



Transcript- Episode 58

Why Running and Refusing Aren't the Real Problem

Welcome, welcome to Episode 58.

Today we're talking about what if they run or refuse? Now, Kristie, why are we talking about those two different behaviors? Like why are we putting those together in one podcast? Well, you know, it made me think of it the other day when you were, I think you were quoting Ross Greene or a conversation that you and Ross had about the kids who are the luckiest. Maybe you could just share that real quick and then I'll connect it to running and refusing.

Yeah, I love that. So if you know Ross Greene, he talks often about that people, humans, react in two ways, really, to being overstressed. And one is this very reactive and obvious and kind of in your face way fighting, fight, flight, that kind of thing. And then this other way is freeze or faint.

And Ross Greene says that if you typically, if a kid typically responds with something like freeze or faint, they're the lucky ones because they don't often get in trouble in school because it most often goes under the radar.

Yeah. So I thought when you were talking about that the other day, I was like, we need to bring up that both are equally destructive or, you know, in terms of like, you're not learning and you're not growing and you're dysregulated.

But I thought maybe people need to understand. And then we were working on [Behavior 360](#). So there were two things, I guess.

We were working on our on-demand series [Behavior 360](#) with some folks. And we were talking about refusal. And then when we were doing that training in Iowa, we were talking about it again.

And it was like, OK, refusal doesn't just mean I cross my arms and I look at my teacher and go, no, no, I'm not going to do that.

Right. Right.

It's like refusal is how it feels as the adult. But a kid maybe doesn't make a choice, or a kid doesn't start an activity, or a kid doesn't stay with a, quote, unquote, unpreferred activity. That's all like this kind of feeling of that they're not cooperating.

So I would call that a fight or flight behavior. And then running, because as you described, it is like I can see it. It's in your face.

Well, let's talk about states versus behaviors. Let's talk about what you and I talk about in terms of red versus blue. And then let's give some strategies of how to support either the kid who's the runner or the kid who is seemingly refusing just by being passive or not engaging in the way we want.

Yeah. And Kristie, I'm just picturing this little guy named Steven who was supposed to be doing a worksheet. And I remember I don't have a word to describe what he did, but imagine if a human person could turn into water and slide down off your chair.

I totally see that. The visual is like, was, stunning. It was like he turned into a cartoon person or like..

And again, that's like water. This kid was refusing, but he wasn't saying no. He literally just was turning into a pile on the floor.

Perfect. I spent 30 minutes of our podcast trying to describe what I meant by refusal, and you just depicted it. OK.

OK. So picture a kid turning into water and you're just like, what is going on?

Right. So we're going to talk about the different states, not the behaviors.

OK. So, Kristie, you say that a lot. We've got to focus on the states, not the behaviors.

Why? What does that mean? You know, it's kind of related to our other podcast, about looking for triggers sometimes by labeling the behavior. I still don't know what to do. So if you tell me the kid elopes, which I think is a funny word, it makes me feel like a middle schooler.

I laugh every time someone said they elope. I'm like, OK. But, you know, I know it's serious, but seriously, I don't always know what to do or I get a little freaked out or my lid starts to flip.

But if I understand that their nervous system is dysregulated, then I go, oh, my job is to get them back to homeostasis. What stressors can I reduce? What can I, you know, what coping strategies can I offer? And I'm not thinking there's this like specific answer or a particular solution. I'm just the only fool that doesn't know.

OK. So, Kristie, correct me if I'm wrong, but I think essentially, if we were to boil this down, what you're saying is it doesn't matter what the behavior is, whether the kid turns to water on the ground or runs out of the building or punches someone in the face. All of those things.

The only thing we have to think is: this kid is dysregulated. We have to get them back into their prefrontal cortex.

Yeah, because what happens, Julie, if you're a little kid who like, you know, turned into water, then let's say from a regulatory state, let's say that was like a hypo arousal, but then they got kind of embarrassed because people were like giggling or something. So then they like jumped up and punched their friend, and then

they were like surprised they did that and somebody yelled at them, so they withdrew again. So now the kids like ping pong between behaviors.

Yeah. Before I could even solve the water one, I got the punching one and that's right. And so if you can separate those two things, the goal is to go dysregulated human.

Yeah, period.

That's it. Dysregulated human. And the strategies to get students back are pretty straightforward, but we don't need a different strategy if you're on the floor than if you're running out the hallway.

I mean, a little bit in that you've got to keep kids safe, but beyond that, all the strategies are the same to get kids back.

Yeah. So let's let's just talk a little bit about states and then let's give you some strategies for the running and the turning into water, which I'm going to call now.

So, Julie, let's actually start with Ross's because we started that conversation with these kids who are in freeze or faint. Give us like a handful of examples of what behaviors we see when they are in the reactive freeze or faint state.

So the freeze or faint state, Kristie and I often call the blue state, and essentially it's when someone's system is nearly shutting down and it's really almost like a disassociation and it's often a way of being that looks like too little reaction.

That's good. And so some examples would be the kid is totally confused. They're disconnected.

They look helpless. They have flat emotions or looks like no emotion. They look numb or feel numb. They feel trapped, shut down, spacey, zoned out.

OK, those are examples of what we see when a kid is in the freeze or faint state, which is a reactive state. And now should we go to the fight or flight?

Yeah, go ahead. Keep going.

OK, so the fight or flight state is like, whoa, it's very overwhelming to the system. They're usually flooded with fear and they are becoming what looks like defiant.

And it often looks like too much of a reaction, which is why Ross Greene says, these are the kids that are unlucky. When kids typically go to this as their go-to, they're unlucky because they often get in trouble, detention, suspension, etc. So that looks like aggression, anxiety, chaos, frustration, impulsivity, being obsessed by something, over the top, out of control, overwhelmed, rigid, worried.

Those are words that explain that fight or flight state. And so you can get this list that Julie's describing and defining from on our website for the download for this episode. And it is at [inclusiveschooling.com/download58](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download58).

And we call this human ways of being. And it sets the stage for why are we looking at states versus behavior? And what does it look like when you are in a reactive fight or flight or a reactive freeze or faint?

It also says, well, what's a ready state? What am I trying to get to? How would I know kids are there? And some people call this the window of tolerance. Julie and I call it a ready state because we want people to really be thinking about, oh, I'm ready to learn.

I'm ready to make quote, unquote, a good choice. I'm ready to be able to take the action that is being expected of me. However you want to think of it, it's important to go, oh, I'm ready to do that thing.

So we're going to walk through a couple of solutions for kids when they're in a reactive state, whether it is fight or flight or freeze or faint. And we'll use running and refusing briefly, just as the context to kind of reign in all the possible scenarios. Because Julie, even like when we were talking to the teachers in Iowa, there's runners and there's runners, right? So there's the kid who like, it's a matter of safety, or bolts at any situation.

There's others who are running around the room and ripping down things. There are others who, you know, like each scenario takes on its own 'what if?'. What would you do, Julie? What if they did this? And what if they did that? And so it's kind of like, you got to know in the moment what to do.

So we're going to give you some strategies, and these are all things that we discuss in [Behavior 360](#) as well.

Okay, so I think the first thing everybody needs to think about, no matter the behavior, is centering the human first. So going, it's not about maybe what I think it is, but let's just take running, for example.

It might mean I need to get out of here. My body feels unsafe. I don't know how else to get help, right? It's that kind of a behavior.

It's a stress response. And so the kinds of things we might do when someone is in that state where they're running is saying things like, let's slow down. Your body's telling us something big.

Let's come back to a safe spot together, right? Those kinds of words, that kind of phrasing. All of it to help that nervous system get back to homeostasis so that they can view you as a trusting support partner to get to the right place. And when we think about how to be even proactive, though they're kind of strategies too, Julie, to do in the moment because it's about escalating.

Sometimes a kid might be moving quickly or moving often and we don't attend to it. And then it builds up, as you were saying, other times about that accumulation of stressors. So being able to pre-teach what are different movement options.

So it's not okay to run out of the room or run in the hall or run away from me, but what could you do instead? So that sort of pre-teach when I'm more in a ready state.

Yeah, pre-teach options that are okay with you as the teacher, right?

Right. Kind of identifying the stressors ahead of time or noticing they're starting to move a lot. So how can we reduce some stressors so that it doesn't escalate to a full-on elopement?

Yeah, I love that. And I'm just going to add one more, which is a really clear plan so that the student knows that if I do this thing, I'll meet you in this place, meaning I'm not feeling safe at all and I'm going to run. So I'm going to run to the library and that's where I'll meet you, right? And it's just essentially, it allows the kid to plan for the fact that sometimes their body feels out of control and the need to run is real.

And so we know I'll meet you in the library and then we'll figure out what to do next when I get there.

Yeah, so if you're interested in learning more about how to respond to these reactive states, again, in the show notes for the episode, you'll find information about [Behavior360](#), our on-demand PD, and you can also get the download for today's episode before we move on to refusing, and you can get that at [inclusiveschooling.com/download58](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download58).

And so when I think of refusing, Julie, in [Behavior360](#), we see sometimes no is just a pause button, not a full stop.

So even that kid who, like, slid out of their chair as a puddle into a puddle of water, it didn't mean I'm never going to do the worksheet. It didn't mean I'm never going to do it, though we might encourage them to do a part stop, you know? But you know what I mean? Like it could have just been like gathering myself or gathering the will to persist.

Well, I'd like to welcome viewers to answer the question, have you ever felt like sliding down off your chair because you're just super overwhelmed or this feels too big or you can't do another thing, right? And so again, same strategy, center the human first and realize what this can look like, this can just be overwhelm.

This can be anxiety. And the goal is how do we get them back in their prefrontal cortex? So what do we do in the moment? We might lower the demand temporarily.

So Kristie, Stephen slides to the floor. His body is telling us, I'm good here. I don't want to do it. It's okay to say, whoo, I see that.

We're going to come back to this tomorrow. Right now, let's do something else, right? You're taking the lead from the student. And I think, Julie, people might freak out and go, oh my gosh, Julie, you're reinforcing. Now every time they don't want to do something, they're going to slide to the floor. And so how would you respond to that?

I love that because essentially it's a lot of things. But the first thing is remembering that this human is behaving in the best way they can in the best way they know how, and they don't know how to say, I cannot complete this worksheet. I am all done here. Those aren't the words they're saying, but their body is saying it for them.

So let's listen to the behavior and start to help the kid get back into their prefrontal cortex so that they can learn in a few minutes something else, and we can try again at another time.

But it is just such a clear signal that we want to listen to it just as if this kid has politely said, excuse me, Ms. Causton, I'm going to be unable to complete this worksheet right now due to the fact that I am overwhelmed because of multiple stressors in my environment. Okay? Because if the kid said it that way, we'd be like, oh, no problem, Steven, let's go find something to get you back. It's just imagine that they can say it that way, but the way their body is doing it is to slide into a puddle.

Okay. So as we wrap up this particular episode, we'll just leave you with a couple more tips about how to support kids when they're in a reactive state. So a lot of things are about validating.

A lot of things are thinking about how do I give students a sense of agency where they have input. I'm always looking for patterns and stressors that I may not have noticed in my body are a stressor, but are for the kids. So let's take the worksheet again.

I could say, you know what, maybe I really shouldn't be doing worksheets with kids of this age, or there should be at least three options because some kids, myself included, wouldn't mind doing a worksheet. So it's not like I have to like burn them all, but I could also give some options to learn the same content in different ways.

So it's an invitation for me to think about how can I arrange the environment or the lesson differently? So in this episode, we're really taking a minute to look at what are states versus behaviors.

What is a ready state? What is a reactive state? And then we use the example of running and falling into the floor into a puddle of water as the examples. And you can get the download at [inclusiveschooling.com/download58](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download58). 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 is communication, not defiance.** Running, shutting down, or “refusing” are all signs of dysregulation — not willful misbehavior.
 - **Focus on states, not behaviors.** Every human operates from different nervous system states: *ready*, *fight/flight*, or *freeze/faint*. Once we know the state, we can respond with compassion and skill instead of control.
 - **Ready = regulated.** In the ready state, students feel safe, open, and able to learn. When they move into a reactive state, our role is to guide them back — not to punish or escalate.
 - **All humans need lifelines.** When stress builds, kids (and adults!) need tools, options, and predictable supports to return to balance.
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Episode Download/Handout

The companion guide — **Human Ways of Being** — explains how to recognize and respond to three key behavioral states:

- **The Ready State:** calm, curious, engaged, flexible, and safe.
- **The Reactive Fight/Flight State:** overwhelmed, anxious, impulsive, or defiant.
- **The Reactive Freeze/Faint State:** withdrawn, numb, disconnected, or shut down.

It also offers practical ways to help students (and yourself!) extend time in the ready state and re-regulate when flooded.

👉 Download at [inclusiveschooling.com/download58](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download58).

Highlights from the Handout

- **Julie’s Favorite:** The reminder that *humans show up in the world in broad behavioral states* — not good or bad behaviors. We can’t choose our state consciously, but we can influence it through connection and safety.
 - **Kristie’s Favorite:** The phrase “*center the human first.*” Whether a student runs or melts into a puddle on the floor, begin with empathy and connection before solving the problem.
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Practical Tips

- **See the signal, not the behavior.** Running might mean “I don’t feel safe.” Refusal might mean “I’m overwhelmed.” Listen to what the body is saying.
 - **Create proactive plans.** Establish safe meeting places or movement options before a crisis occurs.
 - **Validate before redirecting.** Simple phrases like “Your body’s telling us something big” or “Let’s slow down together” help students feel seen and safe.
 - **Offer flexible choices.** Reduce demands temporarily, give students agency, and revisit tasks when regulation returns.
 - **Adjust the environment.** Look for patterns or stressors — noise, pace, expectations — and modify them so students can stay in the ready state.
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Want to go deeper?

If you connected with our conversation about why running and refusing aren't the real problem, you'll love [Behavior 360](#). Created by Dr. Julie Causton and Dr. Kristie Pretti-Frontczak, this transformative framework helps schools move beyond outdated discipline toward practices rooted in inclusion, compassion, and brain science. Learn how to shift mindsets, respond with connection in the moment, and build systems where every student feels safe, seen, and supported.