

Transcript - Episode 80

Respect the No

We spend years teaching children that it's okay to say no—to unsafe situations, to peer pressure, to alcohol, to drugs, to anything that doesn't feel right. But somehow, when it comes to school, “no” becomes a problem to solve instead of a message to understand. Today, we're exploring why respecting the no isn't about lowering expectations. It's about creating neurological safety that makes learning possible.

And you know, Julie, I wonder if anyone consulted with Nancy Reagan back in the '80s. All I can see is that commercial: “This is your brain on drugs. Just say no.” The whole time you were doing our quick little opening, that's all I could see, which is totally dating myself. But people know I've been 25 more than once, so it's okay.

But it's odd, isn't it? It's odd that we have these national campaigns, and parents spend their whole lives telling us—or maybe that's the problem. They're telling us what things are okay to say no to, and then they don't like it when it comes to them.

Yeah. It's like, “Say no to anyone else, but not to me.”

Not to me. Yeah. And I think people get very upset. Just look at our Facebook page if you want to know what people think about the Respect the No campaign.

Yeah. People have a lot to say about it. Lots to say about it.

Yeah, and we want to talk about that. Actually, when a student says no and it's ignored—so, Kristie, it's no for anything: “I don't want to do that. I don't feel comfortable. No, thank you. I hate this.”

Let's take a specific example, Julie, because I think there are people saying, “Okay, so you mean you say, ‘Get on the bus,’ and the kid says no? You say, ‘It's time to eat snack,’ and the kid says no?” Maybe just pick one for a minute and walk us through it, because my brain is going to explode.

Sure. Or you're going to turn off this podcast and say no.

Or I'm going to turn off the podcast and say no.

Which is fine. It's like this: No is the beginning of a conversation, not the end of a conversation. What we want students to know is, “I heard you, and I want to support you better.” So there are certain things—like not running into the street, getting on the bus, or the kinds of things that students need to do—where they have to respect what you're saying at the time. What we do is use that no as an example of where we're

starting the conversation. Where are we even beginning this conversation? In school, the no is almost always treated as defiance.

But in reality, the no in school is really a neurological response. Because our brain, as you know, is always asking, “Am I safe?” When a student feels threatened or powerless or unheard, they're not going to be able to learn. Neurological safety is necessary for any kind of learning to happen.

Well, what this makes me think, Julie, is that while I was inviting us to differentiate between situations, maybe it's better for a minute not to differentiate between situations. Because for the kid, there probably isn't this fine-tuned distinction. Their nervous system is still registering, “This is ‘unsafe.’”

And so my body's response, whether it's running into the street while I scream no, or shaking my head no when you say, “Eat your beans”—that's for my sister Janet, because my dad always made her eat beans—it feels the same in the body.

And so, Kristie, so much wasted time and energy in schools is spent on, “Is this a big deal or a small deal? And I've got to teach you if it's a big deal or a small deal.” What you invited is where I was headed, which is: No matter the situation, you hear no and you think, “I need to get curious about this no. I need to make sure the student is heard, and I need to look beneath the refusal.”

And so when we get to looking beneath the refusal, it's saying, “All right, this is communication, and I need to get curious. Might it be overwhelm? Might it be fear? Might it be embarrassment? Might it be exhaustion? Might it be a need for autonomy or connection?”

And our job is to say, “Oh, I hear you said no. Thank you.” I'm going to honor the no, and I'm going to move on and help myself get curious. Ways to communicate that I heard you are things like, “Thank you for telling me. I'm glad you let me know. Your feelings make sense.”

Because, Kristie, what you were just saying is the opposite. If you go, “That's a small deal. That's not a problem. That's a small problem,” blah, blah, blah—it's not small to the kid. No matter how much language you give it, it's not small to the kid.

I'll use a student I used to work with. We were doing papier-mâché, sticking our hands into glue and substances like that. And the no was physical. It was emotional. It was mental. I would say it was as if I said to you, Kristie, “Please put your hands in this hot fire.” That's how big the response was.

Well, I need to hear it, see it, understand it, and go, “Got it. This is a big response because this is a big amount of sensory overwhelm.” And it doesn't mean I'm going to coerce you to put your hands in the glue or whatever it is that we're working with. It might mean I'm going to hear, honor, and see that no, and we're going to do something different.

Well, and I think the word different—“do something different”—makes some people's lids flip. I think even “get curious” makes some people's lids flip, because it's like, “I've got 32 kids or 35 kids, and I can't be curious about why they're being disrespectful.”

Yeah, and so this is asking a lot of people. Kristie, what you just said is so good: “disrespectful.” There's an assumption being made about why the kid is choosing to say no. When you say “get curious,” or force yourself to get curious, it is because you're saying no is communication. No isn't disrespect.

And I think when you said a little bit ago about autonomy—I think you and I do want to talk a little bit about PDA in this context. But for me, if I were to say, “Hey, in this instance, you don't have to be curious. You don't have to give choice. You don't have to do something different just for them,” it's because I'm afraid my nervous system will go, “Oh, I'm coddling them,” or “Now I have to do 35 different things because 35 people don't like papier-mâché.” Right? I'm sharing my negative reaction.

Yeah. But if you said, “Preserve autonomy,” or “Keep the expectation, but you can get there a different way,” that might be an easier path for me as an educator to think about. “Okay, I'm just allowing or preserving their autonomy, but I still have the expectation.”

Yeah, and I think it's just reminding me, what's the goal here? A lot of people will say, “Yeah, the goal is to get used to unpreferred things. You have to get used to unpreferred things. It's just something you have to do. You might have a job later. This person may become a professional wallpaper hanger, and they might have to put their hands in wallpaper paste.” Right? There are those kinds of things that people say.

And all I want you to do, friends, is use common sense and say, “Given the age and stage of this particular human, what is the goal here?” And chances are, they will tell you clearly, based on their body language and response to the task, how big of a deal it is in their nervous system. And there is a time when you should expect or plan that every student is going to struggle with any task you're giving them at any time.

And you need to have choices available. So if you can't put your hands in the papier-mâché, or don't want to put your hands in the papier-mâché, could you help rip the paper we're going to use? Could you participate in a different way? I don't mean, “Go sit on the side and put your hands in beans.” I mean still participate in some fashion with the task that's also okay for your nervous system.

Yeah. So I think that “different way,” or “Would you rather…?” or even just offering a choice doesn't have to be, “Well, you can just eat a popsicle, and we're going to do math problems.”

Right. We're not asking people to just let anything go. It's recognizing that our nervous systems read situations differently and that no meant something.

It might not even mean no. I'm thinking about a little kid who was having a meltdown at a center-time activity, and everybody was trying to calm his nervous system in a variety of ways, one of which was to invite him to play with farm animals. Farm animals were his favorite toy, and he just kept screaming, “No!”

Everybody's like, “But you love farm animals.” And it's like, “No!” “Do you want the horse?” “No!” “Oh, you love the cow.” “No!”

Right. In that moment, we didn't open it up for conversation. Even though we weren't trying to get him to stop saying no, we were trying to get him to say yes, like, “Yes, I want to play with that.”

And you can't convince someone with a dysregulated nervous system, no matter how much you try, that they actually love this thing and it's going to be fine and they're going to be safe. Language isn't going to make that work.

And so, Kristie, we go in a lot of different directions, but I think respecting the no does not mean lowering expectations.

Yeah. It actually means respecting the human being, honoring the student, and supporting their growth. It's really just using practical responses that preserve dignity.

Well, and I think a lot of people know this example because it's been thrown around for decades. The kid doesn't want to get in the car or into their car seat, and the parent says, “You can either do it yourself, or I'll help you.” That's one people hear all the time. But that's the idea.

We still have to get on the bus. We still have to clean up. We still have to whatever it is. But there are many, many different ways to get there.

Yeah. We're still going to get on the bus, but you can bring this stuffed animal with you. We're still going to get on the bus, and you can go in two minutes or one minute. We're still going to get on the bus, but we can tiptoe or jump there. We're still going to get on the bus, and I'm going to help hold your hand if that's better. There are things we sometimes have to do, but when you add choices, that autonomy kicks in, and students can sometimes get calmer in that particular situation.

Speaking of autonomy, Julie, do you want to talk about PDA or the handout next?

Let's just quickly mention PDA, because a lot of people will say to us—well, on Facebook, they say—“Apparently, you've never worked with a kid with PDA before.” And I want to say I've worked with tons and tons of kids with PDA.

Kristie and I call it “persistent drive for autonomy.” There are many other ways to look at that particular acronym, and we like to use it that way because it makes it a much more positive look at what's actually going on.

A strengths-based way of reframing or restoring.

Yeah. Language That Lifts.

Language That Lifts. And so all we want you to know is, whether a kid has a PDA diagnosis, definition, or profile, that kid still has a nervous system. Their PDA responses are just bigger than kids who don't necessarily have that profile.

But what we're doing in the same exact way is, instead of saying, “How do I make this kid comply?” we say, “How do I maintain this learning goal while increasing the student's autonomy and safety?” And for me, when I worked with kids with PDA, the hardest part of this was their time frame.

Right. And I had to relax my time-frame expectations to know that we're going to get there, but we're going to get there in a much calmer and gentler way than demanding it right now at this moment.

And I think, Julie, you just hit on something, because I would say two things about time. One, your concept of time and my concept of time is one of our biggest challenges. It underlies a lot of our room for negotiation. Meaning, you either feel an impulse to get it out quickly, and I want to take forever—which I think is just the right amount of time—and you would be like, “I'm going to poke my eyes out.”

Right. Or you think we have so much time to cover content, and I'm like, “Julie, we have to hurry. We can't cover this all in 90 minutes.”

Right. So neither is right or wrong. Julie and I have to talk about these things. But for a teacher who has 42 minutes for a class period, that becomes heightened. Our obsession in white dominant culture with clock time and covering the content by a certain time: “This unit has to be covered by this date because we're moving to the next unit,” or “We have statewide testing, so we have to cover this much content.”

This is a hard ask, to be on a different time frame. And then if I've got 35 time frames running around and I'm just one person...

Yeah. And I think this gets to a different podcast we have about Success Minutes. The way I used to manage my own discomfort around how long it was taking this kid to decide to do the thing, or whatever, was I'd say, “Okay, Julie, what does successful mean to you right now?” And if it's not “comply immediately,” what is it? It could be “stay in the room.” It could be “staying quiet,” even right now.

Quiet? They're yelling at the top of their lungs, “No!”

Staying with me. Just resting here. I would start to go, “You know what? Success at this moment isn't compliance, but what is it?” And then I go, “Oh my gosh. For four minutes, they sat and laid their head down and chilled out. I'm going to call that success, and we're going to move from there.”

And I just had to make new goalposts, I guess, to say, “This is success for right now.” And even approaching it, or whatever it is, might be my next success as opposed to completion of the task.

Okay, so I will link to the Success Minutes podcast, no problem. But let's just tell them quickly about the download for this episode to see if there's some things in there that will help as well. At inclusiveschooling.com/download80, there's a resource that's going to help us rethink what the no might be communicating.

And to Julie's earlier point, it's just the beginning of a conversation. Now, don't take us literally on that. That doesn't mean we're going to engage in a lot of language, per se, because the student's probably dysregulated at some level, and language is not our entry point. But the conversation is one about, “How can I achieve autonomy here? How can I get curious? How can I offer choices?” So, Julie, what do you see as sort of a takeaway? What will they find in the handout?

Yeah, I like that. I'm just going to give you a bigger overview. Inside this handout, called Respect the No, you are going to get three main steps. Step one is pause before you assume defiance. Step two is reflect before you respond, and we give you five simple questions to help you get clear about what it is they're needing. And then step three is build neurological safety. In step three, we have 25 practical strategies for how to increase trust, autonomy, access, connection, and emotional safety.

I'll give a quick example, Julie, just because we've been talking about PDA and autonomy. If I want to increase or preserve autonomy, I'm going to offer meaningful choices. I'm going to respect their bodily autonomy, in particular their space or distance or position. I'm going to welcome self-advocacy, like, “That doesn't feel good in my stomach,” or “That tastes bad to me,” or “That hurts my foot.” I have to believe that, even if I don't perceive it. Make it okay to ask for help and allow students to say, “I'm not ready yet.” So it's like, “It's time to clean up,” and they can say, “I'm not ready.” How do I manage that? That would be an example.

So this is all about the long game, and I think we didn't really start there, but I want to end there. Helping people understand that what happens to a student's nervous system when you honor and respect their no is that the long game of trust and connection starts to form. And they start to say, “Hey, I know this person will respect my communication. I will start to engage sooner because I trust this person will help me to co-regulate.”

Good point, Julie. Good point.

It's not forever. It's not forever. And maybe on a Wednesday, I'm going to engage faster because on a Monday, that teacher supported me through a rough day.

Right. And the goal isn't ever compliance. It's actual participation, communication, and belonging. When we put that as the goalpost and say, “We want you to participate in some way. We want you to be able to communicate your needs. And we want to help increase your belonging,” we're going to make different decisions about how to support that learner.

So when students know that it's safe to say no, they're going to be more willing to say yes later. As you interact with students, pay attention the next time they say no. Before asking, “How do I get them to comply?” try asking, “What are they communicating?” You're going to discover that honoring students' voices doesn't necessarily lower expectations, but it does build trust that makes those expectations achievable later.

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SHOW NOTES

What happens when a student says "no"? Too often, we interpret it as defiance, disrespect, or something that needs to be corrected. But what if that "no" is actually telling us something important?

In this episode, Julie and Kristie explore why respecting a student's "no" isn't about lowering expectations or letting students do whatever they want. It's about understanding what their nervous system may be communicating and creating the safety, trust, and autonomy that make learning possible.

Through real classroom examples, they share how to move beyond power struggles, preserve student dignity, and offer meaningful choices while maintaining expectations for learning and participation.

Key Takeaways

- **"No" is communication, not necessarily defiance.** Refusal may signal overwhelm, fear, sensory discomfort, uncertainty, or a need for autonomy.
- **Neurological safety comes before meaningful engagement.** When students feel threatened, powerless, or unheard, learning becomes harder.
- **Respecting the "no" doesn't mean removing expectations.** We can maintain learning goals while changing the supports, choices, timing, or pathways to participation.
- **Autonomy matters for every learner.** For students with a persistent drive for autonomy (PDA), flexibility, choice, and reducing demands may be especially important.
- **Trust is built over time.** When students know their communication will be respected, they may become more willing to participate, take risks, and accept support.

Episode Download / Handout

Respect the No: A Practical Guide for Educators

This free three-page guide helps educators move beyond power struggles and respond to student refusal with curiosity, communication, and choice.

Inside, you'll find:

- **Step 1: Pause Before You Assume Defiance.** Explore what a student's "no" might actually be communicating.
- **Step 2: Reflect Before You Respond.** Five questions to help you distinguish safety from compliance, preserve dignity, and maintain expectations.
- **Step 3: Build Neurological Safety.** Twenty-five practical strategies for increasing trust, autonomy, access, connection, and emotional safety.

Why download it?

Because knowing that "no" is communication is one thing. Knowing what to do next is another. This guide gives you practical ways to respond without escalating the situation, abandoning the learning goal, or getting caught in a power struggle.

👉 Get the handout at: inclusiveschooling.com/download80

Practical Moves for Your Classroom or School

1. **Acknowledge before redirecting.** Try "Thank you for telling me" or "I hear you" instead of immediately correcting or challenging the refusal.
2. **Get curious about what's underneath the "no."** Consider whether the student needs processing time, sensory adjustments, more information, connection, or a meaningful choice before participating.
3. **Maintain the goal, change the pathway.** A student who doesn't want to touch papier-mâché might help tear the paper instead. The goal is participation, not forcing everyone to participate in exactly the same way.
4. **Redefine success in the moment.** Success might mean staying in the room, accepting support, becoming more regulated, or taking one small step toward participation. Notice these Success Minutes and build from there.

Additional Resources

The Inclusion Podcast Episode 41: Language That Lifts: Writing IEPs That Inspire Possibility:

Julie and Kristie explore how the words we use to describe students shape expectations, opportunities, and support. Learn practical ways to replace deficit-based descriptions with language that recognizes strengths, communicates needs, and preserves dignity.

The Inclusion Podcast Episode 77: Success Minutes: The Mind-Blowing Metric That Changes Everything:

What if we tracked what's going right instead of focusing almost entirely on what's going wrong? Julie and Kristie introduce Success Minutes, a practical way to notice small moments of engagement, regulation, connection, and participation—and identify the supports that make those moments possible.

