Episode 593: Dr. Jen Forristal on the Umbrella Effect for Raising Resilient Kids
Child: Welcome to my Mommy’s podcast.

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Katie: Hello, and welcome to the Wellness Mama Podcast. I’m Katie from wellnessmama.com, and this episode is a really deep dive into certain aspects of parenting, and I love this conversation. I’m here with Dr. Jen Forristal, who is a naturopathic doctor. Her primary focus is actually pediatric mental health, and she’s the founder and CEO of the Umbrella Project, which we talk a lot about today. But it’s a positive coping
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Dr. Jen: Yeah. Well, I mean, it's a really important idea. And it's like one of the reasons why I really thought this book was so important to write because I think parents are dying a very slow death of information overload, like, there are just a billion things you could do for your kids. But ultimately, if you try to do all those things, you're damaging your own well-being in the process. And, you know, we need well parents to raise well kids.

So, some of the big ideas in the book are just the things, the non-negotiable things that we know to be true, that we can tweak our parenting around to make sure that we're taking that into account when we're raising kids. So the very first principle in the book is just, you're not getting out of life without some rain, like, 100% guarantee your children, my children, every child out there is gonna hit some points in life that are hard, they're gonna have some stumbling blocks, we can't prevent that forever from them.

So what do we need to do with our parenting in order to make sure that our kids are actually prepared for those things along the way? And I think, adaptively, it feels like our kids are doing really well if they're happy, right? But when our kids are young, we can often use our own coping skills to get rid of challenges in their environment, right? And it seems like they're happy. But when we take our own umbrella of coping skills away as a parent, underneath that, that child doesn't know how to do that for themselves.

So, "The Umbrella Effect" is about how we raise kids to develop their own coping skills, how we temper some of our own parenting anxiety in watching our kids struggle along the way, right? Because I think...I mean, for me, certainly, my own anxiety definitely gets in the way of parenting my kids fully as I know I should because I don't like to see them struggle, right? It's really, really hard. So "The Umbrella Effect" is about understanding the bigger picture of why you might allow them, you know, the space to struggle and how you could support them through that in a way that allows growth instead of just creating temporary happiness.

Katie: Yeah. I think this is such an important topic, and it's something I thought a lot, especially when my kids were young before I realized life automatically presents wonderful opportunities for this. But I thought a lot about as a parent, of course, the instinct is to protect your kids from painful experiences, which makes complete sense, but also realizing in my own life, looking back, some of the more difficult experiences in my life were also the most impactful and led to some of the most amazing parts of my life.

And so as a parent it's that kind of friction of, of course, we're not gonna try to make their lives difficult for them on purpose. But it's how do we give them the foundational tool so that when life inevitably does, they are able to turn those into learning experiences and view them, in hindsight, in a positive way, or at least the lessons of them in a positive way. You mentioned kind of the growth mindset. I think this is huge. And it's a thing that many of us, at least people I've talked to have to learn as an adult, if it wasn't sort of incorporated into your own environment when you were a child. This is something I know I did a lot of work around, is making my mindset and curating my inner dialogue and learning to frame things that were difficult as beneficial when I realized the outcomes of them. What are some ways that we can do that with our kids, even when they're little? Because I know you've written about this, but I'm excited to get to talk about it with you.

Dr. Jen: Yeah. Well, I mean, it's funny that you mentioned that because I think almost everybody who reads the book first says, like, "I haven't even gotten to my kids yet. I think this book is about me, and my experience, and my journey and, like, just understanding what skills are strong in me and why?" Right? And, I mean, we call them umbrella skills, we call coping skills umbrella skills because skills take practice.

So why some of your most difficult experiences in life are right beside some of your strongest skills is because you've just gotten to practice that skill over and over to get you through that difficult time, right? There's a very clear correlation between what you got to practice as a child and what you didn't. So I can think about my
own personal experience growing up and see why, you know, empathy really stands out to me as a strong skill of mine. But why something like, you know, my autonomy isn't as great and it comes a lot back to how I was parented.

And so I think, to get back to your question, how we can help our kids, like, start to build these really important skills for themselves. The very first thing starts with helping them understand that, you know, struggle is a normal part of life. So one of my favorite things to help kids really understand what's happening during challenges and learn to expect them is to sit down with them and help them think of a sucks but normal category in life. So your sucks but normal category is all the things in life that suck but are really normal parts of life.

So, into this category might go like a school subject that you find really hard or really boring, you know. A teacher that doesn't teach to your type of learning style, right? Or a friend who's being mean to you. Or you getting in trouble from your parents. I mean, the list goes on and on and on and on. And these are all very normal parts of life. But there are parts that when they happen, everybody tends to react like something has gone wrong, something bad has happened, instead of something normal has happened that brings up feelings that we don't like, and, you know? So, I think that is one of the first steps in helping kids understand that there is some things in life that they're gonna have to cope with, that are very normal but also don't feel good. So, you know, and it's okay.

I really think an important parenting shift for young kids is to be looking for all the feelings. So even as parents of young kids, and I know you have quite a few of your own, it's easy to wanna make things go away, like anger and frustration and sadness and jealousy, right? These feelings when they come up, we tend to try to, like, reduce instead of seeing it as a list of things that we're looking for in our child. Today, I wanna see that my child knows how to express anger and feels that feeling. I wanna see that they feel frustrated and that they know what that feeling is. And instead looking, like, allowing all those feelings to exist in our children when they're very young will help them as they get older to be able to deal with those feelings and to be okay with those feelings, right, and know what to do with them when they come up.

So, it all kind of fits into a puzzle of, stress is normal, even though it sucks, the feelings that you experience when you have these things are also normal. The goal isn't just blind positivity all the time, right? Most people who are just positive about everything need a bigger range of feelings. And, you know, they're probably doing things with the feelings that do come up that aren't great for them. So, yeah, finding that whole plethora of feelings in your kids is really important. And then, you know, feeling a little bit of a parenting win almost when your child experiences those instead of like, something's gone wrong in your parenting journey, or that your child shouldn't feel these feelings.

Katie: Yeah. And probably just that reframe alone makes the experience of those emotions so much easier because you're coming at it from an entirely different mindset. And I think back to, like, my own childhood, and I think my parents were great parents, but they would say, like, "Oh, it's okay, don't cry." And I think about that with my own kids, is I never wanted them to think, like, crying is not okay, or if you're crying something...you know. Like, I wanted them to have the freedom to express that.

Dr. Jen: Totally.

Katie: And also to your point, to, like, give them words for the emotions and the tools to be able to talk through them. Because I think often, at least for little kids, there's a frustration in feeling like you're not
understood, and so the more we can be present and help them hold space for that, but also still not, you
know, condoning any negative actions they may have taken while experiencing that emotion.

Dr. Jen: Yeah.

Katie: I've even tried to, like, give them a wider vocabulary of emotions, instead of just like mad, sad, happy,

it's like, "Are you feeling frustrated?" "Are you feeling helpless?" "Are you feeling..." Like, give them more cues
to be able to talk it through. And even with my little, little ones, trying to make it more almost imaginative of
whatever?" And just trying to get them in touch with their physical sensations of those emotions, because I
think that was something I had to learn as an adult actually in therapy was how to get kind of back in touch
with my emotions.

And then we also talk a lot about the difference between emotions and actions and how emotions are all
valid. And you feeling that emotion is completely valid, you don't have to shut it down. And also, you're still
responsible for your actions, even if you're feeling a big emotion, especially with little ones, we talk a lot about
that.

And you also said, if you will read the book and think like, "Oh, is this about me," which I think is awesome,
because if there's one thing I've learned in parenting, and I'm still learning every day, it's the importance
of modeling, and that they pay attention to some of what we say, but I think so much more of what we do. And
so to the degree that we work on ourselves and model whatever it is we're hoping to get across to them, the
more effective it seems to be. And so when my kids see me when I'm upset about something, take a deep
breath, and sit for a moment before responding or whatever, they're more likely to do that. Then if, for

Dr. Jen: Oh, 100%. Actually, I've heard you on your podcast ask people, like, what are three myths about your
area of expertise? And I think one of them is that we can parent our kids in a way that, like, we're doing for
them and we're not doing for ourselves and expect them to grow up healthy and well-rounded because they
are watching us, you know. We can't sacrifice everything that we are as our own people and parents in order
to make our kids well, because ultimately, they're watching how we parent, and they're gonna grow up to
learn how to be a parent. And they're gonna do that same thing, right? They're gonna sacrifice their own well-
being for their kids, for example.

And so one of my pet peeves is always how many parents just standing around watching their kids play sports
and exercise. Like, I always think there should be something for parents to be exercising at the same time as
their kids because it's great for us to do that for our kids. But if they don't see us taking care of our bodies, for
example, and moving our bodies and exercising and nurturing ourselves in that way, when they grow up,
that's the image that they have of what a parent is. So we actually have to be the change we wanna see in our
kids. We can't just give them what we think they should do. We actually have to embody what we want them
to grow up to be.

And, you know, I even talked to my mom about this the other day, because she is such a great mom, but she
often sacrifices her own. She hurt her knee, and she wouldn't call my sister or I to come and bring her food,
she wouldn't let us know how bad it was because she didn't want us to disrupt our lives to come and help her.
And so I use this on her. And I was like, "Mom, you know when I watch you I'm learning how to be a mom too,
how to be a mom of adult kids. And is this what you would want me to do, you know, with my kids when I'm
older? What if I hurt myself, should I not call the kids to come and help me and bring me food?” And was such an aha moment for her. But it’s so easy to overlook that, right? It’s so easy to just give and give and give and never take what we need for our own well-being and mistakenly think that that’s gonna be good for our kids.

Katie: Yeah. And having only, of course, lived in this generation of parenting, but looking at past generations and remembering conversations with my grandma, for instance, I do wonder what differences you see between parenting now in today’s world and previous generations of parenting? Because it seems like, at least a couple of generations ago, there wasn't maybe quite the same level of stress and/or self-sacrifice that moms had. Like, my grandma, actually seemed really good with boundaries and having her own, you know, hobbies and self-care and not letting her kids interfere with that, but still also making really good time to be with her kids and be present for them.

I know I've seen it written about how this generation of parents seems much more stressed than previous generations. And I'm curious your take on that. Is it that we're putting more pressure on ourselves? Of course, we're navigating new challenges of parenting with technology, but what do you think is contributing to that sort of shift in the mindset around parenting?

Dr. Jen: I mean, I think, like, there's two things that really jump out to me in that area. One is exactly as you mentioned, like, there's a lot of new things in our kids' world, things are changing faster and we don't necessarily know exactly where we're trying to parent them to sometimes, right? We don't really know what the jobs are gonna be like 10 years from now. We don't really know or understand their digital world and what it means to them because, in our generation, it was a bit different, right? So things are changing quickly. And I think it's probably the first time that parents are trying to parent a generation where it's a little bit unclear where we're trying to lead them.

"The Umbrella Effect" itself is really designed to give you something that you're leading towards. Because it doesn't matter, we need our kids to be adaptable, we need them, you know, to have coping skills, that's kind of a universal principle that's never gonna go away. So I really do hope that "The Umbrella Effect" gives a way for parents to see what they're trying to build towards and take some of that uncertainty out of the parenting journey.

And then I think the other thing is back to the information overload, like, there is just so much that you could do for your kids. But ultimately, if you try to do all those things, it's counterproductive to healthy parenting. So the other thing "The Umbrella Effect" does is help you really, really see and understand what your kids need next, and do that one thing. Instead of doing 100 things, you can do that one thing. So, in the book, and actually on our website, there's an umbrella assessment that helps you and your child assess your umbrella of coping skills and see what's wrong, and what needs work.

And then I always recommend to parents, pick the lowest coping skill, and start to put some specific parenting energy into that. So at the back of the book, there's an index of all the skills and some do's and don'ts of parenting if that's the skill that your child is really struggling with, so that you can really narrow down your effort, you know? If cognitive flexibility, for example, is your child's biggest struggle, and they absolutely cannot cope when things are different in their world, they're not very adaptable, there are some very specific parenting things that you can do to start to nurture that hole in their umbrella, and get it stronger and stronger. Because that's what that child needs.

You know, maybe they don't need more work on their empathy or their growth mindset. But what happens in parenting, I think, is that we see all these things that you could do, right? We could be doing gratitude journals
in the morning and, you know, this exercise at bedtime, and we could be doing more playdates and doing more sports, but every child is different. And we can't do all those things, right? So knowing your own child's very specific needs is a great way to narrow down and do the one most important thing for your child's coping in that moment.

And then as you watch that skill grow, you can pick another one, right? Parenting is a long game. And I think it's great that you can see your child's umbrella getting stronger. And what happens actually when you do that, when you fill in one little piece of your child's umbrella, is whatever rain they're facing feels a little bit more manageable, they're a little bit more likely to take on another challenge and start to build even more coping skills. So it's almost got, like, a spiraling effect when we build coping skills that they feel a little bit stronger, they take on a little more, they feel a bit stronger, they take on a little bit more. And suddenly you have this child who is able to take on those challenges that they couldn't before.

Katie: Yeah. I love so much the adaptive nature of this because it really takes into account the thing that I learned when I had my second child, which is if you have figured out parenting for one child, what you have figured out, at least for me, is how to parent that specific child in this specific moment. And it's always constantly changing and every child is so different. And I think that's been my frustration with some parenting approaches is they seem more one-size-fits-all. And that's not how children or humans work.

Dr. Jen: No. Well, I mean, your parenting input is one piece of input of many that the child is getting, right? When they're out in the world, if they're going to school, if they have friends, they're taking your piece of parenting, whatever you're trying to give them, and they're putting it into the context of all the other information that they're receiving. So, of course, one strategy doesn't work for everyone or even for the same child the next year, right? Like, things are constantly changing and adapting. And so not only do kids need to be adaptable, but parents do too, right? They have to say like, "Okay, that didn't work for this child because of all this other information that they have." And they need to be able to, you know, constantly kind of come back, check in, and see how the big picture is going. Because, yeah, it's great that kids have tons of other input besides us, but it also makes it really complicated to, you know, apply black and white parenting strategies. There is no black and white when it comes to parenting. It's all gray.

Katie: Yeah. So true. And I'm curious, are there specific ages that this book is especially helpful for? I know it's adaptable, so are there approaches for every different age along the way or more ideal time?

Dr. Jen: Yeah. I mean, I would say, kids in that school age, you know, kindergarten to grade 8, is a really great time to be actively working on coping skills. But if you have an infant, you can read this book before you start getting into all of, you know...into the parenting journey. It just helps to provide a frame of what you're working towards. And if you have teenagers, on the other end, there's tons of conversations in the book that are really helpful as well.

For any of you with teenagers out there, I'm sure you've discovered that words matter a lot when you're talking to your teenager. And that the conversations that you're having with them are really make or break when it comes to your relationship with them, right? Teenagers need to be heard and understood and connection. And their interest and desire to do and listen to your guidance comes from connection, or it comes from fear. And I think most of us as parents want that relationship to come from connection. So, there's lots of things in the book that will help you think about your connection with your older kids too, ask them questions, and get a lot more curious about their experience so you can parent them from that place where they feel understood.
Katie: I love that. I have several teenagers now, my oldest is now 16. And that's something I think about a lot is that connection versus fear thing. And I think back to my own teenage years and just remembering all of the big emotions that came with that age, and that really intense need to feel autonomous, and to feel how grown up I thought I was at that moment. And I think there's obviously a lot that goes into that.

But I think a lot about, like, compliance and defiance being more under that fear category. And even if you get them to do what you want out of fear, it's still really just the other side of the same coin as defiance, it's just you're in the power seat versus them being in the power seat. And it seems like...I don't have a lot of older teenagers yet with the oldest just being 16, but it seems like connection really is the antidote to that, to your point of like, if it's coming from that place, and they feel like you actually understand them, even if there's things you have to say no to, they are able to hear it a lot better. And also it means...it seems, like, with mine at least, there are a lot more things I can say yes to because there's very much that two-way conversation. And I trust them and they are willing to communicate with me.

And they also, I think, have confidence, hopefully, that even if they make mistakes, which, of course, they will, that there is still unconditional love on the other side. And that there's not gonna be that, like, really intense fear reaction for me or, like, you know, anger reaction. Even if it's something that's, like, really upsetting, we're gonna work through it together.

Dr. Jen: Yeah. I mean, I can't imagine not knowing those, especially those mistakes, right? I mean, it's great to know all the day-to-day fun that your kids are having too, but I feel like our role as a parent of teenagers is to be able to be there for those bigger mistakes, too, to help them, guide them through it, right, and to provide a sounding board with some experience that can maybe help them through those difficult times. And I think the only way you're gonna get your kids to share those experiences is really by figuring out how not to punish them when those things happen, and still allow for the logical consequences of the action to happen.

So I love, wherever there's possible consequences that aren't doled out by you as a parent, I love to try to make use of those. I think that's a great way to allow kids to understand the world beyond your house, right? So, for example, my daughter who's in grade 9, sent me a message the other day that she didn't wanna go to one of her classes because she had already finished the work and she was essentially texting me for permission not to go to her class.

And, I mean, while I understand her logic of why she doesn't wanna sit there for an hour and a half while she's completed the work, I also have to hold a parenting boundary around skipping class, right? So, my response to her in that situation was, you know, "I understand your logic, but you don't have my permission to skip class. So there are consequences at your school if you miss a class. And if the office calls and says that you weren't in class, I'm not gonna be the one who's in the office making up a reason why you weren't there, you'll have to deal with that consequence yourself if you choose to skip school, but skipping school is your choice."

And, you know, in finding those opportunities, there's an openness that she can tell me if she did or did not miss that class, because there isn't necessarily a consequence with me. I'm open to hearing what her experience is. But I'm also not gonna save her from the consequence that exists in her system. So those kinds of moments, I think, are important to think about as well as the parent, like, how can you stay open and still hold your boundaries of what is and is not acceptable?

Katie: I love your language around that too, the difference...using the word boundaries versus, like, punishment. I'm a big fan as well of letting the natural consequences play out versus always having to impose the consequences. And one of my principles of parenting is that, for the most part, I don't do things for my
kids once they're capable of doing them themselves. I mean, obvious exceptions for, like, connection, like my daughter can braid her own hair, but I love braiding her hair at night sometimes because it's the time for us to talk. It's not that I never help them, but it's like, if they're capable of doing the laundry or doing the dishes, I'm not gonna do it for them. But I'm also not, like, the enforcer of that. Like, they know what their responsibilities are, there's natural consequences built-in, if they don't do their laundry, they don't have clean clothes. That's no longer my issue, that's their issue that they have to figure out. But talk a little about why you use the word boundaries versus, like, for instance, punishments or other language that could be used there.

Dr. Jen: I mean, that's a good question. I've always just felt like parenting boundaries, to me, feel like a hug for your kids. A big wide hug of safety where you're establishing a line, which allows for their freedom of development, that you're constantly watching them and seeing where that boundary should be, but that you're keeping them safe from going outside of that boundary too often, or you're trying to establish the widest possible net you can for your kids, while still making sure that they're, you know, making good choices in life that they won't regret in the future too profoundly.

So, actually, one saying we have in our house that started as a joke, but actually became, like, a really foundational part of my parenting is self-regulate or be regulated. So there are certain things that I think are important for us to be doing as parents, right? So let me use the example of choosing to eat healthy, put healthy foods in your body, right? I think that's a really important thing for parents to be thinking about with their kids because it really does profoundly affect a lot of our future health.

However, if you do that too much for your child, they never learn how to do that for themselves. So, in our house, I allow my kids to make their own food decisions. I mean, some of my kids are a bit older now, so, of course, they make their own decisions. But as they were growing up, you know, of what they're choosing to eat, what they're choosing to order at restaurants, and I'm just kind of keeping an eye on it. And if at a certain point, you know, they haven't had a vegetable in a week and I'm thinking, you know, then I will help to regulate them by saying like, "Okay, you know, I think it's time that you choose some healthier foods," or whatever it is. But they know the principles. So they also know that their food is within their own control and that they're entirely entitled to self-regulate. And I'll only step in if I see that what they're doing is a potential risk, or it could harm them in a more significant way in the long term.

So that's, I think, sort of, like, the boundaries thing, right, where I'm trying to create a safe boundary for them with my parenting, but that boundary is very wide, and it allows them a lot of grace to regulate within it. And my boundary is, like, the safe hug at the end of the day that keeps them, you know, out of harm's way in a real way.

Katie: Wide boundaries. Yeah. I think that's such a great concept. And I take a similar approach with food. I think it surprises people sometimes because even though I'm very in the health and wellness world, I am not in any way, like, the guardian of what they eat. I view it as kind of, like, division of responsibility. And we talk about this in my house where like, "I am responsible for buying the groceries and providing nutritious food to you and I enjoy cooking. So most of the time I'm doing the cooking. And I'm gonna try to make things that are both healthy and delicious. And that's what I'm providing. And your responsibility is to figure out when you're hungry, and when you're hungry, to fill your body in a good way that nourishes it. And I'm gonna trust your autonomy in that. So if there's a meal that you don't wanna eat, whether it's because you don't like it, or you're not hungry, I'm gonna respect that. But we're not gonna a restaurant or eating, you know, cereal for dinner just because you don't happen to like it. But you can always choose not to eat, how much you wanna eat, everything within that."
And if they're not in my home, I'm like, "That's not my responsibility. You have autonomy in your body, you can eat what's there." And so I don't forbid them from eating cake at a birthday party, for instance, or anything like that. And I think this also touches on that modeling component because I've realized, even the more I've healed my relationship with food, they model that so much and they make healthy choices without me imposing that on them. It's just what they're used to. And I just think that I love that approach so much that you talk about. And you also use the term curious empathy, which you touched on empathy a little bit, but I'd love for you to expound on curious empathy and kind of the mindset shift that's within that.

Dr. Jen: Yeah. I mean, I have definitely found curious empathy to be the most effective parenting shift that I have ever had with teenagers and with teenage kids' parents because I think back to us not really fully understanding what our kids are experiencing right now. Whether it's with their online connection with friends, and how all of that goes. Curious empathy just means parenting from a place first of curiosity of your child's experience, assuming that you don't know anything about what they're experiencing. And I think families are wonderful because there's a lot of familiarity. I think we would all probably say that we know our kids inside out. But it's actually quite surprising how many things we don't know about our kids and their internal experiences.

So starting with curiosity, asking more questions about what they're experiencing, instead of assuming, you know, your child comes home and says, "Oh, this friend was mean to me." And immediately saying, "Oh, that's awful. How could they do that to you, doesn't..." You know, and on and on, whatever our paradigm of the world is for that experience. Instead asking a lot more questions and getting a lot more curious about what our child is actually experiencing.

And then, using empathy as a really important parenting tool, where instead of trying to change our child's experience, instead of trying to divert them away from that experience and that feeling, just being with them in that space, you know, just kind of coming up alongside them and trying to understand why they might feel that way. I think it's also easy for parents who have had a whole lifetime of experiences to be a little more resilient to some of the little things in life. And so it's easy for us not to get why our child is making such a big deal about something.

And so I often recommend, if you can't empathize with the experience that your child's having, try to empathize with the feeling that they're having, like, sadness, frustration, loneliness, whatever the feeling is, you know, try to remember a time you felt like that, and then kind of come up alongside them and just be with them if you can, in that feeling, and allow them to have it rather than trying to talk them out of it.

I do think there is something to be said though, one of the things we talk about in "The Umbrella Effect "is the ratio of rain to umbrella. And that matters a lot, right? Like, if you have a golf umbrella worth of skills, and it's sprinkling outside, you're probably doing pretty well underneath that umbrella, you're probably pretty dry. If you have a cocktail umbrella of skills, and it's a monsoon, like, you're not gonna be doing okay in that situation, right? You're probably gonna be struggling and putting a lot of negative coping skills in place just to try to protect you from that.

So, I also think it's very important as a parent to be watching that ratio of how your child's doing in that moment and adjusting your parenting accordingly. So, you know, sometimes it might just mean sitting with your child and just empathizing with their feeling and allowing them to, you know, get some of that out of their system. Sometimes it might be helping them to be distracted for a little bit, you know, to get out of the acuteness of that feeling because you know it's just the last straw for them, and one more thing isn't the right thing for them to just work through with that, right?
Sometimes it's about finding and helping them with your umbrella of coping to come out of that feeling and then come back to it later, you know, at a better time to talk about it. So I do think the ratio matters quite a bit. I mean, we don't need to jump in and save our kids from every feeling, but sometimes, there is an application also for helping them through that feeling in a really real way.

Katie: Yeah. That's an important balance for sure.

This episode is brought to you by Four Sigmatic, the company that first introduced me to functional and medicinal mushrooms and whose products I've been using for almost a decade. Mushrooms are absolutely fascinating, being genetically closer to humans than they are to plants. The largest organism in the world is a mushroom and they allow trees and plants to talk to each other using something called mycorrhizal networks. Many types of mushrooms are also well studied for the benefits to humans, and widely used in many ancient medicinal traditions and cultures. Researchers has found that mushrooms have high amounts of ergothioneine and glutathione, both important antioxidants, that help fight age-related decline. I love eating culinary mushrooms but sometimes it can be hard to work them into my everyday diet, and specific mushrooms have additional more targeted benefits. That's why I love Four Sigmatic products. They have a wide variety of beverages that incorporate these amazing superfood mushrooms and that taste amazing. On a typical day, I’ll drink a cup of their mushroom infused coffee or matcha with ingredients like Lion’s mane for focus or cordyceps for overall health. I also love winding down with a cup of their Reishi elixer, which helps me fall asleep and get more restorative deep sleep. I especially love their packets on the go because they are so easy to throw in my purse or my bag when I travel, and I’ll often just order a cup of hot water on the go and make some Lion’s Mane coffee on a plane. I also love mixing a packet of their coffee or matcha into a protein drink on the go for a protein-packed iced latte option. Speaking of protein, they have the only plant-based protein I like, with 7 functional mushrooms and adaptogens and the flavor is great. Check out all of their products at foursigmatic.com/wellnessmama. Use the code wellnessmama for a discount!

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And I have a few kind of maybe, like, rapid-fire items I wanna touch on that I think are big topics for parents, and I'm curious your take and how you approach them in your home. The first being things around related to bedtime struggles and getting kids to bed on time. And I'm curious how you even approach that, if that is, like, a strict timeline in your house, or if, as they get older, they have more autonomy, and when that is, and how that is, or how you approach bedtime, and/or especially if they don't wanna go to bed.

Dr. Jen: So, yes, I would say that we do have a pretty clear routine around bedtime expectations. Because, again, like, with nutrition, the research is pretty conclusive that sleep is a really, really important part of coping well. And so what we usually do, especially with our bigger kids, but as soon as a child is able to participate in family discussions and conversations, we absolutely try to loop them in. I have a two-year-old too, so he doesn't get much say in his bedtime right now. But as soon as your child can be a participating member in your family, I think it's really important.

And so an example of this, as we came up to the school year this year, we wanted to make some changes around our bedtime routine because I think over COVID we got kind of sloppy with screen time. And then it was like, all the kids have their devices in their room and it's 10:30 and nobody's sleeping and, you know. So my husband and I sat down and we said, you know, "What would be some significant changes that we would love to see for better sleep for the kids, what's our thinking?"

And then we took the kids out to a restaurant, and we sat down with them. And we said, "Hey, you know what, here's what we're thinking, and here's why. What do you guys think? This is your chance to give us your input. Is there anything in this structure that you're thinking isn't gonna work for you? And now's your chance to kind of bring, you know, your things to the table too."

And then we came up with what was fair, you know, plugging phones in at 9 p.m. in a common family space, but still being able to access those devices while it's plugged in, and we're all in the family space to send a message to a friend about walking tomorrow to school, or whatever it is, right? And then onward from there, what a bedtime routine would look like. And it's been going great so far in this school year.

But I think allowing autonomy for your kids to have a say, you know, having a set of parent ideas of what you think is really gonna work, and then making your child a participating member of your family when it comes to that stuff really helps the rule not to be a battle in the moment. Right? And you're not tackling it at 9:30 when you're frustrated, and like, "Is your phone in your room? And how did this happen again? And what are we doing, right?" It's like, "It's fun, we're at dinner, you know, we're all having a great time. And we're here to talk about something that is a problem in our house, which is bedtime, right? And we wanna find something that works for everyone." So that, for me, is how we try to approach most problems.

Katie: Yeah, I love the family meeting idea. And getting them out of the home seems like a great pattern interrupt. It feels like there's more focus and less distraction. Ironically, even in a more distracted environment. Kind of all around a table. What about things like tantrums? I know this will touch a little bit on what we talked about, with holding space for emotions and not shutting them down. But I'm curious if you have any special approaches for the little ones with tantrums.

Dr. Jen: Well, I mean, this is... So, if you have an infant, starting from birth, one of the things that I think is incredibly important for tantrums is talking to your kids as much as you can. So babies walking around, you're like, "Oh, there's a tree and a bird. And here's what we're doing." And you're just narrating life for them. Because vocabulary for young kids is a great way to put off tantrums, right?
And I don't know if you find this with your kids, but a lot of hard tantrum-me feelings come from frustration, right? And so in the youngest and earliest kids, you know, your two-year-olds, there's a great deal of frustration that can be headed off with just having words to describe what they're feeling, what they want, you know what their experience is.

And then as you get into those older kids, I think being able to just hold space for the tantrum and allow them to let their feelings out is also a great way to reduce tantrum. It seems like it might increase how often they have tantrums, but being able to hold your line and say to them, "With everything that you're doing, this feeling is hard. I'm here for you." And telling them, like, you get what they're feeling. "I understand that you're frustrated, right, but still the line is still the line and we're not gonna, you know, turn the TV back on because you're really upset that we turned it off. Because that's, you know, the decision that we've made."

Because I think, again, with that sort of boundary or that hug, when we give in to our kids' big frustrations like that, even though we know we shouldn't be, in many ways, we're telling our kids that we can't handle their big feelings either, right? They have huge feelings and our job as a parent is to handle them, you know, like to just be okay that they're feeling that way, and tell them, you know, that they are frustrated, and that's okay, "You're allowed to be frustrated."

So I think that's a big one when it comes to big feelings, is just not allowing those big feelings to scare you as a parent into changing what your line was. And then as your kids get a little bit older too, really being able to help them negotiate in an effective way. So being open, also, to changing your mind if the thing that you set down in the first place was unfair.

So I'll often, you know, as that feeling is coming up, I'll even ask my two-year-old like, "Hey, you know, do you wanna tell me a little bit more about why you're frustrated and what you're thinking right now?" And he's got a lot of language. So he can usually explain a little bit in his own little two-year-old way of why he's so upset. And if that reason is actually not fair, like, "Oh, you know, we usually always let you have three shows, I don't even know why I told you to turn off the TV right now, it wasn't even related to, you know, anything." Then allowing space for that kind of conversation and negotiation.

Katie: Yeah. And modeling that curious empathy you talked about even at a young age. Probably, I've often thought that too, of, like, tantrums seem to relate to that feeling of powerlessness. So to the degree that we can give them power by giving them more words, or by giving them an understanding that even when we are not gonna agree with them, or change it, we're listening to them...

Dr. Jen: Yes. Absolutely.

Katie: ...seems to go a long, long way. And I think curious empathy is a wonderful tool in any relationship, not just parenting. I've noticed this in friendships, in business negotiations, to the degree that you can be actually curious and in a state of learning about someone versus listening to their points to be able to say what you're gonna say next. Or if you're in an argument, even with a spouse, to, like, rebut what they're saying, it's an entirely different energy, and you feel different, the other person responds differently. It's just typically a much more productive conversation in any relationship. So I think that's an absolute gold tip. And another one I hear from a lot of parents about is frustration around kids and chores. So I'm curious how you approach this in your house and how things get done in your home.

Dr. Jen: So, I mean, almost identical to the sleep question. How we try to start with chores is really allowing the space for conversation before. And food's the same, right? Allowing the space for what the meals might be this week at the beginning of the week rather than trying to negotiate in the moment of the meal, right? So,
chores are exactly the same, you know, really trying to proactively talk about what those chores are, allow space for your child's opinion about it. But in the moment, when they don't wanna do it, validating that it's okay and nobody...like, you know, "You're doing the dishwasher because I don't like doing it either every day, right? It's not something necessarily, that's fun. And I get that. However, it does still need to be done. So, you know, we're gonna do the chore now."

And I think the more you can hold that ground and the more you can understand why they're frustrated and not make it out of anger but just make it out of understanding but clear lines is a big one for us. What about you? How do you get chores done at your house?

Katie: Very similar. I try to model in the natural consequences as much as possible. And we have lots of conversations around family and working together and what our joint goals are. It actually...like autonomy and them getting to feel that has been such an important principle for me since they were young.

It was a really funny experience a few months ago at my house. I came home from a podcast day actually, and being at work all day. And the six kids, on their own, had decided to sit down and have a family meeting because they felt like not all the chores were getting done. And there was lots of, like, them happening late and people having to remind people. And so they sat down and figured out a new system on their own and had written it out...

Dr. Jen: Wow.

Katie: ...and made a schedule. And then they came and proposed it to me and it involved them doing all the same things. But they had just figured out a better way to do it. And I was like, "Absolutely. Let's try it. Let's see what happens." And a few months in now, it's been working really, really well. And so I think, like, when we don't underestimate our kids, and we teach them early just how capable they are, it's really fun to get to see that play out as they get older. And I was really impressed that they had taken that initiative and that now they actually...I was still helping with the dishes on certain days and different things, and now they have completely taken it over on their own accord, so.

Dr. Jen: Oh, that's amazing. Yeah. And that's, I think, another big parenting thing is sometimes you don't get to know in the moment if what you're doing is actually working, right? Like, there's a lot of parenting effort that goes towards encouraging chores. And, you know, you're always on top of them to try to get them done. And it's this kind of prolonged effort. And you don't get to know, in that moment, when you're putting out that effort if when your kids get older, they're gonna be able to sit down and come up with a new schedule and propose it to you, right? But you have to trust in something, right? You have to trust that the efforts that you're making, if you can really zoom out on the big picture are the right ones to get your kids to that point where they are autonomously doing that stuff.

So always good to keep in mind, if you're kind of in the throes of the frustration of each of these different things, right, that there is some confidence to be had in your efforts if you just take a few minutes to zoom out on the big picture and really understand it. And so I hope with the book, that is exactly what we've really tried to accomplish. And what I've really tried to give to parents is something bigger so that you know whether, in the moment, what you're doing is likely to, you know, help your kids down the road. Because it's not always easy. And it doesn't always look like it's working, you know. Sitting there with your toddler while they melt down about the TV again doesn't always translate to resilience at age 12. Unless you know the steps of how you're getting there and you know the big picture of what you're working towards, right?
Katie: Yeah. And I think your book is so, so helpful. It's such a valuable tool because it does take into account the different ages and all the different things that go into parenting. And I also think like...you talk a lot about modeling and your own energy that goes into parenting. And I think that is also a huge key because I think when we, from a young age, approach our kids with the energy that, "I think you are incredibly capable, and incredibly intelligent, and incredibly..." Like, with all the things we hope that they are, and we give them that energy, they rise to that. And it's that they wanna choose these things because that's how they've been...you know, that's how they felt their whole life and that's how they've been treated.

And it seems like the older they get, the more those things fall into place. But you're right, it is a lot of effort when they're little. And then I find so far that parenting the teenage years has been one of my favorite parts because they are so capable and responsible and also they communicate still so well that I feel like I am getting to know them on a whole deeper level and, you know, as they're approaching these adult years soon, that I have a really good relationship with them. And it didn't always feel like that, of course, when they were two. There were days where I felt, like, internally ready to tear my hair out. But to your point, it's the long game and it really does pay off and definitely can't recommend this book enough. I will put the link in the show notes at wellnessmama.fm. And it's also available wherever books are sold. But the last wrap-up question I love to ask is, speaking of books, other than your own, if there are any that have really profoundly impacted you, and if so, what they are and why?

Dr. Jen: I'm a huge reader. So I think they're... It's so hard to narrow down. But if I were to pick one fiction book that I can think back that really had a huge impact on me, "The Fountainhead" by Ayn Rand. I read when I was in my late teens. And why that was so impactful for me is because it really brought home the fact that you should think critically about what the world is presenting you as normal or healthy, and you should make your own decisions about what's good for you. I think it really shifted my level of understanding that different is not a bad thing and that society doesn't always...the big picture of what people value is not necessarily always what the best thing is for you. So I love that book for, like, teenagers to read as they're kind of coming into adulthood.

And then from a parenting perspective, I mean, I always love "French Kids Eat Anything And Yours Can, Too." It's such a simple and fun read. But again, what I love, love love about that book is it's a lot about shifting the environment to be a better environment for your kids to flourish, rather than, you know, imposing rules upon them individually. So it's not about, "Eat more vegetables, you have to, this is my parenting rule." It's about how can we create an environment where you see other kids eating vegetables, where everyone around you is eating vegetables and vegetables are just a great and normal and delicious part of food, right? So that's why I love that book. It applies to so many things besides food when it comes to parenting. And I think we've definitely touched on it quite a bit in this podcast of just how you might shift your environment rather than trying to control your child's behavior, so much more powerful than of a parenting strategy.

Katie: I love that so much. It reminds me of something that I've seen floating around on Instagram that says something along the lines of, you know, "When a flower is not blooming, we don't try to change the flower, we try to improve the soil."

Dr. Jen: Yes, 100%.

Katie: I think that sums up so well so many of the things we talked about. And I also know there's so much we didn't have time to get into in just a short podcast episode. But a lot of you guys listening, I highly recommend Dr. Jen's work. And this book, in particular, I think it's hugely, hugely helpful. And I'm so glad we got to go on some of these topics today. Thank you so much for all your work and for being here today.
Dr. Jen: Same, right back at you. Thank you for all your work. You do such a great job of nurturing the health of your whole community. So thanks for having me.

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

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