

14 | Confusing Behavior? Is it a Stress Response?

Ruth Ayres (00:01.698)

Becca you sent me a news article from like a local paper. You follow it on Facebook. So you sent me this article and the article is called, I wrote it down here. It was about the way school administrators are and it was quote, working to curb student behavior. So I think probably that was part of the reason why you're sending it to me, but also because of the comments that were being left on this Facebook post.

Becca (00:31.147)

Yeah.

Ruth Ayres (00:31.31)

And I think both of us were like, oh, like this is kind of the way that we're seeing kids and the dysregulation. So you and I, our lens when we see kids dysregulate is we understand that they're giving trauma responses. But I think this article, and we'll link the Facebook feed here in the show notes so people, if you want to look at it too, can see, we were like, oh, this is kind of like,

just a different way to see things. And so in like that most relevant feed, there were people commenting like, hey, I work on behavior and like schools, they need to kind of call the parents and have the parents come in. And kind of it was this thought of if parents would discipline their kids more, we wouldn't be having this behavior.

Becca (01:30.398)

Yeah, and I was thinking how shocking it was to see parents being blamed by community members, because I'm so used to this narrative of community members blaming the school, right? Schools aren't doing what they're supposed to be doing. Schools are allowing these behaviors. And so to see this article close to home, and to see local community members calling out parents for

assumed lack of parenting was shocking to me because you and I are of the belief that parents are sending us the best that they have. And also like no parent is perfect and situations arise and everyone has moments they wish they handled differently. So to see these comments really gave me pause and made me wonder like what teachers would

think and feel reading that and what parents think and feel.

Ruth Ayres (02:35.958)

And there was like a real emphasis kind of on like punitive discipline consequences and that that didn't set well with me. But then I really thought back to this earlier version of me. And like when I started teaching, sometimes I would think, if I just could take that kid home for one week, they'd come back a new kid. Right. And I even have to admit, like,

Becca (03:02.944)

Yeah.

Ruth Ayres (03:05.259)

When we adopted our daughters, they were four and six at the time and they had been in foster care. And I kind of thought, I'm just going to bring them home. I'm going to give them a warm bed, plenty of food, lots of love and firm boundaries. And we're going to be good to go. Like I thought it'd be rocky for a little bit, but once we all adjusted, we'd be good to go. And the truth is, is that's not how it went.

And I often say like, trauma doesn't play fair. And what I mean by that is, you know, I thought lots of love providing for kids firm boundaries and then things would be quote unquote, just fine. Right. And it's just not like that because there's so much more happening than just

that child is entitled or they haven't ever learned to follow the rules. There's a lot more happening in that.

Becca (04:14.422)

For sure. And I think it's important one to acknowledge that there are lots of reasons for dysregulation and that you and I are coming at this from a trauma lens, a lens of kids who have experienced trauma. And also, like behaviors present in a variety of ways, because of different life experiences and understanding the different ways that bodies

present their trauma, the different trauma responses kids can exhibit, can help you to support them in those moments where they're experiencing those trauma responses.

Ruth Ayres (04:54.806)

Yeah, there's a lot of research statistics that are coming out here in the last five, six, seven years. So that's showing that there's more and more kids coming from family structures that have been disrupted. there's lots of reasons for that. it's not a judgment. The statistic is that

89 % of students coming into kindergarten had some kind of disruption in their family structure. And so we know from our understanding of how kids learn, when there's a disruption, and it can be anything. can be a family member passed away. A lot of things outside of our control. So I just want to be really sensitive to that.

It's simply part of life. But what happens for kids when they've experienced that disruption is there's some changes that happen in their minds, in their brains.

Becca (06:09.718)

Yeah, at a fundamental level, their brain is changed. And as teachers, we get to come alongside them and understand what's happening and then help them to heal and to grow. And at a fundamental level, their brain has changed because of the life experience and and we get to be a part of helping their brain function through that and heal from that.

or learn how to compensate it.

Ruth Ayres (06:40.046)

Yeah, and like just this idea of like parents need to be better. It's not helpful and it's not going to do anything that will position kids to learn. But what can help is as teachers if we begin recognizing some trauma responses. And so I just know like for me, when our daughters moved in, I really believed like firm boundaries, lots of love, fill their needs, we're going to be good to go. And then I began

seeing some things that didn't, it was confusing. Like it just didn't fit. It wasn't how things were supposed to go. And I think we see those in our classrooms. So I'd like for us to talk through some trauma responses and some that we've heard, right? So probably most of us are familiar with like flight, fight or freeze. So fight, flight and freeze are three common trauma responses.

but let's talk about what it looks like, like in your kindergarten classroom with kindergartners. Okay. So something that might, trigger a trauma response is let's say a student, they're working, they're, they're doing some work, some independent work. It could be writing, it could be math, problem solving, play dough and unstructured play. It can be anything, but let's say they ruin like they ruin something. Okay. Is this a stretch?

Becca (08:02.122)

Yeah.

Ruth Ayres (08:05.432)

for the imagination.

Becca (08:06.486)

No, that happens all the time.

Ruth Ayres (08:08.576)

Okay, and so you go up to them and maybe you're like, hey, what's happened? Why'd you ruin that? So if a student freezes, what might they look like?

Becca (08:15.478)

Mm.

Becca (08:21.558)

So sometimes when they're frozen, they just freeze, right? They're not going to respond verbally. They're not moving. They're not engaging in what was just happening and they're not going to turn and engage with you. And often the best thing to do is just protect that. They need to process through what's happening in their brain. They're in a freeze response, so they're not going to engage in a more dangerous behavior after.

necessarily. And so the best thing to do is to like, be there with them. And like, occasionally in a calm, like monotone voice, like you're safe, and I'm here, I'm ready to talk when you are. And like, at some point, their brain will be able to access that auditory processing, and they'll be able to engage in that with you. And they might not know why they ruined the other kids' play dough creation, they might not know why that just happened. And

The reality is why doesn't necessarily matter. You need to help them get grounded back into the kindergarten classroom and like know what's happening around them so that their hippocampus can remember that they're in the present day experience.

Ruth Ayres (09:37.964)

Let's say same scenario, right? But as student responds with a response, what would that look like?

Becca (09:43.99)

Mm.

They run and they usually in schools, they call them elopements. They elope. I've had a variety of elopers. Some kids run far and will run out of the building and run and hide. Some kids will run to a familiar place that feels safer to them. So if someone ruined their creation,

Ruth Ayres (09:52.718)

Mm-hmm.

Becca (10:10.474)

or they unintentionally ruined another child's creation and then are like afraid, right? They're in a fear response and they're flying, they're in flight, they go. They disappear because they think that's the safest option.

Ruth Ayres (10:27.724)

I also think we sometimes, so I was sitting here thinking, like, would I qualify this as a flight response? Sometimes I think, like, the hoodie goes up and they'll, go underneath a table. Like, you know, so they haven't actually left the classroom, but they're still, to me, that's a flight response. Like, you know, like, I'm getting out of this situation. What about...

Becca (10:37.224)

yeah.

Becca (10:42.763)

That's

Becca (10:46.134)

Right. Yeah.

Becca (10:51.382)

Yeah, that's a really, yeah. That's a, it's really important to acknowledge that as a flight response because it's like removing yourself from the situation. And that could be in a level of, they're in a level of healing where they don't need to fully escape the scene, but they still aren't sure how to process yet what just happened.

Ruth Ayres (10:57.869)

What's that

Ruth Ayres (11:15.052)

Yeah, I would see it a lot with our son who we adopted just before his eighth birthday. We might be having a conversation and he would just pull his hoodie up and cross his arms and he's still there, right? He's still there, but I'm like, we're not accessing any rational thought at this point. And it's so hard. We want to be like, come back to the table. Let's have this conversation or fix this thing that you just ruined.

recognizing that's not gonna help because we're in a trauma response. Another real common one that we see is fight. What might that look like?

Becca (11:53.674)

Yeah. So if a kid just ruined someone else's creation, and the child whose creation was ruined is like, Hey, like, Mrs. Burke, he just ruined my creation. Sometimes the response is like, I'm going to turn around and punch you. And they might punch you right in the face, they might push you out of your chair. And they get aggressive really fast. And they're not consciously thinking about I'm trying to exhibit dominance here.

that's what their body is doing. They're like, I'm going to show you how strong I am so that you don't try to come and control me because I'm in control. And that's like a very, like a very, I can't come up reptilian, like their reptilian brain is accessed. And they're showing that they are stronger. And the best thing to do is like just be the calm presence to co regulate next to them.

and keep everyone else safe, right? So you're not trying to be punitive, you're not trying to punish or redirect that behavior in an extreme way just to maintain safety. And they'll come down from it quickly if you don't try to engage in correction right away.

Ruth Ayres (13:09.784)

So, Becca, one of the fight responses that I'll see oftentimes in older kids, and I'm curious if it, like genuinely curious, Becca, like we haven't talked about this before, but they'll like verbally fight. So they might call names, they might argue, they might, does that happen in kindergarten or is it more of a physical?

Becca (13:32.538)

it developmentally, they're very physical. So it is way more physical for the most part as they learn to process through the physicality of things towards the end of kindergarten, I start to see

more of the verbal stuff. Or if they live in an environment where their verbal attacks are, are typical. and also I, because I've had such a, an age range at home, the younger kids tend to have the more physical responses.

in those early stages of dysregulation or in a fight response. Whereas the older kids, it's preemptive, the verbal stuff is preemptive. So if you know that's what's happening, their fight is verbal at the beginning, you can kind of help them deescalate before they hit the physical. But at the beginning, we didn't have any idea what we were doing. And it took us a while.

Ruth Ayres (14:26.54)

Exactly. Yeah. And I'm so glad you said that because it happens so fast, right? Like, like they're, they're at table, they're on structured play, everybody's getting along. And then there's, you know, a student says, why'd you do that? And then boom, they're out the door. And it's not because they're willful. It's because we're seeing a trauma response if we know what to look for.

Becca (14:30.962)

Yeah, so fast.

Becca (14:40.224)

on the 10th floor.

Ruth Ayres (14:52.748)

So interesting, there's a few more that sometimes are a little, like maybe we don't see them right away or we might not have heard about them in our undergrad work, but I'm starting to see these more and more. And one is sometimes it's referred to as a fawning or a friend response. So do you see this?

Becca (15:10.422)

Mm-hmm.

Becca (15:13.96)

I do in some kids, it's not as common in younger kids, because it involves some higher level thinking, right? In order to access the fawn or friend response, you have to be able to read the people around you, especially the person that is causing the fear response in you. And and know how they're expecting you to act even if your body is feeling unsafe. And so that's a higher level thinking you

see it a lot in kids who live in chronic trauma, right? So you'll see this in kids who have pretty much lived in trauma outside of school their whole life. They're really great at fawn or friend I've also heard it called feign like they're feigning a response in order to just make it through a situation. But I

Ruth Ayres (15:59.128)

Mm-hmm.

Becca (16:07.07)

I don't see it often and in some ways, like, I'm glad I don't see it often because it's indicative of a higher level of trauma.

Ruth Ayres (16:15.534)

Yeah, that's one of our kids that was, and I think like we see this, like different kids, they kind of had a go-to response. And I don't know if that is research-based or not. I just know like from my experience in our house, different kids had a go-to. And one of ours, was like, that was definitely her response. No matter what, it was just like, I'm gonna...

be friendly, I'm going to pretend like I'm doing what you want me to do because this is the safest, easiest way for me to get out of a situation. And so we would see that. Another one that I think we see in older kids is this like, fine. I'm fine. It's fine. We're all fine. I don't know if you're seeing that in kindergarten.

Becca (17:06.9)

I think in some ways I do, but they're not as good at it, right? And so they'll be like fine for a few minutes and then they fall apart again. It's definitely a trauma response that is honed over time. So you see it in older kids, but also in kids who are in those more chronic situations. It's something we see a lot in our home that everything's fine until it's not, right?

when you're seeing that trauma response of like, clearly something's up, but you're saying you're fine and you're acting fine, but we can tell something's off. If you can help them to regulate them, they can come back down to baseline. But if you're not picking up on those or like other people are around and you can't help them regulate as fast, you might start to see something like fight or flight or just higher levels of dysregulation.

Ruth Ayres (18:05.432)

So this is just something that I think it's about being aware and beginning to pick up some of these responses and understanding that it is happening in the reptilian part of the brain. And so they're feeling fear and they're responding in a way that's not, it's not logical. And that's what I noticed like with our daughter.

She just continued to respond in unexpected ways. And it wasn't because she was bad or willful or manipulative, but it was because her brain was altered by the trauma she had experienced. And these trauma responses were really giving us an indication of she's not feeling safe. And our response to her first has to be like helping her really access

the part of her brain, the prefrontal cortex, where she would be able to make some rational decisions. And until she could, we really needed to back off. And so I think the same is true for what we're seeing in classrooms. But when we don't know to look for it, then it's just, then we think things like, parents should be better.

But speaking as a parent who like nobody could have been harder on me than what I was on myself, I really needed to understand like this is not a result of my parenting. It's a result of the trauma responses and the stress response that they're feeling.

I hope people will pick up our sticky hope kit because it's because of like this kind of thing that we put it together.

Becca (19:54.046)

Yeah, I am so excited for our Sticky Hope Kit. And I just went through a pretty similar experience with one of my kids at home who was having a huge trauma response at school. And their school is like so beautifully understanding of trauma, and they've willingly come alongside us. And I feel like the Sticky Hope Kit has slowly been built based on like you your experiences and my experiences like in supporting teachers in working with our kids.

And I really hope that we are able to impact teachers and bring them a little bit of hope and hug on those days that like things are really tricky and they feel like they're not understanding completely what's going on, but they know they need something more or something different. We're hoping we can be right there in it with