

BUILDING RESILIENCE IN CHILDREN WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED COERCIVE CONTROL

Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of Flyingfreenow.com, and you're listening to the Flying Free Podcast, a support resource for women of faith looking for hope and healing from hidden emotional and spiritual abuse.

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 113 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I'm excited to have with me Dr. Debra Wingfield. She's an author and counselor with over forty years of experience treating adult children from dysfunctional families, child abuse victims, domestic violence victims, offenders, and child-witness victims. She also has over fifteen years of experience educating psychotherapists in small group trainings and university classrooms. She has presented conferences, workshops, and classroom courses in domestic violence intervention and treatment and addictions related to domestic violence, all of which are now available virtually. We'll provide links to several of her resources in the show notes if you go to flyingfreenow.com/113, which is the number of this podcast episode. Dr. Debra has also authored several books based on her education programs for adult children from dysfunctional families. She is currently authoring books on inner personal violence related to coercive control. Many of the processes in her books are incorporated into her training curriculums. Welcome, Dr. Debra!

DEBRA: Thank you, Natalie. I'm glad to be here.

NATALIE: Today we will learn from you about how to build resilience in children who experienced coercive control. I thought we'd start by having you define coercive control for us so we are all on the same page.

DEBRA: Coercive control is a pattern of oppression. It's an offense to liberty that prevents women from freely developing their personhood, utilizing their capacities, or practicing citizenship. The consequences are that they experience this as entrapment. That is from Evan Stark's book, "Coercive Control."

NATALIE: What I love about that definition is that when it says it prevents them from practicing citizenship... It takes away their autonomy; they can't even be a functioning citizen in society because of what is happening to them inside their homes. I think that's an interesting added thing we don't always think about. Since we are going to be talking about building resilience in children who are experiencing this coercive control, can you clarify what kinds of situations a child would be in where they would experience coercive control? Are we talking more about children of divorced parents who may

experience it in one parent's home — the abusive parent's home? Or is this something that can happen when the parents are still together as well?

DEBRA: It definitely happens when the parents are together, and it can continue after parents separate and children are going between their parents' homes. Let me take this a step further. They are experiencing seeing their mother being coercively controlled, and at the same time they are also experiencing themselves being controlled through loss of movement, loss of time, loss of the ability to be a person as well. That loss of citizenship that you were talking about also occurs for them, because they may be told they can't go out and play in certain sports. They can't do certain activities outside the home. They can't have friends in their home, or they choose not to have friends in their home because of the fear of how the coercive controlling situation may erupt at any time.

NATALIE: Plus, I've seen in different situations where the abusive parent has picked a favorite child but he or she is coercively controlling another sibling, so even that child with the favored child status is still watching the other parent being controlled or the other siblings being controlled. That still affects them as well.

DEBRA: That's very true.

NATALIE: What is a common question that safe mothers could ask their children to help their children protect themselves when they are going to be with the abusive parent?

DEBRA: They could say, "What can you do to make sure that you feel safe while you are in your other parent's home?" If the children say, "I don't know. I can't get away from him. I can't run next door." "Is there a way you can move to another part of the house to get away and get yourself some safety?" We're talking about emotional safety as well as physical safety.

NATALIE: I've experienced this. What happens if the child says that the parent will follow them wherever they go?

DEBRA: When that happens, then we have to help children find a way to be safe inside their head and to say, "I'm a good person. I can take care of myself. I can do these things myself." I have an example of that where a father was not allowing the children to go to the bathroom by themselves, not allowing them to bathe by themselves. We're talking about eight, ten, and twelve-year-old children where they should have privacy. I worked with one mom through talking with her daughter who was very uncomfortable with the father being in the bathroom with her when she was bathing. The mom said,

"Is there some way that you can lock the door so he can't get in?" She said, "Well, there is no lock on the door." She said, "What about putting a chair underneath the door handle?" The child could actually do that to keep herself safe.

NATALIE: That is really a sad situation. I love how you said that we have to teach them skills to be safe in their head, separating their own brain from the brain of the abusive parent who is pretending that the child belongs to them. It's a great concept that is hard to teach children, especially when you aren't there with them in the moment. Can we talk a bit about resilience?

DEBRA: Let's talk about what resilience is. It's a process of navigating through adversity where protective factors, both indirect and direct, internal and external, decrease the probability of negative psycho-social outcomes. I know that's a long definition, but I wanted to give people a real thorough definition. Navigating through adversity where they can find ways to protect themselves... One thing, if we go back to how children keep themselves safe even when the parent is hovering over them... I used to do a visualization with kids where they could imagine themselves in a room where they have control of the lock on the door, and they can keep anything out of the room that doesn't pertain to them, that isn't about them, or that really is about that parent. When we are teaching protective factors and resilience skills, we are teaching children not only ways to think about things, but to use their imagination to put themselves in a safe space.

NATALIE: What are resilience skills? Can you give a couple examples of those?

DEBRA: Some resilience skills would be being able to say, "No," or being able to say, "I don't want to do that. I don't have to do those things." We have to help children know how to be discerning about that.

NATALIE: Right. I'm thinking that, depending on the parent, they might get some kickback if the parent perceives they are talking back or not being cooperative, obedient, or whatever.

DEBRA: Let me give you an example. I have a two-year-old who lives across the street from me. I was over babysitting her the other day. I asked her something and she said, "No!" She was very empathic, and we know two-year-olds can be very emphatic. She said, "No. I don't want you to do that." If I were an abuser, I would probably be all over her. Instead, I accepted that she had a right to say, "This is my body. I don't want you touching my body. I don't want you doing that to me right now," even though it was for her own good. I had to find a way to distract her to change her diaper, which is where

we were at.

NATALIE: A necessary thing.

DEBRA: I had to do a necessary thing, but I could do it in a way that respected her ability to say, "I want my own space." When children are denied their own space, in their heads they might create imaginary friends or even do some dissociation, which we get concerned about, because then they are leaving the scene emotionally or physically. We want to teach them how to stand up for themselves in a way that makes sense for their age. So talk about what you are feeling instead of acting out what you are feeling. What we see a lot of times from kids who come out of coercive, controlling homes is that they will tend to want to hit, kick, and lash out physically. What parents can do is teach their children to express what they are feeling: "Sit down, take two minutes to take some deep breaths, then tell me what you are angry about. Tell me what you are frustrated about," instead of hauling off and hitting a kid because the child lashed out at the parent. That doesn't help a child. What it does is teach him that hitting is okay.

NATALIE: Right. I think these particular listeners, many of them are moms. Many have been homeschooling moms and were raised in these conservative little bubbles where we were taught that we had to control our kids. That our kids had to line up in a little row at church and be quiet in the pew. There is a lot of pressure on moms to make sure that their kids are controlled, so even moms who are not abusive... I realized, as I was getting out of my own abusive situation, how I really had not taught my kids how to stand up for themselves. I taught them inadvertently that it was better if they were just submissive, didn't argue, and simply did what they were told.

Fortunately, I have some... I don't know, maybe my kids are just like all kids. My kids are pretty rambunctious, despite my control. But I did let up more and try to approach it more by allowing them to be who they were and to have the space to share what they are thinking while still maintaining boundaries and still trying to provide guidance and direction for them. When you are getting out of this whole abusive situation, it's very confusing to figure out what to do. "How do I parent? What's the best way to parent, because I think I've been doing it wrong this whole time? I don't want to go the opposite way where I'm just letting my kids do whatever they want to, either." I think this is an important discussion to have, because I think teaching our kids, even kids who aren't in an abusive home... We all need to learn resilience skills because we will need those skills when we go into real life. How do resilience skills help to provide protective factors to children?

DEBRA: They help children find their own selfhood separate from their parent. They

learn to be discerning of people who are around them. They are less likely to get into an abusive relationship as an adult or to become an abuser because they know who they are. Some of those factors we want to develop are social competence. If our children have been locked in the house with only their siblings and those are the only people they know how to get along with, then when we get out of those relationships, it's important to put our children in social situations where they can develop social competency skills. They can develop communication skills. They can learn to regulate their emotions. They can see success because they do something, not because they are forced to do it until they do it perfectly.

NATALIE: Yes, that's really good. I want to encourage those of you listening who may feel like I felt when I was coming out of this. I felt very defeated and like I had failed my kids. I had nine children. The first four were only homeschooled, and the other ones were put in private school. Now the ones still at home are in a mix of public school and private school. But the older ones, a couple of them, felt like they did not get the skills that they needed to go out into the world and interact with people in the ways that they really wanted to. They had to learn those skills on the fly once they graduated, went to college, and started intermingling with more people than just the people in our church and our homeschool circles. It has been difficult, especially for one of them.

It is easy for moms to think, "I didn't do what I needed to do," but our kids have their own life experience. Our mistakes — the mistakes that we made — were not intentional mistakes. All kids grow up in homes with parents who are imperfect and make mistakes, even those who aren't growing up in abusive environments. That's just part of the human experience, so we need to let that go. But we also need to look at any children still left in the home and ask, "How can I do it differently? How can I build some of these resiliency skills? How can I set some of these protective factors in place for these children who are still here?" It's not too late to do that. I have been able to do some of that with my younger children. It's been so helpful, and you can see the difference. I can see the difference in their lives compared to my other children when they were that age. There is a lot of hope there. We are all learning. We need to learn how to build resiliency skills in ourselves too, and re-parent ourselves as former victims of abuse. What is the importance of children learning these protective factors?

DEBRA: As they go out into the world, they must learn to get along with all kinds of people: Their co-workers, bosses, even people at the grocery store. We run into all kinds of people every day in our lives. We must gain that social competency and emotional intelligence to know what is what. I will go into the store just intending to pick up a prescription and get out of there. The next thing I know, the pharmacist says, "We don't have it ready yet. It will be about twenty minutes." Now, I could sit there and

have a temper tantrum right there in front of the pharmacist, or I could say, "Okay, that's good. I have a couple of errands to run. I'll be back in thirty minutes." So it is learning how to roll with life, almost.

I want to go back, because I know when I came out of my first relationship that was abusive, what I did... I didn't know good parenting skills. Because of where I was in my educational training, I was asked to teach a class on parenting. That was probably a gift to me that I didn't realize I was being handed, because I learned to teach my daughter to live with logical and natural consequences. There are multiple parenting programs that teach that. When I started parenting her that way, things smoothed out for us and things smoothed out for her in her life. She came to me when she was eighteen and said something to me. I thought, "Oh my goodness! My words were parroted back to me." She said, "I know mom. I messed up, and I have to do A, B, and C in this situation." I said, "Yeah, you're right." But she learned because that was a consistent parenting model. What I would say to parents, whether it is "Love and Logic," "Active Parenting," or any number of parenting programs that teach logical and natural consequences, be consistent, and that consistency will flow through. It will take your children much further in not only protecting themselves, but also being resilient and being able to bounce back when bad things happen.

NATALIE: Would that be more like saying, "Here are the boundaries or the ground rules. You are free to violate them if you want to, but if you do, here are the natural consequences that will probably happen if you do that. You have to take responsibility for your choice." Is that kind of what you are talking about?

DEBRA: That is what I'm talking about. When we teach children to be responsible for their choices, then we don't have abusers who blame everybody else for their own actions.

NATALIE: Right! Yes! That hits the nail on the head. It is basically telling your kids, "You are responsible for your choices. I'm not going to control you. I'm not going to force you or make you do what I think would be best for you. You get to decide, but just know that if you decide to go down this route, there are going to be consequences. When you go out into the real world and decide to break the law, you will probably end up in jail. Bummer, but that's just the way life works." I love that.

The wonderful thing about that is that it frees the parents to feel like they don't always have to... I didn't want to control my kids. My ex-husband wanted (and he still does) to control everything they say and do and how they look. He wants to control it all. He has to have complete control of what's around him, but all that does is teach them to be

afraid of him. It doesn't teach them to want to do what is right. It's also draining. As a parent, when I was in that mode of thinking, I had to make sure my kids were always doing the right thing. It was so exhausting, because you simply cannot control other human beings all the time. You can't do it. It's not possible. You're pulling your hair out and banging your head against the wall trying to do something that is not possible anyway. It is so freeing emotionally. When you are freed up, when you just lay the ground rules and then come at it with a sense of love and freedom, your relationship with the kids is much healthier as well.

DEBRA: Yes, it is. It has long-lasting connections with your children.

NATALIE: The last question I want to ask you, and maybe you can tie this up in a little bow, let's say some moms (or even dads) who are listening want to teach their children protective factors. How can they do that? Do you have resources they could go to so they can learn these kinds of parenting skills? Or do you have certain things you recommend?

DEBRA: One thing the Lutheran churches in Minnesota did... Since you're from Minnesota, I'll tell you about this one. They supported a project by the Search Institute. You can look online for Search Institute. They did studies of children to see what assets they had that helped them get through life. The more assets that they had, the better their lives functioned. That provided those protective factors and resilience factors. They came up with eight primary developmental assets — four external and four internal. There are all kinds of exercises that they have on there as well as what parents can do to instill those assets in children. One thing is having relationships with other healthy adults. When we move into a neighborhood, we get to know the kids around us, because those kids are less likely to do anything to damage our property because they have a relationship with us.

NATALIE: Love it!

DEBRA: Building in that self-motivation to want to reach their own goals is an internal asset. Instead of having mom and dad hovering over them saying, "You will get straight A's," the kids want to learn. They have an internal desire to learn. I have to say, at my age, that internal desire to learn is still very active. I believe that I'm a lifelong learner, and it's because of that asset that was instilled in me as a youngster to learn and grow and explore. So we want to build some assets in our children. I like the work that Search Institute did, because I think it brings this all together for kids.

NATALIE: Okay. I'll do some research and put some of that in the show notes. If you are

listening, flyingfreenow.com/113 (this episode's webpage) is where I will put what I find. Actually, I do have one more question. Why don't you tell us a little about what you offer on your website that these listeners may be interested in knowing about?

DEBRA: We are now in our third year training offering for advocates who want to work with moms who are coming out of abusive relationships — these coercive, controlling relationships. We have now trained upwards of two hundred advocates, and during this year we've added two hundred advocates who are going through our training program. They are learning how to walk alongside women who may either still be in these relationships, are just getting out of them, or are maybe going through family court to have someone they can talk with confidentially and to work with them. That is our advocacy training program. We are encouraging people to get involved and to help us. When I say us, I am talking about Joy Forrest from Called to Peace Ministries who asked me to do this training, because she and I want to build an army of advocates who are out there walking alongside women and helping them through the craziness that is going on in the family court system.

NATALIE: Yes! I love that! I want the same thing. I know there are many people listening who want to do that. I just got an email from someone the other day who asked, "Where can I go to get some training? I just want to help women, and I need some training." I gave them your information. It's very exciting. I think God is doing a new thing, and it's powerful and amazing. It's been great to have you on the podcast. I really appreciate your time and that you were willing to come share your expertise. For those of you listening, thanks for joining us for today's episode. Until next time, fly free!