



## RAR 102 – What Kids Really Want (and Need), Dr. Meg Meeker

**Sarah:** You're listening to the Read-Aloud Revival podcast. This is the podcast that helps you make meaningful and lasting connections with your kids through books.

Hey, hey, hey! Sarah Mackenzie here. We're back with another round of episodes for the Read-Aloud Revival podcast. This is season 13. We have a bunch of wonderful guests who are coming to the Show over the next couple of months to chat with us about how we can make meaningful and lasting connections with our kids through books. It's going to be a great season. So, all through July and August you can look forward to a brand new episode of the podcast dropping into your ear buds every Tuesday. And if you want to be the very first to know when a new podcast is available or when we have a new booklist or free resource for you, you want to go to [ReadAloudRevival.com](http://ReadAloudRevival.com) and put your name on the email list there so that you get notified first. Another way you can do that is just by texting the word BOOKS to the number 345345. You'll be the first to know when we have new great resources for you: new podcast, new book lists, new awesome things, and you'll also get access to our free Read-Aloud Book List which is getting some updates over the coming year with some new favorite titles, so you're going to want to get that and make sure that you are on the list so you hear about those changes and improvements.

### 1:48 Dr. Meg Meeker is here!

OK, well, today I have a very special guest. Someone I've been wanting to have on the Show for a long time. She has had quite the impact on

my own parenting. I'm talking about Dr. Meg Meeker. Dave Ramsey calls her "America's Mother" – she has been touted as the country's leading authority on parenting, teen and children's health, she's been on Oprah radio, NPR, The Today Show... she's been a little bit everywhere. She's a pediatrician who helps us as parents raise really great kids. Today, she's here to talk to us about ... well, you're going to have to listen to find out. Here's my conversation with Dr. Meeker.

**Sarah:** So, at the Read-Aloud Revival we're all about making meaningful and lasting connections with our kids. In fact, while I was writing The Read-Aloud Family book, at first I thought I was writing a manifesto of sorts on reading aloud, but it became clear to me pretty quickly that the point is not actually the reading aloud, the point is that meaningful connection with our kids. I have Dr. Meeker here today because one of the things you've said, Dr. Meeker, that has had a huge impact on me as a parent is that what our children need and what they really want isn't more activities, more things, more lessons, more gadgets, what they really want is us. So, talk to me about what you mean when you say what they really want is us.

### 3:25 What kids really want

**Dr. Meeker:** Well, first of all, thanks for having me, Sarah. You know, you're right on. And it's such a simple message but it's one that I have to constantly come back to and encourage parents because conscientious parents don't realize it but they're acting under a lot of peer pressure, and by that I mean, if your best friends or my best friends have kids our age it's very natural for us to, sort of, compare what our kids are doing with what our best friends kids are doing. And, sort of,



feeling well, you know what, my good friend's kids are in soccer and dance, and mine are only in soccer, so gee whiz maybe I better step up my game. So, I think in a lot of parenting there's this undertone, this subconscious drive to constantly put our kids in more and sign our kids up for more because that's what we know, that's sort of the collective parenting model. But, the reality is, and this is really important for parents to understand, a child's identity is shaped by spending face-to-face time with mom or dad and scouring our faces for clues about what we think about them and what we believe about them. And that's why this one-on-one time, got to be in the same room, eye-contact, and I love the reading that you're talking about because it can even happen while someone's reading aloud. But, basically what happens is when a child's in a room with a mom or a dad, they're listening very carefully for what mom thinks about them at that moment. Is mom happy about them? Is she angry at them? Is she irritated at them? Is she happy that they're in the same room? And the same is true with dad. And if kids collect these clues from mom or dad that say, yeah, my dad really enjoys being in the room with me, he's reading to me. Or, he asked me to help cook with him, or he asked me to go on errands with him, so then kids take those clues, positive or negative, mom or dad likes being with me, they enjoy my company, or they're constantly annoyed that I'm around – they internalize them and that's who they become. And you and I know this because we were kids once, too – how many adults do we know are still trying to prove to their mother or dad that they're really OK...

**Sarah:** Right.

**Dr. Meeker:** ... so, that's why this face-to-face, one-on-one time is so critical to not only a child's

self-esteem but to their identity formation, so being with them more and having them do less builds a better character in your kids.

**Sarah:** Yeah, I think I've heard you say before that your kids, especially your older kids and teens, can walk into a room and kind of gauge your mood in the first 15 seconds, or something. Tell me about that.

**Dr. Meeker:** Oh, you bet. Because, here's the thing what parents need to realize. Kids of all ages, even if they're 18 years old, basically from a year on, well, no, younger than that, sorry, are connected to their parents by a need that's based in love. So they have a need-based love. They need parents. Parents don't need children, so when your child is in the room with you they figure out very quickly what kind of mood you're in because they need to know how you feel about them, what you think about them, if you're happy to see them, because they want you so much to want them around. So, that's why when dad walks home or mom walks home at the end of a busy day and it's 5:30 and somebody (little Sally) is sitting out at the kitchen table coloring, she immediately sizes up mom or dad to figure out is she in a good mood or a bad mood? Is dad in a good mood or a bad mood? Because then if he's in a good mood does he see me, does he like me? Uh huh, yeah, OK, I feel good I can keep on coloring. If dad is in a bad mood, Sally goes uh, ooh, daddy's in a bad mood he must not like me, I better stop coloring. Uh oh, what's going on? So a child is constantly processing what kind of a mood you're in because they need to feel better about life in that moment.



## 8:00 A peaceful and happy parent

**Sarah:** This resonates so much with me. I know a lot of our listeners here are homeschooling parents and one of the things I was just sharing at a homeschooling conference recently was that the curriculum doesn't matter nearly so much as our disposition and what affects our children more than anything in our homeschools, or if we don't homeschool just in our parenting all around, is that peaceful and happy parent, that peaceful and happy mother or father, right? I think that's what I hear you saying.

**Dr. Meeker:** Absolutely. You know, happy moms make happy kids, and happy dads make happy kids. Now, there's a caveat to that. You don't take off and do whatever you feel like doing just to be happy so that you're home one hour a week and you're happy. What I mean by that is it's really important for parents to do a lot of self-care so that they feel content, as content as possible, around their kids because kids wear our feelings – they're little sponges and there's usually one or two in the pack who wear them more than the other kids. You know, that's that really sensitive child who, if mommy's having a bad day they're going to go outside and pick flowers and try to make you feel better. I'd like to say it's because they really care about you, but what they really want is you to be happy so they can be happy.

**Sarah:** Yeah.

**Dr. Meeker:** So really, kids are profoundly egocentric and that's good – that's the way they're supposed to be. So, if you're a parent who basically enjoys your life as a mom or a dad you're going to have really happy content kids. If you're really miserable in your life one or two of your kids are going to wear that misery. Now, I don't want to freak parents out and say they can

never have a bad day. Of course, you can. But what I mean is do what you need to do to help yourself live a pretty content life because that's really going to shape your kids.

## 10:00 Competition kills joy

**Sarah:** You have so many wonderful books and one of my favorites is *The Ten Habits of Happy Mothers* and in that book, one of the habits, I think it's habit four, is "Say no to competition" and I don't remember what year this book came out but I think this is probably even more relevant now than when it was when you first came out with the book because of the expansion of social media used ...

**Dr. Meeker:** Yes, Oh!

**Sarah:** ... and what I know for myself (I have six kids) I will start to feel discontent or down or frustrated or angry a lot more often when I'm comparing myself to what I see on social media, so I think that's a huge piece of the puzzle there, is saying no to competition, right?

**Dr. Meeker:** Oh, absolutely! Absolutely, and I'll tell you something, Sarah, I just spoke at a local school chapel on this. There are very clear studies that show there is a link, a direct link between the amount of social media use in girls and depression. And it makes a lot of sense; first of all, social media's a show-off zone. It's really not about connecting with people, it's about showing off, it's about showing everybody, 'Look how great I look. Look how happy my kids are. Look how well dressed my kids are. Look at my kids who are learning to do the laundry and they're four!' And to that I say, "Go away!" I will tell you, I can't go on social media. And, I'm old, and I should have a really healthy self-esteem, but you know what? It makes you feel bad about



yourself because no matter what you're doing somebody else out there is prettier, skinnier, has happier kids, is traveling the globe, has this really glamorous job, is making a lot of money, and she certainly isn't slogging around kids on her hip with ketchup all over her face. You know?

**Sarah:** Yeah.

**Dr. Meeker:** People don't post pictures like that, and so I don't go on there, but you're absolutely right – mothers by nature are fiercely competitive creatures, and we want to do the best we possibly can at this mothering thing. We don't want to mess it up. And we're so convinced that we're going to do something that is going to harm our child and for sure they're going to go to jail when they're 16 if we don't get the right curriculum or send them to the right kindergarten at the right time or start them at the right time ... or whatever it is, we're convinced that we're really going to mess up our kids. And, to those people I say this, God is a perfect parent and look how many messed up kids he has. So, even if you're really perfect at this mothering thing your kids are going to grow up to be who they are, and so your job is to steer them this way and steer them that way, and one thing that absolutely, 100% will kill your joy as a mom is to compare what you're doing with your kids to with what your good friends are doing with their kids. And we all have this list in our heads, and I think I write about this in the book, that we constantly review, 'I need to do this, I need to do this, I need this, I need this, I should this, I should this, I should this, I should not have peanut butter in the house because what if my kids suddenly develops peanut allergy when they're 5 and I didn't know about it, they could die,' or 'What if I choose the wrong laundry soap? What if I send him to the wrong school?' and it absolutely kills

our joy as mothers so I think it's really important to do a lot of self-talk and say, "You know what? At the end of the day I'm going to pick out three things that I did really well as a mom, or tried really hard to do, and I'm give myself a pat on the back, and I'm not going to compare myself to how my friends are doing it." It takes a concerted effort; you have to be very intentional about it, but it really will help pull back and stop comparing yourself to other moms, because your kids don't want that mom, they want you.

**Sarah:** Yeah.

**Dr. Meeker:** They don't want your best friend to parent them. And they don't want their aunt to parent them they want you to parent them. And so, just do a good enough job and your kids will do great.

## 18:09 Time & attention - how to make it count

**Sarah:** We're talking about being attentive and connecting with our kids, tell me about the difference between – I've heard you talk about this before and I'd love for our podcast listeners to hear you talk about the difference between being an active parent on the sidelines of your kids' soccer game or basketball game, or whatever, or watching your child's orchestra concert, or for our homeschooling parents, teaching our kids – what's the difference between that kind of time and attention and the time we spend just delighting in the presence of our kids?

**Dr. Meeker:** That's a great question. There's a huge difference and understanding the difference is critical. And that is, we're as a culture; secular culture, Christian culture, Jewish culture – it doesn't matter what culture eco-system your kids are growing up in – it really doesn't matter, our



culture is incredibly performance-driven and parents are performance-driven. So what that means is if our kids excel at something or do well: they get good grades, they're ahead of themselves on the curriculum (I know you have a lot of homeschool parents), they're star on the basketball team, they're doing really well in this, and the piano, or whatever, then we feel like a job is well done. So, in a way, it's very self serving, it's very egocentric of us ...

**Sarah:** Yeah, yeah.

**Dr. Meeker:** ... and I will ask mothers if you think you're not competitive with your kids pay attention to the conversations you have over the next week with your girlfriends. How many times do you remark on what your kids are doing? And don't! Stop yourself. Even if a friend of yours said, "Oh Johnny just won the soccer game. I'm so pleased, I'm so happy. Johnny is excelling in gymnastics and I know I shouldn't have him in five days of gymnastics a week when he's 3, but you know, he's just so talented! God just gave him this incredible talent." OK! So, anyway, but here's the difference, Sarah, and it's really important. If you're applauding your child's performance you need to back off. And, I will tell parents if you're at your child's soccer practices and their piano recitals and their piano practices and you're clapping, and you're "Oh good, good, I'm so proud of you, I'm so proud of you!" stop, because kids see right through that. And what kids tell me, and they usually figure this out before junior high is this, if I'm not on the soccer field or I'm not doing my homework right or I'm not practicing the piano, mom doesn't pay any attention to me. I saw an elite swimmer who went through college swimming, and she really could have been on the Olympics, this kid was really good – she was Division 1 swimming. Her whole

relationship with her mother centered around her swimming because mom came to every single swim event, college, high school, anything. After she graduated college and she stopped swimming her relationship with her mother just fell apart. They didn't know what to talk about, they didn't know what to do. And so, if you find yourself as a parent constantly applauding your child's performance, back off. Your child doesn't want that kind of attention. They feel like a little marionette. They feel like they need to continue to perform to get your attention. So here's how you not do that, here's how you avoid that:

**Sarah:** OK.

**Dr. Meeker:** ... focus on praising your child's character. Find a character quality in your child that is innate, or that you want to develop. Is your child tenacious? Is your child stubborn? Is your child patient? Is your child kind? Is your child a giving person? Then you find times when your child exercises that. You get down on your knees, you look at them, and you go, "You know what, Sally, you were so kind to your sister, the way you said that, I am so proud of you." Boom! There you go. And that helps you not focus on your child's performance, focus on their character because no matter what your child's skill level, intelligence, or abilities, every child has some character quality you can praise.

**Sarah:** And we might not notice it unless we're intentional about looking for it. I don't know, I think as the mother we have that tendency, I have that tendency to look (I'll speak for myself here) at my own kids and you see all the things that you feel like you need to fix in them, and then it's just that we notice the things that bother us instead of noticing the things that they're doing well.



**Dr. Meeker:** And we run around we want to clip this behavior, clip that behavior, clip this behavior, clip that behavior, and it drives our kids crazy and it drives us crazy. And what we do is we buy in to this feeling that if I just applaud my child enough their self-esteem will go up, they'll be a happy person, and we'll have a very smooth relationship. Wrong. Your child doesn't want to be a performer for you, your child just wants you to enjoy being with them. And I will tell you a secret, I worked with a lot of high risk teens, I helped start a halfway home for high risk kids here, 15 years ago. Every single high risk teenager I've ever had has said two things to me: (1) no one cares to listen to me, and (2) nobody cares enough to say, "No." So, in other words, these are kids that feel no one sees them, no one listens, no one wants to listen. And so it's really important for you to just stop and pay attention to what your kids are saying, and don't always feel you need to correct everything. I think mothers, we feel like, 'oh my gosh, why did my child say this? I better stop that type of thinking, I better stop that behavior before it gets really out of control.' You know what? Sometimes just listen and watch and wait, and a lot of the things just go away on their own.

## 24:26 The most powerful tool we have ...

**Sarah:** One of the things I find myself experiencing with my teens and my older kids, as a parent, and I've been talking to a lot of other parents, especially at these homeschooling conferences, and they all say this too, is that I think in the past I have underestimated how terribly important discussion is in parenting. I sort of think now it's probably the powerful tool I have to parent well, is this ability to talk with my kids.

In fact, in The Read-Aloud Family there's a part in there where I say if you actually need to read less with your kids, do that, if it means you'll make more space and time for talking with our kids.

**Dr. Meeker:** Yes.

**Sarah:** Do you want to talk to us a little bit about what that should look like?

**Dr. Meeker:** Yes. And I'll talk specifically to the mothers out there now, too, because as I said we're very competitive and we tend to be very controlling, and we want to control the dialog because we have to get our kids to understand what we're trying to say.

**Sarah:** Yeah.

**Dr. Meeker:** And if they don't get it the first time we'll say it over and over and over and over. Well, that doesn't work. One of the best ways to teach your kids and to have control of the conversation is to listen very carefully – don't interrupt when they're talking to you – let them finish a sentence because what mothers typically do is we'll ask our kids a question, they'll answer the question, half way through their answer we formulate the correct answer, and we interrupt them before they finish the sentence to correct what they're saying.

**Sarah:** Yeah. I so do that.

**Dr. Meeker:** That doesn't do any good for anybody. All it does is exasperate the heck out of, so if you need to count in your head to five or ten, and as you're listening to your child, listen to them and look at them while they're talking. If a child feels you're listening to you, they will talk to you and engage with you. A lot of parents say my kids will never talk to me. Oh yes they will, if you listen. The problem is you're not listening. And you don't want to hear what your kids have to



say, and you want to banish the conversation, and you want to correct them all the time. So, if you let your kids finish their sentences and make them stay in the room, even if they're angry, and say, "OK, I'm going to listen to what you have to say, but there's rules if you're saying things; you can't swear, you can't be mean to me, and you can't wreck my stuff, or hit me." So, you're going to have rules if you're angry, and you listen to your kids and then, rather than correcting what they say, say a little piece of what they said back to you, "Wait a minute, Sally, I heard you say that I never listen to you. I'm so sorry. When do I do that? When do I not listen to you?" So you reiterate a little piece of what they said, which shocks them because they realize, wow, you really were paying attention, and then you ask a question. So, you can direct the conversation by asking questions, follow up questions: "What makes you say that?" "Why would you say that?" "Where did you hear that?" "Do I really do that?" "When do I do that?" "I don't want to do that, how can you help me?" If you question a child and they are engaged with you they will talk to you for an hour.

**Sarah:** And it takes them off the offensive it sounds like.

**Dr. Meeker:** Completely.

## 27:53 The Runaway Bunny (and our teens!)

**Sarah:** Yeah, puts you on the same side. I think that's one of the things I forget, and that a lot of us forget, in parenting is that we're actually on the same team as our kids, we're all rooting for each other, but we forget that. We're just about out of time but there was one other thing I wanted to ask you which was, I've heard you talk

about The Runaway Bunny before which is one of my favorite board books. I love that book so much and you were talking about how that book is sort of a model for how we should pursue our teens and older kids. Can you just talk about that real briefly before we run out of time?

**Dr. Meeker:** Absolutely. So, teenagers and kids pull away because of the way they feel about life. But, parents take it very personally, and they go, 'Oh, you don't like me, you don't want me to touch you.' I'll never forget, our son is our youngest, we have three daughters and our son, and he's our baby, he's 26 but he's still ... OK. And, I'll never forget when he finally just pushed away from me and it crushed me. It crushed me! I thought I've lost him, I've lost him. He's going now for sure, because I don't have this mom/son bond anymore.

**Sarah:** How old was he when that happened, do you remember?

**Dr. Meeker:** 13.

**Sarah:** OK, OK.

**Dr. Meeker:** 13. I mean, shaving, voice change, six-feet tall, no can touch my mother. OK? And, so anyway, but what happens is, kids, because of what they're going through in life pull away from their parents, they feel foreign in their bodies and what parents do is they go "Ooh, OK. My child's a horrible teenager because all American teenagers turn horrible, they turn into monsters, there we go. I'll see him in five years." NO. Chase them. Love them. Go after them. If they don't want to hug you in front of their friends, go to them at bedtime, sit on the edge of the bed, touch their foot and go, 'How was your day?' And if they don't want to talk you go, OK, walk out. Then go the next night, the next night – it's the runaway bunny thing. A teenager who's



withdrawing from their parents, feels so sad and so unheard and so bad about life, and the last thing a parent should do is withdraw from their teenager. Gently, gently, gently pursue them, listen, ask questions, love on them, come at them, don't interfere in their life, don't be obnoxious, don't demand that they talk to you; the worst thing a mother can do to a teenager son is say, "You never talk to me anymore. Do you just not like me?" You know, don't do that to your sons, but pursue them until they will come back to you.

**Sarah:** So good. Oh. Dr. Meeker, the listeners to this podcast, we're parents, we're all parents who really want to connect with our kids and this Show has been so good at help reminding us of what's most important when we're making connections with our kids, so thank you so much for your time. Before we hop off where can our listeners learn more from you?

**Dr. Meeker:** Oh well, go to [MegMeekerMD.com](http://MegMeekerMD.com), I have a lot of parenting tools and tips and things. And, then I also have a podcast "Parenting Great Kids," and someone said, "Why would you call it that?" And I said, "I've never met a child I don't think is great."

**Sarah:** I love that. I love that podcast. It's one of the podcasts I listen to, just about every single episode when it pops in my feed. We'll make sure we'll put that podcast in the Show Notes, Dr. Meeker's website in the Show Notes, and several of her books which are all fantastic, in the Show Notes as well. So, thank you so much for joining us. I really loved talking to you.

**Dr. Meeker:** Oh, thank you so much, Sarah, and I love, love, love your book and everything you do. All of your listeners need to keep listening to you because you're right on track.

## 31:07 Let the kids speak

Now, it's time for Let the Kids Speak. This is my favorite part of the podcast where kids tell us about their favorite stories that have been read-aloud to them.

**Child1:** I am Isla May and I am 6. I live in New Zealand. My favorite books are The Penderwicks series. My most liked characters are Hound and Batty because Batty and Hound have such a special relationship, and I am a dog person, too. Mummy likes The Penderwicks in Spring best. It made her cry.

**Child2:** Hi, my name is Lydia. I'm from China, Idaho. I'm 10 years old and my favorite book is The Betsy and Tacy. I love that book because I like all of the adventures they had.

**Child3:** My name is Leah. I live in China, Idaho. I'm 5 years old. My favorite book is Happy Picnic. I like the part when they take their cartons off.

**Child4:** Hello, my name is Finley. I'm 7 years old. I live in Montana and my favorite book is Winnie the Pooh. My favorite part is when Tigger chokes on acorn.

**Child5:** Hey, my name is Priscilla and I'm from Tennessee and my favorite book is Gymnastics. [Mom: Top 25 Gymnastics by Jeff Savage.] Top 25 Gymnastics by Jeff Savage because I'm in gymnastics.

**Child6:** Hi, my name is Benjamin and I am 6 years old and I'm from Tennessee. My favorite books are all The Narnia books. All The Chronicles of Narnia books.

**Child7:** [Mom: what's your name?] Ian. [Mom: how old are you?] 6. [Mom: where are you from?] Sarnia, Ontario, Canada. [Mom: right now, what's

your favorite read-aloud?] Ginger Pye. [Mom: Why?] Because they got their ducky back.

**Child8:** I'm Cole. My age is 8 years old. I live in Sarnia, Ontario, Canada. My favorite book is Dash of a Dog Diaries. And I like it because it was exciting, some parts intense, and I like the boy dog in it, Dash, was going to become the future dad.

**Child9:** [Mom: what's your name?] Sammy. [Mom: how old are you?] 4. [Mom: where do you live?] Ontario, Canada. [Mom: and what's your favorite read-aloud book?] Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle. [Mom: why?] Because she's mean.

**Child10:** My name is Felicity. I'm 6 years old. I live in Virginia. My favorite book is Half Magic by Edward Eager. I like it because all of the adventures they have with the charm, and I like that Martha's the youngest, Jane's the oldest, Mark is the only boy, and Katherine's the middle girl.

**Child11:** My name is Sebastian. I'm 4 years old. My favorite book is Grasshopper on the Road because the bees weaving the road.

**Sarah:** Oh man, thank you kids. I love those messages so very much. If your kids want to have their messages aired on the Read-Aloud Revival podcast, all you need to do is go to [ReadAloudRevival.com](http://ReadAloudRevival.com), scroll to the bottom of the page, and you'll see where you can leave a message. It's very, very simple with a click of a button. We air every message we receive, in the order we receive it in. I hope you enjoyed the podcast today. If you want to check out the Show Notes, you'll be able to find links to everything we talked about, everything Dr. Meeker and I talked about during our conversation right there, and that's going to be at [ReadAloudRevival.com/102](http://ReadAloudRevival.com/102), because this is podcast 102. So, go to

[ReadAloudRevival.com/102](http://ReadAloudRevival.com/102) for the Show Notes. And, I am so glad to have you with us for another season of the podcast. I cannot wait to share next week's Show with you. So meet me back here, next Tuesday, same place, same time. And until then, go make meaningful and lasting connections with your kids through books.