal.

It's something that everyone in your peer group is doing. Or, it was the first time you ever tried it. Okay? And usually a good reflection will encourage someone to keep talking. Um, not always, [00:36:00] but usually. and you get to learn more. Um, and the reason that it's important to learn more is a couple things.

One, because the advice that we give has to be tailored to the situation. If I just walk into the room and say, marijuana is bad, you shouldn't be using it. It's dangerous. It can cause mental illness. , and you know, , you could incur all kinds of other consequences, , because it's not allowed in school, it's not allowed in sports, blah, blah, blah.

I might not be giving information that that person doesn't already know, or I might be, I might not be sort of tailoring my information to the actual question or concern that that person has. So for, I'll, let me just keep going with this example. So say my kid is actually, , using a lot of marijuana, , and they know it's bad for them and they can feel that [00:37:00] it's affecting their mood and they're very worried about getting caught and getting in trouble at school.

, but they're having trouble cutting. , , or say the opposite, that this is not something that my kid is into, , but they truly did just try it for the first time. , those are different. My advice for those two kids is actually gonna be pretty different. , right? And if I don't listen long enough to know that difference, I'm not gonna be giving, , specific and appropriate and helpful advice.

So that's one reason that it's important to listen. The other reason it's important to listen is to enhance my own credibility. You know, we listen to people. It's, it's kind of maybe like a narcissistic facet of human behavior or something. But we think people are smart when they understand. right,

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. The other, this is related to to this point, which is that as parents and as partners, we [00:38:00] often think we know exactly what the other person is thinking, feeling what they're gonna say before they say it, and, . I think that there is some narcissism to that. Most people are more interesting and surprising.

Not to mention it feels insulting to have somebody say to you, I know what you're gonna say before you even say it. It feels diminishing. So there is something that is just going to help with the connection if you listen deeply.

**Emily Kline:** It's a big principle of sort of mindfulness and my, my limited understanding of, of Buddhism is to try and maintain that beginner's mind mentality that I don't really know everything about this person and I can always ask myself what. Have I never noticed before? Um, and I think that that is something that I tried to write about in the book because, um, it's such, it, it restores, I think, an important piece of parenting.

And I think when we raise our kids from being little and we've fed [00:39:00] them almost every meal of their life and we've wiped their butts, you know, for the first three years that they're like, it can feel hard to be surprised by this person, but, um, it's really. lovely to actually be surprised by your kids and to try and cultivate an unknowingness about them.

I, when mom said to me, this is one of the parents who was in one of my studies, she said, wow, I keep looking for the teachable moments when I should really be looking for the listening moments. You know, when can I learn something about him?

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. I so feel that, and honestly, it's one of my favorite parts about parenting and something I think about a lot when I'm doing parent coaching myself is that, you know, to, to cultivate that sense of wonder with your child is so much fun as a parent, right? Sometimes they say the weirdest, most surprising things.

Sometimes they say the most wise things and you're like, I gave birth to that person. That's amazing. [00:40:00] And you know, sometimes you're disappointed and you're like, oh, where did that come from? And it's, it's, it's eye-opening, I think, to cultivate that sense of curiosity and wonder. And we don't do it enough with our kids or with our partners.

I, I'd also argue,

**Emily Kline:** Yeah. Yeah. It's harder with your partner sometimes even than with your kid, cuz kids are always growing and changing. But, um, I can see, you know, sometimes I am working with, um, with people who I say, okay, so you know, you, this would be a good time in the conversation to ask a question. And they do say, well, I already know what she'll say.

Um, and that. . Yeah, that's, that is, like you say, it's, it's diminishing and it's, it's very pessimistic. But I think, um, like you said, it's a form of learned helplessness that people are anxious about at, at, you know, questions make everybody anxious. I teach a lot.

**Yael Schonbrun:** it breeds uncertainty and we don't like uncertainty.

**Emily Kline:** And, and the questions are hard to ask.

You [00:41:00] know, when you're teaching and I give lectures to medical students and the residents and the psychology students at bu and I go in, I ask a, a question, I might be standing for a couple minutes. It's not minutes, hopefully seconds. It feels like ours. Um, hoping somebody will say something. And the same thing I think happens in our intimate relationships, but even scarier because you're that much more vulnerable.

Um, if you ask somebody a question, um, they might. Disappoint you. They might let you down. They might not meet you at that level of vulnerability that you're hoping for. And, um, yeah, it does make us, it does make us vulnerable to be curious about people and, and ask questions about people, but it's also the only path to, to real connection and influence.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. Okay, so statement of fact. reflection. Keep them talking. Remain curious.

**Emily Kline:** Remain [00:42:00] curious. Ask the questions that come to mind for you. Um, and the questions should be good questions, what I call curious questions. , you're not on law and order, you know, you're not trying to prove a point. You're not trying to lead the witness. And you're not trying to teach, you're not necessarily being Socratic in that moment.

You're truly trying to understand, you're asking to understand. So a question you might have about marijuana would be like, you know what, what do your friends think about marijuana? , scary question to ask. Cause the answer might be they all love it, But I wanna know that, right? Because that's gonna be relevant.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah.

**Emily Kline:** , good question might be, , , what does it, what have you noticed about how it makes you feel? You know, what does it do for you? What do you like about it? What do you not like about it? , those are curious questions. Questions that are not curious. Questions are like, did you know that.dot, , [00:43:00] or have you tried or, or what were you thinking?

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. What were you thinking? Not a curious question, unless it's Oh,

**Emily Kline:** It could be. Yeah. Right.

**Yael Schonbrun:** I, that has a lot to tone. Yeah, right. A lot to do with tone. Then what I mean, so say you get the information, that is what you're really not hoping for, which is. , I noticed that it really helps my anxiety and makes me feel more connected to my peers.

And I'm nervous that you're gonna tell me to stop and I don't want to.

**Emily Kline:** That's very, it's a tough moment. It's a tough moment. I mean, so if, if you were my kid or my client, cuz um, , I don't know if I'd be able to pull this up with my own kids. Respect for all the parents actually out there doing it. Um, and I do do it with my own kids. Luckily they're young and haven't come to me with this particular problem yet.

It'll really test me when they do. , so, you know, I would reflect that. So to say you are a fan, you feel like it's [00:44:00] helping you with your anxiety and you don't wanna stop at that point, I would say. , I, you know, I, I feel like I, I get your perspective. , I'd like to give you mine and then I would say what I think, which is that, , this may, I, I hear that, I know that this probably does help you in the moment with your anxiety, but I'm very worried that it's gonna, in the end, make it worse.

, that you're gonna get in trouble at school. , that you're gonna lose your opportunity to participate in things that are important to you if you get in trouble at school, , and that you could be setting yourself up for a lot of problems. ,

and that I, I, I don't want you to use it, I just don't. And I, but I can't. I, I, you know, I probably. , you know, there are things that I can probably do to leverage some influence over you, but ultimately I, I can't really control your decision. Like, cuz I can't follow you around all day. I have a job I'm gonna go to and you have school.

[00:45:00] Um, so , you know, I could say, well I am gonna check your backpack every day and I'm gonna confiscate anything I find and I might look in your room and confiscate stuff or. You know, I'm not gonna give you an allowance if I feel like you're gonna spend it on weed. , those are sort of levers that I do have available to me, but ultimately, you know, it, it is kind of up to you cuz you're, you're, you're 17 or however old this imaginary child that we're picturing is, and I, I, I can't make that decision for you and I know.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah, but so I, I'm just gonna pull. A couple of things that you're doing, which is, so first you start with I, I'd love to give you, I'd love to give you my perspective, which is in essence asking for permission to give pers to give advice or to give your perspective. And we talked about this, I talked about this with Nadine Maestro on a previous episode that will link to in the show notes, but she's done research on motivational interviewing that suggests that for therapists [00:46:00] when they're talking to a client, asking for permission before they give advice is a really powerful tool.

I love this in the context of the parent-child relationship and also in partner, partner relationships. Like, would it be okay if I tell you what I think and if the answer is no, save your breath. Like there's, you know, and respect that you can ask again later. But if the answer is yes, you have more buy-in for the listening.

Um, when you do offer that advice,

**Emily Kline:** Yeah.

**Yael Schonbrun:** part is that you're saying that this comes after you empathize and really listen to what it is that your child or the other person is saying, right? So the advice only comes after the perspective. Giving only comes after, as you've said, you've fully understood where the other person is coming from and you've given them airtime and it this, there's this social capital piece where it's like when you've listened fully, you're a lot more likely to get a listener in response.

Finally, I'll just say, and I think this is so powerful, this is really, really hard to do, but it's not just [00:47:00] understanding that you don't have full control. It's letting the other person know. I am aware that at the end of the day, you have agency. There are some things I can do to manage, but ultimately you get to decide your own life and you have to live with the consequences, and I care very deeply. afraid it's gonna be hard for me to watch you do things that are harmful, but ultimately you are gonna make that choice and it really helps the other person to kind of own it, right? They're not fighting against you. You've turned it back into what do I wanna do with my life that's gonna be good for me?

And given them the opportunity to, to really own that their choices have consequences. Good. And.

**Emily Kline:** The other thing that I tried to do in that kind of little role play was, , connect my advice to what I was imagining were the values of the person sitting in front of me. So I didn't say, I don't want you smoking weed because it's illegal, because it's gonna embarrass me because you won't get into Harvard.

Right, because I, it, it, the, [00:48:00] the child or the teenager that I was imagining sitting in front of me didn't care about those things. They cared about, , their mental health. They had already told, you know, they, you said it, it helps with anxiety. So you know this, okay. Clearly this person does value their mental health and thinks a lot about it.

, And I was imagining maybe they care about something at school or in sports or in extracurriculars that they could lose access to if they are caught with, um, with contraband, with marijuana. So I tried to really not make the advice center on my own goals and fears, but on the things that are important to the other person.

**Yael Schonbrun:** I wanna ask a related question. So for example, with alcohol, would you recommend or what would you recommend, um, a parent do? If you know or suspect that your teenager is going to be drinking, if you, you might for example, start by saying like, here's what I'm concerned about, but would you, would you say something like, if you drink, please don't drive, I'll pick you [00:49:00] up, or how would you handle that?

**Emily Kline:** I think it really depends on the kid and on the sort of social norms of drinking around that kid. Um, I certainly, you know, so. ? Well, I'll just be more concrete. So I always think in the micro, because I am a therapist and it comes to alive for me in this, in the specific individuals. So for a kid who, um, you know, is curious about alcohol, but there's not a ton of drinking going on around them, it's not that much of a norm for their social group.

, I might not sort of go there, but for a kid who I sense is drinking right, and I know that. likely. I'm thinking of a family, a mom who was in one of my studies whose kid, you know, very typical, like there's a, in that town, there's a party in the woods. And this wasn't that mom's first, rodeo. Rodeo, it was her third of three.

So she like knew, she knew the deal. The kids go to these parties at this particular park and they drink, uh, but she really didn't want her youngest going.[00:50:00] , you know, I, I would start to think. You know, for the parent to ask themselves, but also to ask their child and have an open conversation about like, what are you most worried about, right?

Is it actu, is it, is it the passage of, is it the cracking open of the beer in the passage of it through the digestive system? Or is it getting into a car accident? Is it, , being in an unsafe situation where somebody might be like sexually exploited? Is it getting in trouble with police? Uh, what is this?

What, where are the specific fears of harm? , and really address those directly. Like I'm very worried that you will, you know, not have a safe way to get home and that you're gonna get into a car with the kid who drives you there, who swears that she's not gonna drink, but she does. and kids, you know, die in drunk [00:51:00] driving accidents.



So let's talk about that. How, what, and, and really to enlist your teenager who's probably pretty smart, and can do some problem solving and knows what's realistic and what this party is going to be like better than you do. Um, Enlist them in kind of problem solving around that to say, I really don't want you getting in a car with somebody who's potentially been drinking.

Like how, what are your ideas for getting home safely? , because they ha will have some idea of what that party realistically is gonna be like. and what will feel like an acceptable solution to them, maybe to them calling their mom for a ride does not feel like a good solution because now they've invited a parent to come and see where all the kids are drinking and they would never rat out their friends that way.

Maybe to them, okay, I'm gonna preload some money onto an Uber account and make sure you have an app on your phone that feels like a realistic solution. Or maybe it's, um, [00:52:00] I don't know, something else. Something, but. Most of the time we are the experts on our own experience, and when we get into the real details of these scenarios, nobody else can really plan for us.

Like we know better than anybody else will know.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. Oh, I love that. That is so wise and something. Hard to remember in parenting because you want, you feel like such the expert. So I wanna do one other quick sort of clinical scenario because so much about what you're advocating is to really work on listening and not push your preferences on your child, but fundamentally motivational interviewing and.

to some extent, parenting is like about, you know, trying to get our kids to do better for themselves. You know, behavioral, it's about behavioral change. So how the heck do we use it to get our kids to be motivated to try something new that we, that we do think is important, that they may not think is important?

And I wonder if maybe we can just use the, the personal hygiene as an example. So say you have a kid. [00:53:00] doesn't wanna shower. They're like a teenager and they don't wanna shower. How? How would you handle that if you are interested in behavior change? They are not.

**Emily Kline:** So first of all, I just wanna say that kids will do a lot for a good relationship with a parent. You know, if, if things are constantly kind of in power, struggle mode, um, and you say, Hey, go take a shower. They might just say no. If things are going pretty well overall. and there's a good vibe in the house and people feel like, you know, my needs are met, my mom listens to me.

, kids will do a lot. I was just supervising, um, a brand new trainee in our clinic the other day, um, who had her first session with a young man who's really struggling. And, um, she said, well, tell me about why you're here. And he said, I don't need to be here. I'm only here cuz my mom's, my mom said to. So kids actually will do stuff, you know, just, just for their parents.

And she very [00:54:00] wisely, um, said to him, you know, it sounds like you really value that relationship with your mom. , respect that. , but it's also possible that, that, you know, the relationship alone is not gonna cut it and doesn't for many people . So, um, you know, just to point out again, statement of fact, you haven't showered, at least in my accounting since Sunday.

Or you smell, I can smell you. I can smell you from across the room. That's a statement of fact, you know, , um, and see what they say. And, um, you know, again, try to be nonjudgmental. Try to commit to that reflection. You don't feel like you need it. You showered three days ago. , you're trying out a, you know, low environmental impact lifestyle.

Okay, got it. And say, you know, can I offer my perspective or can I give you some advice? And really, again, trying to tie that advice to their, what you know or suspect are their values. Like I know that you have [00:55:00] your job interview coming up, or you know, it's Valentine's Day, um, when we're recording this, then you have a social event you're looking forward to, , that is gonna go better for you.

If you go take a shower right now, , or, you know, one of my favorite questions, , to ask in therapy and also to offer to parents is just sort of a back pocket question is what's getting in the way?

**Yael Schonbrun:** Hmm.

**Emily Kline:** is getting in the way? Like really, and not in a smart ass way, but like truly what's getting in the way of making this behavior change.

Um, and so we can learn and try and do helpful problem solving rather than sort of lecturing.

**Yael Schonbrun:** what? What? Can I ask a follow up question? So what do you do if you ask what's in the way and the. doesn't know, right? They don't have the insight. They haven't thought about it or they, they sort of aren't able to identify the same thing goes for values. Cause I think values are really important and you may glean what your kids' values are, but they may have a hard time having

the insight into what it is because their prefrontal cortex is [00:56:00] not fully developed and some kids develop even later than you know, their peers.

So how do you help? To think it through when they don't really have the answer. And the danger is that if you help too much, they're gonna sort of push against.

**Emily Kline:** Yeah, that's tricky. That's tricky. I mean, I might help connect the behavior. I might myself draw the connection between a behavior, , and something that they're looking forward to. Um, and, and, but then, you know, do it in a sort of open-ended way. Like, you know, what do you. , what's your plan for kind of presenting well at this job interview?

, or, you know, how, what are you planning to wear to, you know, the Valentine's Day party at school? Um, and. Try and draw them out on those topics, , and hopefully help them make that connection in that way. And again, it's okay. So kids need our [00:57:00] advice, right? Like the point of the book is not walk away. You can't have any influence here.

Give up. It's, um, , it's keep going and try and enrich the relationship so that your kid is feeling understood, um, feeling in control, feeling confident, and it's gonna be receptive to your advice when you say, okay, I hear that, um, you don't feel like it's that big a deal and, , whatever. But I, I'm gonna offer you some advice if that's okay.

And here's, here's how I'm seeing it. , that often will, will go a long.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. The other thing I was gonna add is that sometimes when you do a reflection of or or give your own insight of, okay, I think this behavior might connect to maybe you're not showering because you're actually afraid of close contact, and it's a way to kind of distance people, right?

**Emily Kline:** Oh yeah.

**Yael Schonbrun:** then they say, That's not it at all, but that's great.

Then they're engaging with you. You've made a hypothesis and you can even say, you know, I don't really know, but what about this? And I think even expressing that, I don't [00:58:00] really know you're the expert on you, but here's what I'm seeing. And if they disagree with your interpretation, then you actually have them engaged a little bit more than you might otherwise have by, by not offering that assessment or that interpret.

**Emily Kline:** I think that's something that probably only a psychologist would ever say to their kid, though But potentially relevant to your listeners

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yes,

**Emily Kline:** Yeah, but Right. No, we all have our interpretations of other people's behavior all the time, which may or may not be accurate. , but yeah, to throw it out there and say, here's what I'm seeing is that, is that right?

Um, and ask for feedback, right? It's a way of kind of getting engagement.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. The sort of a , an unrelated topic that I think happens for parents and again, for partners too, is sometimes you think that the other person is hiding things from you, like you feel really sure of it. And even throwing it out there, like, I, I feel like you've been keeping things from me that either.

you're hanging out with people and not telling me about it, or it seems like maybe there's some behavior that [00:59:00] is on the level of substance use or secretive eating or you know, some other health issue that you're keeping from me. I'm suspecting it. I think this is happening. And then silence and let the other person respond and see what they say.

And you can use the same se sequence of strategies that you're advocating for in your book when there's something that you think is going on but you don't really know.

**Emily Kline:** That's such a good idea. You know, I'm gonna, I'm, I'm gonna use that because sometimes there's no concrete behavior. That sort of initial statement of fact, that jumps out at people. , but. Are, you know, just using an I statement and saying, well, this is what's happening for me, is what is another way of starting the conversation.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. There's so much wisdom in your book. Um, and I, I just love, I'm gonna finish with , a couple more things that are just tidbits to get people really interested, but[01:00:00] you talk about the goals of discipline. You talk about watching our ratio to build our relationship with our kids, how to apologize, how to be vulnerable, how to help them clarify their values, and in so many ways.

Again, this book is really a guide for having hard conversations with anyone, including with our adolescents. and I just think it's really powerful. So thank

you so much for coming and sharing this wisdom. I think it's gonna be valuable for so many people. Where can people go to find out more about you and your work?

**Emily Kline:** So, um, you can go to my website, [dr emily klein.com](http://dr.emilyklein.com). Um, you can follow me on social, it's a little bit goofy, but I work with some, , BU students, , to kind of demonstrate some of the skills or create reels, , that, you know, are consistent with themes in the book. , sometimes we act. , you know, a, a conversation or a role play.

, our handle is at learn about Milo, motivational interviewing [01:01:00] for loved ones. Learn about Milo on Instagram or TikTok, , or just get in touch with me. I'm not that hard to find. If you go to my website, you can just send me an email.

**Yael Schonbrun:** I love your Instagram reels. They're so fun and helpful, . Um, so people should definitely follow you there. Thank you so much. And I hope everyone picks up this book and learns to have hard talks more skillfully.

**Emily Kline:** Thank you.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Hey, psychologists, off the clock listeners, I'm gonna guess that if you got to the end of this episode that you also love to geek out about books in psychology.

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