



Transcript- Episode 60

Non-verbal Ways to Support Behavior in the Moment

Woo-hoo, we're at Episode 60.

And this one is a mighty one. And I did not understand this until I started to work with Kristie. I really didn't get this at all when I was teaching.

And now I wish I could go back and do it differently. It's about nonverbal ways to support behavior in the moment. We're going to talk about when a person, a human, is melting down or struggling, how your physical presence, your posture, I mean, even your eyebrows, Kristie, right?

Exactly.

They can speak louder than any words you're saying. So if you're going to get tattooed eyebrows, be careful. I did get tattooed eyebrows, but I tried to make them look friendly.

Exactly, because you were really thinking about what your nonverbals were saying. So right now you're probably like, go on Facebook if you want to see my eyebrows and you can see them there.

Okay.

Anyways, the point is not about eyebrows, but essentially to say that it is really powerful what your body is doing, even more than what you're saying. Most teachers say to us, all right, Kristie, what do we do? What do I do when? What do I do, Julie, when? How do I say? And what we mean is, what words do we say? But we're going to start kind of in a different place to say that there are go-to nonverbal strategies in terms of how to do this work. And we have an entire class in [Behavior 360](#) all about this.

If you don't know what [Behavior 360](#) is, you're definitely going to want to check it out in the show notes. But it's going to be all about kind of how do we do a nonverbal body scan to make sure that our body is saying what we intend it to say.

Yeah, that's an important caveat right there.

Does it match, right? Does it match our intention? Does it match our words? Does it match the situation? Does it match the kid's need?

Wow. Okay, let's talk a little bit about, especially when it comes to behavior, why this is so important.

Okay. So if we are tense, rushed, frustrated, students will notice even when we don't say a word. And there's been a ton of research on this. And it shows that a human can pick up emotional cues almost like you can feel them before you even understand they're happening.

So Kristie, say more. How does that work with small kids in particular?

Yeah, I was afraid you were going to ask me how that works in the body. And I was going to be like, oh, I'm not that kind of doctor.

I don't know. I don't know. Yeah, so it's just, I would say that the part that people can relate to with young children is like the cascade effect, where if one kid starts to cry, another starts to cry.

If one gets really excited, the other one gets excited. It's kind of the fear that most early childhood educators have about like, you know, that cascade effect. And so it's because of, partially I'm guessing our mirror neurons, but something happens in our heart where we can respond to emotions and feelings, an actual literal measurable full second before our brain can consciously process them, especially with young children who are using their limbic region, which is all full of emotions and their right hemisphere dominant in the early years, which is also lots about emotion.

So they can read those cues, kind of resonate with those cues much more easily than logic or language or anything like that, that we gain as we get older.

Hmm. Okay.

So if I'm a small kid or a teenager, it kind of doesn't really matter. I guess what you're saying, Kristie, is that everybody's body is kind of sending a signal.

Yeah.

And I, as the student in this moment, am perceiving your body first before I even can hear the words you're saying. I'm deciding if you're safe. I can quickly determine if you're calm, if you're tense.

And so educators who learn to manage your own body and you take a quick pause and you ground yourself and you say, I want my entire body to demonstrate that I am safe. That is going to speak volumes to the students so that they can begin to become more calm and re-engage.

All right.

So I loved when you said manage your own behaviors because that's about the only time I like the word manage. So let's talk about a strategy. Like, how would I go about that? Because, Julie, I know from years and years working with young children that my face is very expressive because they would imitate my face and then I would recognize.

Now that I'm older, I have creases, crevices, in places because my face does a repeated pattern. One of those is frowning.

Yeah.

My face just does that. Even if it's more like I could be concentrating, I could be thinking, but it's going to come across as a frown. Now I feel like it's too late.

I just keep rubbing my head trying to erase it. But maybe if I was a young teacher again, I could use these strategies and not have the wrinkles. And if you're not, there's always Botox.

So there's just so many ways. There's all kinds of good advice today.

Yeah.

And so, Kristie, I'm really glad you started thinking about the forehead and the eyes and things like that because I want to do just kind of like a whole body scan to help people know what you might be able to do to make your body really communicate what you want it to communicate.

So, Julie, that reminds me, they can get the download and go along with you as you do the body scan. And so at [inclusiveschooling.com/download60](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download60), we have a really straightforward handout, but it's a reminder of how to do this body scan top to bottom and what you can do with that body part, I guess, to help it convey I am safe, I am calm, you know, you can trust me.

You know, Kristie, all that, yes. So go grab it, find it and walk this through with us. And I just wanted to add one piece that I just thought of, which is there's a lot of research that says that kids who've gone through significant trauma are likely to read a neutral expression even as negative.

And so I want to say that we want to do this even bigger than we might think we need to. So what I mean by that is we're starting at the top of our forehead or thinking about our eyebrows and our eyes. And what we want to do is soften our face, release the tension in your forehead, avoid that stern expression.

And then this is my favorite part. Think to yourself, how can I show I'm listening without even saying a word? So Kristie, have you ever met someone who looks at you and is fully engaged with you and you can tell just by looking at their eyes?

Yeah, for sure. Even with kids.

Yeah. That's the goal, right? That's the goal is to say, communicate with just your eyes. I am with you.

I am listening. I am right here. What else do we do with eye gaze, Kristie, in order to make it most comfortable for people to hear us, what we're sharing?

Yeah. Maybe a couple of things. One, if let's say the person's having a meltdown, that person could be of any age, usually like getting below eye level. So it would look less threatening if I'm below your eyes.

So my eyes can be soft, but if I'm above you, it could still translate. So it's a little bit of my body position, but it's where my eyes are in relation to your eyes. I also think

that, and people know this from other work, hopefully, that culturally, expectations around eye contact or where we look.

Now, like in dance, we're supposed to look at our partner so they feel connected, but we look kind of through them. So we either look at their collar or we look at the top of their head or over their shoulder so they still know we're connected, but we're not like looking into their eyes. And many of our friends with autism will say that looking from a sideways at you is a more comfortable way.

So I guess I would just say in general, thinking about eye contact is very personalized. And so to signal that I am safe or a secure harbor, it's almost also thinking about what I allow back as an eye gaze from the other person. So maybe I went on a tangent.

No, what I want to keep on that tangent, and I just want to say this, it's like a commercial. There's a quick commercial here called, if any of your IEPs have anything about eye gaze, go cross out those goals. Yes, stop the podcast now, but it's okay.

Don't worry, we'll still be here when you get back. Yeah, go remove those goals and then come back. Here's why.

All of our friends with autism tell us that eye gaze can be confusing. It can be frustrating. It can be nearly painful.

And yet we still are forcing kids to look us in the eyes. And that's something we need to move away from, not just culturally, Kristie. I think that's really beautiful because that's super important to mention is that we're using a white dominant culture's way of thinking about eye gaze.

And we need to stop that completely. Additionally, when we think about a neurodivergent perspective, which is, it's not okay to expect eye gaze. You can expect that someone hears you, listens to you, responds to you, or you can hope that that happens in those ways, but it's not something that's okay to put on an IEP.

We're still all about joint attention. We just don't want eye gaze, but we'll make a podcast about it. I swear we should.

Why not eye gaze? I threw it down right now. Okay, it's happening. Thank you.

All right. Let's just talk. We're kind of going down the body and shoulders, arms, and hands.

Now, I understood eyes. I was like, yeah, I get it. You want your eyes to look like you're listening.

Like if I'm on a date with someone and I'm trying to impress them and I really want them to be – so I'm married, so I'm acting as if I go on a lot of dates with different people.

Okay. You can think about it.

Let's imagine I want to impress Ellen. I try to say, are my eyes looking like I'm listening? And it really, really helps. It would help even further if I was also behind my eyes really, really listening.

But that's like step two.

Okay. Sorry.

We're on to shoulders, arms, and hands. Drop your shoulders away from your ears. Signal open arms.

So uncross those arms. Keep your hands visible. There's a ton of research about keeping your hands visible.

That really displays or explains safety to others. Avoid fidgeting or clenched fists. And try to think about having an inviting stance with your hands, which usually means palms towards the person instead of palms down.

Oh, Kristie, I wanted you to talk about breathing, but you hate to talk about breathing.

Well, I don't mind talking about breathing, but I'll tell you why Julie says that, friends, is for two reasons. One, I don't like to breathe on demand.

So when people say, take a deep breath, I just want to punch them. I don't know why. Maybe I feel vulnerable.

I don't know. And the other thing is, is that every time there's a kid with a challenging behavior, the strategy is take a breath before you react. And I'm like, who has time for that? So it's just my snarky self.

But in truth, if I would do deeper breaths, it would help my vocal modules. My dance would look better. People would probably feel just better around me.

Yes. So that's why I'm going to continue the conversation about breathing, which is, this is so critical. It's the number one way you can get yourself back.

And it's not just, I like what you said, Kristie. I hate being told to breathe. But it's like, essentially, how do you calm your own body with a big, calming breath? When you can do that, even kids around you, their mirror neurons, can't help but start to calm.

So you are modeling regulation with your breath, and your calm becomes contagious. And it is really, really powerful. And if you're someone who's kind of resistant to it, like Kristie, give it a shot.

And breathe until you feel more. Okay, baby. Breathe until you feel a little bit more calm.

And let's just end with feet, legs, posture.

Yeah, I think that this one's an interesting one, because I think this is probably the one I didn't really think about. And that shows up in a lot of ways, because I move at a rushed pace.

Yeah. And I think even when I'm standing still, I look like I'm getting ready to run the 50-yard dash.

That's true.

This idea of distributing your weight kind of over both feet, so that you don't look like you're pacing or getting ready to go or hovering. So it's like you're just kind of like, I'm rooted, I'm sitting next to you, I'm not waiting for you to finish up the crying so I can move on. And just kind of keeping that sort of grounding essence being conveyed to the person, that you're not rushing them, you don't have someplace else to go, you're not angry.

I guess all those things could be perceived. What if you are angry and what if you are rushing and what if you do have someplace to go and what if you are feeling those things? Essentially, what we're saying is, don't convey those things, right?

Right. So the truth is, underneath it all, you might be like, I am about to lose my mind.

Instead, you're thinking about your whole body and you're calming your own self and you're getting yourself grounded so that kids can feel that groundedness and start to use your groundedness, right?

Yeah, definitely. So this has been a really fun podcast and I hope you all give it a shot. Episode 60, which is Nonverbal Ways to Support Behaviors.

And what we want you to do is think about this whole body experience when you're with kids and think about your stance and your tone and your pace and your breathing and remember that kids notice all of it.

Don't forget to check out [Behavior 360](#) because we have so much more support for you there. But remember that kids are like a little mirror and so when you get yourself centered, they're going to get themselves centered. We're pretty excited to hear how this works for you because we want you to create classrooms where every student belongs and you don't even have to say a word.

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

- Students read your body **before** they process your words — they decide “Am I safe?” through your posture, pacing, face, and breath.
 - Your nonverbal cues can **de-escalate** a moment faster than any script.
 - Kids with trauma often interpret neutral expressions as negative, so educators must **soften more than they think is necessary**.
 - Eye gaze should be flexible and culturally responsive — connection doesn't require forced eye contact.
 - Grounding yourself — through breath, stance, and posture — helps kids regulate through co-regulation.
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Episode Download/Handout

Nonverbal Body Scan: Support from Eyebrows to Toes

This simple, visual checklist walks educators through a top-to-bottom body scan so your **presence communicates calm, safety, and connection** — especially during challenging behavior.

It includes clear guidance for:

- Softening your eyebrows and expression
- Adjusting eye gaze without demanding eye contact
- Relaxing shoulders, arms, and hands
- Using breath and pacing to lower tension
- Grounding your stance so students feel secure

👉 Download at [inclusiveschooling.com/download60](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download60)

Practical Tips

- **Start with your face.** Gently relax your forehead, soften your eyes, and check whether your expression matches your intention.
 - **Adjust your height.** Move to or below the student's eye level to reduce threat signals.
 - **Uncross and open.** Drop your shoulders, uncross your arms, and keep your hands visible and unclenched.
 - **Slow your pace.** Move and breathe like you have time — your calm becomes contagious.
 - **Ground yourself.** Stand with weight evenly distributed and avoid looming or hovering.
 - **Use your breath as regulation — not a performance.** Take a slow breath *for yourself*, not to “teach a skill.”
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