

## **Meerilinga Podcast – Positive Childhoods**

Season 2 Episode 4 with Veronica Metcalf

### **Belynda Smith**

Welcome, welcome everyone to the Meerilinga Positive Childhoods Podcast. This podcast is recorded on the land of the Whadjuk Noongar people, so I'd like to acknowledge respectfully their continued connection to land, waters and community, and to honour their elders, past and present, and First Nations people everywhere in the spirit of reconciliation. Especially their parents, who've been parenting right here for many thousands of years. I'd like to thank the Department of Education and Lotterywest, Positive Childhoods is produced as part of the Children's Week celebrations in WA thanks to generous funding from these bodies. Thank you so much to those educators, parents and others listening in today, we really appreciate everything it took for you to tune into this podcast. Finding time in your busy day to learn more about how we can support the needs of children.

I'm Belynda Smith on a parenting facilitator with Meerilinga Parenting Service. I'm really passionate about meeting the needs of parents so we can help families and children to thrive.

Meerilinga is a not-for-profit organisation and a registered charity. We promote the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child working with children, their families, early childhood professionals, planners, and the community to raise the status of children in WA.

The 2022 Children's Week theme is: "All children have the right to a standard of living that supports their well-being and healthy development." So that's our theme for this series of podcasts.

Now I'd like to introduce you to a wonderful guest, Veronica Metcalf. Veronica lives on a small farm in Crossman, near Boddington in WA, with her husband, three kids, and a complete menagerie of animals. While looking to help their eldest son, Toby, who has cerebral palsy, Veronica discovered the Anat Baniel Method neuro movement, and ended up taking the training and becoming a practitioner. She has a passion for the natural environment, and she's currently addicted to weaving beautiful baskets from both recycled and natural materials.

So, thank you so much Veronica, it's lovely to have you here.

### **Veronica Metcalf**

Thank you, Belynda. Great to be here.

**Belynda Smith**

So, I would love to start with just a little introduction to you and how you got where you are today, doing what you're doing?

**Veronica Metcalf**

That's a good one. So, it is interesting when you have kids. You know it's going to be an adventure, and by having a child with special needs, at the time when they're born – that's when it all happened with us – it was such a roller coaster and a rocky road, and you don't really see the "out". You know, for everyone it's a pretty tough road and now looking back, I can't imagine how I would be without that. You know, it is what it is. We are very lucky; Toby is very healthy, and I'm much richer in every way for it. People do go "Oh, poor you." But its actually not, its not at all.

**Belynda Smith**

I'm very fortunate that I know Veronica and her beautiful family and there's no "poor you" about it! You have some amazing kids and an amazing family

**Veronica Metcalf**

My second son Felix said he'd like to do the podcast and comment that "Toby is just Toby, and he is blinking annoying", as brothers generally are.

**Belynda Smith**

First of all, Veronica and I had a little chat before we started about terminology because that's something, for me, I'm always curious to know what terminology the person sitting in front of me wants to use and also trying to make sure I get it right.

So, disability, additional needs, special needs, what's the terminology that you and your family, or particularly Toby, to hear people use?

**Veronica Metcalf**

I've raised this with Toby a few times and he just is not interested at all. He just says: "I'm Toby" and that's it. So I don't know he cares if you put a label on him, but as we're saying, we want to be treated with respect and dignity and assumed competence. When you're speaking to anybody, you treat them as if they're perfectly able to understand. They're not deaf, poor Toby gets a lot of people yelling at him. So it's the way you treat someone rather than what the label is.

And you can always say, "sorry, is it OK to call you [label]?", because if you do that with humility and kindness, you're not going to go wrong.

**Belynda Smith**

Yeah, absolutely.

**Veronica Metcalf**

So yeah, just thinking, "OK, this is a decent human being, I'll treat them like one"

**Belynda Smith**

Yes, absolutely.

The well-being of children is what this podcast is focused on, and I'm curious about the specific well-being needs of Toby versus children who are more neurotypical. What's the deal for you there?

**Veronica Metcalf**

Yeah, so Brennan and I were talking about this last night, working it out – and we said yeah, there's no difference in a typical child to an atypical.

**Belynda Smith**

I figured that might be the answer

**Veronica Metcalf**

And then it gets complicated. That's the easy answer, but then there's the guilt, especially with how Tony was not developing, was not meeting milestones. So, there's the guilt of you have to step in and help them get to a goal of someone's description.

**Belynda Smith**

Yes, yes.

**Veronica Metcalf**

So, when Toby was little, trying to access therapy, access options to help him get where he needs to go. But then you run into the issue of: you've got other family members, you've got you, we've got a farm; there's that balance. That's where I found it very easy to get out of balance: trying to achieve whatever goal you try to achieve for the child, and actually forgetting, what is it that that child needs? Is this goal for me or for a therapy provider?

But hang on a minute, what does **my** family need? And that's where I had really, really great family support. My mom would just say, "Look, take two weeks off, just have a break"

More often than not Toby did amazing. He actually had time to integrate and stop and just be a kid! So many kids get dragged to so much therapy and they don't ever get to just be a kid.

But it's a personal balance and what works for my family doesn't work for your family. And trying to really empower parents to really look at their situation and have that confidence to say. "No, thank you" to that, and "Yes, please to that."

### **Belynda Smith**

And that's something I see in you and other parents I know who have children with additional needs is that you become really strong advocates. You kind of become really strong leaders in your family and then more broadly in the community because you have to.

### **Veronica Metcalf**

We almost don't have a choice. And that's good in some ways. It kind of pushes you out of your comfort zone. It's a thing that you're going to do your whole life for, like that's your kid you'd do anything for. So of course, it's an easy decision.

I do say to Felix and Abby, you guys are actually really lucky. So many of the decisions we've ended up making have been good for all of us. We may never have gone down that path if it wasn't for Toby. And that usually causes some grumbles because we're an average family.

### **Belynda Smith**

I know how hard you've worked to support all of your children's well-being, and I love your lifestyle, I've visited your beautiful farm. What sort of choices do you think you've made that have been particularly important for their well-being, and particularly important for Tobes with his additional names?

### **Veronica Metcalf**

Yeah, so a few years ago we decided to home school, which we kind of thought would always be on the cards as neither Brennan I particularly enjoyed the school system. We are fine with it, but it's a bit suffocating and getting more so, especially in some rural areas, you don't have a lot of choice for schools and teachers. Because schools have to follow very rigid safety and workplace [programs], with Toby then you're only going to get as far as your aid. It can be a bit of slim pickings and if they don't get along with the EA, because not everyone meshes with everybody, and we actually did [have some issues with schooling]. But actually, we ended up having decided [to home school] ages before we were going to pull out. So, it was really nice to have it as a backup.

That has been just so fun for all of us that we can't imagine why we didn't do it earlier. But that's life, isn't it? Having that time to spend with your kids, giving Toby the time – that's where school, you know you're a certain age meaning you're in a certain grade and you're certain etc. Well, that's not going to work for everybody, not even just Toby, but any kid. And Toby just being able to take his time, choose what he wants to do, just so much more healthy mentally I think.

### **Belynda Smith**

And medical challenges? I was really curious about that because that can be such a difficult experience for families. How do you bounce back? How do you focus on a child's well-being if they're in and out of hospital or if they have those difficult challenges?

**Veronica Metcalf**

So, early on what Toby was born we were in hospital for two weeks and that's when they told us and he wouldn't walk, talk, or anything. Day four we're like panic station, and I looked across to my husband and he just goes, "we'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

From then we've just assumed that we're going to get, and we're gonna get and we're getting. Toby really hasn't been in hospital much at all since then, he has had some procedures to help him move better, easier, and they are really hard. We're lucky that he is very healthy, and we had never been in hospital for health issues more just the procedural issues, but it is really hard.

When you're allowing people to do something with your child's body, like we did do the Botox injection for a few years, they didn't really help enough, and they cause a little discomfort, so we've pulled out of that. But there's a lot of push to do all these things. And in your head just thinking, but that's not my body!

So, we've always discussed as much as we could, age relevant, and I would never do anything big and luckily didn't have any need to because everyone is different. Nothing life threatening, our decisions were made on, you know, easier to move, etc. And we could say, I don't know Toby, this looks quite big, and go "we're not happy to do that", but if you want to look into it. So yeah, we've tried to just have gone that path. But like I said, we're very lucky not to have had anything to life threatening. Otherwise, that's a whole different kettle of fish.

**Belynda Smith**

Yeah, it is, isn't it?

So, to meet his needs and to help him thrive, you've ended up on your own pathway, learning about Anat Baniel, I don't know the full terminology for -

**Veronica Metcalf**

Yep, neuro movement. I think they're slowly rebranding it to be more neuro movement rather than the name, because the name doesn't mean anything.

**Belynda Smith**

Neuro movement. Tell us a bit more about this and how it helps children's well-being. It it specifically for children with a disability? Is it something that is across the board?

**Veronica Metcalf**

It's for anybody who has a brain.

**Belynda Smith**

Ah, there you go!

### **Veronica Metcalf**

I must have been Googling something for Toby when we felt like we had a bit of a wall. When you've got a neuro-typically developing child, it's amazing, they just develop. It's crazy. Well, with Toby, you'd hit plateaus. And my mom would always say, "oh, you notice it more because he's behind. But everyone hits plateaus," which is true.

So, whenever that would happen, you'd get on old Google.

I found this being mentioned all the time, so I looked it up, got Anat's book which is called Kids Beyond Limits. I ordered it, read it, and immediately felt empowered that I could do something. Basically, going from fixing to connecting is its underlying thing.

So instead of me dragging Toby to all these therapists that we weren't feeling like we're getting enough out of – sometimes we did some things we didn't. On the whole it felt like a lot of work for only a little return. I could start doing the base, you know, not actually working on Toby but connecting with him through the book. And I was seeing changes straight away – feeling so much more confident and calmer and just more whole I think, with all of us. Oh, my gosh.

I had the opportunity to go to a children and parent workshop in the states with Toby and that was amazing. A five-day workshop. So, the children and the parents in the morning and just the parents in the afternoon for movement lessons and everything else. I came back and just felt so isolated.

It was the most connected and accepted that I've ever felt. Because people treat – you know, we all treat people differently, that's how we are. Every time when you took Toby anywhere, you'd get the funny looks that he's not walking or he's not this or that.

At the [conference there was every possible kid, and everyone was just accepted and not patronising in anyway. It was just amazing. So I got home and thought I don't really like not having that feeling. I ended up having to decide "Do I spend (we had trust fund money to spend) do I spend it on taking Toby back for more lessons or do I go do my training?"

### **Belynda Smith**

And build your own community here?

### **Veronica Metcalf**

So, we thought so ok, and I talked to Brennan and luckily, I said "But how can we afford it?" He goes, "We'll work it out." But what about – you know, because he works away and I work away, "We'll work it out"

He said, "Look, we'll work it out. If you want to do it, we'll work it out."

So, I did my training. That was 2016; I started that and luckily finished just before lockdown at the last segment before COVID. So yeah, that has been a game changer and for Toby, we don't

actually do any other therapy anymore. I don't do as much work on him as I should. We work together when he wants lessons because it's tricky working with young children. I'm very aware of that and I'm a bit too bossy with him.

You don't treat your kids like you do other people's kids. I do work with special needs families in Perth and adults who come and find me. It generally is kids because the parents are looking for everything. Once you're older – the modules were: special needs kids; vitality and anti-aging; high performers – so [it caters to] everybody. Every aspect of life. A lot of people work with sports people, musicians, I've just recently done a movement lesson with our local riding club. Anyone who wants it, you'll benefit from it.

And that's why I love as well. It's just not some special thing I have to take Toby to. You've got enough things that make them different. This is actually something that I really grew as a person and really realised who I needed to be. It's just a really wonderful journey.

### **Belynda Smith**

Sounds really integrated and sort of wholesome.

### **Veronica Metcalf**

It's basically working with – you meet a person where they're at. You're not trying to make them be anything. Sure, you have a loose idea of where you want to go and whether that person is moving easily. It's looking at it's using movement as the language of the brain. A lot of the movements we do looks a bit like physio or things like this, but in the training, you're really thinking: "How is this person organized? What is the brain doing with what I'm doing?"

You're really asking that person question through movement and seeing how they respond and then giving them some other choices. There are nine essentials, which, and that's worked with, you know, hundreds of kids and worked out that this is what brains need. There's, movement with attention, slow, variation. This is what we've got in our head the whole time we're working with people.

Instead of, repetition, just for the sake of repetition, we'll do slight variations. And that's what our brains need to kind of wake up and go, "Oh that's different." We learn by being able to differentiate, so if we don't know we're at, we can't move forward.

A lot of it is actually just going, "Oh, your arm does this. Well, that's interesting. This arm does this."

It's very non-judgmental. It's just this is what it is. It's a bit like having a map at the zoo trying to get to the bears but not knowing where you are. So, there's no way you can get there. Work out whether you are here and then giving that brain a chance to form those different connections. It's very much a personal journey for that person. It's not what I want that person to achieve. Imagine you're in your car, you're driving somewhere. If **you're** driving to that destination, you're more likely to remember how to get there again. If you're in the passenger seat, you kind of

vaguely know, but you switched off for half of it, and someone was moving your leg... It didn't mean so much.

We're trying to be the not the driver. We try and just give that person a little bit [of direction] and then they can go, "Oh." I love it, I would jump on a table as well and have a practitioner work on me anytime.

And that's another thing that I think parents need to remember is to put yourself in the place of your child because you know, we learn our experience. It might not be what we're trying to get them to learn. If it's really uncomfortable and really out of their comfort zone, that's all they're going to learn. It might be a wonderful therapy-

**Belynda Smith**

But it's if their experience of it negative

**Veronica Metcalf**

Yeah, it's not good.

So always. Yeah, as I'm getting older, I'm learning to go. "How would I feel if that was me?" That's a big [influence] in my head of how I try and gauge am I doing it right or what am I doing when I work with anyone and when I'm with Toby.

**Belynda Smith**

I'm just hearing all these kind of connection points through everything you're saying. Almost what you're saying generally about the well-being of children across the board and children with additional needs is how I want to be talked to. Do I wanted to be shouted at in this way or would I want to be treated with respect and presumed competence.

And I love the way that your journey, it sounds to me, has been more and more about you taking that leadership role in and taking that expert space and saying, well, this is what works for our family. This is, what we're enjoying. This is where we're feeling connected and good together as a family. It's really lovely to hear.

**Veronica Metcalf**

To get the best out of and for your children, you need to be in the right place. You know, if you're running around like a looney and not sure we're going, that's what your kids pick up. Life is not perfect and you're not going perfect all the time but during the training, this is what you learn is actually I thought I was doing the training for Toby. Very early on that they talk about how everyone thinks they're doing this training to someone else turns out you're doing the training for you so that you are the best you can be. And then everyone can raise to that. You're not like that all the time, of course you're human, but you can apologise, you can own up to stuff. Like, I do get, really short-tempered with Toby because he can be quite hard work. And I'll lose the plot at him, and I suddenly realise that it's because I've got something else on my mind.

**Belynda Smith**

Welcome to parenthood.

**Veronica Metcalf**

Yeah! I and I go, "Toby, I'm really sorry. Actually, that was nothing about what you were doing"

And my kids are pretty used to this, they go, "Yeah, we knew that mum. We know." And I say I know, but I can still do better. You own it, you're human and you try and try and move on and get better at it.

**Belynda Smith**

Yeah, beautiful.

Ah, so fascinating. So, is there anything else that you think parents can be talking to their children about with regards to disability? Or early educators might, you know, it might be good for them to think about if they've got a child in their care who has a disability and working with those families.

**Veronica Metcalf**

Well, I think first off. It's funny because kids want to talk to kids. And it's usually the parents going "Sshh"

I know that feeling because even now that I've got Toby in a wheelchair – other people with wheelchairs go past and I think, "Do they want me to make a thing and say hello?" Do I not say it? I'm worse than I was before because you don't want to make them feel – because Toby does feel a bit singled out sometimes when people are extra friendly and then no one talks to anyone else. It's a bit tricky.

So, I think from a young kid, let them! I have kids come up and go, "Why is Toby in the wheelchair?" and the parents are going [don't do that!]. I say it's fine, Toby and I are happy to answer that question. And we just talk about it. Well, Toby has brain damage, which means his messages from his brain to his mouth is a bit tricky. He can sort of walk sometimes, but it's easier for him to be in a wheelchair.

You just do it and it's real. It's there. You don't go, "Oh, and it was terrible." You know, nothing dramatic. It just is.

And you get that. Where people go, "Ohhhhh." And you're like, "Oh my gosh." And it's so well meaning, but it doesn't help.

**Belynda Smith**

No need for the pity

**Veronica Metcalf**

Yeah, so it's a tricky one, but I think parents of little kids, if you see a kid at the playground, just treat them like any other kid. If a kid bumps into them, you know, just let them talk to them. They're just a kid, wanting to be a kid.

And then it follows on from there, I think, if children are used to it. I mean my two, they don't see Toby in any other way other than a really annoying brother at times. They literally don't see him any other way. It's so funny when I'm at shopping centers and one of them punched him. And you see people just looking, like, "Oh my gosh!" And I'm just chuckling away, I just leave them to it. yet I'm still. I step out of the way, while they're having their [fight], because they're kids. That's what brothers and sisters do. I think it's really good that people see that, and then they usually have a chuckle as they go past.

Because they're just kids.

**Belynda Smith**

Just kids and figuring it out.

Well, thank you so much. For each of the podcasts that we produce in this series we like to finish up with five quick questions.

Name the book you loved most as a child.

**Veronica Metcalf**

So, I had to toss-up between *Black Beauty* and – I was very pony mad, I still am, actually – and a series of books called *The Jewel Books*. I think my aunts and uncles used to bring them out from the UK, I don't think you could even get them here.

Yeah, so they were my favourite horsey books.

**Belynda Smith**

What helps you have a sense of well-being?

**Veronica Metcalf**

Uhm, being on a farm and having space and going for a walk with the dogs and the lambs.

**Belynda Smith**

The dogs and the lambs?

**Veronica Metcalf**

Really just a 20-minute walk can just be all you need to come back into a good space.

**Belynda Smith**

Gorgeous. What's your happiest childhood memory?

**Veronica Metcalf**

There were two that popped into my head. One of them was running with my pet lamb. So again, not much has changed. And the other on was pony rides and getting a pony for Christmas when I was 11.

**Belynda Smith**

What's your favourite outdoor space?

**Veronica Metcalf**

We live along the river and yeah, the river is definitely the go to, to just completely get away, Whenever, because our place isn't perfect, you see other places and I go "Oh, that's really nice," but it doesn't have a river. It's just off the radar, you know, doesn't have a river. And I don't realise actually how important, even though I don't always go there, when I'm somewhere else it feels really nice, but something's missing... it's the river.

**Belynda Smith**

And complete this sentence: To help them thrive, children need.

**Veronica Metcalf**

I think they need love. They need to have connections with themselves first and then anyone around them and place, a connection to place, and they need space to be *them*. I think a lot of us are on that bandwagon, and I'm equally to blame, you have a vision of what your kids are going to be as they grow up and that's fine. But they're actually them. They're not really your kids? You are their parents, I think. And it's really hard to kind of let go of that a bit, but I think to give space for them to grow and to be is really, really important and to support them in that.

**Belynda Smith**

Beautiful. If anyone wants to get in touch with you, or learn more about your work, how can they best do that?

**Veronica Metcalf**

So, we have got a Western Australian Anat Baniel Method Facebook page, so if they searched the Anat Baniel Method in Perth they should come up.

**Belynda Smith**

Thank you. Thank you so much for joining us today. It's really lovely having a conversation with you all about this and thank you to our listeners.

If you'd like more information regarding Meerilinga, you can contact [mycf@meerilinga.org.au](mailto:mycf@meerilinga.org.au) or visit our website at [www.meerilinga.org.au](http://www.meerilinga.org.au)

Thank you.