Transcript for *"Love to Learn: A Conversation with Isabelle Hau"*

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:00:00] Reach Out and Read, where books build better brains. This is the Reach Out and Read podcast. I'm your host doctor Dipesh Navsaria, a practicing pediatrician with degrees in public health and children's librarianship. I'm a clinical professor of human development and family studies at the School of Human Ecology, and a professor of pediatrics at the School of Medicine and Public Health, both at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. At Reach Out and Read, we dream of a world in which every child is read to every day. Our show explores how children and families flourish and thrive through a combination of individual well-being, confident parents, supportive communities, strong public health, and good policy. Join us here for thought provoking conversations on these issues with expert guests, authors, and leaders in the field of early childhood health and literacy. Research shows that reading physical books together brings the strongest benefits to children. That's why we're happy to have Boise Paper, a responsible paper manufacturer, as the founding sponsor of this podcast through their paper with Purpose Promise. Boise Paper looks for ways to make a difference in local communities. Thank you to Boise Paper for investing in our Reach Out and Read community. A new book on early learning surveys the research and thinking behind how relationships have long been the greatest catalyst of learning and thriving. In addition, it argues for a move away from what we've called child centered education and towards relationship centered learning a shift in focus from bolstering GPA and IQ toward what our next guest calls RQ or relational intelligence. We're going to explore this concept of relational intelligence and look at what the research says to back it up. Our guest today is Isabel Howe. She's the executive director of the Stanford Accelerator for learning. She previously led the US education practice at Omidyar Network and Imaginable Futures, where she invested in mission driven organizations. Her new book is Love to Learn: The Transformative Power of Care and Connection in Early Education. Isabel, welcome to the show.

Isabelle Hau: [00:02:09] Thank you for having me. It's an honor.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:02:12] Excellent. So let's start off with kind of the why you wrote the book. You have had a great deal of exposure to early ed research in your current and also your previous roles. What prompted you to write this book?

Isabelle Hau: [00:02:28] Yeah, there were two big reasons for me to write the book. One is actually deeply personal. And let me maybe start with this one, because it's the one that's closest to my heart. Early childhood education quite literally changed the trajectory of my own, my very own life. So early childhood education is something that I believe in, and I, I have worked in for now, many years. As a result of that, when I was three years old, I was what many people would call a late.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:03:07] Everything okay?

Isabelle Hau: [00:03:10] I was a late walker, a late talker, and so my parents had me take one of those psychological tests at the time. And the test came back and said that I had low academic aptitude. Not exactly the type of outcomes that, you know, parents wants to see at at age three.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:03:33] Sure, sure.

Isabelle Hau: [00:03:34] Because obviously it means that, you know, pretty low prospects in, in life outcomes overall. So anyway, my parents stay stayed largely undeterred and continue to cover me with a lot of love. And they did something that would be a meaningful turning point in my life. They enrolled me in a high quality early childhood setting, and that simple act, I believe, changed a lot of my own trajectory. So I would end up graduating from Harvard University. So this low academic aptitude is clearly well behind me. But this deeply personal experience highlighted for me, you know, the importance of investing in high quality early childhood education, both as a way to change individual trajectories like mine, but also, you know, change societies more broadly. So and looking back, it was not just the education that mattered. I believe that it was the relationships. Right. You know, clearly the care and love of my parents, as I mentioned, but also The incredible personalized attention and support that I received from early childhood educators, and in particular, two that I describe in the book at length. And I thank them with so much gratitude. Mrs. Combs, which I'm still, still actually lives in the little village where my parents live. And when Mrs. Lenoir, these two amazing women really changed my life. So that's why I wrote Love to Learn. That's, you know, the big first reason? Because I simply believe in something quite profound, which is if we want to unlock human potential, we must start with relationships.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:05:35] Sure, sure. Yeah. Thank you so much for that. That personal story, it highlights, I think, so many things that are important. Was there something that you sensed was missing in the field that you wanted to explore? In the writing of this book?

Isabelle Hau: [00:05:50] Yeah. Thank you for this great question That gets me maybe to the other like reason or. Maybe like why now? Because this idea of writing a book was not necessarily something that. Well, well, well, I had this personal story that was driving my work in early childhood. Why writing a book was, you know, and there is one moment that I point to, which was at the onset of the global pandemic, where you may all remember this moment where we were all looking at New York City because, you know, this was the first wave of the disease going through that particular, you know, sitting in a way that was extremely, extremely concerning for all of us, certainly for New Yorkers, but also all of us in the US, if not in in the world. And I had the opportunity to connect with one of my colleagues who was based in New York City, who is a neuroscientist and pediatrician named Doctor Dimitriu.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:07:05] Yeah.

Isabelle Hau: [00:07:07] Amazing, amazing researcher and also amazing practitioner. And she was studying the mom baby cohort in at the Morgan Stanley Hospital in New York City. And she shared a very concerning stat, which was that based on her observations, 80% of little ones who were born in that hospital didn't have a strong emotional connection with their mom. But that's actually, you know, this is deeply concerning, of course, but maybe this is related to one moment in time, that heightened moment of stress that we were all in in New York City.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:07:57] And this was because of all the Covid precautions made in masking and all those other things, was thought to be some of what was going on.

Isabelle Hau: [00:08:06] Yeah. And I think the more masking actually if she ruled it largely out, yeah, there were other factors. And the primary one that she thinks was attributable to that was stress.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:08:21] Yeah.

Isabelle Hau: [00:08:21] Yeah. Which we know from many other studies correlates with attachment and the the ability of all of us to bond with other humans. But then she showed me this, actually, what I what she showed me another stat that was pre-pandemic that I found even more concerning and actually really led me to say, okay, I need to dig more into all of us. This is something that I didn't even realize based on all my years of working in in early childhood education. She showed me a stat that had which was pre-pandemic, that had 60%

of those children not being emotionally connected with their mothers. And this is pre-pandemic, essentially a baseline.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:09:16] Sure.

Isabelle Hau: [00:09:17] And I, I have to say, this was a moment for me where I was like, I actually didn't even realize we were at this level of crisis in terms of relationships. And of course, there are lots of reasons why this may be the case. Even pre-pandemic. You know, parents in our country are very stressed. They are very they have such low supports. But also the circles of relationships are villages. You know, our winning, our contracting, our shrinking around our families and around our children. And then there is this huge unknown about the impact of technology, which I'm happy to speak more about. But all these factors are contributing to the state of play that's that concern me a lot and continues to. So where I think we will, we really need concerted collective action.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:10:12] Sure, sure. You mentioned the relationship circles that are key. And the four that you laid out are family, friends, educators and community. I think anyone listening to this would say, oh, yes, that makes sense, right? It sounds good. What does the research say about those different environments that are critical for children?

Isabelle Hau: [00:10:38] Yeah. So in terms of trends, we know that all those circles of relationships are actually shrinking, so families are getting smaller. Especially with fertility rates declining, grandparents often live further and further away from families. It's certainly the case for my family. We have one side that live close, but another one that's actually very far away. We also live in what others have called age segregated societies. Right. And one stat that really surprised me, that came from actually one of my colleagues at Stanford is only 3% of children have ever met an adult above age 65 who is not a family member.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:11:40] Hmm. Okay.

Isabelle Hau: [00:11:43] This is really surprising, actually. I had to think a lot about my own family to say, okay, how am I am? My children are my very own children. Seeing some people who are older in our neighborhood anyway, just services of such a 3% only. It's such an interesting statistic that just speaks about how we have probably unintentionally or maybe intentionally so constructed age segregated societies play also and play. So play has been receding. We have lost a lot of hours of play every, every day, every week, every every year for our children, especially outdoors. And that's being replaced more and more with structured activities that start ever, ever earlier. You know, these tiny soccer tots.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:12:36] All the leagues and everything. Yes.

Isabelle Hau: [00:12:40] Yeah, exactly, exactly. And I live in a you know, I live right outside of Stanford University in this beautiful city called Palo Alto, where we have a lot of structured activities, I would say probably one of the Mecca of structured activities and play, just to make a logical point for all of you who are listening, play if you need. That connection is directly related. And research shows that the more a child plays, the more friends they have.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:13:16] Right?

Isabelle Hau: [00:13:17] So it's also related to this other circle of friendships or peer that is also critical, not only the adult relationships, but also the peer and little friends, friendship. Also having a close friend in kindergarten is one of the greatest predictors of academic motivation.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:13:44] Mhm. Sure. Mhm.

Isabelle Hau: [00:13:47] All of this is very obvious when you look at those data from research. But putting them together we have this situation where well we all know that it takes a village to raise a child. The networks of connections around our children are shrinking.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:14:05] Indeed, indeed. So at the top of the show, I teased this concept for our listeners about relational intelligence. So, it seems like in education research, there's an intelligence for everything, right? There's all sorts of quotients started probably with IQ. Right. And then EQ, which is more emotional intelligence and all. So you talk about this concept of relational intelligence. Tell us, tell us more about that.

Isabelle Hau: [00:14:37] Yeah. So relational intelligence is simply our ability to connect and to collaborate to care for other human beings. What I'm observing is two things. One is, and I'm happy, by the way, to go into this in greater depth. We have a huge body of scientific evidence behind the importance of relationships. Huge body of.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:15:09] Science. We've covered that on quite a few episodes of this show in different ways.

Isabelle Hau: [00:15:13] Yeah, I'm sure there are many colleagues working on the importance of relationships for academic outcome, for health, for longevity, for happiness and thriving. I mean, all these, you know, just so, so, so much, so much there on, and growing, by the way, I had a lot of fun looking at the cutting edge of research from that standpoint. So we know this from a scientific perspective. What we also know is from anthropology and especially this amazing research from Robin Dunbar that shows that we as a species, as a human species,

have a brain that has developed to optimize around our networks of relationships. And the very famous number from Professor Dunbar is 150. So each one of us has about 150 connections that we are not sharing. And the brain, our brain size is actually optimized around it. Other species have different brain size because they have different social networks sizes.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:16:37] And for our listeners, that's not the same as the number of Facebook friends. Okay, so.

Isabelle Hau: [00:16:43] No, but it's so Professor Dunbar has a number of eally interesting little stats. For example, 150 is the the average number of wedding guests. For example, you know, of those types of 150 actually relates to a lot of things in our lives. But we could also. Oh yeah. Oh that's interesting. But the, the so we know that essentially our human development has been optimized around this, you know, this size of a network. And so if we start having lesser and lesser relationships or we are more and more lonely or more and more isolated, there is a big risk that our human intelligence may decline. And we already have some concerning evidence of this on the cognitive side. So on the cognitive side, we have had this measure, as you mentioned, of IQ that was invented by a French researcher, about 150 years ago. And every decade since the invention of this measure, there was a steady rise in IQ. And so, as a matter of fact, the cue was reset every decade or so as a result and upward reset. And over the past now decade or so, we have had actually the opposite trend line and which started to be observed in Western Europe, in multiple countries, multiple research.

Isabelle Hau: [00:18:26] And more recently in the US. There was also a really, really interesting set of data that was published a few days ago in the Financial Times, which was done as a as a survey of 18 year olds in the US. Looking at also a number of cognitive traits such as ability to to focus or. Interest in learning new things. And all of those measures are actually not. Heading in the right direction based on self-reported data from those 18 years old. But actually alarming trends overall on the cognitive side, all of this to say that I think that on the cognitive side, based on trends of technology, loneliness and so forth may not be heading in the right direction. And this doesn't mean that intelligence overall of humans may be declining. But maybe this is a time and the urgency of our times to rethink about how we, you know, understand our human intelligence and maybe refocus on this call to action on relational intelligence?

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:19:36] Sure. Yeah. And some of this is the groundwork for this is laid very early. There was a British study that you talked about that researched babies and laughter. And, can you maybe briefly explain what was going on there?

Isabelle Hau: [00:19:54] Yeah. This is one of my favorite, I find that that that particular colleague has probably the best job on earth. He studies literally one thing, which is maybe how and why, baby laugh. I mean, this has to be the best job on earth from my standpoint. And laughter is one of those signals, like others. Like, like language, like touch, like where we can look at all these serve and return interactions between a baby and a parent. And so that expression of joy is a clear indication of how babies connect with, with, with the adult across from them.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:20:47] Indeed. Yeah. Laughter is a social marker I think is a great thing to think about. You talked a bit in the book about, I love the phrase relational pedagogy, because pedagogy is one of those words that just makes us all sound very erudite and smart. But it's, of course, the study of how we teach in different ways. You talked about how it doesn't just emphasize academic success, right, but is really about cultivating relationships and emotional intelligence and resilience. And, and you talked about a few programs that specifically do that. You talked about one in Denmark and also the Suzuki method in music. Can you say a little bit more about those?

Isabelle Hau: [00:21:31] Yeah, yeah. I think there is a global trend that we can point to on this, although it's still early. I wouldn't say that there are lots of programs that I would love to see more of those and certainly more in the, in the US. Not to say that in the US, we don't have a lot of those basis of this. I think a lot of early childhood settings have several meaningful assets, including educators who want to be relational. But the I don't think we have had a lot of intentionality behind relational pedagogy. So the Suzuki method is one that is really interesting. So for all of you, this is this was started in Japan as a pedagogy, a revolutionary pedagogy, actually, on how we, how young children learn music. And actually, it was very revolutionary at many levels, including how young a child can learn music, how they learn music, and in what context. And also across socioeconomic backgrounds. Because at the time when this pedagogy was invented, music was, you know, more of an elite activity. And so definitely democratize access and proved that any child could learn music. One of the big components of the Suzuki method issmall groups and the exposure of different way of learning, which is multi-modal. You know, we speak a lot about multimodal in AI right now, but Suzu Suzuki actually invented this with this pedagogy, where essentially young children learn, learn by listening and by I practicing as opposed to learning first the theory of music, which was the older methodology. So clearly the social element of a group based instruction paired with an element of sensory exposure that was quite revolutionary to listening and exposing young children to the listening part of the music was a and has spread globally. Many young children are learning through this methodology at this point.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:24:08] It makes me think of some of the changes we've actually seen in medical education. It used to be you spent, you know, all your time on the basic

sciences, and you didn't come anywhere near a patient till much, you know, almost halfway through your training. And now that's been flipped. And there's much more of that exposure early on and connecting with people. Before you necessarily get into all the, the scientific details and all. So I don't know if that was done intentionally with that in mind, but maybe it's similar.

Isabelle Hau: [00:24:40] It's just such a beautiful analogy. Yeah. There's this. You know, I think what Suzuki and what you're describing with medical education is a combination of essentially experiential learning and project based learning, learning in groups and learning through experience of listening or experience of practicing a craft, whether medical or music. Yeah.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:25:08] So, you mentioned earlier about technology and all. Could you say just a few words about how you think technology interferes or supports all these things we've been talking about? And I'm sure everyone's thinking about AI and the impacts that might have. And I know we could easily spend several episodes just on this topic alone, but what are your top line thoughts on that?

Isabelle Hau: [00:25:34] Yeah, at a very high level, technology is a tool, so it can be applied for good applications or not. You know, very similar to, I don't know, fire, for example, that can.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:25:49] Or a book.

Isabelle Hau: [00:25:50] A book. Exactly, exactly, exactly. It's a it's a tool. So it can have an extraordinarily positive impact. In education, in early education, especially when applied to, to adults, whether they are parents or educators. But here is the catch to that statement. And this is a really important one. A lot of the technologies that currently exist are actually not positive for young children. So my colleague Kathy Hirsh-pasek has studied this closely, and she has a beautiful framework that I love, which has four letters on the A for active for active learning, E for engaging, M for meaningful, and S for social or relational, what I call relational. And she has concluded that 90% nine zero of all existing educational educational technology that is meant to, to be, or that is sold or distributed to parents and early childhood settings at the moment do not meet those four criteria. So I and this is what I call the difference between junk tech. So junk like junk food where we have a lot of junk tech at the moment. So 90%. But we can also have what would be a lot more positive, which is what I call in the book Relational Tech. So technology that makes us more connected and that makes us more human. You know, an example of this that everyone would relate to is FaceTime with grandma or grandpa is an amazing use of technology that connects us. So that's not, you know, that's not an area where I would say, let's cut that. That's not what's relational tech. But there is unfortunately

too much of the use of technology for applications that do not connect us and do not make us more human.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:28:06] Mhm. Yeah. Look for tech that brings us together rather than isolating. So.

Isabelle Hau: [00:28:11] Yeah. Or what a lot of scientists are calling. Calling co-viewing.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:28:16] Mhm. So we're about out of time. I have one last question for you. You give us one more quotient in the book, which is the love quotient. What does that mean?

Isabelle Hau: [00:28:29] So it's very connected to relational quotient, of course. And that's a core of what I'm trying to elevate, which is that to have relationships, we also have to have those micro moments that build into relationships. And that's, as we all know, is called love. And the strong belief that I have, which is that if we want our children and all of us as adults, to love, to learn, which is increasingly important in our future of work as well, we first need to learn to love and to love each other.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:29:11] Indeed. Thank you so much for this lovely conversation. I hope I think I felt my own relational intelligence rising through all of it. I hope, and hope you did as well.

Isabelle Hau: [00:29:25] Thank you so much. It was a lovely, lovely conversation.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:29:32] Welcome to today's 33rd page or something extra for you, our listeners. Remember, picture books typically have 32 pages. So this is that little bit extra we're giving you. In today's conversation, we had a brief discussion about baby laughter. And I have to say, it reminded me of a personal experience I had, when my son was, you know, I have to say, I don't actually remember precisely how old he was. Maybe eight months or so. You know, we connected all the way from when he was born. Of course, all the back and forth serve and return, smiling and peekaboo and all the things you'd expect. I mean, after all, I do spend a lot of time talking about this stuff, so of course I did them. But I remembered this one moment. I was lying on the couch in her living room and had him on my chest and face down, and we were playing, and I made a funny face and he did something, and I just started laughing because what he did was just so funny to me. And he picked up on that and started laughing back. It was this deep, hearty, unprompted laugh, and I felt that deep connection right at that moment, even deeper than I had ever since before.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:30:57] So, you know, maybe we can learn something from baby laughter and something about ourselves in the process. And that's today's 33rd pitch. You've been listening to the Reach Out and Read podcast. Reach Out and Read is a nonprofit organization that is the authoritative national voice for the positive effects of reading daily and supports coaches and celebrates engaging in those language rich activities with young children. We're continually inspired by stories that encourage language literacy and early relational health. Visit us at reachoutandread.org to find out more. And don't forget to subscribe to our show wherever you listen to your podcasts. If you like what you hear, please leave us a review. Your feedback helps grow our podcast community and tells others that this podcast is worth listening to. Our show is a production of Reach Out and Read. Our producer is Jill Ruby. Lorie Brooks is our national senior director of external Affairs. Thank you to our founding sponsor, Boise Paper, for making a difference in local communities like ours. I'm your host, Doctor Dipesh Navsaria. I look forward to spending time with you soon. And remember, books build better brains.