The Power of Positive and Unique Thinking

EPISODE #149

Dr. Nicole Tetreault 0:00
What makes you unique? And then from that, that uniqueness, what ways do you want to share who you are? So really tapping into early on where kids can intuitively trust that essence that they were born with to share with everybody.

Emily Kircher-Morris 0:17
Reexamining neurodivergence through a positive lens, reimagining established thought processes and using the plasticity of the brain to move toward compassion for self and others, these goals are what keeps Dr. Nicole Tetreault awake at night. She's a neuroscientist, meditation teacher, and author of the book "Insight Into a Bright Mind: A Neuroscientist Personal Stories of Unique Thinking", and founder of the Awesome Neuroscience Blog. We talk to Nicole Tetreault straight ahead on episode 149. I'm Emily Kircher-Morris. And this is the Neurodiversity Podcast.

intro 0:56
This is the Neurodiversity Podcast.

Emily Kircher-Morris 1:19
We're launching our second course in the Neurodiversity University, called "Foundations of Dyslexia for Educators." Research shows that one out of every five students is dyslexic, which is why it's so important to understand and accommodate these students. "Foundations of Dyslexia for Educators" is a four module course that will help you understand what dyslexia really is, how it's identified and assessed. Some methods for developing reading skills, and supports and accommodations that work for dyslexic students. For details, look for a link in the show notes or just go to www.neurodiversity.university. Up next, a conversation with Dr. Nicole Tetreault. She's a neuroscientist, meditation teacher, international speaker and author of the book "Insight Into a Bright Mind." She's also the founder of the "Awesome Neuroscience Blog", where

she translates the most promising neuroscience and positive psychology into understandable concepts that readers can use. We'll talk to Nicole next time.

Narrator 2:26
On a previous episode of the Neurodiversity Podcast.

Mona Delahooke 2:29
I think there is this kind of in our cultural DNA still, this idea that properly behaving, you know, children should be seen and not heard. I think there's kind of this mystical, unspoken idea that behavior management is appropriate and, and somehow valued. Somehow, with how the research was interpreted as successful, it became the mainstay of our education system. And when you look at the science, the neuroscience of resilience, and you lay that side by side to behavioral management, the two don't line up very well.

Narrator 3:11
That's episode 116. Find it in your favorite podcast app Today.

Emily Kircher-Morris 3:28
I'm excited to talk to Dr. Nicole Tetreault. Nicole is a neuroscientist and author of the book "Insight Into a Bright Mind: A Neuroscientist Personal Stories of Unique Thinking." So Nicole, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today.

Dr. Nicole Tetreault 3:43
Thank you for having me. I'm so excited to be with you.

Emily Kircher-Morris 3:47
I want to start off with a question that I've asked other guests on our show, because I'm always curious about how people understand this concept. So how would you frame what neurodiversity is? And how would you describe the concept of being neurodivergent?

Dr. Nicole Tetreault 4:02
Ah, hmm. Isn't that the million dollar question? You know, for me, I settle on coming back to it from being a neuroscientist. So really, the way that I think about it a lot of the time is different brain wirings, and different really receptivity and processing that's relying on different types of brain wiring. And it's really an umbrella that it kind of encompasses. So when I think about it encompasses gifted ADHD on the autism spectrum, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, and then when we start looking at all the statistics of that we know it's about one in five people, so like a large part of our population. And so I

really try to kind of categorize it as people who experience and process the world differently, but tend to be highly creative, highly unique problem solvers, as well as trying to erase the words of deficit, or something's wrong with somebody and really embracing the positives. And really seeing these brain types as unique. And more so we need to change our structures in society, you know, based on universal design to include all people.

Emily Kircher-Morris 5:27
I was recently speaking with someone, and they were telling me about, they were talking to their child's doctor about possibly seeking an autism assessment, and that they believe their child was neurodivergent. And apparently, the doctor kind of scoffed at her and said something along the lines of like, "oh, neurodiversity that's not a real thing." And I kind of was just like, I'm not sure what that means, like, how would you respond to someone who doesn't believe that neurodiversity is a quote unquote, real thing?

Dr. Nicole Tetreault 5:53
Well, I would say, absolutely, you're wrong, but I wouldn't say it that way. I would say well, that's, you know, there's a lot of misinformation, but scientifically, we do know that people have different brain wiring, and when you have specific brain wiring, you're going to communicate and produce differently, and, you know, having an identification gets you the services you need. And so it's not that it's better or worse, it's not that you know, you're special on any element, everybody's special, everybody has gifts, but the reality is that, due to human variation, from a biological standpoint, we are variable beings. And in fact, science wise, we know that each one of us has a very unique brain print, so like, Emily has her own brain print, you know, your kids have their own brain print. And we even know scientifically that people learn differently that when in a scanner, people are learning a new technique that their brains light up differently, and so that in itself, we know, is scientific proof. And when I was researching my book, I read over 1000 papers, so it's not like this is something we can take lightly, because it does exist. And I do think, unfortunately, in our society, it's a convenience for people to say that doesn't exist. Just like if a child is struggling with mental health challenges, like anxiety or depression, like, oh, they need to get over it, they need to buck up, they need to have more resilience. And it's like, well, first, we have to understand to help them unpack the struggle that they're dealing with. So I think it's sort of, in some ways, a bit of a lack of compassionate of a response in one way and it's also a way of not caring to try to understand that this does exist, you know, and we know that when you play ignorant, you know, that doesn't serve anybody.

Emily Kircher-Morris 8:03

I feel like there's been some pushback, that the idea of neurodiversity is a fad, or it's trendy for people to identify as neurodivergent, I'm like, well, it's a disability rights movement. And not that all types of neurodiversity, like the whole point of it is breaking free of that stereotype of disability along with that, but it's interesting how some people are really resistant to the idea of it.

Dr. Nicole Tetreault 8:27
Well, because they have to take on responsibility, and you have to have accountability, and you have to be willing to open your mind. And I think you've raised such a beautiful point right now by saying the both and that it is a disability movement of equality and inclusion, and at the same time, people aren't less than. And so it's, you know, I think it's the both and to recognize that people need services. Somebody who has ADHD and who's highly gifted, maybe they're not so ADHD, but they're more gifted, needs to have an environment where they feel safe to work, they need to have an environment where they can feel safe with their peers. And so if we say that their condition or an identification I like to say is better, because it's just an identification, when we ignore that and say, oh, they're just being a pain that they need to get up, that's not true. Physiologically, their body and brain is on fire, and they need to be able to move. And so yeah, I think that it's the awareness that is going to be pushed back. And that's in any movement, we have to be ready to keep standing strong and keep going together.

Emily Kircher-Morris 9:47
I think there are a lot of folks also who are neurodivergent or even multiple neurodivergent who don't even realize that they are or they recognize maybe whatever the first label was that they were given but then that hides maybe other types of neurodivergence beneath the surface. And you kind of mentioned that piece about identification just now. How important do you think it is that people have accurate diagnoses and labels for being neurodivergent?

Dr. Nicole Tetreault 10:16
I think in our society, it's necessary. I mean, because I think having the proper identification first and foremost, allows for a better understanding of yourself. And then the second piece is really the understanding to accept yourself. And then the third piece is advocacy to communicate what your needs are, in a classroom, what your needs are in a boardroom, what your needs are in an airplane, and what kind of seat preference you need, because, you know, different nervous systems need different things. So I think the identifications are important. I think the second piece to that is to not get lost in the identification as a sole identity, because we're a million parts of many things. And the other thing too, is our identities change time and time and time again, you know, I'm a mother, my son is now at college. I'm still a mother, but I have a lot more free time.

Emily Kircher-Morris 11:17
I await the day.

Dr. Nicole Tetreault 11:18
Oh, yeah. You and your husband are gonna be like liberation.

Emily Kircher-Morris 11:21
Yes, yes. It's a long way off. But yeah, those identities, they kind of fluctuate, and they change.

Dr. Nicole Tetreault 11:27
Yeah, and at the same time, you know, when you have an identification, you know, I'm dyslexic, for example, like, I've been dyslexic my whole life, you know, I've managed my dyslexia with different tools, you know, audio books, and other thing of universal design, all the way to recording parts of things that I write, you know, and have voice to dictation. But at the same time, when it comes down to it when I'm tired, spelling goes out the door. So I mean, I will forever be dyslexic, but it's not like there's anything wrong with it, it is just part of who I am.

Emily Kircher-Morris 12:07
Well, you learn coping skills, you learn what works for you. And I think as adults, we have so much more freedom to access the accommodations that work for us. And sometimes kids are in this position where they don't have as much freedom to ask for things or request things, or even know what's available to them.

Dr. Nicole Tetreault 12:23
Oh, yeah, and I mean, I think that's where the identification like you're talking about is really important, you know, my identification didn't come until I was 22. So I've literally gone through school without any support. And it wasn't until college that, you know, I tested different ways to learn how to study that made all the difference, it was a deal breaker in my academic success. And I think that's the other challenge is, so much of our society is wrapped up in the idea of what it means, you know, to be gifted or and or to be on the spectrum and you're a savant and you have to excel in this very specific way, rather than your human being.

Emily Kircher-Morris 13:05

I think there's also a stigma and a misunderstanding about specifically dyslexia. I think people would be surprised that somebody could be dyslexic and a neuroscientist, have you run into that at all?

Dr. Nicole Tetreault 13:18
Yeah, well, first and foremost, I always, I mean, before backing it up, people are like, you're neuroscientists, wait, you're blonde.

Emily Kircher-Morris 13:28
These things do not compute.

Dr. Nicole Tetreault 13:31
And then they're like, wait, you're personable.

Emily Kircher-Morris 13:34
You're just breaking all the stereotypes?

Dr. Nicole Tetreault 13:36
Yeah when it comes to dyslexia, you know, I think it wasn't until that I learned to advocate for myself, you know, when I was applying to graduate school, where, you know, there was a discrepancy, the year that I was identified, like, I had B's and C's in college, and then when I went and was identified, I had straight A's. And I always had to explain, well, I had double time on exams, and it helped me and I have dyslexia and. And there was this, at the very beginning, shame that I had, you know, that I thought something was wrong with me, I didn't think I was smart enough. Unfortunately, when I was tested, the tester never explained to me what 99 percentile was in certain other categories, so I didn't know that I was gifted and dyslexic so I was only focusing on the deficit myself. And then really, by the time I got into grad school, people didn't even care because at the point that I could, you know, we have spell check. You know, I think developing my writing skills over time took a lot. You know, I always wrote poetry randomly, but my sentence structure is a little different, you know, and it's taken me time, like, even the way that I put words together is different, and I think that's part of the dyslexia and part of the magic. But when it really kind of felt like a stopper for me was when I at the time, I wanted to be a chemist, organic chemists, and that's when I realized for synthesizing different molecules, visually, that's when it was very hard for me like I would leave off a carbon chain and it's like, you have a completely different molecule. So I knew that wasn't the field. But when I went into neuroscience, bizarrely enough, I don't know how I was able to memorize brain areas very easily and memorize physiology very easily. And the spelling of physiology words, I don't know why, I never

had a major issue with like, words like hippocampus, but like, spelling receiving is harder than spelling hippocampus for me. There's some sort of plan that I don't know.

Emily Kircher-Morris 15:57
Well, I think also, it's like those words that are sometimes unique are harder than the ones that are common or have a lot of other words that are kind of similar. You kind of overcame these things but it's interesting, because at the time, when you were in school, even when you were younger, did you feel like you were overcoming something without being aware of it without having that identification? Was there an impact there on your life?

Dr. Nicole Tetreault 16:20
For me, I was a terrible student in elementary school in the sense that I just didn't do any work, right, because I wasn't motivated, but I had a great time with my friends. And then high school really shifted, when I went to high school, I went to all girls Catholic school. And it was totally different because God was a she, and there was like this open door of possibility. When I was in high school, I actually accelerated in math. My dad's an aerospace engineer so math was very easy so I kind of had that. And then with writing, to be honest with you, the first book that I actually read from cover to cover multiple times was Maya Angelou's "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings." And a pivotal thing happened for me in high school where we had to write like the author, we had to write a sensory experience, and I did that and I had this one teacher read what I wrote, and that kind of shifted me that like, oh, maybe I'm onto something writing, where it kind of opened the door that maybe this is something I could do. At the same time, when you're talking about overcoming, it was almost like I knew there was stuff inside me, but I didn't totally know how to express it, like, my bigger ideas. So it was more searching for people to talk with about the things I was interested in. I didn't feel like oh, I was coming from a deficit. It was almost like, I know, there's something inside of me, and there's something I want to share, and there are these people out there that I know, want to share these things with me. I just don't know where they are yet.

Emily Kircher-Morris 18:11
And I think always upon reflection, looking back on those things is interesting. The other way that I feel like, as adults, neurodivergent adults, we're always so impacted as how we parent. And so you know, being a mother, I'm curious, how has your work and your awareness of neurodiversity influenced your relationship and how you parented him?

Dr. Nicole Tetreault 18:32
Oh, it changed. You know, when I was in graduate school, I was reading patient reports about kids that were on the autism spectrum, and one thing that I really learned was

how different everybody was. Simultaneously, I would look under the microscope, and I would see the brains, and no two brains look the same. And even though they were numbers, I was like, oh, yeah, this is number 8542, and they have a very distinctive pattern, I didn't know who they were, but it was like, each brain looked really unique. And when I raised him, you know, I came from looking at autism with a deficit based. By the time I finished graduate school, I really realized that in the community, as a scientist, we were really shortchanging the community, and that was when I started to shift. Simultaneously, my son was identified as gifted, and I also knew he had this asynchrony and as processing speed, and he didn't like to be around other kids, he liked to be very to himself, he loved reading. And so I was in a parent teacher conference, and I found out he was spending most of his recess and lunch in the library reading and I was really worried because I was a psycho that would go out and I would be like, hit with the dodgeball and I'd be like, come and get me and I would tease you know, I had three older brothers so.

Emily Kircher-Morris 20:01
That influenced some things.

Dr. Nicole Tetreault 20:03
Yeah, like I was like, you can't mess with me. But my son did not want that, and he looked at me and he said, Mom, I just go to the library to recharge, the kids are just too much. The teacher looked at me and said, he's doing everything right, he's totally self regulating, there isn't anything to fix. And that shifted everything where I realized, like, I'm not in control of the ship, he's telling me what I need to do, and how I need to love and accept him and trust. So you know, I was never the mom that super pushed my kid, I would say, I think you'd be good at this, or you could do this, or I'm here for you, like, I'd show up to everything, but it was really his lead. And, you know, when he said he was done with something, I let him let it go. And my biggest thing was really wanting him to love who he is to share who he is with the world in whatever shape and form that comes in. And the other piece was to recognize how much we don't know. And that the biggest thing was, I'm here as your parent to love you infinitely, and mistakes will happen along the way, and I'm here and let's work on it together. You know, there were times that, for example, in middle school, we you know, we would show up on vacation, and I'd get a notice right before break, that he was missing, like 20 assignments. It was like, oh, we're doing this, and I'd be like, okay, so every morning on vacation, we're spending an hour and a half or an hour getting through four or five of these assignments. And, you know, there were a couple of times that there had to be like a vast safety net, and then there's other times where he learned to develop executive functioning skills. And so it's been a space where I let him lead the way, and I'm always here, though.

Emily Kircher-Morris 22:05
Yeah, I think that's so important, and I, you know, you were talking about when he was young and the social connections and your worries as a mother, and wanting him to kind of have on the one hand relationships that are fulfilling to him, but then it also sounds like when that wasn't what you maybe we're expecting, it was a little, it took you a minute to kind of, to kind of readjust to that. And I feel like we talk so much on this podcast about being neurodiversity affirming, and I think a big part of that is letting go of what our expectations are. And just because it's the way that everybody else does it, or the way that we did it, doesn't mean it's going to be the same for our kids, our students, whoever.

Dr. Nicole Tetreault 22:48
You're totally right, our family member, and I think that's, that was the biggest thing that hit home was like, oh, he's gonna tell me how to parent him, he's gonna tell me what he needs. And it's like, he was always that kid that's like, Mom, I need a little alone time. Okay, I get it, and then coming back to it, I realized, like how much alone time I like so I'm like, okay, I just have learned to listen to him. He's also brutally honest, like he is to a tee, and it's just such a grateful piece of him that I love. Like I put on an outfit, he's like, definitely not, where my husband's like, it looks great. And I'm like, I'm listening to Spencer.

Emily Kircher-Morris 23:34
Yeah, Spencer's like, No, Mom.

Dr. Nicole Tetreault 23:35
I'm like, thanks, babe.

Emily Kircher-Morris 23:36
Yeah, that's funny, that's funny. Yeah, I think that the more we can do that, the better. I think at the school like you mentioned that teacher kind of recognized that in him as a strength and was able to support that. Are there other things that you feel like parents or schools could do? Like, what would be the most impactful thing that could help them support bright neurodivergent kids? Like, is there a belief that you think needs to be changed? Or, I don't know, a strategy or something that you feel like everybody should know?

Dr. Nicole Tetreault 24:08
I mean, I think parents and teachers alike need to check in with kids, first and foremost, what they think they're good at, and what they want to do. You know, I think so much of

the time, we tell kids what we want them to do and how they have to go through hoops and do school and do life and do sports, and to really ask them what they think their strengths are and what they want to do. You know, I have so many, I mean, it's like time and time again, I just had a best friend of mine tell me how her daughter's dyslexic and I said, okay, it's good you have all these supports in place, but what is she doing that she loves to do? That she knows she's really good at? And maybe even it doesn't have to be like, oh, the super strength but just something where they feel is their area of genius that they get to express every day, and they get to participate in. Because, you know, we think about these three different tiers, you have, you know, the zone of genius, the zone of excellence, and the zone of competence. Spelling is the zone of competence. Zone of excellence is putting a great sentence structure together. Zone of genius is, you know, writing about something in a way that nobody has ever heard before, or, you know, the way waves crash, and, you know, the salt taste, you know, whatever, but it's that sort of piece. And so, really, for me, I always give parents in my talk or teachers, educators the question, what makes you unique? And then from that, that uniqueness, what ways do you want to share who you are? So really tapping into early on where kids can intuitively trust, that essence that they were born with to share with everybody.

Emily Kircher-Morris 26:07
One of the questions that I get, especially when I talk about supporting kids from a strength based viewpoint, parents will often say things well, what if, what if the interest or what if the strength, what if the only thing they're motivated to do is something say, like, video games? Do you get that question ever from parents or things like that? And if so, what advice do you have for them?

Dr. Nicole Tetreault 26:28
Well, first and foremost, there's the idea that video games are bad, and there's the idea that video games aren't healthy, and there's different layers of video games. So for example, scientifically, Minecraft has been shown that it enhances creativity. Games, like Wordle have shown that when people have suffered trauma, and they unpack a word and series of you know, doing word games, that it actually reduces the trauma that they take in. So I think that there's a lot of mixed information about video games, because they are highly creative. Now, for example, there are some that are very shoot them up kind of sort of thing, and I think it's like a confounding element. And also, we know to scientifically that kids who use video games that their hand and eye coordination and dexterity is actually elevated, you know, because they've trained those muscles, and they actually tend to have kind of the brain wiring, that would be really good for surgery, believe it or not, so it's not all bad. And then there is the second element is the addictiveness to it. So that's where you need to pay attention and see, you know, if you're getting those rapid dopamine crashes that a child is experiencing.

And I also think that finding the amount of screen time that feels comfortable in the family and in the home, you know, and I think that's a very personal feeling. You know, if, for example, video gaming is interfering with normal activities, like showering, brushing your teeth, getting to bed on time, that's when you want to kind of call it in and be aware. And at the same time, they could have the brain wiring that they could design the next video game, that could be a breakthrough, they could have the brain wiring where they could be one of those kids that they watch playing video games, you know, like on Twitch, I think it is. So I think that if the child really enjoys it, and also there are elements that in some of these games, there's social connection, you know, so for some of the kids, there's elements where they can't totally connect, maybe in person, or in the classroom, but they could connect over being an avatar, and I think that's a definite form of imaginative play. And so I think that for the family, the advice would be to just find areas that you're comfortable with for the duration of the child playing. And actually, what I do because my son does enjoy video games and like, sometimes he wants me to just sit and watch him play, and like, that's social enough, you know, how different is it than watching a sports game or a TV show together? And I think there has to, it comes back to that expectation we're talking about, right? Like, I have the expectation my child's going to connect with me playing the violin and your kids, like I'm not picking up a stringed instrument, but I can pick up playing video games, you know, the parents kind of have to step into the world of their child and be okay with who they are.

Emily Kircher-Morris 29:49
No, I love that. Meeting kids where they are is just so important, and so I'm really grateful for your time today. We have time for one last question. So if you could pass along a message to a neurodivergent child or teen who's just beginning to know and understand who they are. What is it that you would want them to hear?

Dr. Nicole Tetreault 30:08
Hmm? Well, you are certainly perfect exactly as you are and you were brought into this world to show us exactly who you are. And we are so excited to see who you are and what you have to share. And the other element is the number of times you're going to do everything imperfect in this world, the word imperfect, it's, I'm perfect, and you're exactly perfect in all of your imperfections, as we all are.

Emily Kircher-Morris 30:42
Nicole Tetreault, author of "Insight Into a Bright Mind", thank you so much for your time today.

Dr. Nicole Tetreault 30:48
Thanks for having me. So much fun.

Emily Kircher-Morris 30:57
How we view neurodiversity influences how we view ourselves, it shifts how we understand and support our children and the environments we provide for them at home and at school. It impacts how we advocate for accommodations and accessibility in the workplace and public venues. The phrase "minds of all kinds" encompasses the idea that all of the various neuro types in our world add value. There's not better than or less than just different from the more we can embrace this idea, the more we move toward a world that actually does support all kinds of minds. I'm Emily Kircher-Morris. I'll see you next time on the Neurodiversity Podcast.

Dave Morris 32:04
Thank you to Nicole Tetreault, the host and founder of "The Awesome Neuroscience Blog." We invite you to check her out and look for various links on the episode page at neurodiversity.podcast.com. Also, I'd like to direct you to our Facebook group. It's called the "Neurodiversity Podcast, Advocacy and Support Group." It's chock full of interesting conversations and articles, and I'll put a link to the group in the show notes as well. Our host is Emily Kircher-Morris. And our production assistant and all around social media and office manager is Krista Brown. I'm the executive producer and studio engineer Dave Morris, for all of us here. Thanks for listening. Tell a friend. We'll see you next time.

Dave Morris 33:15
This is a service of the Neurodiversity Alliance