

Marjorie Aunos (00:03):

We all know that parenting is hard, so how do parents with disabilities do it? With creativity and because we know of the value of interdependence! Come hear about ways experts say we can best empower these families and let's all learn about how parenting can be done differently.

I'm your host Marjorie Aunos. And today my guest is Traci Laliberte. Traci is the Executive Director of the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare. She is a trailblazer with a vision and definitely wants to make a difference by supporting professionals who work in the Child Welfare system. She truly believes this will make the most impact for families.

Enjoy! And don't forget, for more information about where to find the full recording and additional resources, check out the show notes!

Marjorie (1:05):

I am so excited today. And I, I guess also a little bit sad because something comes to an end, but in the same time, so incredibly happy and, joyful that I had the privilege to spend this whole year with a whole bunch of my favorite people. And today, I end this wonderful journey with one of my favorite people, Traci Laliberte who is a scholar, but also the director of the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare. And without her, this project of this podcast and meeting, you know, over 20 scholars in the field of parenting and parents with intellectual and other disabilities would not have come to light. So I'm really excited, Traci, to have this conversation with you, in terms of like, where did it come from, and how we, we built this together. To me it was really important to have this sort of legacy, to be able to record scholars that made a difference in the field, but also in practice. Um, and you gave me that opportunity, and I really wanna thank you.

Traci LaLliberte (02:25):

Well, you're most welcome, and I'm really excited to be here. Thanks for having me today. And I agree with you, I think in some ways things can be sad when they end, and I think people say all the time, oh, but it opens the door. But I think in this instance, it's really true. It's more true than I, I can remember thinking about it in, in other situations because I think what you've been able to create, you know, in partnership with all these amazing researchers, is really a path for people to continue to collaborate and to build knowledge that really has the opportunity to affect incredible change in people's lives, the way that the profession operates and, the policy, actually the impact on policy that we, we can see in this. And so, I'm, I'm equally grateful to you,

Marjorie Aunos (03:14):

And it's interesting because today what we wanna spend is sort of like do a recap and outline some of them most, uh, salient themes, uh, that were covered through the years by different people. I was wondering if you know, there were a couple that you wanted to sort of showcase from the get go?

Traci LaLliberte (03:37):

Well, I, gosh, I don't know. It's hard to pick your favorite. I think that there are, I'm drawn to different podcasts that have been done for different reasons. You know, I've been doing this work in terms of research for over 20 years. And at the very beginning, right, there were a handful of us, and we knew each other really well. We'd go to a hotel and a conference, and there, you know, there were less than 10 of us. And I think about all the learning that I've done from Gwynnyth and how brilliant she was in her podcast, and how much I enjoyed listening to her. She was incredibly gracious to me a few years ago.

And my kids and I went and lived in Australia to be able to learn from her and to be able to really kind of observe her process and the work that she was doing at that time. Incredibly generous, mentor, and scholar that has paved the way for, for all of us.

You know, David and you, Maurice, of course, Liz Lightfoot, you know, all of those folks that were the early kind of group. And then as it has grown and we've met people or had the opportunity to learn about the research of people in all these other countries has been amazing. And they've all showed up in the podcasts. And so for that reason, I just loved all of them in different ways. But I do think that hearing from the kids, so hearing from Tammy and Beth and Lily, you know, I come from a place as a scholar where I feel like primarily my identity is a practitioner. I first started to identify issues of inequities for parents with disabilities when I was working in the field of child protection. And, and it is what drove me to become a researcher in this area. We all, and I loved hearing about everybody's kind of inspiration and origins. For me, it was practice. It's always been practice. And it's been that the system, the child welfare system, um, intent aside, has done a really, really bad job of providing services to kids and families. And I think that workers, professionals in the field need to hear from parents for sure. But they also need to hear from kids that, you know, this is, this is my life and these are my parents, and I love my parents, and my parents can do a good job. And together we make a family that might not look like your family. They might, we might not function like your family, but it doesn't mean that we shouldn't be a family or that we can't safely be a family. And I think that those are the voices that resonate with practitioners. So they're, they're probably the ones I gravitate to at the end.

Marjorie Aunos ([06:31](#)):

Yeah, totally agree. To me I think, you know, uh, if there was an after, um, Parenting Done Differently podcast or like a year two or whatnot, to me it would be, let's talk to children. They are the most powerful voices because at the ultimate or at the core, we all wanna do what we do for the children because we wanna make sure that they have the best life that they're safe, but that they're also feel that sense of connection to their family. I remember a conversation with Hanna and Jim, and Hannah was talking about this, uh, young man that, you know, had a family, and was taken away from that family.

And entered to the child welfare system, like many, you know, different families, and each family, he was okay and he was well taken care of, but he never connected, he never felt like he belonged to, you know, this group of people who were taking care of him. And when he turned 18, that's the first thing he did, was try to find his family of origin because of this yearning of wanting to belong to a group that you can call yours. And I think that story, to me was very powerful in terms of like, how can we do a better job, you know, to ensure that there's, you know, the kids are safe and they're well taken care of, but in the same time that we actually do something for their sense of connectedness and belonging.

Traci LaLliberte ([08:06](#)):

Well, I think that's really interesting because, you know, it's a phenomenon that we see across families with and without disability. There's all kinds of kids who grow up, um, especially in later years in the foster care system. And age out is a phrase that's often used and seek their family of origin. And, uh, you know, so I mean, I think it's another example of parents with disabilities or families who are headed by a parent with a disability are not different than other families. Their kids have different kinds of experiences, but some of those, you know, mental health needs, the permanency needs, um, the attachment, those are the same. And we have to be able to start building capacity within our workforce and our systems to do that work with all families.

Marjorie Aunos ([08:59](#)):

Yeah, a hundred percent. So there was definitely one theme where, um, there was a lot of criticism on

the system, um, and how, you know, even, you know, Robyn Powell would say like, we need to just completely abolish it and, and start over. She's not the only one. Hanna and Jim, Jim Rice and Hanna Bjorg Sigurjonsdottir's said similar things. But there's also like how to empower and how to ensure that services are in place. And that training is sort of in place. And we've had, you know, many different scholars sort of talk also about services and training. And I'm talking about Beth Tarleton, I'm talking about Maurice Feldman, I'm talking about Laura Pacheco <mm-hmm>. And so that notion of sort of empowering the system, but also sort of being critical of what works and doesn't work.

Traci LaLliberte ([09:52](#)):

That's really interesting. I feel like in some ways that's really the crux of my professional career is, you know, being an insider, so to speak, within the system, having worked in the system and now training people who work in that system. Um, you know, it is to be that grain of sand. It is to be that voice of, of discourse. I think what you're describing in terms of what Robin talks about is really abolition, right? There is a tremendous amount of conversation in the US about abolishing the child welfare system. Um, it comes largely from communities of color who are, um, horrendously disparate and disproportionately represented, and who have, you know, since the origins of slavery and beyond, really suffered family-wise at the hands of organized government systems. And I think parents with disabilities are positioned within that in the same way that we know parents with disabilities are disproportionately, um, present in the system.

And I understand, and there's part of me as a practitioner and an advocate for kids and family that feel like, yeah, we've tried to reform the system for decades and it hasn't worked. And so maybe, maybe the places to just have a different system, different process. I think systems beget themselves. And I don't know that whatever we came up with wouldn't end up aligning itself in unintended ways as well. I think there's transformationists, little bit different than reformists in the sense that they truly wanna transform the system, break it, change it, don't fix it, break it, and change it. And I, and I think that's probably where I align myself a little bit more, both in racial disparities, but also in terms of, um, disparities and disproportionality for, for parents with disabilities.

Whenever I do a presentation, I say, you know, I'm gonna come off really critical of the child welfare system and the professionals that work in the system, but make no mistake, these are my people. This is the system that I work in. I believe I, I've seen some horrendous things in my life and I believe that there is a need for some children to have those ultimate levels of protection. Absolutely. Does that mean that families can't come along with that? Or that there aren't families who are inappropriately looped into the system? All of those things are true at the same time. But for me, um, I think of it more as transformationist and not abolitionist.

Marjorie Aunos ([12:44](#)):

Yeah It's interesting cuz you bring a point that came up also in some conversations. Um, one that was to me, you know, transformational in terms of like, I love and I love talking to everybody, you know, I'm not picking favorites, but in this topic, um, she was just incredible. And that's, um, Ella Callow and when she talks about sort of, you know, even First Nations and how they're overrepresented, you know, in child welfare, and so multiple identities just make, you know, certain subgroups, marginalized communities sort of more at risk of being, you know, involved in the system in the first place or having a different outcome because services are not provided the same way. I felt, to me that was like fascinating and when she was talking about how First Nations, like how the child welfare in First Nations community sort of works differently and how, you know, it's intended to support the family and to work within the family, the enlarged family of origin, I think everybody would abide by those principle. And listening to other culture sort of brings that possibility in terms of, like you said, transforming the system in changing some of the things that don't work.

Laura Pacheco also talked about like different cultures and how even disability is represented and conceptualized in those different cultures and the importance to also sort of listen to that, sort of way of understanding something that for us is maybe seen as negative. And we've seen that in the podcast with some of the women who are women with disabilities and proudly so, um, and sort of changing sort of that view and, and trying to avoid getting into the ableism preconceived notions, uh, of it all.

Traci LaLliberte ([14:44](#)):

Yeah, it's, it, you know, gosh, it's so interesting to think about how all of these things come together in training too. Um, we've pretty recently in Minnesota, I work at the University of Minnesota, have partnered with our state agency to collaborate on a training system, new training academy, that goes statewide. It was really to overhaul all the new training for new social workers entering the field as well as existing and advanced training. And it's a position of tremendous privilege to be in, to be able to craft what that training might be. And it's also an incredible pressure because there are so many things that these people, these professionals need to know and to learn. And when I say that, I think, you know, imagine your, you know, 23 year old niece or kid is coming into the field and they suddenly need to be experts on everything. Experts on child maltreatment, experts on child development, experts on attachment, experts on substance abuse, experts on domestic violence, experts in mental health, experts in disability. Right? It's just not possible. And so you've got to be able to build resources that continue to enhance people's learning over time, while holding that foundation of recognizing your own bias. And that, of course is racial bias, but it's also our ableism biases and prejudice. And how do you weave that throughout training so that people don't, ... my big concern in training, and there's so many wonderful trainers out there that do a one and done kind of training, and people learn that and they think, oh, I can see that in my practice. And then they go back to their practice and it just kind of goes away. Or other people in their unit haven't had that training. And so it kind of just gets squeezed out over time.

And I think the real challenge for training in the field of child welfare, child protection is that disability knowledge is integrated throughout all of their training and experiences, just as it would be in terms of being able to work interculturally, being able to understand that there's a trauma lens at the base of everything that we do. Right, there are just some assumptions and some givens in the very foundation of what we do. And it's, it's how can we hold space for all of those things and keep moving forward? That I think is the real trick for all of us who are translating research to practice and who are doing training and education in formal ways.

Marjorie Aunos ([17:40](#)):

One of the things that I loved, you know, seeing in what you have done and, and what you've participated in, you know, in all those 20 years that you, you talked about that you've always found ways, like different ways, different medium to try to get sort of that training or that information to child welfare workers. Like for example, one thing that I, I remember the CW 360, that still happens, that still is published on a regular basis. You always found sort of that as, okay, this can be a tool where we're disseminating information, we're talking about the real stuff, but not just like the research stuff, the personal stuff, so that it's also sort of like real life examples. And I've always sort of really enjoyed the resources that you and your team have created because it's coming from the place of let's learn together and, let's apply together, you know, different ways of, of doing things. To try to see if there's a different outcome for, for those families.

Traci LaLliberte ([18:52](#)):

Yeah, I appreciate you saying that. I think training products is really the heart of the Center for

Advanced Studies in Child Welfare. So the CW 360 is kind of our flagship publication. And, and honestly it's been 10 years since we worked on an issue both for children with disabilities and a separate issue for parents with disabilities in child welfare. So perhaps we will, you know, update that and work with you, um, and some other folks to be able to really, um, make that a little bit more timely. The podcasts are another version of that, being able to, to reach people and to be able to have people access knowledge that they otherwise wouldn't have in a format that really works for the workforce. I think that's where we really are able to do our best work, is trying to identify what's the best way to get information to the workforce.

We also developed a set of flip cards. It was just, it was like a key ring and there were small, um, maybe three by five cards that were laminated. And each card had a different type of disability on it, and it talked about the disability real basic. And on the backside talked about, you know, how might you see this? Or how might you be working with people with this type of disability and child welfare? And so it gave that applied lens and they went like hotcakes. I think we were in our third printing of those because it's just a resource. You know, I might have a caseload that has a parent who has cerebral palsy and, you know, kids who have other kinds of developmental disability, and I just need a refresher. Or it's been 10 years since I had that case, and now I have somebody with a different type of disability. How can I, it's just a place to start getting more information.

I think we also had a product where we worked, I worked with Liz Lightfoot on this to be able to create some legislative template language, just a guide for how states in the United States could start to change, legislation and statutes that were old and antiquated and, discriminatory, to be able to move into a more supportive arena. So very practical applied things, like you said.

Marjorie Aunos ([21:08](#)):

Yeah. So there's a couple of things that I wanna, highlight in what you just said, but I, I will start with just finishing on certain themes because you mentioned, you know, the CW 360 on parents with Disabilities being 10 years old. And how the field might have evolved. And I think that is one thing that we've seen recently in the last, I I guess 10, 15 years in our field, we've seen some themes that have emerged that weren't there at the beginning. And certainly some of those themes were sort of anything related to prenatal birth conception, you know, postnatal period. And we've seen that with, you know, Monica Mitra and Hillary Brown, Leslie Tarasoff, uh, you know, talk about sort of like those periods and how important and crucial it is to support, you know, families at that stage.

And then another theme that emerged also, you know, in the last 10 years is this notion that you touched upon of trauma, the trauma lens and how like trauma can really impact parenting and anything that, you know, the research that had been done specific to disabilities and trauma, um, you know, with Tommie Forslund and and his team, to really look at that and sort of see that trauma is actually what impacted parenting way much more than disability did. And so those themes are really important and, and have emerged. So being up to date, uh, in all of those research is so important.

Traci LaLliberte ([22:49](#)):

Well, and I think where I want to see research continue in that area, cuz I think that you're right, in terms of the trauma is, you know, being involved in the system itself creates trauma. You know, in some of your talks, your TED talks certainly, and early YouTube talk you talked about just that panic of like, at any moment somebody's gonna come to the door, you know, and, and I don't think that we pay enough attention to what that then does and how that changes people's behaviors and responses to, um, you know, if I'm panicked all the time as a parent with a disability that something's gonna happen. Maybe I'm not letting my kids have all the experiences that I otherwise would have cuz I'm just so nervous I'm holding them so close. And I think that we do a disservice to people by not recognizing that when they

enter the system, you know, there are, at least in the US we've got certain timeframes that apply, be legislatively people will always say the clock starts ticking and there's a pressure to do things and to act and to respond in certain ways in certain timeframes. And none of that takes into consideration the trauma that a parent has experienced and the kids, of course, in care possibly. It might take a little bit, and by the way, you might need a little bit of support and service to get through that part before you can even reasonably engage with what you need to do to ameliorate whatever the situation is on top of traumas that you've experienced previously in life, domestic violence, sexual assault, um, extreme poverty, isolation, unemployment, underemployment, all of those things that really lead people to live, um, in those, uh, places of trauma.

Marjorie Aunos (24:39):

Yeah. I was thinking as you were talking, we do say we don't have our favorites, but I mean, the podcast with Gwynnyth was just priceless for me. Like it was just, oh, it was like candy. because she's such a beautiful narrator and telling teller of stories, that just brings you in and like, you know, like, just come on, I'm gonna show you. I'm gonna tell you about how it was or how it got, uh, started. But I was listening to you and I had a similar feeling where I was like, I love talking to Traci because Traci always sort of puts a spin. There's always something that makes me go deeper into the topic. And you're right, trauma is not just like the trauma that we've had necessarily in terms of, an assault or neglect as a child or whatnot. Trauma can also be created and caused, at the hand of the people who are trying to do a good job. Ddefinitely, I mean, I wanted to highlight that because when you were talking, I was like, yes, it happens. Even when we wanna do a good job, sometimes it creates a negative impact.

It tells me also of the power of one voice and how one story or one voice can really sometimes make a difference or, or leave a seed, you know, that can grow, in a particular context. And that brings me to the two moms that I, uh, interviewed in the podcast that to me, were meeting them over the years have been significant because they have shown me how to be proud to be a mom with a disability, and that there are great things that I'm teaching my son because I have a disability. Um, and that probably I wouldn't have taught him the same way. Maybe I would've taught him, but not the same way. And to me that was very empowering. So sometimes, you know, just one person can really make a huge impact on other people's lives. And so sharing those stories is so, uh, important.

Traci LaLliberte (26:47):

I think that's an important message for workers to hear too. The power of of belief, the fact that you believe in this person, that you believe that they can make the change that they need to make. To believe that they are capable whether it's to head this family or to be integrately, you know, connected with this family. Having somebody believe in you can absolutely make all the difference in the direction that a case takes. Without a doubt. I've seen it time and time and time again. When people believe in, in a parent and when people don't believe in a parent and the impact and the trajectory that that has, it's incredibly powerful.

Marjorie Aunos (27:34):

Yeah. And as you were talking, it made me think of, um, how Tammy Bachrach talks about her, her family and how, you know, I've heard so many times people say, oh yes, she loves her kids, but you know, and then they bring the disability status. And Tammy, when she was talking or when she is talking about her mom, she talks about her mom as being like, love itself, you know, to really sort of being there, um, and how powerful that was and how sort of the person who was the, you know, discipline and the structure and the provider in a way, you know, in terms of financial things was important to her, but the person who impacted her the most was her mom, who was love and who was caring and who was present and who was there, um, for her in those little intimate moments. And so there are many

different strengths in a family and a parent, but we should never underestimate the power of love and what that can do, in terms of supporting families and supporting children, um, to grow up.

Traci LaLliberte ([28:50](#)):

Hmm. You know, as I look back over the entire series, one of the things I think about is, like you were saying at the beginning in the origins, we got together and we were, people were really focused on what skills parents could be taught, parents specifically with intellectual disability and a lot of research and a lot of program development taking place in, in that regard.

And, and then we did move more into services and what's the system doing? And like you said, then Monika and folks started to come along really looking at prenatal, Hillary, looking at, um, the prenatal work. And what has struck me about this podcast series is that the way you've organized it, it's really brought together this comprehensive lens for all of these pieces have to be happening. All of these things are important in terms of moving us forward.

We cannot just train parents and then think there's gonna be success because there's systems issues. We cannot just fix the issue and then, you know, hope and pray that the parents can kind of work this out.

We have to provide services that are fair, assessments that are fair and equitable and, accessible. We have to develop services that actually meet the needs of the people that we're serving. I think about substance abuse. I mean, people with disabilities have substance abuse issues as people without disabilities have substance abuse issues. How trained and evolved are our substance disorder providers in working co-occurring disorders with an intellectual disability and a substance abuse. Very few, very few people are able to do that. So as we're looking at the services, particularly those traditional services that get utilized a lot in child welfare: anger management, parenting classes, I think we've got that one covered. You know, substance abuse issues, other mental health services and supports trauma. Where are the practitioners and, and is our work ahead of us to really look at how people are making modifications and accommodations within those service areas so that when we send parents for services, they actually get the services that they need.

I think that's an area we still have a lot of work to do, and I think that's multi-system cross-disciplinary work that is, it's amazing to be part of, it's time consuming. It's expensive, it's hard, and it needs to have the voice of parents at the center.

So I'm hope, I'm hoping that that's a direction that we, we move.

Marjorie Aunos ([31:45](#)):

Yeah. So part of like, um, each of those episodes when I was talking or conversations that I've had, there was always sort of like, and if there was one thing that you would say to child welfare workers, um, do you have any favorite answers that came through? I mean, I'm putting you on the spot, but,

Traci LaLliberte ([1:56](#)):

Oh, um, I, now, I can't remember who said it, but somebody was talking about, um, you know, paying attention and connecting with the parents. Maybe it was Susan Collins, but it was really about, you know, that the worker needs to be engaged and see the parents for who they are and then do the work with them. And if they aren't seen and you aren't connected to them right, then it's harder to get that work done. So I think that her hope was that people engage with parents who are, um, on their caseload and to really do the work with that parent and not just superficially manage a case.

Marjorie Aunos ([32:36](#)):

Yeah. One of the things that I was happy to see or to hear was that pretty much everybody said like, kudos for people who work in the system because it's, it is one of the most difficult job ever to do. because of, you know, sometimes lack of resource, lack of training, you know, the need for supervision and so forth. And just like working sometimes with families that have complex needs. And so that, you know, leads to what you just said in terms of we need to work with so many like different services and try to piece, an intervention plan that makes sense. And so I was happy that people were recognizing how these are the most dedicated people that work in the child welfare system and definitely sort of passionate about what they want, in terms of supporting, you know, kids and, and families.

So I think that that was one that resonated for me. And then there was a couple of different things. So like not judge the person, understand the context, to be careful of labels and the language we use, cause it might have an impact. And that sometimes we really need to think outside the box if there was like something that you would like to say to our listeners, to sort of close this, this beautiful year of wonderful conversations. What would it be?

Traci LaLliberte ([34:03](#)):

My greatest hope for the listeners is that what they're able to take away from this is hope. That there is a possibility to be able to serve parents, families headed by a parent with a disability well, effectively and safely. And that might have a myriad of different outcomes in how it looks. And that, as you said, we think outside the box that there's many possibilities. And that I want people to be able to be hopeful and be creative in thinking about that to believe in people. I think as a social worker, gosh, I want you to believe in people and that sometimes we have to look for answers where we least expect them. As researchers, how we ask questions, to whom we ask the questions and how we interpret that. And as practitioners, um, you know, the service or the plan that has worked for other people might not work here. Doesn't mean that you aren't capable of developing a very effective plan to work with this parent. And so for me, I think that those are the, those are the things it, I think it is a village. I think we are able to do this. I think it's gonna take many different people and, policy research and practice, it's the trifecta and all of them are really needed in this work as we move forward.

Marjorie Aunos ([35:36](#)):

Totally. To me the, the one thing, you know, that would, summon, everything is sort of collaboration and partnership, you know, and it's working together. It's also being aware of, you know, everything that was done prior. So to talk about sort of the legacy and how we can sort of bring that along and build something, and continue building, what we need and what these families need and what the system and the professionals as well. we can't do that on our own. We need to sort of have that team, that you so beautifully said, you know, in of it. It takes a village and it takes a village for, for everything and everybody in practice. Exactly. Yeah. So I think that that would be a beautiful way, um, to end actually the podcast by saying that everyone is welcome on our team and we want to collaborate and partner up. And I would say if you have ideas or if you know of something that's outside the box, please do share them, with us, through the podcast, there are links that you can connect with us and so we could continue that conversation cuz I would want this to just be sort of the first step of larger conversations that we continue to have all together.

Traci LaLliberte ([36:59](#)):

I agree. <So thank you.> It's, it's been a pleasure having you do this podcast for us Marjorie. It's really, it's one of a kind and I think that it has really created a pathway for us to be thinking, differently about how it is that we're going to communicate with each other and reach each other too as scholars and as



researchers, um, and translating that into practice for practitioners. So we're grateful to you.

Marjorie Aunos ([37:23](#)):

Well the pleasure was all mine cuz your team is just wonderful, everybody on that team and I'm very sad that I won't have those regular contacts with them. cuz they're so just beautiful. But they're a pure reflection of who their, their boss lady is, which is you: beautiful and thinker outside of the box that is you and collaborative. And so, thank you for the opportunity and I hope for all the listeners you listen and re-listen those podcasts as you need, and that you get all the information and the knowledge that you need to hear at that moment. So thank you so much.

Speaker ([38:00](#)):

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