

Matt (host): Welcome back to Nimble Youth, the podcast where we explore the emotional lives of children and teens and help parents better understand how to support them with compassion, insight, and care. I'm your host, Matt Buttermann. We're beginning our second full season of Nimble Youth with the support of MindBridge Behavioral Health, a new pediatric mental health care practice for children, teens, and young adults, ages five through 22, serving the Winston Salem and Piedmont Triad areas of North Carolina. Led by pediatrician, doctor Gretchen Hoyle, my partner, collaborator, and frequent guest on this podcast, MindBridge is opening its doors on July 7 and is accepting new patients. Please visit their website at www.mindbridgebehavioralhealth.com.

So today's episode, the first of our second season, focuses on one of the most important things any young person can experience. Feeling fully seen, accepted, and loved by the people closest to them. For LGBTQ plus youth, the coming out process can be deeply meaningful, but also emotionally vulnerable. Many young people wrestle with fear, uncertainty, rejection or isolation before sharing who they are with family and friends. At the same time, many parents genuinely want to support their child but may feel overwhelmed, confused, afraid of saying the wrong thing, or uncertain how to navigate very unfamiliar territory.

Today's guest believes that this journey, while often messy and emotional, can also become an opportunity for deeper connection, growth, and understanding. My guest is Heather Hester, author of the book *Parenting with Pride* and host of the podcast *More Human, More Kind*, where she provides guidance and support for parents and allies of LGBTQ plus youth. Through her coaching, writing, and advocacy work, Heather helps families move from fear and confusion toward compassion, connection, and empowered support. Heather, welcome to Nimble Youth.

Heather Hester: Thank you for having me, Matt. I'm very happy to be here.

Matt (host): Great. We're glad to have you. So so Heather, your work is deeply personal. You've spoken openly about your own family's journey and how your child's coming out experience ultimately led you into advocacy and support work. So can you tell us a little bit about that journey and what you wish you had known in the beginning?

Heather Hester: Absolutely. Yes. So our journey started close to ten years ago when my oldest, who was 16 at the time, came out as gay. And he's the oldest of four. We had no idea.

It was a complete surprise, and we did not know how to best support him. We did not have any friends or family who were gay. It was not something that people were really open to discussing or talking about. So we didn't know where to get support. We did not know what questions to ask.

We didn't understand what he was going through. And so it was it was pretty messy, which is why I commonly use that as a descriptor because it was very, very messy. And it took quite some time for us to kinda get our feet under us for lack of a better way to say But it was a a very

long, at times, very scary road. He did struggle with a lot of different mental health struggles. He had some substance use struggles.

And so we were definitely in a place of a very sharp incline of learning. And every time we kind of figured something out, there would be something new that we had to figure out and, you know, fire to put out. And that's what it felt like for, like, eighteen months. And when we finally kind of got to a good plateau where he was safe and, you know, we just all felt like, okay. We can take a breath.

I thought, this is kind of insane that this was that difficult. And why is it so hard to find information? And why didn't we can't be the only ones who were feeling so isolated and so alone. And, so I just set out to create what we had been looking for. And that's been kind of my process of, you know, how I've gotten to what I'm doing, what I'm doing.

But, you know, I wish that we had known and understood understood more more know, at the beginning of what he was experiencing, what he was going through, what good questions we could have asked at that time that would have cut so much time off of our learning, off of his struggle. So I think that would be the the biggest thing that I would say I wish we had known at the beginning.

Matt (host): And and you've described the coming out process, as you kind of alluded to earlier, as as being both beautiful and messy, which I love that description of it, which feels incredibly honest. And I suppose the messy part is somewhat self evident. You you can understand that how it might be messy. But what what where where is the beauty, and and where is the richness of the experience? Because I'm sure it can be both of those saints.

Heather Hester: Absolutely. Yes. Well, I think that, you know, what I very quickly was so grateful that I had the awareness to see was watching him kinda step into his authenticity, step into, like, this is who I am. And, as difficult as it was, it was the coolest thing to be able to see him be like, oh, wait. Like, I feel comfortable in my skin now.

I I feel comfortable wearing this or embodying, you know, my full person. And then seeing that kinda trickle down through our family as well, not even down through the siblings, but even through myself and through my husband. And so it was really acknowledging and honoring the the courage his courage of of being able to say that. Right? And then being able to to take those steps of, like, this is actually who I am in this world, not knowing how anybody would respond to it.

Right? So I just found all of that so extraordinarily beautiful. And and then, you know, all the pieces that came came after that as well.

Matt (host): For sure. So, you know, I guess for for many parents, they may have their suspicions that their their child is LGBTQ plus somewhere in that alphabet. But for for many parents, there's there's also a specific moment when that reality, when they're coming out, is

voiced by the child. When they say something like, Mom, I think I might be gay, Dad, I'm transgender, and I need to tell you something about who I really am. And that moment can feel emotionally charged for everyone involved.

So what are some of the most important things parents should remember in that that moment, which is which is exposed and and existential for your child?

Heather Hester: Yeah. Absolutely. So I think that, you know, we feel as parents that we need to make some big speech. Right? That our child is expecting us to just give this monumental have these, like, words of wisdom.

Right? And and it needs to be perfect, and we need to say it in the most perfect way. And that really couldn't be further from the truth. They need the most basic thing from you, which is I love you. Thank you for sharing this with me.

That's it. You don't need to say anything other than that. That is the that is the most perfect thing that you could say.

Matt (host): Yeah. And are are there some responses, even if they're well intentioned, that might unintentionally cause distance or create some sort of hurt for the child that's coming out?

Heather Hester: Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely. Yes. I mean, we we, in fact, said a couple of them ourselves, which one of them was, are you sure?

And that is a very common one that parents say, and our son, you know, pretty quickly let us know that that was not a okay thing to say and why. And and the reason for that, the reason it's not okay to say is because by the time your child tells you and shares this information with you, they have likely been thinking about it, contemplating it, bargaining in denial. There are a lot of stages that go here that you're not aware of at all. This is not something that they just woke up that morning and decided to tell you. So, yes, they are definitely sure.

But some of the other ones are how do you know? You're too young to know. What if this is just a phase? Do you think this might be a phase? It could be a phase.

Maybe you heard it on TikTok. Maybe you heard it at school. Any of those things. Just keep that in your brain, but don't let it come out of your mouth.

Matt (host): Right. Exactly. Exactly. So one of the things that you address with a lot of compassion is that you certainly keep the parents in mind, and and you you say that some parents experience fear, grief, or or this confusion after a child comes out, and it's not because they don't love their child, but it's because the expectations suddenly shift and they don't really know where to find themselves. So how can parents process those emotions in a healthy way without shifting the emotional burden onto their child who is already, you know, dealing with enough at this time?

Heather Hester: Right. Absolutely. Well, that's you have a lot of good stuff right in that question. And so I'll just kind of break it down a little bit. First of all, yes, it is very, very common to feel grief, to go through grief.

And this is not you are a bad parent. This is not you don't love your child. This is what you I call it the the, exploding of your movie reel because it's the what you created in your mind that the story of your child's life, perhaps the story of your life as a family together, that blows up. That's not what you expected it to be, and it is okay for you. In fact, it's actually necessary for you to mourn that and let it go so that you can move forward in this brand new beautiful direction as uncertain as it may be.

But it is okay for you to allow yourself to have that moment or to have those moments. And I also just want to kind of reiterate the importance of your child. This is not your child's to help you through. This is yours to help yourself through. Right.

So, you know, some of the ways that you can do that is I I'm a huge, huge advocate of having a therapist, a counselor, that you speak with. And so, you know, it could be that. It could be speaking with your partner, a trusted friend, somebody who can be very objective in in listening to you and allowing you to talk and work through this. Another way that is really good to process this type of information is through journaling. I'm a huge advocate of journaling as well.

I think that is a just a great way to just dump all of it, the good, the bad, the ugly. Just get it out. And then once you're kind of through that to kind of start your your learning process, so you've done a little bit of, like, letting go and unlearning, and then you can begin to learn and put new information in there.

Matt (host): Yeah. So, certainly there's a lot of prejudice and unfair treatment of LGBTQ plus youth and it's been very well documented. But there's also been progress, certainly, in acceptance. And so, the research consistently shows that LGBTQ plus youth who experience family acceptance, they have significantly better mental health outcomes. And again, it may be somewhat self explanatory, but but maybe not.

And and that is why is parental support such a powerful force?

Heather Hester: Sure. Sure. I know that does sound like it would be self explanatory, but I think the reasoning behind that that's so important to understand is that it's with with the parents within your family unit that a child actually derives their sense of belonging and their sense of safety. And that is such an important foundational piece of, development for a child, for an adolescent teenager, even for a young adult. That piece is so, so important.

So, you know, the the opposite of that that you often, you know, will see in these types of situations is how destabilizing that can be for a child, for a young person, and how just, like,

almost destructive in some ways that it can be both to them as their person and, you know, just kind of in a general sense of their growth.

Matt (host): Yeah. And I think that the acceptance doesn't just affect their identity, but it also affects the safety. Right. Their self worth and resilience and overall their mental health for sure. So your book, *A Parenting with Pride*, it talks about unlearning bias, which I think is such an important phrase. Many parents grew up with messages, religious, cultural, or societal, that shaped how they think about gender and sexuality.

So how can parents begin examining those beliefs with honesty and openness?

Heather Hester: Yes. So thank you. That is also one of my favorite phrases because I think it's something that we can all get hung up on. And that is, you know, when you hear the word bias, people often think, oh, it's like, that sounds judgmental, and it's not. It is every single one of us have biases, and it's based on, you know, many of the things that you just said.

Right? Our culture, our politics, our religion, where we grew up geographically, economically, all the pieces. Right?

Matt (host): Yeah.

Heather Hester: And so by first off, acknowledging that that's not a statement of judgment. It's just a statement of fact. And once you're able to kind of let go of that judgment piece and allow yourself to begin to be really curious about, well, what did I grow up learning? And do those pieces still fit who I am now or who I'm wanting to be or who I'm growing to be? Right?

Because everybody's typically we're all growing throughout our entire lives. Right? We are learning. We are changing. That's kind of the hope is that we continue to evolve and grow.

And so being able to take that time to really think, oh, well, here's what I grew up with. Again, without judgment, just a statement of this is how I grew up. But that doesn't really align with my belief system now. How can I what do I need to learn or unlearn so that I'm more aligned? And when I think when we are able to look at it that way, it's a little more I mean, it takes the emotion piece out of it.

Right? It takes the you're, like, shaming yourself or judging yourself. It's just you being, like, really curious and like, oh, well, I can actually take this piece, and this doesn't fit anymore. But what do I need to learn and to get over here where I'm I'm moving and growing toward?

Matt (host): Yeah. Certainly, that's a theme we've seen on this podcast a lot is to approach approach your child's life with curiosity and not with judgment.

Heather Hester: Yes. Yes. Absolutely.

Matt (host): On the on those lines, what does healthy communication look like after a child comes out, and and how can parents create an environment where their child continues to feel emotionally safe?

Heather Hester: Yeah. That's so good. So I think the two biggest things, and these are pretty general, but they're they work, which is open ended questions and being curious. So really adopting that mindset of wonder. I wonder why they're doing that.

Can you share more with me? I don't really understand this. Can you help me understand? And you can practice the the many things that you're you know, if you just sit when your child isn't around and you think, what are the things that I don't understand? What is it that I I don't I just don't know and that I want to know?

And how can I ask that in a way that isn't that doesn't make my child feel cornered, judged, you know, backed into, you know, just backed into a corner, I guess, is the best way I can say that? I often you know, our one of the best things that can happen is for our child to come to us with things that they are dealing with. Right? Things something that's happened at school, something that's happened with a friend. And one of the things that we learned pretty early on in our process that my husband still loves to teach people is learning how to validate what our kids are going through.

Because in learning how to validate their experience, that not only does that show them that we are curious and opening open and wanting to learn about them, it also gives us a minute to kind of take in what they're telling us. Right? So when they come to us and say, this happened at school and it was, you know, blah blah blah blah blah, you can say, my goodness. That sounds like it was a lot, or that sounds like fill in the blank with an emotion. And doing that, it opens up the conversation, but it also opens up, like, ten, fifteen, twenty seconds for you to be able to breathe and kinda take in what they've told you.

Right? Then you can ask those questions. Right? You can ask those open ended questions. You can ask them in a way that lets them know that you really see them, that you really are hearing what they're saying to you.

And then after all of that, it can lead to a place where you can say, do you wanna know what I think about this? Would you like some advice from me? Are you just telling me this because you need to get it off your chest, or or do you do you want me to to weigh in? And just by asking that alone is gonna get you huge, like, parent gold stars. So that's one of my favorite favorite things to to share with parents.

Matt (host): Yeah. Is it okay for parents to admit when they're still learning about everything here?

Heather Hester: A thousand percent. Yes. Yes. My goodness. In fact, it really does it models to your child that you aren't not only are you not perfect, but you're always learning that we're even as adults, we are learning.

We're growing. We're wanting to become better versions of ourselves. So I think that it models so many so many beautiful things when you can say, oh, I don't know the answer to that, or I don't understand this. Can you help me understand? Huge.

Matt (host): Yeah. Yeah. For sure. So we spoke a little bit earlier about growing acceptance of LGBTQ plus youth. I know, certainly, I have two kids who are in their is now just finished college and their generation, if someone is gay or someone's transgender, it's it's a statement of fact.

It's certainly not any kind of shade on the the person that they are describing. Whereas I think in in my generation, it was, you know, sort of whispered behind backs and it was almost an insult to someone. But having said that, LGBTQ plus youth, they still face higher rates of anxiety, depression, bullying, and social isolation. So what are some of the ways that parents can actively protect and support their child's mental health?

Heather Hester: Absolutely. Yeah. So I think first of all, understanding that there's not a higher rate of that because they are LGBTQ. Right? There's a higher rate of that because of what they face in the world.

So even though, like you mentioned, yes, it is there's more overall there's more overall acceptance. They are still being hit every day, multiple times a day with things online, with comments, with and it doesn't even have to be directly toward them. It's in stories that they're hearing. It is you know, many of our kids are online. They're on social media.

They are so it is like this constant. It's like, you know, just like tiny little of of just knocking them down derogatory statements. So that information gets in there. And even if they're not actively hearing it, their subconscious is is registering it. Right?

So these are the things that it's really important for us to be aware of so that we can kinda counteract it with our language with being aware of their tells. Right? So their physical, do they speak a different way? Do they act a different way? Is their body language different?

Of really getting to know those really, really fine points of our children so we know when we need to step in and say, you know, whether it is just a hug from you. It is an extra, you know, just being there and listening, or if it is a step up, you know, from that and saying, hey. You know, do are you would you be interested in talking to somebody outside of me? Would you be interested in finding support group of other kids, you know, that are going through similar things? You know, there's a multitude of options available to you, but I think that is kind of the base of of just being aware.

Matt (host): Yeah. For sure. So sometimes the challenge extends beyond the immediate parent child relationship. And so how should parents navigate situations that involve extended family members who are not accepting? Schools, they vary in their ability to be accepting churches.

That's a huge problem in many cases. Or communities, other communities, sorts of communities that may not be supportive.

Heather Hester: Yes. Yes to all of the above. Yeah. And and I would say so my overall answer to this is twofold. It's uncomfortable, so we have to get comfortable as parents with being in a state of discomfort around these topics because it just does not feel good.

And the second part of that is learning how to set unapologetic boundaries, whether it is with a family member or a church. Sometimes that can look like you have within your family structure, within your your nuclear family, you make the rules of, like, this is what's acceptable. This is when it becomes not acceptable, and that is when we walk away from the church that we are in. That is when we say, hey. Listen.

I've asked you two times, three times to please use my child's correct name, my child's correct pronouns, to not make derogatory statements about queer people. You are not listening to me, so we can no longer come for fill in the blank. That's hard. I know that that is hard. I will also tell you that I have done that myself.

And so I'm not sitting here coming from a place of, like, you should do this. I am coming and it's it's not gonna come out of your mouth that clear either unless you've practiced it in the mirror a 100 times or you just are naturally gifted speaker, your stomach is gonna be doing flips and you're gonna be nervous and it's gonna feel just scary, but it's also one of the most important things you can do is to set that boundary because every single time your child's well-being trumps a family member, a church, a community, this is your child. And this is literally the one thing that we can control, which is their safety.

Matt (host): Exactly. Yeah. Absolutely. So for parents listening who may be struggling right now, they they love their child deeply, but they also feel very overwhelmed or uncertain about things. What's one thing you might want them to know or more than one thing?

I know it's hard to pick bear it down to one.

Heather Hester: Well, I think that, you know, if I had to pick one, it would be that you're not alone. And I know that sounds maybe trite or cliché, but I it is also probably the most common feeling of parents is that they are alone and that this does feel very, very isolating. And so I always feel like it's important to validate that you're not nuts for feeling isolated and for feeling like, is there anybody else around that's feeling, you know, going through this? That's so very real. And just for you to know that there there is community out there that's available to you.

There is support that is available to you. And I would be happy to support you or to point you in the direction of great support. I'm sure Matt and his organizations would be as well. So it is just, you know, taking that breath and saying, okay. I need to reach out and say, this is what I'm looking for.

This is what I need. And know that there are people out here who want to support you and want to just be in community with you.

Matt (host): Absolutely. And if an LGBTQ plus teen or young adult is listening to this episode right now, and we certainly hope they are, and especially someone who feels scared or misunderstood or very much alone, what might you want them to hear?

Heather Hester: That they are so loved. That they are so, so loved. And that they will find their people that just hang in there. You are wanted in this world and that you will, I promise you, find your people. It just might take a little bit longer, but you are so so loved.

Matt (host): Absolutely. So, Heather, as we wrap up, I think one of the most important reminders from today's conversation is this, and that is young people do not need perfect parents. What they do need are parents who are willing to listen, parents who are willing to learn, and parents who want to stay connected with them and to lead with love even when that path feels unfamiliar or very uncertain. Because when a young person feels accepted for who they truly are, it creates a foundation for emotional safety, resilience, and healing stability. So before we close, I'm I'm asking you for all these wrap ups here, but but is there one final takeaway you'd like to leave with our listeners?

Heather Hester: Sure. Sure. I would just offer again, it's very simple, but I think it I know that it works so well is just to take a really, really deep breath and know that there is support, that there is community, and that it is totally, totally okay to just embrace all of the messiness that's around you and to try to find that the beauty that's woven in there.

Matt (host): Absolutely. My guest today has been Heather Hester, author of Parenting with Pride and host of the podcast, More Human, More Kind. And you can learn more about Heather and her work at www.heatherhester.net. We will have links to her website and her titles as well in her podcast in our show notes for this episode. And if today's conversation resonated with you, please do share it with a friend, and don't forget to rate and review Nimble Youth on Apple Podcasts and Spotify because your support helps us to continue these important conversations around youth mental health, parenting, and connection.

Until next time, remember, the most powerful thing we can offer young people is the freedom to be fully themselves and still feel deeply loved. I'm Matt Butterman. This is Nimble Youth. We'll see you next time.