Harnessing the Polyvagal System: Brain-Body-Sensory Practices to Calm Dysregulation in Children

Robyn Gobbel

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 organizer of this online summit, Nurturing Hearts Nurturing Minds, the Neuroscience of Peaceful Parenting. Today I am thrilled to introduce you to my guest, the amazing Robyn Gobbel. Robyn Gobbel MSW is the author of Raising Kids with Big, Baffling Behaviors: Brain-Body-Sensory Strategies That Really Work. I highly recommend this book, which is one of the best parenting books I have ever read, and that is saying a lot. Her website is robyngobbel.com, where you can get your hands on oodles of free resources, including her podcast, The Baffling Behavior Show. Today we're talking with Robyn Gobbel about harnessing the polyvagal system, brain-body sensory practices to calm dysregulation in children. Robyn, I'm so excited to welcome you to the summit.

Robyn Gobbel (01:05):

Same, just so delighted to be here.

Dr. Laura Markham (01:09):

When I read Big Baffling Behaviors, which just came out about a year ago, I was blown away. This is my favorite parenting book in the last decade, and the reason I love it so much is that you make the science totally accessible, and there's a better way to say that, which is that it doesn't sound like science, but it is. It is the underpinning of... Well, what I love about your approach is everything is about safety. Does the nervous system feel safe or does it not feel safe? Is that right?

Robyn Gobbel (01:43):

Exactly. Yep. It sounds overly simplistic, but in a way it really does come down to that very binary question.

Dr. Laura Markham (01:52):

Yeah. So can you explain, you don't need to go really deeply into polyvagal theory just very briefly, but then using your terminology about how we see kids' behavior really, and our own behavior, but how we see the nervous system operating and how we can work with that.

Robyn Gobbel (02:12):

I think that maybe just to give a quick little summary, could set a good foundation for us.

Dr. Laura Markham (02:18):

Perfect.

Robyn Gobbel (02:19):

As polyvagal theory look at as the science of safety and helping us use the science of safety to really kind of interpret folks' behavior with the emphasis on the fact that behavior starts from an implicit impulse that arises from the autonomic nervous system, which is not something we ever think about. I know that sounds like a bunch of mumbo jumbo, but most of us rightfully so look at behavior as the impact of the behavior. That makes perfect sense. That's how we were all conditioned. That's what we can see. It makes a lot of sense. And behavior actually starts so long before it emerges and has an impact. And in my career, I have always worked with the kids that really, frankly, nobody else really wanted to work with. They were stumping us. We didn't know what to do with them. Their behaviors were making absolutely no sense, and I was feeling the same way their parents were feeling, which is like everything I learned about parenting doesn't work, it doesn't apply, it makes no sense with this child.

Robyn Gobbel (03:34):

And I wasn't really satisfied with feeling that way so I just kept digging and digging and digging, trying to find the science, which is like, we believe all these things about people and kids and attachment and all this kind of good stuff. So how can this behavior make any sense? And so I stumbled upon Dan Siegel's work first that really left me believing in some way, shape, or form, all behavior does make sense. Then I found polyvagal theory and I was like, oh, and this kind of is the final piece of me understanding how that could be true. That if we look at the science of the autonomic nervous system and the reality that behavior starts well before we ever see it, and how a behavior impulse begins, it not only makes sense, but then now gives us much better ideas about what do we do to help folks whose behaviors are really having huge negative impact on their life and on their relationships.

Dr. Laura Markham (04:45):

Yes, I love that. And when you say you started with attachment and then behaviors didn't make sense, I think all parents have seen their child at some point push them away. Like why are they pushing them away if it's all about attachment, right?

Robyn Gobbel (05:01):

Yeah.

Dr. Laura Markham (05:03):

And I think your book answers that beautifully, but maybe you could tell us just a little bit. I know that's sort of a tangent of the overall thing, but a little bit about why that might be the case.

Robyn Gobbel (05:13):

Well, as humans, we are very much driven to be in connection with one another, and Dr. Porges' work actually gives us the science of that, which I think is very cool. He says connection's a biological imperative. But a key piece of attachment theory that I think sometimes it's easy to overlook is that attachment is about being always in connection, right? Attachment is about safety in connection and safety in individuation differentiation. And so there's an aspect of development in which connection has this double-edged piece of bringing safety, but frankly, too much connection, too much enmeshment, too much sameness. There comes a point in just normal developmental trajectory where, from a polyvagal theory we'd say, that starts to be kind of the cue of danger. We're too the same. I'm not having enough of

my own me-ness. And so it's that kind of quote-unquote cue of danger that prompts, again, normal development of the differentiation, the individuation.

Robyn Gobbel (06:24):

So that's how we could think about polyvagal theory and the quote-unquote typical development of attachment and connection. And then in so many of the families that I work with for a variety of different reasons, most of my families have a history of relational or complex trauma. The vast majority of my early work especially was with adoptive families and kids who had experienced trauma, abuse and neglect, that there's a phenomenon that happens where essentially the connection circuits get a little bit tangled up with the danger-danger circuits because connection is intended to be soothing and safe. And for some folks, they have experiences where those most intimate connections weren't safe or soothing or they weren't seen in those experiences. And so we maintain this drive to be in connection.

Robyn Gobbel (07:28):

And for some, that also has been almost tied up with a felt sense of danger. And so it does start to feel very confusing for... Again, I think it feels confusing for just your average parent who doesn't know that that's a very typical part of development. And when you know that it's like, oh, well this makes perfect sense. But then especially for folks who are parenting kids with attachment trauma or even some other differences in neurotypes can start to entangle some of this into it simply because it makes a lot of sense when we're talking about two folks with slightly different neurotypes, or sometimes significantly different neurotypes, that it just makes it harder to find some attunement, right? Nobody's necessarily doing anything wrong per se. It's just a little harder to sync up.

Dr. Laura Markham (08:22):

Yeah. So let's explore how understanding the polyvagal system will change the way we approach a dysregulated child.

Robyn Gobbel (08:35):

If we were going to get really oversimplified, and I think there's some benefit to simplification, if we understand that there's still a lot of complexity in it, generally speaking, the behaviors that we like in one another and with our kids come from a nervous system that's feeling safe. They aren't the kinds of behaviors that are prompting us to tune into a parenting summit or read parenting books. We're just rocking and rolling with life. The kinds of behaviors that we're chronically frustrated

with, overwhelmed with, baffled by are behaviors that are emerging from a nervous system that's not feeling safe. And so I would call that protection mode, or sometimes I talk about that just being danger-danger mode, and it really is a binary system. We feel safe or we feel unsafe. And then on the unsafe side of things, I talk about it, it's like a dimmer switch. Like we can feel a little unsafe or a lot unsafe. There's some nuances there of course.

Robyn Gobbel (09:44):

But just safe to unsafe is actually pretty binary. It's one or the other. And if we can look at the behavior emerging from our kids as behavior that's coming from a nervous system that's, I would say in protection mode or not feeling safe, it totally changes how we're interpreting that behavior. Totally. And for the families that I work with who have children who have pretty head-scratching behaviors, like even I at 20 years in, I'm like, huh, well, that's a new one. I haven't thought of that one before. That almost becomes kind of irrelevant. The fact that this is a new behavior, I have no idea what to do with it, it kind of takes a backseat because I can be like, well, this is definitely a behavior that's coming from protection mode. This kid seems to have probably what I would call a sensitized stress response system, meaning they're having a huge reaction to a stressor you or I would call small. And that feels baffling too.

Robyn Gobbel (10:55):

So now we were totally changing how we see this kid. Like, oh, this is a struggling kid, not a bad kid who's pushing me out of connection or just wants to be in control or is manipulative or... Which completely changes our directions with that kid. And that's very important. It allows us to send cues of safety, but it allows us, what I would say is to finally start trying to solve the real problem. And the real problem isn't that we haven't found an effective consequence or punishment, it just never is that. The real problem is what's happening in the nervous system and how can we support that?

Dr. Laura Markham (11:38):

So if I'm a parent listening to you right now, I'm wondering, "Yeah, but my kid was not feeling threatened when he walked by and batted his brother upside the head, his brother was just sitting there coloring, or when he peed down the heating vent, or why is he feeling in danger-danger mode?" What would you say to that?

Robyn Gobbel (12:01):

Great question. And I always start with, of course, you just look at this on the outside looking in, and that doesn't make any sense at all. But if we remember that, again, outside normal, typical human development, and sometimes siblings walk past their sibling and knock them upside the head as they're figuring out our dynamics and relational. There's a lot of other just pretty typical child development that kind of goes into that. But we all kind of know the feeling of when a behavior isn't typical anymore. So if we're looking at like, yeah, this behavior doesn't really feel typical, then I would say to parents, yeah, I totally get that. This makes no sense that your child would be in danger-danger moment at this time.

Robyn Gobbel (12:51):

But actually the brain's processing about 11 million bits of data in every second to determine safe or not safe. And we're only aware of about 5 to 50 of them. So that's essentially 11 million things your child could be tracking unconsciously that could be giving cues of danger that neither you or them even know about. So we want to stay open and curious to that. And also the way that we are in every present moment is really only about 20% based on what's truly happening right then and there. 80% of our reality is based on all sorts of other things, memory and how we're making sense of what's happening in the here and now. And it's just much more complex.

Robyn Gobbel (13:43):

And it helps me to kind of take a breath and go like, well, even if I have no idea what's prompting this person to feel unsafe, something is going on that is prompting a behavior like peeing in the heating vents. And even if we want to land on that child is just being controlling, the next question though is, but why? Yeah. And why in that way.

Dr. Laura Markham (14:18):

Yes. When I first heard a heating vent story, I was like, why in that way? And then I've seen other kids do it.

Robyn Gobbel (14:25):

Yeah, that is actually not an uncommon behavior.

Dr. Laura Markham (14:29):

But the kid getting smacked upside the head, who knows what happened at school that day? Who knows what happened between the siblings this morning or last week? So we are going to assume for the purposes of our discussion and really for

the purposes of all parenting that off-track behavior or behavior that really is not connection-oriented, maybe that we don't like to see from our kids, we're going to assume that that's all coming from a place of danger-danger. And it could be mild danger, it could be more extreme danger.

Robyn Gobbel (15:01):

Exactly.

Dr. Laura Markham (15:01):

So take us through, because this is one of the things I love about your approach is that the polyvagal says yes, which is on or off, you're either safe or not safe, and your nervous system shifts. But once you shift, you can have what's up, just checking it out, or you can have attack, and there's some places in between there, there's some things. So tell us about that.

Robyn Gobbel (15:25):

So this is where I brought in the work of Dr. Bruce Perry because Dr. Perry has this way that he conceptualizes arousal and activation in levels. So essentially Dr. Perry talks about sympathetic fight-flight response and the dissociation response, which I just mapped to, like Dr. Porges' of course sympathetic activation and then the dorsal vagal complex. And so what I find so helpful with Dr. Perry's work is that he brings in this nuance of these different levels of stress response and that there are... he identifies four levels that are essentially mild, moderate, I can't remember, intense and severe. I call them different things now, but essentially four levels on both sides of the fight-flight response as well as the shutdown shutdown response.

Robyn Gobbel (16:26):

And the reason I have found that nuance really important in the work that I do is, well, maybe a lot of things, but two things are coming to mind right now. One is it matters to parents to try to ascertain how dysregulated the child is because the support or the intervention that's needed varies based on how dysregulated the child is. But I also think that it helps parents start to make more sense of, "What do you mean stress response? I told my child that dinner was in five minutes and they're watching me plate it, but they want dinner right now. And so they threw their plate at my head and then ran out the front door. That doesn't make any sense."

Robyn Gobbel (17:16):

And I'd say, "Oh my gosh. You are so absolutely right. In a resilient stress response system, which is formed in this way, la, la, la, you're right, that level of stressor and that stress response don't match." But if we like Dr. Perry's work and how a stress response system becomes very sensitized, we actually can start to see how these teeny-tiny stressors can make big, big, big responses. So we can have a quote-unquote problem that a 10-year-old should be able to regulate through, which is dinner's in five minutes, not right now. But this particular 10-year-old has such an impaired stress response system that has to do with all these other things that we've talked about, like maybe has a history of living in danger-danger mode, or who knows. There's all sorts of reasons that this teeny tiny stressor evoked this attack watchdog brain response. So understanding the different levels and that there are different levels I do think helps parents also make sense of why sometimes those levels seem totally off.

Dr. Laura Markham (18:29):

Yeah, I love it. I have about three questions I want to ask you right now, but I want to go back to the watchdog that's like, okay, your child is wanting dinner, let's just use your example of wanting dinner, and maybe as you're busy cooking dinner before it got out of hand, you didn't even really notice, but the child... and the child could have gone from 0 to 60 like that, but maybe there was a buildup. So tell us about those different, what you call the what's up watchdog to the watchdog and what's in between.

Robyn Gobbel (19:08):

Yep. So on the watchdog side, which is sympathetic activation, the watchdog has energy to it. The watchdog has a what's up watchdog, which is just sort of like, "Huh, something might not be right here. Let me take in more information and figure it out." That is an ideal place for kids to use their coping skills. All the other places, coping skills' not really an option. After that, we get to what I call the ready for action watchdog, because this watchdog is starting to get a lot of energy in his arms and legs, and it's getting ready to use that energy, but it's not maybe necessarily using it quite yet. So we might start to see tension or fists or raised shoulders or glaring eyes, but we're not necessarily seeing storming away or punching or hitting the table or verbal aggression quite yet.

Robyn Gobbel (19:59):

And then the back off watchdog is total, the absolute intention is to get you to back off. So that's where we start to see verbal aggression, some posturing behavior. They

start to act really threatening, kind of throw their weight around. We also will maybe see some flight behavior there, this might be where the child turns and leaves. I also sometimes can see in between these two places, kids who get really uncomfortably silly, can be this energetic kind of flight behavior when you can't really flee. And then we get all the way to attack watchdog where we see physical aggression, where that energy that was being pumped into their arms and legs and mouth is now being used and acted out.

Dr. Laura Markham (20:56):

So here is my 10-year-old who got some internal signals of hunger and didn't quite notice them fast enough and was overwhelmed with it, and maybe it's on top of a bunch of other stuff, our day, whatever. And so was in the what's up watchdog, but I didn't notice it because I'm busy cooking.

Robyn Gobbel (21:16):

Totally, yeah.

Dr. Laura Markham (21:17):

And then he's ready for action, and he's moving. He's moving around, he's in the kitchen, he's walking fast by me, he's looking in all the pans, right? He's moving. What should I as the parent do at this moment? What would be helpful to calm his nervous system before he escalates to the-

Robyn Gobbel (21:37):

Yeah. Well, I'll give a couple options because of course, it's going to really vary kid to kid. I mean, I have a history as a play therapist, so kind of play and fun tend to be my go-to strategies, play and silliness. And oh, look, you're trying to see in the pan, can you stand in your tiptoes to see in the pan? What if you jumped two times? Could you see high enough then to see in the pan? You're wondering what's in there. You're wondering if you're going to like it. But keeping a playful tone is sending cues of safety. Using movement can be ways to send cues of safety. If your kid is getting energy in their arms and legs, maybe we could use it by making a suggestion about jumping three times and then tell me what do you see in the pan? Is it red or is it green? Right?

Robyn Gobbel (22:37):

The other thought that I had about that is if you're noticing this increased intensity and you can interpret it for what it is, as opposed to, oh my gosh, this kid's being so

annoying, or they won't leave me alone, or for heaven's sakes, can they just… Because maybe I'm in what's up watchdog too. Maybe I've had a really hard day or so many things, but if I could interpret his behavior through the lens of the stress response. And then I also think, what do I know about this kid? Is this a kid that has a history of food insecurity? Do they have a hard time waiting? I can maybe say, "Oh my gosh, you really wish dinner was ready right now. It is not quite ready and it's not fully cooked, so I can't even give it to you early, but here's a granola bar that I have, or here's an apple I've already cut up, or here's some nuts."

Robyn Gobbel (23:34):

Something that if they quote-unquote "ruin" their dinner with, which isn't even my biggest concern if I have a kid with a really sensitive stress response system, but if we are at a place where we're concerned about their nutrition, offer something that even if they did ruin their dinner, that would be okay, because what's more important is that they're getting these experiences to soothe their stress response system, trusting that over time, as they have more and more of those experiences where they're soothed, soothed, soothed, their capacity to wait, their capacity to pause, all these things that I would call owl brain skills will increase. Does that help?

Dr. Laura Markham (24:23):

I love that. And I loved when you said more than once, cues of safety. So what the parent could do in that moment is give cues of safety. And one way is playfulness. Another way is acknowledging what the child is feeling. Another way might be to use their movement, "Hey, put on the music, and as we move the food onto the table, let's dance at the same time, but not spill it. Can we do that?"

Robyn Gobbel (24:48):

Yeah, yeah.

Dr. Laura Markham (24:49):

Yeah, yeah.

Robyn Gobbel (24:49):

Yeah. Exactly.

Dr. Laura Markham (24:51):

So I also heard you say owl brain.

Robyn Gobbel (24:53):

Yes.

Dr. Laura Markham (24:54):

So tell us about the owl brain.

Robyn Gobbel (24:57):

So the owl brain is, if we go back to polyvagal theory, what Dr. Porges would call that ventral vagal state, which is theoretically allowing for... When you're in your ventral vagal state, you're from an autonomic nervous system perspective, what's going to happen is you're kind of highest level cortical processing that's available to you is going to become available in that moment. So obviously this is different if you're three or if you're 30, right? So the owl brain sort of sits on top of the brain, I picture metaphorically when that ventral state is engaged, the owl brain is those highest level cortical thinking skills, but also a very important piece of that ventral state is relational safety and connection. So the owl brain is taking a math test and accessing all of their math facts, but the owl brain is also having relational serve and return and caring about somebody else's experience in a relationship, and maybe they're open for compromising instead of just getting exactly what they need when they want it, things like that.

Dr. Laura Markham (26:16):

When we're in danger-danger, it's hard to care what someone else wants, but when we're in a state of wellbeing, connection is important to us, and we do what they want. So that's why sometimes our kid can negotiate with the other kids and sometimes they can't.

Robyn Gobbel (26:31):

Absolutely. I mean, it's not just important to us. It's our expectation. It's really our baseline. When we can't get the connection that we want or need, let's use that word, need, that's a cue of danger. So we are really looking for connection, safe connection to bring us back into that ventral state.

Dr. Laura Markham (26:54):

So this is another thing that I really love about your approach is that we increase connection when our kid is having a hard time. So a kid who's peeing down the heating vent might need our presence more at the time of day when he does that, because something's going on for him that's causing him to do that, right?

Robyn Gobbel (27:12):

Yes.

Dr. Laura Markham (27:12):

Maybe you're off nursing the baby and that's what's going on or whatever. But the point is he... So tell us about that, about increasing connection when your child's having a hard time.

Robyn Gobbel (27:23):

So a lot of folks will use the word trust. I can't trust my child to be alone while I'm nursing the baby, he pees down the vents. And so again, I was like, "Yeah, I get that. I mean, let me tell you, urine in the vents is really uncool. So I get that." And what if we looked at this not through the lens of trust, but through the lens of what was he missing at the time? Let's assume that he doesn't want you to be mad at him, and that doesn't make actually any sense from a big developmental place for our kids to be constantly trying to make us mad. They need us to survive literally. So again, outside normal development of individuation and differentiation, our kids really aren't intentionally trying to make us mad. So let's get way more curious about this, what's happening.

Robyn Gobbel (28:20):

So parents will say, "Well, if I was watching, they would never do it. I can't trust them." I'm like, "Okay, well, let's deconstruct that. What else is happening when you're watching? You're close enough that you're providing connection, you're close enough that you're providing probably at least passive co-regulation, even if it's not active, but just being there is co-regulating. You're close enough that those cues of safety are really piling up. So in this specific example, it could be as simple as you go into another room and you go into another room to take care of another little one, right? Now we start to increase the complexities here and we can see how, oh, well, the co-regulation diminished significantly because you're out of the room. The connection diminished significantly because you're out the room. That probably means cues of danger increased and their capacity to regulate through it decreased.

Robyn Gobbel (29:20):

Now, this isn't the parent's fault in any way, but it totally shifts how we're seeing our kids if we look at it through in that moment, they weren't getting what they needed in order to follow the rules, essentially. So how can we either accommodate that, give them what they need, or at the very least, maybe you're like, "I have to leave the room

sometimes there's just no way for me to give this six-year-old constant supervision." Well, that's true. So if that becomes true, and there's no possible way that you could ever not leave a six-year-old alone, and then you do, and they do something like pee in the vents, you can take a breath and go, "Well, this is crummy. This is a huge mess, and I hate cleaning this up." And you could get really mad about it even, but you can still see your kid as a kid who's struggling, not as one who is intentionally making you mad or whatever, right?

Dr. Laura Markham (30:29):

A kid whose nervous system didn't feel safe and whose behavior shows that and was not in his owl brain.

Robyn Gobbel (30:40):

No.

Dr. Laura Markham (30:41):

Yes.

Robyn Gobbel (30:41):

Exactly.

Dr. Laura Markham (30:42):

So as we think about practices to help kids calm their nervous system and establish safety, one of them is we've already talked about playfulness, we've already talked about movement, we've already talked about increasing the connection in whatever way, just being nearby, but there are lots of ways to increase connection of course. I want to talk about growing the owl brain in a minute, but how else can we create safety, increase our cues of safety when a child is starting to get dysregulated, acting silly, for instance? Yeah.

Robyn Gobbel (31:22):

It's something to try. Now, the truth is that there's a lot of cues of safety or danger that aren't exactly universal because everybody has their own history with whatever that potential cue of safety is. And so maybe I'm a kid who spent time in a circumstance, in a family, in a school where there was a lot of very mean-spirited teasing. And so now silliness actually is confusing and it doesn't feel safe. So that is really the most important thing, is to think about what feels safe to this kid.

Robyn Gobbel (32:08):

This is a time in the nervous system where playfulness doesn't feel safe anymore. We've all had playful attempts with our kids fall very flat and escalate the situation. But generally speaking, playfulness is a cue of safety because playfulness in me is only possible if I'm feeling safe. So I think it's helpful to think about it from that perspective. What sorts of behaviors emerge for me when I'm feeling safe, right? What's my tone of voice? What's my body posture like? Think the relational pieces we do and relational experiences are like we offer people drinks and snacks. I talk a lot about, let's think about kids like houseplants. We want to feed them, water them, move them, make sure they have enough sunlight. But what that means for your unique kid is really going to vary. Was that helpful or was that too broad?

Dr. Laura Markham (33:11):

It's broad. That's okay. I think you're right. Every kid is going to be different. The thing that I would, my takeaway, my nugget here of what you just said is every parent knows the difference. They are in what's up watchdog or some other more dysregulated state versus when they're in a state of well-being, which you call the owl brain. When they're in that state, their voice is different, they're radiating, they're able to attune to the child, and they're radiating emotional generosity by comparison, right?

Robyn Gobbel (33:50):

Oh, I love that. Emotional generosity. And also to be clear, you can be regulated and owl brain and also frustrated. We're not talking about ooey gooey like, "Oh, honey, you're peeing down the vents." No, no, no, no. Part of being in your owl brain is having an authentic but measured and regulated response, right? That's designed to support your child as opposed to unintentionally scaring them, and that we're not going to be in our owl brains all the time. We are going to respond to our kids with our watchdog brains.

Dr. Laura Markham (34:28):

So let's talk about growing the owl brain and having a more resilient stress response, is our goal for ourselves, but also for our children. How do we do that with kids?

Robyn Gobbel (34:39):

When I think about growing the owl brain, I think of, I always go back to the felt safety, connection and regulation. So if I start in the felt safety camp, and we try to simplify it down to what Dr. Porges tells us about felt safety is that we get cues of safety from

our inner world, from the environment and from the relationship. So that helps me. I always like to chunk it out. So okay, how do I help my kid physiologically? Because if they're hungry, tired, they have to pee, they're sick, right? They're stressed, they've got an infection. There's so many things that can be happening internally that are sending cues of danger.

Robyn Gobbel (35:20):

So what's the lowest hanging fruit, right? Snacks, drinks, again, making sure they're moving their bodies, getting their physiological needs met. And when I have kids who are very dysregulated for a long time, despite a lot of support, we start to think about is there something else going on? Is there something undiagnosed that's happening physiologically? Do we have a neuroimmune disorder? Do we have something else going on? We want to start exploring those kinds of things that's sending cues of danger from the inside.

Robyn Gobbel (35:50):

The environment, we can think about structure, predictability, routine. Most kids get cues of safety from a lot of structure, a lot of routine, a lot of predictability, that's flexible, not overly rigid. Some kids do, I would say there's a portion of kids who find cues of safety in a lack of structure, but for the most part, the brain really gets cues of safety when it knows what's about to happen next.

Dr. Laura Markham (36:22):

Predictability.

Robyn Gobbel (36:23):

Totally. So a lot of families think their life is very structured and routine oriented, but if we really look at it, you can see a lot of places that it's not, and sometimes tightening up some of that kind of stuff can be really helpful for growing the owl brain. And then the relational space as well. So those are the third places you get felt safety from. So I'm always asking parents, "Let's really look at how connected you and your kid are feeling right now." I know when my kid's out of sorts, one of the things I try to do first is think about, well, what's happening in our relationship right now? Have I been busier at work? Is there other things going on? So it's not criticism of me, it just needs to be looked at.

Robyn Gobbel (37:09):

And what are some simple ways we can increase delight, we can increase playfulness, we can increase some of these relational pieces in kids? All of those things. Increasing felt safety grows the owl brain. The more we can get cues of safety the more that owl brain will grow. And then connection to co-regulation really, I mean, they all go together, but connection and co-regulation of course really go together because connection is such an important piece of co-regulation. And so helping parents see their kids' behaviors through the lens of the stress response so that they can respond in kind, see this behavior as dysregulation that needs support.

Robyn Gobbel (37:49):

That by itself is just crucial for growing the owl brain because a lot of kids have a challenging behavior and it activates our watchdog brain. And so we criticize or we send away or we separate. And all of those reactions make perfect sense, but they're not helping our kids grow the regulatory circuits that they need. Keeping our kids closer to us, decreasing the distance. Sometimes our teenagers can't have teenager opportunities in life because they don't have the internalized regulation yet to maybe go to the football game without adult supervision, things like that.

Robyn Gobbel (38:36):

So keeping them closely, keeping them closer, and I also think almost every skill can be scaffolded. And so if we know what kind of skills go into what we feel like our child is lagging, whether that be impulse control, empathy, being able to follow directions, all these things, they're actually very complicated skills, and we can really break them down and see what's missing in those. How can we scaffold them? How can we increase... Yes, I want my 10-year-old to go clean their room, but if they can't do it, they can't do it. So let's break that down and look at how do we scaffold that skill in a toddler? How do we teach a toddler how to pick up, right? Well, we do it with them. And then we have a red bin and a blue bin, and we tell them those things go in the red bin, those things go in the blue bins. We really scaffold this. We can do that for our older kids too. And all of those things grow the owl brain.

Dr. Laura Markham (39:42):

So let's talk about a very specific skill that a lot of parents worry about, impulse control. So that's a complicated skill.

Robyn Gobbel (39:52):

Yes, it is.

Dr. Laura Markham (39:53):

How would you scaffold impulse control?

Robyn Gobbel (39:58):

Again, most of the kids and families that I work with have impulse control challenges because of their lower brain and autonomic nervous system dysregulation. And we're not strictly looking at this as an executive functioning thing.

Dr. Laura Markham (40:15):

Right.

Robyn Gobbel (40:15):

So when I'm thinking about impulse control, and what that comes out with, sometimes I just have to label it that for parents. They're like, "My 10-year-old walked up to the toddler and just yanked the toy out of their hand. He's so mean. He doesn't even care about accidentally hurting the baby." I'm like, well, maybe that's it but maybe he had a thought of, "I want that toy," and there was no space between, "I want that toy," and "I'm taking that toy." That's an owl brain skill. That pause of, "I want that toy. How do I ask for the toy correctly?" Frustration tolerance if I can't have that thing I want right now.

Robyn Gobbel (41:07):

So those are all owl brain skills. So we got to do two things. One, we got to look at from a bigger picture perspective, how are we overall growing the owl brain with the things that I just talked about? Are we really getting in there with those types of things? In the moment, we're going to assess what happens. A 10-year-old walks over, takes the toy, the toddler starts crying, maybe hits. Now the 10-year-old's mad and hits back. The first thing we got to do is recognize this as like, "Whoa, whoa, whoa. We got a lot of watchdogs here." We got watchdogs that are hurting each other. So when we have hurting each other watchdogs, the number one goal is how do we keep these people safe? So how do I get the baby away? How do I get the 10-year-old away? How do I separate them?

Robyn Gobbel (41:54):

And for me, I tell parents like, "Hey, use your best instinct to know. I can't tell you how to keep your kids... Keep your kids safe." From there, look at who needs the connection and co-regulation most immediately. And if the toddler's safe and they're distracted, and maybe they're in a safe place, you can turn your attention back to the 10-year-

old, and now we can start using some other attunement or validation kind of skills. Well, you really wanted that toy. You wanted it, and your owl brain wasn't able to say, oh, you could wait or you could ask, or you can ask mom, right?

Robyn Gobbel (42:38):

Your owl brain just totally flew away. Your watchdog came and just took it, right? You couldn't wait. And then the baby's watchdog hit you back. So we can narrate it. And we're looking to try to bring in some de-escalation here, some co-regulation. I might say, "This has been exhausting. You wanted that toy, you didn't get it. Then your brother hit you. What if we, let's go grab a quick drink. Now we're getting more connected, we're getting more regulated, we're resisting the urge to feel like we're rewarding bad behavior, because we're not, we're co-regulating. Right?

Robyn Gobbel (43:14):

And then when we get that owl brain back, maybe we can say, "All right, well your little brother has the train that you really wanted. You took it, that didn't work out. What are some other ways? Can we practice them? You can ask me if there's another train. You can ask me if you can have that train. And maybe I could say, 'You can have that train in five minutes. Let's put a timer on.' There's a lot of options here based on the uniqueness of your family. But the overall piece there was safety, stay focused on connection and co-regulation as opposed to the actual behavior problem. As the owl brain comes back, now we visit the behavior.

Dr. Laura Markham (44:08):

And one of the ways you brought the owl brain back or helped the owl brain come back is that you made a repair. And I find that parents say all the time to me, "Well, after I finally calmed the toddler down and then I go to my 10-year-old and he doesn't want to talk about it." And I say, "Is it that he doesn't want to talk about it or he feels the way it's going to be talked about, he's going to be judged and criticized and be bad? Is there another way to do it?" And so I love your approach. You went in and made a repair. You said, "That was really hard. You really wanted the toy." And then you described what he did, but you described it completely non-judgmentally.

Robyn Gobbel (44:47):

Totally. And I love that you label it that way because repair is my number one thing. After your kid had a hard moment, number one thing to do is repair. People are like, "Well, what do you mean, I didn't do anything wrong, why should I apologize?" Like, no, no, no, no, no. I mean, maybe you need to apologize. Certainly there's been times

where I've needed to apologize to my kid, but that's actually not what repair is. Repair is, let's get me and you back in sync. And that has to happen first. And then talking about the behavior through the lens of the watchdog or possum really de-shames what's happening, and help kids start to understand their own nervous system and then differentiate between, I'm a good kid who sometimes struggles instead of I'm just a bad kid with bad behavior. So I agree that talking about the behavior through this non-judgmental, neutral way, your watchdog just totally took over and then your brother's did too. Your owl couldn't help you wait to take that toy. You needed it right then and there. Right? It's not excusing the behavior, it's crafting this important narrative.

Dr. Laura Markham (46:02):

And the model you have where you have the owl brain and the watchdog, and we haven't talked about the possum, but the possum brain as well.

Robyn Gobbel (46:10):

Yes.

Dr. Laura Markham (46:12):

That is so useful to talk to kids. It's so clear for them to be like, "Yeah, that was my what's up watchdog. Now I feel better now that I had a cold drink of water and a hug."

Robyn Gobbel (46:23):

100%.

Dr. Laura Markham (46:24):

Yeah. So I wish we could talk forever, and I know we can't, but let me... And I think people are just going to have to find out about the possum, they're just going to have to get their hands on your book. And below our interview we'll have the link to your website and stuff. But I believe you also had some goodies for that, for parents.

Robyn Gobbel (46:48):

Yeah, absolutely. So I put together a little packet that kind of touches on several of the things we talked about today, and some of it is just learning about the owl, watchdog and possum brain, and some different graphics that kind of help both parents and kids with that. A couple coloring pages, because people of all ages really enjoy coloring. And I have some owl, watchdog, possum coloring pages, and I have a handout on tips for felt safety. So I know when I'm dysregulated, I can't think

clearly at all. And having almost like a word bank, that's how I think of it, of things that often communicate safety can be really helpful. So I have them in a little infographic to go on the fridge.

Dr. Laura Markham (47:33):

So when I'm in a moment of stress with my kid, I can just look at the refrigerator and I get some ideas about what to say for felt safety.

Robyn Gobbel (47:39):

Exactly. Yep.

Dr. Laura Markham (47:41):

Perfect. All right, well this has been such a pleasure, Robyn, to talk with you.

Robyn Gobbel (47:46):

Yes.

Dr. Laura Markham (47:47):

And really thank you.

Robyn Gobbel (47:49):

Yeah, thank you. It was just delightful to be able to have this time together.

