

Matt (host): Welcome back to the Nimble Youth Podcast. The podcast where we explore the emotional lives of children and teens and give parents and caretakers practical tools to support their mental health. I'm your host Matt Butterman. Today's conversation is about something deceptively simple and profoundly powerful gratitude. Research continues to show that gratitude practices in childhood are associated with lower levels of anxiety and depression, improved sleep, and stronger peer relationships.

And in a world where the average child spends several hours a day on screens, many parents are asking, How do we cultivate reflection, resilience, and connection instead? My guest today is Katie Wood, author of the bestselling children's gratitude journal, *A Simple Seed*. Katie is a mom of four, a former division one athlete, a former special education teacher, an entrepreneur, and someone who has walked through profound hardship, including raising a daughter with a life threatening medical condition. Katie, welcome to Nimble Youth.

Katie Wood: Oh my gosh. Thank you for having me.

Matt (host): Absolutely. So before we talk about the journal itself, I'd love for the listeners to understand the heart behind it. And you've described creating a simple seed during a very hard season in your own life. You were navigating your daughter's serious mental condition at the time. So, you tell us about that, that hard season and how it led to the birth of this journal?

Katie Wood: Yeah. So, I feel like no one author really writes a book unless they need it first. And that was really the birth of this. So about eight years ago, my third daughter had a lifesaving surgery for something called craniosynostosis, when the sutures of your skull fuse prematurely, not allowing your brain to grow. So as a parent, you can imagine my mind started to spiral and I went to a very dark place.

So I stumbled upon the power of a morning routine of really learning science based tools of how to center my mind. And so I used to get up and practice gratitude. I'd read something positive. I would practice positive self talk. And I used to do these things so that I could have more awareness of how to turn the script down of those dark, scary thoughts.

They don't go away. Unfortunately, the brain doesn't work that way, but these tools really heightened my awareness so that I could flip the script. And so I have never not had a morning routine because of how much peace it's really given me. Fast forward to COVID, a mom of four, I'm homeschooling three kids, I'm nursing a newborn, my husband's a paramedic, like cue the chaos again. And early one morning, one of my daughters came down and said, can you teach us how to have these mornings?

Like she came down during my morning routine and it, a light bulb went off like, yes, this is exactly what we're going to focus on during COVID where the world is spinning out of control. How can you control what you can control? And that is your mind and your response and your attitude. And that's where I took my morning routine and started creating it for kids. And this became what we did during COVID.

And then I saw there was a much bigger need than just my family, which led me to publish this book.

Matt (host): I'm when, negative fatigue, heart has easily taken over. But for parents or teens who might find themselves stuck in that negativity spiral when life feels overwhelming, just too much to deal with, what's one thing you might say to them?

Katie Wood: First, I think the first thing is to know that it's very normal that your brain will focus on the negatives, right? It's negativity bias. It's a 2,000,000 year old brain that was created for survival, not for us to thrive. And the brain will magnify negativity way more than positivity. The simple practice of gratitude and self talk and reading positive, it's just a mental training.

It's really training your mind to see what's right instead of what's wrong, because both are available. Wrong is always available, but so is right. And unless you do the mental work, your brain's always going to look for what's wrong. It's it's here to keep you safe, comfortable and alive, which is why it scans the world for for negativity to protect you. Until you have that awareness and change something you do every single day, then your outlook will change.

Matt (host): That's a very important point. So, was there a specific moment when you realized that gratitude wasn't about ignoring the pain, putting it to a side, but it was about holding both pain and hope in your hands at the same time, right?

Katie Wood: Gratitude is not pretending your life is perfect. It's just choosing where you place your attention, right? And it's trading your mind to see the good, which builds resilience when you're in the storm. That at the end of the day, it's a perspective shift and something you need to practice every single day and really train your mind and rewiring that neuro plasticity is very real. It's doing the work because your brain's going to work for or against you.

Matt (host): A topic that we talk about often on this podcast and something that, that often gives us, we'll just say some pause is, is the elephant in the room on this podcast. And as we live in a digital world and parents often feel like they're losing the battle against screens, against devices. And so this journal that you've, you've, created for us seems like a remedy, pen and paper, you know, doing it the old way. Right? But but let's be honest, some kids are going to, you know, roll their eyes when that when they're handed a, you know, a 12 gratitude diary instead of a screen.

What would you tell parents who are maybe worried that their their children won't participate in something like this?

Katie Wood: I mean, I'm pretty old school. I'm like, it's the same reason why we make our kids brush our teeth. Like, as parents, we know what habits are good for kids and what aren't. Any kid in the world could sit in front of a TV for five hours and be completely just drawn to what's on the screen. But as parents, I'm a big believer and we need to pick our heart.

And the hard thing to do is turn the TV off and create good habits. Like that is hard to do, but you either do the hard now or you do the hard later. And the hard later is dealing with the side effects of a kid who's addicted to screens. They're both hard. So it's like a pick your heart.

I'm not saying, yeah, there are kids that are definitely going to roll their eyes. My own kids sometimes don't feel like doing it, but it's such a it's created that it's engaging. It's created with jokes and humor. It's created to be simple, hence why it's called a simple seed. It's simple to do.

It's simple to not do. That's your choice as a parent. But you know, the world has changed dramatically. A character and values and the science of happiness has not. And it's just being intentional and taking the time to plant the seed, to give those kids these good habits, to give them strong roots so that they can grow up and handle what the world throws their way.

So I'm a big believer in pick your heart. We as a family, we have our kid do this. Our kids do this journal. Some mornings they don't go perfectly and that's okay, but that's also life. For the most part, we are very firm on planting these good habits because it's going to only going to benefit them as they get older.

Matt (host): And so is another key to sort of encouraging this participation would be maybe doing it yourself, right? It's starting your own journal. If your kids see that you're doing such a thing, they might model it, right?

Katie Wood: Kids do not do what we say. They do what we model. It is mirror neurons,

Matt (host): where your

Katie Wood: brain is going to emulate what you see. And that's why you have to be very careful of the content you consume. And as a parent, 100%. Like my daughter would have never come down that morning and asked to do a morning routine had I not been doing it. So it 100% starts with parents.

Matt (host): I'm actually writing things on paper. I mean, actually in the process of writing my first novel right now at the age of 56. Awesome. So, you know, I I have a piece of a pad of paper next to my my, bedside table, and, you know, I'll wake up in the middle of the night and have these these great ideas. And so there's, you know, what I need would be to wake up and go to the computer terminal and and type it in.

But I find that just writing it down in a in a journal is just so important and it stays with you so much longer.

Katie Wood: It's why January 1, those who write their goals and those who don't, there is a difference. Different totally differently.

Matt (host): You're completely right. Carrying your advice right now, in this day and age, I can feel like a tidal wave. There are all these different approaches. There's gentle parenting, helicopter parenting, cautious parenting. It's all, the end result is just very exhausting.

Yep. So what was your antidote to all of that noise, all of that, these different, theories that we're being bombarded with?

Katie Wood: It is very overwhelming. I will be the first person to totally agree with that. I think we also overcomplicate things at times. I think at the end of the day, we want to raise our kids with good habits. We are a sum of our habits, right?

Like our habits are who we are and that's who we become. And they're formed as a child. Most adults are creation of the habits they learned as a kid. And so for me, I try to give the basic habits for the science of happiness. And not that I want my dream is I just want my kids happy.

I know so many parents say that, but that's so unrealistic. I want my kids to be able to regulate their emotions. I want them to enjoy the highs and then learn in the lows. I want them to stay in the middle and to do that, the foundation is gratitude. It's been proven over and over again.

It's such a simple thing to do. Those small things can lead to very big results. Pay attention to the self talk. We all have this voice. What follows your I ams is a boomerang.

We'll come back and follow you. You know, going into the world with that service mentality, like how can I bring joy to someone? Whose day can I make better? And the more good you do, the world will reflect that back to you. And then the training your brain to read something positive.

Those doing those things you cannot argue will help any human. It cannot be argued. It's scientifically proven. So I try to just stick to the basics, do the best I can, what's right for my kids. I know there's no one size fits all, but at the end of the day, there's not a single kid in the world who wouldn't benefit from those practices.

Matt (host): Simplest practices is what we might think is the easiest things that we do are in fact the most powerful, right?

Katie Wood: Yeah, correct.

Matt (host): Yeah. So you talked about planting what you call seeds of resilience, and I love that metaphor, but it's the Monday morning and everyone's late, you know, the backpacks are missing and no one's cooperating. So how do you deal with the reality?

Katie Wood: We've been there. We've all been there. I'd be lying if we haven't as well. Doing a simple seed journal doesn't mean your day is perfect. It does not.

But what it does mean is that tiny moments can anchor the day. When you get up in the morning, the reticular activating system, the RAS in the back of your brain, it gets up along with you and says, what do you want to focus on today? And I'm sure you know this by studying the mind. And we have this ability to program it, right? So in the morning, even if it's chaotic, I'm still having conversations while making lunch, while they're eating breakfast to say, you know, what is something we can be grateful for, right?

Or, you know, I heard this woman had a really, this isn't my idea, but I love it and I'm using it when you're going to school and there's traffic and it's chaotic and you're late. But fortunately you have a car and you have the ability to go to school that has heat and lights. It's just a mindset switch. So it's not about perfect mornings because real life is messy. The goal is not a perfect routine.

The goal is planting the seed so that your kid, even in hard days, has the awareness to really flip the script, turn the volume down on the negativity, and choose to see what's good around them. That's the goal.

Matt (host): Yeah, for sure. Building on that a little bit, you know, we are in a chaotic world, the twenty four hour news cycles, all these schedules, you know, with with multiple children, it gets, gets out of control. I know with four, you must have a very difficult time coordinating schedules, all the constant notifications, the changes that come about. So what's, what's the first step you'd recommend to help families kind of slow down and just reflect their situation?

Katie Wood: Yeah. I think it's embracing the pause, right? We go from twenty to thirty, thirty to forty, forty to 50, and there's no pause in reflection. And, you know, my life is incredibly busy, four kids, my husband's a paramedic, he's gone a lot. You know, my kids play an insane amount of sports.

Like we are always on the go. And the pause is sometimes that slow down to speed up in the best way, right? Where the world moves so fast and kids rarely get that moment to pause and reflect. And the journaling, that is a main reason this was created is to create the pause. It's being intentional, not looking for more time, but being more intentional with your time.

And at the end of the day, everybody has five minutes. You do. And if you don't, then you need the journal more than anybody. But it is really creating that small pockets in the busy day of just being a little more intentional.

Matt (host): The whole idea of finding grounding or peace in that, in that pause. Right. Yeah. Just gratitude for that. So you spent a decade also, I mean, among the many things that you've done with your life, you spent a decade as a special education teacher, which gives you a powerful lens.

What was the most surprising lesson you learned about, fostering a growth mindset in the classroom?

Katie Wood: So I'll say as a special ed teacher, my kids that I taught taught me more than I could have ever taught them, especially kids with special needs, because I had some students that were severe and man, with everything against them. They saw the world with the most beautiful lens, no complaining, never a victim mentality. It was joy. Like they literally had joy in everyday life. And as a special ed teacher, I learned that from them, that no matter what my circumstances, because so rarely can you control the things that happen in life, right?

90%, I would believe you really can't, or you cannot control, but you can control how you respond. That is a 100% in our control. Teaching those kids really taught me how to choose joy and see joy. And so our mission, because we have a journal that is for schools. This is for teachers and students.

It's really helping students find that joy, that special, the kids I taught with those with special needs, that love for life that they had. How do we help all kids find that? And that's starting your day with this journal. So goodbye, word of the day. We don't need to talk about the weather in the morning.

Kids are already dressed. Like change the way the world is changing. We need to start teaching kids how to think, not what to think. And we have over 300 schools that are doing this every morning to start their day with the right mindset. It's the pause.

And what happens is their cognitive function goes up because they have really learned to center themselves, get focused and come from a place of joy where, their day flows better. And it's incredible what some schools are doing.

Matt (host): I mean, it's, it's such a great thing to, to do, I think, to focus on what you have and, and not on, on what you lack because

Katie Wood: Yeah.

Matt (host): I think oftentimes we're conditioned to to focus on what we lacked, and that's it's not right. Yeah. You've you've shared that the book was inspired by your daughter asking how to create these magical mornings, which I I love that phrase. How does your other children respond to the journal? Was it, was it, was there a universal acceptance of it?

Was there some resistance among your kids or how did that, how did that play out?

Katie Wood: No, you know what? We, we, we did it. We kind of created this journal as a family. You know, there's jokes. My kids were in charge of that.

I actually created a community of a thousand moms, dads, teachers on Facebook and asked, if God forbid tomorrow's your last day, what is the one thing you want your kid to know? And really helping with that proactive parenting. So much of parenting is in reactive mode. After the bully,

after the failure, after the mistakes, where when we have those 100 really powerful life lessons, we're planting those seeds so that the kids, you know, are learning it before the situation, helping set up kids so that they can handle the hard moments. So my kids, because it was a joint effort, did not have a lot of resistance in creating it.

I mean, yeah, were they, was it like, fa la la la the whole time? No, it wasn't, but what is? And so I will say it, there was a lot of lessons learned. They saw grit, they saw resilience, they saw hard work takes time. They saw this really isn't an Amazon society and a microwave society of the quick hit.

Like this was a journey from start to finish, and they witnessed the whole thing. And there was a lot of failure and tears and wanting to cry, but knowing it was a group project, I wanted to quit, but could not quit because I could not let them down. So yeah, it was an up and down journey for sure. But for the most part, it was a good group effort.

Matt (host): Yeah. So not to put you on the spot unnecessarily, but if this journal could fix one thing about modern childhood, what do you think that it would be?

Katie Wood: That's such a good question. I would have to say it would, it would be to your, I'm a very big believer that your life is only as good as your ability to notice the good. And that is the truth. And I think a lot of kids have not learned that. And I think it's one of those things that when we grow up as parents, we realize it.

And then we do the work to unlearn probably all the bad habits we learned, right? We spend a lot of time unlearning. Where my wish for this younger generation would be to have that mindset of seeing the good, believing in themselves, betting on themselves, you know, having a strong mindset so that they can handle whatever life throws at them, because life is definitely going to throw stuff at them. You know, speaking positive about themselves and then putting good into the world, knowing that that is the purpose of life, right? It's the good you do and the lives you make breathe a little easier.

Like that is the purpose of life. I want the younger generation to know that, but also know that it starts with them. Like you can't control other people and the way they think or the things they say, but you can control you and your perception and your beliefs. And that would be my biggest wish that kids understand the power they hold.

Matt (host): Amazing force, isn't it really?

Katie Wood: It's an amazing force.

Matt (host): It is. Yeah. So I think you touched on this earlier when you were talking about your experiences as a special ed teacher, but what's one thing kids have taught you about gratitude that maybe you didn't expect? Some unexpected, unexpected epiphanies they might've taught you about.

Katie Wood: So my third daughter, Gabriela, the one that had the life saving surgery, we named her Gabriela, which is an angel from God because she had a lot of complications. She's a miracle baby. She's doing incredible things in this world. But what I, when I realized there were issues, I would go on walks like all the time to like clear my mind and I would pray. That's my thing.

You can call it what you want. Talk to the universe. For me, it was talking to God. And suddenly I started to notice hearts everywhere, hearts in nature, hearts in my food, hearts in the trees, hearts on the, in the snow, like, like incredible hearts everywhere. And they always showed up when I was in a dark moment.

To me, was life's way of saying, you're going to be okay. You're not alone. You're going to be okay. And if I didn't go through that with my daughter, I really credit her for that. I don't think I would have looked at the world like that.

Cause to this day I see them and I believe they're there for everybody. I just think it's your ability to notice them. And that's something that I'll forever be grateful.

Matt (host): Absolutely. So this, this journal, with this old school, setup writing, writing on, on paper, a lasting, record of, of your experiences. So it focuses on the timeless values of things like kindness, patience, deflection. And, why do you think this current generation of kids and us as well, parents, why do you think that we need this reminder more than?

Katie Wood: I mean, many times as parents do we say we grew up in the best generation, you know, things were so different. You kids will never understand. Like we're always saying these comments, right? So then what are we actually doing about it? I understand we cannot take away cell phones.

Like the world has changed dramatically and there's a lot we cannot control with that. But kindness, patience, gratitude, positive self talk, they're still the roots of strong character, right? The world has changed, but the character principles haven't. So it's kind of going back to what worked, right? Which was spreading kindness, you know, writing down things you're grateful for, all the things that, you know, we know help kids, old school, slowing down, pausing.

This journal is simply a roadmap for parents to help them do that. That's all it is. It's a roadmap for proactive parenting, deep conversations, the ability to reflect. It's five minutes of a deep connection, which honestly, I think our kids are craving more than that.

Matt (host): Absolutely right about that. Every episode of this podcast, we talk about the need for connection in the current generation of young people and connection with nature, connection with other people, because these screens between us don't help, do they?

Katie Wood: No, they sure don't.

Matt (host): Yeah. So for younger children, one thing is that's really, I think remarkable about this journal is that it's ageless, right? It really, it, it can, be adapted really for, for anyone, whether it's an older person, whether it's a young person focusing on children, of course. Is there a way that you can think of how the book might be adapted for these impressionable minds for children younger than six?

Katie Wood: Yeah. So if a child is younger than six, I believe there's no, you can never be too early to plant the seed of kindness and goodness. Right. And that might look different according to how old the kid is. For sure.

There are a lot of young kids who do it where the parents write the kids' answers. All kids can answer from three on, you know, I am what? I am strong. I am kind. Like kids really grow up with a level of belief that you pour into them and starting building those I am statements.

You write it for them. What are you grateful for? Help guide them. Food, you know, this, a cup to hold my water, the little things in life, a spoon so I can eat my cereal, things we all take for granted, right? Bringing awareness at a young age only benefits kids.

And then whose day can I make better? Kids love to spread the goodness, right? It's like that gift giving that feel good. You know, it's a double win for the kid and for you do going out and doing the goods. Any age can do it.

Even teenagers as people we have the elderly and convalescent homes doing it to keep their minds sharp. The lessons are for all walks of life. The reason it was created and designed for the younger age is to really plant those seeds and build those healthy habits when kids are most impressionable.

Matt (host): Yeah, for sure. And I, it's about, I guess, giving them the right prompts at any age, right? Yeah. Right things to think about. So Katie, as we close, I keep thinking about something you've said about planting seeds.

Katie Wood: Yeah.

Matt (host): Because in youth mental health, we often focus on the crises, the overwhelming anxiety, depression, screen overuse, academic stress, but gratitude is preventative. I love that, that whole metaphor is protective. And it's a small daily act that builds, emotional muscle. Before we wrap up, is there one final encouragement you'd like to leave?

Katie Wood: I think you don't have to be a perfect parent. There's no such thing. And you don't want to be a perfect parent because you don't want your kids growing up being like, have to be perfect. Why do I not feel perfect? Right?

It's not realistic, but you can plant the seeds every single day. And here's the reason why. A simple seed is like the acorn, right? Like an acorn can turn into the mightiest tree in the forest, which is the oak tree. And that's, there's an oak tree inside every acorn.

But why do so many acorns stay dormant? And why are so many acorns just sit around? And that's, I believe, because we haven't pulled out the greatness in them. And in order for an acorn to become an oak tree, it has to have the right environment, the right sunlight, the right, you know, water. And that's what we're doing.

We're planting these seeds to give these kids strong roots so that they can grow into the best version of them. And when the winds come and the storms come, they don't get knocked down. They have strong roots. They stand firm. They have the tools they're equipped.

One day when you send them off to college, you're still a parent, but really your influence has gone way down. You can look them in the eye being like, gave you it all. I gave you those roots. I've planted the seed, go fly. And that's the importance of planting the seed because at the end of the day, we know our kids a lot longer as adults than as little kids.

And there's a small window that we have this opportunity to really pour into that belief and that can be done in five minutes a day.

Matt (host): He is the author of *A Simple Seed*, which is a children's gratitude journal designed to help families slow down, reflect, and grow resilience together. And we will link to the book and to Katie's broad, body of work in the show notes. And if today's conversation resonated with you, please do share this episode with a friend and don't forget to rate and review *Nimble Youth* on Apple Podcasts and Spotify. Your support helps us continue these important conversations. Until next time, remember small seeds planted consistently can grow into something extraordinary.

My thanks to Katie Wood and my thanks to you for listening today. We'll see you next time.