



## Podcast 27: Seeing the Child Behind the Behavior

Episode notes: <https://prekteachandplay.com/podcast27>

Kristie: Hey, Laura. It's so fabulous to have you back.

Laura: Hi, Kristie.

Kristie: Today, we're going to talk about seeing the child behind the behavior, but before we get into all of that, just in case, there's maybe one person that hasn't yet heard the amazing things that you share with Solutionaries, take a minute, tell listeners who you are, what you do and then we're going to dive in to how we can better see the child behind the behavior.

Laura: Oh, fun. I'm excited to be back and share with you. My name is [Laura Fish](#) and I live in San Diego, California. I've been doing work with early childhood for over 25 years and in particular, I've been working a lot as a coach in preschool classrooms and as a trainer for professional development teaching children about social, emotional development preventing challenging behavior. My background as a preschool teacher, that's how I started out then I was a mental health consultant for several years and when I started doing that, I found the teaching pyramid framework.

Then for several years I worked with WestEd Center for Child and Family studies, predominantly training and coaching on that framework, and adapting that framework from the national center's model. In California, we have a little bit of an adapted model that I worked on for several years but now, I'm on my own, I'm consulting and I'm still coaching, training, and then bringing in more of my mental health background, my private practice work with interpersonal neurobiology into the work that I do with teachers and coaches. It's impacted a lot of what we're going to talk about today so I'm excited to share.



Kristie: Yeah, definitely. It's so helpful to have all of those pieces of your background come together in a way that's going to really help us think about for anyone that has been following us a little bit really reframing how we think about challenging behaviors not only in terms of what's going on for the child but what's going on for us. Today, we're going to talk a little bit about how to search for, recognize, find the “why” behind child behavior and it's probably not what people expect. They might think, "Oh, we're going to talk about the function of behavior and we're going to invite everyone to do a big old FBA but we're not.

We're going to talk a little but more about what I've been calling an SOS, but we're going have to think more about if that makes sense to anybody else but it's really that this child that's in our care is sending out a distress call around three basic needs that they would love if we would attend to. Talk to us a little bit about these three basic needs and how this starts to reframe how we prevent challenged behaviors but then promote health and well-being.

Laura: Absolutely. The prevention, promotion, intervention framework is really an important framework and it's threaded throughout everything that we've talked about, Kristie in our last few podcast but today, we want to introduce the idea about children's basic needs and the work we're talking about today, I've adopted from [Rick Hanson](#), H-A-N-S-O-N, for your listeners who don't know him. He's phenomenal. The idea is that all human beings have three basic needs.

Broad category for safety which is emotional safety and physical safety, satisfaction, and connection. The reason I'm lit up about this for teachers and for parents is that I watch them struggle when children have challenging behavior for them to see beyond the form of the behavior and look behind the behavior as to what might be triggering the behavior. What might be the reasons why the behavior is occurring.



The form of the behavior can be hitting, biting, punching, kicking, pushing, withdrawing, not eating, running out of the classroom, refusing to go to bed. That's form and that's what we see. If we just look at the form and we just tried to stop the form of the behavior, we are going to be frustrated as adults because we're not going to be that effective and we're also not hitting upon some of these underlying factors that are really driving the behavior. We really want to consider all the time what each individual child's safety, satisfaction, and connection needs might be and are they getting them filled? Do they know how to feel them themselves with help from us?

Kristie: If people go, okay, so they've listened to us talk [before](#) about needs and the difference between a [need and a want](#), and so if they go, okay, there's three needs that humans have, safety, satisfaction and connection, but what's the driver behind it or you say why, but ... How can I say this? One of the things I get struggled with when I think about why, I had this yoga teacher once that said, "Don't ever ask why because it's a circular line of reasoning. You can always ask another why and why is that and why is that, then why is that?"

Sometimes when I think about "why" I also think we're trying to place blame and we're going to figure out who's responsible for it. The parent didn't do this right, or the kid consciously chose to bite somebody because of this. It's not so easy for me and my little brain to find a "why", so help us figure out how do we start thinking about "why" without getting into a circular loop and without trying to find blame.

Laura: Beautiful. One of the things we talk about in practical application with teachers is exactly what your yoga teacher said. Start to notice when you say to a child, "Why did you hit him?" that you get something like, "Mickey Mouse came to my birthday party." It baffles us, right? Why are they telling us why? Sometimes they'll say, "I hit him because I wanted the block he had."



Kristie: Sure.

Laura: They may say that but it's really not an effective approach so this overarching thinking about the “why” is really just a way to trigger in adults their curiosity, their tuning in for them to be able to say, “All right. It's upon me to consider that there's more than what meets the eye. I may be seeing one child hit another child but that's not exactly the whole story. Let me look deeper.” It's really to promote curiosity and your yoga teacher example here is something really good for teachers to know that it is very circular. There isn't one reason “why” the behavior is happening.

There are myriad factors. We work with humans, not Hondas...like I always say so it's incredibly complex. What I hope is to just give teachers and parents a guideline, a guide, a way to make this huge, “what's happening”, look a little bit easier to approach by giving you a framework. A child hits another child or spits on another child and you can consider what are their safety, satisfaction, connection needs and what's not being met?

Then on top of that, we're going to talk about so if he's not getting his safety, satisfaction, connection needs met, “why” did he have to spit? What was the drive to spit and that's where we can talk about also drives and how they're connected to needs.

Kristie: Why don't you go ahead and do that. That makes sense.

Laura: Great. Rick Hanson again further goes on to say that our safety, satisfaction, and connection needs are linked to what we call operating systems in the brain. We have ... Which also I like to think if as drives. We have the drive to meet our needs and we can meet our needs by avoiding something, approaching something or attaching to someone. Now, the connection between safety, satisfaction, and connection are basic needs and avoid, approach, and attach can be looked at through brain development.



I'm sure your listeners have heard you talk about, and we've even alluded to the work of [Daniel Siegel](#) or even just brain development in general, the brain in the palm of the hand how the brain develops in stages. We have the brain stem that developed evolutionarily first then we have the limbic center or what Rick Hanson calls the subcortex and then we have the cortex. Daniel Siegel refers to this as the downstairs brain and the upstairs brain. The downstairs being the brain's terminal limbic center subcortex and the upstairs brain as the cortex.

You can connect that development loosely to your safety, satisfaction, connection needs and your drives. Your drive to avoid harm is connected to you trying to get your safety need met. That's loosely associated with your brain's stem development. Then you have the drive to approach satisfaction or approach rewards. That's loosely associated with that limbic center, that mid brain, and then you have the drive to attach to others to get your connection needs met.

The safety, satisfaction, connection, the needs are lined up nicely with those operating systems or the drives, the avoid, approach, attach. We can be human adults or children. We can be operating from one or more of the operating systems or drives at the same, exact time. It's not just like we're either only avoiding something, only approaching something, or only trying to attach, it gets more complicated than that where we could be doing all three and typically are at the same time when we're trying to get our safety, satisfaction, and connection needs met.

Kristie: That's what you're saying that we're not a Hyundai or a Honda or whatever, we're a human because we don't-

Laura: That's your take on it. We're not humans, we're Hyundais.

Kristie: If you drive a stick shift, you can only be one gear at a time otherwise have a hot mess, but as a human we could be in multiple and then on top of that, we can be consciously or unconsciously aware of which drive is at play.



Laura: Absolutely. That aligns nicely, the unconscious and conscious to bring development as well and your listeners probably know too that it believed currently that the human brain isn't fully developed until the mid 20's. That sense of consciousness and awareness of what we're actually doing and tuning in to what that means and to be able to try to work with that, that evolves as human brain evolves.

We're working with children, say zero to five, zero to eight, whatever, zero to 25, children and adolescence. We're working with them. Their ability to tune in to these drives grows exponentially as the brain grows. What children zero to five needs is for us as adults to have this awareness and think, they're driving in third when they really need to be in first. Their drive to get their safety satisfaction and connection needs, we don't mind that, that doesn't sound bad. Nobody is going to be upset about that but it's the way to go about it that we get all lit up about. That's the form.

Kristie: Right, and if we think that they have control or say over how they go about it because we're like that's the most inefficient and annoying way to go about it but the kid, for them it's their habit or it's their basement brain just kicked in to gear without asking can I shift. It's not like they are purposefully doing it and that's why sometimes even though I do love WH questions, I love why, I love being curious, I am worried about that blame thing that even if people make a pairing between safety and avoidance that they'll over inflate the choice that the child had in taking that action to get a need met because we think you're trying to get your needs met. It seems purposeful, right?

Laura: Yes. Then let's go to the next level where Rick Hanson leads us and where Siegel has already led us as this downstairs brain versus the upstairs brain or basement brain versus the upstairs brain. If we look at that, these operating systems, this avoid, approach, and attach can be ignited from one of two settings. From a reactive setting or a responsive setting, what Rick Hanson calls the red zone, the reactive setting versus the green zone in our green.



The red zone is akin to the downstairs brain and someone is operating adult or a child from the downstairs brain, they're going to go about avoiding, approaching, or attaching in a very reactive way (i.e. without a lot of conscious planning and thinking), it's a reaction.

If you're walking down a trail in San Diego and you see a black thing stretched out across the trail, you don't get closer and try to investigate, your brain tells you, "Danger, jump out. It's probably a rattle snake." We react.

That can be adaptive, but not always. Sometimes we react in ways that are inappropriate and harmful to others. Then we have that upstairs brain which is more of the cortex and where actually it's really an integrated brain where the downstairs and upstairs are connected. When we're in that setting, that responsive setting, we can avoid, approach, or attach with more intentionality, more "planfulness," more integrative parts of our brain are working together.

This idea of this is where it gets really complicated. I hear this a lot. I was just hearing this last week, "Laura, I get all that but sometimes Jacob is able to do it and sometimes he doesn't. I think he's being manipulative." Then I have to say, if I have really good connection with the person, "Are you always a really patient parent? Are you always a really organized parent? Are you always a really understanding parent? No. Sometimes your patience wanes, your understanding wanes, organization skills wane based on myriad factors and some of them are your safety needs, your satisfaction needs, and your connection needs aren't being met."

We just don't look at it like that. We just say, "Oh, I didn't get enough sleep or oh, I'm just really hairy today," but these are basic needs so of course for children, that's going to happen too. There's going to be all kinds ... Throughout the day, there's going to be all kinds of things that "empty their cup", "fill their cup", "drain their cup a little", maybe "overflow" in regard to their safety, satisfaction, and connection needs.



Then the other icing on the cake, the reason we have to really give kids a huge leeway in terms of shaming and blaming them in that sense is that the brain isn't fully developed till the mid-20s. Our brains are fully developed and they still get disconnected. We still operate from the reactive centers in our brain throughout the day on and off all the time so why would we expect children to be always be in the green zone, approaching, avoiding, and attaching to get their safety satisfaction and connection needs met appropriately? We can't. We still want to teach them that but we can't expect them to always be operating in that way.

Kristie: We're going to give some examples here about how people can actually implement some practices that help kids stay in the green zone but I want to cycle back and there's ... Wow, my goodness, Laura, we could talk about so many things. A couple things that people are taking away, hopefully.  
A, the whole purpose is to be curious and to respond and not react when you're faced with a challenging situation which in this case might be a child demonstrating a challenging behavior.

One of the ways that we're going to reframe and be curious is to say, "Is a basic need not being met right now?" We have three basic needs but it gets compounded because it could be, one, two or all three. We say, "Well, we know there's a basic need that might not be met. How is the drive behind it? Where's the drive coming from?"

Avoid, approach, attach... but again it's some mathematical equation by some nth degree because it's the combination of these things and then layer that on with conscious or unconscious which part of the brain is firing the reactive basement brain or the responsive thoughtful upstairs brain and then on top of all of that, the children are young and they are not Hyundais, they're humans so at any given moment, they're somewhere in that mathematical equation. How's that? Nobody could see it drawn on a whiteboard.





Laura: No. That is a beautiful whiteboard and just to build upon that all of what Kristie said and same for you guys, same for adults, that we fluctuate through ... We're walking up and down that staircase and then going from downstairs brain, upstairs brain, downstairs brain, upstairs brain and this year, I'm working with a lot of programs that are having type A violations for licensing which if you don't know what type A violation is, it just means that someone came in and assess that there's serious violation of children's rights going on. I am training people, I'm trying to help them stay in their integrated brain, the adults and the integrated brain so they don't flip their lid and react inappropriately with kids.

Violating children's rights can be things like threats and punishment and even California wants to do timeout. There's these things that we're doing and one of the reasons is those safety measures are in place if you're a licensed childcare provider is because the people that put that in place now that if you're not meeting their safety satisfaction and connection needs, you are violating their ability to be able to have their brain develop appropriately. This is just getting to the root of why we're told to do certain things like developmentally appropriate practices, how we fold in inclusion. This is all part of that and then maybe I can give a specific example. How's that sound?

Kristie: Okay. Let's do it.

Laura: If anybody is sitting in there thinking, stop talking about theory and give practical application. Here's a specific example of a child driven to meet his needs in an appropriate way. Let's start with the appropriate way. Say, a four-year-old in a preschool classroom is transitioning from circle time to free play. He approaches a block area because he has a plan to build a house out of foam blocks. He avoids the emotional harm of frustration or disappointment by getting to the block area first so he can claim space and get the blocks.



He approaches a block shelf and starts to organize his plan for building the blocks by taking the ones he wants to use. He starts to do this and then he attaches by asking his friend to help him build the house he has planned to build. If all goes well, these approach, attach, avoid drives will help the child meet his safety, satisfaction, and connection needs. He feels emotionally safe because he can begin to execute his plan. He's physically safe because the classroom has a clearly defined space for blocks that's large enough to sustain creative play without a lot of disruption of other kids.

Then he's satisfied because he got to the blocks and is able to execute his plan, what we wants to do, and he feels connected because he has a friend to engage with. Safety, satisfaction, and connection in this example, those needs, in this moment are being met in an appropriate way. He was operating his drives or operating from the setting of the responsivity zone, the green zone. No challenging behavior here but as the play unfolds, there are so many opportunities for his safety satisfaction connection needs to be forwarded.

Say kids begin to interrupt the play, which happens constantly, even if you're a program that tries to limit the number of children in your centers to prevent challenging behavior, it's still a space and kids want to get in everybody's space. This child might feel his safety needs being violated, got his emotional safety because, "No, no, no, no, no. Don't come here. I had a plan." His connection needs might be violated because he just wanted to play one on one with this other boy because this other boy was down with a plan.

These kids don't know the plan and they could really make a mess. That means his satisfaction needs won't be met as well because he won't feel satisfied because he can't play the way he was intending to play. Then you might see some challenging behavior. That's the big moment for the child. There are two roads to go down and not necessarily with intentionality if a safety, satisfaction, connections needs haven't been met up until that point. He may "flip his lid" and



react from the red zone and do something inappropriate to try to get his needs met.

If his “cup is full” enough, if his safety, satisfaction, and connection needs have been fulfilled, and he's learned the skills because he's been taught of how to quote-unquote, "use his words," which means express your safety satisfaction needs, express your desires. He will express himself to children and there will not be challenging behavior.

Kristie: No. That's never going to happen. You're telling the story, I'm like, the minute he decided to rush over there, somebody in the classroom was going to tell him to use walking feet or something. He wasn't assigned to that zone today and he had to play elsewhere. I was like it wasn't even where you got to where he was playing in harmony and then he got disrupted. He didn't even make it there in my mind.

Laura: You're in a lot of places that need a lot of help too because it was interesting when I was thinking of this example, I was saying he wanted to get there, he wanted to approach it because he has a plan and I didn't say he was running but that's exactly what we think as most kids. Of course when they're really excited about their plan, walking feet are so hard. You're right, that is typically where we go with it.

Kristie: He wanted to make sure that he got there. He unconsciously or consciously knew they're scarce resources and he knew that there were other people who desire these foam blocks.

Laura: No question.

Kristie: His reptilian brain couldn't help but pull upon its billions of ... I don't know how many years, not gonna lie. All of those ancestral roots that said, "What's yours -hoard it!"



Laura: Absolutely. It's interesting. Think about how amazing children are and that this was an example that I just watched last week and when children started to disrupt the play, the little boy did not have challenging behavior. He's like, "Hey, guys. We're playing here."

Kristie: Wow.

Laura: He stayed in his own brain. Now that's a classroom where they've been working really intentionally on helping children hit the pause button, helping children notice reflect, respond. There's a lot that we do as teachers to help build that green zone so it's more accessible but there's the rub too. Say, that's a 9:00 in the morning, he arrived at the program 8:00 am, we don't know what happened to this little boy from 6:00 am to 8:00 am. Did he arrive at school with safety satisfaction connection needs being met?

Probably, if later on he's doing okay, but that can be drained so easily and that's what we don't know too is people will say behavior comes out of the blue, behavior never, never comes out of the blue. There's always a reason but we can't see it. We just see the form of what's going on. We just see what we see in this dimension but we can't see what's going on in their minds and brains. We certainly don't see completely that there's no thermometer that we can look at to say, "Oh, safety, satisfaction, connection are in a good place so he'll be driving from their responsive brain." We won't be able to see that. These are tools we can use to try to hypothesize. We just have to be detectives.

Kristie: Yeah. Like you said, it's three different needs and they don't always work in concert so two could be okay and there could be a red light on the other. Just like if you have four ... I'm going to use your car analogy, but you have four tires. To do the best the car can do, all four tires have to be working optimally and in an integrated way. The minute one of them goes even if the other three are fine, they don't operate well.



Laura: That's right. That is so right. Absolutely. Go ahead.

Kristie: That's another behavior and I wanted you to clarify that but maybe you should say what you were going to do and then go to function really quick.

Laura: Just one other piece because especially here in California where we're always talking about school readiness and getting children prepared. We want to build independence. We want to promote those executive function skills in the prefrontal cortex but here's the caution is that we are evolutionarily designed to be in relationship with others and children in the preschool classroom, infant toddler, preschool classroom, kindergarten classroom it doesn't end.

We develop in the context over relationships so children are biologically designed to attach to adults to get their needs met because the brains are not fully developed yet so our goal is to teach them to be able to meet their needs. We want to teach them to be able to engage in conflict resolution. We want to teach them to be able to regulate and self-teach but they need us to help. They do that through the context of attachment.

In group care you often see elevated behaviors or what teachers often describe to me as, "I'm always putting out fires." One reason is that there aren't enough adult brains to be able to help children meet their safety satisfaction needs in the way that they really should be met in terms of much smaller group size. It's just another way for adults to soften their view to see the child behind the behavior and that yes, you have given them great tools.

You have taught them the four steps to conflict resolution. You do have a system to limit the number of children so they can look at the board and see okay, this center isn't available right now. You've got great stuff. They still need the adult co-regulation, they need the adult promoting and preventing the skills. They need that to help them and they do that in a context of attachment.



Kristie: You said so many things. I could get on eight soapboxes, but I'm just going to say class size matters especially for young children. Let's not fool ourselves. Large group, kiss of death especially with young children. Let's not kid ourselves. We've got to stop using teacher's time doing compliance and paperwork that doesn't allow them to engage in true formative assessment because it takes away from their time to engage in relationship building.

Just had to say because I can say that a billion times but we've got too many kids in classrooms with two few adults who are not regulated themselves. We have too much time spent in whole and large group, and we have teachers spending more time on compliance and paperwork than building relationships-so I just had to say it.

Laura: I am glad you said it.

Kristie: Off my mind.

Laura: There's a Bitmoji for that. I think just before we get into function too, just one other piece right here and we'll talk about this maybe in a future podcast, Kristie but we really do teachers and parents a disservice by not helping them take time to reflect regularly about how this applies to them, the parallel process, because one of the things doing teaching pyramid for so many years when we would see that implementation wasn't really happening with fidelity, people were quick to say teaching pyramid doesn't work, or their curriculum isn't working.

What we find then is that the adult isn't in their integrative brain, they're not in their green zone. Something is draining them, their safety, satisfaction, and connection needs so when they're trying to implement these strategies, they're not thinking about how to individualize strategies but they're also not avoiding, approaching or attaching themselves from their responsive brains. That's just something to a pin in and we talk about later for that, for sure.



Kristie: For sure because it is such a parallel process. So many people need to thinking about that for their staff or for their district and as they think about professional development and learning that we have these adult brains that we have to pay attention to as well.

Laura: Yes.

Kristie: I know I keep saying we're going to talk about function but we are. It's going to be just a really quick point of clarification but I also, because people know about the green train and the [red train](#) and now today we're talking a little bit about green zones and red zones. Don't worry about the trains but just for the record just state again what the green zone is and what the red zone is by way of our conversation today of looking at the why behind the behavior and responding to children who are in distress.

Laura: Great. You can think of the green versus the red zone as two different settings for children to engage the operating system of avoid, approach, or attach. If a child is going to avoid harm, approach satisfaction, and attach to connect to somebody, there's two pathways in the brain or two zones in the brain or two trains that you can get on. They can get on the red or the green. They could be on the red or the green and the difference between that is all the work that we do with the developmentally appropriate practice is to help children wire their brains.

The green zone isn't going to be fully developed until the mid-20s so the amount of time they spend in that responsivity zone is going to be very difficult to sustain because the downstairs brain, the red zone is more fully developed than the upstairs brain, the green zone. Reactivity versus responsivity. We want people adults and children to try to engage in responsive behavior versus reactive behavior.



Kristie: Just like your example of the teachers that said “He sometimes can do it and sometimes he can't or doesn't,” I should say- “I think choosing or manipulating me” -- that's also helping understand just those two paths and it's not always a conscious decision which path to get on.

Laura: No. We want to bring more consciousness into behavior absolutely but my private practice is filled with adults who I'm trying to teach how to make their behavior more conscious. We are so on autopilot all the time. We are in our default mode network of our brain and we're in trance and we're not tuned in. We have fully developed brains. They might not be developed in such a healthy way so that this state of reactivity in adult has now become a trait of reactivity. The good news is for children that are new on the planet, we have a chance to prevent that state of reactivity from becoming a trait of reactivity and there would be instead-

Kristie: We want to give them some specific strategies and the download for this podcast is going to be a handout with concrete practices and examples of what we're going to hear in a minute that's also from Hanson's work around pet the lizard, feed the mouse and hug the monkey but because I said it eight times, we have to say, "We didn't talk about the function of behavior." You and I are going to talk about it at future point.

We also didn't say the other, what is it, when we have ... I know the word and it just slipped my mind but all those words begin with the same letter. We have the fight, flight, freeze, faint. We have approach, avoid ... All these words. Really quickly, Laura, tell people how is function different than or aligned up with drives and then what about this when kids are responding to threats and we say they're fight, flight, or freeze mode. Can you just quickly help us sort those out?





Laura: Sure. Especially for those of you who are listening and I've trained you in teaching pyramid, you've heard a lot about function. When we talk about function of behaviors, especially when we adapt to that here in California, we talked about three functions. All behavior can be considered to meet one of three functions, the child is trying to get something, trying to avoid something, or trying to express an emotion—or the adult too, all behavior.

That's something that we introduce to teachers or we introduce to parents because it's a really great point of entry because you can really go, "Oh, okay." That child just had a red truck, another child came up to him and said, "Can I have the red truck?" The boy said no so the child hit him over the head and grabbed the red truck. We go, "Oh, he was trying to get the red truck. He was trying to avoid not having the red truck and he was trying to express his frustration because that child didn't give him the red truck when he asked for it."

None of that is appropriate but that's the function possibly. That's our hypothesis. Where safety, satisfaction, and connection comes in is to help us see even a deeper connection to what the function of the behavior might be. He wanted to get the red truck for sure. Avoid not having the red truck. Oh yeah. Looks like that's true, but also his safety, satisfaction, and connection needs weren't being met.

There was some sort of deeper threat to him which is really powerful and that is connected to the drives because if those aren't met and he doesn't get his function met and he's going to drive from the red zone. The red zone is connected to fight, flight, freeze, or faint. That's where you're having the reactivity and you're not in the green zone or your socially engaged, engagement system.

We're not avoiding, approaching, and attaching in appropriate ways. Our amygdala has overpowered us, has hijacked our brain and we're, fleeing, freezing or fainting.



Kristie: There you go. It's like their heads are spinning like "Oh right!" We're going to keep talking about this as long as people keep listening, but I felt like we needed to show them that if you're all related, but they're all parts of the complexity and so if you just buy in to one part or one person's theory or a curriculum only addresses a particular part of this story. It's just not going to do enough service to help us.

Let's talk a little bit now about a little bit more practical in terms of some practices that people can do to help kids stay in the green zone to really promote that upstairs brain to grow and really to address those three basic needs.

Laura: Great. Like you had mentioned Rick Hanson makes it a fun way of thinking about how to organize meeting these needs. To meet the physical and emotional safety needs of children, you can think about practices or strategies that you might use to "pet the lizard"-- referring to reptilian part of the brain in the brain stem. Then you can think about satisfaction, what are some practices or strategies that you can use to "feed the mouse" or the limbic center of the brain. Then what are some strategies for connecting, or "hugging the monkey."

I'm just going to give you one example for each and then in our handout we will give many more examples. The one I thought about that I really wanted to start with for safety needs is something that has really come to mind when I'm doing a lot of work with trauma informed care. To provide most children with a sense of physical and emotional safety, teachers can monitor and modify their nonverbal communication with children.

This is something that I don't hear a lot of people talk about in depth. They're really not aware of a lot of time so by that, I mean it can modulate their facial expressions, the gestures, their posture, their tone of voice, their prosody of speech, the cadence of their speech as well as the timing and intensity with which they speak. It starts with us



as adults and the way we are communicating the nonverbal, it's an often overlooked set of strategies that promote a sense of security, safety, emotionally and physically with children but if we think especially of typically developing children who may have experienced trauma, these kids tend to be hypervigilant in scanning the environment for signs of danger including these nonverbal signals, and many adults use nonverbal intimidation to control children. They give them quote-unquote, "the look," or they stand over the children instead of getting down in eye level, or they fold their arms across their chest to signify, "I'm serious right now."

Ways that may not seem threatening to other adults, but from a child's perspective, this could be very dangerous so a teacher who is attempting to prompt a child who does not want to leave cleanup area, who does not want to clean up shift gears and put the toys away can remember, okay, stay on the child's eye level, soften my tone, pause to give the child to respond, forego demanding eye contact from the child as you speak to him, possibly placing a hand on the child's shoulder for reassurance if the child doesn't mind being touched.

These nonverbal signals coincide with words that are encouraging the cleanup but without the threat. People don't mean to but if you watch yourself on videotape is what you're doing an attempt to prompt the child to move in a way that is threatening. There's ambient trauma in so many classrooms that I'm working with and I think this nonverbal is a really great place to start for safety needs.

Kristie: Say that last part just one more time. If I start to focus on and be aware of the nonverbal in my classroom, and or in my interactions with people, it gets me what?



- Laura: First of all, it can help you stay in the green zone. It can help you just say, “Okay, I’m going to bring this down. I’m going to stay integrated and I’m going to unhook myself in the habit of using intimidation to get children to do what I want them to do.” Any intimidation or manipulation.”
- Kristie: Then which basic need am I supporting?
- Laura: Safety.
- Kristie: So I’m supporting safety, and I was trying to make a clever connection but then which of the animals am I petting, feeding or hugging?
- Laura: You’re petting that lizard.
- Kristie: Okay.
- Laura: That lizard is going to be all relaxed and pet because there’s no nonverbal threats going on.
- Kristie: A bit of poking the lizard.
- Laura: Don’t poke the lizard.
- Kristie: I’m kidding, that wouldn’t work.
- Laura: Exactly. Especially in a thing like transition and a cleanup transition, which children don’t necessarily want to do. It’s a high energy transition, “You’re making me stop play that I was having fun with. Even though I may know what comes next I’m still focused on this play.” It’s just a great always with a nonverbal every portion of the day but this is a great time for safety. It needs to be really important.



Kristie: I get to keep the child in the green zone, address their safety need, might get the added benefit of having an extra breath in there for myself and then I pet the lizard, which keeps the child from picking the path or unconsciously going down the path of reacting.

Laura: Yeah, absolutely.

Kristie: All right. Next example.

Laura: Then to “feed the mouse” or to help a child with satisfaction needs, many different strategies that you could be using but I'm going to highlight when we've talked about on here called positive descriptive acknowledgement, “PDA” or “PDA Plus” for those of you who have been through teaching pyramid, it's really just a way to acknowledge children's efforts to engage in appropriate behavior without praise. We want to leave praise behind if we can and engage in this positive descriptive acknowledgement.

A teacher may say to a child, "Giovanni, you're sharing the magna tiles with Vanessa. Now, she can build a structure too. You're being so respectful." With this PDA Plus phrase, the child has the opportunity to pause and tune inward to reflect upon his actions and connect his actions to the impact on others. Then he could go further with connecting these actions to feelings either on his own or by noticing, "Geez, I feel pretty good about myself. I'm pretty happy or proud that they helped Vanessa," or the teacher can then say, "How does it feel to help Vanessa by sharing your tiles."

They could ask Vanessa, "How does it feel when Giovanni shares with you?" What the teacher is doing in this moment is to put the pause button on a positive state that's occurring. There's this sense of connection that the children are having, they're sharing and then we just want to say, "Hey, cast the spotlight of attention there. What's this



like for you guys?" It doesn't have to be long, it's just seconds. In that moment you may be ... There's an active, positive experience happening but you're helping to install that positive experience by helping the children reflect on it or even just receiving from you this PDA Plus statement and then they can take it in and say, "Oh, I'm sharing the magna tiles. I'm being respectful. I really like that. It makes me happy. Oh, she's happy too. That's great."

It's going from what Rick Hanson calls activation to installation. Taking a moment that does feel satisfying instead of racing past it like we tend to do as human beings to the next moment we help children install that moment and so then connections are being made in the brain that help promote this upstairs brain development and then ultimately the green zone connecting the upstairs and the downstairs brain.

Kristie: If people can handle one more analogy, the way I always think of this one is as with ice cream and mindful eating so if you've allowed yourself to have whatever your guilty pleasure is by way of food if it's ice cream, people know for me, it's going to be beer, if it's chocolate, whatever. Instead of rushing to the second scoop or the second bite, it's that mindfulness of noticing right now. For me, when I think of B, I always remember I'll be satisfied with each bite and so that's how I make the connection and so I'm really going to sit there and acknowledge that moment.

Like you said, instead of racing forward and teaching color, shape, size or something else, seeing this as a teachable moment that is also allowing children to stay in the green zone a little bit longer and to actually notice the green zone and go, "I like it here." It has many different layers of impact but if we acknowledge children's effort using PDA or PDA Plus, we are now feeding, I think about food but we can think about feeding the mouse as Rick Hanson would say, right?



Laura: Absolutely. Just think about the impact this can have for teachers and parents is that if we can really continue to encourage teachers like we have talked about to [scan for the positive and then help children install that positive](#), it's like protective factors. It's like a buffer. Okay, my satisfaction needs are being met most of the time. This is great but it has a brain result. It actually can form connections in the brain that will promote their ability to drive from the green zone rather than the red zone and try to avoid, approach, or attach to get their needs met in the future.

It's like putting money in the bank. It doesn't mean that we only ever focus on the positive. That's not what this is saying so I want to make sure it's clear, you don't have to be a Pollyanna and only see the good. We want to see everything that happens. It's just when the positive is happening, we go from activation to installation. PDA and PDA Plus are one way to do that.

Kristie: Perfect. All right. Let's get on to the third example or practice knowing again that our handout is going to have a bunch more of these where we'll define the practice and give really good examples of it and make those connections back to how the strategy addresses those basic needs and help keep the child in the green zone. We're at "hug to monkey".

Laura: That's connection. Meeting the child's connection needs. The last example that I gave about Vanessa and Giovanni is also a way to meet connection needs. When you point out to children they're connecting, they may say, "Oh, I feel connected." Even further, a strategy, a practice that you and I are both very passionate about is creating opportunities for children to engage in self-selected small groupings for play.



In our previous [podcast](#) we talked about some of the challenges with the large group sizes for children including access to materials, ability to carry out meaningful play, sharing space, competition from materials, demands on sharing, turn-taking. Smaller groupings may decrease or eliminate some of these challenges and for many children, they're more effective for meeting their connection needs. Last time, I think I joked about when we talked about asking children to learn at circle time like trying to learn at a Justin Bieber concert.

There's just too many distractions. There's too many things impacting their learning. It's very challenging for most children. The same with meeting your connection needs and this isn't just for introverts like me. I mean I prefer one on one any day of the week in terms of not just learning, just being around people, I like smaller and smaller groupings because connection is an important need for me. It's true for all children.

Many children like to have three, four, five, absolutely but you'll notice if you watch children go out during free choice play teachers, you'll notice that predominantly they don't grab eight kids and go, "Come on. Let's go." It's usually two or three kids. It's a small grouping and so when their connection needs are being met, that's akin to building the upstairs brain, they're feeling safe, they're feeling satisfied, now feeling connected and now you're building that green zone.

Kristie: I think what's so amazing about these three examples, you've just given us, Laura is that we didn't have to go out and buy a curriculum. It didn't come in a box. It didn't come in the mail and say, "On Monday, you will "pet the monkey" because that sounds a little bit, I don't know, right? It's like you have to say ... This is just common sense that this is what brain architects do. It's our everyday moments that allow us an opportunity to be facing two paths, the green zone or the red zone path and we can always have a better chance of helping children grow





when we're in the green zone and just take a breath and go, "Oh, look at my nonverbals. Oh, did I notice and affirm? Oh, can I do small group instead of large group today?"

Maybe those feel insurmountable right now but they're just three things that we absolutely have control over or some say over, and we didn't need to get district approval to do it.

Laura: It's such a great point, Kristie. I do want to caution people like myself, yourself or other coaches that are listening to this. Here's my practical experience. I do the same "Awesome, you don't have to order from a company, you don't have to" ... Here's where this type of knowledge becomes scary for some adults and they may end up reacting to it and dismissing it—because what we're asking is for teachers to look inside themselves and to instead of trying to change something in the child, see if there's something they could change about their paradigm the way they view children and that can sometimes be scary.

I just did a training last month in a city that will remain nameless and on the evaluation they're like "blah, blah, blah theory. Give me some practical strategies." I gave strategies like this, examples like this and I also showed videos of more intense behavior and things but... I understand teachers. What's really scary is when a child is throwing a chair across the room, "What do I do right then, Laura? What do I do right then?"

Really, what I'm saying everybody who's listening is right then what you do is you do intervene and you have an intervention that helps the child stay safe, it helps everybody else stay safe, but your work is then to go back and to reflect and to think "safety, satisfaction, connection. How can I have them drive from the red, not the green? What are the strategies that I have?" and we'll have more in the handout that will promote the green zone development so I can prevent this challenge and behavior in the future? It's both.



You do have to intervene and you're not going to be intervening when a child is throwing a chair going, "I wonder if I've got safety needs right now or satisfaction needs? How full is his cup?" No, you're intervening to make sure that you can co-regulate the child in that moment but that's not your ongoing strategy to wait for the chair to be thrown. We're saying two-thirds of your work is thinking about constantly daily throughout the day how to individualize the teaching practices you have, keeping this framework in mind.

Kristie: It's so funny because the other day a teacher shared that the red train doesn't work. I was like, "Well, it's not a thing." I mean speaking of theory...that's a theory. It was just my way to say exactly what you said, so much more eloquently that in that moment...I always have the kid on the table disrobing and saying the F-word because that just make it seem really critical that you need to do something and you can just sit

there and be curious. Though Barb would remind us, you do still need to keep a part of curiosity because it's part of the framework of just keeping you off of the red zone, right?

Laura: Absolutely.

Kristie: When I think the red train ... When I say the kid is on the red train, I'm not saying there's a strategy there, I'm saying that's a framework. That's a way to reframe, to know that I can't teach in this moment, that my job is to offer a lifeline. My job is to make sure that they are literally not even figuratively safe. My job is to get them to co-regulate. There is a lot of work to be done, it's not just all of these things that are in the curriculum that are on the prevention side.

Laura: Absolutely. What our hope is today is that people listening will now take this and integrate it and really reflect about it, the adults, and think, "Okay. I do still need to intervene but even with this knowledge now, I'll be able to intervene in a responsive way versus a reactive way." Instead of shaming or blaming or intimidating a child when



they're having challenging behavior to control them, we will see the child behind the behavior at all moments, right, but as we intervene, we are knowing that that's just one step that's just calming them moment but then our real work is to go back and to reflect about what's our plan? Especially if this is an ongoing persistent challenging behavior.

Kristie: I hope people just hit rewind and hear that last invitation that Laura just did and I'm going to ask her to give you a really clear suggestion of a step to take to embrace what she just shared about being curious, about looking behind and at the "why," ensuring that children's needs are met.

Laura, wherever we are in our journey whether this is the thousandth time we thought about challenging behaviors, if this is all new to us, what's a practical step we could take moving forward other than downloading the handout, other than listening back eight times to make sure we caught all of your wisdom? Where do you suggest we go from here?

Laura: I think, one, it's all about self-reflection and also one of our former podcast had a [giveaway about self-reflection](#). The challenge is when they say "I don't really know how to self-reflect." You can self-reflect through journaling, you can self-reflect through talking to with a friend and if it's Kristie, apparently there's going to be beer involved. Just really thinking, "What does this mean about me? I don't think I intimidate? I don't think I'm using verbal intimidation or threats. I think I intervened from the green zone" and really challenging yourself and saying, "Well do I?"

Then going beyond that, so part of that first up is going beyond that and thinking what are my values and perceptions and beliefs in regard to what I'm hearing today? This bumps up against what I've learned about challenging behavior and what I've learned about being a



teacher. I used to do classroom management and what I'm asking you to do is to do child development. When you develop the child to manage the classroom, but I might be bumping up against your values, perceptions. I believe it's something you've been or you understood you were told and it's not aligning.

Just go back, keep quiet, think about that and if you do, if you are one of those unicorn programs that actually has reflection time with the teaching teams, amazing. I hope there's more developing every day but do this with your team as well and with self-compassion, not with shame and blame like I'm a bad teacher. You're not a bad teacher. You're doing the best you can with the information that you had and you were not part of an early childhood program that teachers had this training. You didn't get a lot of this zero to five. I know I didn't in regard to what we're trying to give to children today.

Know that your brain can change, your reflection can change, your green zone can be more activated and it's not like we're saying we're letting children off the hook and spoiling children. We're saying, "children's brains are developing, they rely on your brains for co-regulation, for co-development and we want to see the child behind the behavior." Start with yourself and just one step of turning inward and just exploring what's there for you.

Kristie: Right. Fabulous. I'm going to take that advice as well and really think about management and development, that little phrase you just shared, as well as "the Honda and the humans" and just remind myself at any age this person in front of me is super complex and I'm super complex, and so it's no wonder that the interaction is super complex.

Laura: Yes.



Kristie: All right. Laura, I cannot thank you enough. All members of the {r}evolution, thank you for your wisdom and for your concrete strategies and little mantras that you give us to make sure that we can do the very best to help children thrive every day.

Laura: Thank you, Kristie.



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