Befriending the Nervous System: Polyvagal Practices for Homework Resilience

Dr. Debra Em Wilson

Interviewed by Dr. Laura Markham

Dr Laura Markham (00:04):

This summit is brought to you with love by Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids. Welcome. Hi, there. I'm Dr. Laura Markham, founder of Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids, and the organizer of Nurturing Hearts, Nurturing Minds: The Neuroscience of Peaceful Parenting Summit. I'm so excited to introduce you to my wonderful guest, Dr. Debra Em Wilson. Dr. Wilson is the founder of S'cool Moves, a program that integrates regulating movement with academics.

(00:33):

For over 25 years, her workshops have provided evidence-based strategies to support all students in the classroom and homeschooling environments. She's the author of The Polyvagal Path to Joyful Learning and The Resilient Learner's Backpack: Mind-Body Activities for Focus, Regulation, and Engagement.

(00:51):

Debra's experience as the mother of a child with a constellation of developmental and cognitive challenges enhances her understanding of children who learn differently and need specific strategies to help them thrive. Dr. Wilson, thank you so much for joining us today. I'm thrilled to have you here, and I really appreciate your taking the time to share your wisdom with us.

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (01:10):

Thanks. I'm happy to be here.

Dr Laura Markham (01:12):

So let's start with polyvagal theory. I know it's all the rage to talk about polyvagal theory, but if you could give us a very quick lesson that parents could use to frame our discussion, that would be so helpful.

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (01:30):

Polyvagal theory is about befriending our nervous system, understanding our nervous system, understanding how we respond every day to all the events that come at us, and having that capacity to move between states. So we're not always going to be in this regulated state. What we learn from polyvagal theory is that that's okay. We have this perception of ourselves that we always have to be this perfectly regulated person and our children have to be perfectly regulated all the time.

(02:01):

The research actually tells us that we're at mismatch almost 70% of the time, and we have to be in attunement about 25 to 30%. And the mismatch that we experience actually builds resilience, and that's a huge relief for everyone. So when you get into that during homework or whenever and you're getting into a little bit of that tit-for-tat, just think, I'm building resilience.

Dr Laura Markham (02:26):

That's so reassuring. Tell us what polyvagal theory has to do with kids' ability to regulate their emotions and focus and stay engaged with homework, for instance.

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (02:40):

Well, polyvagal theory tells us we have three main states. We have blended states as well, but our three main states are ventral vagal, and that is a place where we're ready to learn. We're ready to engage. We're curious. We have the tools around us to get whatever we need to get done. It doesn't mean everything's perfect, and we're not in a yoga state of breathing and bliss.

(03:01):

It just means we're ready and we can take whatever's coming at us for the day. That's ventral. We're not activated. In sympathetic, we can be mobilized and it's usually disorganized. And as a teacher, I see a lot of that in my classroom, the disorganized mobilization, and that's our fight or flight response. We're feeling unsafe,

so we mobilize. And so our job is to try to find those activities and those experiences that help students and our children to organize the mobilization.

(03:31):

And then in dorsal vagal, if that doesn't get us more towards safety and get us out of feeling danger, then we move down. Deb Dana has this ladder. Ventral vagal is at the top, then we have sympathetic, and then we move down into dorsal vagal. In dorsal vagal, we just say, "It's too much. I can't do it anymore. I'm going to stay in bed, keep the covers over my head. I don't want to get up. I don't want to get the kids to school. I've just had it."

(03:56):

And that's a shutdown response, and it can be you can shut down for things that you wouldn't think are life-threatening but are just overwhelming. That place is a place of low energy. We don't have a whole lot of energy to do what we need to do, and we are just basically shut down and just don't have what we need to get through the day.

Dr Laura Markham (04:21):

So it's almost like giving up at that moment, dorsal vagal. And for a child who comes home and they've had a hard day at school and their mom says, "Okay, here's a snack. We need to sit down and do your homework," and she's bringing her own nervousness about the fights they've had in the past and the power struggles about homework maybe, and the child is bringing the full day of overwhelm and stress, and they open up the math and they just look at it and they can't remember a thing like, "I don't know what I'm supposed to do here," it's possible that they would just shut down, isn't it?

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (05:02):

Yes.

Dr Laura Markham (05:04):

And so that would look like what? What might happen then?

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (05:07):

I think the most important thing is that we check in and we say, where are we right now before we even sit down or engage, because we've had a hectic day. It's a full day. We come home. Even on the drive home, you're thinking, ugh, we have

homework coming up. And it's a really vulnerable time for nervous system states because everybody's held it together all day.

(05:31):

And they just want to come home and relax, or they have to get out to a soccer game. I mean, they've got to get it done in this little window of time. So they also have this time pressure. So the first thing is just to find your regulating resources and be regulated before you sit down. And so when you walk through that door and you know this is coming, you know you've got to get this homework done, you...

(05:54):

The polyvagal theory and Deb Dana, who translated a lot of Dr. Steve Porges' work, she has a formula that I love. It's called inside, outside, and between. So when you're looking for regulating resources, you're saying, what do I have inside myself? Can I do some quick deep breathing? Do I go and listen to a little bit of music for a while before I engage? What is it inside myself that I have that I know I can do?

(06:18):

And then outside is where do I go in my home that feels regulating for me? And I think that's a part of the homework experience too is predictability. Having that place for your child that they go to that they like. It's not a random place in your house. Every time you walk in, do homework someplace different. You have a place set up that's lovely if you have some space.

(06:45):

Just even a little nook or a corner that has the things that your child likes, little pictures of their friends or animals. You have this set up that this is where we meet and this is our ventral place. I call it our ventral place, where we can stay regulated. And then the between us and the relationship, so you've got inside, you've got the outside of looking around you. How is my environment helping me be regulated?

(07:14):

It's not going to be really regulated if somebody's getting dinner and there's stuff all over the counter and you're moving it away and trying to do your math. That's probably not going to be the most regulating experience. And then the relationship between others. Who do you have? And I like to bring the point that sometimes we want children to do it by yourself, but co-regulation is a big part of just regulation in general.

(07:40):

And sometimes a child does need somebody to sit with them initially to get them started and to co-regulate and say, "Yeah, this math's kind of difficult. I'm really not

too sure about it too, but we're going to get through this together." That co-regulation, that feeling like we're in this together. And we know the research tells us that the best kind of homework is homework that involves the parents and is realistic and something that's engaging, but sometimes that doesn't happen.

(08:08):

It's like just do this whole page of math problems. So just engaging and having that child feel safe and seen and understood. And I know you've held it all together. I appreciate it so much. I know how hard you work at school, but together we can get this done. I know that sounds like pipe dream, but it can happen in some situations.

Dr Laura Markham (08:33):

I think parents can do a lot to make it happen. And I love the words you just used, safety, seen. These are some of the words we use to describe a state of secure attachment. Does that person feel safe? Do they feel seen, understood? Do they feel soothed? Just like you said, we're going to get through this together. Is there someone soothing them? So all of what you're describing is creating a secure, safe place for the nervous system, right?

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (09:00):

Right.

Dr Laura Markham (09:05):

I'm seeing that child who's a little shut down, the dorsal vagal shut down happening, that maybe they would perk up a little bit because of the reassurance of the parent in this instance. What about a kid who's had bad experiences with homework in the past and ends up... They're not shutting down, but they're in fight mode. The sympathetic nervous system is engaged. They're rebelling against this, "No, I won't do it. You can't make me." What do we do with that kid?

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (09:35):

So first, we acknowledge that's mobilized, and we acknowledge the nervous system state. And I think teaching children to see their nervous system state and understand it, then you ask the question, what does your nervous system need right now? So it's depersonalizing. It's not like what do you need? It's your friend within. And Deb Dana uses that term befriending.

(09:57):

So I think if we can teach them to befriend it and be okay with, yeah, I do feel mobilized and I do feel anxious about this, or I do feel mad. So acknowledging that, but giving them those regulating tools. Well, what does your nervous system need? And you've had this discussion even before you've sat down. So when everybody's in a place of ventral, everybody's in a place where they're ready to learn and connect, ventral is a place of social connection too.

(10:25):

It's where we can relate to one another. And you've already prepared, so it's not like every time you sit down, we go through this. It's like beforehand, you've taken some time to say, "I notice when you go to do your homework, this is really a frustrating, maddening experience for you. So how can we make it better? What do you need? What can we use?" And at S'cool Moves, when we see that sympathetic fight or flight response, we give them movement that helps organize that.

(10:56):

So if they're learning their spelling words and they're needing to practice and they're writing them, we have activities where they actually jump while they say their spelling words. We have activities where they use little pencils and they tap and say their words. And I have all of this in my freebie section too. I put the word ping pong card up there. I actually put a homework plan.

(11:18):

I came up with a little P-L-A-N, and we can talk about that, their plan. They can download that and get that if they'd like. When I look at mobilized energy, that's hard to just get them to sit and focus. So I like to do active learning. So any way I can, I try to make that learning a little more fun, a little more active, and we can jump, we can tap, we can even fist. Like if you have words on a sheet, you can say the words while doing your fist, right, left, right, left, right, left.

(11:52):

And that just helps bring more executive functioning, more frontal lobe activation. You can't really get a student to focus or a child to focus when they have that much energy going through the system. You have to find a way to provide regulating movement for all that energy.

Dr Laura Markham (12:15):

So when you have a child whose nervous system is activated, escalated, and they're full of that energy, and you try to say, "Okay, sit down. Be quiet. Read your book," or whatever you're trying to tell them to do, it's going to explode, right? There's no way that that's going to be helpful.

(12:31):

But when you can figure out a way to help them move as they're learning, or even before they're learning, it could be a standard thing you do when you get home or even before you get in the car or whatever, but when you're on your way home, that they move and they channel some of that energy.

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (12:47):

Yeah, and if the parents can do it with them, the parent needs it too. So it just helps regulate the parents. My daughter, she was always a co-regulating learner. We always had to do homework together. I'll say one word, you do another word. I'll read one sentence, you read another sentence. We split it up. It's just no matter however I tried to get her to do it all by herself, she's just a co-regulator.

(13:10):

She's that way with almost everything. She loves interaction. She loves connection. She loves doing things with people. And so we have to respect that. I think sometimes we think a student or a child who likes to do co-regulation it's a weakness, but is actually a very powerful regulating resource for the nervous system like every other resource.

(13:32):

And at some point, you can say, "Well, how do you feel about this now? Can you do the last two problems on your own? Are you good with it?" And they'll probably go, "Yeah, mom, I'm fine. Go do your cooking or whatever." So I think checking in using co-regulation as a resource and not seeing it as a weakness is huge in polyvagal world.

Dr Laura Markham (13:52):

Yes. Because if we've got a judgment against that kid, if we're like, "Oh my gosh, once more I have to do this and I can't get dinner started, and then everything gets behind," then we're coming in with dysregulation ourselves. The child is never going to be more regulated than the parent. If we're offering co-regulation, then we need to really be noticing our own attitude toward the whole thing. So I love what you're saying.

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (14:19):

And you can share your regulation. That's what's cool about it. It's when you're regulated, it's like, well, you can share... That's one of the polyvagal concepts I love is you can share your regulated nervous system with somebody else. And I think

sometimes you just have to come to terms with this half hour or this hour I need to be with or adjacent, next to, close by knowing that I'm going to...

(14:43):

Most likely, unless they're in high school or whatever, they can call a friend or maybe do it in a different way. But I just think it's just coming to those terms that they're probably just not going to go off to the room. That's a rare child that can just go off to the room. They haven't seen you all day too. So part of them just wants to be by you. They just want to see you.

(15:02):

They want to hang out with you. I want that to be more of a pleasant experience. So I think accepting that that time's going to probably be a co-regulating time.

Dr Laura Markham (15:12):

So I want to go back to something else you said. You said you might ask the child, "What does your nervous system need?" And you would do it when you're in a calm, ventral vagal state. Both people are calm. How do you recommend, give us a little script for how a parent might talk to a child about the nervous system? I mean, if you've never spoken to your child about it and you say, "What does your nervous system need," they're probably going to just stare at you. So what should we be saying to them?

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (15:37):

Right. Well, I like the term your friend within. What does your friend within that helps you get this done need right now? Because sometimes it's easier to think of it as a friend than some complicated nervous system kind of thing, and then modeling it. I know at work, I have to bring my work home. So you model and say, "What I do is I create an environment around me where I can get my work done. What do you need?"

(16:05):

And we have three types of cognition. We have embodied cognition. We always think it's all coming from our brain, but body cognition is using our body to learn. Situated cognition is learning using the environment around us. Post-its, colored markers, calculators, whatever we need is in that environment and ready for us. And then distributed is asking other people, sharing that learning with other people.

(16:30):

So we have to keep in mind that it's not just brain power and it's not just grit and we have to grit. That's a myth about the brain. That's not a muscle really that needs more working out. It needs support. And so I would ask the child, let's set this up. What do you like to learn? Some people don't want to sit at a desk. I never wrote a book sitting at a desk. I'm sitting on a couch.

(16:58):

That is just who I am. I have papers spread all over my bed in the evenings when I'm working when I should be sleeping. And so not all of us are desk sitters, and that's another thing. There's some parents just like, "You have to sit at the desk." Or you get a gym ball so they can sit on the gym ball and they can bounce a little bit and get a little movement that way. You have some variable seating.

(17:23):

Do you want to sit on a cushion? Let's sit on the floor together on this cushion. Just trying to make the environment be something where the body goes, ooh, just lowers that activated level. And they know, children know what it is that makes them feel more regulated. We just have to ask the question.

Dr Laura Markham (17:44):

You mentioned a PLAN before. Can you share specific polyvagal based techniques or activities that parents can use with their kids just to help their nervous systems settle and focus during challenging homework tasks?

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (18:03):

I was swimming yesterday and this just popped into my head because I've been thinking about this interview. And I thought, could we have a PLAN? I know acronyms are always like I can never remember what's in an acronym, but I thought this was pretty simple. So PLAN. P Is predictability. We know the nervous system loves predictability. The brain likes some novelty, but the nervous system likes to know when it comes into a room, there's a predictable environment.

(18:35):

When I come home from school, here's what I'm going to do. So I think number one is having that predictable environment, which includes where are we going to study, how are we going to do it, when are we going to do it? It's very clearly laid out, so there's no energy lost in trying to, sit over here. No, sit over here. All that even creates some nervous system stress. So that's the P. The L is listen and link. So I have this thing where we just listen.

(19:02):

We have our other hand on our belly and we listen in and we see, where are we right now, and we link what is our nervous system state. It's very simple. I'm ready to go, or no, mom, I've got to go. I've got to go run around the house outside a few times, or I've got to go do something. I'm just not ready. I think that's a real key is, are we ready? And maybe they'll never be ready.

(19:26):

For some students, I understand. Some children might never and you have to rein that in. But I think initially just getting them to notice this. And then active learning, the A is active learning. Whatever you can, make it come alive. It's on paper, but find a way to make it fun, to make it come alive, to move while you're spelling, to do some wall pushups while you're...

(19:52):

Get a little workout in while you're spelling, whatever you need to do. And I have tons of those activities at my website and my books about... I have these templates, all these different movement type templates, where you can write in the words or write in the numbers and that sort of thing. And then N is really important, N is notice glimmers. So Deb Dana has this glimmers.

(20:15):

We all know our triggers. We just all know our triggers, but our glimmers are those moments where things are going well. And we have to train our brain, and this is how we retune our nervous system as well. Even if we're triggered because we hated homework as a kid, so we're already triggered, we retune by noticing during the homework, we always notice what all is going wrong, but we need to notice what's going right.

(20:43):

Oh, this place we've set aside, he seems to really like. That's a glimmer. And you say it. You notice them. You receive them. And during the time together make a point to say, "Well, I noticed this." At the end of your session, it's a ritual. At the end you might say, "What were our glimmers today?"

(21:08):

And the child might say, "Well, I really liked it, mom, when you sat with me and we took turns reading those sentences, or I really liked it, dad, when we did some things together. That really helped," because those glimmers are what reinforce the positive experience. And our brain's going to hang on to the negative. It's trying to do that.

Dr Laura Markham (21:32):

That's how the brain works. It makes me think of Rick Hanson, focus on the positive. All of his brain work that he's shared with us is all about focus on the positive, because of course, the brain is tuned toward the negative. So I love that we would notice the positives and enhance that good feeling for our child about the homework situation. And also we'll learn so much when they say to us, "Oh, this worked for me."

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (22:00):

And what happens too is they bring this into the classroom. I have teachers that at the end of the day, all their students, they get together and it's their ritual. We know rituals are really powerful, and their ritual is to share a glimmer. And they don't have to, but everybody usually does. And one student said, "My glimmer is glimmers." That makes her really happy.

(22:23):

And one teacher told me they were heading out to the bus and a student yelled and said, "We didn't do our glimmers today." And the students were all saying their glimmers on the way out to the bus and after school homework. And I think that's a way of even if we had a really rough day and we think these children have had a rough day, you find out, oh, they really liked what we did when we were doing this particular activity.

(22:45):

That's interesting. And then you can note that and you can start learning, how does this child's nervous system respond to these different activities I'm doing in the class, and give that nervous system more of what helps it regulate.

Dr Laura Markham (22:59):

So what do you see happens with kids if they are doing more in the classroom, let's say, or at home with their parents with homework that helps them notice their nervous system and shift their state? How does that affect their larger life, the other areas...

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (23:17):

That's what I love about writing the two books because I just felt it was so expansive. It helped me personally understand my nervous system state. I grew up in a violent alcoholic home. I've had some retuning to do of my nervous system, and it was such a wonderful healing journey to understand that I had more control over it than I thought, and that I could actually understand when I'm starting to get triggered and I could bring in those glimmers.

(23:43):

So personally, writing the books for me was really healing. It's a lifelong skill we're teaching. And I've been working with some high schools, and I'm thinking, wow, if I had had this in high school, how different and different choices I would've made in my life if I could have befriended my nervous system and understood it. And we haven't talked about those blended states, and we can just real briefly, that play is a blended state of ventral and sympathetic.

(24:13):

So when we do see students, our children, getting into that sympathetic fight or flight, remember if you add a little ventral energy, we now have play. So if we can turn that into play. And just looking at what that child enjoys doing and somehow weave that in, now we're in a blended state that's really powerful. And then quietly still is tricky. That is a state of ventral with dorsal vagal.

(24:41):

So you have to be able to have some ventral energy online, but not shut down. So when we ask students and our children to be quietly still, that's the hardest state to get into if there's a lot of sympathetic. If there's a lot of sympathetic activation, you have to find a way to... I keep saying this in my interviews, but it's really so important I think we miss. That sometimes we go sympathetic.

(25:05):

Let's do deep breathing. But you know what? Deep breathing can be hard for a student has a ton of energy that needs to do something with it. So let's move in a productive way. Let's get their spelling words out. Let's do some jumping activities. Let's do whatever, some bop bounce. I call it bop-bink-bounce where we bop like this, we bink with our pencils, or we bounce red and blue balls.

(25:29):

So we can do these different types of things with our words, with our math problems, with whatever we're doing. And then they can shift. You can see once that's organized, they're participating with you, and that fight or flight's turning a little more into play because we brought some ventral in, then it's easier to shift down into, okay, now we need to do our little silent reading or we have to read this paragraph. Something that takes a little quieter energy.

Dr Laura Markham (25:59):

So a parent who is observing their child, who their child is having a hard time or is very activated, and they want to bring a little ventral energy to be playful, I can't tell

you how many times mothers say to me, "My husband does the play. He tosses them around and they laugh. It's all good. I don't have time for that stuff. I have to get them through the schedule." And so they find themselves, it's very hard to reach for playfulness when they're feeling the clock ticking.

(26:29):

So when you say add some ventral energy, you've got that activated kid who doesn't want to sit down and do the homework, I can really see that if you were in the room, you would somehow get that kid moving and engaging because engagement is the ventral thing, right? And I love the movement that you bring. But what would you advise this mom who's a little stressed herself? What would you advise her to do at that moment?

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (26:54):

Well, there's always this reality versus not reality. I think we go back to acknowledging where the parent is. And if they're not in a ventral place of play, it's just going to activate the whole situation. We bring that energy, they're picking up on it. So if you are agitated, they are going to, generally speaking. I've seen where parents will put some of the templates on a refrigerator.

(27:27):

So while they're cooking, the words are on there on the refrigerator. And the kids just jumping, "Hey mom," and she's cooking away and they're doing... So sometimes that play doesn't have to be co-regulated play. Sometimes they can get to be playing on their own. If it's something that's fun and it's something that's engaging for them, they'll like to do it. And still you can be cooking and looking over and saying, "Yeah, way to go," kind of thing.

(27:52):

But I know it's hard. We're talking like this is easy. It's not easy. And I do want to make a point though that if homework becomes consistently this terrible, terrible experience for both of you and everybody involved in the family, it's time to go talk to somebody. It's time to go talk to the counselor at school. It's time to go talk to the teacher. Usually when children take forever, like my daughter would take forever to do homework.

(28:20):

So we just toward the end of it went, give me 10 minute homework assignment, because it just took too long and she got frustrated and everybody did. Remember that homework's negotiable. People think it's like, I have to do this whole packet. But

go in and talk and be in a ventral place when you go in so that you can place of safety and make everybody else feel pretty safe.

(28:44):

If you have a 504 or IEP Plan, I think it's really important. I had a parent friend of mine whose high school student just couldn't get all the homework done in the time, couldn't turn it in the next day like she needed to. And they got allowances for it. As long as it was turned in by the end of the grading period, she got credit and she didn't get dinged. And I know some people say, "Well, then no students will turn them in on time."

(29:07):

We get into all this discussion around it. I think you have to be an advocate for your child, first and foremost, and for yourself. I just wanted to put that out there. There is negotiation with homework.

Dr Laura Markham (29:21):

Yeah, I appreciate that. I think we're telling parents the best case scenario. They have these inner resources, but sometimes they have to work hard to find those inner resources. So I appreciate that sometimes changing the situation and having less homework might in fact be what you need to do for your kid.

(29:41):

But speaking of resources, you mentioned your own background and how you learned to befriend your nervous system. So there are lots and lots of parents who could resonate with what you said. So what advice would you give to a parent who says, "I don't even know where to begin to make friends with my nervous system?" What should that parent do?

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (30:04):

Well, you have to learn about your nervous system, so you need to go online and watch some videos. I have a lot of YouTube videos that are really good that I did with Anna Ray, who's a social worker. We did a whole group of... Just tune in and watch and learn your nervous system states, first and foremost. Those of us who are brought up in these types of homes, we have a raging critical parent. We are so critical of ourselves.

Dr Laura Markham (30:35):

Inside. Yeah.

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (30:36):

Yes, inside. And so I feel one of the best things that happened to me was I learned to quiet that critical parent and become curious. So instead of judging myself for doing things and saying, ugh, all of us want to be this regulated parent, but we have moments where we're dysregulated. One is just saying to yourself, saying out loud, saying to your child, "Wow! I'm really feeling like I'm getting dysregulated."

(31:02):

Even just saying it helps bring on more frontal lobe activation where we can think through it. And then befriending means being curious. So instead of getting like, "Oh, I can't believe I yelled," saying, "Huh, I wonder why that triggered me. What was it in that, I'm curious, and what could I do maybe next time?" That curiosity is very powerful, and we have some science coming up about curiosity and it getting us into ventral. Just being curious is a ventral strategy.

Dr Laura Markham (31:37):

Talk a little more about that.

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (31:41):

If you're getting really critical and judgmental about yourself, instead say, "I'm curious. I wonder why I activated to that particular experience." And when your child's being curious and saying, "Huh, I wonder what's going on here," that curiosity just changes that whole feeling from judgment and beating yourself, beating ourselves up. That's what we tend to do as parents and teachers do it too. We just need to befriend ourselves and our nervous system and be more curious about what's going on. I think that's the first step.

Dr Laura Markham (32:15):

It sounds like curiosity deactivates the threat. If we have a critical parent in our own head, we're under threat. And of course, we're going to move into a state where we're either fighting back or shutting down with sympathetic or dorsal. But if we can shift to curiosity, suddenly we're not under attack anymore. We're just curious.

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (32:40):

It's a whole new world. Curiosity is a whole new world. It has been for me, because I'm so hard on myself and can be so critical. But being able to say, "Hey, that's interesting," just makes it feel different.

Dr Laura Markham (33:00):

And then we're communicating that to our children. We're communicating our curiosity to them instead of our judgment to them. So they're not under threat. They're suddenly free to engage and move again, shift into a ventral connection as opposed to running from what they think of as an attack.

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (33:19):

And if we are verbal about it, we are modeling. We're saying our words as we're going through it. It's okay for our kids to look at us and say, "Oh, what do you mean by you're curious?" Well, that really bugged me and I'm curious what it was. Oh, I used to hate doing homework when I was a kid. Something would come up like, oh, my dad used to make me sit there for hours. Whatever. We all have our stories and we bring those stories into our parenting and we bring those stories into our classrooms. So we have to acknowledge and understand those stories.

Dr Laura Markham (33:56):

So the last thing I want to ask you is if some parent listening is like, "Yes, yes, I want to do this. But concretely, when my kid gets home today, concretely, I'm going to check in with myself. But when I engage with my child, how do I... And I'm going to do it in the same place every time. We learned that. And I'm going to try to be curious and not threatening my child to sit down right now and do the homework, but what can I concretely do if my child is having a hard time?" What would you tell that parent?

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (34:29):

It's all about connection. It's all about safety. It's all about sitting with them and saying, "I can see it. I understand it. What can we do together? How can we get through this? We've got to get it done." And if they're still just really explosive, I like thinking that we've already talked about this when we aren't in that state, that we've already prepared. We've done our plan.

(35:00):

We have our predictability. We've listened and linked. We teach them how to listen and link to our nervous system state. We already have our templates for how we're going to make our learning be more active, the A, the active. And we're going to notice our glimmers. So I'd say sit down with them with your plan and just really say, "Here are some things we're going to be doing and here's how we can do it.

(35:21):

And what do you think about that and how do you want to do it?" We haven't talked about the three Cs of safety, which are huge. We have choice, we have context, and

we have connection. So we always have to make sure that's there. So choice, not tons of choices, but a couple. Do you want to do math first? Do you want to do spelling first? Just give them some choices. And then context is why are you learning this? Why do I need to do this?

(35:48):

My geometry teacher, I kept asking her, why do I need to know this? She never answered my question, and I didn't do too well in her class because I needed the context. I needed to understand. I don't understand the value of this. So context. And then connection is they feel safe. They feel a connection to their family. They feel like they're going to be supported in this experience. So those are the three Cs of safety.

Dr Laura Markham (36:12):

Love that. And sometimes the connection is to also the teacher, if you're lucky enough to have a connection with the teacher. That can make a tremendous difference in a child's motivation, right?

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (36:23):

It really can, yeah. You need to keep those channels open with the teacher for sure. And I don't think there's a teacher on the planet who wants you to be suffering and stressed and spending three hours. Very quickly, I'm a reading specialist, I wanted to give a little tip. There's something called automatized rapid naming, RAN for short. And children who have IEPs or have been tested for special ed often have a score for that.

(36:51):

And if your child has been tested, look at their rapid naming score because this tells you and it's great information for your teacher. If that rapid naming is really slow, that is basically your processing speed. So your brain processing speed, if it's very slow, your homework will all be slow, responding to question is going to be slow, you're going to need more time.

(37:17):

The teacher just can't call on you, just cold call. They have to give you time to process and write it down before you're able to respond. Your reading's going to be slow. And if your rapid naming's fast, most of those children actually do everything a little faster. They get their homework done. They can answer and respond. They can think on the spot. So that's a really important tip that we miss.

(37:41):

And if you've had some assessments done, go look at the rapid naming score. Because if it's slow, you're going to need to reduce the homework load. It's going to take you too long. For the average child, your child's going to be so much slower.

Dr Laura Markham (37:56):

This reminds me, cognition overload. When we talk about working memory and long-term memory, and we know we can only hold a certain amount in our working memory at once, and that's what then gets transferred into our long-term memory. But you were just talking about overload.

(38:14):

And so what happens with kids... I'll often hear from a parent, "Well, my son was tested and his ability, his working memory is low." So what would you say about... There's lots of things you can do there, but what does polyvagal theory tell us about why someone might have cognitive overload?

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (38:40):

That's a great question. So in the book, I talk about cognitive flexibility is underpinned by nervous system flexibility. If you don't have that flexibility move in and out of these nervous system states and know how to regulate, then you're going to have limited cognitive flexibility at all. It's a bidirectional loop between the brain and the body, and people forget that. They all go into brain stuff like executive functioning.

(39:06):

Then other people are really into somatic practices and vagus nerve stimulation with the body. And I'm here saying, folks, it's a bidirectional link. They just feed off of each other and they are nurtured by one another. If we don't have a nervous system flexibility, it will be very difficult to have cognitive flexibility. They go hand in hand.

Dr Laura Markham (39:29):

Aha! So when kids improve their understanding... So what's the long-term effect? We start talking to our kids about their nervous system. We start asking them to make friends with their nervous system. We start being with them to be able to slow down... Well, first of all, to move when we're activated, but also to slow down and be in quiet, stillness, intimacy with them.

(39:55):

Maybe we're reading to them or meditating together, listening to a little short kid's meditation or something. So we're helping them shift their nervous system in the

course of their day. So as we're doing this, can we expect that our child's nervous system will become more flexible?

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (40:13):

Yeah, definitely. Absolutely.

Dr Laura Markham (40:18):

Not that they're always going to be in a zen state or anything, but that they're going to be able to notice and shift in a way that maybe we couldn't do as children because we didn't have that support.

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (40:29):

Right. And the blended state of quietly still, the side of it that is a little more difficult is when we go into quietly failing. And so in our classrooms, we have... And that's a term I've coined because I feel like I deal a lot with quietly failing students as a reading teacher. They've just given up. And I've worked so much with high school students who are reading at second and third grade levels.

(40:56):

And until I help them befriend their nervous system and their stories, their cognitive stories around, "I can't do it, I'm a failure, I'm dumb," all those myths that they have, then we can't really get the change we want to see. But quietly failing children, they're overlooked and missed because they're quiet and they don't cause a lot of trouble. They just sit there. But I worry.

(41:24):

Those are the ones I really worry about. There's loudly failing, you know those kids, but they're asking for help. By all the things they're doing, they're trying to say, "Look, I need some help here." The quietly failing doesn't know how to ask for help, and these are the ones that mental health-wise I really am worried about. And then they can self-medicate, and there's a lot of challenges with it.

(41:46):

So let's pay a little more attention to that as well. And if your child's quietly failing, if you feel like they're moving into that quietly failing state, they really need to work through this whole nervous system, their myths, their metaphors around learning and get a lot more support for... They're not screaming, "I need support." That's what they do. I just want to make a point of that.

Dr Laura Markham (42:12):

This is so important. They're not asking for support because they've given up.

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (42:17):

Right.

Dr Laura Markham (42:20):

I mean, the parent hasn't done anything wrong, the teacher hasn't done anything wrong, but this kid has run into some sort of a roadblock in understanding what's going on in the classroom, either because of innate learning challenges, or because there's a lot of stress on them at home, or because they just didn't get the pieces they needed and the way they needed to learn in the classroom early on. And they blame themselves. They've given up.

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (42:44):

And they could be perfectionists.

Dr Laura Markham (42:46):

Oh yes! So tell me about perfectionism. How does that affect the kid?

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (42:51):

Oh boy. Some children just won't try if they know they can't do it perfectly, and they're really stressed out and anxious around everything has to be done perfectly. That's the whole growth mindset versus fixed, right? The growth mindset is I can fail.

Dr Laura Markham (43:07):

You mentioned growth mindset and fixed mindset. We know this is a Carol Dweck thing, and people think of it as, okay, I can learn. If I think my brain can learn, I can learn better, rather than just thinking I'm smart or not so smart. But tell me how that relates to polyvagal theory.

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (43:27):

That's what I did when I was writing the book. I was like, how does this relate? I mean, that's a question I asked myself. And I came up with a concept of evolving mindset and devolving. So my feelings and the research and how I was putting it together is if we have access to regulating resources, and that's the key, do we have access to those regulating resources so we can shift those states, move back into ventral, keep one foot in ventral, as Deb Dana says, always keep one foot in ventral, if we can do that, then we can move toward a growth mindset.

(43:57):

But if we do not have any of those regulating resources from inside, outside in the environment, and between others and relationships we don't have those regulating resources, we can devolve into the fixed mindset. And so I feel like that's a term I'd like to see us use a little bit more is that a child is evolving. They're evolving into growth, and we want to see them evolve towards growth rather than devolve towards fixed.

Dr Laura Markham (44:23):

And it sounds like it depends on developing those resources.

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (44:28):

That's a big key.

Dr Laura Markham (44:29):

If you don't have the resources inside, if you're a kid who doesn't have those resources yet, as Carol Dweck would probably say, yet, then as the parent or the teacher, your goal is to help the child find those resources in the environment and also between the child and you. Is that correct?

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (44:46):

Yeah. Who do you go to when you're stuck? Who do you have? And that's what we need in life. We all have our friends that when we had a rough day, we call or text, mostly text these days. But we all have those people that we know that we have a relationship with that can help and support us in those times. Our students and our children need to know who those people are. And it needs to be explicit.

(45:09):

In the book, I put this learning hub. In the middle, the castle's social emotional learning has an empty center. So many of these programs have the Wheel of Awareness, empty center. So I said, let's pop something in there. Let's pop the learning hub, the polyvagal learning hub. And that is the safety and connection, the interactive regulating resources, I call them interactive because they all relate with one another, and cultivation of skills.

(45:36):

So we still need to teach. I mean, even though I have students who I get them regulated and they're sitting with me for reading and they're in a great place and ventral and they want to learn to read, I still have to teach them the skills.

Dr Laura Markham (45:49):

The reading skills.

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (45:51):

The reading skills. So as parents, we still have to teach them those homework skills. We still have to teach them those little tricks. And I found a really good article and I put it at my website that you're going to reference and they can click on it. It was Johns Hopkins University, great one, on all kinds of homework ideas and science behind homework and is homework helpful. They created a whole parent coalition for homework. That's how much of a challenge this is.

(46:19):

So I want to tell everybody listening is that you're not alone. Homework's a challenge for most people, a lot of people. You're not alone in this. And so they started a whole coalition of how can we design homework that's family friendly where we can do this together? If you're doing a math problem saying, "Oh, do you want to get some new carpet in your room? Let's measure. Let's measure. How much do we need? How much would it cost?"

(46:45):

So you have these realistic problem solving activities that you're doing as a family that might be practical and purposeful, and that's what they're pushing. That's what the research was showing, and I really liked that article, so I've linked to it at my website.

Dr Laura Markham (47:01):

Again, this is the context you mentioned. That geometry teacher who didn't know what to tell you about why you needed geometry, but if you want a new carpet, you need the geometry.

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (47:09):

Yeah, exactly.

Dr Laura Markham (47:11):

You need to help kids actually experience that.

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (47:14):

Right.

Dr Laura Markham (47:16):

Well, this has been so... You have so many insights and your understanding of kids and parents is so helpful. Thank you so much. Really appreciate your being with us. And let me ask you, how can people find you online?

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (47:32):

Www.schoolmoves.com and spell it S-C-H-O-O-L. I was kind of crafty and spelled it S apostrophe like cool, S'C-O-O-L, but the web doesn't like that, so there's no apostrophe in it. And I do have a lot of really good videos on YouTube. That's like my teaching station. I use that channel to just teach, and there's all kinds of fun little rollerball spelling. I have all these different activities there that you can look up and get some ideas.

Dr Laura Markham (48:02):

Wonderful. We're definitely going to be linking to your YouTube channel below your bio.

Dr. Debra Em Wilson (48:09):

Thanks for having me. It was a great conversation. I really enjoyed it.

Dr Laura Markham (48:12):

Great to talk with you.

