

Episode 103: The Hidden Bill of High-Achieving Parenting, with Dr Tara Porter

Mandy: When your child gets in the car after school, the first thing that you say is probably lovely, “Hey, how was your day?” And you mean it. And then, count the seconds, comes the salvo of further questions. “Have you got much homework? Did you hand that essay in? How did you do on the spelling test? What did your teacher say about the project?”

So, “How was your day?” is the greeting, and then the questions that follow are the audit. If that’s uncomfortably familiar, welcome. You’re amongst your people. This episode might sting a little bit, and I hope it’s usefully. There’s an important conversation that we’re having here, and I’m inviting you to listen, and here’s why.

There’s serious replicated research showing that kids raised in high-achieving environments now sit on the same mental health risk list as kids growing up with poverty and trauma. The tutors, the top school, the violin practice, the 6:00 AM swim squad, the whole beautifully organized color-coded machine on the same list, not because of the schools, because of one specific thing that loving, really well-intentioned parents do without ever hearing themselves do it, and that’s exactly why it hides in plain sight.

It doesn’t look like a problem. It looks like devotion. It looks like winning from the outside. So my guest today has spent her career in the room where the other side of the story gets told, and you may know some of this story from the inside, that sense that grades and blue ribbons and trophies were a currency, and that you were most valued when you were achieving.

Maybe you’ve spent four decades quietly proving that you’re worth keeping. I know that one. I’ve paid installments on it my whole life. Welcome or welcome back to Enough, the podcast. I’m your host, Dr. Mandy Leto. I have spent years working on a trading floor of an investment bank, and now I coach the kinds of people that this episode is about, the impressive ones, the ones with the CV and the calendar and the quiet hum underneath all of it that says, “Yeah, still not enough.”

This is a show about what that constant achievement, no matter how impressive, might be costing you. In every episode, you’ll hear insights and ideas from high achievers who’ve learned to do life differently, and they have the stories to tell. So my guest today is Dr. Tara Porter, clinical psychologist and author of Good Enough. For decades, the kids in that back seat I was talking about have been ending up in her therapy room, and so have the adults that they become. So one thing before we begin. This is not a parenting tips episode. Tara and I take you to way deeper places than that, and we’re inviting you to listen for the double mirror.

You’ll hear the kid you were, the one who learned that gold stars meant being safe, being loved, and you’ll hear the parent or the boss or the relentless self-optimizer that you became. Same wiring, both mirrors. No judgment here. It’s all curiosity and compassion. So let’s go back to the school pickup and the violin practice.

I asked Tara, when she works with the children of highly competent, high-achieving parents, what do those kids feel that would surprise their well-intentioned moms and dads? Let’s find out

Tara: Firstly, I’d say all children are obviously different, stating the obvious at the start there. So there isn’t one thing that they feel. But I guess when they come to see me, sometimes that kind of splits into two problems at the extremes, I would say. So it feels for lots of kids like a yoke of expectations around their, their, their, their neck and shoulders, you know, weighing them down. And I see that in the first assessment when parents come in and they’re sort of gobsmacked that their child is having that, a problem, a adolescent, say, and they,

they sort of list all their child's achievements or how wonderful their child is, and I see the child sort of sink under that weight of expectations.

So that's one thing that I think, um, parents don't know that their child is feeling. They think that they're giving their kids opportunities, but somewhere along the line, the opportunities that the parents are giving have shifted to be expectations in that kid's mind, expectations that are weighing them down. And the other thing, the other type of kid I might see in clinic, you know, kids who've really got the problems, um, they're often the rebellious ones, and so the parents kind of know, but the, the-- they think that the kid is just throwing everything away, not valuing their, the opportunities they're giving them.

They think they're not respecting, they think their kid's not respecting them. But often their kid really, really feels the expectations, and really feels that sense of being a disappointment to their, to their parents, and just feels overwhelmed, and knows they can't meet those expectations, and so opts out.

Often, sometimes that can happen in contrast to a better behaving sibling or a higher achieving sibling, where they just go, "I am not in this game. I am not gonna even try, because I am not gonna make the premier league. I'm only gonna make the third division, and so I am just not gonna play." So, I think those are the two, the two places we get-- I see it coming out in problems.

Mandy: So second question, if that feeling, I realize it's very difficult to generalize 'cause every, every child is different, but that feeling that you describe of that yoke around their shoulders, that expectation that they're feeling, if that feeling had an inner sentence attached to it, and this probably comes out in the conversations that you have with some of these kids, but maybe some of them never say it out loud.

Maybe it's something that they never say out loud to their parents. Uh, so the one that I often got when the expectation was on me at home was like, "You have to be perfect," or there's, or the felt, the feeling I had with my mother was she was already holding so much with my alcoholic father that I felt I didn't wanna burden her with more stuff, even though I was feeling the pressure of the expectation to do well at school, for example, or if I had my own challenges.

There was this unspoken, almost like sentence attached to that feeling of heaviness that I never knew I could speak out or... And a lot of my adult clients too, I don't coach children obviously, but a lot of my adult clients experience very, very similar explanations of what you said, of just like feeling for years, for decades, ever since childhood, like this, this yoke of expectation.

They actually use that specific phrasing. And I'm curious if we start to explore that from the child's perspective, once you coax some of that language out of them. What might some of those silenced expectations be that maybe the parent never hears, but the child feels deeply?

Tara: I think one of them that is going on at the moment particularly, Mandy, is that perhaps the generation of parents that we're speaking to on this podcast did better than their parents of the previous generation.

Yeah. So the previous generation that sort of, your, your, your clients' parents, they may have been born at the end of the war, and then as education got fairer and women started going to university, there was an increase in, in people's opportunities to go to university, to work, all of these sorts of things.

And I think the children nowadays are feeling but not saying that the, the turn in the economic cycle, where perhaps our children won't be as well off or have as many opportunities to succeed as we did. That's been an assumption. I don't know how many through history whether that's always been assumption, but certainly over the last generation's an assumption that they would do better or as well as their parents and have a similar lifestyle or a better lifestyle.

And so I think that underpins quite a lot of it. And so a lot of the places the pressure shows up, I think, is in academics and in education. And of course, AI coming along. You know, that's the new kid on the block in terms of that pressure, isn't it? Yeah. So there's a very much a story now, so kids going into law or that they, y- you know, which was always been thought of as an excellent profession and you have a good career, but there's now this idea that you won't get those low-level jobs, those starter jobs, lots of different places, computer, uh, software engineering.

You know, will AI cut out a lot of the work that, that, that kids might do? So, you know, all of that adds to the pressure, I think.

Mandy: Yeah. I, I think that's also a good point, and also the, the way in which a lot of those interviews are being conducted, for those of us who have older children, of just that feeling of the loss of the human connection when you submit an application and there's some kind of an AI bot that immediately rejects, I don't know, 90% of them within 30 seconds.

So just this, this feeling of removedness and isolation that I've been hearing and I've experienced, uh, that can be very, very challenging as well, of how do I win at this? I don't know how to win at this, and even though I have all the marks and all the extracurricular activities and all of the work experience, it c- feel very, very frustrating.

That pressure is real.

Tara: It's real, yeah. And, and there can be... It can engage parents into an arms race. They, your child, they, they feel their, their child needs to go to the best school, or have, um, many, many hours of tutoring a week, or, you know, be aiming for, um, top universities even though, you know, who decides what's a top university?

Or particular courses. And so it infiltrates parenting and, you know, I'm sure you're gonna ask me about w- what, what are the hidden costs, and one of the ways it, you know, one of the hidden costs is on the relationship between you as a parent and your child if you're constantly thinking about your child's outcome.

Mandy: So what do kids become really good at in these kind of environments that later might become a challenge or a problem?

Tara: Oh, so many different things. I mean, one of the things when we're talking about the kind of English education system is that they become very good at learning facts for the GCSEs, you know, and, and, uh, and climbing over those first hoops, uh, becoming the good girl that we all know about, being compliant and, and, uh, and, and winning at that.

But the cost of that is at their own integrity, really, their own autonomy. And later on, they often then struggle because the skills required that we're training kids in our education system to learn facts, to just, to learn the Let's Revision guide off by heart and get through your GCSEs, are not the skills that are required in most jobs, or even in a d- in studying a degree, where there's a complexity, there's a nuance in thinking that is required.

So often, you know, kids are sort of channeled into this f- uber ac- academic path, and then later on the line they find that the academics that they were good at, that they thought they were smart at, are not any, any more required. So, you know, kids who go through their GCSEs with the kind of color-coded highlighter pens and the index cards, and they've got it all sorted, that works for learning GCSEs.

It works a little bit at A level, but then when you go on into life and do degrees, it doesn't work. Y- that is not a strategy that's gonna work so much in real life. So yeah, and that's often at the expense of their own integrity and their own autonomy. So what they're interested in, what they love, what they feel passionately about, who they are i- in a wider sense.

You know, we're all more than our academic achievements. So all of that stuff can get silenced.

Mandy: Mm-hmm. And I think it can lay down some belief systems, too, that as long as I'm competent, as long as I'm achieving, as long as I'm winning, as long as I'm coming home with gold stars, then I'm safe, then I'm loved, then I'm worthy.

And I think particularly that piece around the good girl or the, you know, the good boy behaviors, that this winning at school, winning at academics, is what's going to make me valued by my caregivers or by my teachers. And it can really set up some challenges later for,

especially when that, i- it's hard to untangle that I do therefore I am. It's very, very difficult to pull that apart.

Tara: Yeah. And, and it's, uh, implicated in research as a causal factor in terms of mental health problems, and actually in terms of not achieving, um, in the longer term. So let's just unpick that a little bit.

So what we know about kids who, this is American research, it's somebody called Luther, if your pe- your listeners are interested, who's done a lot of research in high-achieving schools, and what she shows in her research is that, uh, kids who attend high-achieving schools have mental health problems about six or seven times the normal rate of- Wow mental health. Yeah. I know, it's ex- Wow ... extraordinary. Yeah. So when I was training as a clinical psychologist, you know, a generation ago, when we thought about what caused mental health problems in children and adolescents, we were thinking about things like deprivation, poverty, uh, discrimination, abuse.

And now, and those factors do show up. They're in the top f- those top f- four factors for, in this, uh, research I'm talking about. Um, but the fourth factor is, is attending a high-achieving school. Now, when you really drill down, 'cause that isn't every kid at a high-achieving school is going to get mental health problems.

This isn't the, it's just the likelihood. When you really drill down about which kids get mental health problems and which kids don't get mental health problems, what is shown is it's conditional regard from the parents. So criticism and conditional regard. So if the parents are giving the kid a sense of only loving them because they're doing well, or it...

And, and I'm sure those parents don't actually feel that, but if they're giving them the, that message in their behavior, then that is more likely that the kids end up with a mental health problem. So criticism or conditional regard. So conditional regard is, and we all do this sometimes as parents, when we lead with our child's outcome Ha- not, "Hello, how are you?"

But, "Hello, how wa, did the test go? Did you get the test results? Have you heard from that university? Have you got your coursework in?" So if we're constantly asking, if we're shining our attention light as parents always on their competence, on their achievements, and we're putting them in high-achieving environments, and we have that implicit, that implicit, uh, pressure that is from o- ourselves being high-achieving, that is a heady mix for- Yeah a child. It's a

Mandy: pressure cooker.

Tara: Yeah.

Mandy: Yeah. A pressure cooker.

Tara: For sure.

Mandy: Yeah. And the bill of that shows up later. So if you are working with young adults, or I'm sure you've worked with adults too in your practice at some stage, what shows up later in your therapy room from these high achieving- I think it shows up...

Tara: Yeah, yeah. I mean, it shows up all the time. You know, it shows up at every age. There isn't an age it doesn't show up. So, you know, I have kids in 11 right upwards who're feeling this pressure, you know? So it's not just that it always shows up in 20 years' time. I mean, the, the, the research I'm talking about, those kids were suffering from mental health problems whilst they were at school, you know?

But it can, I do work with adults as well, and it can show up with implicit expectations on yourself, uh, as an adult. And I think b- I don't know whether it's just more women come to therapy or, um, or come to see me, but, you know, particularly in women who- where we've had that opportunity, um, perhaps a first generation of women who are working, who are achieving, then running a tight ship at home, and we just feel they just can feel all the time that they have to make the grade.

They have to meet everyone else's needs, um, before their own. Yeah. Mm-hmm. They make their own needs smaller, and that comes at a mental health cost. They're anxious. They're suffering with an eating disorder. They're suffering with obsessional compulsive problems. They're constantly jumpy and nervous. You know, they can't ra- re- rest or relax. So those are the sort of problems I see.

Mandy: And I think the solution to that can feel like optimize, do more, go faster, don't rest. Like, stop doing any of the things that fill your tank because I've just gotta get this done, and that can be the compelling lie that we tell ourselves is, "I just need to get through to the holidays, and then I'll rest."

And I think there's something about that almost, the acknowledgement that this is unsustainable can feel like it's letting you off the hook. But of course, there's no there there. Like, as soon as you get to the holidays, there might be a bit of reprieve, but it's just repeat, repeat, repeat, repeat. And the, the insidious thing about this, and I see this in my coaching practice.

W- we, we have very distinctive lanes in therapy and coaching, but I see this as people coming in and saying, "I need to have better time management skills." Yeah. I know, yeah. "I need to get more organized. I need to get my shit together. I need to... because my life is overwhelming me, and I feel like I'm in a real-life Pac-Man game, just eating the dots of the next thing, next thing, next thing, and I get to the next level, and it's faster, and there's more things to look out for."

Literally that feeling of being in a video game, and things are moving at an ever-faster pace. So the instinct is to optimize, to get more competent, and I think this is the challenge, and it's a great segue in the cost to the parent, uh, because often we're just doing what we learned. We're playing out how we learned to win.

And the intent is good, but there's a distinction between the intent and the impact, both on the relationship, as you said, with the child, and also on the relationship that we can have with ourselves. 'Cause I think somewhere deep down, we know that this is probably not healthy for the relationship, or we know this is probably not healthy for the child.

But because in our own systems we've normalized being in that video game, Pac-Manning at speed, it's almost feels like, well, this is life preparation. This pressure is life preparation. Which may be true, but there's lots of this shadow side that I think we don't talk about because it looks so shiny and impressive on the outside. This looks like winning from the outside.

So if we think now, what is the cost of that parent, to that parent of this, uh, what did you call it? Like an arms race to prepare your child. You're doing all those things. Like what, what do you see on the parents' side of the cost to them of this culture of competence that they're creating at home?

Tara: It's always a future-focused- Mm-hmm

isn't it when you're doing that? Yeah. Yeah, yeah. You're always planning for the future. Yeah? And what does every guru about happiness say where the secret of happiness lies?

Mandy: But as soon as I get to the holidays, then I'll be present, right? Like, that's the thing. It's this tension, exactly as you said.

Tara: It- so every guru from happiness says the, the pl- you know, the happiness is in the moment.

You have to find the happiness in the moment. Yeah. So a future-focused state where you're trying to meet outcomes is constantly an anxious state, and you're right. People, people say, "Oh, it's because my time management is f- poor." Yeah. I mean, their time management would be suitable for a brain surgeon or a rocket launch.

You know, their time management is incredible. Mm-hmm. You know, you, you want them to be prime minister because they're so organized and competent, and they've Excel spreadsheeted everything into the timetable. They've got so many balls in the air. But it's a cost on their own integrity, isn't it? It's their own happiness.

It's their relationship with their child, which ironically is the best indicator of, you know, success and happiness. Your, our relationships. So yeah, I mean, we used to call it a generation ago sort of type A behavior, didn't we? And it was more seen as a man problem. And so, and that was linked to all sorts of, um, physical health problems as well, which I think we'll be seeing as this generation, our generation kind of gets to older age, where it starts impacting on their heart, and, and their blood pressure, and all that sort of stuff.

So it's a real cost. It's a real cost. It's, it's not a way to live, and it's not about, you know, people come and say this, but also parents bring their children, and with that kind of idea you just played with, the, about the time management, that they need some, with anxiety, they need some strategies to cope with their anxiety.

Mm-hmm.

Mandy: Tips, hacks.

Tara: Tips. Yeah. Top tips.

Mandy: Tools.

Tara: Top tips. But you know, there aren't any top tips. If you're in a really, if you're in a burning building, there aren't top tips to manage your anxiety other than get out, you know? It's, the anxiety management tip is you have to change your expectations, right? You, y- Ooh

your life isn't... Oh, I know. I know. Oh. You have to change- I bet they

Mandy: don't like to hear that.

Tara: I don't know if you've, if she's come onto your radar, this Alysia Liu, the, um, the, the figure skater who was, I don't know a lot about her, but she was, a- as I understand it, coached from when she was five years old to become an Olympic champion, and there was, um, like, a million dollars invested by her father in her coaching schedule and all of that.

And at the last Winter Olympics she said, "This is no longer fun. I am giving it up." And she's come back to it for this Olympics on her own terms about having fun, and about enjoying the experience, and about... There was a sort of quote around that she, when she was traveling and involved in it before, that, uh, that, that they were al- the expectation was always that she would win, and she had to train, and she had to do, and she had to perform, and she was never, she didn't go experience the culture of anywhere she went or have any, uh, have, have any good times.

And now she's come back in it with the expectation that she will enjoy it, and it will, she'll do what she's passionate about, and she will experience the culture of the place that she's visiting and all of that. And you know what? She's gone and won the gold medal. So lowering your ex- Oh.

Mandy: It's, it's so interesting what you're saying there, because I think part of the cost to the parents of running this tight ship in this way is the difficulty, the anxiety, the inner, uh, just deflation it can cause when someone suggests or invites you to lower your expectations or to, air quotes, "have fun and enjoy yourself."

And that's the solution somehow. I know when I've been told that in therapy myself, or with coaching, or, you know, some mastermind groups that I've been in, I find myself getting so tight, Tara. It's just like, it's like, well, it must be nice to have fun. You know? Like, fun is something it's not even an option.

And I wonder if there's something to do with this generational piece that was so interesting that you referred to earlier of being born to families that were born maybe in the '40s, where times were really tough, that, you know, it was hard. It was a hard way to grow up, and then all of a sudden the, the pressures and the opportunities.

I remember as a young woman being told by several women that were older generation, like, "You're our person. Like, you go and do it because we never had the opportunity. The only choices we had were to get married and have children." So I remember just feeling that yoke of pressure as a young woman that I had to now become a rocket scientist or a, you know, a, some kind of an incredible human being because it was like the weight, the intergenerational weight of all of those women who never got to go out and do theirs.

So fun was also something like You know, it wasn't, it wasn't available. It was just you- Just those

Tara: vacations that you're- Yes ... holding out for.

Mandy: Yeah. Yeah. And it was just fun had to be earned. I mean, I spoke about this with my own therapist. For us to be able to go to, uh, a theme park as a child, my father made us first scrub the f- the family room floor, a huge room, with toothbrushes.

Fun was earned. Fun felt painful. It wasn't something that was easily available. So actually fun, because it was so hard to earn and often painful, it was like, "Okay, well we don't need fun. Like, we're just gonna stay in the work. At least that feels familiar." So I think there's this, there might be a bigger challenge that m- my

experience might be extreme, but this, this thing, the cost to parents about fun not seeming available, and fun sort of seeing, seeming light and foamy, and a waste of time.

Like, "Come on, snap, snap, let's get serious now 'cause, you know, we have to compete to get these jobs that are like hen's teeth." What's your experience in your practice of dealing with people who maybe never got to have fun as kids, and how is that showing up now?

Tara: I mean, I guess, uh, perhaps, uh, uh, to go back to what you started with there.

You know, maybe the word lower is the wrong word in terms of expectations. Maybe the word I should use is change. Change your expectations. 'Cause I guess what, what the expectation I'm talking about here is the expectation of the ability to be in the moment, and not always to be doing that future planning.

'Cause you're, when you're talking, what I'm thinking is, I'm talking about the fun of sitting at a meal without being rushed. The, the fun of clearing up the meal and having some music on as a family, and talking, and dancing, and laughing. I'm talking about that fun. I'm talking about making the time for, to engage with your children in a real way, uh, without the constant time pressure, without the constant pressure to do the next thing, to tick the next thing off the list.

Um- Yeah, that future focus ... and I see that many people- yeah, and many families give up that, um, on to instead- have masses of activities, to do the, the violin practice, to have the tutor come in, to drive somebody to ji- jiu-jitsu. And so that is the cost, the cost of being in the moment where we know that, you know, happiness lies, you know?

So that's what I would say, and that's a real connection. And when we look at studies of happiness and success, so you may be familiar with the Harvard study, which has been tracking men, uh, I think since the 1930s, uh, who- men who attended Harvard and what, what, what factors impacted on how successful and happy they were in life. And the thing that shows up again and again is a real sense of connection, of relationship that protects, uh, in physical and in mental health.

So when you say that, I think about generational legacies. What legacy do you want to give your kids? Do you want them to give them the legacy that... We don't want kids to have an idea that their whole life is gonna be fun. Of course, we don't. We want them to have a sense of hard work, but we don't want to sacrifice everything on the altar of hard work, you know?

It's a balance, and that's, that's where the idea about, you know, my book is called Good Enough, and that kind of middle balance of good enough, you know, of, of balancing fun and hard work of, is, is really important.

Mandy: I think the challenge when a child is still a child and you're living in that culture of competence, the intent from the parent, because what they learned, and that becomes the lens through which we see everything, right?

Is do more, go faster, be future-focused, because it's not good enough now. So to focus on the now feels a bit Oh, you know, you, you sort of don't wanna look at all the mediocrity and the ordinariness and everything. There's this outsized expectation of what the future will deliver, and therefore this constant optimizing for what's going to happen in the future.

Next, next... I call it nexting. Next, next, next, next, next. In the desire to move at pace to get somewhere, to a destination in the future where things will be better, and then I can enjoy dancing, and doing the dishes, and putting music on, and spending time. I think a lot of the challenge is I, I feel like I inherited a lot of that nervous system wiring from growing up in that culture of competence, that fun is frivolous.

Fun is painful, actually. Fun needs to be earned. Fun is painful, and all good things are the mirage sparkling on the horizon. And then, you know, even when you get there, it never feels as good as you thought it was gonna feel because of the outsized sacrifice that has happened. Speak to the parent in that moment, 'cause I think just thinking about the legacy that they wanna create, I'm aware of that, but it goes against all that wiring to do faster, better, more.

So if we go to the root of that, what could someone start to think about or do differently? I'm not asking you for tips and hacks, I promise.

Tara: I mean, when you t- y- I think the answer's all in your question, to be honest, Mandy, because, you know, when you talk about it, about that mirage on the, on the hill, you know, we know it's illu- an illusion, right?

We know that that kind of future-focused happiness, you know, when we get to the holiday, it will feel just not quite right because we've sacrific- well, you say about we've sacrificed so much or because we've put s- so much emphasis on it, then the smallest thing being wrong with it can feel like a disaster.

You know, the, the, uh, the twin-bedded room isn't right or it's not where it's meant to be, or whatever it is, you know? So, so I think that, you know, unpicking that illusion, you know, the illusion of control, the illusion of perfect in the future, I think just talking about it is the start of it. But then the other thing you said is about the future-focused, isn't it?

Because everybody knows, you know, that we need to be more in the present, right? That's why we go to yoga and massage and Pilates and all of that sort of stuff. That's why we do breathing workshops, because we know that the, that the, the secret of happiness is enjoying the moment. And so-

Mandy: But a lot of that can be seen as an optimization tool.

That's what I'm saying, that- Oh, absolutely ... there's that misconception, like, if I do yoga, I'll, I'll be better prepared to run faster and be more organized.

Tara: Absolutely, yeah. That could absolutely be, "Right, I'm gonna schedule in having a bath with a candle 'cause that's good for me- ... between 7:19- Are you watching me,

Mandy: Tara?

Tara: 7:19 and 7:39, where I have to get out of the bath and go and pick them up from the tutor, the jujitsu, and the... And then the water's been not warm enough, and it all goes wrong. Anyway, but yeah, so I think it's about bringing that future focus into your everyday life, isn't it? Into every moment. But also then it's about bringing the relationship.

It's about leading with the relationship. So one of my key things that I talk about all the time is relationship-based parent, uh, parenting rather than outcome-based parenting. And catching us- Oh, say more about

Mandy: that.

Tara: Well, it, it's what w- I was mentioning about earlier, when we get, we go in and we lead with the, "How have you done on your test?"

Or, "How have you done your homework?" Or, "Have you got your bag packed for tomorrow?" And those things, I'm not saying they're not important. Obviously some degree of them is, but are we balancing them with that, with relationship, with the laughter, with the connection, with the finding out what's actually going on in their minds and what's important to them, spending time with stuff that we, doing stuff that we all enjoy, having family time around a meal table rather than rushing to 100 different activities.

All of that stuff which is important, yeah. Having time where every week that you spend together. So just pulling it back from the future focus, focusing on the relationship rather than the outcome. Your job is not to make a best child. You do not get to engineer a child, you know? You've been given a packet of seeds in your child, and you're, you're, you're nurturing the seeds you've been given rather than growing the, uh, well, oak tree that you, that you wanted to pre-order.

Mandy: It's not an easy transition to go from being so future-focused and, and optimizing everything, and, you know, competence is the culture of this family, and we are going to win. You will win at life be- and you'll thank me for it one day. Uh, which is a really good segue into the say less Tara section. So this is, for those of you who have teenagers, you've heard them say, "Say less," which basically means you've said enough, maybe too much.

Here's some phrases that I've gathered for you, and I would love you to help parents to rephrase these things that roll so nonchalantly off of our tongues sometimes, which might have an impact that will have a cost to the relationship and a cost on our own anxiety. How could we rephrase those, or how do we change that, uh, what it's saying?

So the first one is, we're only pushing you because we believe in you. So that might roll off your tongue, well-intended. What could somebody say instead?

Tara: I think it's about whatever you want to do is fine, and I'm here to support you.

Mandy: So that's the shift between, uh, relationship-based parenting and what did you call the, the outcome-based parenting?

Tara: Outcome-based pa- parenting, yeah.

Mandy: Okay. You know- Let's, pick another one ...

Tara: I mean, the, the, that kind of sense of belief. You know, God, that sounds like a yoke around somebody's shoulders to me.

Mandy: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. We don't quit things in this family. Heard that one before. I, yeah. What could you say to that?

What could you say instead- I think it's really- ... when that wants to come out of your mouth?

Tara: I think if you, uh, it's important to have the balance between knowing when's the right time to quit and when the right time is to push in. Yeah. And if you really want this, I would recommend you don't quit. But if this is really something you've decided isn't for you, then by all means, quit.

Mandy: How about this one? I've sacrificed a lot for you.

Tara: We've worked hard so that you can have a choice about what you do with your life, and we will support you in this or that way, and we won't, won't support you in this or that way.

Mandy: Mm-hmm. Nice. You'll thank me later. I know I'm pushing you hard, but you'll thank me later.

Tara: I want you to think about whether you really want this university place, this course.

I want you to think about being five years older and what you want to be doing with your life. And if you really want to be doing this, I think this is what was necessary for you to do now. But if that's not for you, then I'll back off.

Mandy: So what's the common theme of all of those responses from your perspective in this relationship-based parenting?

Tara: It's about something actually that we've not really talked about. We've ta- we've not really talked about that a child is not a machine. It's it has its own free will. I mean, sometimes we see our kids' free will, depends what sort of kid you get. I saw my kids, one of my kids' free will from when they were about one years old, you know, they were very determined on their own path, and their own autonomy.

So what research shows is that for, for, for us to have a sense of intrinsic motivation inside of us, if we want to be self-motivated, which is what most parents want for their kids, they need a sense of autonomy. They need to have a sense it's their thing that they want. You don't get a sense, uh, you can't impose a, a, in, a, a, your motivation for your kid into them.

That's just pressure. That's always gonna be extrinsic mo- motivation, or it's going to be them letting go of some of their autonomy to internalize your pressure. So it's about acknowledging that as your kid gets older, that they have their own, their own autonomy, and something, their path has to match what is their thing.

And I, and I'm not saying that, that we all have, like, one thing that we're passionate about. I don't believe that. We have a range of things we can do, but you, they have to own it. And the other thing that they need is they need to... Well, there's two other things for intrinsic motivation from the research.

One of them is competence, but the other is a sense, a sense of relatedness. So they not only need the autonomy, they need to know that they're accepted for their autonomy, for their, what their thing is.

Mandy: Which is that balance that you talk about, that, yes, okay, some striving is important. N- it's not just all about fun, but it's also this relatedness, this sense of, which I'm assuming is, like, a sense of belonging, and I am accepted here in my inner sanctum of people for whatever choices I make.

Exactly. That's a really important point. That's a really important point. If parents remember nothing else from this conversation, what's the hidden bill you most wish they would notice before it shows up in therapy?

Tara: Uh, well, it's their kids' happiness, isn't it, really? Um, that's the hidden bill. You know, when we hold our babes in arms, we s- when they're first born, we always say, we wish, "Oh, I hope our baby's gonna be healthy and happy."

And then somewhere along the line, we- We want them to get into a particular school or get their grades or get their violin scholarship or whatever it is. And I think we need to take it back to expectations. I'm not saying no expectations, of course not. Expectations can be really important, but balancing that expectation rather than going along in an arms race to create the best child. So it's that.

Mandy: A good enough parent is someone who... Fill in the blank.

Tara: Is standing in the middle of a seesaw where at one s- one side is, you know, not having expectations, not having rules and boundaries, not having... Not paying enough, any attention to their child. And on the other hand is thinking of their child as their project that, that they can mold, and that they can...

Trying to be, like, create a perfect child or try to give them a perfect parenting. And trying all the time to balance that good enough parent in relationship with somebody else who's in front of you, your child, who has got their own agenda-

Mandy: Mm-hmm.

Tara: Mm-hmm ... their own interests, their own intelligence, their own, their own personality.

Mandy: So that packet of seeds, of everything Tara said, and there was a lot of good stuff there, that one's a keeper for me. I keep coming back to that. You don't get to pre-order the oak tree. You get this packet of seeds that's unlabeled, and your whole job is growing what's actually in the packet, not the tree you had in mind or the prize-winning rose bushes or whatever it is.

You have the seeds that you got. And now the double mirror, and I want to come back to that, because that's not about your kids at all. Maybe once upon a time, someone greeted you when you came home from school. And then there was that salvo of questions that may have felt like an interrogation. What's with the C on your report card?

We've got to work on that. Did you make the team? Are you the lead in the play? How did your science project do? And at some point, you were probably too busy achieving to notice that that audit had moved in-house. I know because I sit with phenomenally senior leaders in my coaching practice who still hear their father's voice when they haven't quite nailed it, or their mother's voice when something isn't perfect.

Sometimes those parents are long dead, so the audit doesn't retire. And that's the second mirror. So I'm curious if you might be both the kid in the back seat and the one running the audit on your children and maybe on yourself. If so, here's my invitation, and it's a gentle one. Next time the salvo of questions wants to leave your mouth at the school gate or in the team meeting or in your own bathroom mirror when you're interrogating your own appearance or whatever else you might be doing, just notice.

That's it. That's the practice. The Jedi level might be at the school gate, for instance. How was your day? Full stop. You won't manage it every time, and you don't need to. It's about progress over perfection. If you want more from Tara, her book, *Good Enough*, is in the show notes. And if this conversation stirred something in you, chances are there's somebody else in your life who would really appreciate it.

So thank you in advance for sharing. I'm Mandy Leto, and this is *Enough*, the podcast. I'll see you next time.