

# The Good Life Camp part 3 - An interview with Dr. Nell Weber

**Joe Mamlin** 00:00

This is **News From The Peak**. I'm Joe Mamlin.

Well, we've had a couple of recent episodes, which you should check out if you haven't already, centering around the **LCO Good Life Camp**. This camp, while an amazing experience on its own, is part of a larger grant that we're working on with **Lac Courte Oreilles** tribe in Northern Wisconsin. The grant itself is focused on responsible parenting and economic mobility. The underlying theme of the grant is the idea that teaching young people about their own culture can improve these outcomes for them as they become adults. There's obviously a lot more to it than that. And that's where our guest today comes in.

Today we welcome **Dr. Nell O'Donnell Weber**. Nell is a consultant and researcher with experience in parenting, parental beliefs, early childhood education, literacy, language acquisition, global citizenship, and international education. She earned her doctorate in education from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and now makes her home in Charlottesville, Virginia.

We talked to Nell today about her research on parenting both in the US and internationally, and how that background led her to our project; we discussed the impact of culture in parenting, and why this is such a key component of the work that Lac Courte Oreilles tribe is doing with this grant.

Nell has been a great person to work with on this project. She's an excellent speaker. And this is an engaging conversation that I think you'll enjoy. We recorded this live at the Lac Courte Oreilles Child Support's office in Hayward, Wisconsin, and it was the first time that we actually got to meet Nell in person. As I mentioned, don't forget to check out the other two episodes about the camp. It's going to be a great show. So stick around, and we'll be right back.

**Maureen Leif** 02:48

So I'm so excited that you're here to talk about the Good Life and your role on the project. And I want to- first before we talk about the Lac Courte Oreilles's project specifically, just talk a little bit about your background and your research, which is how we found you, we kind of call you a unicorn, you're like- I don't know how we found you. But you're like the perfect fit for this project. And your background in learning about how people develop their parenting's beliefs and knowledge and maybe just talk a little bit about your research and experience in this area.

**Dr. Nell O'Donnell Weber** 03:25

I did my dissertation research on what American high schoolers know and believe about parenting and child development. And that wasn't my original idea for a dissertation topic. I'm

really interested in the parents' role in early learning, and I had done prior research on parents' goals and how they see themselves in meeting those goals, and the way they interact with their children. But I got some funding to do research on adolescence, with the idea that eventually this could be a preventative measure to help diminish achievement gaps, or child abuse, by knowing more about what high schoolers know and think, and then maybe designing interventions around giving high schoolers and adolescents more knowledge and trying to shape their beliefs in ways that are healthy.

So I did a pretty big survey of 1044 American high schoolers to find out what they believe, what did they think a parent should do? And how do they learn about the parenting role? And then what do they know about how children learn and grow? Some of the interesting things that I found that supported my prior research, is that the way that high schoolers, and really all people, learn how to be a parent, is through three primary means, the most important which is how they were parented themselves. So their experience of being a child and being parented - what the things their parents did well, the things they said "I will never do that!" "I hated it when my mom did that", or "my dad did that, and I vowed never to do that" although sometimes you eat your words once you become a parent, and their experience caring for younger children; so being in a caregiving role. So I call that kind of the experience realm.

They also learn through formal means, although that's probably the smallest; many states and schools offer parenting units, or babysitting classes. Or, you know, there's that kind of famous like carrying a sack of flour or caring for an egg or robot baby, in some cases; an activity that a lot of high schoolers do. And so those are the three means.

1. How they're parented.
2. Their experiences caring for younger kids.
3. And then through a more formal kind of instruction.

It was an interesting research. And I'm still working with the partner who funded the research and my former adviser to design interventions for high schoolers and implement them and test them; we just did a project, just wrapped up the valuation of a project in a bunch of schools in Illinois. And it looks good. And that's how you guys found me, through a little article written about my dissertation research, and it was so exciting to see that people are finding it and are interested and that I got connected with the project that seems so relevant, especially since I do lots of cross cultural work on other places.

**Maureen Leif** 07:03

Yeah. And so our first phone call, I think you were doing a project in Jordan. You were talking about this multinational perspective, and you said that it would be really cool to do a project

closer to home. So before I talked about the LCO project; was the project in Jordan kind of the same philosophy, in the same topic or...

**Dr. Nell O'Donnell Weber** 07:26

Similar. So it was a national survey that we had to use how many people I think like 2500 parents were surveyed, mostly in person, which is really crazy with COVID, they were doorstep surveys. And the goal was to get a nationally representative sample of Jordanian parents' beliefs and knowledge of early learning. And so we focused on talk, singing, play, math activities, and reading behaviors. And with the goal of setting a baseline of you know, this is why Jordanian parents - Parents in Jordan, I should say, because we also surveyed lots of Syrian parents, that was a population of particular interest to the government into the funding organization. And found that there's a lot of room for improvement especially around reading behaviors. But there's a lot of great stuff that's already happening there too. And parents enjoy and love their kids and really want them to succeed in school. So that was a great project that I worked on for a couple of years.

**Maureen Leif** 08:52

So, on the Lac Courte Oreilles' project, the Good Life project, you know, our project was a little different than some of the other sites because we really focused on the cultural aspect. And you have such a great way of describing why the culture component is important to parenting. And I don't know if you can expand a little bit.

**Dr. Nell O'Donnell Weber** 09:12

Well, when the main source of how you're parented, how you think about what it means to be a parent has to do with how you're parented, then, of course, culture is a huge piece of that, it's family culture, but it's also your community culture. And for this project, one of the things that became really clear to me from the get go was that strengthening cultural identity was really a linchpin in this project. That is the means through which we're going to build healthier, more responsible parents; that giving kids a really strong sense of self, that giving them pride and comfort in their cultural identity, is going to be a protective factor against a lots of things that could happen to them but also going to give them internal resources to be a really good parents.

**Maureen Leif** 10:05

Because I feel like there's been, and I was probably guilty of this before we were, you know, too far into the project too, but thinking that the cultural aspect was nice to have. But the more that we've met with you and all of your research and evaluation team, this is critical.

Studies show that if kids are connected to a culture, they're more likely to finish school and do all the things that we want them to do. And like you said, it's a protective factor. So when we're working with you to design this curriculum, how have you or what was your experience and incorporating all of that culture that none of us come to the table with?

**Dr. Nell O'Donnell Weber** 10:43

Yeah, as you said, I don't come to the table with it, I'm a cultural outsider. And I am frequently in that role with my other work in other countries. So I have a little bit of practice, and trying to be a good listener, and to really work collaboratively with local partners and cultural insiders. But I feel as though you know, it's just a process that is ongoing. I am trying to put in place strategies, like getting interns from the community to help me but every time I have a meeting with our partners here- our Lac Courte Oreilles' partners, I feel like I just get so much better information. And that my mindset is brought in that I think, kind of small and discreet, like this is the learning objective, we're going to learn about fatherhood, and then we have a conversation with our partners, and they say, but we have to think about it differently. And just yesterday, we're talking about the importance of learning and context. And often when you're creating a curriculum, you're pulling it out of the context, you're putting on paper that here's a lesson plan, you know, this is your script. And this is the resources you need. And I'm trying to rethink how to make sure that all this learning happens in everyday moments. And then context is really when you think about how you're parented. That's really what it is. It's the everyday moments, it's not like your parents sitting down and saying...

**Maureen Leif** 12:15

Lesson one!

**Dr. Nell O'Donnell Weber** 12:17

Exactly. Here's a list of- you don't know, I want you to practice this, but it's just everyday interactions and everyday moments, that are, you know, sitting in the car, going for a walk or eating a meal together.

**Maureen Leif** 12:30

Yeah. A lot of discussions are in the car, for sure. Because they are captive, that's where a lot of learning is taking place. So we were talking about this intact, and maybe expand a little bit on that for the camp. So our experience was that we had this curriculum, and actually, I still love it. And I don't want to, you know, some of the play and the role-playing kind of stuff I loved. But when we got there, then the kids were in these beautiful locations, sitting in front of the fire, trying to learn language, talking about the play that we were going to do while they looked at the lake, and they just couldn't. But then later, we would take hikes, and we're swimming and Bonnie would incorporate the language. Is that kind of what you mean by in context?

**Dr. Nell O'Donnell Weber** 13:16

Yes. First of all, I mean, I think that's a good example of kind of best-laid plans, and in good teaching, too. You know, you start with your objectives, and you know what your objectives are, and you have kind of a plan of activities. But sometimes you have to throw your plan of activities out the window, because you have opportunities that come up to meet those objectives in a more natural way. And that's what we're going to try and do with the camp is, yes, we have plans for this storytelling workshop with skits. But, you know, maybe we can meet the same objectives in a way where the kids aren't taken into a room away from the lake. And they're on the hike, and they're learning the same, you know, meaning, the same learning objectives, getting the same content, but doing it in a way that feels natural. And it's in that context. And that's fun.

**Maureen Leif** 14:11

So in the original grant's application, they talked about the historical trauma and the boarding schools and, you know, as I've been doing research and stuff, it feels like there's this one side of- I don't know if there's too broad—but American society saying: that happened a long time ago. And it's not relevant today because kids aren't in boarding school today. But can you talk a little bit about why it's still incredibly relevant today to this project and what we're doing and where kids are today in this community?

**Dr. Nell O'Donnell Weber** 14:42

Well, first of all, it really wasn't that long ago. I mean, I think the last boarding schools closed in the late 70s, which is parents and grandparents age. But you know, I keep mentioning the way you learn to parent, the key way is through how you were parented and for generations of native people, they were taken away from their families and not in that process of getting enculturated into like a parenting culture, that was disrupted. And so they weren't given the opportunity to learn the traditional ways of parenting, their familial cultural ways of parenting. And so when and if they did become parents themselves someday, they didn't have the resources to do it in a way that made sense, you know, they were kind of at sea. And I think we're still feeling those effects today. I think there's also a really deep seated, or deep rooted and hard to get rid of, I don't know how to put it exactly: damage to this cultural identity for the individual to know that this part of them was tried to be killed. I mean, that's really honestly, it's goal of these programs: to kill the Indian. And that even today, when, you know, it's not happening in the same overt way. I think that even grants like this, which I think is a wonderful thing, but it's maybe trying to eradicate some native habits, like even the idea of delaying parenthood versus every child is a gift. I mean, those are two cultural values that are kind of in opposition to one another, that an explicit goal of the grant is to delay parenthood until you're ready. Whereas there's a deeply held Ojibwe cultural value that the Lac Courte Oreilles community that every child is, again, no matter the circumstances of their birth, or how old the parents were when the child was born. And so that's a more kind of implicit way of trying to kill an aspect of the native culture and kill might be too strong of a word. But I think that some people feel that way.

**Maureen Leif** 17:15

Well, and the more you kind of dig in and understand what some of- I mean, one of the first trips to Hayward, we went and learned how to rice and we got like, lectures- a conversation with the Elder, and she was telling us the story about the Rebensburg, and her story: she was actually featured in one of the n'Digi Dreams videos as well. Her grandmother had been taken to a boarding school. And so it's not just disruption, like she was in a boarding school, and then she got out, and then culture came right back. It's this long inner growth process, where they didn't know the culture to pass on. So there's this,- Disruption almost feels like too loose of a word, because it feels like it was just disruptive. But it came back and it's really just gone.

**Dr. Nell O'Donnell Weber** 18:03

No... Yeah, it was eradicated. It was removed.

**Maureen Leif 18:06**

Yeah. So now it's like trying to recreate things that people didn't know. So the coolest part about this camp, honestly, and I talked about this in one of the other podcasts: like, we learned so much, and I felt so grateful that they were so open with us, because we are outsiders that they were- They loved when we said miigwech, and we said the blessings at dinner, and that they were so open to it. But it was amazing how few kids actually came in with any cultural, like, how to introduce themselves, or how to, you know, some of the traditions and-

**Dr. Nell O'Donnell Weber 18:41**

No, but I think you're right, that for us as outsiders to love and respect the culture to join in the practices, I think is really nice and great. Especially because I know I feel a little shy about [say: boozhoo. You know it's because- I don't know, is it okay to do that?

**Maureen Leif 19:02**

I know!

**Dr. Nell O'Donnell Weber 19:04**

But I'm also enthusiastic. I want to be an enthusiastic embracer. And that's, you know, in this country, I think we have a bad habit of- if my children learn Spanish in a dual immersion program, everybody's like, 'That is so great.' But if a child from Central America, who is bilingual, English, Spanish, we see them as kind of a problem. They're like an English language learner in schools in a way, kind of, as like white people privileging the language and culture of the Ojibwe, I think, like Elevate- I don't want to say elevated because it makes it seem like we have all this power, which I mean, in some ways we do, but it's a sign of respect. And yes, it's unfortunate, but exciting that these kids that haven't necessarily had the opportunity to engage with their language that was in the process of dying out, but hopefully is coming back. That they're getting this opportunity because they say that to be a culture you need to have a land, a language and a spirituality, the land has been almost completely taken away, the language has almost died out. The spirituality. I mean, there's like a lot of missionary work that was done to try to also kill their spirituality. And so to bring those three things back to really give the people back themselves, I think is really exciting.

**Maureen Leif 19:06**

Yeah, I love how you articulate that. Well, it was really interesting too, because they were so open, I think that's, kind of, what I see is just society in general's problem is that we don't understand each other. e don't. And we're all you know, in our own kind of cultural bubble, or I don't know how to say it. But it was neat, because they really like the camp counselors were doing the dances, and Becky was teaching the men how to do the fish dance. And when the Lac Courte Oreilles' boys saw the Camp Highlands' white men doing the fish dance, they got more into it. And I thought, those were the moments where it was so impactful to see they had a new sense of pride: Oh, they're interested in our culture. , I don't know, and maybe it was me projecting things.

**Dr. Nell O'Donnell Weber 20:41**

Especially with all the negative portrayals of native people that, you know, there's problems with addiction, and there's problems with poverty. And there are negative materials or just only citing all of the ills and not highlighting all the beautiful parts. I think that does damage to kids, even if they don't realize it.

**Maureen Leif 21:53**

Because part of this grant feels a little bit, and no entity in particular, but it feels like maybe because we're the only one of the few sites that has a Native American component, that we have to work extra hard to explain why the culture is so important, and that it's not a nice to have; this is absolutely critical to change the trajectory. And so it feels like sometimes we're kind of always trying to explain why the elder voice is really important, because that's not something that you would typically see in a traditional state issued grant, or, you know, like, why we have youth at the college, but the youth are not like of a certain- They're not youthful in terms of age. And I don't know, sometimes it feels like we're trying really hard to justify it and also explain it in a way that makes sense, but is respectful of the community.

**Dr. Nell O'Donnell Weber 22:47**

Yeah, I mean, my work in other countries on parenting has shown me that, you know, there are lots of different ways to parent and it really makes a difference. The culture makes a huge difference. The language makes a huge difference.

One of my first projects out of my masters was a Early Literacy and Numeracy Program that I was writing for a big development organization that they were going to use in a whole bunch of different countries. And we wrote a component, a whole series of resources for preschool, or like Child Care Centers. And then we decided to add a parenting component. And first of all, I was like: why didn't we start with parents? I mean, preschools don't even exist in so many of these countries, or they're only in the cities, but parents are the people who are teaching, educating their young children.

But second of all, the first place I went to go train people on this program was Rwanda. And we had written all these kinds of lessons on the components of early literacy, like phonemic awareness, knowing that sounds and letters are connected, and that words are made up of sounds. And I was talking about doing rhyming words, and the people there said, in Rwanda, our language, our dominant language, there are no rhyming words, the words do not rhyme. And our words only start with one of three letters, they all start with K, or M, or, I think, W. But because I didn't know the language, I didn't know that. So all these kinds of, canonical research on the building blocks of literacy- language and literacy-did not really apply in the same way because of the language, and language and culture are united and so that kind of a concrete example where I came in with all the expert research. But all the expert research is based on what they call weird countries, Western, educated, industrialized, rich, developed. And so we had to really rethink a lot of the things we were doing if we wanted to do something that was applicable in lots of different countries, and I still have lots of reservations whenever I do work that's supposed to be

applied to lots of different communities, because that was really eye opening in a way that it shouldn't have been at that point in my career, but it was, that you really have to understand the local context.

**Maureen Leif** 25:28

But it goes back to one of the things you said on our first call, and you've said so many times: it is like just listening, and coming with curiosity and trying to as many times- we all come in with assumptions that we don't even know our assumptions, but just checking ourselves to make sure that we're still listening and listening to understand: yeah, I like that. Well, it's really interesting stuff. I've learned so much from you. And I'm so glad that you're on this project, I really am. And I think, you are a true unicorn, and we're really happy that you're on here. I hope we get to work together a lot.

**Dr. Nell O'Donnell Weber** 26:07

Thank you. Me too... That's been great. Well, thank you for bringing me in.

**Maureen Leif** 26:09

Yeah.

**Joe Mamlin** 26:27

Well, thanks again to Nell for joining us on the show today, in a rare live recording of our podcast. If you haven't already, please check out our two episodes about the Good Life Culture Camp for more context on this project.

We'd love to hear from you and get your ideas and your feedback. And if you'd like to be a guest on the show, please reach out to us on the contact link on our website.

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