

EPISODE 177

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:02.6] PF: Welcome to Episode 177 of Live Happy Now. This is Paula Felps and today it's all about kids and happiness. To kick off this episode, we're talking with LeA Waters, the current president of the international positive psychology association and author of *The Strength Switch: How the new science of strength based parenting can help your child and your team to flourish*.

We sat down with Live Happy CEO, Deborah Heisz, to talk about the online course she's developed based on that book to help parents easily apply these parenting principles.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:34.2] DH: Thanks for joining us Lea.

[0:00:35.8] LW: Hey, it's my pleasure to be here.

[0:00:37.4] DH: I guess the obvious question is, what's *The Strength Switch*?

[0:00:41.6] LW: That's a good place to start Debra, but before I start there, I just want to say I like your accent too.

[0:00:48.1] DH: I appreciate that. Mid-western all the way.

[0:00:52.9] LW: It's great. I can definitely tell yours is mid-western, but any US accent, it's really funny because I'm actually in the US now on a bit of a book tour and I'm currently in Philadelphia but wherever I travel, people are like, "Oh, you know, I love your accent," because it's the Aussie accent. But then I'm exactly the same, I'm like, "Wow, I love the US accent."

[0:01:13.0] DH: Well, it's good to know.

[0:01:14.8] LW: Yeah, exactly. So yeah, let's dive in to *The Strength Switch*. It's really, you know, a strength based approach in parenting, in the work place, in your own self-development, in any relationship you have, it's just – it's an approach where you choose to place your attention first on what's working well.

You choose to place your attention first, if you're a parent, you know, helping your children to maximize and make the most of the skills, the talents, the assets, those beautiful little positive quirky aspects of their personality, first. Teaching them how to leverage those first before we turn our attention to sort of what's wrong fixing weakness, working on problems, working on challenging behaviors.

It's not about ignoring those weaknesses or problems or challenging behaviors by any means, but it is about placing your attention first on building up strength so that we can come back and work on weakness in a more constructive way.

[0:02:15.2] DH: Give me an idea of how strength-based parenting looks that's different from typical parenting where you want to dive in and solve the problem?

[0:02:24.2] LW: It's about observing and tuning into the moments where your children are energized, where they're self-motivated, where they're performing well.

[0:02:33.9] DH: Let's talk a little bit about the course though, so people can learn how to do this. What made you want to develop a course and how does the course actually work?

[0:02:44.2] LW: Being a psychologist for 22 years at a university researching for the same amount of time, a mother for 15 — I have 15 year old son who recently became taller than me, which is one of those parenting moments where you're like, "Wow, how could this happen so quickly?" And an 11 year old daughter and so, I mean, my natural inclination has always been to do the research and look at the case for why we should do this.

But then, there's just the pragmatics of it isn't it? You know, I'm being a researcher and doing all this great research program, finding out that when children and teenagers have parents who help them tap into their strengths, you know, it's a buffer against mental illness, it enhances life satisfaction, they get better grades at school, they have greater self-confidence. But if you don't

know how to translate that into every day action as a parent then kind of what's the point, I suppose, of doing that research?

The pragmatist in me really was motivated to write the book and do the course to say, "How do you just boil this down into really concrete conversations, exercises, activities, games, things that you can do on an everyday basis in your own family home?" Because that's what I was doing at home was doing that sort of trial and error based on evidence and then, you know, I'd meet my girlfriends for coffee and they'd say, "What should we do here, what should we do here?" And I'd say, "Well, do this, do that. He's a fun piece," – my piece of stick, for example. We often ask our kids how was school today? I don't know about you Debra but now that I have a teenager, I don't always get a great answer. To that question.

[0:04:25.1] DH: No one does.

[0:04:27.3] LW: Yeah, I mean, a simple practical thing to do is just introduce strengths into the questions you ask your children and we ask our kids hundreds of questions every day. Like, "What do you want on your toast? How are you going to get to school? Do you have homework? How was school?" Instead of "how was school today?", you know, ask, "What strengths did you use at school today?" If someone comes away and they've had an argument with a friend, you know, sit there and listen, be their emotional companion and then ask them, "You know, what strengths do you think you have to restore this relationship to resolve the conflict?"

That's a really practical tip of doing something that you're already do anyway, you already ask questions as a parent but starting to bringing strengths into those questions. So what motivated me was my won, pragmatism, and my girlfriends kind of saying, "I don't want to wait every six months to have coffee with you to like learn about this. Can you please do a course somewhere where we can have ready access to it?"

Really, just being about to take good research and translated in a way so it helps families all across the world and the course, much to my delight, has really – it is going across the world. We've got parents in England, Hong Kong, Canada, Italy, South Africa, USA of course, Australia New Zealand, United Kingdom, Ireland, Scotland, like it really – it's just been so beautiful to see the way you can engage parents from all across the world in what is a very energizing approach

to raising children and just make a concrete and practical. That's really the emphasis behind the course.

[0:05:58.1] DH: What can someone expect if they take the online course? Walk us through how the course actually works for people who are going to be experiencing it.

[0:06:05.8] LW: Yeah, okay It's a five week course, which I mean some parents do it in the five weeks, they do it sequentially, other parents, it takes kind of three months depending on how busy your life is. The five sort of sessions that we go through, we start with understanding strengths and then we move on to seeing strengths, using strengths, growing strengths and then celebrating strengths and with each of those weeks, we have this nice little kind of rhythm or recipe that's built team.

So the first part is an online session with me just for the parents themselves. They get some video session with me and they get to do some surveys and some self-reflection and then the second part of the week is called Family Time. Once the parent has learned a little bit about each of the themes, understanding strengths, then there's the family time session. We have a bucket load of like, just fun things to do videos to watch, surveys to do, hand outs.

For the younger kids, it's like work sheets on choose your own super hero and feeling your strengths based on your super hero for the older kids, this seems like a family tree ancestry. So, "Trace back two or three generations in your family, what were the major character strengths that you saw?" I had a lovely feedback from family in South Africa who had, she had done that family tree exercise with her kids and originally, her family had migrated from Ireland and a couple of generations ago, she was saying it was really powerful to see her teen aged children and discuss their ancestors and say, "Well you know, they must have had hope to immigrate to a new country. They must have had grit and resilience to make it there, they must have had social intelligence to kind to kind of fit in with the locals," and just in that exercise themselves, she said, just seeing her teenagers really kind of hone those qualities. These are the qualities that define our family through generations so the next time I need to use grit or hope, I know it's kind of in build.

We have the parents session with me and then we have family time and then if you want it, we just call it where you can find. There are additional exercises and things to do over the weekend

to kind of reinforce the learning and bond the family together and we have this nice little three way rhythm for each of the five weeks.

[0:08:22.1] DH: So I think it's really important people understand that this is a family activity, not an individual one and that there's participation for everyone in the family and it's important. Because obviously, the vocabulary of strengths is something that unless you know, you do what we do, you may not have.

It can be really difficult to incorporate that without going through the entire thing, it's not just grabbing one piece of knowledge, you actually have to have the experiential tie.

[0:08:53.0] LW: Yeah, it's such an important point that you raise. You know, a being part of our strength is yeah, I mean, you could have the knowledge of it, it's very rare that I would meet a parent who says I don't want to be strength based, we all know that that's what we should do.

It's about putting meaning into practice and you can't do that overnight, you know, it has to be these kind of in the case of the strength switch, this five week series of like scaffolding and coming to me with the concepts, starting to get more comfortable using the language, exploring what it means, what's the individual strength profile of each of our family members and when we do grow in strength, we have a lovely exercise called The Family Contract and each family member says, "Well these — are my top strength is kind ness or mine's perseverance, mine's humor.

Then we make up this family contract of how am I going to use my strength to help make a happy family. Teenage son, I'm going to use my humor to – if my little sister pulls over and hurts herself, I'll use my humor to cheer her up. It's really – I'll put that into experience as you say, that's the only way to learn and the other thing that I'll pick up on what you said is that, you know, it's like any skill. You can become strength based, it's just learning the skills and it's like any skill, it's practice.

It takes time, what starts off feeling a little bit clunky and effortful, in the end, just becomes automatic behavior, it's about training our brain. I always liken it to adopting a strength based approach, you get that new pair of shoes which initially they're a little bit uncomfortable, they're

a bit clunky to kind of walk in but the more you wear them in, pretty soon they just become your favorite shoes, they're so comfortable, you never want to let go of them.

That's what it's like with strength based parenting. It takes effort to learn the language and the concepts to begin with but the more you practice in, the more they just become automatic and you know, you see this beautiful enabling culture occur within your own little family.

[0:10:55.3] DH: So I know you've said that you've done this around the world already, many western countries, and I know you've got to have at least a couple of examples that people can really relate to that you could share with us, if people have been through this and what changes they've seen.

[0:11:09.6] LW: So Many, where do I start? You know, beautiful feedback too from the parents. I mean, one that just pops to my mind right now, and I don't know what it does because it's actually with younger kids and my kids are a little bit older now as I mentioned but this lovely mother from New Zealand, you know, who wrote in to say that she's got preschoolers and one of the bugbears of her days, is getting her preschoolers into their harness, in the back seat of the car. There's always this moment of tensions because the little ones don't want to get in or they want to do it themselves.

She really decided, "Okay, this is a point of tension in my family and I want to see if I could take the strength based approach to that," and so she – well, I mean, one of the great ways of using strengths is you can use them to prime behaviors. She talked to two little girls about when we get in the suit, when we get in, I want to see teamwork and I want to see patients.

So the older one, the teamwork was about her trying to help settle the younger one and the younger one was around patience and she said, "Look just that simple sentence and then reinforcing and praising, good patience, good teamwork, we did such a good job." Just that small little change in putting the harness on every day. She said it just made such a difference to this source of tension which was driving her crazy, which is now a much more enjoyable.

Not only is it a neutral experience, it's an enjoyable experience because she is cultivating these strengths in children. Every time the harness goes on it is an opportunity to practice building teamwork and patience. Lots of examples of how it's impacting sibling rivalry, sibling conflict and

where parents can sit down and instead of doing what all of us are attempted to do and what I myself, I am not going to say that I am the perfect parent, I still do this occasionally.

You know like rising to their anger, rising to the occasion, “Stop it! I am sick of it. Why are you guys always fighting?” To like just have that little bit of pause and say, “What is happening here because 10 minutes ago you were getting along really well? What do we need to fix this? What’s the strength? It seems like fairness is missing or maybe your patience is missing or maybe your kindness is missing, what can we do to repair this?”

So it is a very different conversation and that’s one of the biggest kind of concrete examples that parents are writing to me about, is just helping with that daily sibling conflict of taking a strength fast approach is a huge factor in building resilience in their children because as much as we want to as parents, we can’t stop them from experiencing loss or challenge or adversity or suffering in some way. That is part of life’s formula. But what we can do is equip them using a tool kit and that to me is about equipping them with their strengths so that they know that they have their capacity and the inner resources to be able to not only get through the loss or the challenge or the suffering but grow as a result of it.

[0:14:01.2] DH: Well, I love that you wrote the book. I love that you did the course because one of the things that I find as I talk to a lot of positive psychologists, a lot of researchers in that area, there is so much information out there that I think everybody can benefit from. But it is just not available yet. It’s just not in a consumable package that your average person can access it. So I am thrilled this is available. I am excited about it. I’m excited our listeners and our readers are going to have the opportunity to take advantage of this because it’s powerful stuff.

[0:14:34.9] LW: Thank you and I love that language, “consumable package”. I think that’s been after 22 years as a researcher is me – I mean as you say, it’s so powerful. This practice and this science is so powerful and I felt almost guilty that because of my job as a psychologist and a researcher, always getting access to this really powerful knowledge and helping to build my kids optimism and resilience but feeling like, “I want to gift this to everyone. I want to be able to translate the science in practical ways so that it’s not just my family who benefits but it’s many, many families.”

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:15:14.5] PF: That was Lea Waters talking with Live Happy's Debra Heisz about her online strengths-based parenting course. We'll be back in just a few minutes to tell you how you can learn more about her course. But first, we're talking to Mike Pepperman of LG Electronics. Earlier this year LG Electronics announced its initiative to help equip children with sustainable happiness skills. Mike talked to me about what that means, why it's important, and how you can learn more.

[INTERVIEW

[0:15:39.7] PF: So what are sustainable happiness skills and how do you teach them?

[0:15:43.9] MP: That's a great question. We partnered with the University of California at Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center to help us identify six sustainable happiness skills, which are important to help teach kids to help them deal with and cope with this ever increasing amounts of strengths in their lives. Those six skills are mindfulness, human connection, gratitude, positive outlook, purpose, and generosity.

The way we go about teaching those skills is we actually have a few non-profit partners who we work with who work directly in schools. One of them is called Inner Explore and through their mindfulness based program, they help teach these skills and another group is called Project Happiness and we have a focus on them on high schools and creating a series of happiness clubs.

[0:16:28.6] PF: Now obviously, it is really important for us to be able to start out happy and so being able to reach children while they're still young instead as adults now we are all trying to figure out this happiness thing. But to be able to teach them at that age is so dramatic. What kind of results do you expect that this could have on their future?

[0:16:47.0] MP: Well, we're hopeful that by providing them with these skills now and having them create a practice over the course of their lives that it's going to help them develop into happier adults. In addition to that, some of our non-profit partners see increases in GPA's and test scores but that's not as important as the social-emotional wellbeing of the kids themselves.

That is the root of the issue in the social-emotional wellbeing is that what then leads to better achievement as they grow older.

[0:17:15.4] PF: And right now, it's such an interesting time because we know that teen suicide is going up. We know that bullying is a huge problem. So it seems like this is coming at the perfect time because there are a lot of problems that seem insurmountable and people just don't know how to handle it. They don't know what to say to their own children. How is your approach going to help some of those really large problems that children are facing today?

[0:17:40.3] MP: Through the practice and the skills, we're hoping to create a culture shift, a happier more positive experience for kids and adults alike and as part of that mission, we are launching a new initiative with Discovery Education, a program that we are calling Discover Your Happy under the LG Experience Happiness umbrella, which is a free asset for schools across the country.

It starts with a 30 minute video for in classroom or parents to use and it's an introduction to the science of happiness and six sustainable happiness skills and from there, Discovery Education created a set of standards aligned curriculum and activities that teachers can continue to use in class to reinforce the six different skills.

[0:18:21.1] PF: It sounds like a really powerful toolkit that you are giving and what I love is as you are talking about the parents. So as the children are learning it, it seems like the parents are going to be adopting some of these skills as well. Is that something that is by design?

[0:18:33.9] MP: It was. Our intention is always to ensure that parents are involved as possible. But a lot of times, what we're starting to see is that the kids are as influential with their parents as parents can be with the kids themselves. So when the kids learn these skills in school, we're hoping that they're going to bring them home to their parents and their siblings.

[0:18:51.8] PF: And then how is that going to change both the family dynamic and the interactions at school? Because it seems like you're hitting our culture in two different, in our two most important fronts by targeting the family and the school environment.

[0:19:06.7] MP: Yeah, absolutely. The six skills and I'd point probably most specifically to human connection. We talk about things like bullying. The skill of human connection is about creating deeper, more meaningful relationships and a lot of the teachings of the non-profit partners and through the Discovery Education Program is about reaching out. Somebody who you might know that well, somebody who you may not like. It's just as important to treat them with respect and kindness as it is to your best friend.

[0:19:36.0] PF: That's a really fascinating thing for kids to be learning and I love that you are starting so early that kids can start growing up with this and as that happens, how do you think that can change the dynamic in the future, and how is it going to change the way that we experience our lives?

[0:19:52.4] MP: From what we know so far, happier kids turn into happier adults and it really spreads exponentially. People talk about random acts of kindness; one person does a random act of kindness and the experience for the person who is on the receiving end is just as impactful as it is for the person who provided the act of kindness. So our hope is to continue to grow those experiences and just for this to really expand and bloom.

[0:20:19.5] PF: And do you have any kind of benchmarks and measurements that you use to know how many children you've reached and know how it's exponentially reaching other people?

[0:20:29.9] MP: Yeah, through our partners, they are measuring the number of teachers who are using their programs, the number of schools that the programs are in, and our focus is really on not just providing a single touch point but developing a practice for all of those kids. That has been the most complicated part for us in determining the total number because we want to reach. Because we don't just want to reach them with a single experience, we want to help them create a lifelong practice.

[0:20:55.9] PF: And why was it important for LG to do this?

[0:20:58.7] MP: Well at LG, we've always been a very generous company but we have done it in very quiet ways spread across our different business units and our CEO wanted to bring us a great focus and give us a little bit more of a strategic site behind what we are doing to allow us

to make an even greater impact than we had before. Our motto, our tagline is “Life’s Good” and that’s what we really dove into to pull out the insights to say that, “We need to be focused on happiness and we want to start with the kids because we know the youth today can have that tremendous exponential impact.”

[0:21:35.7] PF: This is such an exciting program and again, it’s so timely and so valuable for all of society. If someone is listening to this and whether it’s a teacher or a parent and they want to bring it to their community and get that in their schools, how can they go about that?

[0:21:51.5] MP: So we have a whole listing of resources on our website, which is lgexperiencehappiness.com. We start off with our mission and we talk about the science behind happiness and we have links to each of our partners including the Discovery Education Program that will launch it.

[0:22:07.8] PF: All right, so they can go to your website and find out more about that. Is there anything else that we need to know that we haven’t talked about yet today?

[0:22:14.6] MP: I guess the only other thing I would say is that the Introduction to the Science of Happiness program will be online for the foreseeable future and it’s not just a one day one and done type situation. So it’s really set up as an introduction so I’d encourage everybody to visit the website to learn more about it, sign up and check it out.

[0:22:35.7] PF: All right that’s wonderful. Thank you for sitting down with us today and thank you for what you are doing. This is an exciting program and I think it is going to change a lot of lives for the better.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:22:44.1] PF: That’s all for this episode of Live Happy Now. Be sure to visit us at livehappynow.com to sign up for Lea Waters Strength Switch Parenting Course. You can sign up directly through our website and help your family begin applying their strengths to build a happier home.

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That is all we have time for today so please join us back here next week and until then, remember to make every day a happy one.

[END]