



Transcript- Episode 62

Design Before Discipline: How to Prevent Behavior with Simple Shifts

Hi, everyone, and welcome to the Inclusion Podcast.

This is Episode 62, and it's about stopping challenging behavior before it even starts.

Okay, but Julie, I know we're going to set the stage a little bit more, but you know, sometimes I have trouble when everything's always about prevention. When most behaviors that challenge us happen in the blink of an eye, or a kid goes from zero to 60, so I'm going to keep my skepticism to the side, but I'm curious how we're going to talk about prevention when my heart is heavy with, you know, zero to 60.

Yeah, the in-the-moment stuff. And so here's the bad news. The bad news is the more time and energy you spend on prevention, the less likely you are to have those kinds of behaviors.

And so it seems counterintuitive, Kristie, because, yes, on your heart, it's going to be those moments. What if they do this? What if they do this? Or they did this, and I wasn't expecting it. It feels very unexpected.

But if you spend 80% of your energy on the proactive stuff, you're going to have fewer and fewer of those instances, and your life is actually going to be a lot easier in the classroom.

And when you just said that, Julie, it made me think, if we're always saying to folks, you can't teach during the storm, right? When a kid's dysregulated, they can't learn, they can't remember, they can't recall that stuff, even if it's for a split second or a minute. Conversely, we're also, or simultaneously, I guess, we're also saying, teach self-regulation.

So what you just did was you clarified in my mind that these prevention or proactive tweaks or techniques are actually teaching self-regulation and coping strategies 80% of the time, but then 20% of the time, I'm spending getting kids back into a ready state.

So it's not just like prevention, but when you said proactive, I felt like, oh, I'm actually teaching self-regulation skills by doing all these things, right?

Yeah. Some of the tweaks that we're going to share with you today are proactive in the way that you create the environment for fewer and fewer behaviors to occur.

And some of them are actually about teaching self-regulation or teaching how to help kids to co-regulate, essentially. And so those are different, but they're all about reducing the amount of minutes you're going to spend in the storm. It's going to reduce the amount or number of times that kids really, really struggle.

And I can hear you right then, Julie, so we can just say it out loud because you are hesitant to say teach self-regulation because you know people are thinking that means the kid's going to be able to regulate on their own, especially anyone that's younger than 25 years old, which are all of our students. So I could see it. You guys can't see Julie, but I can see her and she's like, I want to talk about co-regulation, not self-regulation because I know that's what kids need.

So just folks, whenever Julie and I say self-regulation, we mean the ability to manage energy and tension, that ability to stay in homeostasis, and that we recognize that that requires co-regulation and these tweaks that we're going to talk about today. And you can get all 16 of the tweaks, we're going to cover all 16 at [inclusiveschooling.com/download62](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download62).

Today's episode will give you 16 of these preventative and proactive tweaks.

Yeah. And so if you're wondering, well, what are the kind of tweaks that they're going to talk about? They're really kind of ranging from predictable routines to sensory friendly spaces to helping everybody learn and understand how to better self-regulate.

And so all those kinds of things will be wrapped up in the 16. And we've got to remember the more time and energy we spend here, the less time and energy we spend really stressed by behavior. So which one do you want to start with, Julie? What tweak is on your mind today?

Hmm. Okay. Let me look. So what I would like to start with is predictability.

Okay. That's a fun one.

Yeah. And it's really about a couple of things. When we say predictability, I think a lot of people move to this idea of, oh yeah, kids with autism need a [visual schedule](#) and we've got to stay super predictable for those kind of neurodivergent humans.

Wait, stop. True. We need to be predictable for lots of kids who are neurodivergent. It helps.

And predictability helps for every single student in your class. So whether they're a 12th grader, an eighth grader, or three years old, the more you can explain what's coming, take them... It's kind of like, I love to write, right? So I love an advanced organizer. I love when I'm writing and I've got this paragraph that says, hey, this is what you're about to read.

And I also love at the end when I say, this is what you read, right? These are the big ideas. Same concept, except you're doing that live and in person and in the classroom to say, here's what's coming, here's what's different or unexpected, and then let me support you through those transitions because they're harder on the human brain and nervous system than you might think.

So Julie, help me out even just from your perspective with ADHD as a superpower.

So I was having a conversation the other day with my friend Debbie about how people like to do things that they've done before. And you don't tend to like to do things on repeat. So let me set it up a little bit.

So we have a friend that has done the Appalachian Trail before and he wants to do it again. And Debbie's like, why would you want to do it again? And in my mind, I love predictability, as you well know. I do not like anything unexpected.

I'm thinking because he knows what to expect. He knows what it's going to feel like, look like, where he's going to stay, when he's going to get tired, like, because he's done the trail before. And she's thinking, how boring, like, there are 8 million other trails in the world, go do them.

So I'm curious what you're thinking about as we were talking about even students who are neurodivergent or students with autism, this idea of like predictability, but also how necessary novelty is. So help me out here, like, do you go on the trail again or not?

So I would say I'm allergic to repeat. I'm nearly allergic to doing the same thing over and over and over again.

And what we mean by predictability is setting up the agenda or the day to be clear with what is to come, but fill that schedule with novel things. So it doesn't mean, hey, every day is going to look the same, the same thing, you know, we're going to read chapter 2 on repeat all day long, you know, all the year long. Now, you know, some people like Kristie would be like, you know, the nuance, like, you know, the nuance I could pull from chapter 2, I could have such a deep and under, you know, but instead, it's like, we're still doing novel things, but the framework stays predictable.

And anytime there's disruption, it's very clearly explained. And that you expect disruption to feel hard to all people. Kristie, even when we teach adult learners, I think it's so useful when we talk through the agenda, when we repeat back to the agenda, when we say we just learned this, we're going to move to this, all their little brains, it helps them get back into their prefrontal cortex.

And so the more you can act as if you are a concierge bringing people through this land of learning and supporting them all the way through, they're going to not be stressed about the one thing called, what are we going to do? How long is it going to take? When is it going to be over? When are the bad parts coming? When are the good parts coming?

Instead, their little minds are calm and they're ready because they know what to expect.

I'm going to piggyback on that because, Julie, we said we were going to, you know, the handout for this episode has 16 and we just took like eight minutes to talk about one of them, which is fine because I think this is what you and I try to tell people all the time. We say art and science are nuanced.

You can take something like predictability and we really do as educators need to sit down and talk about what assumptions are we making about our own nervous system driving the predictability? Like my classroom might get too rigid because I like that level and now I bored you to death.

So I have to take those different perspectives as well as understand, oh, the framework stayed the same. There can still be comfort, but we can have novelty for those who need more, you know, excitement or stimulation or change or challenge.

So I think on top of that, one of our other tweaks in the download, which is at [inclusiveschooling.com/download62](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download62) is that notion of pre-correction and redirection, because I think sometimes when we tell people, you know, it's all up front, they might do it like as they're saying, here are the stations to pick from or here are the centers that are opening or here's the we're going to do kind of like in an old high scope preschool thing. But we would do plan, do review.

Yeah.

So you plan what you're going to do. You do it and you review what you've done. But what about the whole time while you're doing, like sometimes that's where the behavior starts is once we've gotten settled in.

There's some tricky moment, there's some sort of challenge or issue or social interaction, and we need to sort of anticipate that escalation or that tricky moment and be ready to redirect or once again, pre-correct.

Well, Kristie, I don't know if I'm taking this in the way that you were thinking, but I want to add that whenever I'm in the moment and I'm realizing this isn't working for somebody, even though I laid out all the centers, even though I explained all the choices, I go, I wonder if there's a place to add another choice. That's kind of the question I ask myself.

And so I take a look at- you said it might be a social interaction kind of thing. But right then and there, I might say, you know what? It's OK to work by yourself if that feels more comfortable to your nervous system today. And all of a sudden, you're just building in a quick choice that's going to eliminate kind of in the moment what's happening for some kids.

And that's a perfect reminder that this particular handout of 16 has embedded in it hyperlinks to other handouts because, you know, it's our love language.

So you're right. [The 101 ways to offer choice](#) is embedded into this download for Episode 62.

And I feel like access points and offering choice are such beautiful things to do in the moment. Maybe we should also link to the [zigzag](#) in the Show Notes, but just maybe, just on this theme for a minute, like, fine, I know that these are like proactive and preventative tweaks. And I planned for it.

But what to do if things start to escalate in the moment either? And when we say escalate, it could be like lack of motivation, escalates, resistance, refusal, right? It doesn't have to just be, oh, now kids yelling, smacking and yelling at each other.

OK, do you want to pick one more, Julie?

I do, because it's probably my favorite. Motivate.

Yeah, [motivate with purposeful, engaging tasks](#).

So I don't know how many times Kristie and I have been invited to school systems to come in and look at this kid who has the most challenging behavior on Earth and we go and then we look at the task this poor child is expected to be doing. And look at the IEP, because it's, like, required that they do that task.

But go ahead, give us some ideas of some tasks we've seen.

Oh, well, I've seen this one poor kid who had to write his name and address 20 times before he could do anything else. So it was fine motor practice.

It was also a, they called it a life skill. And he had to do it 20 times. On the sixth time, he flopped to the floor and rolled around.

Right. I would have punched someone on the second time. I don't like to do anything on repeat.

And I don't like to do anything without a purpose. Like I will write my address if it will get somebody a letter. But that's it.

Right. And so we've got to rethink, especially in those awful self-contained classrooms. I'll just say it, where we're doing these social skills.

We're doing all these skills on repeat and then we're surprised by the behavior. So all that to be said, of course, our number one solution would be to include those kids in general education. Second piece would be let's look at purposeful, [engaging, interesting, exciting tasks](#) that will help them.

It will prevent boredom. It will prevent anger. It will prevent all the kinds of things that were going to result in a behavior.

So kids thrive with real-world relevant tasks. And when it looks like busy work, you're going to get behavior that looks like busy work.

And I think, Julie, it could, you know, definitely because the one that came to my mind was in also in a life skills room when they were teaching the five senses, you know, for the 12th year in a row.

But I was also thinking about the classroom. I think it might have been a history classroom that we were in. And there were like, maybe five or six of the students who English wasn't their first language and none of the materials had been translated.

And they were talking about things that were happening. Globally, but not making it relevant to what was pressing for those students currently, so like the [access points](#) were just like missing, missing entirely. Which it didn't mean the students weren't interested in global affairs.

It didn't mean students weren't motivated to learn about facts and figures. It's just they couldn't even access the content.

That's right.

That's right. So we have to look at a couple of things. What are we asking students to do? How do we make it much more motivating, much more relevant? And as Kristie's saying, add access points to make sure every human has a way in and every human has a connection to the actual content.

As opposed to I have to cover this, whether it's relevant to you or not, doesn't really, doesn't really relate to my task.

Yeah. And I think like to wind that thought down, I cannot take another goal that says a kid will engage in an unpreferred task.

Why? I mean, Julie, I mean, I don't want to cause. OK, like I always tell people when they're working on toileting skills with kids, you have very little control over the frequency. So when you write an IEP goal, you can't say that the kid will toilet successfully four times a day because you don't, you can't predict they have to go to the toilet four times a day.

OK, unless you're going to give them a lot of juice at snack.

Yeah. Or unless you're menopausal and you know what I mean? And then you have to pee that many times.

Correct. And then it's like four successful out of the number of times you went today isn't going to be a success, right?

Correct. So it's like you're measuring the wrong thing.

And in this case, you're actually causing the bad, challenging, disruptive, unproductive behavior because you're making humans do things that they're not only maybe unmotivated by or don't see the relevance or don't feel awfully connected to. But you're actually doing something known to agitate and trigger them.

So I, and I like the one way I like to think about it is asking adult humans who are listening today: Do you have a task that's unpreferred? And all of us kind of laugh to say go clean the toilet or something.

Right. I don't know anybody that likes that, but maybe somebody does.

Sure. But the point is, you have an unpreferred task in mind or you have multiple unpreferred tasks. And the more you practice it, it doesn't make you more excited about doing the task.

What we want to do is take unpreferred tasks and make them more preferred so that kids can get through it. And especially double checking that the task itself is relevant to what's expected in the general education content curriculum with peers.

All right, because I'm going to wrap this one up with us, Julie, because I just feel myself wanting to go into a whole thing about but, you know, what will the kid learn if I let them do only things they want? So that will be another podcast, friends.

So, Julie, let's wrap up. First of all, that they can get today's download at inclusiveschooling.com/download62. And what, what did they get out of this episode or this handout? So, again, we were talking about stopping challenging behavior before it starts.

And the bulk of the strategies are going to be on that handout. But remember, prevention doesn't mean perfection. It's about setting up spaces where kids feel safe and capable and connected from the start.

So we also have in [Behavior 360](#) a lot more information on this. So if this is something that you're interested in, you might want to look up [Behavior 360](#) or we'll even link it in the Show Notes because it's packed with even more real world tools and videos to help you strengthen what you're already doing and get your classroom ready for all learners all the time. 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 to build more inclusive schools together.

SHOW NOTES

Key Takeaways

- The most effective way to reduce challenging behavior is to **spend more time on proactive design and less time reacting in the moment.**
- Prevention isn't about control or perfection — it's about creating classrooms where students feel **safe, capable, and connected.**
- Proactive strategies don't replace in-the-moment responses; they **dramatically reduce how often those moments occur.**
- Teaching regulation is really about **co-regulation** — students borrow calm from the adults and environments around them.
- Many behaviors labeled as “challenging” are predictable outcomes of environments that lack access, clarity, relevance, or connection.

Episode Download

Proactive Classroom Tweaks That Prevent Challenging Behavior

This downloadable guide outlines **16 practical, research-aligned classroom tweaks** that reduce challenging behavior by addressing it *before* it starts. These are not behavior management tricks — they're foundational teaching moves grounded in neuroscience,

Inside the handout, you'll find strategies that help you:

- Build classrooms around
- Increase predictability without sacrificing novelty
- Reduce anxiety through routines, [visuals](#), and clear expectations
- Embed regulation, choice, and connection into everyday instruction
- Design [tasks that motivate](#) instead of frustrate

Why download it?

This tool helps educators shift from constantly reacting to behavior to **designing classrooms that make challenging behavior less likely in the first place**. It's ideal for individual reflection, team conversations, walkthroughs, and PD — especially when staff are stretched thin and need changes that actually stick.

👉 Download at [inclusiveschooling.com/download62](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download62)

Practical Tips (Action-Oriented)

- **Start with strengths.** Design lessons and routines around what students do well to increase confidence and cooperation.
 - **Embed daily connection.** Use quick rituals — greetings, check-ins, questions of the day — to build safety before instruction begins.
 - **Offer meaningful choice.** Let students choose how they work, show learning, or engage with materials to reduce power struggles.
 - **Increase predictability.** Preview the day, explain transitions, and name changes in advance to lower stress for all learners.
 - **Teach expectations explicitly.** Model and practice routines instead of assuming students “should know.”
 - **Use pre-correction.** Gently remind students of expectations *before* tricky moments to prevent escalation.
 - **Normalize regulation tools.** Make fidgets, movement, and calming supports available to everyone — without asking or stigma.
 - **Design engaging tasks.** Replace repetitive or irrelevant work with purposeful, accessible, real-world learning.
 - **Plan for access, not permission.** Apply UDL principles so students don't need to “earn” support.
 - **Regulate yourself.** Remember: students borrow your calm — or your chaos.
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Additional Resources

“Children and youth are able to use a steady adult nervous system as extensions of themselves. An emotionally attuned educator or caregiver has the ability to shape the growth of the child’s emotional systems.” - Dr. Lori Desautels

Connections Over Compliance with Dr. Lori Desautels: In this episode of the Pre-K Teach & Play Podcast, Dr. Kristie Pretti-Frontczak sits down with Dr. Lori Desautels to explore how educational neuroscience can help us shift from compliance-based approaches to connection-centered learning, especially amid the challenges of the pandemic. Their conversation highlights practical strategies for reimagining education with hope, grounded in understanding brain states and human needs.

Effective Use of Visual Supports: This resource helps educators explore how they can make the unpredictable more predictable for learners, especially those navigating strong emotions or complex social expectations. Drawing on guidance from Barbara Avila, we highlight practical strategies — like keeping visuals simple, moving from concrete to abstract, and using tools such as the Sun Diagram — to support regulation, clarity, and dignity without shame or overwhelm.

Strength and Interest-Based Product Grid: A powerful tool featuring 235 examples that expand how students can show what they know. By aligning products with learners’ strengths, interests, and multiple intelligences, this conversation invites educators to move beyond one-size-fits-all outputs and design learning experiences that are more engaging, affirming, and truly inclusive.

Beyond the Surface: Unpacking Student Engagement to Understand Motivation: This resource unpacks what engagement really looks like — and what it reveals about motivation. By expanding our lens beyond compliance to include cognitive, emotional, social, and creative forms of participation, this conversation helps educators reinterpret behavior, honor student agency, and design learning experiences that foster belonging, purpose, and authentic engagement.

Zig Zag Equalizer: A practical tool that helps educators thoughtfully adjust the level of challenge by shifting between structure and complexity to better match individual student needs. By exploring progressions like concrete to abstract or single to multiple, listeners will gain actionable ways to reduce stress, boost engagement, and support deeper learning without lowering expectations

Access Points for Common Activities: A practical framework that shifts the question from “Can students do this?” to “How can we make this accessible?” By adding thoughtful access points — whether students are asked to listen, discuss, read, write, test, or use technology — educators can proactively remove barriers and create learning environments where more students can participate meaningfully from the start.

101 Ways to Incorporate Choice in Learning: A powerful reminder that choice is not an add-on — it's a cornerstone of inclusive practice. From where and how students learn to how they engage, process, and show what they know, this conversation offers practical, flexible ideas that honor student agency, reduce barriers, and invite deeper engagement for every learner.



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