



Transcript of episode 62, Sticks and Stones - Neurodiversity and Bullying

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:00:31] Hey there and welcome to episode 62, I'm Emily Kircher-Morris. Kids today are exposed to a lot, and navigating social situations can be tricky. Our guest today, Amanda Morin, is going to talk to us about how we can help neurodiverse kids handle those situations, including bullying and standing up for themselves and others. A quick bit of news about the release of my book. Some of you know that I've been working with Free Spirit Publishing on a book called Teaching Twice-Exceptional Learners in Today's Classroom. It was originally slated to be out in September of this year, however, because of the pandemic and the difficulty with predicting what school will be like this year, the decision was made to hold off and release it before next school year in the summer of 2021.

But for now, everything else stays the same with the podcast. We'll keep sharing ideas and having great guests, and I will keep you posted about the book as it gets closer. Up next.

Amanda Morin: [00:02:05] I'm Amanda Morin. I'm the author of the new book, What is Empathy? A Bullying Storybook for Kids. I'm also an advisor and expert in family advocacy and education for understood.org.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:02:16] Stay with us. (break)

On episode 62, we're welcoming back Amanda Morin. She's paying us a second visit, she was here for episode 32 as well, where we talked about special education for twice-exceptional kids. And today we're going to talk to her about bullying. Her new book is called What is Empathy? A Bullying Storybook for Kids. Amanda Morin. Welcome back.

Amanda Morin: [00:02:42] Thank you so much for talking to me today.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:02:44] So tell me about what inspired you to write this book.

Amanda Morin: [00:02:47] It's actually an interesting story. The publisher came to me saying that they had read a lot of things that they had, that I had written about empathy and how it's about perspective-taking, and we really think there's a need in the community to teach kids about empathy. Do you think you can write a kid's book? Um, I didn't think I could write a kids' book, but I said yes, I could write a kids' book, and then I sat down and started trying how to, how to do that. And once I started writing, it was very clear to me that what I

wanted to do was really write a story that kids could relate to and not a story that was sort of bonk them over the head with the lesson of empathy.

Um, and I had a lot of fun writing it. So when I started writing, I realized, okay, the way to teach about empathy is to take kids through the journey of empathy, and to make sure that the adults around have the resources and support they need to sort of talk through that journey. So in the beginning of the book, they're sort of a parents' and educators' guide to how, how do you read this book, what do you do with this book, and what questions can you ask?

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:03:49] I found it really interesting how you chose to tell the same story from two different perspectives to really help kids understand what that's like. What brought you to that decision as you were writing the book?

Amanda Morin: [00:04:00] I didn't start out with the two perspective idea. I thought I was going to tell this story through the eyes of another child who was watching it from the outside. And as I started telling that story, I realized what I was really missing was what was going on in the heads of the two characters who are really having trouble relating to each other. And so I started again and I wrote it from one perspective and I realized that was helpful, but then I, what was missing was, what was she reacting to? What was going on?

So the is about two, two girls, Sophia and Ava, who've been best friends forever. And then one of them moves away and there's another friend who sort of gets in the middle of that friend group and makes it difficult for them to remain friends. And what I realized is there was just a whole lot of misunderstanding going on, and I didn't have a way to show that unless I told the story twice, through Sophia's perspective, and then through Ava's perspective. Um, I will tell you, it was really hard to figure out how to tell that story twice. I had to sort of lay it next to each other. I wrote one side of the story, and then I had to put the other side of the story together and decide sort of what's the same and what's different.

And that was the part that I found really interesting is to realize that there were some things that were exactly the same for each perspective.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:05:19] I think that that is the complicated part about perspective taking for kids. What are some other obstacles that you notice for kids as they're learning about perspective taking?

Amanda Morin: [00:05:33] I think, especially kids who are gifted, I think they have a very strong sense of justice, right? They have a very strong sense of what's right and what's wrong. And they're very emotionally attached that, and that's not, I mean, that's not just a kid thing, adults are also very attached to their emotions.

But I think that, what gets in the way sometimes is the ability to realize that there doesn't have to be a right and a wrong, that sometimes there's an in-between. And so for some kids, it's really hard for them to see, it's okay to consider somebody else's perspective and still keep my own opinion. And that often gets in the way of perspective taking. And it's a skill that we have to start teaching when kids are younger, so they can start realizing it's okay to

have my opinion. And it's okay for somebody else to have an opinion, too. What matters is where we can find common ground.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:06:26] Yeah. I think you hit a really important point there about actually teaching this skill to kids. I think so many social and emotional based skills we just expect kids to figure out. And that doesn't always happen. Would you agree with that?

Amanda Morin: [00:06:43] I totally agree with that. I, um, you know, as you said that I started, I started to smile because I hear that called soft skills so often. The hard skills are the knowledge and the material, and the soft skills are the social and emotional skills. And everyone just sort of assumes soft skills develop. And I don't think that's true. I think there are things that need to be taught. You know, we don't automatically pick up on emotion, and the way to express emotion, and kids often get stuck in having sad, mad, and happy. Right? And so if we don't give them words for anything beyond that, we're really doing them a disservice in teaching them how to understand complex emotions. And I think empathy is really about understanding complex emotions and not just complex emotions in other people, but complex emotions in yourself, complex emotions that conflict within you. Um, and I, I just think that's something that everybody needs to learn and we need to start teaching it.

And in part, because it's not developmentally something we're born with, right? There are adults I know who are still trying to figure out how to be empathetic.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:07:51] It's always a lot easier, I feel like, to be empathetic or compassionate when my own emotions aren't necessarily directly involved, but especially when it's a conflict I'm having with somebody who I know personally, that makes it a little bit trickier.

Amanda Morin: [00:08:03] It's hard to take your own emotions out of the equation. And I don't think that you have to take your own emotions out of the equation completely, but I think we need to teach kids that their emotions, aren't the only emotions in the equation.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:08:15] One of my favorite interventions that I use, and I actually talked about this on one of the virtual presentations that I was doing last night, and I use this often with my, when I'm doing my counseling, one of my favorite strategies to use is, um, the wheel of emotions.

Amanda Morin: [00:08:28] Yes.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:08:29] Have you ever seen this? You know, the circle? And I like it because it has the tears on it and it has kind of the spokes where it has the more specific and nuanced emotions on it.

Amanda Morin: [00:08:37] Yeah.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:08:38] And I feel like that is such a good tool to help kids learn emotional literacy because there's power in finding that just right emotion word. And especially for our gifted kids who have so much emotional intensity, and a lot of times, might

have a more mature awareness of the emotions, but they don't have the vocabulary to identify those emotions at a younger age, that has been a really important tool for them. But I agree that that's such an important skill for kids to learn.

Amanda Morin: [00:09:09] Well, I think you said it when you talk about it as emotional literacy, right? We think about literacy as being the ability to read, and emotional literacy is the ability to read emotion. And so to that end, it's a skill. It's definitely a skill. And I love that you point out that gifted kids have such rich emotional lives, and they do, they just have so much going on, but they're still kids. Right? And so there's this discrepancy sometimes between what they're feeling and their ability to express it. And I think that comes into play when we're talking about perspective taking too, because I think often kids who are gifted have a hard time realizing or understanding that not everybody thinks like they do, because they only know their experience of the world and they only know how deeply they feel and think, and really experience the world. And we have to let them know that that may not be what's happening with other kids around them.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:10:07] With gifted and 2e learners and bullying, it's possible that there are both protective factors that come with being gifted that can help them in those situations, but there are definitely risk factors, too. What are your thoughts about that?

Amanda Morin: [00:10:21] I think we hear more often about the risk factors, so I think I'll start there for a little bit. I, I, you know, I talked a little bit about gifted kids' ability to really feel things deeply and not always know that other kids aren't thinking the same way they are. Um, a lot of 2e and gifted kids are perfectionists. As you well know, um, I have two of them myself, and we are always talking about the difference between perfect and good enough sometimes. Right? And a lot of times that perfectionism sort of spills over into their expectations of other kids. And I think that can get in the way sometimes. Right? You end up trying to work through the fact that, what kids are expecting of their peers and other students and other kids around them is not the expectations that those kids have for themselves. And that can get them into some... trouble situations. Um, but I also think that that strong sense of justice that I talked about is a real protective factor. The ability to see that things are unjust really gives our gifted kids the ability to speak up when they see something as unjust. And I think that's where it really helps as an educator, as a parent, as the adult in a child's life, to really start talking about the difference between tattling and telling. Right? And so tattling is when you're telling something to get somebody else into trouble, and telling is when you're telling to help somebody else get out of trouble. Right? To talk about the difference between tattling and telling, to kids who really understand the difference between right and wrong, and when they see other people hurting, is really important. And I think that's such a benefit to our kids who understand these deep emotions, and some who are really able to feel other kids' emotions in a lot of ways, um, I think they have the ability to really become upstanders instead of bystanders in these kinds of situations.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:12:16] I definitely think for gifted kids, the logic and the verbal skills that they have are really a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can really help them to understand things at a deeper level and be able to explain and rationalize, you

know, their thoughts. Uh, but on the other hand, sometimes it can cause some obstacles in communicating with their peers, or be perceived in different ways by others.

Amanda Morin: [00:12:43] I think even just from the vocabulary perspective, sometimes the vocabulary that gifted kids use can get them into trouble. Or as in the book we call it a pickle, get them into a pickle, right? So they're using vocabulary that other kids don't understand, and that they don't understand that, that can put other kids sort of on edge and make them feel like they're being talked down to, when that's not what, what gifted kids are trying to do. They're just trying to express themselves with the words that they have.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:13:11] Sometimes with gifted kids, our expectations are such that you expect them to be above some of the social issues like bullying, and as parents, we can tend to sort of sometimes victim-blame.

Amanda Morin: [00:13:24] Yeah.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:13:25] I know. It's really important that we're careful about that.

Amanda Morin: [00:13:28] First of all, really be happy that a child has come to us and said, this is what's going on and this is how I'm feeling. But I think a lot of times we get into this pattern of saying, well, what did you say? And what could you have done differently? And all of those kinds of things which really feels like we're putting the onus on a child to not be bullied. Right? And so I think we need to step back and say, wait in a minute, you're feeling this. It really happened to you. And let's talk through that part of it. Not the, what you could do differently, not what you may have done to precipitate this, but the, how do we get you through this? And I know that as a parent, I probably have been guilty of that more than a few times. Um, but now I'm trying to be much more aware of the fact that, it doesn't matter if, if the other child reacted to my kid using the word discombobulated, as opposed to confused, it matters that whatever came back at my child hurt them. And that's what I need to work through with them.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:14:26] Yeah, there's a really fine line between helping kids recognize what's in their control and what's out of their control, and validating the emotions that they have for the things that are out of their control, but also helping them have a sense of power and autonomy.

Amanda Morin: [00:14:44] When you said within your control, I started thinking of the locus of control circles to give them that visual of what's within their control and what's not in their control means that you can start talking about what they can do about the things that are within their control. One of the things that occurs to me is, I think a lot of times gifted kids, kids who have ADHD, kids who have autism, kids who are sort of different in various ways, have trouble knowing the difference between things like teasing and bullying. And so that's, I think, a 'within our control' thing, is to teach them the difference. And in that regard, to have them start looking at things like, what's the power dynamic in the relationship? You know, what's your typical relationship to this, this other child that you're having problems with? Are you friends normally? If you're friends normally, is this the way that you kind of banter back and forth on a regular basis? Is the intent of that other person to hurt you? Or is

their intent to connect with you? And those are the things that I think are within our control to start helping kids realize we're in their control, right?

To be able to say, okay, wait a minute. Maybe that wasn't the insult I thought it was, maybe they were just trying to get my attention and connect with me. But if it's somebody I've never met before, and they're saying something that hurts my feelings, maybe they did mean to hurt me. I remember very clearly the first time our now-ten-year-old, who has ADHD, autism, and is gifted. So just a whole lot of things going on in one amazingly small little child. The first time he was bullied, he was probably seven, and, and another kid, like, slapped him across the face. And he had no understanding of the idea that somebody would do that on purpose to hurt him. And I remember so clearly saying to him, sometimes people do things to hurt other people. And him just not understanding that that was a possibility. But I needed to sort of break the bubble for him so he could see that that does happen sometimes.

And, you know, I think I went way off track there, but to me, that's sort of one of those important things that, to understand whether kids have an understanding of intent, whether they know that not everything's an accident, I think sometimes that's sort of the limits of forced apologies. You know, you have the like say you're sorry, kind of thing.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:17:09] Right.

Amanda Morin: [00:17:10] And, if you're getting forced apologies, then you're often not realizing there was an intent to harm there, and the apology is just because somebody told you to do it. And it's tricky.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:17:21] We talked a little bit about the risk and protective factors, but especially for twice exceptional kids, that really is one of the risk factors, because, um, you know, especially for those kids, I think on the spectrum, that social communication piece is really difficult. And if I've never thought about intentionally hurting somebody, it's hard to even wrap my head around the fact that somebody else would do that. And on the one hand you love that innocence.

Amanda Morin: [00:17:47] Right.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:17:48] You know, but that's just not how the world works, unfortunately.

Amanda Morin: [00:17:52] Right. And I, and I think that there's a line between protecting kids from the real world, and teaching them what they need to know to be savvy in it. Right? I think we don't need kids to know all of the difficult things that go on in an adult world, but we do need to teach them enough to be able to understand the part of the world they're in right now. And that changes as they get older, you know, it's, it's different at seven than it is at 17, for sure. And then even more different when you're 27. But I think as we start teaching those skills and start talking about perspective taking and what's happening in your life, we need to start being a little, I guess, honest in ways that that hurt us as parents to do, and hurt us as educators to really, to be the person who, who says, this, this was on purpose. This wasn't an accident. My instinct is always to protect my kids, but in not telling

them the truth, I don't think I'm protecting them. I think I'm probably making life a little more difficult for them sometimes.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:18:58] Right. Let's bring this into just the bigger picture and talking about why this book, while it's a children's book, is really an important lesson, I think for all of us right now. And just talking about how important empathy is, and being aware of bullying with everything that's going on right now in our country. Can you speak a little to that?

Amanda Morin: [00:19:24] We are living in really extraordinary times with a lot of different factors, all thrown together at once. Right now, as I'm talking to you, we're in the midst of a pandemic, we're in the midst of a really important movement around Black Lives Matter. We're coming up on an election where people have very strong opinions. And there's a lot of difficult things for people to be working through, especially kids who have been socially distancing from friends, right? So they haven't had the opportunity to be in the mix and really have these conversations. And one of the things that I think is really important around perspective taking is giving kids the understanding that we're all in the same situation, but how we're dealing with that situation is different. You know, we in our home are lucky enough to be far... you know, my, my office is in New York City, the office I work in, but I live in Maine. And we're lucky enough, we're fortunate enough to be in a position where we can go outside and be in our backyard and, and not have to be around people. My children have friends who don't have that opportunity. Right? So for them, their experience is very different.

Um, I think we need to give kids the way to start looking at the fact that there are going to be differences in how we talk about things. There are going to be differences in how we experience life, and that there are also things that are really similar about everybody. You know, everybody has emotions. Everybody has a reaction to what's going on around them. Everybody has something they want to say and something that's important to them. And that's really, to me, sort of the crux of compassion.

Realizing that everybody has things that are important to them and everybody matters, no matter what your position is and my position is or where you are, you matter. And I think we need to start teaching kids that everybody matters and starting to have civil discourse is a way to learn how we are more similar than we are different. That said, I also think we need to give kids the power to stand up to things that they really feel strongly harm themselves or other people. Right? So I think you don't have to listen to a difference of opinion that is really racist and harming you. You don't have to listen to something that is going to be damaging to another person in your life. I think it's okay to tell kids I'm not comfortable with this, and I want to walk away from this conversation.

But even that is showing some empathy. It's showing, I hear you, I don't agree with you, and I'm choosing not to continue this conversation.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:22:12] It's okay. To set those boundaries.

Amanda Morin: [00:22:14] Yeah, absolutely. And I think adults are, are learning how to do that right now, um, more than ever. And I just, I think that this is a time where we can start talking about emotions in ways that we haven't before, in part, because we're around our kids more, right? They're right here. And it's a continuous conversation, it's not just one time. And so you have the opportunity to talk about a little bit, and, you know, have a couple of days where you're not talking about it, and then come back to it. And I think that's, that's the key for me is to make sure that we're, we're always giving the opportunity to continue the dialogue.

And a lot of times with kids, you have to, especially gifted kids, you have to follow their lead. You know, when they're done talking, they're done talking. But they're probably going to come back to it and probably at the most inopportune time, right? We're going to come back to it at the most inopportune time when you're in your pajamas and you're ready to go to bed.

But that's our job as parents, I suppose, is to be able to, to be available when they're ready to talk, too.

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:23:18] Amanda Morin author of *What is Empathy, A Bullying Storybook For Kids*. Thank you so much for being with us today.

Amanda Morin: [00:23:26] Thank you so much for talking to me today. It's been a pleasure.

(vignette)

Emily Kircher-Morris: [00:23:33] When I worked as a school counselor, bullying was a frequent concern from students. Most often the situations weren't really bullying, so we did a lot of education about what bullying actually is. Many situations were a disagreement or a misunderstanding or possibly a rude comment. There were times that bullying was occurring.

We want to watch for our most vulnerable students. Our neurodiverse kiddos can definitely be at risk for being bullied. There's also the flip side, the possibility that they are the student engaging in the bullying behavior. I prefer to describe the action as bullying behavior instead of labeling the child a bully.

But let's think about it. If a kid struggles to read social cues, they may think they're teasing when another student thinks they're bullying. And, bright kids can be tempted to use their intelligence or advanced vocabulary for evil instead of good. We shouldn't buy into the stereotype of bright kids always being the nerdy kid who gets bullied, because it can definitely go both ways.

These are the reasons why being proactive about teaching kids about bullying, perspective taking, and empathy is so important. We can solve it before it becomes a problem. And the bottom line is that we need our kids to be strong advocates, and to speak up when they see something that's wrong.

I'm Emily Kircher-Morris. I'll see you next time on Mind Matters.

Dave Morris: [00:25:08] Our thanks again to Amanda Morin. You can learn more about her and the book she's written at www.AmandaMorin.com. Thanks to our Patreon patrons for sponsoring transcripts for the show, you can find the transcripts on each episode page at www.Mindmatterspodcast.com and you can join the cause by clicking 'support' at the top of the page. For Emily, I'm executive producer Dave Morris, stay healthy, stay safe, and we'll see you next time.

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