



Episode 423: The Surprising Reasons Why Some Kids Struggle and Others Shine
With Dr. Michele Borba

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Katie: Hello, and welcome to the Wellness Mama Podcast. I'm Katie from wellnessmama.com and wellnesse.com. That's Wellnesse with an E on the end, my new personal care line. This episode is one of my favorite ones I've ever done and a must-listen for any parents. I'm here with someone I highly respect, Dr. Michele Borba, who is an educational psychologist. She's a former teacher and she's a mom. And she's recognized for her ongoing research on the field of success in kids and how to raise resilient kids. I think this is especially important right now. We go deep on a lot of these topics.

But she has a book called "Thrivers." And it's a science-backed guide that really helps parents and teachers impart to kids essential character traits that correlate with success. And these are also especially important in our rapidly changing and anxiety-driven world, especially this past year. And I think her research on resilience, and these traits, and how to tangibly build these traits as a foundation in your children is highly impactful and extremely beneficial to our children and to our family units. You'll find me agreeing with so much of what she says. And I feel like we are very much in alignment on a lot of these topics. I think you will learn a lot. I

certainly learned a lot from this episode and from her book, which I will link in the show notes. Highly recommend that you check it out. Without further ado, let's join Dr. Borba.

Dr. Borba, welcome to the podcast.

Dr. Borba: Oh, thank you. I'm so glad to be here and speak with you.

Katie: Likewise. I think this is such an important topic all the time. And especially right now in a year like this, there's just so many different things I really wanna delve into with you today. And this is such a topic close to my heart as well. So I'm a mom of six. And I've talked a little bit about this on a podcast, but when my oldest was getting towards school age, I looked and tried to evaluate what was gonna best prepare him for whatever the future would look like, which we can't even predict. My job certainly didn't exist when I was 5, and realized that none of the available options, whether it was homeschooling, private school, public school, completely did that. And it made me step back and question, well, what do kids actually need to become successful adults?

And I realized it was very much more focused on character traits and skills than knowledge and output in a school environment. And so we built, kind of, our own curriculum from the ground up. And when I found your work, I just found myself saying, "Yes," like, so many times because you have done the research on this and you've really identified the things that are important for this across the board, no matter what area they go into when they get older.

So, to start broad, you have worked with kids for a really long time. And I've read that you have said, you're more worried about this current generation than you have been in the past. So, walk us through, kind of, the broad level, why that is, what problems you're seeing and that led to you writing this book.

Dr. Borba: First of all, Katie, thank you. If every parent would do what you just did, we would be raising strong kids who can thrive because our first step is to realize it's a different world. And that's how I started with all of this. I have been working on this book for 40 years because I began to see every decade, the world was changing. But last year was when I really had my aha moment. I began to see the stats and they were very, very concerning. First, congratulations, we're raising the smartest kids, GPAs of 4.0s or 7.3s. They're very well-educated. They're very well-loved. They're more open. They're more diverse. And those are the wonderful things about them.

But we also know this generation is the most stressed with the highest rates of mental health problems. And when I started interviewing 100 of them, coast to coast, one-on-one an hour each, they also told me that they were amongst the emptiest. So then it was why? How could this possibly be? And I realized what one child said that was, "Oh, gosh," he says, "I think sometimes we're being raised more like products than humans.

We're missing the stuff on how to be good people. And that's what we need because that would fill us up and give us a lot more hope."

Katie: Absolutely. That's what I realized with my kids as well as that when you look at the successful people and also, what is the definition of success? I'm a big fan of someone named Naval Ravikant. I've mentioned him on here before. But his definition of success is a calm mind, a fit body, and a happy home. And I think, like, those definitions, things like that are much more important than a 4.0 GPA or making a lot of money because long-term, those are the things that actually correlate to true happiness in life. But you have really identified things that set these young people apart and things that contribute to resilience, like what sets them apart from those who succeed to those who don't, and that these are the seven teachable character strengths. So, can you, kind of, just give us an overview of each of those and how they relate?

Dr. Borba: Yes, the first thing is, I was trying to figure out so what's the new model we parents need in order to help our kids to thrive? And I looked at all the work on resilience. I think we've, kind of, forgotten that there is phenomenal longitudinal studies that have been going on for decades that have been following the same groups of kids, despite adversity, these kids really do make it. They're just more invisible kind of kid for some reason. And then what I did was just put Post-It notes all over the top of my desk and say, "What do all of these studies have in common?" And I came up with seven. So my definition of success is that it's a kid who has heart, mind, and a will so that he can survive not only in a classroom but succeed out there in life.

The first is self-confidence. They have a feeling of they really know who they are. They have an understanding of themselves and their strengths. And that seems to be the foundation for the rest of these strengths. The second one is they have empathy. That's feeling more of a we versus me. And research is saying that empathy level if you feel we is far more correlated to mental health, that's a strength area because kids need to get along. Self-control is number three. It's regulating so a kid can put on the brakes and stop the impulses so that stress doesn't build, build, build, build, build. Integrity, interestingly enough, over and over keeps coming out that kids who are resilient, who thrive have a strong sense of not only who they are, but what they stand for. So when push comes to shove, they can keep on going and not have to make those heavy decisions.

And then five, six, and seven are sometimes underrated. Five is curiosity. Thrivers have an openness to life or an openness to ideas or people. So when they do face a challenge, they're more open to go, "Okay. Well, this is what I'll do instead." And they keep on going. And that is number six. They persevere. They don't need the gold stars to do so. They just keep on going because they know they can. And finally, they see silver linings. They have an optimism or a hopeful outlook on life. So it keeps their mind and hearts open and keeps them going no matter whatever comes their way. The best thing is, Katie, every one of those traits is teachable. And we can start when our kids are toddlers. So this is your framework from sandbox to prom and keep on going because we moms need these same skills ourselves.

Katie: Yeah, I'm just sitting here taking notes. And I love that you brought up curiosity. That was one of the core skills that I identified for our curriculum as well in teaching them, more the school side. And our curriculum certainly looks more like an un-curriculum and that it's very hands-on and Socratic versus

bookwork. But I've realized curiosity was a big one, that people who...And kids are born with it is the beauty of it. They naturally ask why. They're naturally curious. And so, in some ways, it feels like we just have to not untrain them.

Dr. Borba: Oh, I love that. That's exactly it. Most of the kids have this potential. But the sad thing is, every single one of these seven traits is also, in the United States in our American kids, nosediving. Curiosity is probably the leader of the pack. It's going down fastest, from around 5, 6, and 7 years of age. Now, that's scary because that's the age when kids want why. And we need to be able to say, "I don't know. Let's go find the answer. I'm so glad you asked." If we keep that curiosity, their mindset open, it actually boosts their confidence level and they're more likely to thrive and persevere. Oh, yes.

Katie: I love that. And also the idea of resilience because I understand the tension of this for parents and that we wanna protect our kids from needless suffering or from pain that they don't need to go through. But I also have heard this from multiple podcast guests and I've heard this from many teachers and educators right now that kids don't have the same resilience or ability to handle even constructive criticism that they used to. Are we doing things that are actively counterproductive to resilience?

Dr. Borba: Oh, unfortunately. Not you and me, Katie. It's the neighbors next door. But it seems that yes, yes, yes is the answer, unfortunately. And in all fairness to us, it's because we do wanna protect our kids. We don't want them to suffer. But we also need to redefine resilience and get rid of some of the myths. It's not a gene. It's not part of your IQ. It's not part of your temperament. Every bit of research is really telling us that we can teach resilience from a much earlier age because it's not fixed. It's stretchable. And maybe one of the things that we're doing wrong, and in my book "Thrivers," each one of those seven traits, I start with, here's the three things we're doing that it's actually countering it. In all fairness, some of these ways why we're countering it is because we're told we should be doing the opposite and that's what's causing it.

But clearly in life, what's happening is we are trying to overprotect our children. And high school teachers and college professors are saying they've never seen so many risk-averse kids, they're afraid to fail. And that really shortchange their resilience because failure is part of life. What we need to do is tell them instead, "Everybody does. Mommy does, Daddy does, everybody does." What we need to do instead is say, "So what are we gonna do to turn it around? What are we gonna do next time?" And there goes the curiosity mindset because we help them start problem-solving a solution. Just storm your brain. It's inside there. Let's figure out another way around it.

Katie: Yeah, I love that. I think in a sense, it's realizing as a parent, of course, we wanna protect our kids. But often in this desire to protect, we can actually do things that are inadvertently harmful for them, which, of course, we would never want. And I've seen that same trend, even with the younger employees of just being very risk-averse or not wanting to do something unless they are already good at it. And I noticed that trait of myself as well. It's something I've had to work through in therapy a little bit as being a firstborn in a very academic family and very driven. And I think also maybe being told you're smart at a young age can be counterproductive. Because of that, I had this...I didn't wanna try things that would show that I wasn't good at

something because it felt like some of my identity was predicated on that. And so, I think that's a really important point and to recognize consciously as parents that in our desire to protect our kids, we have to look at the whole picture. We can't just look at keeping them safe from experiencing discomfort when sometimes short-term discomfort is a path to much longer-term happiness when it leads to learning.

You also mentioned tolerance for failure, which I think is really important. And I'm seeing a lack of this in a lot of kids these days and also in employees. One way at our house that we've been helping our kids learn that failure can be a great thing is through playing chess. They've all gotten interested in chess. And I've explained, you know, you have to lose a good couple hundred games before you can start to see the patterns and get good. But it's great to facilitate those questions and frame failure as if you learn from it, it's a great thing because after every game, we can say, "Well, what did you notice? What patterns came out of that or what will you do differently next time?" And so, I love any other tips on that of how can we start to shift our own mindsets and our kids' mindsets to have a higher tolerance for failure and to go into that curiosity of learning?

Dr. Borba: Well, first of all, Katie, you've done exactly the first step, and that is, figure out what do you all do in your home, is it chess, is it Monopoly, is it Chutes and Ladders, is it whatever that you can use as a learning opportunity? Because games seem to be a fabulous way to not only teach sportsmanship but also grit. And when you do start to fail, all of the research, the science is saying don't emphasize the end product, how many did you get right or did you win, but how hard you're working to stick in there, your effort. If we do that alone, all of the science says we actually stretch the child to stick to a task longer. So first step is whatever your child is doing, praise not for the end product, what you get, but praise for, "Hey, I saw how hard you're working. You're getting better. Yesterday you did here, tomorrow, you're doing here." Every time the kid says, "I can't," you say, "Yet. You can't do it yet. But if you hang in there, you'll get better and better." So you're stretching the child and helping them realize they've gotta have a growth mindset. And really, success is a matter of how hard you exercise those muscles and stick in there.

Second of all, I think your new mantra as a mom is never do for your child what your child can do for yourself. Watch to see what they can do and make sure your footwork is stepping back. If they can do it, then don't rescue them. Keep on going. And if they can't, then what you do is maybe each week or each month, find one little thing that they're struggling with, and start with bed-making or dishwashing or, you know, feeding the dog and say, "Here's how you do it right. Watch me." Because the best way to teach any new skill is not telling but showing. Then the second thing is, "Let's do it together." When you do it together, you're actually helping your kid practice with you whatever the skill or the task is from chess to, you know, wiping down the tables to doing the homework. Then you say, "Now show me you can do it." And once the child can do it, start stepping back. So it's really show, do together, and then do alone. And if we keep doing that for every single skill we wanna teach our child, what you're doing is stretching resilience and stretching that sixth trait, which is perseverance.

Katie: Yeah, absolutely. And I think that often of our goal being to raise adults, not children, obviously. And I remember being a teenager and how by even like 13, I thought I was pretty independent. And so my goal with my kids was, by the time they reach that age, I wanted them to have the foundational skills to be functionally independent, even while still living in my house. We are very big on entrepreneurship. So, when ours hit that

high school age, we helped them start a business. And I've mentioned this on the podcast before, but we have a contract with them that before they can drive or have their own phone, they have to have a profitable business for a year. It could be a very small, profitable business. But so many skills are built into that including perseverance, and consistency, learning from failure.

And I also think it's really important as a parent to lead by example when it comes to that too, whether it's resilience and grit or getting out of your comfort zone, or a high tolerance for failure because I remember being a little kid and thinking my parents, you know, they always just...They seemed like this competent giant who knew everything. Like, they could figure anything out. And seeing them work through struggles was really impactful for me whether it was something they were working on in the house and having to figure it out. And so I wanted to make sure my kids also saw examples of that. And so I've taken up pole vaulting with my kids so they can see something I am definitively not good at yet, but trying to get better.

I also love that you use the word yet, that is in our house all the time. If anybody says they can't do anything, I'm always like, "Yet." And it, kind of, even rippled over into our friend group such that we had a friend over the other night, and he said "yet", and my youngest was like, "You and my mom always say yet." But I think, like, those small changes can have such a big difference in long-term mindset. And I love that you also brought up a growth mindset. Can you, kind of, explain the overview of what a growth mindset is and how that differs from a fixed mindset?

Dr. Borba: Oh, yes, because that alone is one of those simple little practices that once you get the power of why it matters, you'll actually implement it into your parenting on an everyday basis. It's Carol Dweck, her research is profound. She started as a teacher and realized that for some reason, all the kids were gifted and they're all doing math but for some reason, one class was far more successful than the other, particularly when it came to overcoming frustration. At the end, one class was far successful in terms of the grades. She started looking at the teaching strategies and she realized they were teaching exactly the same curriculum but one teacher was praising the kids differently.

Teacher number one whose kids didn't get the over-the-top grades and actually were starting to plateau were always praised for the end product. "Well, how many did you get? Why did you miss those?" Teacher number two was praising for, "You hung in there, you didn't give up," she praised the effort. What happened is that the children with the praising the effort begin to realize what they did, how hard they work mattered because they were developing a growth mindset. Success isn't a matter of IQ. It's really a matter of how hard you work where the other kids figured it was a fixed mindset. It doesn't make any difference what I do, it's all a matter of my IQ, or my GPA, or where, you know, my zip code is. So, it's a powerful, powerful technique. Praise how hard you're working to develop a growth mindset in a child.

Katie: Yeah, such an important point and one that...I think when you make that subtle shift, it's a huge difference. You also mentioned this in a school capacity. And I think maybe one area where this is sometimes the hardest to implement or I'm hearing from a lot of parents that there's tension right now, especially with virtual school and parents having to, kind of, half a teacher as well is how to implement these kind of

strategies when it comes to school. And certainly, I think a lot of parents attach a lot of importance to the academic side. And we've touched on that a little bit. But any specific guidelines for navigating the academic side with different ages. I love that you also brought up don't do for your kids what they can do themselves. That's a non-negotiable rule in our house. And if my kids...if I ask them to do something, they say, "I can't," I'm like, "Well, I won't, so you're gonna have to figure it out." But any ideas of, like, implementing these strategies on the school side?

Dr. Borba: Yes. Now, first of all, every one of these traits is made up of three skills. So, what we can do is look at the skill set, like, you turn to "Thrivers," there is an actual...In fact, I'll give you one, Katie, so you can maybe download it and anybody can take a copy of it. When you look at the framework, you'll see that these same skills are gonna help everyday life on a soccer field, as well as sitting inside of a Zoom conference for your academics. Goal setting seems to be highly correlated with curiosity, perseverance, and thrivers, not only in a classroom but also in life. So the first thing when you sit down to do your work, your first step is let's take out those Post-Its or it could be in an agenda. And on each Post-It, write down the tasks that you have. What are you gonna do today? Good. Okay. Now you've got them all lined up. Do it regularly.

First thing you do is just line up, here's what I've gotta do. Now put them in order. What's the first thing, the second thing, the third thing you're gonna do? Little kids can draw pictures of them. Here's another little thing. Do the hardest one first. If you get rid of the hardest task, your child will be less stressed because otherwise, he's thinking about that task all day long. I'm talking about the homework idea. For little ones, in particular, we've discovered when I was writing "Thrivers," I'd go to classrooms of classrooms. You mentioned Socratic dialogue, which I absolutely love. But one of the things was called Tools of the Mind. Tools of the Mind program realizes that self-control is critical and little ones have a tough time staying focused. We all have a tough time staying focused, don't we?

So the first thing that they do when they start to do their homework is they take out, for little ones, a big old index card, and they say, "What's your plan today? What's the one thing you're gonna work on right this minute?" We're talking 4, 5, 6-year-olds. Draw a picture of your plan. "Yes, I'm gonna read my book," or, "I'm gonna listen to it," or, "I'm gonna go play with the blocks." But the kid holds his play plan so that when he forgets what he's doing, all you have to do is say, "Whoa, what was your play plan today?" "Oh, yeah, I was gonna go play with the blocks," or, "I was gonna do my ABCs." That's another strategy that is extremely helpful for kids. So we're looking at helping your child manage their routines of what am I gonna do first, second, third, fourth? And then tear off each task as they do it to the point where if you keep modeling it, after a while, your child can do it all by themselves. Set it up as a ritual and a routine.

Second of all, those are their goals. What's the one goal you're gonna work on today? What's the one little thing you're gonna do to try to be the best little student you can be today? Yeah, I'm gonna work a little harder on whatever it is, but how are you gonna do it? And then the third thing is play plans. Having what's called a mediator, or a picture, or a word in front of me that reminds me what I'm supposed to do so I stick to the task.

Katie: And you also mentioned something called the multiplier effect. And you've touched on this a little bit already. But let's go deeper on this. Because I think this relates to...Like, I'm a big systems person. So in work or at home, or even with my kids in school, anytime I can stack things to make them more effective, I do that, whether it's to save time or to increase the effectiveness of any given thing. And I have a feeling this lines up with what you call the multiplier effect. So, explain what that is and how to use it to our advantage.

Dr. Borba: I think it lines up perfectly, Katie. It's different ways of terminology to use it. The big question that I'm asked...because I'm using this as a framework for school systems now. They're revamping it and taking the seven traits. But the big question they always ask is, "Which one's most important? Where should I put my time and energy?" I always say you start with where your child's strength is, not their weakness, start with their strength skill, and then figure out the one little one that they need to work on. Ideally, you do it as a family but here's the piece. When you put two strengths together, they multiply the power. What we've been doing too often is thinking of resilience as one trait. I'm just gonna teach perseverance or a growth mindset.

In reality, when you put two or three together like empathy plus curiosity, "Oh my gosh, can you imagine the power that child has to now wanna try to change the world. You put perseverance plus hope, the child's not gonna give up because, you know, I'm gonna keep on going, but I can do it because I have a hopeful outlook on life. Take any one strength, add it together, add more and more together because this is not a do it tomorrow framework. This is do it from your entire parenting plan until your child finally leaves you. They keep adding the strengths together and they quadruple the power for a child. It's kind of like a superpower for a child. And they'll be able to use them more and more to compensate for what their weaknesses are.

Katie: Absolutely. We have a definite range of different school types in different school environments for parents listening, and a lot who homeschool actually, a pretty large portion of the listenership. And then also, now many people are in virtual or homeschooling environments somewhat by default, just things are still a little strange. But for people who have more freedom like that, more tangible freedom with their kids in what a school environment looks like, what do you think is, kind of, the optimal learning environment? Because what I had come to with mine was, kind of, they should spend less time in books, and we have a whole lot of mindset pieces related to the reason for that. But if we could set up the optimal, kind of, learning environment for kids and home environment, what would that tangibly look like?

Dr. Borba: Oh, what a great question. I saw it in the most interesting place in the world, Beirut. Here is a place where very, very difficult times, but I happen to walk into the American Community School and it's called the Reggio Emilia school. It's based on the framework that you keep your child's curiosity and creativity alive by following their path, as opposed to pushing them in the path that you want them to be. So, the first thing they do is figure out their child's strengths. When I look at it, it's an open environment in that the teacher figures out what is driving the child's passion and then helping them to align the curriculum, which is perfect, really, for a homeschool environment which you're doing. As a result of it, the science says it actually will help your kid stick to a task longer because kids stick to tasks longer when they have what's called flow. They have this feeling of, "Oh my gosh, I'm intensely interested in it. I really like this." And so they keep pushing and pushing and pushing.

Now, here's the thing that we have to keep in mind. The average child in the United States gives up a real talent around the age of 13 says the University of Chicago. That's a travesty. Why did they give up their talent? They tracked kids who are enormously talented because they said they didn't have enough practice time. They didn't have enough time to go with their, I don't care if it's violin or woodworking or computer processing or reading or whatever. So their first step is, figure out what your child's strengths areas are and make sure you build in time or carve it in to follow that path somewhere along the way because that's what's gonna help your kid develop that confidence, and hope, and thriving, and potential. It doesn't mean you're gonna alleviate the rest of the curriculum content, but at least follow the child's path because it helps them thrive.

Keeping more open-mindedness in terms of watching the child. What do they gravitate towards? What are they more interested in? What gives them joy? And build that into the curriculum content. A more open-ended pace of that curiosity doesn't have a fixed, here's the answer. You're helping your child figure out, "Well, I don't know that answer. That's a great question. What do you think?" Let's keep going. I love that entrepreneur that you're mentioning because gap years, and businesses, and entrepreneurs of figuring out where your passion lies, actually helps your child develop all the strengths of resilience. It's just finding what works for you and your family, Katie. That is the answer.

Katie: That's so great. And I often think of some of the great polymaths and thinkers. And it's always funny to me because you hear people mention people like Leonardo da Vinci, or Ben Franklin, or even Thomas Edison, or these kind of great thinkers. And then they say things like, "Isn't it amazing what they accomplish with so little formal schooling?" And I'm like, "Or maybe they accomplished that because of so little formal schooling, they got to keep their creativity."

Dr. Borba: Yes. Here, I'm jumping in because one of the things I did in "Thrivers" is find a story about a real kid who was extremely successful, but overcame adversity. And I love Albert Einstein. I absolutely adore him. He did not do so well in a classroom because he was so curious and he drove teachers crazy. But what his parents did at a very early age is figure out what drove his passion, his dad giving him a compass. And he spent years with that compass trying to figure out gravitational forces just based on a compass. That was a fluke from a parent going, "Wow, he's really interested in that." But everything was an openness from giving him the books that he seemed to like, giving him the violin because it seemed to interest him, following the passion.

You mentioned, Thomas Edison. Thomas Edison, I adore, also had enormous difficulties in a classroom. But what his mom would always do is help him when he made a mistake figuring out, so big deal, what are you gonna do differently? When he was asked, "How did you possibly invent more inventions to any other name known to man, make so many incredible contributions to inventions?" He gave the greatest answer. He said, "I always would keep journals and journals and journals of what I did wrong. If I couldn't figure out what I did wrong, then how could I possibly make it right? I'd focus in on how to tweak it the next time." He wasn't overcome with a mistake. He wasn't paralyzed from it. He just figured out that mistakes are a learning opportunity. That's a goldmine as well because that's what keeps that perseverance, that habit number six open.

Katie: That reframe alone, I think, is absolutely life-changing for people. And we've talked so much about curiosity. I think this is also really important for us as adults to really cultivate our mindset and our curiosity about life. I'm a huge fan of Charlie Munger. And he has a quote along the lines of, "Any time you make it through a year, and don't question and dismantle a firmly held belief, that's a wasted year." And so I feel like this is another area that we as adults have to model but this is a practice I do every year is to go through and I make a list of anything I think I would say I believe with some certainty to be true, and then I question each of those throughout the course of the year and purposely read things to challenge both sides of that, realizing that if I'm incorrect, then hopefully, I learn the correct way of thinking in whatever that area is or if I've already reached a good conclusion, hopefully, I've at least learned empathy for the other side by questioning it.

And I think people hear that and they're like, "Oh, that's a great idea" until you have them start questioning things like, is the normal school system, the way we teach kids, is it actually good? Do kids need to go to college in every scenario? I would argue, actually, there are times when they could potentially be much more effective by pursuing other options. But I think that that curiosity extends to adults as well. And maybe we're seeing a little bit of an epidemic of adults having trouble with that curiosity too.

Dr. Borba: Yes. Because curiosity keeps you open to ideas and to people. And when you add curiosity to empathy, you're creating a far deeper thinker. That, I would say, is critical on our list as moms these days because we're dealing with a population of children, in all fairness, they're being raised in a cut-and-paste world, where they quickly can look up, they can Google everything they want, and too often they take whatever the thought is at value and go, "That has to be the truth." We have to make them dig deeper and figure out, and it could be with people. Take a moment, look at that person. How do you think she feels? How do you know? Why is she feeling that way? How would you feel if that were you? Flip the TV channels so you're looking at different news commentators from different viewpoints. When they come up with a face value of something, "Hey, Mom, look at this," don't assume that it's a fact. Go dig deeper. That's sort of what you were doing, Katie. But I think we need to flip it and make sure our kids are doing the same thing. Because when we do, we help our children not be so quick to pick up a different view.

You know, the most mind-boggling...I have to backtrack a minute and tell you I've had some real honors in my life. And one of them was being hired by the U.S. Pentagon to work on 18 army bases all over the world overseas, from South Korea to Germany and Europe. And I ended up in the most unusual place in Laos. And I found something also in Tibet. It was by fluke. It was a monastery. And I was viewing a monastery for training kids, teens who were monks. But I walked in, and I've never seen anything so mind-boggling in my life. I sat down at a quad with AP wire reporters who would come there from all over the world. And what they were doing was looking at teens, monks, who were in the middle of the quad and they were paired with another person. Now, I don't speak the language, nor did any of us, but we were like, "Oh, my gosh." What each kid was having to do was pick up a philosophy, or a thought, or whatever it was, and prove it to the other person.

Well, you know, like the Socrates or Aristotle or any deep thinking, an ethical conversation, they had to prove it, so that the other person would actually buy into it and believe it. And though you didn't understand it, you could see the stress of one person trying to make his belief be, you know, counted, while the other person would look and go...you'd see him shake his head or clap when he got it. The professors or the teachers were on the outside corner. They never intervened, unless there was really a hardship and a child needed to...I don't know where to go with this one step more thinking, oh, my gosh, we could be doing that in family meetings. We could be doing that anytime we needed to explain a child. We could be having the child turn around and go, "I think this is right, mom," and you being able to turn around and say, "Prove it. Why do you think that?" It's kind of like that debate that we used to do but we could have the kids do healthy debates in our homes, and it opens up their minds to all kinds of possibilities. And once again, it helps them, according to the research, thrive.

Katie: I agree. And I have said before, I think very much we are, kind of, the sum of the questions we asked ourselves. I think the questions we ask our kids, kind of, become their inner question. So it's a huge responsibility as a parent, but we can give them so much through the way that we help them shape their mindset and their questions. On a tangible level, I noticed this in my own life when I was struggling through health challenges or trying to lose weight over the years when my questions were things like, why is this so hard or why can't I lose weight? My brain would jump in and be like, "Oh, well, here are all the reasons. Obviously, you have thyroid disease, and you have six kids, and blah, blah, blah." And when I changed my questions to be, "How is this so easy for me or why is it so much fun to do all these things?" then my brain started answering the right questions.

And I think we can give our kids that gift by helping them curate those really good questions early on. I also love using the phrase...I think Amy from Positive Parenting does this as well, but I use the phrase "convince me." So instead of just being the, like, arbiter of you can or can't do this, if it's something I think that might be a little out of their maturity level but that they would reasonably be okay to try, instead of just saying yes or no, I'll be like, "Well, explain it to me, convince me, why do you think this is a good idea?" And put that burden of, kind of, explanation on them and to help them get a chance to develop the skills of having to work through that both mentally and verbally. But I'm a big fan of curating our inner questions and learning how to have our inner voice, kind of, work for us. And I think, like you've said, it all does tie into curiosity as well.

Dr. Borba: Yes, it does. And I love you flipping it to the other child. It's that dialogue instead of a monologue. And one of the things that I was looking at in "Thrivers" is so many of the researchers were saying, at a young age, our little ones ask so many wonderful why questions. And after a while, we get tired of their why questions, so we come up with a yes or no answer. And what it actually does is cut off their curiosity. When you turn and you say, "Convince me," or, "Why do you think that?" or, "Tell me more," or, "I don't know that answer but I'm so glad you asked, let's go figure that out," that keeps their little hearts and minds open because resilient children always have a more open-mindedness so that when they do come up with a problem, they've had the ability along the way for us to let them know, don't get sidetracked by it. Don't feel like it's a wall. Find a door to go through it by figuring out a different way.

Brainstorming could be absolutely an incredible opportunity. We teach so many of our Fortune 500 companies, our business people, brainstorming but we should be doing at a far earlier age. Don't ever give your child the answer but always say, "I don't know. What's one more idea? What's one more idea?" In fact, I always teach kids just spark your brain by say the problem. Now, keep on going. Remember that when we start sparking our brain, we come up with positive, positive, positive, no negative to some of the ideas. Keep saying and assess one more idea, ask one more idea until finally when you come up with the final answer, and you've got three or four possibilities go, "Okay. So which one are you gonna choose and why?" What you've done is you've role modeled how to help your kids spark their own brain when they're not with you. And those are the moments that they're going to need those traits so they can get through the door when there's a wall in front of them.

Katie: Yeah, that's such a practical, tangible way to implement that. And I think that's been a fun thing, especially as my kids have gotten older, when they ask questions, especially as I'm questioning many of these beliefs in my own life, and very often my most honest answer to some questions is, "I don't know but let's figure it out together," that also ties into that confidence side of letting them see the process and realize, like, okay, there's a problem I don't know how to solve but I'm confident that I can figure out how, especially considering we all have the entirety of human knowledge at our fingertips in the form of a cell phone these days.

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We also have family mottos in our family that they are probably quite tired of me saying at this point. But on our culture wall in our kitchen, we have all of our mottos. And one of them is, "You were made to do hard things." So when things get hard and they are like, "Uh," then I'm like, "You were made to do hard things. It's fun. We got this, let's figure it out."

And I think so many of the times I have seen in your work and it really does all go back to that mindset, and I think that key that you highlight so well is it's tempting to get into the idea that these things are fixed and that the kids are born with them. And I would argue they're actually born great. They come with all these traits innately, but they're also all, like you said, trainable and teachable. And so we can very tangibly give our kids the gift of a foundation that increases all of these things. We might have touched on it already. But I had a note to ask you about the question that you say would help parents raise more confident kids.

Dr. Borba: Yes, it's taking a moment to just watch your child and say, who is he? That sounds so simple. But what I discovered from interviewing all the children, the teens, in particular, is that they felt like they were being raised more on what. What do you want me to be, or what is my grade, or what subjects should I be taking, as opposed to who am I? And one of the things that was a stumbler is many kids said, "But I don't know who I am." Bill Damon is a phenomenal researcher at Stanford. And he began to see a trend that kids begin...it was top Ivy League school in the country but they didn't have a sense of purpose. Only about 20% of the kids coming in had a strong sense of identity, that confidence of knowing who I am. And that is what's going to draw their ability to go, "Okay. I know who I am. I know what I stand for. I know what my passions and my interests are. I know that I have to also take these other courses." But in the reality, it's that backlogging on that who.

So, it may be a wonderful thing over the next week to get an index card for each of your kids. I have three and you have six. But let's just do an index card on each child and watch them a little closer, figuring out what their loves are, what their passions are, what their interests are, and then making sure that we develop those because that's where self-understanding comes.

Katie: Absolutely. I wonder if there's any specifics related to teenagers, especially. I've got one and a couple more right on the cusp of that. And so it's a new phase for me, but I've tried to approach it the same way I did with, kind of, the school concept when they were young of what do they actually need? How can I best prepare them for this phase? And realizing it seems like psychologically, they actually do need to move into a lot of independence and autonomy at that age because they're working on transitioning. Like you mentioned, they need a sense of purpose, which to some degree, I'm guessing they have to, kind of, form themselves. We can help, but that would need to come internal. And then, it seems like they have a very strong need for community and not just in the family unit, but also in social circles, as well. So, I've been trying to figure out

how to curate those things in my teenagers and build community and mentors for them that are maybe younger than I am, who they look up to. But do you have any specifics related to how we can really, kind of, help through those teenage years, which seems to be a tough point for a lot of families?

Dr. Borba: They are a tough point for a lot of families. But you mentioned something, Katie, that I think is a goldmine. And that is what we do know is that community or that empathy piece is absolutely essential. The highest correlation to mental health needs is empathy and connection. Now, let's look at one step more because now we have social distancing, we have isolation. And we're finding the reports are gonna be coming out next week from Harvard that we've never seen so many lonely kids. How do you flip that around? When I asked the teens for ideas, they said, "Connect with our friends," which was interesting. That means you need, we need to find our kids, we need to know who they like to connect with, their buddies. And then we need to maybe connect more with their mothers, and find a way to help our kids do things out in the community or Zoom in the community. Why?

First, the highest correlation to, yes, mental health needs is that sense of empathy. We don't teach empathy to our kids through a lecture. It's through face-to-face connection or finding their purpose. One kid told me, he's age 16, that his mom did something really sneaky, but now he knows was brilliant when he graduated from high school. He was just starting to get interested in a girl and he really liked to be with this girl but his mom also told him that he had to do some kind of a service and contribution. We now know that service and contribution are powerful, but they're always far more powerful if they're done face-to-face or the kid is actually doing and not just collecting 50,000 coins and sending them to Biafra. When a child sees the impact of his gesture, it opens up his heart even more.

So what the mom did, this is probably gonna be post-pandemic but you can still be creative on this, is she figured out what he was passionate about, which was he was concerned about homeless, and she found a shelter. She found a shelter where he and the girlfriend, the other girlfriend's mom, and she, the foursome could do together. So he's got the mentor, he's got the connection. He's still got the moms who are, kind of, following while the son is taking the lead. They would collect things together and then drop them off at the shelter. The son began to say, "It was the look in these person's eye that I realized I never saw myself as a giver, not a getter, but a giver that I had to keep doing. I was doing it with my girlfriend, which is even cooler. But the most amazing thing is I saw something cool about my mom. I graduated from high school, we were still doing this project together. But when I went away to college, I couldn't believe what my mom was doing. I love her even more. She kept working in that same shelter, she saw something in herself together."

So it was this incredible opportunity to figure out what drove your child's passion, finding out a project that they could do together not as a one-time thing, but as an ongoing once-a-week thing, doing it ideally face-to-face, doing it with a friend. And it was everything that research says helps our kids open up their empathy, find something powerful about themselves. And wow, have this moment to do with your child together as well, a memory.

Katie: I absolutely love that tip. That's incredible. And I think that's one of those things, we use the word, like, superpower a lot in our house, especially with the younger kids because that's so intriguing to them. And I'm good friends with Jim Kwik, who has a lot of learning methodologies, and he uses a lot of superhero tie-ins. But I think kindness and empathy are probably top of the list of superpowers you can have as a human being or to be able to teach your kids, and that's such a great example of one way to do that. You also touched on the really rapidly rising rates of anxiety, and depression, and mental health struggles we're seeing, especially in young children, which is really, really concerning. And certainly, I think this past year has only increased that. We've definitely already given so many strategies that you've already mentioned that can, of course, be directly helpful for that. But any specific advice for parents who have maybe children who are in, kind of, the crux of one of those right now?

Dr. Borba: Yes, and I...But first of all is tune into your child. What the CDC is telling us is that all of this social distancing, isolation, and the worry factor is impacting our kids. Let's look at how it impacts them and then let's look at the superpower of the seven that could really help your kid. There's two of them, three of them, actually. But the first thing is our younger kids are becoming more worrisome and more fearful. They're catching our worries. Watch what you say because it spills down to your children. Watch the news, turn it off. Because if you're a kid and you are watching a daily death count, it's gonna have an impact on that seventh trait, which is optimism and hope. You're gonna be seeing the world as a doom and gloom scenario. The second thing is we're seeing our elementary kids becoming more stressful, and stressed out. We're seeing our tweens becoming more worrisome and more anxious but we're also seeing a heightened level of depression in our teens. That's what the CDC is saying.

So, what do you do? Step one is, you start to realize that above all of those seven traits, they need self-control to manage that anxiety, or that stress, or those worries, so it doesn't mount, to catch it early. First step is look at the superpower of self-control, which is putting the brakes on your impulses so you can think straight. And the first thing you may be doing as a family together, this is family, not just pointing out the one kid who's got the most stress in your house, but this is what Navy SEALs told me. the most elite forces in the world that I was working on those army bases, and they said, "This is what you should be teaching your kids," because it's rewiring our brains and it's helping us get through some really tough times.

First is take the next week or month and make sure that every kid, and you, and dad can identify each other's stress signs before it starts to mount into anxiety. What are your unique signs? And start just dignifying and calmly saying, "I notice that right when you turn that Zoom on, your feet start to go a little more or you start to put your hands into a little fist when it's time to do the time tests. Or when dad says it's time to take out the garbage, I see your heart start to go up and down or your breathing start to go a little faster."

Every child has their own unique stress signs. If we can point them out to each other, not it's a time-out, this is a time-in to, "Hey, have you noticed that the trigger is right when you have to do that time test or go to practice, here's what you do," until they start to identify it in themselves. So first step is everybody start pointing out each other's stress signs, "Have you noticed?" The second thing is so what are you gonna do to counter the stress? The moment you start to feel the stress, Navy SEALs say they do two things. And you mentioned one, Katie. The step one is they come up with a mantra inside their head, a positive mantra that

they practice when they're calm. Like, "I got this," or, "It's all gonna be okay," or, "I'll get through it." If you say that mantra to yourself out loud around the house, pretty soon you say it enough, "I got it, I got it, I'll get through it," pretty soon your child catches it and your voice becomes their own inner voice, that's powerful.

The second thing they do is they take a slow deep breath, but they do it the right way. They take a one-two breath. They take a deep from their abdomen or their tummy from a little kid. They ride it up like they're riding up an escalator, keep thinking, keep thinking, keep thinking, hold it, they get to the top, then they slowly let it out. Your exhale is twice as long as your inhale. That is glorious because it's the fastest way to relax. You can't do that in the heat of the moment. But if you practice in calm moments and you make it into a regular ritual and routine...If you go to chapter 4 in "Thrivers," and you just look at the 50 ideas of how to teach your kid one strategy to calm down, and then you keep doing it again and again and again, what will happen, it'll kick in.

So, step one is identify your kid's stress signs. Keep doing it over and over again. Step two is in a calm moment, everybody practice a one-two breath. Little kids very often breathe too quickly. Bubble blowers are great. No, no, no, breathe your worry real slowly away. How slowly can you blow that big worry bubble? Tweens put a feather on the top of a desk or a straw on the top of the desk. If you blow too quickly, it'll jump. Deep breaths that are really well go real slow and breathe it slowly so it doesn't jump across. What they'll begin to do is get the idea. Those are the beginning steps. We can talk about others of the next, third, fourth, and fifth idea. But those two are the most powerful ways to help kids learn self-control so that stress doesn't mount.

Katie: I'm putting these notes in the show notes. Any of you guys listening at wellnessmama.fm have a lot of our recap of our conversation here. And, of course, we've mentioned your book. I mentioned it in the intro. I'm sure it's available everywhere books are sold, but just give us a little bit of a high-level overview of the book, which I definitely encourage you guys to pick up.

Dr. Borba: Oh, thank you. "Thrivers: The Surprising Reasons Why Some Kids Struggle and Others Shine," it's available anywhere. But what I wanted to do was really give parents, us, teachable tools so that, first, we have a science-backed new framework for parenting kids for a brand new, uncertain world. Here's the seven most highly correlated skills that are gonna help your child in the classroom as well as in life. Each one of those traits is made up of three skills. You'll get an evaluation tool at the very beginning, real simple, to figure out what your child's existing strengths are. And then, what I really wanted to do that I hope you'll see in the book is it'll give you dozens of age-appropriate ideas. If you have a toddler or a preschooler, you just flip to the younger set ideas. So tweens, teens, middle school, elementary age, it'll give you dozens of ideas, find one idea, like identifying your stress signs, that'll be in the book. But then, over the next week, two, three, however long it takes, make sure that everybody has mastered that, and then you add on the next skill and the next skill of the next. My goal is to help us all raise a strong generation of thrivers.

Katie: I love it. And like I said, of course, the link will be in the show notes at wellnessmama.fm or anywhere books are sold you can find the book. And speaking of books, is there a book, other than your own, that has had a profound impact on your life? And if so, what is it and why?

Dr. Borba: Oh, yes, I was in a very difficult place that it was viewing...I was on the killing fields actually. And I was in a crying jag with a nosebleed crying so hard on how people could be so cruel. I couldn't understand how this could have happened to humanity. But I walked outside and there was a little table. And this book called "The Altruistic Personality" by Samuel Oliner, he's a psychologist who has done the most profound bit of research that is a wake-up call to all of us. I bought the book because what he did is he started interviewing rescuers, rescuers in World War II who risked their lives to help perfect strangers from going into death camps. Now, how could a person be that way? He started interviewing after World War II hundreds of those rescuers and asked them, "How did you turn out that way?" And every single one of them said, "It was how I was raised." Now, that was my first, "Oh my gosh, how were you raised?"

The chapter on empathy, chapter two in "Thrivers" talks a lot about it. Every one of them said the same three things. Number one, Katie, you mentioned these. It was what my parents stood for in our family. You were to do the right thing. And we talked about that over and over again of what the right thing was. Number two, my parents modeled it. Every time I looked at my dad or my mom, they always modeled kindness. They always modeled empathy. And number three is they gave us opportunities to do good. So we were required to do good. But the powerful thing about those little service projects, it helped us see ourselves as good people. And so, when the push came to shove, at that moment, I had to step in because I realized that's who I was. Thrivers, they have it inbred in them. It was my turning point in that book to go, "Wow. Parenting really does matter. It's not a gene. It's not a trait. These are skills that are teachable." You figure out how you want your kids to turn out, come out with that it's your parenting plan. "Thrivers" is gonna give you the option, but all of the science says we do make a difference and we better.

Katie: And I think that's such an important point to end on. And maybe one that I think hopefully parents have intuitively thought of, but maybe not thought all the way through, which is that parenting is perhaps the most important work we will ever do. And we make plans for businesses, we make business plans, and we make plans for vacations, but how many of us sit down and write down an actual plan of what tangible things do we wanna make sure that we get across to our kids and give them as skills before they leave home? And I think your work really gives such a good action plan for that. It's why I am a huge fan and so grateful that we got to chat today. I'm gonna say out loud that I would love to do a round two if you're willing one day.

Dr. Borba: Oh, I would love to, Katie.

Katie: Awesome. Well, Dr. Borba, thank you so much for your time. Like I said at the beginning, this is such an important topic and only more so right now. And I'm very grateful for your work.

Dr. Borba: Thank you.

Katie: And thank you guys as always for listening, for sharing your most valuable resources of time and energy with us today. We're so grateful that you did, and I hope that you will join me again on the next episode of the "Wellness Mama" podcast.

If you're enjoying these interviews, would you please take two minutes to leave a rating or review on iTunes for me? Doing this helps more people to find the podcast, which means even more moms and families could benefit from the information. I really appreciate your time, and thanks as always for listening.