



**Episode #181:**

**Zach Morris on Emotionally  
Supporting Children Through Difficult Periods**

October 29, 2019

Debbie: Hello Zach, welcome back to the podcast.

Zach: Hey Debbie. Thanks for having me.

Debbie: Of course, I always get excited when we are going to have a conversation because I usually have many aha moments and they just bring a different quality and subject matter to the podcast than kind of our typical episodes. They tend to be more, I don't know if cerebral is the right word, but I just really appreciate your insight and there's always lots of food for thought. And, not to put any pressure on you or anything, but you know, I'm really looking forward to this. So you and I have been going back and forth about, you know, really what to talk about and we discussed this idea of, you know, what I know I'm personally experiencing and what I'm hearing from many families in my community is this kind of the Fall, I've been in school for awhile and now I'm kinda start to resist or you know, whatever it's a regression or whatever it looks like that resistance is starting to really crop up.

Zach: Yes.

Debbie: So let's talk about that. Let's just even talk about it in a broad scale because you run a school and I'm just wondering, is this your experience at, at your school as well? Do you notice something happening around this time of year?

Zach: You know, I, I think I do in terms of, uh, just sort of that, that setting in of maybe habit or the doldrums of sort of this timeframe and sort of like you're saying, just like a solidifying where at the start of the year things are new and it's fresh and people are coming back from a break and, and now you've, you've been in routine, right? And you've been in, you've been in habit and I think that's when newness can wear off. That's when sort of certain excitements, right, everybody is familiar with the honeymoon phase of, of certain things, especially if it's a new experience. And so what I notice at our school is this is when I'm, I'm becoming increasingly interested in getting authentic information as to what students are experiencing because it's when they're slipping into the comfort of, of what's been going on, even if that, what's been going on has been uncomfortable.

Right? And it's sort of just that I think this is where parents start to hear, hey, what did you do at school today? Oh, not much. And that just becomes the everyday sort of experience because, because every day has a little bit of the same qualities to it. And so I think from a student's perspective, often it just felt like maybe any other day, and maybe there was a lot to that or there wasn't much. And so I think this is where I start to notice just that waning of, of sometimes information I'm getting from students. And, and I would guess that this is maybe something that's happening for parents as well, is you're like, I just want to know more. I want to know more about what's going on and how you're experiencing it and how things are going. And, and you've maybe as a student

slipped into just sort of this comfort of, of just what the day is, whether that's a positive experience or, or a less than positive experience.

Debbie: Yeah. I think that newness piece is, is definitely a big part of it. You know, cause I think especially, you know, I hear this again from a lot of parents that maybe they are starting a new school or just a different teacher and different classroom dynamic and things get off to a great start, you know, and they're like, wow, you know, we've made this progress and I think this could be a really good year. And then, I'm just going to share with you an email that I got recently that kind of speaks to this, this mom wrote, we finally found a great school, good teachers, and a great setting. Her son's 13. She said he has great new and one old friend, but now he's started to have a stomach ache, nightmares have arisen again at night. He's still happy and energetic, but the tests have started and the stresses are increased. And so the school resistance or refusal, I'm hearing from a lot of parents too, is happening a lot. So where should we even start with this conversation? So maybe even what are some signs that parents might notice or that you notice also when kids are starting to make a shift that we should be paying attention to?

Zach: Yeah, I think, I notice sort of canned responses to questions that are asked, especially when you're, when you're asking for information or insight from the student's perspective that that sort of more telling you what you, what they think you want to hear. I think, you know, parents are really good at identifying those things of whether this is like a genuine piece of information or if this is just sort of packaged up in the way that's going to create the least resistance. And I also see it as a waning of things that were previously of interest. Those things that were once sort of a driver of motivation or something that they were really excited about. Now that's, that started to wane. And there's a decrease of willingness to try new things within that. And so that's what I see with, with my students and, and what I experience and what I hear from students and even just sort of in my own perception is this, this waning of hope within all of that.

And that's sort of the thread that I see. And I'd sort of be interested in hearing what your thoughts on that are as well. But this idea that as I get deeper into my school year as a student and I start to become familiar with what the systems are, how the day works, what I expect at certain points of the week or the, or the year. And if I'm having sort of less than wonderful experience within all of that and the other end of the spectrum being maybe high anxiety or high overwhelm in regards to some of those things, I maybe start to experience this waning of, of hope that it could be different or that I could have a different experience or that my vocalizing my experience is gonna do anything to shift sort of what's going on. And that waning of hope can be a momentum that really just sort of slows down an individual again in their, their capacity, in their, in their interest, in their willingness, in their sort of openness to conversation and really just really sharing themselves and really showing themselves in what's authentic versus what's maybe sort of expected from adults or what is going to kind of, again, create the least path of resistance.

Debbie: Wow. Yeah. That just, that language, waning of hope, just really struck me and completely resonated. Yeah. I think that makes so much sense. Especially if a

child is going back to school and you know, maybe they recharged over the summer, fresh start, you know, and you go in with these kind of hopes, whether you express them or not, about what might happen or that we've experienced this growth, it's a new year and maybe this year things are going to be better. Maybe I'm going to make that great friend, maybe things are going to click more. And then yeah, as things become more routine, I could see that happening. I mean, I do see it happening. And so if we're even noticing that, like I'd love to know what do you do when you start to recognize that? And then in answering that, I want to of course listen as a parent and think about what, you know, parents can do if they're starting to recognize that this might be going on with their child.

Zach: Yeah. So I want to speak towards, towards kind of my approach, but first I want to even just sort of touch upon, I think another component that I see to this, this potential waning of hope, if we sort of use that as a concept. Which is kind of like you just mentioned, at the start of a year, students often have the experience of getting to work with new adults, new facilitators, new teachers, new supports. And students may have the experience that this is going to be an opportunity to get out of the dynamic that they're used to having had with previous adults in their life. Whether that's interactions they've had with their own parents or previous teachers or again, just other people that have sort of been in that role for them. And so now they're presented with this opportunity that, it's someone new.

So maybe, maybe it might be different in some of those, those ways that I've previously experienced things. And whether it has a basis in reality or not, if from their perspective and their reality it isn't different and they get, they get into those same sort of stuck points, those same conflicts, those same, those same dynamics. I see that being a really sort of expedited way for students to sink into that place of thinking, ah, this is getting, this as a whole nother year of it not being different. And so I think so much of this is relationship based with the teachers and facilitators that they're, they're having interaction with and interfacing with on the daily is this idea that, is this going to be a different relationship? Is this going to create a different dynamic? When I share myself, am I going to be met with sort of a different response than I'm used to in this student-teacher relationship?

And that's definitely what I see. You know, especially being someone that's not only working directly with students, but I'm managing staff and how staff are working with students and seeing that when new students come in, there's this, this place where they have this fresh opportunity to create a different dynamic with an adult that's in a very familiar role. And if that dynamic from the get go doesn't look different, it is such a, a sort of grounding point that it's just going to be the same as it's always been. And I think that is, is so difficult for a young person to work through because they also see them, that person outside of them, as the person that's more of the authority figure, more of the power role. So I think that's where that, that hope can really wane is if all of a sudden, I think I'm just sort of in the same scenario but with a different person and a different face in front of me.

Debbie: So let me ask you a question. Is there a line where we also have to recognize that sometimes this is our kid's outlook on things and so we want them to learn how to move through that and take some responsibility for their own role in that experience or that dynamic? Do you know, does that make sense what I'm asking?

Zach: Absolutely. And I would say a hundred percent yes to what you're saying. And I think that's the sort of second or third phase of supporting someone who's going through this experience. You know, I think that that first phase is, is how do I really hear that experience and really listen to that experience and show you that, that that's understood and I connect with that and I validate that, that waning of hope, if that's what we're talking about. And you know, it might be something else, it might be anxiety, it might be overwhelm, but whatever that experience is, it's how can I show you that I see that, I hear that, I recognize it and I acknowledge it and it's okay. And, and we're not going to jump right in to sort of helping you problem solve and own that this is your own experience and how you're gonna get out of it. Because that just might spin me right back into overwhelm.

Debbie: Yeah, for sure.

Zach: So I think that's kind of a part of this. And that's, you know, in you asking, oh, what's your approach sort of in working with students with this, you know, one of the first steps that I'm looking towards is how can I co-regulate with students that are in this, this space of overwhelm, this space of dysregulation.

Debbie: So can you even define co-regulation? Cause I think that's such a big concept that might people might not understand.

Zach: Yeah. So the idea is that in, in sort of moving through dysregulation, we are re-regulating. We're getting our physiological sort of body and experience back to a regulated state. And when we're talking about students and young people and essentially anybody we're sort of serving as a support system or a caretaker for, things like that, that person outside of us might not be able to do that for themselves. They might not be able to regulate. And so that's where the co-regulation piece comes in and it's me sort of leading you into that regulation because I see that you're not able to do it yourself. So it's, it involves a lot of modeling, I think. It involves a really peeling back from the rational reasoning sort of mindset that often the adult brain will bring to problem solving or sort of conflict resolving. Right? As, as we start to look at it really logically and we say, well, like this is that, and if we just do this, and it's very simple if we just lay it out all on paper, right? And when we do lay it all out on paper and look at it from a regulated state like that makes sense. And, and often even the person we're trying to support can look at that and say, oh yeah, I totally follow that. I connect with that. I'm totally on board with it. Right? But in that moment of dysregulation where we're needing to get back to a regulated place, logic and reason and rationality, those, those almost have no, no space there. And so this, this co-regulation is a sort of shared experience and a facilitated experience to get back to a physiologically regulated state.

Debbie: Can you give us an example of what that might look like?

Zach: So I think of the individual who is really worked up, really overwhelmed, and I think this is kind of erroneous whether that overwhelm is from anxiety or from being angry at an interaction they just had, but they're really worked up. Maybe this student is crying and they're talking really loud and maybe we could even look at like a really young child when they get into that almost like hyperventilated state of, of like crying and they just can't even, their breathing is really shallow and they're just, they're clearly really dysregulated.

And I think for, for a lot of parents you've maybe had that experience where you're sitting with that person and you're holding that space for that person, maybe you're even embracing that person and comforting them on that, that touch level. And that moment when you finally like hear that full breath, that deep sigh where I've moved out of that shallow breathing and I've just, my, my tears have maybe ceased a little. And sometimes this happens super quick. This can happen within like a couple seconds where I go from being so dysregulated, hyperventilating, crying to then just like taking a big deep breath and, and really it just happening through that, that time of me, of me sitting there and me holding that person of, of me basically showing like, it's okay that you're here and I'm going to be here and I'm going to ground us here while you move through this. And I'm going to hold this more, more of this state of equanimity while you move through what you need to move through.

And so it's, it's a, it's a sort of grounding piece in letting them know that we can get back to regulation. Like, and I'm here and there's, there's something to sort of focus on and feel a foot on the earth and the, and that person gets to that place of finally, and it's almost like a natural response, right? It's not even this sort of intellectualized choice that the individual makes. It's just when their body discharges. I think, I look at it in the, in the idea of, of discharging a danger response. Right? That's what that, that manifestation is for the individual in the body. It's a response to danger even if that danger is sort of created in the mind of my narrative of what's going on. And maybe it's actually very different what's actually happening. But in my own mind that I've created this, this idea that I, that I'm in danger. And so, so I have, I have fear, I have anxiety, I have overwhelm and before I've even built that on a cognitive, intellectual level, I'm just having a physiological response. So it's a, it's actually a physiological reaction, right? Where I don't even have control over that. And so how in my attempts to help someone co-regulate and for me co-regulating with them is providing that opportunity to discharge the response to danger that I'm having.

Debbie: I love that. I've just never heard it described that way. And it, I think that's nice to think about too because I think a lot of parents, when their child is having a big reaction, whether it's tears or yelling or you know, our instinct is to want to stop that as quickly as possible. And what I'm hearing is that there is value in that discharge. Like that is how we get it out of our bodies. And so we don't want to cut it short. We want to hold a space for them to get it all out.



Zach: Absolutely. And you know, Peter Levine, an author and researcher and someone that talks so much about this type of stuff, he would say it's, it's essential in fact, because if we don't move through that we actually store that trauma in the body. So the next time I, I sort have a similar experience and that all wells up, it's as if I, I didn't break any of it up previously and I didn't, I didn't move through it. And so it's just right there fresh and sort of reignited really quickly. And so he talks about this, this need to really discharge this physiological response to danger in order to really transcend it and really move through it and not have it resurface sort of in the same way as like time and time and time again.

Debbie: Okay. So before we move on to the next part of this process, I just want to ask if you have any tips or thoughts for parents who struggle with this piece, with co-regulating, who find themselves getting tangled up in their child's emotions or feeling responsible for them or you know, being overly empathetic and, and having a deep emotional response themselves.

Zach: My first words of encouragement are slow down. Really check in with yourself and first even identify like, am I in a regulated state, like being witness to this or sort of being in the same shared energy space or am I really moved from my center, and all of a sudden I'm, I'm noticing my own anxieties and my overwhelm and my fear. Because if, if that's the main reaction I'm having, it's gonna be really hard for me to co-regulate, right? How can I co-regulate if I'm not regulated. So what I, I sort of encourage, you know, my families to do that, that are, are working with the students at our school is first really check in with yourself. First, really slow down and then sort of move at like one tenth speed than you want to because you're not problem solving and conflict resolving with another regulated adult brain.

You're, you're working with a young person who's in a really dysregulated state. And so all of those things that you want to get into might not happen at that same pace that you yourself would be able to do. And if you notice sort of as the parent or as the teacher or the facilitator that you're not regulated, first get regulated so that you can offer that co-regulation. And there's a, that's obviously a big spectrum to, to what that looks like. But you know, we could, we could think of it similar to the oxygen mask on the airplane, right? I have to put my mask on before I help other people. And so it's that same idea as like I need to be regulated enough to be able to co-regulate. Otherwise I'm gonna, there's all these subtleties that are going to come out that don't look like regulation that are coming from me.

They instead look like expressions of my own anxiety, expressions of my fear, expressions of my irritation. And so my first encouragement is always check in with yourself. How are you experiencing that? Really do your work. Really start to even maybe record and identify what are these patterns that you have in sort of these same interactions that come up? You know, I think a lot of things that come up for families are patterns, they're dynamics and interactions that resurface and resurface and resurface. And so if I can get really clear and identify on how do I react and respond in those scenarios and I can really look at that from, from sort of a meta perspective and dissect that and sort of lay down what

my intentions are for those future times, then like I'm going to be doing my work on the side for when that happens again. And I might need to discharge my response again when that surfaces before I can really sit, sit with that individual.

And so what comes along with that is also really encouraging parents to communicate with their child the actions that they're taking as that happens. You know, I'm really talking through with my students what I'm doing as that's happening. And so if I, if I'm noticing a student is really overwhelmed and I, and I'm trying to offer support, but I also noticed that, ooh, this is like one of those things that's really hard for me to watch. I can already notice sort of my irritations or frustrations within it. I might tell that student, I see that you're, or I sense that you're feeling this, I see that you're, you're doing this. I'm going to go into the other room just for a couple of minutes and really gather myself and really sort of get in a head space where I feel prepared and I feel confident that I can come sit with you and really, really be with you and really hear you. And so I'm gonna, I'm gonna walk into the other room and I'll be back in two minutes. And just giving them that knowledge of what to expect and when to expect it and what you're choosing and why you're doing it. I think that's also a sort of modeling of vulnerability. It's modeling problem solving. It's modeling how to navigate our own experience because I think that's important as we're supporting somebody else who's going through dysregulated states, we might need to express how that happens for ourselves.

Debbie: I love that language. I mean, I know that I'll be thinking of how I can use that. It's just so straightforward and simple, but it also, what's coming to mind, cause I ask a lot of guests this cause this is what so many of us struggle with. We kind of know on an intellectual level what we want to do. And then when, you know, we're in the midst of it, we, many of us just struggle to take those breaths, to do that regulating work and we just get caught up in it. And so I'm wondering if there is even just value in having some kind of thing that you say to yourself like this is what's happening right now. Like, oh right now we're having the, you know, this kind of a situation. This isn't the time to solve our problem or fix. This is the time to, you know, just something to just remind yourself this is what's happening right now.

Zach: Absolutely, and I think that language can even become shared between parent and child. I've, I've supported families in, in working through that actually as both parent and child are able to identify sort of dynamics and patterns that happen. Because I think sometimes both parties know when it's happening, right? You're like, oh geez, we're already back in this and and can we sort of ping our awareness that we're back in it and maybe have this shared language, this shared shorthand, that sort of names, hey, we're back in it. We're going to, we're going to take some space and we're going to revisit it, but maybe we can even do that in a more, maybe something that offers a little comedic relief or maybe something that offers, right, that's going to be individualized per the person that you're working with, but where it also doesn't have, there doesn't have to be like shame and pain around it.

Right? Or, or blame around it that like, oh well we can't even have this conversation because you're already, right? Just just instead naming it, it being



okay, maybe we have some sort of like shared little joke about it, but with the idea that we are going to revisit it because we've also mapped that out together and we've already had that conversation. And so I think that's really powerful and it, and it avoids invalidating each other's experiences. Right. I think that's, if we don't provide that opportunity for space or for, for co-regulating and we jump right into, to reasoning, that's a really quick way for someone to, to think their experience is being invalidated.

Debbie: Right. So let's talk about that then. So, assuming we're, we've co-regulated and we're ready to more listen and to validate, what does that look like? Especially knowing that we, I know that we want to empathize and validate and we also don't want to, I call it story fondling, but like we don't want to give too much power to a story that we may know rationally isn't serving them or may not be true. So can you talk about that?

Zach: Yeah, I, so that's kind of the relating piece, right? That's, that's how I think of that is and um, I've seen this sort of described as these three R's in a sense, right? Which is, we regulate, then we relate and then we reason. And reason's sort of at the end. And so I think right now we're kinda talking about that cusp of moving through like relating to ultimately getting to reasoning. And so what I would say is in the relating process where I'm trying to acknowledge your experience and I'm trying to sort of validate it. It's, I try to be very wary of not slipping into reasoning because, because when we start talking about it now all of a sudden we are on this cognitive level, right? We've sort of moved through just the physiological reaction. And so now because we're talking about it and because I'm working with my adult brain, I quickly want to move from like relating into reasoning.

But I think in the, in the delicacy that we move from regulating into relating, that needs to be similar for how we move from relating to reasoning. And so in that, in that relating state, it's really a deep active listening practice, right? And really trying to pull out as much information from the individual that we're trying to hear from as we can. So this is where I really encourage people to sort of, those things that you want to challenge that person on, those perspectives you want to share, all of those things to sort of fuel that conversation to go further and, and really inspire that reflection, put all of that on the back burner. Cause that's what we're going to do when we get to reasoning. And so right now I'm just trying to relate. I'm just trying to really hear you express these things and communicate myself in a way that you have the experience that you're being heard.

I can show you that I hear you even if I disagree with you. Right? Like you're saying, even if all right, this narrative you have about it all I'm, I'm listening to and I'm thinking to myself like this is totally not what's happening. This is like totally constructed in your mind. I really want to help you see more clearly what, what might actually be going on, that's the reasoning process. And in the relating I need to, to really hear the, the experience and hear the needs, which is below the surface of actually maybe directly what's being said. So I think what you're talking about is this expression of the narrative, this experience that I'm having. But a lot of the times people, and especially young people are going to be talking

about that through a language that isn't actually really representative of their experience and representative of their needs.

It's going to be steeped in lots of evaluations, lots of subjectivities. And that's where this decoding happens. So I think in the, in the relating process, it's really a decoding of the communications we're hearing and sort of putting that into, okay, what is this person sort of expressing that they're experiencing on an emotional level? What are they sort of saying that their needs are and how do I put that through, you know, really the nonviolent communication strainer, which is, you know, something we've talked about on other podcasts. But this idea that these needs, these experiences, these are, are really sort of generalized to all of us. And those are things I can connect with even if I don't connect with the story that you have, which is how this person did you wrong and that you need them to do this in order to feel okay, which exists completely outside of nonviolent communication practices. What I'd really be hearing is again, the overwhelm, the anxiety, the fear and the need for, the need for collaboration, the need for connection, the need for understanding, right? All of these things that no matter what the details are of that narrative, I can always connect with somebody needing more opportunity, right? Or needing, needing more understanding or needing more challenge and so that's what I'm trying to hear beneath the sort of direct expressions that are coming at me.

Debbie: So how long, how long do you listen? Like I guess I want to know, I guess it depends on how attuned you are to your child's language and how able you are to have a true understanding of what that need is and what that emotion is that they're really expressing. But if we're looking at this as a process in the middle of a, of a situation, could this decoding communication be a matter of five minutes? I mean, and then before we move on, like is it, is it listening until they're done sharing and making sure we understand and we've validated the deeper emotion and then we, then we're ready for the next step? Or how long do we spend there?

Zach: I, you know, I think this could be sort of over multiple conversations sometimes over multiple days or weeks even. Where we might not just move from regulating, relating to reasoning all in one sitting like at all. You know, this might, for one scenario, this might happen over the course of a week. And so I think how long do we listen? I think that really becomes sort of a, a personal capacity understanding of, of knowing like how long can I sit in that and again, still have equanimity, still not be like moved from my center to such a degree that then I start reacting in, in different ways, right? And I start, I start trying to move that pace differently or I start trying to, to move through those stages at the speed that I want as opposed to sort of where this person's ability lies.

And, and I think within that it's very healthy and I really encourage people to be really clear about their boundaries and sort of what they're willing to do and not willing to do. You know, I have a student right now who can really get spun in their narratives about certain topics in certain things and specifically around things like they're reading on the internet, right? And in, in sort of social media and just around certain ideologies and ways of thinking. And she's reading about things that are really hard to hear for her. They don't, they don't align with what she wants to hear. And so will spin her into, into sort of dysregulation and she'll

wanna talk about this with staff and want to talk about it with me and we'll get into these conversations and I can very quickly identify that, okay, we're not having a sort of rational, logical discussion together anymore right now.

You're just like expressing your, your emotional experience right now, which is, which is overwhelm and which is anger and frustration. And I've been in this conversation with you 50 times before this, right? And, and so I already know that we're maybe in regulating, right, maybe we get to relating and now I'm trying to listen and can I hold my boundaries of how long I am willing to listen and serve as that person trying to hear what's being said without communicating it in a way that results in shame or pain or this idea that, that someone's not hearing me. Right? And so I, I think there's, there's a lot of value in being able to package up language that says, hey, I hear this, I hear that. I see what's going on. I really want to support you in this. Here's where I also know we've been before in this conversation.

Here's where I fear this might go. And so I really do want to hear you more. I really do want to talk with you more about this. And right now I'm not willing for this reason and this reason and this reason. And so here's when, when I'll reconnect with you, or here's when I'd like to try again, or I'd even love to offer you the space to brainstorm on what you'd like to do in place of this right now, if I'm not going to be that person that's gonna kind of listen to what you're saying anymore right now. And I think that's really important. And that's also a modeling for our young people that we do get to decide sort of where we end and the rest of the world begins, right. Where I'm, I'm saying like this is my boundary and if I can keep that boundary in I statements where it's not about what you're doing or how you're acting and I really just keep it to me, this is what my experience is.

This is what my choice is. This is what my needs are. Here's the action I'm going to take. That I think provides a really increased opportunity for that to be accepted by the person outside of us without thinking that we're abandoning them or we're not willing to, to be with them through this hard time that they're having. Because I think these can be default thinking as well. And that's something I want to be extra sensitive to with people that I'm working with is I never want you to have this experience of abandonment in a scenario like that. And so how can I really communicate to you what I'm doing, where I'm providing you the best access point to see this as something different than abandonment?

Debbie: So good. Oh my gosh. I want everyone, everyone, everyone to be listening to this episode. I think this is so important. Okay, let's move on then to the next part of this. Are we ready to move on to the next part?

Zach: I, I think so.

Debbie: Did we skip anything?

Zach: Cause I think, no, I think, you know, I think what I would say is just about this, this co-regulating piece and this relating piece is that it just can only move at the pace of, of the person that you're working with. Like it's not gonna move at the

pace I want or the pace I envision or the pace that works for me. And so, so what I really encourage parents and families is, is to like really tap into sort of this like ultimate practice of, of patience within that. And that there's so many things in these scenarios that you want to share with your child and so many perspectives and so many solutions. Cause you're like, I see the pathway to more wonderfulness, right? Like it's so clear to me in my adult brain and so I just want to give it to you. But we might not get to deliver that until like so much later than I actually envision and, and I think the longer that you can sort of stay in that place of knowing that, the more fruitful that interface is going to be.

Debbie: I totally agree. I don't think that that point can be overstated. And I think the last conversation we had for this podcast was about how to help your child transform their world point of view. And the big takeaway, which I got so much feedback like, oh my gosh really, we're not, you know, this is going to take this long. I mean that was the takeaway for me. Like this is something that could happen over weeks, months and years. And I think that is so important. And I, again, this is really resonating with me and what's happening in our life and such a good reminder to don't pivot too quickly into fix it mode or to, you know, to have our Brady bunch moment as I call it. You know, we want to kind of have that meaningful heart to heart and then move on. So yeah, I just really appreciate that.

Zach: Well, thanks. Yeah, and so as we move into reasoning, like you're saying, right? This is the problem solving, this is the solution building. This is where, okay, it's gotten to a regulated state. That person has like been able to be heard and be seen and now they're in a space to want to reason together. The first thing I'm looking for with students is I want consent to collaborating in this way, right? I ask my students all the time, hey, are you interested in hearing my perspective on this? Because if they say no, then my next question is either, okay, well are you willing or I'm just moving on for a little while. We're not, we're just, I'm just not going to share. I got to get comfortable with the idea that, ah, I really want to share this, but this person doesn't want it.

So I guess I have to kind of back off for a little while. And again, that really challenges me in doing that because, because I'm thinking to myself like, but I want to intervene here. I see the way I like, I need to share this information, I need to deliver it. But I've also had my own experience and I'm sure other people have as well of this sort of lack of value of, of sharing all that to someone that isn't interested in it. Right? It's sort of just me just talking for the sake of getting to hear myself say those things. And so first and foremost, I really encourage people to get that consent, get that um, and maybe you're consenting to, to again, interest versus willingness. And those are often different pieces. Sometimes I want to know, hey, are you interested in having this conversation with me?

Are you interested in sort of looking at this from another perspective? And sometimes I actually just want to know like are you willing, because like this is so important to me that whether you're interested or not isn't a huge point of my concern. I mostly just want to know like, will you show up to this or not? And again, if I get met with that expression of no, I'm not willing, well that gives me tons of feedback on where that person actually is. Right? And it tells me like we're not ready for that yet. That person needs some space, they need some time

to sort of arrive at that. Maybe we have to go through a handful more of those experiences where we're really just regulating and relating and we really don't even get to the reasoning and we just regulate and we relate and we regulate and we relate.

And after maybe enough of those experiences, that person goes, you know, I can't figure it out. I actually do want to hear what you think about this or I actually do want help problem solving because I thought I was gonna be able to figure it out myself and I can't. And so I think allowing people to get to that state where they want help is, it's so powerful. And so I think after that consent is established, I first become really interested in what world views around this topic do we share. And I, I have found that that is such a, a valuable place to start because it really helps me direct where the conversation is going to go. So let's put this in a little bit more concrete terms. Maybe I'm speaking with a student who has been doing these different woodworking projects in the shop and this is the fourth project they're on and it's the fourth sort of failed project that they've had.

And so they've, they've entered this place of feeling really bummed out, maybe really angry with themselves or the people around them. Maybe really hopeless about the idea that they're going to be able to manifest a project. And we've moved through all these things and now we're in this, this place of, of reasoning together and trying to problem solve together. One of the first things I might want to know from them is do we share the idea that it is possible for you to receive support around here to build a successful project. And if if they say, I really don't. I really don't see it. I've tried this and I've tried this, I've tried, right. And maybe now all of a sudden they're getting, they're getting dysregulated again just thinking about it, right?

I already, I already know, okay, I have this idea that it's possible and you currently have this world view that it's not possible, so we can't just go into talking about how we're going to, all the problem solving we're going to do to provide the opportunity for it to be possible because you don't even think it's possible right now. And so maybe that's going to change again where the conversation's going to go. That's going to change what we're even really talking about in this, if that makes sense. Because I want to know what are the shared realities that we have around this topic. Maybe it's a conflict between two people, between two students, and they don't feel confident that they're going to be able to have resolve with this other person. They don't feel confident that them saying how they feel about this or what they've experienced is going to do anything to help the scenario and that this person outside of them is never, is never going to hear them, never going to listen to them, and they're never going to be able to collaborate and find resolve. Well, that's really good information for me to have before I start directing the conversation about how we're going to get resolve. Because if I talk that person into something and they don't get resolve, well now I've just validated what their original thinking was.

Debbie: Okay, so then once we've identified those shared values or we feel like we're on the same page, how do we move forward from there?



Zach: I think we move right into collaboration and that's where I'm, I'm really trying to get a gauge on what kind of support they're even looking for. Right? Like are you interested in, in me sharing like three to five ideas that I think might shift this experience for you? Are you wanting to tell me first sort of the ideas that, that you've tried and worked through and we could sort of dissect those together. Are you interested in me just giving you something to try and you're going to try that, right? Sort of gauging from the individual, like how do you want to go about this problem solving process? Right? What does this level of collaboration look like for you? Because I think sometimes you're going to have, an individual's going to have lots of ideas on what they want to try and they really just sorta need a backboard to bounce a lot of that off of. And sometimes they're going to be like, I literally have no idea, but I'm super, I'm super open.

And so, so again, that's gonna also dictate how I'm moving through the conversation. Am I really just sort of serving as this person that's like asking questions or sort of like illuminating the holes in the solutions that they're thinking about or, or am I packaging up a few possible solutions that they're going to choose from or am I just just giving them one to try with the idea that, all right, we'll try that and if it doesn't work in a week we're going to, I'll have a different one for us to try. So I think in this idea of giving a student agency and autonomy in that problem solving, it can look highly directed or it's going to look like I'm really just this sort of supporter or facilitator for a lot of the ideas you already have and the directions you want to go and things you want to try. And I think both ends of that spectrum can still provide just as much agency and autonomy because we've really looped that person into the collaboration process.

Debbie: Right. And again, we need to be curious and, and know this is an experiment. This isn't, once we move to this phase, it doesn't mean the problem will be solved quickly. We're still looking at potentially a lot of trial and error and going maybe through this entire cycle multiple times.

Zach: Exactly. And that's why I think it's really important that the individual that we're working with is on board with these ideas and they don't feel sort of talked into them or convinced by us that they should try it. Because again, if we get in there and it proves unsuccessful, that might sort of create really limited resiliency to want to try something else because they came into this with the idea that like this is what was going to change it. This is what was going to fix it. When really we want to be coming off this platform that this is something we're going to try. This is an opportunity that may or may not pan out, but if it doesn't, we're going to come right back to the drawing board. And it's totally okay.

Debbie: Yeah, I mean, I love that you reminded us of that language of, you know, are you willing to or are you interested in, I know we talked about that in a previous episode and it's something I've adopted completely and it changes everything. Just it, you know, we know that kids like to have a sense of control, especially differently wired kids. So.

Zach: Absolutely.



Debbie: You know, so this is such a powerful process and it just makes so much sense and I feel like these are real tools that we can start really thinking about and applying them to things happening with our child. So for people who are listening, whose kids are struggling right with this time of year and might be experiencing more anxiety, resistance to going to school, getting them out the door. I'm just hearing from so many parents this year, more than any other school year since I've been doing this work, about the school refusal piece kicking in. So could you maybe even show us with a child who's, who's really starting to resist school or having an anxiety response to school, what this might look like, just like this four step process through that lens. Is that, or is that too much? I don't know.

Zach: Yeah. No, I think we can kind of, yeah, I think we can kind of get into that. Cause I, yeah, I want to sort of illuminate some really applicable sort of strategies that people might be able to use in this sort of scenario like this. And um, and so I think for, that that's a perfect place to start, is sort of school resistance or school refusal, because embedded within that is tons of emotional experiences that somebody having right, that's sort of leading them to be like, I want to avoid this. And so if we talk about that first, that state of, of regulating, you know, one of the things that comes out of somatic experiencing sort of philosophy, which I would really encourage people to look up and look some more about that. But basically what somatic experiencing is, is really supporting people and identify like what's going on in their felt sensations, like their physiological sensations of their body.

I think that's a great place to start is trying to support your child in naming and identifying like in this state of moving into dysregulation like what's happening in the body. What do I feel happening in my face? What sensations are going on for me? And actually if you get on the Center for Non-Violent Communication website, you can even find a whole list of body sensation terms to sort of lend and use with your child. But really helping them first name that because if I also can get into my body I can get out of my mind a little bit. And that's where so so much of this, this dysregulation feeds itself is as my narrative spins and my mind really spins.

And so I think coming out of that and really having this opportunity to name like, yeah, what is going on like in my breath, what is, what does my head feel like? It's a really great modeling practice for self-regulating because that's something we can do for ourselves. But also we can provide those, those leading questions a little bit of like what an individual is noticing in the body. And that's going to give us a lot of insight into where that person's at. Because you might be asking some of those questions, you know, what do you, what are you noticing happening in your body right now, or what's going on? And do you feel anything in your legs? And they might be like, I have no idea. I've never really thought of that. I don't have a language for it. Right? I'm, or I'm, I'm so, I'm so running off with this narrative in my head that I'm, I'm completely unaware of even what's going on in my body.

Right? And so, so that might be a whole process in itself because that's gonna give me more information. And so when I get to the relating piece, this is where I'm really trying to hear their experience. And again, this is where the verbal, the

language, might be limiting, especially depending on, on who I'm working with and sort of their current level of ability within language use and things like that. And so this is where I really encourage this sort of individualization approach of like what's going to work for this person to be able to share with you as much of the like genuine, authentic experience that they're having as possible in a way that you're going to understand. And so I think there's a lot of different ways of going about this and a lot of different sort of creative venues that we can work with.

Some things that I use with students is leading, leading questions that then I can create a space for them to share something with. But it looks different than maybe us just sitting down and having a conversation. And so I think a lot of artwork can be, can be involved in this, you know, this might be something like, hey, would you be willing to just draw me a picture of what it feels like when you walk into the classroom every day? Or can you, just using colors but no shapes, can you show me what happens in your body when you sit in the lunch room, right? Or whatever, whatever the scenario is. So that, and maybe they're doing that on your own time, maybe you're saying, hey, I'm going off to go downstairs and go on the treadmill and during that time like I'd love for you to do this.

Are you willing to do this? And when you're done, you can just, you can just leave it on the stairs. Right? So it really like what's gonna pull back the sort of pressure of the scenario to describe what I'm experiencing when that in itself might be leading me to feel overwhelm. And so I think creating a scenario that really like depressurizes that situation is incredibly valuable. And so it might be in something like that. I have, um, I have these cards that I work with, I can't remember the company that they come from, but their cards are called interactive cards and they're these cards the size of like giant playing cards and they just have these like really sort of descriptive drawings of scenes basically that maybe can speak towards like what you might be experiencing inside, right? Like, maybe what it, what it looks like when you sort of feel infuriated, right.

Or things like that. But they're these different scenes with many things involved in them. And so I'll use those cards sometimes to again ask these leading questions and try to get students to identify which ones match up with those things. And this is all just an information gathering session for myself. So I think of the relating piece as I just want to gather information and I want to gather as much information and as authentic as information and as genuine as information as I can. So if we can't just sit down and talk about that, what else can I use in my toolbox that is going to still get me that, that information. This might even just look like a journal back and forth where you're like, hey, maybe my student really actually doesn't mind writing and they like to do that and that's a space they can go do on their own time.

And so maybe we're going to have this sort of like back and forth journal where I'm able to sort of pose questions in there. They're able to respond to them, leave it for me in a place where I can get it. So we just, we don't have this same like face to face energy interaction together that might be uncomfortable. And again, not that we don't want to work towards that. Like I think ultimately there's tons of value in being able to like do that and sit in front of each other and look each

other in the eye and do all those things. But that might not be accessible right now. And if it's not, how can I utilize these other things that are still gonna give me that information. And so then as we get into the place of reason, that's also where I think we can pull in a lot of different tools like that.

We might even be relying on other people in our shared community that they might be able to reason with that are not us. Where I say, hey, I know uncle whoever, you guys seem to really enjoy talking with each other and really helping. And I think he might have a lot perspective on this thing that you're talking about. Would you, would you ever be willing to, to chat with him, you know, just about sort of what you've been telling me about and see what he thinks. And so I think relying on other people outside of just ourselves to provide that voice of reason or provide that space also shows those people that we're working with, shows our children that we work on a team. There's a lot of people here that want to support you and I also see that you have different access points to different people and so I'm not going to try to be everything. Because maybe we can't get out of this dynamic right now and that's okay. That's something we're going to work on. But now maybe because of that, I really want to, I really want to support you in getting to have that opportunity with somebody else right now.

Debbie: Yeah. I do that. So I'm glad that that's something that you're suggesting. I think it's important for everybody involved to, it's important for us to get that break sometimes from being always in the thick of it and to let our child, they're often more open to other people's points of view than the one they're always in conversation with.

Zach: Exactly. And if we've been the person that I'm holding space for you while you get regulated, I'm really hearing you, you might not have a lot of that space for now me to kind of be that person that's challenging you a little bit because when we get into reasoning like I'm inherently going to be that person that's challenging your thinking. Because, and that's kind of what you're talking about is like I can't just feed this narrative that I know has no basis in reality. Like at some point we're going to get to this point of the conversation where I'm going to say, okay, I see this, I see this, but do you see this? Because that seems like majorly in conflict with what we're talking about or that seems like you're saying X is happening, but I really actually see Y happening. That's hard. Those are hard to hear messages for that person, right? We're challenging their thinking and so, so I'm always looking at how can I be providing an opportunity for challenge, but where you perceive that challenge as support instead of an attack.

Debbie: Exactly. Yep. So all right. And is there, is there one more step to this or is that part of the collaboration piece too?

Zach: I think that's part of the collaboration piece is really like gauging like where's the interest? Where's the willingness? What are you even looking for? You know, like I had a conversation with a student recently and we had kind of gotten to a state of regulation and we, we'd sort of moved through relating and that person was still telling me like, I don't actually know if I want to feel different. I don't know if I want to, to have different experience than I'm having. And in my mind I'm

thinking like there's no way that's true. Like, I don't, I don't buy that. I don't believe that. Like I don't believe that you don't want to feel better than you're feeling right now. But again, that being like really valuable information for me to have because now my attention and my intention is focused on not the strategies that we're going to use for you to feel better, it's for me to get more information on this idea that you don't even know if you want to feel better because that tells me there's more, there's more going on. And there's more that I haven't even really gotten. And there's more that maybe you as the individual are even afraid to really look at because, because that's scary.

Debbie: Yes, totally. I was just having a conversation with another parent this weekend at a conference about that I think there, there has to be some payoff for wanting to spend more time in that space. So that is a cue to get more curious about what's really going on. So, wow. Okay. I'm, I'm just really blown away always when I talk with you and I just want, I just want everyone to hear what you have to share. I feel like it's such important information, not just for parents but for teachers, for anyone who interacts with these kids because it's such a respectful, thoughtful way to be in relationship with a child and that's what every child needs. But especially kids, you know, who are differently wired, who are many times dealing with past traumatic experiences or just negative experiences in school and in relation to other kids. So, I feel like you've done such a thorough job and I have a very clear sense of how to approach this in my home and I, and I'm sure that many parents do as well. But any last thoughts before we say goodbye?

Zach: I guess just sort of a reiteration of modeling vulnerability cause that's what we're asking these individuals to do every time we're getting into these difficult conversations and difficult experiences is we're asking them to be vulnerable. Because when we ask someone to be authentic and genuine about what's really going on for them, that's a really vulnerable experience. And so I think encouraging parents to just model that as much as possible and if parents need help putting that into language in a way that's, that does express what they're experiencing but also doesn't maybe let too many cats out of the bag. Right. Cause I also understand that. Talk with your community, like rehash that with your community before you even deliver it to your child maybe. But I think that's really powerful of like show that vulnerability and show it in I statements and, and then just the patience that this process takes and that what you may want to have in one conversation in one hour might actually be better served and way more accessible over the course of five conversations over the course of two weeks.

Debbie: Such a good reminder. And one we cannot hear enough. I like, every time I talk to groups of parents, they, we just are conditioned to want results and especially if the behavior quote unquote behavior is something that's uncomfortable or causing problems in school or at home. But it's critical. Like this doesn't work without patience.

Zach: Right. And sort of the last thing I would say within that is, although the effort that I think we're taking here is to create shifts and create changes in thinking, in behavior, in manifestation, those changes that we're trying to facilitate become secondary to the relationship that we're cultivating. And so like you're saying, if

we get into these scenarios and in my attempts to help you regulate and in my attempts to relate with you, I actually push us too far too fast. And now you, now you as the individual have sort of spun out again. And I've, I've actually been a catalyst for putting you back in that place of dysregulation. I'm actually like taking steps backwards because now you've had, you've actually had another experience of seeing that this doesn't help. And this doesn't work by, by sharing yourself and talking with adults and things like that. And so I would rather again see that hard to watch behavior for longer than trying to change it right away because I might be retraumatizing that person throughout the whole process and therefore actually pushing that change and that shift out exponentially.

Debbie: Wow. So important. Okay. Zach, as always, thank you so much for just your generosity with this community and for the work that you do in the world and for just sharing this with us today. I'm so grateful.

Zach: Thank you, Debbie. It's a pleasure to be on and I'll always enjoy my conversations and, and happy to also hear from any parents out there on, on specific things that are happening for themselves. If anybody wants to email me and, or get ahold of me any way like that, um, love to hear what people are dealing with and navigating and being able to sort of inform us for future conversations and things like that.

**RESOURCES MENTIONED:**

- [Learn Inc](#) (Zach's school)
- [The Center for Nonviolent Communication](#) (Marshall Rosenberg's Global Organization)
- [Educator Zach Morris on Supporting our Kids in Transforming Their World View](#) (podcast episode)
- [Nonviolent Communication, Whole-Person Learning, and Neurodiverse Students](#) (podcast episode)
- [Peter Levine and Trauma Healing](#)