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Cindy Wang Brandt

Parenting Forward: How to Raise Children with Justice, Mercy, and Kindness

Welcome to Happily Family. My name is Cecilia Hilkey. Jason Hilkey, I were delighted today to have Cindy Wang Brandt with us. Cindy is a progressive Christian writer and the author of Parenting Forward. She writes about parenting, her evolving faith and the slow, unseen labor of cultivating the values of hospitality, creativity, equality, social justice and deep spirituality in the next generation. Welcome, Cindy. It's great to have you. Thanks for being here, Cindy, I'm so excited to be here. I wanted to start by asking a a bit about your background because I understand that you went through a pretty radical shift in your faith.

And somewhere in that time, you also became a parent. And and I'm just wondering a little bit about, um what occurred for you with your faith and how it affected your parenting. So, yes, I did. I call myself a missionary convert because I was born and raised here in Taiwan, where I'm at right now, and I was actually converted by Christian missionaries who, you know, did what they did and evangelized to me. And I became a Christian and I was very zealous, Christian.

I didn't. I took a very seriously I became involved in church and missions trips and I eventually went to a Christian college and seminary and

actually become a missionary myself. So I was very much on that path of kind of what I would consider conservative evangelical world. Um, and you know, when you're part of a faith tradition as you become parents, you adopt the tradition that you were born on raised in, and it's very natural to just pass it on to your kids. But because I began a process of seriously questioning my own faith and whether or not um,

I wanted to be a part of a system which I slowly began to realize was really not as inclusive as I would have liked it to be, I felt like it was discriminatory towards people like women or LGBT Q. People, Um, and in many ways, later on, as I discovered to children as well, and so I just started to question so many of those tenants and question my faith, and and, um, yeah, my kids were little at that time while I was doing the questioning.

But as they were growing and asking spiritually questions and and all these things, I began to really consider, okay, I need to make some shifts and how I was parenting them, um, that I didn't want to just sort of use the old scripts that I was given. I felt like I needed to write new ones. And so that is the process that I kind of the journey that embarked on. And it was not something I could do on my own. I mean, issues of faith and parenting is so huge.

I knew that I needed to garner a community and and talk to other people about how we do this thing of bulls faith shifting and parenting at the same time. And so that's when I started my Facebook of raising Children on Fundamentalist. And so we have a thriving group that we discussed these sorts of things what both that both how we are dealing with our faith shifting and our evolving faith and how we want to raise our

Children by break breaking some of those toxic cycles and also giving them values that we think are more just and more right.

More true. Yeah, and I think that you're in really good company with the participants of the conference that many of them come here because they want a parent differently, either differently than how they were raised themselves or differently than kind of the dominant paradigm in the culture that there are so many things. So many ways in which we discriminate, um, against Children. Um, So what are the what are the principles that you then, um, hold now in your parenting? I think both for my own faith shifting and for parenting that the main thing is autonomy.

Um, I'm realizing that because I was evangelized to as a child, which I felt like was actually traumatizing for me. Because when I look back, I didn't feel like I had the ability to consent to a religion that demanded so much allegiance from me. Um, so that's part of my own healing and struggle. And still for my children and for all children, I just really want to make sure that we're constantly giving our power away because we do hold so much inherent power over children because we because our position as adults and and the kind of,

you know we have more finances, were more. resources. We are given more power by society because adults are seen as capable and children are not all sorts. And in all sorts of ways. children have less power than we do. And so I think we have to go the extra mile to give our children the power that they deserve to make decisions about their own lives, their own faith, their own values. Um, and so that's what I really, um, I think that's kind of the core of what I want.

If I could, you know, if I had a magic one, I could change the world. I would want all people, including children, to get to have power over their own lives. Yeah, I love that. It fits so much in the line with our parenting philosophy and the philosophy of the school that we used to teach in that autonomy was something that we really wanted to be very careful to foster in children and also take away from them because they're not this, like empty pail vessel for us to fill up like they are their own being. Than right.

And and I actually want to shift a little little bit and read a quote from your book because I I think it's also in line with what we're talking about here. Um, because you in your book, you don't just talk about parenting. You talk about, um, bigger issues like social justice and the environment and, um, LGBTQ issues. And I just I love this quote. I read this to Jason earlier today. You said, what if the solution to the world's complex problems begins in our homes and local communities by unlearning the patterns with which we have treated Children and having the courage to change?

Um, do you want to talk about, like, what that means to you? Well, I think that treating Children with justice is not only the right thing to do. It's also a very pragmatic strategy for creating a better world, right? Like I think it was Frederick Douglass. The famous quo is easier to build strong Children and to fix broken men. Um, and still like in terms of the major social issues that we talk about today, like racism and sexism and homophobia. You know, instead of getting men to dismantle toxic masculinity,

wouldn't it be so much easier and effective if we wrote, re raised our boys with healthy masculinity on and so I think that's kind of what I'm trying to

say is that if we could have the courage to change those the scripts, like I was talking about to begin to rewrite the stories that we tell about what it means to be human when the Children are young, we really can, um, make such a bigger difference in some of these larger social issues that we're all dealing with today. Um, I also feel like we do have to talk about the larger social issues.

I think a lot of parenting spaces. We we want to focus on just our family and the strategies that we use this parents towards Children. But the reality is our Children do not live in this isolated family. They live in the larger world And so, in order to give our Children justice, we have to also simultaneously be concerned about the larger social justice issues so that we give them the liberties that they deserve when they're when they're walking around in the world. Um, and so much of what concerns a child's life,

like a lot of people will say, Oh, I'm not political, my Children. I just want my Children to play and go to school. And I'm like Play is actually very political the way Children engaged with one another, like we know how Children divide their own teams into different colors when they're playing from very young age.

They they are always mirroring the adult world in their play, and school is very political, the kind of curriculum that they're given.

But the way the administration, the posture the administration has towards Children, so many of everything our Children touches is political and social. And so,

The parents in conversation, I believe, really has to be interconnected with political conversations and social conversations. If we want really this whole list that justice for our kids Yeah,

because their cause they're watching us. Like I remember we used to live in a place where that bottom of the freeway off ramp,

just that their kids were learning to read, we would exit the freeway and there'd be people holding signs that said,

like homeless and hungry and they're like trying to sound it out. And I'm like, Oh, my gosh,

we're having, like, this social moment here in the middle of your like, little reading lesson, Um,

where I don't really care as much about your reading, but you're you're watching how I'm interacting with this person and whether I just drive on by whether I give them money,

whether I give them food, like, wow, right here, like I have to. I have to be a role model and and introduce my kid to this kid's to these larger issues.

Um, and you tackle so many of these issues in your book, and I think she is, she goes,

So I want to tackle some of these issues. Let me let me finish the end of my story.

Okay? I'll tell you what we did. We actually locate a little bags of snacks and other things socks and things that we thought that that those people might want and we started handing those out.

Um, that was something that they could do. And we felt good about, um, So I wanted to go into some of these issues and probably any one of these,

um, we could spend a lot of time on. So we'll see how many of these we can get to because,

um, cause you dedicate chapters in your book to looking at different issues. uh and I'd love to hear,

um Let's just start with the environment because you talk about how we are robbing our Children of animal plant life of those experiences.

Uh, talk about that. And what sort of practical things can we do? Yeah. Ah,

this is such a big issue. I have so many people in my community who I have just have called climate anxiety.

They have climate anxiety. I think we all do, right, Because we're seeing the Australian wildfires. We're seeing the effects of what the scientists have warned us about.

And and it's a stressful because we also know that our Children are going to see even more off the consequences as they grow up.

And I actually confess in one of my podcast. Sometimes I don't know if I even want grandchildren,

because I know, you know, in my pessimistic moments, I just worry so much for the future of our earth and what our Children are going to inherit.

Um, but I won't do to dwell on pessimism and cynicism. Um, I do feel like we have to give our Children hopeful.

Um yeah, action steps. I think one thing to always keep in mind, though, is it's not because of us that's causing climate change individuals.

It's corporations in the oil company said. That's a different issue. So I do think it's important to educate our Children and the,

you know, the causes of what, what's causing climate change. But I think getting our Children to fall in love with the earth,

um, to fall in love with what's beautiful. Why should we care? We have to get them to care which to get them to see the beauty of our world.

Um and so I I really like. I'm some of these Facebook pages, like while their child, and just trying to foster the love and a curiosity for nature.

And the world is so important, not only isn't important for them so that they learn about how beautiful the world this will.

They care about climate change, but because it just rejuvenate our soul so much to be in nature. I asked my group recently.

What is most spirit? What's what's How do they most feel spiritually right now in their family lives, and so many of them said,

When they're in nature, there's something about being out. You know in the ocean or in the mountains.

That just gives us that transcendent feeling that I think is fulfilling a spiritual need and makes us, uh,

come alive in our everyday lives. And so I think it's really important for Children to be exposed to nature.

Now I live in a city. I live in a bustling city, so it takes some effort to to do that.

But I don't think it's impossible. So even for families who are living in urban areas, there are parks,

and there are We can get a ways I really encourage you to have your child be, you know,

touching the ground in some way or be exposed to water. I love water. I'm a water person.

So So those kinds of things like I like what you're talking about because it's about them falling in love with nature.

The thing that we're that we're working to preserve, not about telling them all the problems like you were talking about,

not the pessimistic sign of it, but not telling them like here the problems that we have to You've got to fix these things as your next year we could we could offload that on tomorrow are still talking about like there's

they're these big problems globally that that we're all being faces like there's a time and a place for that conversation.

But I know parents have talked to parents who don't know how to talk to their kids about the climate crisis or the challenges of climate change.

And the thing that I'm hearing you talk about here is, let's not worry about that just yet. Let's just fall have involved with nature,

like let's have them, like, enjoy those things because, especially with younger kids, that could be completely overwhelming.

And I would actually say, even with older kids, it can be overwhelming me there. It takes a level of maturity and understanding of the world to really see what the impact of our choices are and like you're saying,

it's not an easy, straightforward problem. So I enjoy you talking about that inside the context of having them enjoy what we're trying to preserve,

and I'm wondering, is that the same approach that you take with some of these other topics? When we talk about,

like social justice or poverty, things like that, How do you How do you talk to kids or what do you do?

Like talking like this is the thing we were talking about with. We had homeless people sit at the end of the hall,

friend, like our kids, like, higher the homeless. That's like you get a list like, why are they there?

What did they do? We're not gonna explain to a five year old, right? So what do we say?

Good. Wait. Or or could you? Yeah. How did you approach up? So I think my very core value is always telling the truth.

So I think we should always try to tell the truth. And if you don't know the truth, for example,

if you don't know the answer to why are people homeless, then learn? Learn it together with your child.

Um and I I don't quite agree with you that we can't talk to a five year old about very complex problems.

I think we have to scaffold our conversations with them, which just means we have to make it, you know,

age appropriate and in simple ways that they can understand. But simple doesn't mean that we don't tell the truth.

It just means we tell a complicated truth in an age appropriate way. Um and so I think that's how we start these conversations.

I think it's actually very important that we have these conversations from as young as possible so that they are.

They are used to it so they grow when they are nine. When they're middle school and you introduce the topic,

they're not uncomfortable. They're not. Um, yeah, awkward that they're very because you've been talking to them since they were three about these issues.

So yeah, I I do. I do highly recommend that parents learn with their Children. Why? And I think Children reveal those things like we're so used to seeing homeless people that we don't We've normalize and evil.

That shouldn't be. It shouldn't be this way, but we have normalized it. But Children have not yet because they're young is an experience.

And then when they see something and pointed out, it's such a good reminder for us to say, Oh,

yeah, look, this is not the way it should be. That's this is not the way the world should be.

And so let's talk about it. Let's talk about why this is the way it is and and sometimes the things that we say might be over their heads.

But I prefer to have a go over their heads and have them kind of catch up to an understanding than to dilute the truth and tell something that's not true.

It so that it means they're understanding because they can grow. We can kind of stretch their understanding into into truth telling.

Yeah, I just wanna clarify. I'm not talking about saying untruths to our kids, but trying to talk to a five year old about the future disasters that are facing us with climate change could be overwhelming to someone who doesn't understand it.

And so, uh, having them understand at an appropriate level. I think it's what I hear you saying,

its scaffolding that so they can. So it could be a conversation that we can have without it feeling,

uh, helpless, hopeless. Mostly helpless and hopeless. That's like the concern that I have that we give to young kids,

that I, not just young kids. But like middle schoolers and high schoolers who have the climate anxiety,

Uh, that's like a really thing. I think adults. It's easy for us to get into a state of apathy and like,

Oh, there's nothing that we can do Yeah, I'm like Well, with with climate change, I think it's I think nature is such a good learn learning playground.

We can learn so much about consequences. For instance, you know, when you do this to a flower,

when you break the life cycle in a certain way, there's so many things that they can learn. Um,

and so at the same time that you're teaching them a love of nature, you're also showing them that there are consequences when we,

um when we wreck the environment. So I feel like it's a way that's that's teaching them. That's not overly pessimistic,

but that's just natural. So. I think that's that's a good way to do it in terms of overwhelming kids.

I think, Yeah, I think this is a struggle for all of us because we have so much information on social media now,

Um, I I would just say that Well, what I usually say in my parents and community is that we just do 70%.

We do 70% of what we think is the right thing to do because this kind of lower sis takes a little bit.

Gives us a little bit of breathing room for not caring about every single cause an issue. But it also doesn't let us get off the hook of doing something.

Um, so I always say, parenting forward some of the time. Like, cut yourself some slack a little bit.

Yes. And I think we I think we need to do that for our kids as well. You need to say,

you know, we want you to do you know what? We want you to care about all these things when we want you to be socially conscious.

We want you to be kind and generous 70% of the time, Um and we, you know, and to also really lean into our understanding of our Children's unique personalities because some kids are gonna be more drawn to social issues.

Some kids are going to be more drawn to scientific issues. Um, on and some kids, they're gonna be more drawn to relational issues like our kids have certain things that move their hearts and so If we can get them to be concerned about the things that they naturally care about.

Anyway, that's that's just good parenting to begin with. And that's also what the world needs because we don't need everyone to care about everything.

But we need everyone to care about the things they care about most and really invested creativity, their activism,

the and their energy into changing that part and making our world a better place. I like that. Yeah,

Yeah, I I always like lowering the bar a little bit for myself. So 70% or even sometimes I need to learn to,

like, 51% of the time. Um uh, So we've talked about the environment. Um, we have talked a little bit about poverty.

Do you have other practical solutions or suggestions for the audience about, uh, ways to talk to kids about,

um, poverty? Uh, to ways, to, um, tips of things that they could do with their kids.

Oh, this is a tough one, because there's there's a lot of. I'm actually on the board of a humanitarian organization called One Day's Wages.

So this is something that I'm very concerned about poverty of alleviation, which which we know is a huge problem and something that we haven't been able to solve even in this year of 2020.

And the problem, though, is that I think a lot of people fall into the trap of saviorism,

um, you know, we want to do these things, you know, go to soup kitchens and we wanna have these acts of charity and generosity right around Christmas,

time to feel good, like it makes you feel good that it doesn't necessarily help. And I really recommend reading books like when helping herds or toxic charity to Understand.

A lot of the efforts that we do to help other people is is not always helpful to understand the larger systemic problems and just do our due diligence in the or kind of organizations that when we want to help and and when it comes to like teaching our Children generosity and kindness and those things like,

I know this is what my book is about, how to raise Children with justice, mercy and kindness.

But I often say we can't force generosity. We can't force charity. We can't force kindness. We can model it.

We can call our Children to these values that we think is true and right, but we cannot force it on them.

So I'm actually not a huge proponent of saying, you know, do these things. Um, you know,

make your kids give a certain amount of money out of their allowance. Like I feel like that should really be an organic thing that Children do!

But you, as parents, could live out the values that you think are important. So if poverty alleviation is important to you as it is for me,

I'm very involved, you know, I try to I've done campaigns. You know, I sit on the board.

I tried to keep up on the news of, like, best practices. I tried to get involved in these things and hopefully model that for my Children.

But I really want my Children to, like I was saying earlier, to, invest in the causes that they care about.

Poverty alleviation might not necessarily be their thing. Even though, you know, I think it's very important.

So So yeah, I know I'm not being very helpful because I'm not giving you three steps to, um,

you know, helping with this issue, but I just kind of believe and not imposing these values on our kids and let giving them time to cultivate what matters.

Most of them, um, and just modeling it right here is modeling it in a way that they can see it.

And that's I think that's one of the tricks that we found is, you know, like sure, we may give,

you know, a percentage of our income to a charity. And we may, you know, support boards in different ways.

But our kids can't see that you don't mean like our kids can't see us giving that money. They don't see it.

It doesn't make sense. Percentage wise, you know, like those are all those air Wait at a young age,

it's not something they're really getting, So the ability for them tow have a conversation with us about it,

or to be treating people that are maybe homeless, as as real people and with a human with a humanitarian approach.

And so, like those are the things that, like I I was wondering, like, what can we do so that we could model it for kids so that they could see it?

What? What do you do so that your kids can see you modeling that Well, I want to say before you answer that what I've heard already that I want to highlight is that,

um, it not only your role modeling, but that you I can explain why you support a particular charity.

Why it's meaningful for you. Um, like we could explain to our kids like why, um that we do give.

Because So it's something invisible thing that just sort of, like happens on the computer. But we can make it explicit.

We can even talk to Children about, like, here's our income. And here's the money that goes to,

you know, paying for food and paying for housing and paying for ah, vacation. And and here's the money that we choose to give and we can give kids,

um, the chance to to choose their own charities. All right, Are you thinking of things like that too?

Yeah, I think those are I mean, I for me personally, because I've run a campaign through their school.

So they were very active in that and sold it for them is very visible, but yeah, I think those air those air good ways to do it.

And also one of the things I think is very important in doing charity work is listening to the communities of the people that the organizations are helping.

You know, I think that's that's always so. I would really encourage parents to to listen with their kids,

invite their Children to listen to hey these are the communities that, um, that need assistance in some way.

And here's what they are saying that they need. And that also opens up a way for the kids to respond as well.

They I mean, I think it's important to develop a posture of listening no matter what work we do and it's important and just personal relationships.

So, yeah, I'm wondering if, um how what can we think? Thinking of ways for Children to.

Listen to these communities, you know, and there's so many ways now because of social media. You know,

like my kids are built on Twitter and Instagram and it's like, well, let's follow these accounts and let's see what you know,

what are they doing? And whether people saying that they want and the thing is, I think it's very important to know with all of these complex social issues,

that there are complex solutions as well on. And so I think, you know, when the kids are in this time of childhood is a time of exploration and learning.

You know, we don't have to, like, pigeonholed them into saying This is what you 123 This is what you do to help,

But we can show them there's all these different ways to help with all these different problems and then sort of let them walk their own path.

You know, it's that autonomy value that I care about so much. Um, so yeah, I think developing a posture of of listening is really important.

Yeah, and I really you made a comment earlier about, like, sorry that you're not giving us the 123s.

I creep don't respect the 123 I don't respect that. The simple solution because it's often not. Um,

it's not the authentic solution. The authentic solution to a complex problem is complex, uh, and that what we can do in our homes is these small acts of kindness,

These small acts of generosity with our kids and that those believing that those have a ripple effect and that those rays raise the kids to be the adults that don't have to recover from toxic masculinity or femininity in a way that limits them like that's that's transformative in and of itself and the listening part.

Basically, piece, Yeah, boys listen to women to believe women, you know, for girls. Listen,

To, other feminists and yeah, So I think even though we might not have to concrete 123 steps,

we are giving them the strategies and the skills and the tool set to know how to begin to be curious,

to understand, and to decide on the solutions that they want to participate in themselves. So we're not doing nothing.

We're doing some very important work by equipping our Children with these skills that were scaffolding from one there. You know,

when it looks differently, what this listening look like for a two year old?
Very short attention span,

right? But even at that age, you could be developing that, Say, here. This is what your brother is trying to say to you.

Can we sit for two seconds and listen? You know, like so those And then what? Then what does it look like for a high schooler to

listen they can watch Ted talks by then, right. And so like thinking about our Children's ages personalities. And how are we scaffolding These tools for,

um, you know, investigation for critical thinking for a life of compassion and generosity. Because if we're supporting with those and I really enjoy what you're saying is that for building those those fundamental skills those those those places of listening,

generosity, compassion, empathy than how they grow and develop and become, uh, the people that contribute to social justice in whatever way will be true to them.

And it will be true to the foundations. And it will be with their own authenticity rather than being something that they should do that they don't.

Maybe, and and so as a result, it may not be in authentic but also ineffective. And so I really appreciate how you've talked about that here and and as a parent for us,

not just role model it, but to understand it ourselves, like for us to become informed for us to also really delve into it and understand the issues that we're looking to see for ourselves,

so that when we're more modelling for our kids, it's It's not just authentic, but it's actually effective in the same way.

All right? I mean, I think that I My parenting philosophy is very much to partner with our Children that we are not teaching them,

but they teach us just as much as we teach them. And so I think with these things, yeah,

my kids could be into a cause that I've never even thought of before. An issue that I've This has not been on my radar and because I want to support them and I get to learn alongside them and get informed,

and and I really enjoy that. I really enjoy the controversies that they get into with their YouTube stars.

You know, there's a lot of social issues that come up with their YouTube culture, and that's not something that I get involved in.

But I've really enjoyed stepping into that world and again modeling that listening skill, right? Listening to my kids tell me this is what's going on in their world,

and these are the different perspectives that's being talked about, and this is their opinion. And I was like,

Okay, yeah, well, let me come up with my own opinions, so see how their parenting me.

There's teaching me to cultivate my passions for what they're excited about. And so I just love that mutual partnership and our parenting journey.

I love following their lead. I think that's great. And as we're wrapping up here, do you have any final words that you would like to leave us with or a big ask for the audience?

It's here? Yeah, So, um, a lot of my my work. Like I said, it's about faith shifting.

And because faith shift and can be a very jarring experience. Um ah, lot of a lot of parents will tell me Oh,

gosh, I know that these are not the things that I want to teach my kids, but I don't know what the values that I do want to pass on to my Children.

So I've actually developed training to help parents in that position to know what are they're called core family values to pass on,

which I call the Family bumper sticker and that training you can find by going on my website at CindyWangBrandt.com.

And it's just like a little pop up. You can sign up to get that training for free, so I hope that it's helpful to parents.

Please don't say that. You don't know what values you do have your values. You just need to clarify it.

And so that's what that training is for. Oh, that's a fantastic resource. And I think that that is something that a lot of parents really struggle with,

especially newer parents were there. Like I you know, I want to do something different, but I don't know what it is.

And so it's really nice to have a tool like that. So we'll include a link to that in the speaker notes,

and that's a great way I know for people to follow you there and then you Is there another way?

Or is there anything else that you would like for people to find out more about your what you have,

especially like, your book? Yeah, So, yeah, you can get my book Parenting Forward that's available wherever books are sold,

and I also have a Facebook group. If your Facebook person that I've referred to in this talk raising Children unfundamentalist um,

sort of a play on words from the fundamentalist background that I grew up in I kind of want to undo that.

So that's what it's called. And you can search for that on Facebook. And we'd left at you.

Awesome. Great. Thanks, Cindy. Thank you for taking time. Talk to us about this, and it's Ah,

delicate conversation. And I appreciate you tackling that. And being willing, to really work on it and support parents as they go through this journey.

And thank you for being a part of the conference and talking to our audience here and for talking to you again.

Thank you very much. Thank you so much for having me. Thank you.