Coping Skills for Kids: Supporting Emotional Regulation and Brain Development

Janine Halloran

Interviewed by Dr. Laura Markham

Dr Laura Markham (00:04):

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(00:09):

Welcome. Hi there. I'm Dr. Laura Markham, founder of Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids and organizer of this summit, Nurturing Hearts, Nurturing Minds: The Neuroscience of Peaceful Parenting. Today I'm speaking with Janine Halloran, a licensed mental health counselor, host of the Calm and Connected podcast, and author of the Coping Skills for Kids Workbook. She's also the founder of Coping Skills for Kids, an organization that provides resources to help children and teens learn health and safety ways to manage big feelings. With over 20 years of experience working with kids, parents, and educators, she's known for her practical hands-on approach, including sensory-based activities and relaxation techniques, to help kids and teens learn lifelong skills to support themselves to navigate difficult emotions.

(01:00):

So Janine, I am so excited to talk to you about your experience with helping kids develop coping skills for difficult emotions. And I guess the place to start is, why is it important that we work with kids when they're young, to develop these skills?

Janine Halloran (01:19):

So what I love about working with young kids and in my work, as a therapist, working with young kids and teenagers, what I love is being able to start early. Because if we can help them figure out how they are feeling and then realizing that they can do something in a positive, safe, healthy way to help manage that feeling, and then be able to continue to go on into their world and do other stuff, if we can do that when they're young, then they can build on those strategies as they get older into teenhood, into adulthood.

(01:51):

I love when I can start talking with kids at seven, eight, nine about what strategies work for you, what helps you relax? What helps you calm down? What helps you feel good? What helps you when you're feeling mad? And to be able to say, "Oh, you know what, it really works when I take a walk. It really works when I read my book, it really works when I can do jumping jacks." Phenomenal. Let's use that. Let's build on that. Let's find some other strategies. It's so powerful for them to be able to understand I can do something with this big feeling that I'm having, and I don't have to hurt anybody around me. I don't have to be unsafe. But I can do things. It's okay to feel that way. I just have to figure out what I can do to express that in a way that's not going to bother other people, not going to hurt me, and keep everybody around me safe.

Dr Laura Markham (02:40):

So of course, most parents who are listening to us right now did not grow up talking about these ideas. Most parents were told to go to their room, or were told not to have the feeling, or were told it was bad to have the feeling, they were a bad person to have the feeling.

(02:57):

So for the parent who's listening and saying, "Yeah, I want to communicate this with my child," but so far I probably haven't and I've got a seven-year-old, let's say. So it's still early. What would that parent, how do they even begin the conversation with their child?

Janine Halloran (03:14):

So first, I would actually have them pause and give themselves grace, because we all, it's our first time living as well, and we don't know what we're doing. And as a child, I didn't know how to do these things.

(03:29):

So I learned them. I actually went to therapy as a teenager and I learned some strategies there. I went to graduate school because it was such a phenomenal experience to have a therapeutic relationship, and to give yourself grace is the first thing I would actually want parents to just pause and reflect on. It's okay that I haven't figured it all out. Second is, it is okay to have any feeling. Any feeling is okay. A lot of times, when I say to parents, especially around anger, it's okay for them to be angry. It's okay. And they're like, "Oh my gosh." And I say, "It's okay. It's what they do with that anger that matters. It's what you do when you're angry, that matters."

(04:08):

So the first thing I would start with in terms of having the conversation is actually just starting with labeling feelings. And I would start really simple, happy, sad, mad. And start with those three because those are things that are pretty easy for kids to pick up on. And you can talk about it using books. You can read books together and talk about how the characters feel. For especially little ones, I love Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus! Pigeon gets very angry, very angry, and it's silly, but also, it's a big feeling. It's very easy to label.

(04:40):

I would talk about TV shows, and characters and TV shows, and then we could start to think about what are we feeling, and being able to share that in an age appropriate way. And then asking our child, "How are you feeling today?" Just do a quick check-in during snack, after they get off the bus or when they're home after school, "What are you feeling today? How was today? What was good? What was not so good?"

Dr Laura Markham (05:04):

Beautiful. So let's assume the parent says, "Okay, well that's a relief." I do talk to them about happy, sad, mad, even scared, let's say. And I do say, "How are you feeling?" But my child doesn't cope so well. They get mad, they throw things, they get scared. They hide under the bed or cling behind me. How do I give them coping skills to manage these feelings?

Janine Halloran (05:28):

So just as we're helping them label those feelings using books and TV shows, we can also help them identify that there are strategies that work and strategies that don't work when we're going through things. We can even use ourselves. So I'm getting frustrated while I'm sitting in traffic. I'm going to take a few slow breaths to help my body settle down, and I'm going to try and focus on something fun. I'm going to listen

to some music. I'm going to do a little dance while we're waiting in traffic, because it's really hard and it doesn't feel great. So to start to make those connections for them using the world around them.

(06:03):

A lot of times I actually will have kids tell me what other kids do in your classroom, who you've seen in your neighborhood. What do they do when they get frustrated? What do they do when they get mad? What do they do when they get happy? What does it look like? And be then starting to have the conversation about, "Well, what about you? I'm noticing you said this about Victoria or you said this about Evie. What do you do when you are feeling upset, when you're feeling mad, when you're feeling sad?"

Dr Laura Markham (06:34):

I love that you talk about other kids, because it helps the child develop empathy. It helps them develop that sense that we're all in this together. Everyone's got feelings. And I also love that you start talking about strategies right away and modeling strategies.

(06:50):

Because I think when parents hear that we accept all emotions, they sometimes think that means we're at the mercy of the emotions that wash over us and these big emotions. And they don't know how to then support their child through it. And what you're saying is it's fine to feel the anger, it's fine to feel frustrated in traffic, and there are things we can do to support ourselves as we have those emotions. Is that what the strategies are?

Janine Halloran (07:18):

Absolutely. And sometimes, I feel like when I work with families, one of the biggest connections that they can come to is understanding a feeling is okay, and then I have a strategy. And sometimes, people don't even know that those two things can be linked.

(07:35):

There have been times when I've just actually made that link and they've been like, "Okay, we're good. We've got it now. I've got it. I can get it together and I can figure out what strategies work. We can try different things." Some families need a little bit more support to figure it out, because maybe their child's look different from their strategies, and they're not really sure, or their feelings are really big and they're not

really sure how to handle that. That's cool too. But to just make those connections between I have a feeling, I can do something about it is huge.

Dr Laura Markham (08:08):

So can you give us some examples of what are practical everyday things, techniques that parents can use to help their child handle a difficult emotion?

Janine Halloran (08:22):

So one of the first things I like to start with is breathing because it is related to how your body runs. So if kids are in fight, flight, or freeze, and their breathing gets shallow. So a lot of things happen, it happens automatically. And to help kids get out of that mode of being in basically panic, you want them to try and get back down to be in a more relaxed, chill, rest and digest kind of mode.

(08:48):

The first thing I like to start with is deep breathing. And it can look differently because sometimes, I have those kids who always say to me, "Deep breathing doesn't work. I don't know how to take a deep breath." Or they breathe in and don't breathe out or they start hyperventilating.

(09:03):

So I borrow the language from one of my colleagues who, Little Flower Yoga, Jennifer, she's wonderful. So she talks about slow breaths. Take slow breaths together. And sometimes it really can be helpful for families to actually breathe together because if a child is escalating, most likely you're starting to escalate as well. So if you can both breathe together, that's phenomenal.

(09:27):

So I will do something like put one hand on your heart, one hand on your belly. And move your belly out to breathe in and move your belly in to breathe out. So you have to make sure you're doing this sort of breathing from your belly, not from your chest. So I love to just even do that so kids can understand. Sometimes I have little ones lay down on their back, put a stuffed animal on their belly, and move the belly up and down. I actually also use my Hoberman's finger back here, which expands and contracts. I love doing that.

(10:00):

And then for other strategies that I like to use, I love using music. I really do. I love music. I love encourage kids to sing, to dance, to march in rhythm, to just move their bodies to music. To listen to great songs that they love, make a playlist of songs that

make them feel better, that give them energy, that help them work through their sad feelings. Just to be able to find those strategies. So music is powerful. Music is powerful as a way to be able to help kids.

(10:33):

And then another thing that I really like to do is have kids do movement activities, whether it is doing something like doing pushups against a wall, taking a walk around the neighborhood in nature, taking a walk outside, changing locations, just getting a little bit of movement in. Sometimes just even changing locations can shift the energy of what's happening for a child in a situation.

(11:01):

So those are a few strategies. I love talking about strategies. I feel blessed because that's my job, is to talk about strategies with kids, so I could talk strategies all day.

Dr Laura Markham (11:13):

I love that the ones you just gave us, breathing, music, movement are all about, research shows for all three of those things that they calm the nervous system. So they're all body-based strategies in a way, because emotions are in the body.

(11:27):

So for kids to be able to learn early that they can change the way their body feels by listening to certain music or by moving in certain ways is a very powerful intervention, very powerful skill.

(11:40):

But what would make a child want to do that? So I mean, let's just take an adult for a minute. If I'm really upset about something and someone says, "Let's do some deep breathing." I will not want to do deep breathing. I will want to run away from them or hit them. I don't want to be calmed down. I want them to listen to me.

(11:59):

So how should a parent navigate the skills that you've just suggested? When are those best taught, and how do we then encourage kids to use them when they're actually upset?

Janine Halloran (12:10):

So I love that you just asked, when are they best taught? Because it feels like a lot of times, it feels like we should do it in the moment. When kids are escalating, when things are happening. And it's actually not the best time for learning. Their brains are offline. As one of my clients told me, it's like it's background noise and they're moving

their lips, and I just can't hear anything. My brain is off. It is not working. And we take that into consideration. That's not a learning time, that's not a teachable moment.

(12:42):

In order for them to be able to use those strategies when they need them in those moments, we need to teach them when they're calm. We need to teach them when they are in a relaxed state. We need to review and practice when everybody's calm.

(12:53):

I like to use transitional times. I teach at bedtime. I teach before school when my kids were little and they were up really early before the bus. We would do it before school. We do it after school at dinner table right after we've all eaten dinner. So just at those natural points of transition during the day, let's practice a breath together. Let's try doing a relaxation technique together. Let's do rainbow grounding. Just doing those things in the day in those transitional moments.

(13:29):

And then the other thing that I really like for families to try and implement is using visuals of those strategies that work the best for kids. Because again, if your brain is offline and it feels like somebody's talking under the ocean, you're not going to be able to really hear and take in that information. But if you know what those strategies are because you've tried them before, and you've seen the visuals because you've talked through the visuals before, then it's easier to then look at a visual and say, "Oh yeah, I forgot. I can go do wall push-ups. Oh, I forgot. I can dance and march in rhythm to a song." So I can remember what those strategies are. It's easier to have visuals rather than getting the auditory information.

Dr Laura Markham (14:15):

What would be an example of a visual?

Janine Halloran (14:18):

So what I would do is sometimes, so I love making things. It's the other part of my job that I really love. So I make visuals. So if a kid is doing something like let's say deep breathing with a stuffed animal. So I actually will take a picture of a kid and a stuffed animal on their belly, and I will put it on a strategy card. So a little card that's three by five, and I will say that deep breathing with a stuffed animal. And that's their strategy. I print it out. Sometimes if I'm feeling really fancy, I laminate it. And then I can put it up on the wall or put it in a coping skills toolbox that they have.

(14:55):

Other times, I will actually take pictures of the kids doing the strategy, so it becomes part of the learning. When they're actually doing the strategy, they see themselves doing the strategy on the little image. Or I've actually even taken videos of kids just as an individual therapist. I have a little bit more flexibility than I did as a school therapist. I take videos, and I send the videos to the family, and then they watch the videos like, "This is you taking a drink of water. This is you petting the dog." And those are the strategies that you can use. So I love visuals, and it makes it easier if you keep repeating those things and you keep seeing those things. It makes it easier to learn them.

Dr Laura Markham (15:37):

Let's say we have a few strategies. Maybe we have five strategies that the parent has worked out with the kid and practiced with the kid, and made a laminated card. And at this moment, the child is very disappointed about something and very upset. What does the parent do now? Do they say, "Do you want to go pet the dog?" Or do they say, "DO you want to go to your toolbox?" Or do they say, "I hear you. You're so disappointed."

Janine Halloran (16:03):

I would start with, "I hear you. You're so disappointed," because you want to validate their feeling. They're having a big feeling. And kids, sometimes they're feeling things for the first time. When you feel sad for the first time, that's a really big feeling. When you feel mad, to be able to really recognize, "I'm noticing that you're mad. All right, I see that. That's a really big mad feeling. I wonder about using a strategy or here's your coping skills toolbox. What if we did one of these?" Or sometimes my kids would have my hands because that's what my kids would do, and I would just lead them over to the area where they had the strategies. And I would just point. I would use as little language as possible to communicate in those moments. And I would just try to be there and be a support. And keep my own calm, to share my calm with them.

Dr Laura Markham (16:57):

So I've just heard you say that parents need to first stay calm themselves or return themselves to come. And secondly, use as few words as possible. And thirdly, acknowledge the emotion, right? Acknowledge the emotion.

(17:14):

And then maybe the fourth thing is about introducing the tools in a way that allows the child some choice, makes it so the child isn't feeling like you're just trying to get

rid of their feelings and don't want them to have feelings. You're supporting them in feeling better from this hard feeling. Okay.

Janine Halloran (17:36):

Absolutely. And you have that opportunity. They have a choice. If they have five strategies, they can choose from their five strategies. In a world where kids don't have a lot of control, to have some control over picking a strategy feels really good, so that can feel really good.

(17:51):

And then after something has happened, when everything is calm again, because that's just sort of how life goes, we have these waves. So when things are in that calm spot again, I would like to review what worked, what didn't work, in a very neutral sort of way. Not in a, "You're going to get in trouble," more of a curiosity, gentle sort of exploration. What happened, what worked, what didn't work? What can we try next time?

Dr Laura Markham (18:18):

Parents often say to me that when they try to review with the child later, the child resists. And I think you just said curiosity. I think often, when we review with the child, we want to say, "You were really upset and you threw that thing, you weren't supposed to do that." Whereas if instead we're curious, we're shifting out of that state of blame or threat. And we're moving to a higher level, that curiosity where we're connecting with a child. And that allows them to move to that higher level of connection and cooperation. It's a ventral vagal place instead of the fight or flight or the dorsal vagal shut down. It actually allows them to feel connected to us and to be open to that exploration. So I love the curiosity angle.

Janine Halloran (19:09):

Yeah, it's tricky to do as a parent, because if something has happened and something gets broken, or things were said and feelings were hurt, or there's a lot of big feelings and big emotions that happen when kids are having big feelings. And then it impacts us as well. We're human too.

(19:27):

And so you have to not only be, your child has to be at a space where they're calm, but you have to too. And I like to think about this, I have to be neutral. I actually take off my mom hat and put on a, "I'm just a trusted adult," hat because it makes it a little bit easier. I sort of try to distance myself a little bit from it and from the situation so

that we can actually just have a conversation about human to human, what worked, what didn't work, what can we try differently?

(19:56):

And then we can put our mom hats back on later when we're talking about, are there any consequences? Are there any repercussions for what had happened? But in the moment when we're talking about strategies, I keep out of that. I try and stay very focused on, "Okay, what can we do to help you with your big feelings?"

Dr Laura Markham (20:16):

Right. And what worked for you? What didn't work? How can we evolve these strategies? And I think also, that kind of a discussion, again, you're not trying to make the feelings just go away. You're increasing awareness of them and increasing awareness that there are ways to support yourself through them, but you're not saying to your child, "Your feelings are so inconvenient. I wish you wouldn't have them," shut them down with these strategies.

Janine Halloran (20:41):

Right.

Dr Laura Markham (20:42):

Yeah. So tell me when a child successfully uses a coping skill to manage that or to support themselves through a big feeling, what's happening in the brain at that moment?

Janine Halloran (20:55):

So the most fun part of my job is seeing when a strategy is working, hearing when a strategy is working. And the way I've explained it to families is that they are making a new pathway in their brain. It's very easy to go to that old pathway of I'm going to hit, or I'm going to do this thing that is really not safe. But when they do it, they actually make a new pathway. And if they keep doing it, the pathway gets stronger and stronger, and it's really cool to see.

(21:22):

So I love when I hear about a strategy working, even if it's for a few minutes, I take small wins. A small win still works a step in the right direction, because it's never linear. It's not development, unfortunately. I wish it were in some ways, because it would make it easier. But we just have to flow with them and we have to be okay with

the fact that it's not going to always go smoothly. But I love the idea of just making another pathway in their brain of a strategy that's good, and healthy, and safe.

Dr Laura Markham (21:57):

As you work with kids and the strategies, does one build on the next? The fact that they're able to breathe and calm themselves, does that then influence the next thing they're able to do?

Janine Halloran (22:07):

I think it does. So what's really interesting is that when kids have some sort of success, when they say, "Oh gosh, that really worked." Then they're suddenly like, "Well, teach me more. Tell me more. Let's try something else. Let's do something else." The other thing that I like to do, and I've noticed with kids in general is that sometimes you just need one strategy, and sometimes you actually can use a couple at the same time. You can build depending on how big the feeling is. Especially as I get into working with my teenagers, they have a lot of big feelings too.

(22:39):

But sometimes, the strategy that worked when they were seven or eight does not work when they're a teenager. And we need to just build and come up with some more stuff. And the things that they're dealing with are bigger, they tend to be, so I like to build. So if you're going to go on a walk and then listen to a podcast, if you're really having a hard time, letting go of something, right? You're going to journal and then you're going to do some artwork. You're going to crochet and then you're going to watch a TV show if you need a little distraction to build, and you can do more than one strategy at a time.

Dr Laura Markham (23:14):

And it sounds like developing these healthy strategies will last for the rest of their life, experiencing these. Yeah.

Janine Halloran (23:21):

Oh yeah. And what's really neat is to see the strategies that are sort of a through line for people as they go into adulthood and then the ones that change. But there's always a couple that sort of just stay with you. Maybe they change in the way that you do them, but they stay with you. If you love dance, chances are you will dance in different ways throughout your life, right? You'll find different ways to do that. If you are a journaler, I'm a journaler, I've been journaling since I was a child. I will journal until forever. That is how it's going to be. That's always been a strategy that works for

me. So it's interesting that you can learn these things when you're young and continue to build on them as you get older.

Dr Laura Markham (24:02):

And I imagine that parents who are listening to us right now might be saying, "I could actually proactively use some of these ideas when I notice I'm upset. Instead of obsessing about it, I could say to myself I'm going to journal tonight," or, "I'm going to put on some music and have a dance party with my kids right now to shift my energy."

Janine Halloran (24:23):

Yep, exactly. One of the best things that I've experienced working, and writing the books, and sharing my stories and sharing coping skills is when adults come up and say, "These strategies worked for me too, and I don't know if I'm supposed to use them." And I say, "Absolutely." They look different at different ages, but breathing works for everybody, and you just have to find a strategy that works. Relaxation works for everybody, but you just got to find a strategy that works.

(24:54):

And if you like to color and you are 70 years old, color. If you like to play video games and you are 60, go ahead and play video games. It's fine. Everybody can do those things.

Dr Laura Markham (25:05):

Yeah. So we are born without any control of our emotions and we spend our lives mastering them. And as we said, they come from the physical body, and everybody goes through those processes. So what are common signs that a child is actually struggling with emotional regulation and needs some intervention? What do parents need to be aware of?

Janine Halloran (25:29):

So if you are noticing that it is hard for them to be able to be at school all day and not have any challenges with peers, with teachers, with the other adults in the building, if you're noticing that it's really hard to get to activities or to get through your daily living strategies, so if it's hard to get them into the car, it's hard to get them out and back in into bedtime routines, nighttime routines. And if that has been consistent over a period of time, I'm not just talking about a week here, a week there. People are off, people are tired. The beginning of school is always a mess for a lot of families.

(26:14):

But if it's continuing to happen, and it's continuing for a long period of time, and it's really not getting any better, you're not seeing any movement, then it's time to call in other people. You want to build as much of a community around you as possible so you can all help and get on the same page.

(26:31):

That means you want to talk to the school. What are they seeing? You want to talk to the pediatrician. What are their recommendations? Do you think that there's any sort of insight that you could get from doing any testing? Do we need to look at sensory things? Do we need to look at other stuff?

(26:45):

So you're just trying to build a community around you so that you can help support your child. And maybe that includes doing individual therapy or group therapy as well. So I love to be a part of a family's life and a part of a family support system to help them as they're dealing with it. And as I say to the families, my job is to work myself out of a job. I want you to have the strategies, and then I'm going to walk away because you've got this.

Dr Laura Markham (27:14):

So I know parents often say to me, "I don't really know what's going on with my kid. I can't name it to tame it because I don't know what emotion they're having. I don't know what they're so upset about or why they're overreacting this way." So what does a parent do in that kind of a situation?

Janine Halloran (27:31):

That's when I would get curious. Get curious in another, a neutral way. "I am noticing that when we are getting ready for school on Tuesdays, it's really challenging. I'm wondering why. What's going on at school? Is there something that's different? Is there a special that you don't want to go to? What's going on?" It's an attitude of curiosity, and that's really trying to stay as neutral as possible when you're having those conversations.

(28:03):

And then also getting information from the adults. So if you can get a little bit of insight, who are the other trusted adults in their life? That can give you a little bit of insight as to, "Oh, yes it is. They do tend to have a hard time because it is PE on Tuesdays, and that is always a challenge to get out of the classroom because they

do not like PE, because they do not like this." To gather information, you're sort of being like a detective.

(28:28):

But it really comes down to, "Gosh, I wonder what's going on." To just have that connection with your child to be able to sit and try and figure out, and have the conversation, a gentle open conversation about, "Gosh, I wonder what's happening. I'm noticing, have you noticed? And what do you think's going on?"

Dr Laura Markham (28:51):

So when kids are at school interacting with their peers, you mentioned that they might be having a hard time with peers at school, or they might be having a hard time in transitions at school, which is very common. So if those things are happening, the parent's not right there. They can't see it. They can ask the teacher but they can't see it. They can ask their child, they can be curious. But how can they support their child to one, develop a repertoire of strategies that might work in those situations with peers or with transitions? But also, help the child, encourage and help are not really the right words. What I want to know is in that moment, the parent's not there to say, "Could you try a coping strategy?" So how do we help the child to learn to do that?

Janine Halloran (29:35):

In the school day?

Dr Laura Markham (29:36):

Yeah.

Janine Halloran (29:37):

Absolutely. I think that's a great question. So what I really have been enjoying in terms of what I've seen in schools in terms of social and emotional learning is that a lot of schools are implementing a social and emotional learning curriculum, where they are talking about emotions at school, because emotions don't only impact how kids are at home, they also impact how they are at school. So if they are having big emotions at school, chances are they might be having a hard time sitting down and doing the work of learning.

(30:07):

And so to be able to have teachers who are aware and know that these things are part of good academic support, to be learning those social and emotional skills, to

have a calm down space at a school, a peace corner at a school, best practice for social and emotional learning. So kids not only are learning how to identify their feelings and learning how to cope with their feelings during the school day. They're doing it in a sort of systematized way during the school day.

(30:38):

And then if they are having struggles and they are talking about it at home, then we can talk with them like, "Oh gosh, I'm noticing you said that it's really hard for you when this is happening. Gosh, what do you think might help?" Just to ask and see. Maybe they have some insight that, it's always interesting to see how kids answer their own challenges. If you ask the question back to them, it's always interesting to see.

(31:04):

Sometimes they come up with really different things that maybe an adult wouldn't think of. You're like, "Huh, I think that can work. So let's try that." So just again, trying to gather the information from them, see what they have to say, and then being able to encourage them.

(31:21):

And communication with the school and home I think is really essential and key to this so that if there is something that's happening, adults in both places need to know so that we can all be on the same page and help. So if it is a struggle with transition, then we need to talk with the school about, "What can we do to help assist in this? How can I support you? How can you support me? We're on the same team, we're all on the same page. Let's try and help this child out."

Dr Laura Markham (31:51):

Right. I'm thinking of one child in a school who had a very hard time sitting there at his desk, so it's neither a transition nor a peer, but it was about focus. And he had learned from his parents that if he did jumping jacks, he got rid of that excess energy and he could focus a little bit longer.

(32:08):

So he developed a thing where he had a certain number of cards in his desk that he could hold up to the teacher, and the teacher would give him a thumbs up and he could just go out in the hall, do the jumping jacks, and he didn't abuse it. He just came back and sat down, and focused. So the school worked with the parents on a strategy.

Janine Halloran (32:23):

And I love that because if he had just stood up and done jumping jacks without having, it would've been super weird and the teacher would've been like, "What's going on buddy?" And there's all sorts of things that would've happened. But because everybody's on the same page, the communication is huge. And now he's learning, "Okay, this is what I have to do. I'm taking a break in the hall. I'm not," and it sounds like it was, that's perfect.

Dr Laura Markham (32:45):

Very successful. Yeah.

Janine Halloran (32:47):

That's perfect.

Dr Laura Markham (32:48):

Yeah. So do you have other examples from your own experience, or success stories that parents can hear examples of where kids were able to make improvements in their emotional regulation, or their focus, or their peer group by using coping strategies, either at home or at school?

Janine Halloran (33:08):

Absolutely. So I've worked with a lot of kids who have anxiety, and that's a challenge for a lot of children these days and adolescents. And what's really amazing is that I have clients that I've worked with who will talk about, how does anxiety feel in your body? So they're able to sort of start to recognize, "That's what I'm feeling, anxious." And that body awareness can be huge in the ability to then say, "I'm feeling this, which means I am anxious, which means I should do a strategy." So getting that connection for kids, especially my kids with anxiety has been incredible to see.

(33:47):

But I've had children who have really responded very well to a lot of grounding techniques, a lot of mindfulness techniques. So really trying to stay in the present moment instead of focusing on the future or the past, really trying to come up with some different ideas and ways that they can stay focused.

(34:08):

So I have kids who maybe struggle with anxiety in terms of getting up in front of the classroom and giving a talk. So we've done breathing techniques and relaxation using their smartwatches or we've done visualization. So you're visualizing you getting up and doing the presentation well, and going back into get your seat. Lots of

different ways that it's been amazing to see, that teaching those strategies can really have an impact.

(34:36):

And then they can go and do the things that they need to do. They can get up and do the talks, they can get on the plane, they can talk to the peers that they were maybe a little bit hesitant to talk to before. So lots of cool stuff that kids can do once they figure out what strategies work for them.

Dr Laura Markham (34:51):

I love that you're giving kids these strategies, give kids the ability to be more successful in the classroom. How would you apply it to peers? Because there's certainly anxiety with peers, but there's also frustrations or feelings of being left out, all of which shift you into a brain state of more anxiety, or fear, or shutdown. So how do we help kids calm their nervous system to have positive interactions with their peers, which shift them into a ventral vagal, more of a connected state?

Janine Halloran (35:20):

So I like to make sure that kids know at least one strategy for breathing and relaxation to just calm their body down. I also love for my teenagers, especially because the teen and the stuff with peers can get very tricky.

(35:38):

You can always pause, you can take a pause, you can go and take a break, you can go to the bathroom, you can take a sip of cold water. Whatever's going to give you an opportunity to pause, and then be able to react in hopefully a slightly better state of mind. If you can just pause for a second. Because sometimes things just blurt out and you don't mean to, and then things have escalated more than you've wanted to.

(36:03):

But to understand that you don't have to finish the conversation right then, you can be like, "I'll just be right back. I will go and take a drink of water. I'll go to the bathroom and we can talk in a minute." That break is huge.

Dr Laura Markham (36:16):

Yeah. So you're saying every kid needs a little, that strategy of being able to take a break, a strategy of breathing, and another strategy, like one of the ones you mentioned earlier of movement or something else that they can do when they have more freedom to do those things. But even if they don't have a lot of freedom, if it's in the middle of the school day, they can at least do those two that you're saying. Yeah.

Janine Halloran (36:40):

Yeah. I like to give kids a variety of strategies. I really like to talk about what are the things that you can do that involve deep breathing, a movement, relaxation, sensory, your sensory skills. And then also, being able to identify your feelings and identify the things that are hard for you.

(36:59):

I like to give them a whole big list, as many as I can. Because what will work depends on where they are, and what they're feeling, and who's around them and what they're able to do. The strategies that work in your room at home are very different from the strategies that work in math class, and different from strategies at a restaurant, and different from strategies on the sidelines and soccer. So you've got to have strategies for all of those places. You might feel mad in all those places, but what works in different places, in one place may not work in another.

Dr Laura Markham (37:35):

What long-term benefits do you see in kids who regularly practice these coping skills?

Janine Halloran (37:41):

So what I think is a wonderful long-term benefit is just being able to interact positively with other people in the world. Actually, it's one of those things that, one of the reasons why I started working and focusing on coping skills is because it's so integral when you're having interactions with other people to be able to self-regulate. If you cannot self-regulate, it's really hard to interact with other people.

(38:07):

And so that's actually what started Coping Skills for Kids is this, I started from talking about social skills, and talking about interactions, and enjoying other people, and making friends. But really, a lot of times the self-regulation piece was very tricky.

(38:23):

So if you can self-regulate, then it's easier to interact with other people. And if somebody says something that you don't like, if you are getting into an argument, it is easier to be able to use your problem-solving skills when you are able to self-regulate. It's easier, the ability to just let certain things go, to figure out how to actually have a disagreement in an okay way that does not end in everybody shutting down and leaving, but to actually have a conversation to stay with it. It's hard to do that. It's hard to do that.

(38:58):

So that's what I think is one of the most beneficial things about learning strategies is that you can then interact in the world in a very different way. You can show up in a different way to every interaction that you have with other people.

Dr Laura Markham (39:11):

Yes. So your coping strategies are helping children learn to navigate their nervous system states, and to shift themselves from a nervous system state of shutdown or agitation or anger, fight or flight, into a more warm connected state, which allows them more creativity. We know that's the state that we can play, we can be creative, we can connect with others. And what you're saying is it also opens up the ability to come up with better answers. The thinking brain is back online.

Janine Halloran (39:48):

Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. That's when creativity happens. You can't create when you're in fight or flight, you just can't.

Dr Laura Markham (39:57):

Yeah, beautiful. So these tools I think are so useful. And my last question is about one of the tools that you just mentioned in passing, rainbow. Something about a rainbow. What was that?

Janine Halloran (40:10):

Rainbow grounding. I actually taught it to a child because it's something that came up, just trying to find ways to introduce grounding to kids in a way that was more fun and playful. And I've used it with several kids, but there was one in particular I used it for. He was really anxious about getting on a flight. He was going to Disney World, but it still doesn't matter. The anxiety is there. So how do you deal with that?

(40:39):

So we do rainbow grounding, which is you look for two things that are red in the room that you are in, two things that are orange, two things that are yellow, two things that are green, two things that are blue, two things that are purple. And you take a deep, slow breath in and breath out. And it just helps them focus on the present to stay focused on the present. It's really fun. Kids love it. I've tried it with several different kids over time, and it's been really interesting to see how well they respond to it. And it just can help them get focused on the present, instead of focusing on the other things

that could happen, the things that happened in the past, and just staying in the present.

Dr Laura Markham (41:24):

I love that because this is the second time you've mentioned being able to be in the present as a way to handle anxiety. Because anxiety is just fear. And if we're focused on what might happen in the future, of course we're going to be anxious about it. There are a lot of things that could happen. But if we can stay here right now, we can handle what's happening right now.

(41:42):

So you are having the brain work pretty hard finding all those colors, and so it's having to stay in the present. And that shifts us out of that monologue of fear, increasing. Yes, increasing the anxiety, ratcheting up, and we're ratcheting. We're just saying, "We're not going there. We're staying right here."

Janine Halloran (42:02):

And you can just keep doing it over and over again. It works in cars, it works at airports, it works pretty much anywhere. Just like you could do shapes, you could focus on one particular color. It's really just a playful way to help them do a mindful moment to help them stay present.

Dr Laura Markham (42:24):

Right, because we are telling people, "Be present, be more present." But even adults don't know what it means to be more present. I mean, unless you're a meditator and you do it every day, what does it even mean to be more present? So for kids, giving them a concrete way to do it is really helpful.

(42:43):

And I guess that I would ask you, how do you talk to kids about anxiety? Because I think we have a mini epidemic of anxiety in kids today. And we want to normalize it. It's fine to feel these feelings, but we also don't need to get stuck in them. We can manage them. We can have strategies to support you through them. So how do you actually talk to kids about anxiety?

Janine Halloran (43:07):

I actually use books to do that. And I also talk with them just about, anxiety is a feeling. And we all can get worried. And sometimes for younger kids, I use the word worry, because it's a little bit easier for them. So I will say, "It's okay for you to get

worried. Everybody gets worried." I actually had a kid say to me the other day, I said I was worried about something and she looked at me and she said, "You worry? But you're my therapist." And I said, "Everybody worries. I worry too. And I use strategies when I get worried. And that's why I am helping you to teach you strategies so that you can use strategies when you get worried." And we actually did rainbow grounding together, which is so funny.

(43:47):

But I talk with them about worry is a feeling. Worry is just something that everybody has. Sometimes people, they get a lot worried about a lot of different stuff, and it's hard to shut the worry off. So we have to try and figure out some strategies that work so that you can shut the worry off, and go about your day, and have a good time and play. And so I like to use, there's lots of great books. Actually Dr. Dawn, I love her. She's got a whole series of books all on anxiety. So I like to use those books as well to just sort of start the conversation. But really, I talk about it with them all the time. Every feeling happens, but we got to figure out what to do that's going to make it so that you can go and just enjoy your day.

Dr Laura Markham (44:30):

So our goal parents, or educators, or therapists is not to prevent the feelings. Our goal is that everyone's going to have feelings. We want to change our relationship with the feelings. We want to accept the feelings and learn to manage them. Yes?

Janine Halloran (44:45):

Absolutely. That's perfectly said. I love it.

Dr Laura Markham (44:48):

All right. So I know people are going to want to find out. I've been on your newsletter list, so I've been watching some of these strategies come across my desk. How do people find you and learn from you?

Janine Halloran (45:00):

So if people want to go to copingskillsforkids.com, that's where a lot of resources live. You can see, I actually have everything broken down by coping style, so relaxation, distraction movement, sensory processing. I have some free resources on there about deep breathing and how to deal with anxiety, how to deal with anger, how to deal with stress. And then they can join the newsletter and get some free resources that way as well.

Dr Laura Markham (45:24):

Yeah. Wonderful. Well, this has been terrific. I've really enjoyed learning from you today. Thank you so much.

Janine Halloran (45:31):

Thank you.