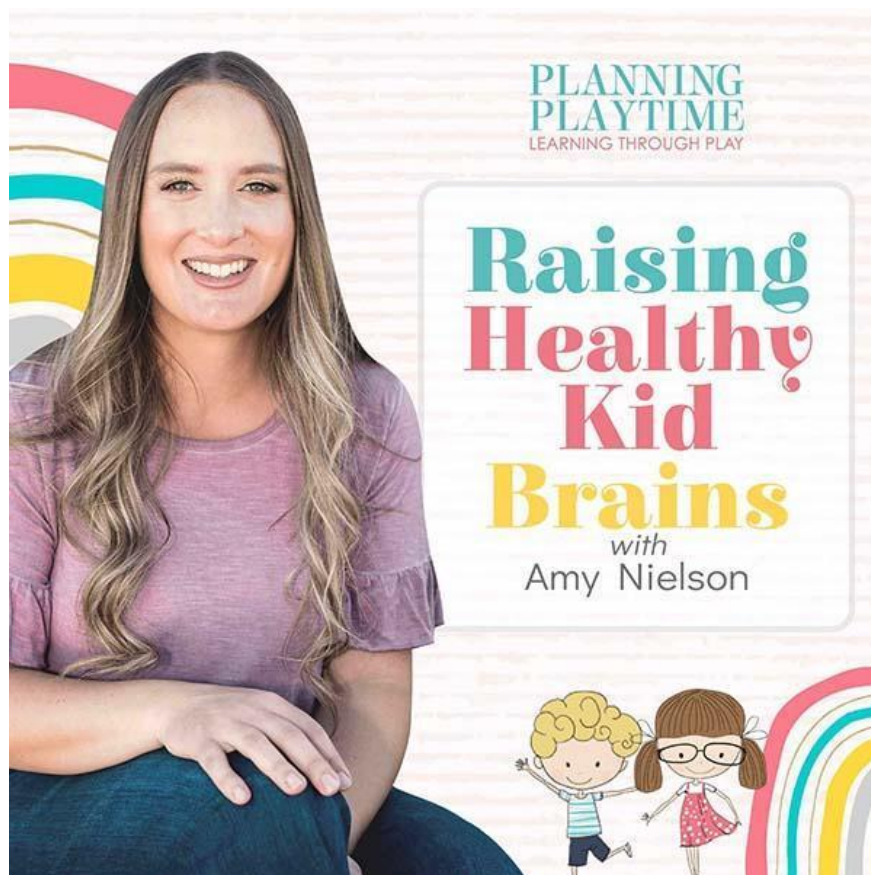


Ep #51: Creative Ways to Get Kids Excited About Reading with Dr. Victoria Waller



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Amy Nielson

[Raising Healthy Kid Brains](#) with Amy Nielson of Planning Playtime

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How do you get your child to love reading and what if they have learning differences? Today I had the most amazing conversation with the energetic, forever young, Dr. Victoria Waller, who is a very creative child educator, a rock star tutor and author of the bestselling book, *Yes, Your Child Can: Creating Success for Children With Learning Differences*. She is prominently known for her tutoring work with celebrity children, including the Kardashians. And her techniques are unique, and interesting and fascinating.

Dr. Waller was so interesting to talk to. She has very strong opinions. She goes to work to battle for her clients, for the students she teaches, and she is so creative. I hope you'll enjoy this episode and our conversation. It's coming up right after this.

Welcome to the *Raising Healthy Kid Brains* podcast where moms and teachers come to learn all about kids' brains, how they work, how they learn, how they grow and simple tips and tricks for raising the most resilient, kind, smart, compassionate kids we can. All while having lots of grace and compassion for ourselves because you know what? We all really need and deserve that too. I am your host, Amy Nielson. Let's get ready to start the show.

Amy: Dr. Victoria, welcome to the show. We're so happy to have you on today.

Victoria: Well, I'm very excited to be here, that's for sure.

Amy: Yes, this is so fun. So we've been chatting for a minute just before we got on to start. And Victoria has this entire huge bookshelf of all the books behind her. And I just kind of want to go visit and see all the books because I love books so much. So we're talking today about reading, right?

Victoria: We're talking about reading, starting very young. I'm not talking about elementary school. I'm talking about your little child who's at home, what happens when they're born? How do you start making them learn to love to read?

Amy: I'm so excited. Because I think so many children kind of struggle with this. It's kind of hard sometimes to learn to read. And I think sometimes in our

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attempt to help get kids reading, we've kind of turned it into a chore and then it's not fun. It's a thing you have to do. So I am so excited to talk with you today and give our listeners just ideas on how to make this something that's truly a passion and starting so early, So when do we start? Where does this start, when we get kids passionate about reading?

Victoria: I know you're going to think this is really weird. In utero. I know that sounds weird. And it's funny, one of my students was Kourtney Kardashian's daughter and she's pregnant now. And I said, "Start reading right now." And she thought I was out of my mind. I said, "No, start reading poetry books, play music, read little, *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* I don't know, nobody has proven anything. But I'm telling you, even in utero, if you do that every day there must be something that transfers. I don't know.

That's just after over 40 years of teaching kids that's what I think. The big thing is, read, read, read to your child. And you're probably thinking, I see kids out now, it's a little upsetting to me because I've been doing this so many years. Because the kids are in their little, the carts and the mom's wheeling them and they have an iPad in their hand and they're literally two years old. No, no, no iPad right now. Read, read, read. Put the cardboard books at the end of their bed. I used to love doing that.

I think the kids were sitting up, so maybe they were what, 11 or 12 months, something like that. And I'd have the hardback. And in my book, *Yes, Your Child Can: Creating Success for Children With Learning Differences*. I have a whole chapter on books for little ones up through five. The hardback books, that are hard, so they're not going to tear them and eat them or anything like that. Very simple little books that maybe you've read to them, *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?*

And they're listening to you. And they're gaining it even when they're little. I had books at the end of the bed. And I remember it was always funny, with Alison I would hear her on the intercom and I'd hear her going and she had the book open and she was reading and that was [crosstalk]. But you put them at the end of the bed, books in the car, not the iPad. Books in the car, books in the buggy.

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You're out to dinner, always take a little bag with books, fun books. It's so funny, now they make so many books that are so great. There's one called *Would You Rather?*

And in my book, I give you a whole list of books, but *Would You Rather*, would you rather be a skunk or would you rather be a fox? And they have the funniest things to ask and it makes the kids think. And they're also funny, but even when kids are four, you could be asking, would you rather be a truck or would you rather be a water slide? They're funny, would you rather. And they have one for Halloween. I just bought one for each of my students that I tutor because I thought they're so funny.

And they make you think and you're getting language out of them, you're talking. Please, please talk to your children. Don't turn on those iPads. Don't turn on the TV. Even little ones, I see little, tiny ones, they're stuck on the TV and they don't want to do anything with a book. A lot of the TV shows are also good. I'm not saying they're not. We had Sesame Street and my kids watched Sesame Street every single day. So I'm not saying that.

When you're out to dinner, take some little books with you. Have things to do for them, everything with reading and talking. That's how you get them interested so that they want to have a book. If your child has a stuffy, make up stories with the stuffies. They love that and even if they can't talk and you're saying, "Oh, look, here's Mr. Snowman and he's talking." Have stuffies around so that they become part of the book.

Also, of course, you're reading a book at bedtime. If you read a book like let's say *Brown Bear, Brown Bear*, When you're reading to them, as they start to get language and you go, "Brown bear, brown bear, what do you, and let them ants go see. And thinking they won't and then you're going to be shocked that an 18 month old is giving you the end of all of the story and you're going, "What?" But this is what reading is about, it's enjoyment. I want that book. I want to hold that book. You said that. The way you love books, you just love them.

Amy: Yeah. Well, and I think what's so interesting about that, I think you're building language. You're building all of those things that we know are so critical, [Raising Healthy Kid Brains](#) with Amy Nielson of Planning Playtime

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and different styles of language with different books. And then the curiosity that you're building with asking questions and then kind of helping them discover knowledge gaps where they're learning more and all those things.

But one of the other things, I think I was just thinking about, as you were talking, is that you're literally creating a culture and an identity as a reader. Which is so valuable because once our brain assumes an identity, then we'll do everything to protect it. And so if you've built into these children this identity that they are readers, they have books. Books are a part of their culture. They're a part of their identity. Then for the rest of their life it's almost harder to not read than to read, because it's just part of who they are. So that seems to kind of maybe take away some of the resistance there too maybe.

Victoria: I think if you start when they're 15/18 months old, well, when in utero when you're reading to them, it becomes just part of their life and they don't know any different. I know with working parents, it's very hard and they just tend to give them their iPad. I know they do that. There are great little stories on the iPad too. I mean there's stories that they read to children. Those are good too. But no, I like books, what can I tell you? I like a book. And that's also at bedtime, if you put them in the story.

Amy: They love that.

Victoria: They love being in the story and they think it's so funny, is that in the book? They don't know if it is or isn't. You have a list of these are things you do in the house. I always had poster boards with stuff on them, always. But I'd have a list of what we're doing today and then I use a marker board. First thing, what are we going to do? Today we go to school, yay. Then what are we doing? We're going to music time. And you're pointing to each word and you're reading it, very simple sentences. and then they'll pretend even, even at two, they'll pretend to be reading something.

Daily activities, just what are you going to do today? What are we doing? Cooking with children is unbelievable. My seven year old student was an expert in cooking. Don't ask me, I can cook, I follow a recipe. He would do a recipe and say, "Vicky, I think it needs another half teaspoon of salt." What, seven years old.

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And it's funny, he now is a 12th grader. He still cooks all the time, but he wants to be a marine biologist. He found his passion. Very young, I talk about this in my book. It's very important.

I don't ever call a child, having disabilities, ever. They have differences. A lot of children have differences but I can tell you right now, if anybody said, "Your child has differences." Be happy because that means they're really smart. Think about the people, Simone Biles, she's now the GOAT, Greatest Of All Time. She has learning differences.

The funny one is the astronaut. The astronaut goes up in the plane. Just recently he went up in the spaceship and they said, "What was the one thing you thought about?" I thought he was going to talk about seeing outside, whatever. He said, "Well, because I have learning differences. They said, "Unbuckle your seatbelt and you could float around", but because I don't know right from left, I unbuckled my parachute." And they're all yelling, "No, no, put it back." We're talking about a person who went to space, I mean, really.

All these kids, it starts early. These are the kids that have passions and strengths and you have to find them. Sometimes parents will say to me, "He's obsessed with drawing." Good, let's see him draw. A parent came to me and she said to me, I said, "What does he like to do? What's something he's good at?" And she looked at me and she said, "Well, he likes to use the computer." When he came to me, we talked and I said, "What do you like?" He says, "I like to potter around with drawing." I said, "Really? Oh, okay." And of course I was going to use art then.

Amy: Absolutely, yeah.

Victoria: [Crosstalk] the next time, I have a white Lab, painted a picture of my white Labrador and I have it framed. I said to the mother, "Do you realize that he's a real artist and he's seven?" And she said, "Well, yeah, but he can't read." She never thought about what he could do because there was so much that he couldn't do, she was focusing on the wrong things. You need to be focusing on what they can do and use that to teach them, that's what happened.

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Amy: How do you take some of those things, because I think this is such an awesome idea. How do we take those things that our kids are interested in and kind of harness all of that energy and that passion, that love, and kind of bring it into helping them learn to read if that's something that they're maybe struggling with?

Victoria: Of course, you have to [inaudible] books about it. One of my parents, he loved trucks. Every weekend are cars and trucks, every weekend, he took them to car dealerships with the fancy cars. And he saw all those cars. I saw an article in the newspaper about the man who was head of Mattel Matchbox Cars. And he said how he couldn't read when he was younger and he found his passion in cars. And now he was vice president of Mattel. So this kid knew everything about Matchbox cars. I called him on the phone. He answered the phone, he said, "Who is this?" I said, "I'm a teacher. I really need to talk to you."

We spent the day at Mattel and it was so fascinating, I have to tell you. The building isn't marked. Isn't that funny? It doesn't say Mattel because they're making the new Matchbox cars and they don't want anybody to go there and steal them, steal the idea. From the moment we walked in, I have no idea what they were talking about. They [inaudible] 1955 one and an 85 one and this one. And I just walked around not knowing. And he had a bunch of questions to ask him and he asked the questions and he came back and he wrote the answers down and I got him interested in something he loved. And his father had been taking him around the car dealerships.

Another child, third grade, the teacher gives them things to write about. She gave him the topic of strawberries. Hello. What third grader, boy, girl, anybody is going to write about strawberries? Well, I knew he really was interested. I can't remember what he was interested in. He was interested in roller-coasters, I forgot, with his grandmother. He was interested in roller-coasters and she lived in Cedar Point, Ohio and they would go there. So we wrote to the teacher, "Do you think he could write about roller-coasters and read about them?"

The teacher, who I felt was an old time teacher, sat at the front of the room and sort of barked things out. She said, "Sure." This child not only did we interview

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the President of Cedar Point. And one of his questions was, we went to Cedar Point on the roller-coaster and my mom lost her Gucci sunglasses.” And the president said, “Let me find out how she could find them.” He didn’t even know. And he comes back and he says, “We have a lost and found and if she had gone to the lost and found and told them what she lost, they would look for it that day or when the things were brought.”

Because apparently a lot of people wear stuff on the roller-coasters, which you shouldn’t. But he used something he loved, parents have to be proactive. Your child’s having some differences and maybe please, you have them getting help with somebody. And I always tell everybody, “It doesn’t have to be Vicky with a doctorate.” I met a girl the other day sitting at a table, she said, “I have learning differences.” She’s 32. She goes, “My second grade teacher tutored me through high school.” I said, “What? I can’t even do 4th grade math with the kids.”

She said she loved teaching little kids, but she was brilliant. She could do all my math and do everything all the way through high school. So it doesn’t matter who you get but get somebody that understands, well use the child’s passions and strengths to teach them. You have them write about what they like. You have them cook with you. Talk about executive functioning. There’s a chair that stands up and the child stands on top even at five years old, four years old, three years old and they cook with you. Even do [inaudible] in the kitchen, you’re doing executive functioning. First we get out the mixer, then we get [crosstalk].

Amy: Right. Sequencing and everything, yeah, absolutely.

Victoria: [Crosstalk] what you do with kids.

Amy: I wanted to kind of look and hear really quick because one of the things that I was thinking about and that I saw that you’d mentioned was just finding fun ways to kind of put something out for kids to read. So one of the things you mentioned was writing a joke or a message in their lunch, which I thought was so fun. So for me, I’ll do with my kids. If I am sending them a sack lunch, I’ll write the question part of a joke on the front. And then they don’t get the answer until they get down into their lunch. Because they always, they’re thinking about it all day.

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So I love it. It's so much fun. And they have to wait until they eat their lunch. And then all the kids around them at the table are invested and they want to know the answer to the joke or whatever. And I mean, you could just Google a list of fun kids' jokes.

Victoria: [Crosstalk] fabulous books. Fabulous. I have the best joke books ever. I can send you the name of them. And I send them to all my students when they're at camp. [Crosstalk] my grandson is sixth grade. I thought there's no way, but I didn't care. I sent him these joke books. It's on Amazon, *100 Best Jokes for Kids*. And they're unbelievable. Some of them are little stories and they're hilarious. Every night, he said, "Everybody said, "Okay, Andrew, tell us a joke."" And he would use the jokes that I sent him. Kids love jokes.

Some of them are simple riddles, but some of them are little stories, which are hilarious and I can send you that. I'm trying to see if I have them here in the garage.

Amy: That is so fun. I loved, you were talking too earlier about marker board. And one of the things I've found that's been interesting. I have a marker board now near my dining room table and my kids will, someone will start doing a drawing or write part of a message and then it kind of becomes this thing that evolves throughout the day. So the other kids will come and respond to it or do something funny. And my boyfriend will come in and he'll do something funny with it or whatever. And people are just, it becomes this ongoing humor thing all day.

Or we can even do a, just I love you message or whatever. So it becomes this thing that's loving on each other or just teasing each other or joking around. And then even our neighbor kids are getting involved now. So their 14 year old girls, they come over battling on the marker board with whoever is there eight hours later. And so are there other ideas that you have that are maybe similar to something like that, that are just some other fun ways to get kids excited about words and reading?

Victoria: Sure. What I love the most are the Ash on Amazon, they're called Ashley hardback books and [inaudible] for maybe older kids. You could do the [Raising Healthy Kid Brains](#) with Amy Nielson of Planning Playtime

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would you rather, would you rather be an astronaut or stick your foot in mud? The would you rather. They're small books or they're 8 x 10 for the bigger kids. I have them write stories. We keep journals. We go on trips and so they take pictures on the trip. I do a lot of stuff with photography. They print out the pictures with their phone. They print out the pictures at home. You put the pictures on the pages.

If they can't write, they retell you the story and you print them out on the pages, you print them. So even little ones who can't read will go back and say, "Here I am at the beach", and the next page. And you have a picture and you've written what the child has said. I mean kids love it and they like to draw the pictures on the cover. And then they have real hardback books that they wrote. I think Ashley books are the best things ever made. I have them at the house all the time.

And then you can also when you're reading with them, a lot of times the little kids like the same story. And you read them a story and leave out a word and you're shocked that they can fill in the word.

Amy: Yeah, I love doing that.

Victoria: So it's building language, building the way sentences work, the way reading works when they start to do that. I also love Amazon boxes. What just happened a couple of weeks ago. It was amazing. The child gets, third grade, 20 pages of every word like lakes, mountains, hills. And she had to memorize every piece of geography. And I'm sitting there going, "There's no way she's memorizing these 25." I said, "Let's go in the garage." 15 minutes, we had an Amazon box, we put white paper on top and she sat with garbage. I have garbage boxes.

I keep different boxes with all kinds of stuff, things that come in the mail, a box, all kinds of things. I buy little trees from Amazon, even boxes that jewelry come in. She made the entire thing on this big box. I got dog food in a huge box. She made the mountains, the trees, the lakes, whatever. Guess what she got on the test? She took it into school. She got 100. And guess what? She'll never forget

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what those [inaudible] are. But if she memorized them, I'll guarantee you, in one day she will have forgotten.

Amy: It's just gone, absolutely.

Victoria: It doesn't take long. Just keep boxes, you'd be surprised how many things you get whether it's an Amazon box or a box with a piece of jewelry or a box that, let's say a computer piece came in. Just keep them in a little part in your garage or a little part somewhere in the house. And when the child has to do something like that, do it with their hands, creating. And then they can write about it and guess what? They'll know what to write about because they made it and they see it, they'll write about it. They may not have the greatest spelling if they have kids with any learning differences, but that's okay.

Amy: But you can work through that, yeah.

Victoria: Yeah, you're going to laugh, something I did. I think I did Pokémon and my grandson says, "Grandma, you threw away thousands of Pokémon cards. They're worth \$1 million." Well, yeah, I loved Pokémon the minute they came out. I think it was 80s or 90s. I would put charts up of all the Pokémon words, and now they're fighting over best way to teach reading. And I go, "Stop fighting. Use all the ways, just stop fighting about which is best." They have phonics in isolation, no child with learning differences is going to learn that way. They need the whole [inaudible].

Pokémon, every character, Pokémon has the long O, the long E, and at the top of the page in the *Pokémon Deluxe Dictionary*, it says how to sound it out. And it shows the child how to sound it out. So I taught all those phonic skills using the Pokémon characters [crosstalk]. And I put up Wheedle, long E, let's write a sentence. Wheedle likes to sit on a seed. You're using vowels [inaudible] in whole sentences, not alone going po, po, po, cut because they're not going to learn to read that way.

Amy: I love just kind of combining the skills, using the power of phonics, but you're doing it in context with something that's kind of more tangible and more real life and something they love. And maybe even adding some hands-on or

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whatever and kind of bringing it into something that's practice-able over and over again, and just going to hit their brain. Bringing that passion into it is so fun. I have a son who's obsessed with Pokémon, so that is really fun. He would love that.

Victoria: I use everything. I use the characters for everything, for spelling words, for vowels, for digraphs, blends. They all have all that in their words, top of the dictionary it says which I always loved from 20/30 years ago. I love that's what they did. So I always had charts with the Pokémon characters. Using clay, I used the plasticine. And let's say you read a story to your child or your child read a storybook and the teacher said, "You have to do something." Make the characters out of plasticine because it doesn't get hard and sometimes the kids with learning differences have brilliance, they have brilliant strengths. I mean things that I could never do. It's always amazing.

Like the boy with the roller-coaster and after he interviewed the head of the roller-coaster park, he made a roller-coaster. Now, if you think I understand what he did with math, every foot of a real roller-coaster was so many inches on this thing he was making. So he made the roller-coaster based on what a real roller-coaster how high they were. I didn't know what he was doing. It was unbelievable. But you know what I love, my best thing? Old cameras. Cameras.

You can get them on Etsy \$5, \$3 and you make characters from, you've read a book with your child and they're very good in art. They don't even have to be but if they are, if they have learning differences, they might be. And you can see this in my book. *My Yes, Your Child Can*, there are characters, the kids make characters and also my Instagram @drvictoriawaller really gives a lot of the projects that I do. There's loads of pictures to help you.

But it's so funny, my website drvictoriawaller, but you make a character. So, [inaudible] did, Strega Nona, where the guy keeps mixing the pot and she tells him, "Don't mix the pot." You have to say something at the end, the pot overflows. And this child, he took the speaker from an old computer. He took the speaker, he put a plastic circle head and eyes and everything. And then he

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made a bowl at the bottom and put in pasta, made pasta out of string. It's so much fun.

That way your child's going, "Oh, yeah, what happened in this story?" They go home and draw a picture. Go home and make a little character, if your child wants to do that. I love old cameras.

Amy: It just gives them, I think something that's more than just words that I'm trying to decode. There's something behind the words. There's something in the words. There's a story. There's characters. There's giving these words something of value to them as opposed to just being this is a task you have to do or you have to decode all of these words and sentences.

Victoria: I have them, my students who can't read, but they are brilliant, they dictate to me and I write. And it's funny, one of the mothers said to me, "I don't understand, the man was swallowed by the whale in the East Coast two summers ago." And I called him and I said, "The student loves whales. Can we interview you?" Well, now we have Zoom. So he interviewed and he dictated what words he wanted to ask him, fabulous 20 questions. And then I said to the mother, "Come when we're interviewing him, I want you to see the Zoom."

After it was done, she went, "I don't understand, he can't read. How did he read those?" And I said, "Because he dictated them. He knows what he wanted to say and we practiced so he could read." And he was bright. Differences are extremely bright. And I don't care what anybody says. I know because I've taught thousands and they are overly smart. And he could read them because he thought about the questions. Did he get a word wrong? Yeah, but he was asking him the right questions.

I like cameras. My very favorite thing, everybody listen, Here With Us Farm Sanctuary, look it up online. This woman owns this farm sanctuary in the East Coast. She's always saying, "I need \$10 for hay this week." It's really hilarious. She is the most amazing woman I have ever encountered. She gets animals, farm animals who have issues. So they have a broken leg or they have something wrong. If you go onto Here With Us Farm Sanctuary, every single

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animal has a story. She has a name for every animal. You write the animal and the animal writes your child back.

Amy: What? That's so fun.

Victoria: [Inaudible] idea. And the animal tells who he's friends with, I play with this one and I play with [crosstalk].

Amy: Oh my goodness.

Victoria: I mean, I can't believe that she has the time to [inaudible]. And she sends you a picture. It's online Here With Us Farm Sanctuary. It's the best thing. And you could do it even with fifth and sixth graders because it's hilarious.

Amy: That's so fun.

Victoria: [Crosstalk] have an animal who's in a wheelchair, goats in wheelchairs. They can't walk and she's adopted them because otherwise they would be killed.

Amy: Right. And they're writing their stories back. I love that. That is such a fun idea. And it could be a really neat writing project too. We are out of time. This has been so fun. I want to come over to your Instagram and just see all of the ideas because I can tell you just have so many more ideas. This is so fun.

And I can see things to do with children that have learning differences but also just kind of all along the way just building this passion for books and for reading and for learning. And so tell us one more time, where we go to follow you on Instagram. And tell us the name of your book again and then we'll include those in the show notes as well for people.

Victoria: Okay. My book is *Yes, Your Child Can: Creating Success for Children with Learning Differences*. And it's Victoria Waller W-A-L-L-E-R. Instagram is @drvictoriawaller -D-R-V-I-C-T-O-R-I-A-W-A-L-L-E-R. And go to my website, same thing drvictoriawaller, it will give you lots of ideas. I have other podcasts

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and other TV, that you can see there too, and you'll get some other ideas. But whatever you do, make sure the books are there forever.

I have a list of books for all ages in my book also. And then also if you do think your child has learning differences, be happy because they're probably very smart or very interesting. A lot of people now are coming out on the internet saying, "I have learning differences", just like Scott Kelly, that was the one, the astronaut. But any kinds of things, you can make things with, always be talking to your kids. Turn those, when you're in the car and they're little, get that iPad off of them, talk to them.

Even if you read a story and leave a word out at the end, or you ask what character do they like in the story, "Have you ever felt this way? The character's so sad, have you ever felt sad?" Use language for even kids without issues because now we've been inside with COVID, with wars, with shootings. There's so many negatives going on, we have to make reading and loving to read positive.

Amy: Yeah. So good. Thank you so much for coming on today and I'm excited to come and get to follow you more and learn more from you.

Victoria: It was wonderful. Thank you.

Don't you just love all the fun things we're learning on the show together? Well, we wanted to give you a chance to practice a little bit of it at home. And so we made you a special freebie just for being a listener here and you can grab it at planningplaytime.com/special-freebie. That is planningplaytime.com/special-freebie. So what this freebie is, I'll tell you, is an amazing alphabet activity that you can start using with your kiddos and it is based in play and is so fun.

You can use dot markers with it, you can use Q-tip painting, you could use circle cereal. There's all kinds of options, but you can print it out today and get started. Just head over to planningplaytime.com/special-freebie and we'll send that to you right away.

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Thank you for hanging out with me today for this fun chat on *Raising Healthy Kid Brains*. If you want to see more of what we're doing to support kiddos and their amazing brains, come visit us on our website planningplaytime.com. See you next week.