

# jennifer

**Speaker:** [00:00:00] Welcome to the Peaceful Parenting Podcast. I'm your host, Sarah Rosenzweig, mom of three young people, Peaceful Parenting Coach, and your cheerleader and guide on all things parenting. Each week, we'll cover the tools, strategies, and support you need to end the yelling and power struggles, and encourage your kids to listen and cooperate so that you can enjoy your family time.

**Speaker:** I'm happy to say we have a great relationship with our three kids. The teen years have been easy and joyful. Not because we're special unicorns, but because my kids were raised with peaceful parenting. I've also helped so many parents just like you stop struggling and enjoy their kids again. I'm excited to be here with you today and bring you the insight and information you need to make your parenting journey a little more peaceful.

**Speaker:** Let's dive into this week's conversation.

**Sarah:** Hey

**Sarah:** everyone. Welcome back to another episode of the peaceful parenting podcast. Today's episode is a guest expert interview with Jennifer Wallace who wrote a really wonderful book called never enough. The subtitle is when achievement culture becomes toxic and what we can do about it.

**Sarah:** [00:01:00] I'd heard about this book for a while.

**Sarah:** And I think I had read some articles by her and I've always had this in the back of my mind. This idea of when we push kids to achieve. And when we put a lot of emphasis on grades and, excelling at sports and extracurriculars and all of that. It's really harmful to them. And if you're a client of mine or in my community, you may have heard me talk about that. Well, this book and my interview with Jennifer was a really, really wonderful addition to our peaceful parenting toolkit in terms of how we can raise kids who feel like they matter, who feel like they're worthy. At aside from what they achieve or, that the markers of success that they achieve. And it's not that achievement itself is bad, which is what Jennifer talks about, but what messages do we give our kids about achievement and who they are and whether they matter aside from their achievements or despite despite their setbacks. So, this is a really wonderful conversation.

**Sarah:** And one that I think you'll get a [00:02:00] lot out of, no matter how old your children are. Jennifer was a wealth of information and of really great parenting strategies for how we can raise those kids who feel like they matter, and they are not tied to their achievement. And you'll hear her talking in the interview. About the dangers of feeling like they don't matter unless they're successful. So have a listen. I'd love to know what you think.

**Sarah:** Share a review with us on apple podcast. Rate us on Spotify and apple at helps us be more easily found in the podcast players. We know there's a lot of podcasts out there today. And have a great listen to Jennifer.

**Sarah:** Hey Jenny, welcome to the podcast.

**Jenny:** Oh, thank you so much for having me. So tell us a little bit about who you are and what you do. Okay. So I am a journalist. I've been a journalist, oh my goodness, for 25 years or so. And Never Enough is my first book. And I have, I'm also a parent of three kids ages [00:03:00] 19, 17, 14.

**Sarah:** Wow. So you really what a great success for your first book. Oh, It is I think I, I hit a nerve. Yeah. I think it was something that I, Was struggling with myself, and trying to figure out why was my kids childhood so different from my own growing up? And how did we get there? And how did we get to, the stress on childhood today?

**Jenny:** And. What we could do about it. Yeah, I love it. And this is something that comes up so often. I mean, for me personally as a mother of also older kids and just for anyone listening, I do have a plan on asking you a question that has more to do with younger kids. Cause I think there's probably this, even though your book focuses a lot on adolescents it's not something that you just start thinking about when your kids are older.

**Sarah:** So if any listeners are listening, Oh, I don't have adolescents yet. This isn't for me. This is definitely going to be for you because I think it's an attitude that we take. In our parenting journey and [00:04:00] not just something that we start with, but we're getting ahead of ourselves because we haven't explained yet what the what the topic of your book is so that this, the subtitle of your book is when achievement culture becomes toxic and what we can do about it.

**Sarah:** So what is achievement culture? Yeah, so just just to be clear, this is not an anti achievement book. I get a lot of enjoy from achievement achieving. I want my kids to have the joy of achieving where it becomes toxic is when our

sense of self. is so tangled up with our successes and our achievements that we only feel, we only feel good about ourselves when we are succeeding.

**Jenny:** We only, and, and so really this book is about helping us as adults and helping our kids to uncouple their self worth. from their achievements.

**Jenny:** And just for aNy parents out there who have older kids. It is never too late. If there are things that, and [00:05:00] there are certainly things I regret in my own parenting and boy, to our kids, they are so open to repair. All they want is a warm, nurturing, supportive relationship with their parents. So if there were ever things that you wish you could have a redo, Boy, they'd be open to it.

**Jenny:** I love that. So this is really for parents of all ages. Yeah.

**Sarah:** It's interesting because I kept thinking about this when I was reading your book, that one of the things we talk about so much in peaceful parenting is that we, I mean, part of the reason why we don't use punishment is because we want kids to know that they're worthy and lovable even when they make mistakes.

**Sarah:** Right. And so we. It's not that we're happy with kids necessarily when they do something that, that is against our rules in our family or, or whatever, when they're not cooperating. But we never want them to feel like their actions make them more or less worthy and lovable. Right. And so I think that really ties into what you talk about in your book.

**Sarah:** And I know Ned Johnson, who's been, I think he's like four time. podcast guest at this [00:06:00] point. And that's one of the things he talks about, or that he and Bill talk about in their book, The Self Driven Child, is that idea that kids need to feel that their parents love them no matter what.

**Sarah:** And that's such a theme in your book too.

**Jenny:** It is. And, and just to underscore what you're saying. I talk about it in the book separating the deed from the doer. So yes, there are behaviors. There are things that we wish that maybe when our kids disappoint us but it's how we how we talk about that disappointment that we're not that they're not quote bad, that they're not quote, whatever it is, lazy or but that there's, there's a better way to do things or a way that we do things in our family.

**Jenny:** So again, when, when they inevitably disappoint us, which is just part of being a kid, it is just being careful about how we express that disappointment to

be intentional about it and to separate the deed from the doer and that takes bandwidth. [00:07:00] So I'm not here to say this is. It's super easy when our kids disappoint us, you just separate the deed from the doer.

**Jenny:** It takes bandwidth. It takes intentionality but it's doable.

**Sarah:** Yeah. So, okay. So the achievement culture, I asked you what it is and you said you're not anti achievement, but, but you know, your book is this Being wary, at least, if not anti achievement culture, being really wary of achievement culture.

**Sarah:** So just explain for the listeners what, what achievement culture is. And maybe, I mean, maybe you could start by talking about the study that, that you, I think that maybe piqued your interest in this when they compared kids from, High income really good school neighborhood with kids, like in the inner city.

**Sarah:** I think I've got that right.

**Jenny:** Yeah. So you're right. This is the, the book really did jump, jump off from this article I wrote for the Washington post in 2019. And I was [00:08:00] covering two national policy reports, and these are reports written by the, the country's leading child development, experts, and they were looking at who are the kids who are at risk for negative health outcomes today.

**Jenny:** And so they looked at children, living in poverty. They looked at children with incarcerated parents, the children of recent immigrants. Children living in foster care. These were all at risk groups. And then they named a new group, children attending what the researchers were calling high achieving schools.

**Jenny:** Those are public and private schools all around the country where the kids go off to competitive four year colleges. These students reports were finding these students were now two to six times more likely to to suffer from clinical levels of anxiety and depression and two to three times more likely to suffer from substance abuse disorder than the average American teen.

**Jenny:** [00:09:00] And these were my kids that I was writing about. My own children go to these quote unquote high achieving schools. And so I wanted to know what could I do tonight in my home to buffer against the pressure. And actually one of the researchers, one of the, Really one of the country's, if not the world's, leading, child development researchers, Sunya Luther, who recently passed away.

**Jenny:** She was someone I interviewed for that article in the Washington Post. And I said what can I do tonight? I know my kids are in this group. And she said a phrase that has really stuck with me. She said, the best thing we can do as parents is to minimize criticism and prioritize affection. Oh, love that.

**Jenny:** So minimizing criticism she said, our kids, unlike when we were growing up, our kids today are saturated by messages to achieve more that only certain people matter only all of these messages and the [00:10:00] wider media on social media. The pressure from their peers, the pressure from their peers, parents, that home needs to be a haven.

**Jenny:** It needs to be a place for our kids to recover from the pressure in their environment today. It doesn't mean to abandon all standards. It doesn't mean anything goes in our house. It just means to be very careful about how we communicate expectations. And again, To separate the deed from the doer when they don't meet those expectations.

**Jenny:** And then the other half of that phrase was prioritize affection. And so what does that mean? It means greeting your kids at least once a day, the way the family dog greets you with just total joy. So much of our lives as parents is just getting through our to do lists. I know it's certainly true in my house that there's just so much on parents today that our kids don't often get to see.

**Jenny:** the joy we get just from being their parent. So making sure at least once a day to show them that joy, just like the [00:11:00] family puppy does.

**Sarah:** Yeah. In our community, we talk about delighting in your child. And then when I read the the puppy, the puppy analogy, I'm like, Oh, she's talking about delighting in your child.

**Sarah:** And that's just letting the love that you see, love that you feel for your child show on your face. Smiling and taking a moment away from that did your backpack packed? And like, hurry, we've got to get to soccer practice. That holds that whole sort of thing. I was thinking about the achievement culture and I, and I'm pretty sure that you talk about this in, in your book about how the why now of, of this is because I'm pretty sure that my, I was born in 1970 and I'm pretty sure that my, that generation X is like the last generation that was doing better than our parents before us.

**Sarah:** Correct me if I'm wrong about that. But I think that this really ties in with the, the surgeon general's report that came out. a couple of months ago

about intensive parenting and how all of this comes because we're so stressed and worried that our kids aren't going to have a good life.

**Sarah:** And so we see that as [00:12:00] getting into the top schools as a way of guaranteeing that they're going to have a good and successful life. And I was super curious to read about the research that you talked about in your book, how there really doesn't, there's no correlation between what school you go to and how.

**Sarah:** Good. Your life turns out. Can you talk about that a little bit?

**Jenny:** Yeah, sure. I wrote this in a chapter, I wrote a whole section called reject the premise on this because I wanted it to be a standalone section that I could have my teens, my own teenagers read. And it really, rejects the premise that the good life is found by going to a good college.

**Jenny:** I think enough parents have the wisdom and experience and perspective to know that where you go to college doesn't really determine later life success or even necessarily career happiness or financial success. And so I dug into the research and I outlined it all in that [00:13:00] section on what does. So if, so there's this great seminal study that was conducted by Purdue and Gallup called the Purdue Index.

**Jenny:** And they interviewed something, tens of thousands of college graduates. And they looked at, was it a college's rank? Was it a college's prestige? Did it matter for later life success and happiness if they had gone to a small school? school or a big state school. What were the factors that were really determining midlife happiness and career and financial success?

**Jenny:** And what they found was those were not factors, but they did find six factors that did have an outsized importance on that later life wellbeing. And it was. Did you have a professor that you connected with as more than just a student? They knew you, they felt invested in you as a person. They made learning fun.

**Jenny:** You had an opportunity [00:14:00] through either internships or multi semester projects to use what you were learning in the classroom out into the real world and contribute, feel like you're adding value in that way. Did you the other thing that, that had an outsized importance was did you Extracurricular activities where you could feel a sense of belonging and connection on the campus.

**Jenny:** So really what it boiled down to was how much a student felt like they mattered on that college campus, how much they felt valued by their classmates, by their professors, by the wider community, and how much they were given an opportunity to add value back. to their classmates, to their professors, and to the wider community.

**Jenny:** Those were the people who got the tools to thrive in later life. So it's this idea of mattering that really had an outsized importance on those students.

**Sarah:** I want to get back to mattering, but why do you think that it There's such a, that this persists so much that there is so much pressure [00:15:00] for getting into and I have to say it's a little bit different in Canada.

**Sarah:** I grew up in the US, so I'm familiar with the pressure to get the high SAT scores and pack your resume and get into the the IVs or the ones below or whatever. It's actually a lot different in Canada, which I super appreciate for my kids, because I think they've had like a way, way less stressful teenage years than a lot of American kids.

**Sarah:** However, I think there still is that fear. I think that's North American in general, the fear of like, you've got to do this or you're not going to be successful. But why do you think that persists so much, that idea of that, that scarcity of competition and being better than everybody else.

**Sarah:** And you've got to get the top marks and all of that.

**Jenny:** Well, I think it's what you hit on earlier, which is when you and I were growing up, I was growing up in the seventies to an early eighties, life was generally more affordable. Housing was more affordable in the U S healthcare was more affordable.

**Jenny:** Higher education was more affordable. So there was slack in the system. And I think parents, including [00:16:00] parents in Canada, I mean, I've been reading about real estate prices. So as real estate prices As the, as the stressors, parents absorb the stressors in their environment and they become, in the words of researchers, social conduits, passing that stress on, not intentionally, not to stress out their kids.

**Jenny:** But instead to prepare them for what they see is a hyper competitive future. And so, so many of the parents that I spoke with, they didn't say this explicitly, but they were, they were betting that early childhood success, getting

their kids into a quote unquote, good school. They hoped would act as a kind of life vest in a sea of uncertainty.

**Jenny:** We don't know AI is now on the scene. We don't know that's going to disrupt everything. We don't know what more than half of the jobs are going to be when our kids are out in the job market. It's always been the job of a parent to raise a child who will thrive when we are no longer around, but never has that future felt so uncertain.

**Jenny:** What are we preparing them [00:17:00] for? And so, like you pointed out, so many parents are hoping that, that a quote unquote, good college will act as a kind of life vest. But what I saw in my reporting and what those two national policy reports were finding was that that life vest is acting too much like a leaded vest, and it's drowning too many of the kids we are trying to protect,

**Sarah:** what about parents of younger kids? I have a lot of clients whose kids have four extracurricular activities and maybe they're only five or six. What are some things that we can do when we're, when we have little kids to avoid starting down this path?

**Jenny:** Yes, I think it is. There's a quote in my book from a sociology professor, what gets in early gets in deep.

**Jenny:** And so it is what are the messages you are sending having your kids in so many activities that they can't stop, that they don't have time for play time or downtime or family time. [00:18:00] So that's advice from challenge success, which is a nonprofit in California. They call it PDF to make sure with young kids and actually also with older kids that every day there's play time.

**Jenny:** Downtime and family time and really value that time as a family on the weekends. It, it goes by quickly, carve out that time find two, three families that share your values and rely on them when you feel yourself getting pulled off course. That's

**Sarah:** so important. The peer pressure can be strong. I remember when my kids were little, the, what you're not going to put them into.

**Sarah:** X and you're not going to put them into Y, right? That peer pressure. And, and also I mean, you touch on this in your book too, not being afraid of what other people think and really managing your anxiety around about what



they, what you think they need versus what they actually need to have successful lives.

**Sarah:** Yes.

**Sarah:** Yeah

**Sarah:** I'd say the majority of my parents don't, who are listening to this, don't have kids yet in high [00:19:00] school. So just give us a little bit of like the ghost of Christmas future of what some of those high achievement schools have done to, or are doing to some kids in terms of that, that let it vest.

**Jenny:** Right. So, so what the researchers were finding among these sort of good schools. So these are well resourced schools. These are schools where kids go off to competitive colleges. There is now an excessive pressure to achieve. So when you go to a school of high achievers with parents who are also high achievers and have High expectations on their kids.

**Jenny:** These kids need to break their necks to stand out. So when you were in a sea of high achievers, you have to just keep it. Every win sets the stage for a better win. It's not enough to just be a great high school basketball player. Now you want to have a. You need to be on a travel team and you need to [00:20:00] be going to certain tournaments.

**Jenny:** And so the better you get, the higher the stakes. So things that used to be stress reducing for kids, sports, other extracurriculars are now just another way of competing. Another stressor. So when you, you and I were being raised. There were buffers in the system. Yes, our parents wanted us to achieve, but it didn't define our childhoods the way it now does with so many young people today.

**Jenny:** And so the buffers that used to exist, relationships with parents that weren't based on achievement. Time with grandparents and down time with extended family. These things have now been replaced with achievement oriented goals. One fan, one mother I interviewed in Alaska was talking about how her kids don't even know what it feels like to have a traditional Thanksgiving meal around the table with multiple generations because they are always doing travel [00:21:00] tournaments.

**Jenny:** over Thanksgiving weekend. So these things that downtime with family, play time, even time with even relationships, even friendships in the book, I call

it the and this doesn't start just in high school. This starts in middle school now, what I call the elephant in the room. And that is achievement pressure.

**Jenny:** That is envy. When you are all going for a small number of spots at a college or, competing to be the president of this or the head of that, right, you have to out compete your friends. And so often we don't talk to our kids about those uncomfortable feelings. And so instead of learning how to regulate envy or unhealthy feelings of competition, we don't coach them through it, and it can come out sideways.

**Jenny:** So actually, I mean, just hitting on envy, what I say when I go and I speak at schools to young people [00:22:00] is I say, we don't have to judge ourselves for feeling envy. We evolved to feel envy for healthy, adaptive reasons. Back to our earliest ancestors, it meant that somebody had something that we thought was a competitive advantage for our survival, and so we would lock in on that.

**Jenny:** And so we evolved to feel envy because we thought it was critical to our survival. We obviously, it is not, it is no longer critical to our survival. But it's hard to separate those feelings. And so you don't have to judge yourself for feeling that envy, but you do have to hold yourself accountable for how you act on that envy.

**Jenny:** So when those feelings, which are inevitable, start cropping up, you can take two routes. You can take the unhealthy route, which is often what we see modeled, particularly for girls, the indirect aggression, the gossiping, cutting somebody down so that you feel better. Okay. Which destroys relationships and also makes us the [00:23:00] person who's feeling the envy also not feel great about ourselves or we could take the healthy envy route, which is using envy as a source of inspiration a motivator.

**Jenny:** We can even ask somebody the source of our envy. I am, I so admire what you've done, like, would you be willing to tell me? I'd love to try to achieve it too. That is a way of not only enhancing and protecting relationships, it's a way of saying, I noticed something great about you and I'm calling it out.

**Jenny:** It's a way of bringing relationships closer. So we don't have to judge ourselves for feeling it, but we have to hold ourselves accountable for how we act on it. That was a long answer. No, that's

**Sarah:** great. One thing you say in your book is that parents have to give kids the confidence to not overwork. And you're talking about the grind and about the the dangers of growth mindset.

**Sarah:** I think that's a hundred percent true. And also, I think that there are probably still some parents listening who are like, I don't know if this is really true, what they're saying that like kids can have a good life without being on all [00:24:00] those travel teams and without getting the 4. 2 GPA or, or whatever it is, like, what do you say to those parents in terms of what the research shows?

**Sarah:** I mean, you did mention that the, the things that do make a difference at colleges or universities, but what do you say to parents about helping them believe to step off of the hamster wheel and like get out of that grind.

**Jenny:** So one of the things I say is in your head, what is your definition of success?

**Jenny:** What does success look like for you? Your own personal definition. What do you dream for your child? What, what is that idea of success for your child? And to get really clear about what you value, not the mom in the math class, or the neighbor, or even your own parents. What is it that you, and so, we got really granular, and really we talk a lot in our house about how we define [00:25:00] success, and it is not a 4.

**Jenny:** 2 average. We define success by I want my kids to be successful in a whole range of arenas, right? I want them to have a successful marriage. I want them to have successful relationships, to really know how to foster close, meaningful relationships, which really are the social safety nets that we need for our kids.

**Jenny:** I also make a point of pointing out the adults in their lives who I think are living successful lives. I'm going to talk to you about how to live a successful life, and how to live a successful life, and one of the most successful of my friends went to a college that I'd never heard of, and I can't even pronounce in Ohio, it's a super small school that begins with an M, and she lives a successful life, she loves her career, she is adding value to the world through her career, she is, has a wonderful marriage, she's a, she is living a balanced life, and so what I [00:26:00] say is, To parents is be ambitious for more than just what society defines is a narrow band of success because that is not going to give you the success that you want for your kids.

**Jenny:** So be clear about it again. I'm not saying abandon all standards. If you have a child who's excellent in math or a fabulous writer, help them grow that. Have expectations around it. But the expectations that you have for your child, they need to be child dependent. You need to get a PhD in your child. You need to understand them intimately.

**Jenny:** You need to be deeply attuned to them. And so that the bar that you have for them, it needs to be adjustable. And you need to be aware of what else is going on in their life, right? There are certain times in our children's lives where, where they don't have the bandwidth to, to go for all the A's or whatever they are.

**Jenny:** They are anyway, I'm getting too granular. No, [00:27:00] no, you're,

**Sarah:** you're, you're not. I mean, and I think that the, that the key is the confidence to not overwork because I think, that it can be tempting to just keep going and keep going. And one of my one of my favorite. Parenting resources who specializes things in anxiety Lynn Lyons.

**Sarah:** She talks about teaching kids, especially perfectionist kids, teaching them to cut corners teaching them that you can't bear down on everything, right? Because that, and she talks about this from a, purely from a mental health perspective, but I think these things are just so related, right? Like your, your mental health will suffer if you don't know how to cut corners.

**Sarah:** If you don't, if you can't say that's good enough in this area, because I really want to focus my energy and attention on this area.

**Jenny:** That is right. I actually have a really sweet anecdote from Lisa DeMoor, who's a child psychologist who was talking about how she was teaching her kids, her daughters, how to be energy efficient.

**Jenny:** And boy, is that an important skill. And so she was talking about her, her older daughter who [00:28:00] was a very strong student. And she would say to her daughter, if you have an A in a class, it's time to Take your foot off the pedal a little bit because if you're gunning it at full speed in every one of your classes, starting on a Monday, by Thursday you're going to be in fumes.

**Jenny:** So figure out where, if you're getting an A, maybe it's time to invest that in a class that you're not doing as well, or invest it in your friendships if you're feeling lonely. So really helping our kids. Say in the book that we are our children's prefrontal cortex that is our job to be the balance keepers in their lives

and to not necessarily encourage everything they want everything they want to go to that sometimes for their mental health we need to hold the back and we need to say you can't take a full plate of honors courses.

**Jenny:** You know something has to give and so what we do in our own house is I say to my kids here are the non negotiables in our [00:29:00] house you need to get the recommended amount of sleep. You need to have time outside every day hanging with your friends being in nature, and you need time together as a family.

**Jenny:** And so those are non negotiables in our house. You also need to be adding value back to our house to our family through chores or doing other things. So we so. If you have those things, then you can start looking at your calendar and seeing where you, where you have the time to take as many classes as you can in a healthy way.

**Sarah:** Yeah. And I think it's also important to note that it, it, I know somebody in my family who's now in their twenties who was really like their parents weren't actually pushing them to in this high achievement, but they were pushing themselves in this high achievement. But the parents, I think with hindsight would say, oh boy, we should have really stopped that in.

**Sarah:** In their tracks in the tracks because they went on to have quite a lot of struggles with their mental health as they went into college and then even into young adulthood and I look back until hearing stories of [00:30:00] how it was cute and funny that they would keep them get three hours of sleep at night because they wanted to get certain GPAs.

**Sarah:** And yes, they got a scholarship to a really good school, but they're still struggling with the aftermath of what they put themselves through.

**Jenny:** That is right. There's also research, I have it in the book, that students who are excessive in their studying, it's been linked to workaholism workaholism in, in the 20s and 30s and 40s, and it's really, it's, it's perfectionism, it's the idea that you're only valued when, so perfectionism as Oh, that's my favorite flaw.

**Jenny:** But actually, it's, it's actually a very destructive, very mentally destructive. And so as parents, we can buffer against perfectionistic tendencies. And we, we talk about it a bit in the book, but it is it is putting up those guardrails and it is saying, I'm sorry, in our house, we have, we have other things that are [00:31:00] important to not just school.

**Sarah:** My husband and I both, I think we're very fairly driven students and like it, and it, I don't think we grew up in the same sort of achievement culture, but we did that to ourselves. And, and I remember as my two older sons who were going through middle school and high school, and we'd go to the different graduation ceremonies.

**Sarah:** And, and I soon learned that they're not going to be the ones up there getting the principal's award or the the, the award for the best GPA or whatever. And I have to admit, there was a small part of me that was like, ah, damn, they're not they're not doing that. And my, my husband even said to me one day, Do you think it's a shame that the boys aren't more driven?

**Sarah:** And I thought about it and I realized, oh my gosh, they are driven in the areas that they're passionate about. One of them is a musician. One of them was really into sports all through through high school and they were absolutely driven, but they were driven in the things that were important to them and they didn't feel the need to be driven in everything.

**Sarah:** And I said to my husband, I'm like, [00:32:00] yeah, but I think it's because they both feel that they're good enough. Yeah. Like they don't, they don't feel the need to prove that they're good enough or prove that they're worthy or that they matter because they already feel that. And that made me feel really good as a parent.

**Jenny:** It's true. And if there's a difference between very much underperforming and. And overperforming, right? There's a big sweet spot. And so if you're a parent who's listening and you're thinking, yeah, but my kids are underperforming and everything and, and lacking motivation. And I hear this a lot when I, when I go on the road and talk about the book and I quote Madeline Levine, who's a child psychologist.

**Jenny:** When I asked her what could, what could those parents do? And she said, if you have a child who's underperforming, get curious. not furious. All Children want to do well. I'm not talking about your Children. I'm talking if if you have a child who's really struggling and and people parents are saying they're just not motivated and get curious, [00:33:00] not furious because all Children want to do well.

**Jenny:** They all want, all children want to feel successful. So if, if they aren't, try to get to the root of it. Is it a learning difference maybe that's gone undiagnosed? Is it maybe socially that they are feeling left out? Or maybe they,

they are not feeling connected to their teachers and so they're not motivated to learn because they don't have a relationship with their teachers.

**Jenny:** Or maybe it's that they need more scaffolding. Maybe when they walk in the door, told by their parents here's how we get work done in our house. We sit at a table. We make sure it's a, there's a bright light on the desk. We, we write down a game plan on what needs to get done that day.

**Jenny:** We and, and you scaffold, you show them how to do the work. And so I think if you focus on how the work gets done instead of shiny outcomes, then The good [00:34:00] outcomes actually do come. Yeah.

**Sarah:** In your book, you talked about I can't remember exactly what you said, but I think it was about being having a well rounded approach actually led to the really successful lives.

**Sarah:** And I think that's what my boys were really good at. They, they both knew what the good enough level was in terms of their academics. And they both yeah. My oldest son just graduated from the University of Toronto with a degree in music performance. So he found his way to the best possible he has a university degree in something that he loves.

**Sarah:** And my middle son is there right now. And he was really into sports until he realized, Oh yeah, academics are actually interesting to me. And he put his foot on the gas himself. But they both had this sort of very well rounded approach, which I think was so far so good, not good. Laughter.

**Sarah:** Awesome. Yeah. So let's get back to mattering before I let you go. Can you just talk a little bit about what mattering is? One thing that struck me is that you talk a lot in the book about how kids have to feel like they matter, but then [00:35:00] you also talk a lot in the book about really for kids to know that other people matter.

**Sarah:** So maybe you could just talk about mattering in both of those contexts.

**Jenny:** Yeah, great. So, so for the book, I went in search of who were the kids who were doing well in these schools, despite the pressure. I wanted to know what they had in common. What was home life like? What did their teachers focus on? How did they experience their relationship with their peers and with the wider community?

**Jenny:** And I, I found about a dozen or so threads that these healthy strivers had in common. But it boiled down to this, the kids who were doing well felt like they mattered for who they were deep at their core, away from their achievements and successes. And importantly, They were also dependent on to add value back at home at school and in the wider community.

**Jenny:** So what mattering did is it acted like a kind of protective shield. It didn't mean that these students didn't have setbacks. They bombed tests. They were rejected by friends. They didn't make teams. But [00:36:00] what mattering did is that it acted like a kind of buoy that would lift them up. These setbacks were not indictments of their worth.

**Jenny:** They knew that they were worthy no matter what. These were simply disappointments. And the kids I met who really seemed to be struggling the most fell into two camps. They, they either felt like they're, Value their mattering was fully contingent on how they looked, how they performed, or they were kids who felt like they mattered.

**Jenny:** Their kids, their parents were clear. They loved them unconditionally, but they were never forgotten. relied on or depended on to add value back to anyone other than themselves. And so what these kids lacked was social proof that they mattered. They heard it in words, but they didn't see it in action. And so mattering is to me, it is the ultimate I used to say that I just want my kids to be happy.

**Jenny:** Now I say, I don't say that anymore. I want something more. I want my kids to [00:37:00] know how to matter. To surround themselves with people that value them and to know where to add value to the world. That to me is the secret to mental health and fulfillment. And so as you mentioned that they, they need to make others matter, a critical part of mattering is looking for.

**Jenny:** Genuine needs, needs in your home, needs in your community, and filling them. That's how we feel like we matter. Not, so at home it is asking kids to do chores. Asking kids, we live in New York City so our kids can walk to the grocery store. I'm busy on a deadline, could somebody go pick up a rotisserie chicken that we could have for dinner.

**Jenny:** So really feeding the family well being is, is where kids first learn that they matter. For more information visit [www.FEMA.gov](http://www.FEMA.gov) From the, from the messages of their family, but also seeing how their [00:38:00] little lives can contribute to the overall well being of the family and then it expands to school and then it expands to the wider community.



**Sarah:** That's beautiful. One thing thAt I thought was interesting about when you talked about how sometimes parents don't think that they're sending the messages of their children. High achievement is the only thing that matters, but they are subconsciously and they don't mean to.

**Sarah:** Can you talk about that a little bit? Do you know what I'm talking about? I do.

**Jenny:** So actually, I think a really practical way of figuring out if you are sending those messages is advice that I got from Tina Payne Bryson, who's a psychoanalyst in California. She said most parents don't know. If they're putting on the pressure at home, so she offers four reflective pieces of advice that could really tell you the signals you're sending your kids.

**Jenny:** So the first thing is to take a look at your child's calendar outside of school. How much of it is pursuing these achievement oriented goals? Two, take notice of how much [00:39:00] money, where you're spending your money as it relates to your child. Again, how much of it is on achievement oriented goals. Number three, take note of what you ask your kids about.

**Jenny:** When they walk in the door, is the first question you ask, how'd you do on the Spanish quiz? Or is it something like, what'd you have for lunch? Something that signals I care about you as a full human. And then the last question is the last question to reflect on is take notice of what you argue with your kids about.

**Jenny:** So if you look at their calendar, how you spend your money, What you ask about and what you argue about. Those four things can tell you a lot about what your children think matters most to you.

**Sarah:** Love that. Thank you so much. Was there anything that that you think parents should know that I didn't ask you about, about achievement culture and what we can do to not fall into those traps?

**Jenny:** Well, one thing that I would just leave parents with is something that I have found so helpful. It was advice given to me by Mark Brackett at [00:40:00] the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. And he said, in those moments, When you are feeling stressed as a parent to take a pause and reflect and think about your children 10 or 20 years from now.

**Jenny:** What is the story you want them to tell about their childhood and about their relationship with you? And then ask yourself. If you're helping them tell that story,

**Sarah:** love that last question, I'll ask you that. I ask all my guests, if you could go back in time to your younger mother self, what advice would you give yourself?

**Sarah:** It can be, it doesn't have to be about this. It can be about anything.

**Jenny:** Oh, I know the number one advice I would give myself. is don't listen to the wider culture. Prioritize yourself and your resilience as a mother, your support system, because your children's resilience is going to rest on your resilience.[00:41:00]

**Jenny:** So fight those messages to be everything and everyone and run yourself ragged. And instead, be counter cultural. Build up your resilience. So that you can be that first responder that you need to be for your kid's struggle.

**Sarah:** Love that.

**Jenny:** So prioritize your relationships.

**Sarah:** Yeah. And that's something you talk about a lot in the book that you, that we didn't even get into in the scope of the podcast.

**Sarah:** So I would encourage everyone to get a copy of your book and read it. It's really helpful. Thank you so much. Best place for folks to go to find out more about you and what you do.

**Jenny:** So my website, [jenniferbwallace.com](http://jenniferbwallace.com), I have a newsletter with more advice like this. And also Instagram at [jenniferbrheniwallace](https://www.instagram.com/jenniferbrheniwallace) or LinkedIn. Awesome.

**Sarah:** Thank you so much,

**Jenny:** Jenny.

**Speaker 2:** Thanks for listening to this week's episode. I hope you found this conversation insightful and exactly what you needed in this moment. Be sure to subscribe to the show on your favorite podcast platform and leave us a rating

and review on Apple Podcasts. Remember [00:42:00] that I'm rooting for you. I see you out there showing up for your kids and doing the best you can.

**Speaker 2:** Sending hugs over the airwaves today. Hang in there. You've got this.