

The addiction inoculation

Guest: Jessica Lahey

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[00:00:09] Meagen Gibson

Welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, co-host of the Trauma Super Conference. Today I'm speaking with Jessica Lahey, author of *The New York Times* bestselling book, *The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed*, and *The Addiction Inoculation: Raising Healthy Kids in a Culture of Dependence*.

Over 20 years, Jess taught every grade from 6th to 12th in both public and private schools and spent 5 years teaching in a drug and alcohol rehab for adolescents in Vermont. She writes about education, parenting and child welfare for *The Washington Post* and *The Atlantic*. And she co-hosts the *#AmWriting* podcast from her home in Vermont with her husband, two sons and a lot of dogs.

Thank you so much for joining me Jessica.

Jessica Lahey

Absolutely. Thank you for having me.

Meagen Gibson

So I would love it if you would start by telling us what motivated you to write a book about addiction as it relates to kids.

Jessica Lahey

So I was raised by an alcoholic, and one of my parents was raised by an alcoholic and so on and so on and so on, and I did everything within my own power to not become an alcoholic myself, but I did anyway, it sort of snuck up on me once I had kids. And once I got to the place where I was headed off to treatment, my first thought was, okay, well how does this end with me?

And once I was in treatment once I'd been in recovery for about a year, I went to go speak at a drug and alcohol rehab for adolescents, because at that point I wasn't teaching full time anymore and I just needed to be in front of kids. And so I went and spoke at the adolescent rehab, and I realized, oh, hang on a second. They must have some sort of education program here because the kids are here all the time. And so I lobbied my way into a job teaching there. And at that point, the big question is then, what could we have done differently? What prevents a kid from ending up here? And what role does genetics play? What role does trauma play?

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And there's this big statement that's all over, for example, if you go to any big, whether it's SAMHSA or you go anywhere to get more information about substance abuse or substance use disorder, the term we're supposed to be using, often you'll read the term substance use disorder is the largest preventable public health care problem. And that word 'preventable' was just this big vague, well, what does that mean? What can we do? And that seems to change the more we understand about the adolescent brain and the more we're able to look inside the brain and look at how various receptors are handling things.

Anyway, I have the coolest job in the world, which is to just completely geek out and do a ton of research and then translate that research for the people that don't want to geek out to the level that I like to geek out. So it's 2 years of research to then overwrite a book and then cut it in half and put something out that hopefully helps as many people as possible.

So really, this was the book that I felt like I was supposed to write. The stories that I tell in it are not just my own, but shout out to Brian and Georgia, and those are their real names, they are in the book as well. And they also said the reason they wanted to use their real names is that this book, helping other people is what makes those experiences worth it and have value, if we can help other people with them. So that's why.

Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. And the book is full of a ton of research. And as much research as I've done, there were a lot of things I had not heard before and not had put into the context that they were put into, which was fascinating. But yet it's also really accessible and has a ton of practical advice and tips and sentence stems and ways in which you can talk to your kids. We'll get all into that later.

Jessica Lahey

I think that's what I learned from writing *Gift of Failure* is that as directive as I tried to be in that book with advice and scripts and stuff like that, people were constantly saying, no, we want more. We want pages of scripts. We want you to tell us what to say when XYZ happens. And so I think that was a really good learning curve for me to figure out how do I, these are hard conversations. And often that's what will stop people from having them. So okay, here's everything I can throw at you to make this as easy as possible so that you hopefully have this conversation as early as possible with your kids.

Meagen Gibson

And I always say when it comes to either sex ed or drugs and alcohol, it's early and often. And I've had friends with substance use disorder say, I know that you talk to your kids about this a lot, how do you do it and why do you do it? And I always say, early and often. I was like, this is not a one time conversation. We revisit again and again and again, depending on their age, their developmental level, what they're hearing or seeing at school or on television and in the media. We just do it again and again and again.

Jessica Lahey

And the more often you have that conversation, the easier it becomes. Kids, when you come at them with one of these, okay, it's time to have a talk.

[00:05:36] Meagen Gibson

I just contracted, and I'm not even the kid in the situation.

Jessica Lahey

And there are times I know that if I shout upstairs and I'm shouting for my kid to come down, and I say something like, could you come downstairs, we need to talk about something? He comes down and he's like, what? What did I do? What's wrong? And that defensive mode.

So if it's part of a regular conversation that you're having all the time and it's just part of talking, then you don't get those hackles up. It's much easier to do.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. So let's back up a second. So what are the statistics around risk factors for substance use? And how much of it is genetic? How much of it is the environment? Take me through it.

Jessica Lahey

So genetics obviously was the first place my brain went because there's nothing really we can do about it. I guess I could have picked my spouse better. He also comes from a family with substance use disorder so there's that. But anyway, according to Marc Schuckit, it looks like genetics is about 50% to 60% of the risk picture.

And there's this terrible, terrible analogy that I hate, but use all the time because it's appropriate, which is genetics is the bullet that we load into the gun and it can just stay there, not hurt anyone, and then trauma is what pulls the trigger. So there's genetics.

And then there's the line between genetics and environment or genetics and trauma, however you want to put it, which is epigenetics. And that's an emerging field, it's fascinating. It looks like things that happen to us in our life, experiences we have can turn off and turn on genes in various ways. And so it's kind of genetics, but kind of not. And that's when we slide into the discussions about trauma and some of the other risk factors for kids. Childhood aggression, social ostracism, academic failure, undiagnosed learning issues.

And those are the basic ones. And then we get into the stuff like Nadine Burke Harris jumps into with, *The Deepest Well*, which is, well, we take those adverse childhood experiences and, hey, let's also talk about things like systemic racism and what, for example, black girls go through. The research out of Georgetown University on the fact that black girls, their age gets overestimated and they get sexualized at a much earlier age. And that's traumatic, too.

So there's the CDC's version of adverse childhood experiences and then there's this wider net that I think someone like Nadine Burke Harris has just been such a champion for. Which is divorce and separation, adoption, systemic racism. All of those things that kids have to go through that aren't as cut and dried as, did your parents hit you? Or did you have substance abuse in the home? So all those adverse childhood experiences clearly set a kid up for having the likelihood that they will have all kinds of negative health and mental health, physical health and mental health, negative outcomes.

But there are also some of those risk factors that are more impactful than others. I think sexual assault, for example, sexual abuse is just one of those big red flags with fireworks going off over it. So

there are ways to, and I hate ranking trauma but there are things you can point to. There are things that we can point out and say, okay, you've had issues with sexual abuse, we definitely need to intervene as early as possible to help you deal with that.

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Because when I talk to people who are, and I still work as a prevention and recovery coach at a rehab in Stowe, Vermont, called Sana at Stowe. When we talk to people about what they've been through, they say it hurts too much to deal with it so I drank or I took opiates. And as you know, the pain receptors, whether it's emotional pain or physical pain, they're the same receptors. And so we're assuaging that pain with drugs and alcohol. Or we can teach people to learn how to cope with it and give them ways to manage it without substances.

Meagen Gibson

And some of that intervention that I hear you talking about is instilling protective factors against traumatic experiences, turning into a way in order to unhelpfully cope with that thing. If nobody in your life... Everybody can say, and validate even, your experience, like what happened to you is horrible. And validate, I'm so sorry that that happened. But if we don't know how to instill those protective factors in people as they're growing and learning and becoming adults, then they don't know how to cope with the feelings that they're having and the difficulty that they're having, and it all kind of stems from that trauma.

Jessica Lahey

And in cognitive behavioral therapy, and actually the person that says this a lot, that I just love, is Tina Payne Bryson. And she says, 'you have to name it to tame it'. So most of the time one of the things I used to do at the rehab in writing exercises was help them name stuff, even if we came at it sideways. I used to do this one writing assignment that I just really loved doing, which was envisioning their addiction as some sort of monster. And then we just describe what that monster looks like, and what its weaknesses are, and how one might be able to defeat it. And whether it's naming their negative emotions, their pains or naming this thing that they often refer to as a monster that lives inside of them. Tina's words rattle around in my brain a lot, but the 'name it to tame it' thing is really the big thing.

And then, when you talk about protective factors, I think of them as like one of those old-timey scales of justice. And risk is on one side and preventive or protective factors are on the other side. And the heavier the risk side is, the heavier the prevention. So my kids were born with a genetic predisposition for substance abuse. And unfortunately it's not one of those things that you can just say, oh, there's that gene, let's just flick that one gene out. It's part of personality traits. It's part of body and brain chemistry, all that kind of stuff. So knowing that my kid has the genetics for it, knowing that then we added other risk factors to his life like, moving him in between middle school and high school, that transition is a risky time for kids and we did that to him.

So now how do I use that information to not feel shame or guilt, but to better protect him? What protections can I heap on him? And whether that's getting him therapy or, heck, getting another dog, which is one of the things we did because we figured great, more oxytocin and running around. It's a stress reliever. Yay. It gets you outside more. Yay. Stress reliever in the form of exercise. Yay.

The more directive you can be with your protective factors, the better your kid's going to be. Which is tricky for people because you have to hear about risk factors with an open, not defensive brain,

because, yes, it's really hard when I have to tell parents that a risk factor for substance abuse is divorce and separation when we know that it's such a common thing in our culture, but it is. So what do we do with that information once we have it, once we know that, what do we do?

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So I think that's the power, we get back power and control in understanding how to best target preventative and protective factors.

Meagen Gibson

And like Tina Payne Bryson would say, there's so much hope when you talk about it and you know about it and you're taking the shame away from it, all you see is possibility and opportunity for preventing or reshaping or repairing, as she would say. I told her that I want to replace the Ted Lasso 'Believe'. I want it to just say 'Repair'.

Jessica Lahey

Well, my word that I would put up there actually, and this is also thanks to Tina, and thanks to Daniel Siegel, actually, her writing partner, is 'Reframe'. That's my big one, because I have one kid who really tends to be a little pessimistic. He worries that if he's too optimistic then he'll be disappointed. And I have to do a lot of reframing with that kid and with myself as well.

And so one protective factor is, how do we take, for example, that move, and thank goodness for Dan Siegel, because I was on the phone with Dan Siegel talking about this move that we did with my kid in between middle school and high school. And I'm talking about it all, feeling so bad for heaping all this risk on him. And he's like, well, but positive risk is a really great thing. Why are you thinking about this move in terms of all this negative risk, when if you just reframe it you can use this move to feed your adolescent's need for novelty and a little bit of positive risk and maybe a little bit of a dopamine boost. So thank goodness that there are people out there to remind me to take my own advice because I was waiting on the risk side and not even thinking about how that risk can be reframed into production.

Meagen Gibson

One of the other contributors that we have on the Trauma Conference, Cathy Malchiodi, was describing it as like, she's an expressive arts therapist, and describing it as a circle of capacity. And trying to constantly work the edges out that we're giving you experiences and opportunities for growth, even when those experiences are difficult. When you're expanding that circle of capacity you're giving yourself a lot more of those protective factors and resiliency. We keep hammering on about resiliency, especially in the last 18-24 months with COVID and all the things that kids have been impacted by. And resiliency isn't just like I had a bad experience and now I'm a stronger person. That's just not how it works.

Jessica Lahey

That was something that was really interesting that happened to me. Right after *Gift of Failure* came out I was asked to be a part of a television show. And of course, my first response was, no. Why would I want to be a part of more screen time for kids? But it was Alice Wilder that asked me to do it, and she helped create *Blue's Clues*, and so you don't say no to Alice Wilder. So I helped create the curriculum for *The Stinky and Dirty Show*. And that entire show is about all the different ways that you

just don't really become more resilient and become more innovative and expand your capacity by yourself. You need a community, you need a supportive community.

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And so I do all this great professional development with teachers where we talk about the fact that your classroom, establishing a culture where it's okay to fail and where it's great to be able to rely on other people to help you leave behind what didn't work and move forward from a place of strengths, I think that's one of the most important things teachers do is create that community and create that culture of, yeah, it's okay to make mistakes. Now, what do we do next? How do we make it so that we do better next time? And that's a really fun part of teaching.

And a really interesting thing that ended up happening to me, was when I was teaching at the rehab, was finding the answer to the question of, what happened to these kids, and why are they here in this rehab? A lot of the holes in their experience that led to them becoming more susceptible to substance abuse is a lack of self efficacy, a lack of feeling like they had any control and a lack of hope. And so those are the big three that I like to talk about a lot in terms of prevention.

Meagen Gibson

And I'm so glad that you brought up teachers, having been one. And I was a teacher at college level for 6 years and especially at the college level, I would get kids that were away from home for the first time, and I had no idea that when I became a college teacher that I was also going to be an amateur counselor. I had no idea. Wow. This is the part of the asterisk on the role that nobody tells you about.

But I love talking about teachers because they have so much contact with kids and with students. And even though we're focusing on parenting in this context, any adult who has interaction with kids, these are lessons that can be installed in how they interact with kids in the environment and the protective factors that they're instilling in the kids that they have contact with.

Jessica Lahey

And speaking of trauma, what we know is that when kids have been through really bad stuff early in their life, if they have one person who believes in them, who loves them for who they are and not who we want them to be, and who gives them an opportunity to tap into hope, teaches them that they have self efficacy, that when kids have that one person that's there for them, that they're much, much more likely to be okay over the long run. I think teachers seem to know that on a gut level, but I think it's important for everyone to know. Whether that's someone who is an assistant coach on a community soccer team. Everyone has the potential. I taught one kid once for whom that person was a groundskeeper at the school, like a caretaker at the school. It does not have to be a teacher, it doesn't necessarily have to be a pastor, it could be any adult who's willing to give them hope for their future.

Meagen Gibson

And furthermore I would even say, and I've told my kids this, and they know that any trusted adult that we trust as a family system is somebody that they can go to. And we don't have right now any major family issues or problems that would give them any adverse childhood experiences. But even just ordinary life stresses, things they don't feel like they can talk to me about, they can go to any of our trusted adult friends and I would have no problem with that.

[00:16:26] Jessica Lahey

It's amazing to me how often kids will open up to someone. My son was taking a jewelry making class, and it was one on one with this lovely woman nearby, and he didn't know her that well. I think they had spent a couple of hours together. And I walked in at the end and he was spilling his guts to her about something that I never would have expected him to open up about. And it was just another moment where I realized, I can't feel bad that he won't open up to me as his mother, it's just that sometimes they need other people, which is what's obviously so appealing about a therapist or someone who can be a counselor to them. Someone objective, just to listen and not try to fix, like mom often does.

Meagen Gibson

Those people aren't going to have the subconscious facial reactions that we, I'm constantly trying to control my face just to be a blank slate. I'm like gray rocking our conversations so they can't even perceive my pupils changing when they're telling me something. I'm like, everything is fine. Yeah, so hard. But any of the other adults in their life won't have the same knee jerk reactions that we try to stuff.

So one of the things that I love that you talk about in the book is how one of the factors that makes it difficult for parents to talk to their kids about it, is this hypocrisy that we run into sometimes where, perhaps because it was a different time when we were in college, or perhaps because we're just ashamed to admit it, we've experimented with drugs and alcohol when we were younger so we feel like we're uncomfortable talking to our kids and telling them don't use drugs and alcohol. Because I used them. I experimented. And there's often some normalization of like, oh, yeah, of course you're going to experiment with that, everybody does. And I love the way that you hammered home why it's different. So I would love it if you could tell me, for all of our viewers, why there's a differentiation there.

Jessica Lahey

Well, first of all I don't like the word hypocrisy, mainly because I think people say hypocrisy, and they say, well, I can't be a hypocrite, therefore I can't talk to my kid about it. Here's the deal. My kids clearly know that I drank a lot because they know I'm in recovery. And also I happen to be an expert on this stuff and so I can talk to them about the risk factors and why it's bad and what's happening in the brain and all that sort of stuff.

On the other hand, my husband does drink, he'll bring home a single beer, a single split of alcohol or of wine and drink it with dinner and then pour the rest out. He's modeling for them what it looks like to take care of your spouse and not expose them to stress they don't want to be exposed to. But they also know that my husband had, what we refer to as 'Daddy's lost year', which is after my husband graduated from college and was just working a minimum wage job, he was really unhappy, he couldn't get a job in the field he wanted to work in, and he was just hopeless and so he just started smoking a lot of pot.

And one of the things we talk about with them is we don't romanticize it, it was a year he went through and here's what that year did to him. We know for a fact, he knows for a fact that it messed with his short-term memory. Coming out of that year he needed all the short-term memory he could get because he went back to school. But the other thing that happened is that that year could have been a lot shorter. He was just not motivated to do much to change his life because he was self medicating his, and I don't like that term, but he was self medicating his frustration and his depression

with marijuana. And it happened to be there in the house because his house mates grew it in the basement, so there's plenty around.

[00:24:29]

So we talk a lot about the fact that, yes, your dad did this thing, and there were a couple of bad consequences because of it. And boy, that year could have been shorter. Boy, he could have preserved some of his short-term memory. And I wonder if there's a difference in what his hippocampus looked like going in and coming out and that kind of thing. We can talk about the fact that we've used, we just can't, A, romanticize it as one of the people in the book did. An expert on adolescent development was totally over romanticizing. He wanted to seem cool to his college age kids and so he talked about all the fun he had in college using all the substances and his kid came back to him and said, dad, I don't think that is the best tactic because you made it sound really great.

And then, on the other hand, if you just say no, I never drank before I was 21, no, I never used drugs before I was 21, especially if it's not true, then also there's a problem there with their kids being able to identify with you. And so I think there's risk going to the extremes. And so for us, it's been honesty, talking about it without romanticizing it and sticking to the very clear and consistent message of, no, not until it's legal for you. Which to me, what's more important to me is that by the time you're 21, your brain is getting fairly close to being fully cooked. So for me it's more about brain development than it is about legality.

But here's the cool thing, we know that parents who have a clear and consistent message of, no, not until it's legal for you, have kids with a much lower rate of substance use disorder during their lifetime. We also protect their brains, the longer they go without using drugs or alcohol, the longer their brain is free to develop. It's really susceptible to outside influences, including chemicals, drugs and alcohol and stress. So the longer their brain has the unfettered ability to develop and grow, great. And the older they get before first use, the lower their risk of substance use disorder during their lifetime. So if a kid in 8th grade starts using, his risk of having substance use disorder during his lifetime is somewhere around 50%. But if we can get them up until 21 or even 18, their risk is somewhere around 10%, which is what it is in the general population.

So the big message of all the research I did is delay, delay, delay, and do not buy into that, oh well, it's just a part of adolescence therefore, all kids are going to use. And that's just not true. It's just not true. Even in college, only 67% of college students drink. And that's even a statistic that needs to be broken down because it turns out that only a very small sliver of kids in college drink the vast majority of the alcohol on campus because of the nature of the way kids drink in college.

So we need to get over our erroneous assumptions about people's investment in alcohol, how important it is to them, and how much they actually drink. Because as humans we tend to over inflate that, we tend to overestimate, it's called pluralistic ignorance. And so kids will overestimate too, unless we give them the correct information. If an 8th grader, for example, is offered a beer and the kid's like, come on, it's no big deal, everybody does it. If your 8th grader just knows in the back of their head that 'everybody does it' is not true, that it's only 24% of 8th graders that admit that they've had more than a sip of alcohol by the end of 8th grade, then at least in the back of your kid's brain they're like, that's not true. They don't need to say it, but then at least they're coming from a place of knowledge as opposed to oh, I guess everybody does do it, then I'm a loser if I don't do it.

[00:28:37] Meagen Gibson

And if the first time they're hearing about alcohol or drug use is when a peer is saying, 'everybody's doing it', then that's literally their only information. So they need the light to go off in their head and be like, actually, I've heard a little bit about this, and I know that's not true. And like you said, they don't have to say it.

Jessica Lahey

And if we're waiting till middle school to start talking about this stuff, we're waiting too long. That's why *The Addiction Inoculation* starts with scripts about stuff you can talk about when kids are in pre K and K, kindergarten, because that's where these conversations originate. And they mature as kids get older, and yes, there are scripts for every age group.

Meagen Gibson

Which we need. I was so appreciative of that.

Jessica Lahey

Absolutely. Because that stuff, clearly with a kid in kindergarten, we're not talking about heroin, we're talking about keeping ourselves safe and what we put in our bodies and all that sort of stuff.

Meagen Gibson

One of the things that you talked about in the book as well, that I couldn't believe that I've gotten to this age in my life and hadn't heard that before, was about the hippocampus and that part of your brain, and what blackouts actually are. So I would love it if you touched on that just a little bit, because I had to pause and put the book down and we'd be like, what?

Jessica Lahey

So as someone who has experienced a lot of blackouts, and for me, blackouts were, even if I looked perfectly fine and I could be talking to my family, I was actually really good at hiding it. So I was actually not remembering a lot of those conversations the next day, which meant that I was having to fake it and pretend like I knew what we talked about, or stay away from any topics I think we might have talked about. It was exhausting.

So the hippocampus in the brain, the hippocampus is the area of the brain that does a lot of the memory processing, especially emotional memory processing. And what we know is that, for example, kids who smoke a lot of pot have much smaller hippocampus's than kids that don't. And actually, some research just came out a couple of months ago showing that we can see thinning in the prefrontal cortex as well, which is the adulting part of the brain, the organizational part. So what's crazy about a blackout is it's not that you have these memories and you just can't access them, and if you try hard enough you're going to be able to pull it up, it's that those memories were never formed. It's like it's gone. And for me, that's freakier...

Meagen Gibson

It was alarming.

[00:31:14] Jessica Lahey

It's just that no record was made of that period of time. And a lot of people refer to it as like a splice in the film, which I think is pretty accurate because it's not like it was recorded and then it ended up on the cutting room floor, it's that there was a splice in the film and nothing was recorded. That's important to know also, because if your kid admits to blacking out as an adolescent, that is a big red flag, because people who tend to blackout are also going to be more likely, when they blackout earlier or with less alcohol in their system, are going to be more likely to have a problem later.

But also, adolescents react differently to drugs and alcohol than adults do, and specifically alcohol, which is they are less likely to understand, to feel, to get how impaired they are. So they're a lot more likely, for example, to get behind the wheel of a car, because if you had an adult and a kid who are at the same level of intoxication, the adolescent is going to have less of an understanding of just how impaired they are and are going to be more likely to take risks not getting that they're quite that drunk.

And the adolescent will also suffer fewer negative consequences. So that hangover that is such a nice, oh, don't do that again, they're less likely to have that. So they're less likely to say, oh, that was bad. I'm not going to do that again. There are a lot of things that happen differently in an adolescent brain than in an adult brain that can impact how a kid drinks, if a kid drinks to excess and how it affects the brain. The adolescent brain is just different. It's just not completed. And so it's not like I'm talking about adult drug and alcohol use here, things that have a mild to moderate risk in the adult brain can have a moderate to high risk in the adolescent brain simply because the adolescent brain is more susceptible to environmental influences than an adult brain.

Meagen Gibson

And circling back to what you said about sexual assault, I'm thinking of if I don't know how impaired I am and I'm literally in a stage of blackout and can't make memories, that puts me in such a stage of danger. I am so vulnerable as a kid, and that's enough. And I love that framing of it. I have already started those conversations with one of my kids about that context of how to put it into words of, you're susceptible, you're vulnerable, you're literally unable to know how much you've had, and we'll take risky behaviors and also we'll have no memory of it.

Jessica Lahey

Well, and if you're scared about that conversation, use the sleep conversation as a way to segue into that conversation. Because the other thing we know about the adolescent brain is that, first of all, they have a sleep phase disorder. So kids, adolescents, just don't get sleepy until later at night. But the other thing is that when they experience sleep deprivation, adolescents are less able to perceive how fatigued they are.

Meagen Gibson

Well, tiredness can be a lot like... The same impairment happens.

Jessica Lahey

Exactly. That's why we think that when schools move their start times to later, till after 08:00 in the morning, 08:30 ideally, that accidents caused by teenagers in cars go down because they're less fatigued, less likely to get in behind the wheel of a car when they're super tired. That's the scary thing.

[00:34:55]

So you can get into that alcohol conversation from the sleep conversation about them not quite understanding how impaired they are. And there's precedent for having these conversations about how we don't always know our own brains, because as humans metacognition, knowing what we do and don't know, is something that we are really bad at. So if you're even scared about the sleep conversation, start with our failure of metacognition. Those days when you go in and you think you're so prepared for a test or quiz and then you just tank it and you come out and you're like, I thought I knew everything, that's a failure of metacognition, as humans were not great at it. So that's why the sleep thing, that's why the drinking thing. The nice thing about that is you can say to them, look, it's not your fault that you don't feel as impaired. It's a part of normal brain development.

Meagen Gibson

It's not personal. It's literally just your biology and your brain development.

Jessica Lahey

Yes, exactly.

Meagen Gibson

It's all fascinating to me.

Jessica Lahey

That's what's so fun about this job is getting to do all this really amazing.... I found out about pluralistic ignorance. I found out about this other thing that was just really fascinating, which is inoculation theory. And inoculation theory was not something I knew anything about. It's the reason the word 'inoculation' is in the title of the book. And it turns out that when we give kids, essentially on a big picture level, when we give kids self efficacy, when we help them know they have ways to stand up for themselves and to refuse, if they want to refuse, and it's not quite as simple as just refusal skills, but that gets us most of the way there. Not only can we give kids ammunition that they can then use and will be more likely to use when they feel like they have this feeling of self efficacy when someone tries to get them to get in a car with a drunk driver, or have a drink or take a drug, or have sex before they're ready or any of those high risk behaviors.

Inoculation theory also generalizes. So if we're just addressing the high risk behavior of sex before you're ready, or the high risk behavior of drinking and driving, it cross pollinates. And when kids have self efficacy, they're more likely to be able to resist a whole host of high risk behaviors, not just drinking before they are of age, or having sex before they're ready, or getting in a car with a drunk driver. It's a really cool thing. And finding out about things like pluralistic ignorance, finding out about inoculation theory, and then figuring out what role that plays in prevention is just the fun part of the job.

Meagen Gibson

Is it fair to say that, and I'm thinking specifically of the way that you said, the coaching around giving people praise and giving children praise, that can start as early as elementary school and when kids are little? I have an elementary schooler right now, and I'm thinking of an instance a couple of weeks

ago where he was experiencing some really big emotions and he literally, verbally said something out loud to the effect of, I am really angry, but I'm not going to do anything bad to other people.

[00:38:04]

And we were doing cartwheels. We were like, we're so proud of you that you figured out how you felt and that you weren't going to take it out... You would have thought he had just won the Nobel Prize. But giving praise around those self efficacy skills, being super specific around, I saw how you dealt with that really difficult situation, how capable you are, that kind of thing, is it fair to say that that starts really early?

Jessica Lahey

And as a teacher, one of my favorite things to do was to give kids evidence of their growth trajectory. So, for example, I loved teaching middle school, and I taught 6th, 7th and 8th grade, and I had access to their writing samples. We would do writing samples every year, and so I could go back, if they've been in the school since kindergarten, and pull their writing from earlier years. And so if a kid was feeling really frustrated because of writing progress, your progress as an evolving writer is slow sometimes. And so it's incredibly useful for me to pick out a piece of writing from even a year before, 6 months before and say, 'look at the difference between these two writing samples and how far you've come'. Because when you're in the weeds in your own development it can be really hard to see progress.

Now, I also want to pull out the research on girls, and their perceptions of failure and progress fits in really nicely here. And, of course, these are massive generalizations, always when it comes to gender. But we do know that girls have a harder time removing themselves from the things they fail at. Boys tend to be a little more able to sort of put it over there and say, 'oh, that thing over there was a failure, but me, I'm totally cool'. Whereas girls tend to be a little more likely to say, 'I failed that test. I am a failure'.

And what's really interesting about that is not only are they more likely to own that failure as a part of them, they're less able to look at evidence of their own competence and success, and own it. They're more likely to say things like, oh, I got lucky, or the timing was good, or I had a good lab partner or whatever. And I certainly have fallen victim to that in the past.

Meagen Gibson

I was going to say, I definitely worked on that even in adulthood.

Jessica Lahey

Well, when people congratulate me on hitting the bestseller list with *The Gift of Failure*, I'm like, well, here's all the reasons that I can't take any credit for any of that, it was good timing and blah, blah, blah. And my writing friends are like, no, you're not allowed to do that anymore. You need to be able to take ownership of some of the things that you worked really hard for there.

But I think when we are talking to kids, especially adolescents, when there is such rapid development, and we are in a position sometimes to see their development better than they can, or from the outside, what I often will praise my kids for, at this point now that they're young adults is, 'a year ago that would have been really difficult for you to go and talk to that stranger about something you needed'. Or '6 months ago I don't know that you would have asked for help about this because

you would have just faked it until it was too late, and then we would have been in a death spiral of failure'. That kind of thing.

[00:41:22]

Anytime you can call up for your kids their progress, 'wow, 6 months ago you would have just gotten angry at a kid and gone off and punched a kid because you were so angry. But look at you now, you're able to talk about what you're feeling and that's your grown up brain attaching, getting connected to your lower brain'. And helping kids understand their brain development is one of the most powerful things we can do for them. When they understand that as little kids they're operating from their limbic and amygdala and all that sort of lower brain stuff, and the older they get, and the more mature they get, the more they're tapping into the adulting prefrontal cortex part of the brain, and the more they understand that it's not their fault when they backslide sometimes and are all amygdala and no prefrontal cortex. That's just how adolescence works. And it's cool. It's not linear. It's not a beautiful linear slope. It's up and down, up and down, up and down.

Meagen Gibson

Spiraling.

Jessica Lahey

Exactly. And there can be progression too, and that's cool, too. I think helping kids understand their brain, not only helps from the drug and alcohol prevention discussion, because I think it really helps when we explain to kids exactly what drugs and alcohol are doing to their brains and why it's so important that we help create an environment in which their brains are free and clear to develop and connect. And, 'sweetie, do you know that synapses only survive as long as they have another synapse to talk to? And as soon as they don't have another synapse to talk to, those synapses figure, oh, well, that's over, and they just sort of die off'. And once you get to be a young adult, there's no reopening that door to the adolescent brain and going back and patching up things that didn't happen along the way. Once that door closes in young adulthood, it's closed. And this is a unique time for you to make as many connections as possible and help your brain have as much potential as possible.

Meagen Gibson

In our house we're always trying to explain it in a way that they can understand as far as their development goes, but also making sure that they know that they're responsible and capable. It's like there's a lot of stuff happening, I'm thinking of an example where my son was really scared about something and his legs started to shake. And so we talked about it. I was like, 'hey, do you know what's happening right now?' And we talked all the way through it, and he was fascinated and he was like, 'oh my God, that's incredible'. I was like, 'so what would you like to do with that response that's there for a reason? There's a purpose. Do you want to run with it? Do you want to jump? Do you want to run? Do you want to scream? How would you like to get rid of it?'. So you're not just a victim of all of these machinations happening in your brain as you're developing, and you're just at their whim, it's, this is happening, understand it, and also you're responsible.

Jessica Lahey

And not feeling in control of those things, that lack of control, that helplessness due to lack of control and lack of self efficacy is what pushes kids in the direction of having angst that they then want to cover up or not deal with, and then turning to drugs and alcohol. And so giving kids feelings of self

efficacy, that's why the excerpt that went in *The New York Times* from *The Addiction Inoculation* was about self efficacy, because I really do feel like giving kids a feeling of self efficacy, helping shore that up, is one of the most important things we do for them. And helping them feel like they are, not just competent and capable, but that no matter what life throws at them that they at least have the power to act and have the act result in a change in their circumstances. And that's what self efficacy is all about.

[00:45:09] Meagen Gibson

I love it. And really briefly, we're almost out of time but I want you to talk about the *Hot Ones*.

Jessica Lahey

I'm happy to, because that was so much fun.

Meagen Gibson

It's just such a great example of how to have conversations with your kids at different levels of development in a way that serves them and that they want to be part of the conversation.

Jessica Lahey

I think after spending many years hearing kids say, 'don't tell my parents', but I actually do want to talk to my parents, I just don't want to talk to them about the stuff that they want to talk about or in the context of whatever. So I'm constantly trying to come up with new ways to get my kids to talk to me about stuff, and that means that sometimes I'm having to be enthusiastic about things that they're enthusiastic about.

My younger son produces digital music, and the kind of music he loves is not necessarily my favorite music, but you better believe that we're going to talk about it and learn about it and watch some YouTube videos about it because that's the way in.

So my kids and I, and my husband and I, also really loved the show *Hot Ones* when it first started, it's many seasons in now. But when it first started, not only was the interviewer just really good at getting, he had a stick for getting people to respond, which was to throw them off balance by serving them wings, either vegan or chicken wings, that were of increasing spiciness on the Scoville scale. So it starts with just sriracha, which most people can handle, all the way through to something that's really just blowing the top of your head off.

And we love that show. And we talk a lot about how effective that technique was. So secretly my husband and I arrived on ten questions, there are ten wings, so ten questions for each of our kids. I have two boys now 22 and 17 but this was a couple of years ago. Ten questions for each kid. And then I went and got a combination of vegan and chicken wings and tossed them in, I ordered the same sauces that they use on the show. It turns out there's a website where you can do that. And so I secretly set up our own episode of *Hot Ones*. And it was so much fun. There was so much laughing. There was so much just, in the end we ended up pretty much drinking liquefied vanilla ice cream because our tongues were just on fire.

But the questions, we were really careful. The questions were respectful. The questions were not meant to embarrass or humiliate, like, what's the most embarrassing thing you've ever...? That's not what we were after. We were after ways to get at how to know our kids better, because that's how we

foster good communication and trust and an openness. So I listed all the questions that we asked them in the book.

[00:48:06] Meagen Gibson

They were even humble where you were like, 'how is our work and our approach, what were some ways in which that didn't serve you that you would like to see us adapt?'. Because when your parents are super informed and advocating for a specific way of life sometimes you're like, I really wish you would have handled this situation without that methodology.

Jessica Lahey

And actually, one of the reasons that question was in there is that when I go speak at schools, and I get to speak to many thousands of kids a year, and one of the things I always do is give them all my email address. Because I'm usually talking to their parents later on that evening at an evening event. So I say, look, I'm going to be speaking to your parents in 3 hours, email me with whatever it is you want me to tell your parents. And the message is often things like, I really want my parents to hear this but they just get so defensive when I try to bring this up.

So not being defensive has been incredibly important, just incredibly important. I think from the very beginning that's the one thing I'm very grateful for is that my husband and I both were raised by people who talk to us like we were capable of understanding and that we were worth being trusted. And that's something we've tried to do with our kids as well, is to say, how could we have done that better? And with my students as well that there's room for them to respond and say, I didn't feel respected at that moment. Or I just didn't feel like you were hearing me when I said, XYZ. And that's really important, because then I can change what I'm doing in order to show them that I care enough to be responsive with my parenting.

Meagen Gibson

And it's so hard when your kid's talking to you about something, and even if they can speak, like, 'I don't feel like you're hearing me'. You feel really defensive. It's like telling somebody, 'you seem really drunk'. A defensive person when told they're being defensive is just going to double down. So it's so hard.

Jessica Lahey

And I am naturally a very defensive person. I like being right. I don't like being criticized, it freaks me out. And so if I know that's my weakness, that's really powerful. So I'm working on that, and then the cool thing is that when your kids can see that you're responding to feedback they've given you, they're like, oh, wow. And plus, for me it has to do with modeling for them what I always expect from them, which is to do the best with the information we have at hand. And then if we learn how to do better, and we change our behavior based on that, then that's all I can ever expect from my kids.

I'm raising two kids with different rules around alcohol. My older kid was allowed to taste and sip and have his own small glass. And I found out that actually, when you do that with kids, you raise their lifelong risk for substance use disorder. And so now I'm raising our younger kid, we are raising our younger kid, in the context of, okay, well, we did that with your older brother. We learned why that works against what we're trying to achieve for you. And so here are the new rules. And do they love it? Not always. But he also knows that if we didn't change our parenting based on this new information, then basically what we're saying is we don't care enough about you to do what we know are best

practices. So that's why it's so important to be transparent about your reasoning. Not just say, here's how it is, but to give them the 'why', because that 'why' is where you get respect and you get buy-in from your kid. And buy in, as we all know, getting buy in is about as important as it gets.

[00:51:55] Meagen Gibson

I'm really glad you mentioned that little specific thing and beyond, too, because it was something I wanted to come back to, because a large portion of our conference audience is European, and there's such a normalization of, or perceived normalization of adolescents or younger people drinking. The drinking age is younger, and kids drink wine at lunch, and it's this whole, in some spheres, European thing. So I really want them to hear that.

Jessica Lahey

Well, and the European thing I hear that a lot, that I want to raise my kid with sips. And it's just part of the culture, and I don't want my kid to overreact and go crazy when alcohol is suddenly something that they can have. The problem is that, number one, the European moderation thing is a myth. The European Union, actually, as a whole, has the highest consumption rates of alcohol in the world. And often people want to push that off on Eastern Europe. And actually, Eastern Europe has made the most advances in lowering consumption rates.

And the reason that among the countries in Europe that have the lower consumption rates, a lot of that has to do with the culture around whether or not it's a cultural norm for people to be falling over drunk in public. And so in other countries, I went to school in England for a long time, and it's not uncommon on the weekends for people to just be falling over drunk in the streets. And that's part of a cultural norm. And so the drinking, the consumption rates are really heavy in England. Whereas in other cultures, like if you go to Greece and Italy, those levels tend to be lower, not as much because of public health guidelines, but because of just a cultural norm around drinking.

So when American families say to me, 'oh, but I want my kids to be so European', I have to say, 'well, let's talk about what's actually happening in Europe'. And that's a great romantic idea, but it doesn't always play out. Plus, we know that parents that have a clear and consistent message, and have to repeat this again, parents that have a clear and consistent message of, 'no, not until it is legal for you', have kids with much lower rates of substance use disorder. Whereas parents who say, 'oh, well, they may as well do it in our basement, and I'll take all the keys and they're going to do it anyway. Or, 'here, let's have sips so that you can have...'. All of those things lead to much higher risks of substance use disorder among kids. It just does.

There's some statistical confounders in there, and we can talk about some causation correlation issues, and we can talk about culture, but that is what the statistics show.

Meagen Gibson

The bottom line. And that is where we should leave it. That's the most important part.

Jessica, thank you so much for being with us today. If people want to find out more about you and your books, where do they do that?

[00:54:53] Jessica Lahey

Everything is at jessicalahey.com including bibliographies of all the books I recommend the most often, *The Gift of Failure*, FAQs, book discussion guides for both *The Gift of Failure* and *The Addiction Inoculation*, and places to get signed copies are on there, too. And where I'll be over the next couple of years. My speaking schedule is up there too.

Meagen Gibson

Awesome. Thank you so much.

Jessica Lahey

Absolutely. Thank you so much for having me. This has been really fun.