

Shining with ADHD by The Childhood Collective

Episode #146: Brain Love: Helping Kids Understand ADHD with Nicole Russell

Nicole: We have to talk to them about self-love and physical fitness and brain fitness.

Katie: Hi there. We are The Childhood Collective, and we have helped thousands of overwhelmed parents find joy and confidence in raising their child with ADHD. I'm Katie, a speech language pathologist.

Lori: And I'm Lori.

Mallory: And I'm Mallory. And we're both child psychologists.

Lori: As busy mamas ourselves, we are on a mission to support ADHD parents on this beautiful and chaotic parenting journey.

Mallory: If you are looking for honest ADHD parenting stories, a dose of empathy with a side of humor and practical tools, you are in the right place.

Katie: Let's help your family shine with ADHD.

You don't want your child to struggle for years and dread going to school. But without an understanding of the school system, you are overwhelmed and confused about how to really help them.

Mallory: Luckily, you don't have to be an expert in school law to get your child the support they need. But you do need to know your child's rights and school terminology so you can be a competent advocate for your child.

Lori: In our online course, Shining at School, we walk you through navigating the school system and identifying the right supports for your child with ADHD. From getting an evaluation, to creating an IEP or 504 plan, to knowing your legal rights and next steps when you disagree with the school.

Katie: We have taken the most important information we would give you in a one-on-one consultation and broken it down into simple, easy to understand lessons.

Mallory: Wherever you are in the school process, we created Shining at School for you and your family.

Lori: You want to feel confident and know that your child is happy and thriving at school. Head to thechildhoodcollective.com to check out Shining at School and use the exclusive code PODCAST for 10% off. You can also find the link and code in the show notes.

Today, Katie and I are so excited to have Nicole Russell on the podcast. Nicole is a bestselling author and lead advocate for mental health and the well-being of children. She serves as founder and executive director of Precious Dreams Foundation, the nonprofit empowering youth in foster care and homeless shelters to learn healthy coping techniques and focus on their dreams.

Katie: She's also the CEO of Pitch House Productions, her social impact consulting agency that educates corporations on best practices for serving vulnerable populations. Nicole uses her nonprofit and creative tools to serve and advocate for youth through every aspect of her career.

Lori: And her best-selling self-help book, *Everything a Band Aid Can't Fix*, is highly regarded as a must have for teens everywhere and has been added to the curriculum middle and high schools nationwide. Inspired by her personal experience with ADHD, she also encourages children who struggle with ADHD and other learning obstacles to speak up for themselves in her book, *My Busy, Busy Brain*. And my kids absolutely love the book! They get so excited to read it, and they're very excited for me to interview you today. So we're just so happy to have you here today.

Nicole: Thank you, ladies. I'm excited to be here.

Katie: Yeah, this is going to be fun. So we love the way that you talk to kids about their ADHD. And so we're really excited to talk with you more about that and your book. But before we get into that, can you just tell us a little bit about yourself and kind of what brought you here.

Nicole: Yeah. So, as you guys mentioned in the bio, my background is in social impact work, and youth advocacy. So back in 2012, I started a nonprofit organization called the Precious

Dreams Foundation in New York City so that we could, empower and educate young people in the foster care system and those experiencing homelessness on healthy and holistic approaches to coping with bad feelings, negative emotions, bad days, just any type of adversity that they were dealing with as they were shuffling through temporary accommodations and housing placements. And so that work expanded rather quickly and unexpectedly. And so we started in New York City and ever since we have branched out, we have volunteer led chapters all across the nation which amazing. We've been able to serve over 2,000 kids who have navigated foster care in the United States. And then going beyond that, because I'm just so passionate about kids and mental health, I started the consultancy Pitch House. And so I work with a lot of different companies just on educating them on best practices of how you approach vulnerable communities. And especially a lot of the work that I do is for black and brown communities where they are under resourced or they don't have access to high quality education. And so, I would say that's my Monday through Friday work. And then when I'm not a social impact agency or the nonprofit, I'm writing. And so, in 2018, I released my first book and in 2021, I released *My Busy, Busy Brain*, which is my proudest product. And it's been really exciting to connect with young people through this tool of creating books and telling stories that are relatable where they can see themselves.

Lori: Yeah, my kids absolutely love your book. They pull it off the bookshelf all the time. Like, they love the colors, they love the story. We're always looking for good books to give parents to help explain ADHD in a positive way. And one of the things I love about your book is that the character is a girl, which I feel like that's not common in a lot of books that talk about ADHD. So tell us a little bit about your journey in writing that book and what was your hope for the kids who are reading it?

Nicole: Great question. So, the main character in *My Busy, Busy Brain* is actually inspired by the story that I wish was mine. Like many girls with ADHD, I was the student who got overlooked. And at a very young age in elementary school, my teacher started calling home and telling my parents that I was talking too much in class. And not only would I get in trouble, I started getting punished for seemingly bad behavior. And to get myself out of those situations, I was taught to stop talking and to learn how to pay attention. I remember my father telling me the importance of making eye contact. And even if I'm distracted, just following the teacher, following the speaker, and making them feel like I'm present and that I'm connected. And so, at such a young age, I learned how to trick people into thinking that I

was not distracted and that I was completely present when I wasn't, which did damage for me because I ultimately didn't receive my ADHD diagnosis until I was an adult. And even as an adult, I look back now and I cringe thinking about all of the rooms that I entered and the spaces that I sat in where I had conversations with people and I made the best eye contact than anyone else in the room and they probably felt like I was seeing through to their soul and I was so present. Meanwhile, I'm thinking about what I forgot to pick up at the grocery store and I am just somewhere else. And so, this book is written in, I guess, the idea of back then in second grade, if little Nicole was able to make sense of what was happening in her brain and what was happening in the classroom, maybe I could have advocated for myself better, and even show the people around me that it's not that I'm a bad kid, it's not that I want to talk to other people. It's that I'm struggling and I need help. And I didn't know that I needed help. I thought something was wrong with me. So I really created this book so that, not just young girls, but like all kids with ADHD or just learning differences could see that, oftentimes it's not that you are acting out or misbehaving. There's usually a route to the issue, and it's trying to uncover that and figure out what's going on. And why is it hard for you to stay in your seat or to pay attention and follow the lesson?

Katie: I love everything you're saying. I feel like it just gives me chills to think about kind of your experience and everything that you're describing is like, why we exist as The Childhood Collective is like, we really want parents and teachers, but most of our stuff is based for parents to understand that and to recognize that in their own kids and just the effort that they're putting in and their heart in the situation. And so that is incredible. And what a cool experience, like, thinking about just for yourself to heal some of those wounds and realize, like, okay, I can go back and talk to second grade Nicole. I love that. And I think that's incredibly powerful. And I know that for a lot of the parents that are listening to, a lot of us didn't get diagnosed until adulthood or maybe don't have a diagnosis yet, but that we probably had similar experiences. I know I was always in trouble for talking, and, my own daughter just carries that torch now. So it's pretty incredible to hear you describe that. And I don't know, I'm grateful to be able to hear that story firsthand. I think that's really precious. So we know that now you go to schools, you give presentations about mental health, ADHD, loving your brain, right? That's kind of the premise of the book. And so, a lot of times, parents don't really know where to start conversations about ADHD. And I do think your book is a great jumping off point, great tool. But what other advice do you have for parents in having these conversations with their kids?

Nicole: Yeah, so, I give a ton of advice to parents and to educators. And in my line of work, it's often social workers and people that work closely with kids in shelters. But I think the most important thing that we can do just as adults, is to educate ourselves. I just think anyone who's even listening to this podcast is putting in the work to educate themselves. These are parents who want to understand their kids better and probably want to understand themselves better as well, which is why I personally tune in. I think it's really important to be in a position to answer questions that your kids may have and even if you don't have those answers, to be willing to go look for them, and come back to your kids and once you're able to answer them, sit down with them and have consistent conversations. Brain love is a topic that should start at an early age and never end. I think just as much as we talk to our kids about their feelings and expressing their needs, we have to talk to them about self-love and physical fitness and brain fitness. And I just really hope that my work empowers parents to work on their communication with their kids so that they're creating space where their children feel really comfortable expressing something that they may be insecure about or that they may think is a challenge. So that their parents are there to listen and make them feel seen, but then also try to find them support and not to shut them down, just to be very open and have a listening ear. But then also help them find the solutions, because especially kids at a very young age, they don't necessarily know what all of the resources are, where to turn and where to find those answers. And so many times they form their opinion on things based off of what the teachers tell them and what their parents tell them. I think it's really important for us to be informed and then also just to use age appropriate language. So I often refer to this type of work as educating people on brain love. And so even when I sign books for little kids, I put, like, hashtag brain love. Because we learn those two words at such a young age. We know that we love our parents, we know what the brain is, we know where to find it in our body. And so just talking about the importance of, like, do you love yourself? Do you love your mom? Do you love your brain? Do you love your body? Those are things that I just really try to advocate for young kids to understand young, because it's something they'll need to take with them forever.

Lori: For my kids, the last thing they want to do when they get home from school is homework.

Katie: Totally and the last thing I want to do after a long day of work is deal with the stress of meal planning, grocery shopping, cooking, and cleaning up the kitchen.

Lori: Same here. We tried Hungryroot grocery service to help us eat balanced meals while saving time and money every week. It's been a game changer for our weekly meals and snacks, and I love that you can customize groceries based on your kids or your family's dietary restrictions.

Katie: Yes! My husband eats gluten free and I love that I can customize groceries based on our family's needs. And not only can I get complete meals delivered, but I can also order my weekly groceries through them. And I'm always amazed at how my kids will try new things just because they came out of our Hungryroot box.

Lori: Yes! It's easy to customize your box each week and you can skip weeks whenever you want. For a limited time, Hungryroot is offering our listeners 40% off your first box, which is amazing. Just be sure to use the code: CHILDHOODCOLLECTIVE40 so you can get the discount.

Katie: We also have the link and the code in the show notes, so you can try Hungryroot today.

Mallory: One thing I hear from my friends is that their kids often think boring tasks like chores or homework are going to take forever, and in the same breath, their kids can play 2 hours of Minecraft and then complain that they just got started.

Katie: Okay, I think that friend you're referring to might actually be me.

Mallory: I'm not naming names. One tool we all love and have in our own homes is Time Timer.

Lori: At this point, I think we all have multiple Time Timers. For kids with ADHD, time can be a very abstract concept and Time Timer helps by making time more concrete. It helps kids visually see the passage of time.

Katie: And it can prevent those inevitable meltdowns when 2 hours of Minecraft just wasn't justification enough to ask your child to complete five minutes of chores.

Mallory: From homework, to chores, to screen time, to daily hygiene, to our own work, we love Time Timer because it is so versatile and their designs are cute too. A staple in our homes.

Lori: If you have a child with ADHD, we know you need a Time Timer and we have a discount code for you to use. So head to [timetimer.com](https://www.timetimer.com) and use the code: TCC to get the discount. You can also find the link and code in the show notes.

In your book, you focus a lot on empowering kids to talk to their teacher about tools that they might need, which is amazing. And we talk about that too. What advice do you have for parents who want to help their kids learn those tools of self-advocacy early on?

Nicole: Yeah, I think it's really important to empower your children to advocate for themselves in all areas of life and giving your kids the space and the respect to do that at home, even at times where they may not necessarily agree with you. And I know that that is difficult. It's easy to say it's difficult to do.

Katie: Absolutely.

Nicole: A lot of people don't know this, but I am the guardian to my young sister who is a teenager and so she also has an ADHD diagnosis and it's like living with a mirror, which is a lot of fun.

Katie: That's what I say. As my kids get older, I'm like, watching this and I'm like, oh, my gosh, I know what's happening, because I do the same thing.

Nicole: Yeah, it's fun to watch. Not so much fun when I need her to pay attention to something I'm trying to tell her and she's somewhere else. But, it comes down to even, like, an example of me telling her that something's inappropriate to wear outside. And there was a time when she was younger and I would just tell her what she can and can't do, and that worked, and she didn't talk back, and she would just do it without questioning anything. Now I really empower her to question my values and question my ideas of what's right and what's appropriate. I mean, she has helped me really do so much unlearning and understand where I get this idea of what is right and wrong in the world, which is amazing. It's challenging in the moment. I've learned to actually appreciate it, but she'll respond and say, well, why can't I

wear a crop top to class? And I always tell her if I ask her to do something and she doesn't like it, it's how she responds to me that could really change the outcome. And so if she can speak to me in a respectful manner, and we can have a calm conversation with each other and we both listen to each other, and if what she's telling me, if her reasoning is not going to harm anyone, I consider it. And I think it's really important that if your kids learn how to advocate for themselves at home, they're going to learn how to do that outside. And for young kids, that can start with something as easy as their bedtime. And I think kids try to advocate for themselves in their bedtime change to change those hours at the youngest age possible. It starts with crying, and then it's like, I don't want to go to bed.

Katie: So funny, so true!

Nicole: Yeah. So it's like, well, why don't you want to go to sleep? And then it's like talking to them about the importance of sleep and then how they'll feel in the morning. Maybe even testing it out and letting them stay up one night later and then the next day seeing what are the results of that and how does it feel and what did it impact about their process of what they do in the morning? So I think it just starts at home. And once you empower your kids to do that in a respectful way, they'll learn to go out in the world and do that in the classroom, and then ultimately in the workplace, and they'll get themselves the raise, they'll get themselves the best title, they'll get themselves in the best rooms. So we have a lot of power as parents to do that for our kids.

Katie: Oh, my gosh, I have chills again. I feel like everything you're saying. So we're just going to use this whole podcast as a sound bite, okay? We're not going to be able to find individual sentences. We're just going to play the whole thing as a commercial. But no, I love that, and I really can relate to that because my seven-year-old, I swear he is going to be like a lawyer or a judge. The kid is just like, man, he will pick a cause and just fight for it. And I love it. But it's hard, like you said, as a parent sometimes to remember it's okay to kind of let him have this one. Let him convince me and be okay with exactly to your point. Right now, it's like pretty cold in Phoenix. We're in Arizona, and for us, it feels like winter, but it's like 47 degrees outside. And he does not want to wear a jacket. But I know that there's people that will see him not wearing a coat and judge me or be like, why is your kid, every other kid in Arizona right now has like a, wool hat and mittens and all the things. But I'm working on that exact thing you know if he can explain his idea, I don't want to wear a jacket because it's

bothering me or whatever it is. And then it's like, okay, you know what? Why don't we just bring the jacket and you can try not wearing it. And that really helps because he's like, okay, yeah, I get to decide. And I love that for him, but it's hard as a parent, you want to be like, no, I know what to do, and I'm going to tell you. And obviously there are situations where you do and you just have to go with it. But I love that you can let them have those moments of what they perceive as like a victory and getting to decide what they want to do. I totally hear you. I can see how that's powerful.

Lori: We had the same situation with bedtime recently where my daughter just wants to stay up later, but I'm also seeing that she's not falling asleep until later, too. So we negotiated a little bit and compromised on her just like reading a book or listening to a book on her audio she has a little audiobook thing that she can listen to that she does before bed. And it's actually been really helpful because then she's not getting up out of bed and bothering me because she's not tired. So, yeah, we've been through the same thing with bedtime at our house.

Nicole: Yeah, I think, not wanting to wear a coat is like a trend right now amongst young kids.

Lori: It is.

Nicole: Even my teen sister refuses to wear a coat. But I saw the cutest video on Instagram the other day, and this little boy was telling his mom, you think I'm cold. I'm not cold. I don't want to wear the coat. And so the mom says, okay, well, how about I just bring it? And then if you get cold, you can put it on? And he agreed to that. Honestly, we've been here for a long time. We've lived life. We know that once you go outside, you're going to get cold and need a coat. I think for kids to wrap their mind around putting it on before you get out there. Maybe that doesn't make sense to them, but give them some time, they'll understand the importance of a coat and a bedtime.

Katie: Hopefully! I'm over here like, I just want to be as warm as possible and go to bed at 8:00 p.m. So I don't know what's my kids issue, but anyway. Well, that's great. I love all those tips for self-advocacy. And I know your book has a lot of really good examples at school too. So if families want to check that out, I think that would be really cool. So tell us a little bit about your upcoming project. It's kind of happening right now, right?

Nicole: Yeah. So, this has been two years in the making. We next month, actually I think around the time the podcast comes out, we are opening the very first comfort shop in New York City. It is a free shopping experience for youth in foster care. And kids will come in and not just shop for their basic essentials, but they will shop for mental health tools and everything from toys and fidgets for kids that have sensory needs. But, a lot of times when it's a child's first day in foster care, they are immediately gone. They go through an evaluation where medical professionals try to determine what challenges that kid might need, what medication they might need, and then they go through the system in the process of getting a temporary room or bed until the judge decides their fate. The entire experience is probably just as traumatic as whatever they're coming from. And so, I've been doing a lot of advocacy work and trying to change the way we approach the foster care system and the way that we, as a state, welcome these kids in and let them know that they're in good hands. And so, on a state level, we partnered with the Administration of Children Services for New York City.

Katie: Okay.

Nicole: And, together with them, we are opening this store inside of the building that kids go to on their first day in foster care. And so they'll put together their own comfort bag, which even includes therapeutic sense and a journal and books and everything they might need, including yoga mats, if that's what they need, or headphones and music. And so just trying to equip them with the tools to take this journey, which could be very difficult and very long. And so we're starting with our first in New York City and hopefully this is something that catches on quick and we're able to do it in other cities, but I'm just so happy that it's happening and that these kids are going to get the love and support that they deserve.

Lori: That's so amazing. And as somebody who's had multiple friends who have had kids in foster care, and if you were in that, I know many of the families in our community have kids who have been in foster care or have adopted them. There's just a huge need for systems to change within that and this is just an amazing step for those kids in advocating for them. So that's so cool. I hope it spreads to Arizona.

Nicole: Yeah, I hope so, too. That is the goal.

Katie: That's when, you know, you're, like, almost across the country at that point, not quite California, but you've basically done a whole movement. That is so neat. And I think, too,

about a lot of the tools that you are providing for those kids in that so many kids with ADHD would benefit and do benefit from journaling and things like yoga, meditation, relaxation, like, we work on so many of those tools, and equipping parents. And so for kids who are more on their own in the system and they don't have that kind of guidance, just having those options available again, I have chills. I think that's so incredible. And I wish that I would have discovered a lot of those tools at a younger age. I was in college before I started researching and understanding meditation and those kinds of things. And so equipping kids at a young age is just so powerful.

Nicole: Yeah, honestly, I feel so lucky, so blessed to do the work that I do. And I always tell the kids, just as much as I'm showing you these techniques and we're testing them out together, I'm constantly having different needs, and my coping techniques change every year. I actually call them my winning habits now because they are things that I do that either set the tone for a great day or can set me up for success. So my winning habits change from year to year. And I always tell the kids, what works for you now might not work for you five years from now, but you just continue to educate yourself and stay open to trying new things. And whatever works, let it stick.

Lori: Yes, absolutely.

Katie: Winning habits.

Lori: Well, thank you so much for joining us today, Nicole. I know that our listeners are going to want to find you to stay in touch. and we'll share links to your books, and information in the show notes. But can you tell them how they can connect with you?

Nicole: Yes, of course. So on Instagram, it's at full name, @nicolerussell and then online, you could actually purchase any of my books through my website, which I'm happy to personalize and sign for your kiddos. So you can go to shop.nicolerussell.com.

Katie: Okay, amazing. And what if someone wants to support the foster care program that you're doing? Is there an option for that that we can also share in the show notes?

Nicole: Yes, absolutely. And I would love that. It's, preciousdreamsfoundation.org.

Katie: Okay, amazing. We will definitely put that in there too. I know, it's really inspiring and hopefully that's something that we can support you in that way. Well, thank you again, this has been wonderful and we just really appreciate your time.

Nicole: Thank you. I'm so honored to be here. So thank you for having me.

Katie: Thanks for listening to *Shining with ADHD* by your hosts, Lori, Katie, and Mallory of The Childhood Collective.

Mallory: If you enjoyed this episode, please leave us a review and hit subscribe so you can be the first to know when a new episode airs.

Lori: If you are looking for links and resources mentioned in this episode, you can always find those in the show notes. See you next time!