



Transcript- Episode 57

Stop Looking for a Trigger: What Behavior is Really Communicating

Stop looking for a trigger.

What behavior is really communicating? Kristie, today we're going to take a deep dive under the surface of behavior. And as you well know, lots of really great thinking people spend a lot of time in schools "looking for the trigger". And I'm putting that in quotes.

And so what we're going to talk about today is why you want to stop looking for the trigger or stop assuming there is a trigger and really move into a different way of thinking about behavior.

Yeah, I'm really curious where our conversation goes today because when I was in Iowa a couple weeks ago, an amazing coach had seen this slide in the PowerPoint or someplace. I had a slide that said, stop looking for the trigger, right?

Yeah.

And then I was getting carried away with something. I was skipping over slides and she's like, whoa, whoa, whoa. Aren't we going to cover that? And I'm like, cover what? And she's like, stop looking for the trigger.

And I was like, okay, let's cover it. And then I was like thinking the whole time because I wasn't with you. I was like, yeah, I wonder how Julie would answer the subsequent questions that came more.

Why do you have this slide that says that? Or why do you have air quotes around it? Or, you know, so I'm curious how we we unpack it.

Oh, cool. I'm excited, too, to see how we differ in our thinking.

And Kristie and I put this together and we want you to know that this is in our course for behavior called [Behavior 360](#). So if you don't know about [Behavior 360](#), you need to check it out.

And today, yeah, we're going to go deep into it and deep relates to the analogy that we're going to be making today.

So I want, as we just kind of get started, for people to think about an iceberg. And you've heard this phrase tip of the iceberg. So Kristie, just give me generically what tip of the iceberg means to you.

It's almost like the opposite of like still water runs deep. It's like you can only see or understand something in a little bit of a way. And it's not as what you probably think.

OK, that's how I look at it. I like that. So it's like you could only see a little bit of that, of the thing, the iceberg.

And then underneath it, Kristie's like there's just it's not what you think. It's totally different.

I mean, I don't think you know how big. I mean, I don't know, maybe like a geologist or something would know. But like, can you know, like what color it is or how wide it is or how deep it is? I don't know.

Whatever an iceberg does below, like what does it do below the water? I don't even know.

That's right. That's right.

I think that's the thing is it's a mystery what's underneath the water. Yeah. Yeah, I think that's right.

And so today we're going to use that iceberg analogy because so many behaviorists people are like there is a trigger for behavior and we're looking for the trigger. Once we find the trigger, we can remove the trigger and we should be good. But the bad news is, friends, there's rarely a trigger.

And we can stop looking for it. So if we have you kind of wondering what on earth we're talking about, just like that teacher in Iowa who's like, what do you mean? Then join us as we jump into this incredible podcast all about how to stop looking for a trigger.

So I think it's interesting, Julie, I'm going to just maybe we'll put a pin in these things.

But rarely is there a trigger? I was like, OK, I feel like I need to unpack that. So I think what you would say is there's rarely a single trigger or a consistent trigger or it's not always the same trigger. So I think there's like some something to unpack there when you say there's rarely a trigger.

Then you said if only we could find it, then we could remove the trigger. Well, that's interesting because we're not here to fix or remediate. So then my head went that direction.

And then I thought about our conversation yesterday about behavior escalating and that that's the real problem. So if we find a trigger, let's pretend, and you get to a behavior, it's not the behavior by itself that's a problem. It's often when it escalates.

So then the trigger didn't help anyway, unless we're asking what triggers escalate a behavior. Anyway, I got it. I just said like two sentences and I got like in deep in my head.

No, it's really cool. And I think it really brings out the complexity here because I think we try to make behavior so simplistic because it helps our nervous system, right? It helps our nervous system to see the chaos in a classroom or to see the chaos in a particular situation and go, I can analyze this. I can find the trigger.

I can solve it and we're going to move on. And what Kristie's sort of bringing to the surface, if we're going to use that metaphor, is that it's different than we think. It's more complex than we think.

I did say there's rarely a trigger, meaning a singular trigger. I did mean it's rarely the same trigger on Wednesday as it was on Tuesday. And what we're going to tell you is that really it's hidden underneath the tip of the iceberg.

So if you can picture an iceberg that's just got a little tip sticking out of the water, then picture a giant ice structure under the water that's just some really wonky shape. What we're saying is whenever you see a behavior, it is almost always a lot of different things. And usually the "a lot of different things" are stressors.

So I'm going to pause for a second and ask Kristie, have you ever behaved in a way that you're not proud of?

Never. Not even five minutes ago. Oh, okay.

Great. Four minutes and 16 seconds, actually. So Kristie's never experienced this, but everybody else listening, you might relate to what Julie's talking about.

That's right. Maybe you yourself as an adult human have behaved in a way you're not proud of. And when you think about that moment, let's say you snapped at your kids or you lost it.

I got these flowers today from somebody who didn't behave the way they thought they should.

Oh, your husband?

Yes. The infamous Mike.

That's really beautiful. And I guess, yeah, we could analyze Mike's behavior. Sorry, I just was like when you're like, you know, some of you may have done something you weren't proud of.

I looked over and there's this bouquet of flowers. I was like, well, yes, somebody did. Somebody did and does and it happens all the time.

And this is an adult human. And so I guess the point that we're making is a lot of times, you might assume it's the last thing that happened before you lost your mind. Right? So let's imagine your kid asked the 30th time, what's for dinner? And you lost it.

You might think, oh, the trigger is my kid who bothers me and wants to know what's for dinner. That's the trigger. We got to fix it.

Remove the kid. Right? There's the answer.

Yeah.

Get the kid out of here. No. But what you know to be true is all day your stressors were building and building and building and building and building.

You were leaving your prefrontal cortex slowly all day long and working so hard to maintain control over your brain. And instead, your lid flipped at this moment and it really wasn't your kid that was the trigger. It was all the other things, how exhausted you are, how you're tired of being the only one who decides what's for dinner.

I mean, I could name a million more, but it's all those kinds of things.

So, Kristie, how do we put this in perspective from adult to child? So we were just talking about adults behaving in ways they're not proud of. Can you bring that to kids in schools?

Yeah, I'll just say it's two ways, maybe.

First, they're still human. So everybody's trying to manage the tension and stressors. So that's the commonality.

Then students, especially younger students or students who are neurodivergent, are going to process all that energy and tension in different ways. And it's going to be things that we as adults don't even see or recognize anymore as a stressor. They still will.

So kids are, you know, people say, what do kids have to be stressed about? They don't have a mortgage. Well, actually, they have more to be, quote, unquote, stressed about because their neurological system is so immature and their brain is so immature that they don't have the coping skills that we hopefully do by the time we're, you know, in our late 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s. So in schools, kids are still exposed to stressors, meaning they're humans and their bodies are going to have to manage, you know, biological things, emotional things, certainly cognitive things.

And they're less equipped than adults are to manage that.

So, Kristie, let's move to a first grader who it's time to transition to music class at two o'clock p.m. and they lose their absolute mind. OK, so we're looking at them. They're having a meltdown.

They're screaming. They're kicking. It's wild.

And you're just looking at them like, blink, blink. What on earth? So if you're looking at the tip of the iceberg, you're just like, this kid has tantrums, pretty significant ones. And you'll pay attention to kicking, screaming, swearing, drooling, crying.

That's what we usually are like. There it is. That's the thing.

OK, lots coming out of that kid's face. Lots of little doubts. Drooling.

Wow. No, I for sure. So you're just like this kid has lost their mind.

All right. But what we want you to do is move way beyond that and pretty quickly and not look for what just happened. So a lot of times people will go, I told him to line up.

Clearly, this kid hates standing in line. There it is. Let's solve the problem.

No. Before this kid was expected to line up, it was their birthday. So they were super excited.

There was a time pressure and they had to finish that reading assignment. There was competition because the kid next to him was going faster. There were bright lights.

They had to share their big thoughts. They were confronted by another kid earlier in the day. In the morning, they had screen time. Their parent told them to get off of it. They had to be still for 26 minutes. Each of those things, multitasking, overstimulation, time pressure, that's what built to the kid losing their mind on the way to music.

So what we're asking people to do is stop looking for the trigger, but listen beneath the behavior. So how do you listen underwater, Kristie? What are we even talking about?

Well, that's a good question, right? Like, oh, gosh. So maybe it's like you dive down, take a peek, and then come back up and talk to your co-teacher about it.

I don't know, right? You get down there, it's a little scary. So we have a download. So Julie already mentioned that what we're having a conversation today about is really something that we've covered deeply, I would say, in multiple different ways from communication as behavior to thinking about listening beneath the behavior, all of that, Julie, in our on-demand series called [Behavior 360](#).

And you'll find a link to that in the show notes. You'll also find a link to the handout that we're going to give you with this episode, which answers Julie's question about how do we listen beneath the behavior? So how do we go below the tip of that iceberg? And so you can get that free download at [inclusiveschooling.com/download57](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download57). We're going to talk through it and give you some ideas that you can take away right away.

But you'll want to go to [inclusiveschooling.com/download57](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download57) and get a five-page handout that gives you 20 different things that we see those, you know, from, I don't know if you put drooling on there, Julie, but from drooling to kicking to screaming to withdrawing to ignoring and what those possible messages are so that we can start to understand how we help reduce those stressors and bring the kid back to homeostasis.

All right. So, Kristie, on that handout, I'm just going to take yelling out, right?

Okay.

So a lot of times a kid will yell out of turn, blurt out, that was me. I'm someone who has ADHD as an attribute.

And that's the tip of the iceberg to us, right, Julie?

Yeah, the tip of the iceberg is just watching this kid yell out and not raising their hand and not waiting for and not la la la all the rules, right? And so we have to say, what is the message under that kid's blurting out? It could be, I'm overwhelmed.

I need attention. I'm excited. And all those kinds of possible messages will lead us to a different response than we need to squelch this yelling out behavior.

And the problem is they don't know how to raise their hand. Do you want to do a different one, Kristie, from the handout just to kind of get us? Let's do one that's like a little less aggressive or in-your-face behavior, like a little harder to even, we kind of miss that tip of the iceberg sometimes.

Okay. Something like withdrawing or?

Yeah, withdrawing or even avoiding specific activities, because I think sometimes when we look at triggers, we think that the kid's either trying to get attention or avoid something. So if it's something like withdrawing, or what was the one you said, Kristie?

Oh, avoiding specific activities, the last one on our table. Yeah.

Okay. Go ahead and share what it says there.

Okay. So on the table, it says refuses to join, which would be sort of like clearly observable. But the other one says avoid specific activities. And usually you'll see on kids' IEPs that they, you know, avoid unpreferred tasks, which I just think is hilarious because like we all do.

But anyway, that's another podcast. So the way to look below or listen beneath that is to say, oh, the possible message or need is the kid is feeling anxious about something. Maybe they think they're going to fail at it.

Maybe they don't like the touch or the texture or the sound of it. Maybe they don't trust that they belong there because they've been criticized or they get overwhelmed. And so then the response is maybe we give them a different way to participate so they can do something by observing, or they don't have to be as near other people to participate, maybe some sort of gradual entry.

Maybe eventually we have to fix the environment, not the kid. So we have to remove something that is, you know, aversive to them.

I love that, Kristie.

So look outside the student to see what else could we be removing, because we're just being curious and we're basically assuming that this behavior is the tip of the iceberg and there's so much below it that we don't necessarily have to understand. We just have to know this kid is underwater, right?

Yeah. So this handout, I'm just pretty jazzed about it.

I'm kind of scrolling through it. So if you want to grab this handout, you can get it for free. It's called Listening Beneath the Behavior.

And Kristie, tell them how to get it.

Yeah, [inclusiveschooling.com/download57](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download57). And while you're there, you'll also check out our show notes and learn more about [Behavior 360](#).

Great. And so this has been Stop Looking for a Trigger: What Behavior is Really Communicating. And just keep that in mind.

It's an iceberg. There's always so much below the surface. The more we understand what's under the waterline, the more we respond with compassion and creativity.

And if you want more, like Kristie said, [Behavior 360](#) is full of these strategies and they're ready whenever you are. So don't forget to download the handout Listening Beneath the Behavior. And next time that we're together, just until next time that we're together, keep listening and keep creating classrooms where every student is very comfortable.

Thank you for tuning in. And don't forget to subscribe and catch up on past episodes where we share valuable insights, straight talk and practical steps to challenge outdated special education practices. You can find every episode with the show notes at [inclusiveschooling.com/inclusion-podcast](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/inclusion-podcast) to build more inclusive schools together.

SHOW NOTES

Key Takeaways

- **Behavior isn't always about a single trigger.** What we see on the surface is often the tip of the iceberg— beneath it are layers of stressors and unmet needs.
- **Looking for “the trigger” oversimplifies.** Rarely is behavior caused by one event or factor; it's usually the buildup of many experiences throughout the day.
- **Behavior is communication.** Actions like yelling, withdrawing, or refusing tasks often signal messages like anxiety, overwhelm, or a

need for connection.

- **Shift the focus.** Instead of eliminating behaviors, listen beneath them to understand what students are trying to express.

Episode Download/Handout

The free handout— **Listening Beneath the Behavior**— offers practical tools to help educators interpret and respond to what’s really going on:

- A table of common student behaviors (like yelling out, avoiding tasks, or withdrawing) paired with possible underlying messages.
- Strategies for shifting from reacting to teaching and supporting.
- Ways to reduce stressors in the environment instead of “fixing” the student.

👉 Download at [inclusiveschooling.com/download57](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download57)

Highlights from the Handout

- **Julie’s Favorite:** Reframing “blurting out.” Instead of treating it as a rule-breaking behavior, consider messages like *I’m excited*, *I need attention*, or *I’m overwhelmed*— and respond accordingly.
- **Kristie’s Favorite:** Rethinking avoidance. When a student refuses to join, the real need may be about anxiety, sensory overwhelm, or fear of failure— clues that point to adjusting the environment rather than excluding the student.

Practical Tips

- **Use the iceberg analogy.** Remind yourself that what you see is only a small part of the story; most of the behavior’s meaning lies beneath the surface.
- **Get curious, not corrective.** Replace “What’s the trigger?” with “What might this behavior be communicating?”
- **Offer alternative ways to participate.** Gradual entry, observation roles, or flexible options can ease stress while still fostering inclusion.

Learn More About Behavior 360 our newest on-demand PD!
<https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/behavior-360/>