

Toxic Achievement Culture with Jennifer Wallace

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Emily Edlynn: That was Jennifer Wallace on Psychologists Off the Clock.

Jill Stoddard: We are four experts in psychology 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, a clinical psychologist practicing in Mile High, Denver, Colorado, and author of Act for Burnout, Act Daily Journal, and the Act Daily Card Deck.

Emily Edlynn: From America's Heartland, I'm Dr. Emily Edlynn a clinical psychologist based in Chicago, Illinois, and author of Autonomy Supportive Parenting.

Michael Herold: Calling in from Vienna, Austria. I'm Michael Herold, ACT coach, confidence trainer, and author of an upcoming book on being a better conversationalist and making friends.

Jill Stoddard: And from coastal New England, I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard, author of Be Mighty, The Big Book of Act Metaphors, and Impostor No More.

Emily Edlynn: We hope you take what you learned here to build a rich and meaningful life.

Michael Herold: Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off The Clock.

Emily Edlynn: Hi everyone, it's Emily, and I'm here with Debbie to introduce my very first interview as co host of the Psychologist Off the Clock podcast. My interview is with author Jennie Wallace about toxic achievement culture. And it's special, not just because it's my very first, but because I know Jennie in real life.

And in fact, she was very instrumental And me writing my own book. So a little background, Jennie reached out to me back in 2020 to interview me for this book. So I'm actually lurking in secret in this book as one of the anecdotes. And in that talk, we ended up talking for a long time. I felt like I was talking to an old friend and she told me I had to write my own book.

So that's why I feel so special.

Debbie Sorensen: that's such a sweet story. I didn't know that. And congratulations to you on your very first interview in the interview seat. It's so exciting. How did it feel?

Emily Edlynn: You know, I was very nervous. I like to do things well, so it's hard to be a beginner with any skill set, but knowing that I was going to be talking to Jennie made it much easier, and she and I just have a lot in common, so it was an easy discussion to have, and I felt really good about it after it was over.

But I will say, my very worst fear actually came true during the interview. So the one thing I did not want to happen was for my dog to bark. And I had the shades down, the noise machine on, dogs in the crates, and then there was a knock at the door in the middle of the interview. It was kind of close when we were talking about the puppy dog principle as a little teaser.

So my puppy made her debut.

Debbie Sorensen: Well, at least you got the worst... Fear out of the way early on and it was a terrific interview, but I know that feeling that that nervousness and also that feeling, but I have to say it's a terrific interview. I loved this conversation that the two of you had and for me personally, I think there were two levels where this really felt important.

The first is just this cultural moment that we're in that I'm observing as a parent and just a person in the world, which is around how much things have changed since I was a kid in terms of the pressure and how we're looking at achievement

and the mental health issues that we're seeing with kids these days with anxiety and whatnot.

the second level for me was because I'm writing this book on burnout, which little moment of self promotion here, which is coming out in January and I'm doing the edits on it now. And there's so much overlap because I think Jennie is focusing on parents and kids and, you know, kids who are maybe, for instance, headed toward high school and college and how parents can navigate this and kids can navigate this.

And she has so many helpful tips. And I see a lot of adults in my practice who I think are the product of this culture. You know, this is fast forward 10 or 20 years from what Jennie's talking about, and we see how people are, so stressed and anxious and don't know how to turn out and, don't know how to rest and turn off that achievement mindset so anyway, I think that she offers a great framework for parents, for kids, for people who have been experiencing this.

Emily Edlynn: I mean, when I was reading this book, I was highlighting all the time. I mean, she hits on so many important issues that we couldn't even do complete justice in this interview. But I agree with you when she talked about grind culture. I think that is really relevant to most of us. In our current cultural moment of this.

productivity to be valuable, belief, and, you know, the difficulty of truly resting. And our kids are absorbing all of that. So it's definitely a top down process.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, there are a couple things that I think she does that are really important. One is that she really puts it in context. You know, she looks at even the economic factors validating as a parent. We're all stressed and anxious about what's ahead. And I think that's playing into it.

And it's not, not like anybody wants to sit there and say, I have an idea. Let's put a lot of pressure on kids. It just kind of, it's the world that we're living in. And so that's so normalizing and validating and just helps it all make so much more sense. And then she also looks at it in context, in terms of, the importance of social support and how much we are just, we need connections.

We need to support each other through this. And if there's one thing that really is a takeaway, it's that that needs to change. And how do we change it? And I think she offers some really helpful ideas for that.

Emily Edlynn: Yes, that is why this is an excellent book that I hope everyone picks up because it's very affirming rather than blaming. So there's the support piece for all of us. It's not finger pointing. It's explaining why we're struggling to help us understand the why. And it gives us actionable differences to make in our family lives.

One of the things I love is this idea of you can't just say, I'll hang out with my friends, you know, as the parent showing that our friendships and social support systems matter. We have to actually put it on the calendar. And reserve that time and block it out. So there's a lot of emphasis on, us, the parents in a very supportive way.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, I think that there are some things that I will change about my own parenting practices having listened to this interview. And I think if you listen all the way to the end, she gets to those really concrete things you can say and do.

And so I think that if you are a parent, you will feel the same way that you got some practical suggestions out of this.

Emily Edlynn: Absolutely. I hope everyone gets so much out of this discussion just like Debbie and I did.

Today we have with us Jenny Breheny Wallace, who is an award winning journalist and began her career at 60 Minutes and is now a contributor to the Wall Street Journal and Washington Post. I am beyond thrilled to talk with Jenny today about her new book, *Never Enough, When Achievement Culture Becomes Toxic and What We Can Do About It*.

Welcome to Psychologists Off the Clock, Jenny.

Jennifer Wallace: I'm so happy to be here with you today, Emily.

Emily Edlynn: I'm really excited to talk to you. As someone who is immersed in the world of parenting and works as a therapist with kids, teens, and families. I have been recommending your book to everyone I know.

Jennifer Wallace: Oh, thank you.

Emily Edlynn: Not only is this topic of achievement culture so relevant in today's world of parenting, but how you wrote this book made it especially compelling.

So I want to kind of share with the listeners your approach and how you integrated science and real family experiences. So could we start with why you decided on this topic and then how you decided to use this approach?

Jennifer Wallace: Yeah, absolutely. So, in 2019, I'd been writing about family topics for about 10 years for the, as you said, the Washington Post and the Wall Street Journal. And In 2019, when the Varsity Blues scandal hit, I don't know if you remember it, but it was when, you know, parents on the East Coast and the West Coast were caught in an elaborate scheme to bribe their children's way into colleges like USC.

And I thought to myself, how did we get to a point where parents were now going to jail to get their kids into a highly selective school and I was not buying the traditional narrative that these parents just wanted the bumper sticker. They just wanted the status. I had a feeling, I had an instinct as a reporter that there was something deeper going on here.

And so, in 2019, I started to dig into this and I conducted a first of its kind parenting survey with a researcher at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. And we wanted to get to the root of these feelings, the root of these anxieties that parents were feeling. And the researcher said to me, we need a sample size of a thousand to really be able to see patterns.

And I said, okay, all right, I think we'll do it. And then within a few days, over 6, 500 parents had filled it out. The survey had, snowballed, and so, that started me on my journey. I wanted to make sure this wasn't just an issue on the coasts. And what I found through my survey and through three and a half years of research is that these anxieties, these fears are found in every state from Alaska to Texas to Wyoming and Ohio and Maine.

And I traveled all around the country interviewing families and meeting, parents and students and teachers and trying to get to the root of all this.

Emily Edlynn: What I really appreciated reading your book is how you integrated that data from your survey as your launching pad and you spoke with experts as well in the field to get their Integration of the research and their analysis of what research is telling us about what's going on with families and then the stories you were able to tell really spending time with these families and like you said for three and a half years.

I mean, this was a big investment for you of taking on this book. So I'm kind of curious what it was like for you to spend this time with families really struggling with achievement culture and if it affected you on a personal level.

Jennifer Wallace: Oh, it very much affected me. So also in 2019, my oldest, when I started this project was going into high school. he was going to be a freshman and I was already feeling this. achievement pressure in my home and I was seeing it among his classmates. And so really, this was, you know, researchers who study things that are personal to them, they call it me search.

So this book was really, me search for me on what I needed to do to raise healthy achievers. And so I you know, I was a little worried that parents would not want to be open with me. About these like really deeply personal struggles and so at the end of the survey that I sent out I asked parents You know if they'd be willing to be interviewed anonymously or with their names attached to please email me And hundreds of parents reached out.

So that's what set me on the path to meeting these families and visiting communities. And as you said, it was a three and a half year journey. And there are some students that I, you know, started interviewing in the end of their junior year and I interviewed them all the way up into college and visited them, you know, on the, the UCLA campus with one of the dearest students that I interviewed. So I was very immersed in these families lives, and they were incredibly generous, talking about their missteps, talking about what was working for their family. In the search, I met with families that had lost a loved one to suicide, and I also, though, in my research, went in search of who were the kids who were thriving despite the pressures in their environment. I wanted to know what, if anything, did they have in common. I did this research with a researcher at Baylor. He was at Baylor at the time. And we found about 15 or so things that these healthy achievers had in common. And when I was searching for a framework, I came across a psychological construct called mattering.

Mattering is the idea that we feel valued for who we are at our core and that we are dependent on to add meaningful value back to our family, to our friends, and to our community. And what I found that these healthy achievers had in common was that they had this high level of mattering that acted like a protective shield.

They still were anxious sometimes. They got down and they had setbacks and failures, but mattering acted like a buoy. It lifted them up because those setbacks were not an indictment of their worth. The kids who seemed to be struggling the

most had a sense of mattering that was contingent. on their performance, that they only mattered when.

And the other group of kids who also seemed to be struggling the most were kids who felt like they mattered to their parents, but they were never depended on to add meaningful value back to anyone other than themselves. And so they lacked social proof that they mattered. Um, so, so that was, those were my findings and what I've brought into my own life and, throughout the pages of this book.

Emily Edlynn: It's an amazing framework that adds such a positive structure to why we should all be motivated to think very critically about how this is playing out in our families, how we're contributing. to the mattering or not. And it is a more strength based focus rather than just drilling down on what we're doing wrong and what we need to change.

So I really appreciated that part of the book and we'll keep talking more about that in detail as we go on. I wanted to Back up a little bit and make sure that we define toxic achievement culture and kind of start with what that even is.

Jennifer Wallace: So,

So how would you

Emily Edlynn: define that??

Jennifer Wallace: So, what toxic achievement culture is to me is a set of beliefs and messages that tell our kids and tell the adults in their lives that their worth is contingent on how they perform, what they look like, what team they get on, what award they win, what their resume looks like. And, toxic achievement in our homes looks like, children with schedules that rival a busy executive, very little downtime, family time is compromised.

you know, a lot of the intention behind the things that our kids are doing are simply to check boxes. and build for their resume, not necessarily for things that feed them and use their natural strengths. Achievement culture for parents is feeling like you work for your kids, feeling like you are working to pay for the travel soccer and the tournaments and giving up your weekends and your time with friends to serve your children. I mean, parents have always wanted to put their needs, you know, second to their kids, right? That's what good parents do. But this kind of intensive parenting that's required to keep up in our

achievement culture really strains parents. It strains families. It strains marriages. It strains friendships.

Absolutely.

Emily Edlynn: And I am so happy you have this out there. It is an issue near and dear to my heart, and I know we've sort of chatted before about how. My work on autonomy supportive parenting really dovetails nicely with your work because autonomy supportive parenting is the antidote to intensive parenting in many ways and it covers all of this that you're talking about.

A sense of worth and belonging as an individual, as who you are, as your authentic being and not what you produce. So this all really vibes together. And, I'm just so happy that we get to explore it in depth today as we go on, we'll talk more about intensive parenting. Cause I think it's a really important topic.

Jennifer Wallace: You just reminded me that, um, researchers who study mattering call it a meta need or an umbrella term that captures feelings of belonging, of connection, of mastery, of self determination. So all of these things that you're talking about are all captured in feeling valued and adding value.

So

Emily Edlynn: both. It's not just you are a valuable person to our family. You are adding value to our family system, to your community. And so it's not all about the self, the child's needs being met. It's a two way process.

Jennifer Wallace: It is, and I will say, just to be clear, this is not a book that's anti ambition, actually it is the framework of mattering. It's feeling like you matter that actually motivates you in really healthy ways to reach higher, to not be afraid of failure or setbacks. So mattering and achievement really actually go hand in hand.

It offers a kind of healthy fuel for kids as opposed to dirty fuel, which is criticism or comparison or anything that a tired parent might do to try to hit a short term goal. But if you can really lead with mattering in your parenting, you can give your kids that healthy, sustaining motivation to reach.

Emily Edlynn: Right? So there's the healthy version of achievement and then the unhealthy or toxic achievement. So I will say that in my talks with parents both in my community as a fellow parent and as well as my therapy work. I

think parents are becoming more aware that this is a problem, but I'm not sure people really are tuned into the specific risks that kids and teens who are in toxic achievement cultures are facing and you do a really nice job outlining that.

Could you talk more about those specific risks?

Jennifer Wallace: Yeah. So in 2019, as the varsity blue scandal was hitting and my son was entering high school, I wrote an article for the Washington Post about how students attending what researchers call high achieving schools, those are competitive public schools or private schools where the majority of kids go on to four year colleges, where the school offers a lot of extracurriculars and advanced placement classes.

The kids attending these high achieving schools were now named officially an at risk group according to two national policy reports at risk for two to six times, um, more likely to suffer from anxiety, depression, and substance abuse disorder than the average American teen. And it is, it is the excessive pressure to achieve that is causing kids to be at risk. It doesn't mean that every child attending a high achieving school is at risk. It just means being in an environment of high performers puts your child at risk.

Emily Edlynn: And I think I remember when that study came out, I remember reading the article you wrote about it and I was really struck by it. It really got my attention. As a psychologist in children and adolescents, I've always studied risk factors for mental health and there's always been a focus on poverty and marginalized communities and so it was a very different vision of what risk means to then include these affluent communities with these high pressures.

And I think it was a really, I mean, this research is really kind of the premise of your book, I think, and why it's important.

Jennifer Wallace: Exactly. And just to be clear, we are not talking about students who come from the top 1% of family incomes. We are talking about kids who come from incomes that are in the top 20 to 25% at the United States. So depending on where you live, that means your parents have a combined income of roughly 130,000 a year.

So we're not talking about the 1%. We are talking about, what one researcher, estimated one in three students are under this excessive pressure to achieve.

Emily Edlynn: Okay. That's an important point. I was actually curious about that, where that landed in terms of how many kids this really covers versus. the

general population of kids and teens out there. So, I love this framework of mattering that you've talked about and I just wanted to pull out one piece of it that I think is a good specific strategy for parents to keep in mind and I partially love the name of it.

It's called the Puppy Dog Principle. And as the owner of a very cute puppy, I can relate. So could you talk more about that principle? Because I think it actually gives a good, real manifestation of the mattering framework.

Jennifer Wallace: Yes, exactly. So when I asked Sonia Luthar, who recently passed away, but was one of the world's leading researchers on resilience and studied this population, I said to her, what can I do in my home tonight? What can I do to buffer against achievement culture in my home? And she said two things.

Minimize criticism and prioritize affection. And, so the puppy dog principle is about prioritizing affection in your home. And it was, a psychologist, Susan Bauerfeld, who gave me this advice, which is to greet your children once a day. The way your family puppy greets everyone in the family.

And it is this just unabashed joy that you just deeply love them for who they are at their core. And actually Scott Galloway, who is a marketing expert and NYU professor. I quote him in the book as well. He wrote, this extraordinary line that I, think about all the time, which is for him growing up, affection was the difference between thinking someone loved me and knowing that they did. And so I keep that in mind. And I think as parents, it's easy to be affectionate, you know, with the younger kids and middle school kids. And then as our teenagers get older, it could feel, you know, they might not be as welcoming. affection doesn't necessarily mean you have to touch the person.

Although my teens, I have three of them, they still like to be touched and, and hugged. And, you know, they need that to sort of regulate their nervous system. They need that closeness from me. remember when my kids were really young, I listened to a psychologist on the radio and she told me that as her children got to be teenagers, they didn't want to be touched by her.

So what she started doing was facials. Giving them facials at night. And she said this was her way of meeting them where they were. They didn't want the hugs and the cuddles, but they were really concerned about their acne. So she could touch them and rub them and put lotion on them and relax them and they could enjoy her.

So it's really just about getting creative and meeting our kids where they are.

Emily Edlynn: I love that example. That is fantastic. And especially with our teenagers, we need to be so creative sometimes. And it's again, really thinking of their needs, not our needs, right? My 11 and 13 year old don't want to watch TV with me anymore, which kind of breaks my heart. So when I will sit down and watch an episode of dance moms with them, even though I really don't want to, it at least gives us a little bonding there. And I can talk to them about how horrible these people are acting.

Jennifer Wallace: A good model, a good way of, of talking through. I, one of the, um, Gregory Elliott, who's a social psychologist at Brown University, has this phrase, which I just love, and that's, parenting is not about the parent. And I think in our culture, we are told time and again, what to do, what not to do, what to say, the script to do.

And that's helpful. But what's more helpful is knowing your children and as you just said, meeting their needs.

Emily Edlynn: Yep. And here we go again. Right back to autonomy, supportive parenting, not to talk about my book, but that is everything. It's seeing your child for the person they are, not a reflection of you, not a referendum on your parenting, but their individual being and then connecting with that person and showing how much you love that puppy dog principle.

Bring that back when they walk in the room, having that your face light up. I'm so glad to see you, you know, and have them feeling that love from you. So this actually brings us to what I think is a really important section in your book, which is talking about the parent piece and in this toxic achievement culture, of course, there are things we need to do to change.

You handle this in a way that I really appreciate because you're not blaming. You're not finger pointing. You bring a lot of context to why very loving, committed parents can fall prey to the pressures of achievement culture. So you devote a good amount of time to unpacking what you call status anxiety and how economic scarcity contributes to achievement pressures.

So I think it'd be really interesting to dig into those concepts.

Jennifer Wallace: Yeah. So I'm glad you picked up on how I am not pointing the finger at parents because I am frankly as a parent, so tired of it. it's not fair. So I wanted to figure out why was. My childhood in the 1970s and early 80s so

different than my children's What was it about that? And so I interviewed historians Sociologists and economists and there are a few reasons but one that really stood out to me were that there are vast changes in the micro macro economic conditions that we are raising our children in.

So back in the 1970s, life was generally more affordable. housing was more affordable, food was more affordable, higher education was more affordable, health insurance was more affordable. You know, a parent could be more relaxed. Because they had faith, child, even with a zigzag kind of life, that they would wind up okay.

There was slack in the system. And over the last several years, macroeconomic forces have really, set this kind of economic anxiety in parents. We're seeing the crush of the middle class, we're seeing globalization, steep inequality like we've never seen. and what So what parents are doing, you know, according to the researchers who study this, is that we are absorbing these macroeconomic pressures, whether we're aware of it or not, and it comes out in how we parent.

And this is not to blame parents. The job of a parent is to prepare a child for the future. And our future is really unknown and it's scary. AI, we don't know what kind of jobs we're supposed to be preparing our kids for. Um, most of them don't even exist right now. So these are very scary times. And at the same time, parents are rightfully sensing fewer social safety nets.

So there were many more safety nets in the seventies and early eighties than there are today. So, this isn't to further scare parents. This is to help parents put into context what they are feeling so that they don't personalize it. We tend to personalize instead of contextualize our anxieties.

And I'm here to tell you we're all feeling it and Um, even though we are doing our best, there are things that we could be doing in our home even better to help buffer against these anxieties. Our kids are too young to be feeling these macroeconomic pressures in their childhood.

Emily Edlynn: Well, and you get into the sort of evolutionary explanation as well, right? That raising or maintaining a child's status is a basic form of reproductive success. So It is hard wired in us to know our child's status in their community and be comparing. And unfortunately, it's not always for the best of our child.

So it's a really, it's kind of an uphill battle, right? To fight against these hard wired impulses while the economic conditions around us are putting on all this pressure and changing the conditions of parenting.

Jennifer Wallace: Yes, and I will, tell you, I thought that when I wrote this book, when I started writing it in 2019, I thought that this message would be a hard sell for parents. It is not. We are seeing the ramifications, we are in an epidemic of anxiety, depression, suicide. Parents are realizing that this isn't working for our kids.

And it's also not working for the adults in their lives. So yes, it is hard, but I traveled around the country and I found families who were doing it and doing it successfully and it works.

Emily Edlynn: So there's hope. There's a way forward, right? It is helpful to start with a sense of awareness and understanding. Right, of, of the why, and then we can look at the how, and how to do it differently. What did you find? You got into this a little bit, and I think it's really interesting, the, um, kind of, the experiences of parents of color compared to white parents within these macro conditions and these pressures.

Could you talk more about that? All

Jennifer Wallace: So, I did do on the ground research, but there's been very little published academic research around this. So I did interview, black families and parents and students and I really combed the research looking for academic studies about the impact of achievement culture on these families and there's very little research on it so, uh, which was very frustrating as a writer, but what I found in the families that I interviewed, and of course it's hard to draw a huge sweeping generalizations for any sort of racial group, but several of the parents and the students talked about an added layer of pressure that they feel.

So they felt the burdens of high expectations in the classroom. But then they felt another layer of, The discrimination, the microaggressions, the feeling like they're only there or they're only getting into a certain college because of their minority status. Several students talked about needing to fight myths.

and so not only are they sort of working against those pressures, it's compounded with achievement pressure. But you know, it doesn't necessarily mean that these kids were doing worse. A lot of the kids that I met had parents who really subscribed to mattering and that acted like a buffer for them.

So, one mother I interviewed, who was a researcher herself, researched trends, in parenting and childhood. And she said that, the anxiety she feels about her kids is not about status and having them at the top of the hierarchy. It's about feeling, can they enter a room and enter a situation where people will not try to rip them down.

And so that is a whole nother

Emily Edlynn: Mm hmm. Mm hmm.

Jennifer Wallace: um, that these parents are working off of.

Emily Edlynn: I am so glad you include that. And it's a really important consideration as we take on this whole topic of these added pressures, but also, what families of color may be doing that's buffering and helping with their experiences and perspective. So speaking of, you really bring so much empathy to parents, and I could spend this whole interview talking about parent well being.

It's so critical, so I want to touch on a couple of the ideas. Um, I love how you pose this question of how much we show that we matter to our kids. So you ask, do I act like my interests are just as important as theirs? And I really resonated with this as a parent who I forgotten my coat on a cold winter day as I made sure all the kids had their coats or my sunscreen in the summer or my own snacks.

My kids are well fed when we're out, but I'm starving. So. I mean, these are small examples, but I think they speak to a larger pattern. So I wanted to just talk about those real consequences of sacrificing our mattering for the sake of our children's needs.

Jennifer Wallace: I would say one of the biggest surprises for me in researching this book was what, Sonia Luthar, again, who is, uh, you know, a well known resilience scholar, what she said to me, which was, a child's resilience and mattering rests on a parent's resilience and mattering. And what she means by that is... In order for us to be what she calls first responders to our kids struggles, we need to make sure that we are supported, that we are well fed, that we are warmed by our coats, that our interests are just as important as our kids, not just For our own well being, but so that we can show up and be the source of support that our kids need day in and day out.

And what intensive parenting does to parents is that it, you know, these individual things in and of themselves do not cause a parent to break down resilience, but it is the day in and day out the daily wear and tear of this kind of parenting without, shoring up our own resources. It just leaves us depleted.

And so if parents take nothing out of this conversation, I hope they will take this, that in order to be the source of support your child needs, you need to take care of your own wellbeing and mental health. And the way to do that is not by the bubble baths and getting your nails done that the multi billion dollar self care industry sells us.

The number one most important thing that we can do is to find people in our lives, who can love us unconditionally, who can see us and still love us despite our flaws and our setbacks, you know, one or two people in our life that we can open up to and be vulnerable to because our resilience rests on our relationships.

So you need to prioritize those relationships and it's really easy in the busy day to day. life to not do that.

Emily Edlynn: Yes. And you talk about what you found in your interviews is people who succeeded at that had to put it on their calendar and block out the time and it has to be extremely intentional to spend time with friends or seek support in other ways rather than I'll get to it when I have time because that's never going to happen.

Jennifer Wallace: Exactly. So there have been, there's been research done. Um, you know, there was a study done at the Mayo Clinic that looked at physicians, physicians assistants and um, mothers who were medical care providers. And they were also enduring a lot of stress professionally and at home. And so one study had these women meet, just a small group of five or so women once a week for one hour with a facilitator where they talked about concerns. They didn't look for advice, but they were able to open up and be seen and cared for the way we see and care for our kids. And so what the researchers find was that it wasn't that parents needed to carve out so much time every day.

What they needed to do was, like you said, carve out intentional time, that one hour a week of deep connection, of being loved and cared for. And as the study was titled Who Mothers Mommy? Who in your life Mother's you who caretakes for you and the researchers point out it cannot be a spouse because those relationships are already strained from you know having to be one person villages for our families so you really need to go outside the family and Connect

with people who are also willing to be vulnerable with you and what you do in those moments Is that you feed each other's mattering you matter enough?

For me to listen and to care for you. And then I feed your mattering by relying on you. So it is this sort of beautiful upward spiral that these intentional relationships can, feed our mattering.

Emily Edlynn: Yes. And I think we've gotten to the point where mothers, especially roll their eyes when they're told to take care of themselves first. It feels like a platitude at this point and kind of not understanding our actual needs and barriers to that. So it's a great very specific strategy with depth under it around why this could be a meaningful Form of self care not an eye rolling

Jennifer Wallace: Yes,

Emily Edlynn: And

Jennifer Wallace: And it takes time to like really, and I unpack it in the book because when I first heard about this research, I said to the researcher, do you mean putting on my oxygen mask on first? And she slammed her hand on the table. And she said, no, I am not asking tired mothers to do one more thing. I am saying surround yourself with one or two people who will put the mask on for you when they see you starting to struggle, when they see you needing air.

So that was, to me, that was a really, profound way of thinking about our relationships as somebody to put the mask on for you.

Emily Edlynn: Very profound and helpful and Doing that I think can help us not fall into the intensive parenting Patterns and traps that have become the norm. So I want to bring that up again, and you really capture intensive parenting very succinctly with this quote intensive parenting is a parenting style that puts our children's needs at the front and center of family life.

And just one example you share is a mother who counted 37 drop offs and pickups in a week. And I really related to that because I feel like I'm in the car all the time. And it's probably not not even close to 37 and still feels like too much. But having that very specific number was really striking. So, even though these efforts are to be the quote unquote best parent, They're really leading to higher stress, burnout, and less responsiveness to our kids instead of more.

So I'm curious, kind of how you see intensive parenting contributing to toxic achievement culture, and then what we can do about it.

Jennifer Wallace: Yeah, so I think you just made the tie in so beautifully that when we are overstretched, when we are undernourished ourselves as parents, and we have all of these things coming at us, our kids' stresses, the social stresses, the performance stresses, uh, the stresses in our environment, we become crankier, we become moodier, we become less responsive to our kids.

And the worst case scenario in all of that is that our kids begin to internalize the idea that maybe they're the problem. And what that does unintentionally is it makes them feel like they matter less. So, it's like this really, counterintuitive thing, but in order to make our kids feel like they matter, we need to feel our own sense of mattering only then can we really be that source of support for our kids. So I'll give you one example, because you talked about the 37 drop offs and pickups. Another mother I interviewed talked about the importance of maternal resilience and relationships, she said that she used to be a mother like that too.

And now what she's done is she reaches out to neighbors and classmates and Um, asks for help with drop offs and pickups. And so she used to be doing it all alone. And then she said, you know what, I used to think it was a burden, but really what it is is me reaching out and saying, I need your help. And that breeds a kind of healthy interdependence that makes the other person matter and makes you feel like you matter.

Emily Edlynn: Right, and you, referred before to the one family villages we're all living in that put strain on marriages, and I think it's really questioning that reality of does it have to be that way and showing some of this vulnerability I do the same thing. I'm all about carpooling. I will reach out to strangers if there are parents on my kids team and live near us and say, what can we work out?

Because it is just one way of creating those relationships, relieving the pressure on each family, working together. And I think it's, a huge step forward and kind of breaking the mold that's been developed over the last 30 years or so.

Jennifer Wallace: I totally agree. It not only, helps the parents, but it. Um, also models for the kids that we are not one person villages, that we do need other people to be our best selves. And so actually like breaking that down for our kids. I write in the book that, you know, we parents are, are told that our job is to raise independent self-reliant adults.

And while that is a worthy goal, I think there is a more profound goal that we need to take on if we really want to buffer against the anxiety and stress that we are seeing. And that is to give our kids the skills of healthy interdependence.

Emily Edlynn: Yes. So let's move on to our kids and talk about what's going on with them and what, they can be also doing differently and shifting in their worlds. So, I want to get into grind culture and defining success. So how would you describe grind culture and how it intersects with what you call an increasingly narrow definition of success?

Jennifer Wallace: Yeah, so grind culture to me is what researcher Sonia Luther called the, I can, therefore I must mindset. And it was this idea that I heard over and over again among students, which was because these classes are offered to me. Because there is this better team that, they always felt the need to be going for it, improving, not stopping.

And they were building these kinds of lives that they needed substances to escape from. So these kids who were really buying into grind culture, who were leaving it out on the field, who were getting up early, staying up late, really not having time for sleep or their friendships or healthy eating habits, in order to shut it down, they would drink and use drugs to excess and they would drink to blackout.

So what I talk about in the book is one of the jobs that we have as parents is to teach our kids how to build a life that they don't need drugs and alcohol to escape from.

So in my family, The definition of success has widened. I no longer tell my kids that I just want them to be happy. I want more for them. I want them to build a life, that is purposeful and meaningful, a life where they matter and a life where they matter to others. So for me, a successful life is surrounding yourself with people who make you feel valued for who you are, and then finding the strengths and the unique ways that you can contribute to the world around you. So to me, success is mattering.

Emily Edlynn: Did that change over the course of writing the book, being a parent? I mean, how has that transformed for you?

Jennifer Wallace: I mean, I used to think it was my job as a parent to, to make sure my kids were happy, right? That's what every parent wants is happy kids, and what I've realized is that happiness is a very shallow goal and it's really fleeting.

Emily Edlynn: It's not realistic.

Jennifer Wallace: not realistic and there, actually better things than being happy.

And so I want that for my kids.

Emily Edlynn: To get back to grind culture, that is a setup for the opposite anyways. And something you say that as a therapist who works with these kids and teens, I found extremely important to pull out is these students don't have internal breaks to help them regulate their time and energy. They don't know when it's time to say to themselves, well, that's enough for the day and it's crushing them.

So they don't have their internal sense of balance for their lives.

Jennifer Wallace: And one of the studies that I cite in this chapter about grind culture is a study that looked at growth mindset and how in certain communities with certain kids, growth mindset, if not employed correctly, can backfire. So why are we saying to kids who are rewriting a paper five times, six times, staying up late, working on each sentence, each word.

Why are we saying, good for you, keep going? There are certain kids in our communities that need to be told the opposite. They need bumpers put up by parents. The parents need to be the prefrontal cortex telling the kid that's enough for the day. This is where we stop. And I think growth mindset is an extraordinary concept and useful even for kids in high achieving cultures, but unfortunately it's been employed, you know, in perfectionistic tendencies.

Emily Edlynn: And I think it's important to ask, what is it all for. So what is this sun up to, you know, way midnight hours, lifestyle, what is the reason for it? And that's where we get into traditional definition of success, which is going to a good college, right? Going to a top college. And you get into, first of all the condition of these acceptance rates at colleges plummeting since we were applying to colleges, and it's just a different landscape than it used to be. And you call it, I love this, reject the premise. This idea that that should be the goal is going to a top college. When you look at the research, that's not necessarily worth everything that's sacrificed to achieve that goal, right?

Jennifer Wallace: Absolutely. I mean, just looking at the plummeting acceptance rates, it is, I think in some ways parents could look at this as an opportunity to have conversations about these highly selective or highly rejective colleges, and say, you know, really, you try your best, but this is a lottery.

This has nothing to do with you. So try your best, put your best foot forward, reach for it, but understand that if you don't get it, this has nothing to do with you and everything to do with the college's priorities. So that's, one conversation to have another conversation. The research really shows this clearly, and these are huge data samples.

That the best thing we can do for our kids is to help them find colleges where they fit versus looking at the rank. Here's what the research says and then I'll explain to you how it fits into the mattering framework. So the research says, you know, they've looked at what students did in college and then over time they looked at where the student went to college and what the outcomes were in midlife.

When it came to financial success, happiness in their careers, a sense of belonging in their community, sort of overall well being markers. And what they found was six or so things that these kids who enjoyed a specific fit in college had in common. They had a professor who knew them personally.

They had a mentor or a professor who invested in them. They did a multi semester project where they could use what they were learning. They had extracurricular activities and they felt a sense of belonging on the campus. And when you wrap those up, really what the research is showing is that these were kids who felt a high level of mattering.

They felt valued and they were given an opportunity to add value back on their campuses. So for parents, I would say it's time for us to broaden the conversation about colleges to talk about what to do once you get to college, because that's actually the greater predictor of success than the rank of a college.

Emily Edlynn: Absolutely. And it's like, can we put that on loudspeakers on every billboard Across the country to just dial down the pressure that everyone feels, you know, around this outcome of college when that is not the end all be all in helping us look past college in how are they developing as a person to manage their life and be engaged in their life?

So something that you get into that I think is really important is the ideas of deliberate rest and moderation. So I think this factors into what you were just talking about, where it's about how you're living your life in a way that's healthy rather than what goals you're aiming to meet and you do weave this into the mattering framework by saying to matter is to realize that we are not machines. We are humans with limits. So what can we all do differently do you think to prioritize rest and moderation over productivity and achievement?

Jennifer Wallace: Yeah. So, Challenge Success, which is, uh, a nonprofit that's affiliated with Stanford University has, a phrase that parents can think of, and they call it PDF, playtime, downtime, and family time. So each child, no matter the age those three things should be hit every day. Family time should be prioritized, downtime, sleep should be prioritized, playtime. So for older kids, playtime isn't necessarily, you know, playing Legos on the floor, but playtime is, you know, hanging out with friends or engaging in a hobby that is not linked to a resume. Just free time. And I think it's hard because as adults, we've really had the idea of play and rest and all that knocked out of us.

We are also, you know, under this weight of the need to be productive all the time. And so I think our kids need to see that with us. We need to show them that adulthood is actually great. And it's not all about banging our head up against a wall to finish a project or running, racing from meeting to meeting, that there's actually more to life than work.

And, this also goes back to a little bit about my definition of success, that success in your achievements is just one part of a successful life. Right? A successful life, if we really drill down to the research, is about surrounding yourself with people who care about you, who can build you up and hold you up through setbacks, and also to have work that you are meaningfully engaged in and feel good about.

So when we think about those two things, we need to balance it. I think, you know, it's so easy to say, Oh, we need balance. Oh, we need balance. We have to get really practical and drill down what that balance looks like.

Emily Edlynn: And what it feels like. I think we've lost both adults and kids have lost what it even feels like to have balance. You get this new normal or it's become baseline to be productive and busy and moving all the time without stopping. And it can actually feel a little disorienting if you start to shift that pattern and it's kind of getting comfortable with letting yourself Hang out and rest and do something that's not reaching a goal.

And so I think that's an important piece too.

Jennifer Wallace: Another, piece of advice that I got from Tina Payne Bryson, who's a psychoanalyst. She said, if you're, you know, if you're wondering what messages you're sending to your kids around achievement culture and growing culture, she gave parents four questions to reflect on. One was. Look at your child's calendar and see how they're spending their time outside of school.

Look at how you spend your money as it relates to your child. What is it that you're asking them about day in and day out? And what do you find yourself arguing with them about? So if you look at those four factors, it can tell a parent a lot about the messages you're sending about how much you prioritize achievement in your house.

Emily Edlynn: And we may not even realize it. So I think that's a really helpful guide for us to do our own internal check and look at what's happening in our families that may have just developed over time and we're not even aware of how it's playing out. So you have provided so many of these really helpful, real life tips that parents can start thinking about and using in the day to day life of parenting kids and teenagers.

To end on, as much as I could talk to you forever, do you see any evidence of these toxic achievement and high pressure trends changing for the better as we are becoming more aware?

Jennifer Wallace: I am hoping. I am really hopeful because I've been talking with parents all over the country around this book. It is a message that is being embraced. I think it's gaining momentum that we need to go back to really the way we've raised children forever, where you are who you are.

You are not your accomplishments. It's only in the past several decades that we've changed this. So, what I am championing here is not a whole new way of raising kids. I'm saying go back to what we know works. Because we know what we're doing right now isn't working.

Emily Edlynn: So we need a course correction,

and your book, I believe, is going to be a huge influence on that course correction. So thank you so much for writing this book and for sharing it, and I really encourage listeners to go get it as soon as possible. Um, because we couldn't even get into the richness of all of these topics in this short time together.

So there's so much more in the book to explore achievement culture and what we can do about it. So I love how hopeful you make this whole topic with your framework, of mattering. And I really appreciate that this book is now in the world to help parents and families and especially kids and teens. So where else can listeners find you if they want to learn more about your work?

Jennifer Wallace: Yeah. So you can head over to my website, jenniferbwallace.com. I've also co founded something called the Mattering Movement where it's going to become the action arm of the book. So parents can head there after reading the book to get even more tools and a community of parents who are working towards building mattering in their homes.

Emily Edlynn: That is so wonderful. I'm really happy to hear that. Thank you, Jennie Wallace for our talk today.

Jennifer Wallace: Thank you so much, Emily.

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