

## RAISING RESILIENT KIDS EVEN IF YOUR CO-PARENT IS DESTRUCTIVE: INTERVIEW WITH JESSICA NAGY

*Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of [FlyingFreeNow.com](http://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 233 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today we have a special guest. Her name is Jessica Nagy, and she is a trauma support specialist, an NLP master coach, and the founder of Mosaic Motherhood. And today she's here to talk to us about how to raise resilient kids even if your co-parent is destructive. So welcome, Jessica.

JESSICA: Thanks, Natalie. I'm happy to be here.

NATALIE: Okay, why don't we start by having you tell us about your story and why you started Mosaic Motherhood.

JESSICA: So a few years ago I was sitting in church one Sunday and the rows were packed, and up on the screen a father was swinging his little boy around like Superman. And I remember thinking, "I wish I had that. I wish my kids had that." I was surrounded by people, tears streaming down my face. No one offered me a tissue or even bothered to ask if I was okay.

NATALIE: Wow.

JESSICA: And I was, again, surrounded by people, but the loneliest I had ever been. And fast forward a few months, I remember imagining myself on the freeway, pressing my foot against the gas, lifting my hands off the wheel, embracing for impact. I fantasized about driving my car off the road, but there were three reasons I didn't: an eight-month-old boy, a three-year-old girl, and someone I could call on to drive. And so that portion of my story and those reasons why I didn't make a poor choice, what catapulted me towards getting safe and getting healthy and stronger... And I don't know that I ever would have done it just for myself. So I can say with a lot of conviction that my children saved my life.

And when I finally decided to separate and ultimately divorce, I decided it was my turn to save theirs, but there weren't a lot of resources available for my kids. There were tons of resources available for me, and I had great ones. I felt like I had a great support group. But there was that piece that was missing, so I decided that I needed to create those resources, and that's how Mosaic Motherhood was born.

NATALIE: Okay, now I'm curious, though: So is your program for kids, or is it for mothers?

JESSICA: So it's for moms who want to empower their kids. The problem with being in a destructive relationship, as you know, is that whether we stay or we leave, our children don't often have the option whether or not they can be safe. They may have to continue going back into that destructive environment, whether that's court-ordered or because we have chosen to stay. And so I want to empower moms to give the kids their tools to be able to go back into that environment and not be detrimentally impacted by it.

NATALIE: Wow, that is incredible. There is a need for that out there. I've never seen anything like that. That's amazing. Okay, well, let's have this conversation. Now my mind is exploding with other questions.

JESSICA: That's okay. You can go rogue. I don't mind.

NATALIE: Let's talk about the idea of kids being resilient because we do hear that, but I'm curious to hear what your thoughts are about that.

JESSICA: Yeah. So I actually hate when people say, "Oh, kids are resilient. They'll be fine," because they're not. At least they're not born with it. If they were, then none of us would be messed up because of our origin story or our childhoods. And I don't know about you, but that certainly isn't true for me. And I've spoken to way too many people who have had difficult or even fairly normal childhoods with a few moments of difficulty, let alone coming from a destructive family system — that is going to affect them.

However, resilience can be built. And that's where I come from. That's where I feel like we need to shift the narrative without saying "Kids are resilient." We can say, "I'm helping my children become more resilient."

NATALIE: That's beautiful. Okay, so women who are getting divorced, a lot of them that I've talked to, they kind of have this idea that they can fight for custody, and I had this idea too. "Well, I'll just fight for custody and I'll get as much custody as possible and minimize the amount of time that they're spending with their dad and in that destructive place." But the reality is, it's usually 50/50. Usually, people are awarded 50/50 unless they've got documented evidence or a restraining order or something like that.

But I know that a lot of women will come into my program and even talk about that. "Well, I'm going to fight for full custody of my kids." And I feel terrible telling them, "You're probably not going to get that." But that's how they think that they can protect their kids. Then when they face the reality of the fact that they're probably not going to get more than 50% custody, now what? Some of them might even decide, "I don't think I can get divorced, then, because I'm not going to..." Their mentality is, "I've left. I'm leaving the den of vipers, and now I'm just leaving my children behind in that terrible place."

JESSICA: It does feel like that sometimes, yeah. I actually tend to counsel women away from that because like you said, "Well, that's what I thought." Well, how'd that work out for you? Yeah, exactly. And that typically, again, unless there is documented, and a pattern of documented evidence, hard, physical abuse or sexual abuse or something like that... And sometimes even when there is, the courts are not trained to see emotional, psychological, covert abuse, and although they say "best interest of the child," it's really parent's rights.

And so if a woman was to go in and say, "Oh, I'm going to fight this big fight..." And I have seen women spend five, ten, upwards of ten years fighting the same fight, which is half of a childhood. And how much money would have been spent in that fight? So I tend to tell women that's not really the best allocation of your resources.

NATALIE: Well, and it's not just money. It's the best allocation of your mental and emotional energy too.

JESSICA: Yes. So when I consider resources, I consider time, your energy, your emotion, your emotional strength. If you remove all of that, if you already know that the bottom line is, "The worst that can happen is 50/50," and you strategize to move up from there, anything above that is a positive, and you can work then and spend all of those financial resources, energy resources, time resources, instead on preparing your children and teaching them how to go back into that destructive environment, how to build their resilience, and how to know when to speak up and how to speak up depending on their ages.

NATALIE: Yeah. That's incredible. Okay, so how would you define resilience then — that's a big question — and how do we do it? How do we give that to our children?

JESSICA: Well, I could define it very simply and say that it's a continual moving forward from where we are now towards the ability to come against the adversity and the difficulties that we're all going to face and not get overwhelmed by them. So an even

simpler way to say that would be, resilience is the ability to regulate in difficult situations. So how do we? Emotional regulation. And emotional regulation is the keystone for what I do and how I help moms to teach their children. And it's something that's really not taught very often. At least, I didn't even hear the word until I was an adult.

And the other day I was speaking at a conference and I was in a room with one hundred women, and I asked them to raise their hand if they learned how to regulate emotionally as a child. And I think there were maybe three or four hands. I said, "Keep your hands up if you were taught." And I think there was one woman who continued to have her hand up. And so we need to be better about giving these tools to our children, and it doesn't have to be hard. It really doesn't.

NATALIE: Wow. They should be doing this... Have you ever thought about going into schools?

JESSICA: I have.

NATALIE: They should be doing this in schools.

JESSICA: I totally agree. I wish more schools were trauma-informed, but everything that I've heard and read and experienced in my own children's schools indicate that that is a long time coming.

NATALIE: That's absolutely crazy because it could totally change everything.

JESSICA: Absolutely.

NATALIE: So how do we teach our kids then to regulate their emotions, especially when they're in these situations that are highly... Some of them are maybe not volatile physically, but definitely emotionally volatile. And then we're Christians. So how do we do it from the idea of Christ? He was put in the middle of very volatile situations with big emotions. How did He do it? I talk about this too. I talk about this with women. Jesus walked through this chaotic, crazy world, and He was somehow this steady rock of a person full of love. It wasn't like He was emotionless. He had emotions, but He was able to maintain a sense of regulating His emotions. So tell us about that.

JESSICA: I love this question, Natalie, because I looked at the life of Jesus, and what I found was in the book of Matthew there are several examples that we can take on how He taught His disciples and how we can use that as a basis to teach our kids.

And so I created this four-step model, and I use the image of a square with arrows going around the square because nothing's ever complete. And the first step would be to model it for them. And Jesus, the first thing He says to His disciples is "Come, follow me. I will teach you to fish for men." He's not expecting them to join the bandwagon and know what to do. He's not expecting them to jump right in and get in the mess and make a ton of errors and probably go the complete opposite direction that He wants them to. He invites them just to watch.

And so emotional regulation starts with us. It starts with us being able to understand when we're in a difficult situation, when we're triggered, and how our body best responds to come back to a more even state.

And before I continue, let me just say that regulation is not emotional flatline, because I think that would be dead or overmedicated. Regulation is more like a gentle wave or like the thermostat in the house where you set it at 72, and it may go up to 74 and then fall back down to 70, but overall, the average would be that 72. So when I say "regulation," that's what I'm sort of speaking on. There is a word for it — I don't really love it — homeostasis. It kind of sounds like a big technical term, so I don't tend to use it. But that's what Jesus showed His disciples. He showed them. He had the tools and techniques, and He just invited them to come along for the ride and watch.

But then what He did next is He shows this incredible example of co-regulation, which is step two. Step two is to co-regulate, and that is, "I lead — we do it together." And the example that I see in the Bible is when Jesus is out on the boat and He's sleeping, and His disciples are freaking out because the storm's coming. They're completely dysregulated. They're like, "Lord, wake up! We're going to die! We're going to drown! How can you be sleeping?"

And Jesus shows us this incredible model. He says first to them — He addresses their dysregulation first — He says, "Why are you afraid?" He says, "You of little faith," which is probably not a great thing to say to your kids, but it was Jesus, so we're going to let it slide, right? He said, "Why are you afraid? I'm with you." And that's what co-regulation is all about. It's about being with. And then after He has been with and shown them this, speaking to them, then He calms the storm. Then He calms the circumstances.

And we can do the same thing with our kiddos. We can come alongside them. If they're little, we can hold them, wrap them in a bear hug, put them on our lap. And our breathing and our heart rate will allow their brains to mirror, and their breathing and their heart rate will begin to match. And you can even do this in between a door — because teenagers — so even if you're not in the same room... Ideally, yes, but

sometimes they don't give you that opportunity. Your presence, your simple presence, regulated, will help them begin to regulate as well. And that's what we see in Jesus.

And so then the third step would be coaching, which is, "You're going to do it, and I'm going to help you." And this is when we see Jesus feed the 5,000. The disciples again are dysregulated. "Jesus, we're hungry. Can you send these people away so we can eat?" That's not what they say, but that's how I see it. I'm kind of like, "Dude, I need to eat. Get rid of these people so I don't have to share." But He says, "You feed them." He's inviting them to step into the leadership role, but He knows that He's already modeled, He's already helped them, and now He is going to send them out to figure it out with the tools He has already given them, and He still continues to do His part. He blesses the food. He still continues to aid them with the things that they cannot do on their own.

And then the final step would be observe. And that's basically, "I'm going to watch and you're going to do it on your own." And when this step happens, it's so beautiful. And we see Jesus send them out with the Great Commission, right? "Go make disciples by baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." And we can send our children with tools, with practice, with a safe home base, out into difficult situations, whether that's a tough kid at school or a teacher that's kind of harsh or their dad's house or even grandma and grandpa, because I know some of us don't have perfect parents. And even in our own homes, we can watch them use those tools and we can be there to point out, "I saw you using that regulation technique." "I saw you take that deep breath." I saw you use 'The 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.' You did an awesome job. I'm so proud of you."

And then, unfortunately, it sometimes starts over, because kids have different stages and they have different circumstances. So what works in one circumstance for one kid may not work in the same circumstance for another child, and then the same kid who had that thing work for him is going to encounter another situation where it's not going to work. So we're never finished. It's always a continual cycle, but that's what I see Jesus showing us.

NATALIE: Yeah, that's amazing. So can you give us some examples of maybe some of the things that you've taught your kids that maybe the listeners could go out right away and kind of implement that in their own families?

JESSICA: Yeah, absolutely. So I would say, again, all of this starts with modeling. So something that moms can do is begin to train your own sensory awareness. What are you observing around you? Just stop a few times a day and name a few things that you

can see. Stop and listen to, “What are the noises that I can hear around me?” For myself right now, I'm aware that my computer is making this humming noise and my cat is doing I have no idea what over in the corner and I have a kid's rock tumbler outside that I can still hear, but all of those things are grounding me in the moment and in myself.

And then I can think, “Okay, what am I feeling right now? Not just in my emotions, but in my body?” Bessel van der Kolk writes this great book called “The Body Keeps the Score,” and it's so true. There are so many ways where if we can get into our bodies, we can begin to bring ourselves into a more regulated state. And I define regulation as that connection in the present moment and with myself. And so things as simple as splashing water on your face or taking a time out to do some breathing, doing the noticing exercises.

And then in co-regulation, it's going to work the same way. Again, that hug that you have for a little child who will allow you to hug them, sitting back to back or on the other side of a door with a teenager. There are some amazing tools that you can do that bring a child to sort of an arousal state, so like jumping jacks or running up and down the stairs. And then you can bring them down into a more relaxed state and have them lay on the floor. And all of that is timed. Or jumping on the trampoline or blowing bubbles.

And for little kids, my kids used to love this technique where one hand would be the bubble solution and then one finger would be the bubble wand, and as they inhale, they're dipping the wand into the solution and then they're blowing the bubble on the exhale. They used to really like that. They also used to really like “The 5, 4, 3, 2, 1” or sensory countdown technique where, “What are five things that you can see that are blue? What are four things that you can hear? What are three things you can feel, two things you can smell, and one thing that you can taste?” And bringing them into that, it's so quick to connect them in that moment.

And then there are more advanced techniques that I teach such as anchoring, which is basically creating a trigger, but positive. So anchoring in something that's a positive emotional state rather than a state of dysregulation — a state of regulation to feel peace or happiness or something like that.

NATALIE: So what have you seen in your own kids — I'm just curious — how have you seen them change and grow as they learn these skills and then still go into their dad's home? Can you talk about that a little bit?



JESSICA: Yeah, absolutely. So my daughter is my oldest, and so she is the one who was around more of the dysfunction before I left. And I will also say that my ex has improved his ability to parent. Well, to be around them and keep them alive on his time. I'm not so sure I would like to use the word "parent," but he has improved. Apparently we're not great together, and I was not one of those women that just silently stayed submissive. I was always sort of pushing back, and so that didn't help. But my daughter is the oldest and so she saw a lot more of it. She has a lot more of the effects that occurred prior to my realizing and being able to work with her.

But there's an example of this technique that I did with her called "The Swish" and she had experienced a really scary moment when dad took her to a public event — and it wasn't even anything that was intentional or specifically abusive. It was just neglectful on his part, and she was really affected by it. So I taught her how to do this technique, and the first day she said, "Oh yeah, thanks, mommy. I feel better." And she was able to go to sleep that night because prior to that she had come home and she really was afraid to fall asleep because she kept saying, "Every time I close my eyes, I see this image of remembering this time."

And so a few weeks later she came back and she said, "Mommy, when I was at Poppy's house, I remembered this image. This image kept coming up, and I was asking Poppy if I could call you. And he was saying 'No.' And so I told him that I was going to teach him how to do..." Or I think he asked, actually. To his credit, I think he asked. He said, "Doesn't your mom have this thing that she does with you? Teach me how to do it." And so she taught him. I have very low expectations as to whether or not he's ever going to use that with them. But she, in teaching him, used it for herself and was able to bring herself down from that trigger.

NATALIE: Wow. That's amazing.

JESSICA: And my son, I call him my emotional regulation rock star because he was only two when I left. And my favorite story about him was we were in JoAnn's and it was Christmas time, and we were picking out little things to make a wreath. And he was still a toddler, and he's walking around until such a point as he's put too many things in the cart. And so I said, "Okay, if you put one more thing in the cart, you're going to have to sit in the cart." Well, of course, he put one more thing in and he was not happy when I put him in that cart. And I was thinking, "Okay, he's throwing a fit." I'm really not the kind of mom who gets super embarrassed about that kind of stuff, and we were done anyway. So I thought, "Well, from here to the cash register, it's not a big deal."

So I just pushed and I sort of had my arms around him and I was breathing and he was



wailing. And then all of a sudden we're down the next aisle, and I hear him more than see him because I'm holding him, and he makes these big, shuddering breaths. And he was taking those big, deep breaths that I had taught him to take. And it had just been a matter of months between the time that I taught him and the time he was able to apply that to his life as a little, little kid.

NATALIE: Wow. That's incredible. So, is there anything else that moms can do to help their kids?

JESSICA: Community. I'm a huge proponent of community. The problem with leaving a destructive relationship where your children have to continue to go back into the dysfunction is that inevitably, when you speak truth to them, the other parent is going to have their version of truth that they're speaking to them as well, and it creates this gridlock.

So I always tell moms, you need the proverbial village to raise your kid because it's not enough for just you to be speaking into their lives. You need safe, other adults to speak into them as well, to back up your truth. And, of course, when they get to be preteens and teens, they're not going to want to hear it from you anyway. So they have this pattern, then, of safe adults that they can turn to that will say the same thing that you had said if they had given you a chance. So I am a huge proponent of building community. I have seen that be possible online, and I have seen even those child-to-adult relationships be possible through a virtual situation as well.

And that is one of the most powerful things that you can do first for yourself, because if you have a safe person to talk to, to vent to, to cry to, you are going to be more likely regulated when they come home and able to receive them than if you don't have that person to talk to, and so they will also have that if that's the only thing they have. They will have that residual effect. And then the potential is so much greater than that.

And unfortunately, I know that the church is supposed to do this. We, as a body of believers, are supposed to be coming around each other and doing life together. But I see that being put into a box of, "Well, we have this small group on this day of the week," or "We have this Bible study on this day of the week," or "My kids go to camp," or "My kids go to youth group," and it doesn't necessarily become doing real life together. It's a specific section. And that's where I encourage women to grab a girlfriend and your kids, and if you both have to go to Target, go to Target together. Or I have ladies in my group who every single night, they have a Zoom call to pray together. They put that together on their own.

NATALIE: That's amazing.

JESSICA: The power of that, aside from the power of prayer, that level of community is incredible. And the number one indicator of a child who has experienced trauma, even in the ACEs study, childhood trauma study, the number one indicator of an improved resilience and a better life at the end of childhood is one safe and caring adult, and the number two indicator is a safe and caring non-parent adult.

NATALIE: Oh, I'm so glad you said that because I feel like, especially in the Christian communities, at least in mine... I was in these really uber-conservative circles where everyone homeschooled. We actually thought that — or at least I did, and I think a lot of my friends did too at the time — we actually thought that people on the outside would hurt our kids or would instill lies into our kids. So we really isolated our kids a lot.

And as I've loosened... I've had kids now graduate from public school and private school, and we've done the whole nine yards now. But as I grew out of that and reached out and got therapists involved and the county health services involved and all these different people were starting to get involved in our family, I did see that. My kids started getting really good information and help from lots of different adults. And that has totally made a difference in their lives.

And they'll go to dad's house and they'll hear the old things that I used to believe, they'll hear that being parroted, and they won't argue with their dad. They've kind of learned how to just pacify him and just kind of go along with it — a little bit patronizing, probably. They just put up with it, but they know, "Okay, that's just one perspective, but I have the perspectives of so many other wise people. There's not just one person that can give me truth. There's a lot of people in my life that can give me truth."

And then the other thing too is that a lot of people I'm seeing, especially if they go through divorce, suddenly they're treated differently in their church. Mom's treated differently, and then the kids don't get the support that they need because other people... I know my older kids said, "Yeah, as soon as you guys separated, people looked at us different. I felt like I was a bad person even though I had nothing to do with your and dad's divorce, but I felt like I was treated differently and was a bad person." So sometimes you can't always find that in your church community, although I have noticed that if you go to a different church that is not familiar with the whole dynamic, a different church will somehow welcome you and they'll love to have you there, but maybe the original church will not be able to do that. And then the last thing I want to say... Oh, I'm sorry. Did you want to jump in here?

JESSICA: Oh, I was just going to say that churches don't do well with that transitional period.

NATALIE: No, they don't.

JESSICA: They're good with marriage and they're good with once you've already been divorced, but all of that messy middle — they don't know what to do with it. And I actually stopped going to church in the messy middle, which was a great step for me. My kids and I have more spiritual conversations about Disney movies than we ever had after a church service.

NATALIE: Oh yeah. God is everywhere and in everything. Yeah, and then the last thing I want to just draw attention to is your point that you made that even if a child has just one person... And I think it's Peter Levine who says that "Trauma happens in the absence of an empathic witness."

So to help our children heal from trauma, there has to be an empathic witness of some kind, and we're that person. But I do think that our own personal work on ourselves is we have to be an empathic witness for ourselves too, and also see God is our empathic witness and in our own healing, then we're going to be able to offer that to our kids. Like you said, in our own self-regulation, now our kids are able to borrow that and self-regulate with our help, right?

JESSICA: Yeah. And I would just add to that, that I don't want a woman listening to think, "Okay, well, I've got to heal myself first and regulate myself first, and then I can help my kids. So I've got a long way to go, and in the meantime..." No. If you can be open and honest and talk to your children while you're going through your own healing process, your own dysregulation process, then they will see a congruent human. Kids get really scared when mom's words do not match with the message written all over mom's body. But if they do, if you can say, "Look, I'm really struggling right now. I'm super angry..." You don't have to tell them who it's at. You can say, "I'm really angry and I'm not angry at you. It has nothing to do with you." Or you can say, "I'm really angry at that choice that you just made, and I need a minute." If you can give yourself that space and then come back, even if you blow it... There are statistics that you only have to be a good enough parent 80% of the time. And when I heard that, I was like, "Oh, praise Jesus."

NATALIE: I feel like it's 50%. I don't even think it's 80%. 80% seems like a lot to me. I think I heard that it was 50% of the time, which is a little more hopeful and doable, I think.

JESSICA: Yeah. But even when you do blow it, I mean, I apologize to my kids every single day. Every single day there is something for which I need to apologize to them. And they have learned that it's safe to call me out on my junk.

NATALIE: Yeah, nice.

JESSICA: And we have specific words around that like, "Mommy, you sounded really grumpy." "Sorry, you're right. I'm in a rush and I'm stressed out and that should not be put on you. Let me try again." And so therefore, when I tell them the same thing — "Hey, can you gentle your voice? That sounded really grumpy the way that you talk to your brother. Let's have a do-over" — they're used to this back and forth. God did not create a hierarchy of human beings. It is human beings and then the animals.

And I know that you've gotten into Bruce Fleming's work a little bit and so have I, and he talks about that. Man and woman are equal in God's eyes. And last time I checked, children also grow up to be men and women. It's not this, "Parents have ruler and ownership." God said, "Let them." There was no specification. And so when we can get on this equal playing field with our children — we mess up/they mess up, we need help regulating/they need help regulating... And they can co-regulate us sometimes.

NATALIE: Yes, that is so beautiful. This has been an amazing conversation. There are so many truth bombs in here that I think are important for us to take away as parents. I love this conversation. I really appreciate you coming on here. And I didn't even know who you were. I'd never heard of you. So I'm really glad that you reached out and made me aware of what you've got.

There's something that you offer on your website. Well, actually, I think it's the little tool that you taught us, but you might have it in a PDF download or something like that. Tell us a little bit about that and how they can actually continue to connect with you if they want to by going over and grabbing this tool and connecting with you over there.

JESSICA: Yeah, absolutely. I do have a free PDF download that I offer, and it's called "Four Keys to Raising Resilient Children," I think. Now I can't even remember what the title is. But it's "Four Keys" and you can get that on my website, [www.mosaicmotherhood.com/four-keys](http://www.mosaicmotherhood.com/four-keys), and you can grab that for free. It does have a diagram with a deeper explanation and the verse locations of those four steps that I called out from the book of Matthew. It also has some additional co-regulation techniques, some information on triggers. It's kind of like a condensed version of all the quick tips. And it's super actionable, so you can check that out. You can check out my website, which is [mosaicmotherhood.com](http://mosaicmotherhood.com), or find me on Facebook or Instagram at

Mosaic Mothers, and then I also have a free Facebook community, which is Full Hands Fierce Hearts, or [facebook.com/groups/fiercehearts](https://facebook.com/groups/fiercehearts). And we just hang out and love on each other in that group.

NATALIE: Beautiful. We will include all of those links too in the show notes if you want direct links — you don't have to remember all of that. All right, well, thank you so much, Jessica, for being here with us.

JESSICA: Thank you for having me.

NATALIE: Yeah, and thank you for listening.

*Hey, beautiful butterfly, thank you so much for listening. If you liked this episode, be sure to subscribe, and then consider leaving a rating and review so others can find us. To connect with me and get a free chapter of my book, head over to [flyingfreenow.com](https://flyingfreenow.com). And until next time, fly free.*