Transcript- Episode 63

We're Doing Breaks Wrong- And It's Backfiring

Hi, everyone, and welcome back to the Inclusion Podcast.

We're so glad you're here today because today is about something that both Kristie and I have seen hundreds of times in schools that seems very innocuous, not a problem, seems good, seems fine, seems responsible to do. And yet it's highly problematic. And that is called taking breaks.

So today's episode is called Let's Take a Break from Breaks. Julie, I'm just over here thinking, I can't say all my thoughts at once. I have to like be succinct and go, okay, what's the problem with taking a break? Because I can hear people going, but wait, I even need breaks.

And everything on Instagram says I should set my timer and stand up every 30 minutes and walk around and take a brain break. And it's like in all of our social emotional curriculum. And then I thought about, oh, this is like one of my... Do you have practices you did when you didn't know better that haunt you still? Sure.

As a teacher, yes. I have this one. It was this kid that I don't know.

I just, I want to write him a letter and apologize. But you know, anyway, we, the strategy was that whenever he got moving around too much or sucking his fingers too much or whatever the adults thought was too much, we would just run up and down the hall with him. But this wasn't like by choice.

It was like, we're big, he's small, we take him by the hand and run up and down the hall. Sorry. That's my version of what I want people to notice in my head when you say take a break from Breaks.n That's the scenario that's playing in my head.

Thank you for sharing that. And I think it's really important because right now a lot of people are like, Breaks are good.

Breaks are necessary. And the truth is, yes. Breaks are good.

Breaks are necessary. But what we're talking about is in Kristie's example, kids not choosing when to take a break, adults deciding when a break is needed. In this case, you're talking about, I'll call it hand over hand running, right? So come on, here we go.

We're running. It has nothing to do with his actual needs. It has nothing to do with what's actually going on.

And the thing that we're talking about that's even more specific to this challenge is it's usually kids with autism. And they're usually taking multiple breaks a day.

And usually paraprofessionals are making the decision to say, ah, let's go take a break.

And then they're walking to another place or location. And then they're having a sensory break or they're having some experience, which I want to talk about. And then they're returning to the class.

And the goal is regulation. We get the goal. We understand all humans need breaks all the time.

But what we're talking about that's problematic is just giving one kid a break on a schedule or giving one kid a break that is making it so that almost the change in location should be reconsidered in their least restrictive environment decision, meaning they're leaving the classroom multiple times a day. They're missing content. So it's actually taking a break from breaks means let's look closely at this practice and figure out how to make it much more inclusive and much more about the students' actual needs than it is about a planned break.

Yeah, I think it's about so many levels of this. I was just taking notes as you were talking. It's about like it's once again the art and the science.

So in the white dominant culture, we're going to be inclined to say, oh, not doing breaks now. Okay, so no more breaks. Nobody gets a break.

No, that's not what we're writing. Yeah, so it's not either or. It's not like breaks are good or breaks are bad.

We're inviting people to look at the both/and. And we're inviting people especially to think about breaks as a solution for when behaviors are, when kids are dysregulated or kids have a particular label or it's on a schedule, as you said, like predetermined. So it could be on the fly and be problematic and it could be predetermined and be problematic.

It could be on the fly and be perfect. It could be predetermined and perfect, right? It's both/and. So we want people to listen to this episode with some curiosity because, Julie, when you started listing the problems, I was like, in my scenario, this four-year-old did have a label of autism.

Yeah. This child didn't have an effective means of communication, meaning we did not know how to communicate with them. I'm certain, again, a cringeworthy moment.

The kid was communicating all the time, but we did not, as the adults, read those cues. We did not have a communication system that was reliable for that kid, blah, blah, blah, okay? And so we would take them for the run. I was a teaching assistant in that scenario, like a paraprofessional.

So I was making those decisions, like, on the fly, this kid looks like they need to go run the hall. And then sometimes, if the running the hall wasn't enough, we went to the sensory room. So you just made me cringe like six more times.

So, okay, onward. Let me just get really clear with one big idea that will help you. I like your curiosity, Kristie.

I'm going to give you a big idea, and it's that breaks aren't always helping, meaning sometimes kids are spending far too much time outside of the room for breaks, okay? Sometimes these become escape patterns, where a student learns that leaving equals relief. Instead, we want to teach them staying with support, as opposed to the only way to get relief is to leave, because then they learn that that's how to get relief, as opposed to you can be supported right here where we are. They miss the best parts of inclusion, which are general ed instruction, peers, connection, belonging.

The more they're walking the halls with the paraprofessional, or running the halls, or hopping the halls, or we've seen lots of stuff, right? It's a good intention to help them regulate, but actually it leads to less learning and more separation. The final one that I'm thinking of is about that it actually impacts the least restrictive environment. Worse yet, if someone who is not an educator is making that decision, meaning it's a paraprofessional who's deciding, this kid looks a little antsy, let's go, they're making a placement decision, which is absolutely illegal.

Actually, let's unpack a couple things, because when you talked about escape patterns, there was a nuance there that I'm not sure everyone's going to pick up on. I think people would say, yeah, the kid is now asking for breaks to escape an unpreferred task. What you said was the kid is learning that the only way I can get relief, the only way I can get more regulated, is through a break versus finding other coping strategies.

Those are two different things. One sounds like I'm trying to manipulate and get out of. The other is like, hey, friends, you've only given me one way to regulate.

That's right. Kind of go there a little bit more. Yeah.

The word escape, I think, is the word that kind of gets confusing. A lot of people get worried about escape behavior to mean they're going to escape an unpreferred task. Well, perhaps that doesn't matter to me one bit because all of us escape unpreferred tasks all the day long.

But what we're talking about is they're not learning the skill of regulation in the environment. We know about generalization, which is if we teach a skill in a different place, it's hard to bring that skill back. We're learning to regulate outside of class.

Then from that point on, we just keep repeating that pattern to say the only way to regulate is for me to leave the room. What we want to do is teach people to regulate in the room in many, many different ways that don't involve leaving. So, Julie, maybe this would be a good time to talk about what Jamie shared with you guys about the lunchroom.

I think that will help people understand what do you mean I'm learning, like I need to leave the Gen Ed classroom to regain homeostasis and calm down, and then I'm back and ready to learn. But that's not always what's really happening.

Yeah.

So this is Jamie Burke, who's a good friend of mine who happens to have autism and types to communicate. He struggles with the smell and the texture and the sight of yogurt. So we couldn't put a whole school ban on yogurt.

Well, we could have, but we decided that wasn't going to be the thing. So instead, I thought this is great. What we'll do is we'll have him eat lunch with a peer in a separate room, and they will not have yogurt.

There will be a yogurt-free environment. And to be honest, he starts to retch. He really struggles with yogurt, and it's a real thing.

And he typed to me, no, teach me to stay in this environment when yogurt is present. That's the skill I need to learn. And we were like, oh, because we thought we nailed it.

We thought we were being very thoughtful and we were like inclusive in quotes because there was another kid in there, and it was yogurt-free. But his point was, I need to learn to stay in this environment because there's yogurt in the world, and I need to learn how to deal with yogurt in the world. And for us, it was like a big aha moment to say, you're right, Jamie.

I think this is a better strategy. So let's help you work through the fact that yogurt will be present. And so for today's episode, we have a download that gives you 40 creative, I would say, maybe not always expected ideas for how to stay put.

Because you might be like, well, how did you all do that? And we want to go on with other things about breaks. But it's at inclusiveschooling.com/download63, and you'll get 40 ways to regulate without leaving the room. Because again, our intention is to help the student get regulated so we have them leave and then come back when they are regulated.

And that's not always what's happening when they leave. So you said a couple of things. A, they could leave and get more dysregulated.

B, they could leave and learn that this is the only way I can get regulated is to have to leave. So now we just keep getting this idea of leaving. Then you said we're spending a lot of time outside of the General Ed classroom.

And so now my placement or my LRE has been impacted. Let's just say a few things about that, Julie, so people understand what LRE is, why anyone on the team shouldn't be making that universally, let alone a paraprofessional or General Education teacher. And then sort of the downsides of that will hit on.

Yeah. So as you may or may not know, least restrictive environment means that a student has maximum access to General Education peers, general education content, and general education curriculum. And every time a student leaves, you might go, oh, it was a six-minute break.

Like, who cares? What did they miss, right? Ooh, let's add it up. They took seven six-minute breaks, but actually one was closer to 16 minutes and one was closer to 11 minutes. We often underestimate how long these take.

And plus we're walking the halls and plus and plus and plus. And so this poor kid who needs the most consistency, meaning I need to understand this content and curriculum in the most consistent way and they're coming in and out of the classroom all day long. And what that LRE is meant to do is to say, let's make sure this student has maximum access to General Education content curriculum and peers.

Every time we're removing them, we're taking that away. So Kristie said nobody should be universally deciding this stuff, let alone paraprofessionals, because it's an actual legal decision, meaning I'm deciding I'm going to pull you out of this because I think you need a break from the noise. Instead, we're going to try noise blocking headphones.

We're going to try a quiet space. We're going to try turning the lights down and asking everybody to lower their volume. It's so interesting because we become, we as educators become hyper-focused on the look around the room.

Lots of students are dysregulated. It just doesn't look like it's not as pronounced as perhaps the kid we're thinking of, but tons of kids are shut down. Tons of kids are dysregulated.

And what we want to do is figure out how to regulate the entire room in new ways, as opposed to let's give this kid a break. Julie, I want to talk about whole group breaks for a minute, but I want to clarify too. When we say paras in particular, it's not something wrong with paras.

It's just that oftentimes they're not even a member of the IEP team. It's like someone making a decision about minutes placement and so forth that's not a member of the team and or paras are being asked to follow a schedule. It could be the opposite too, like you're in the middle of math.

The kid's not dysregulated, but they're supposed to be given a break every so many minutes. So we just disrupt learning and follow the break. So it could go either way, right? That's right.

That's right. I think that's really important to know. We absolutely respect paras.

We absolutely respect their ability to make decisions. It's just this decision is a legal one and should not be made by one staff member and certainly not someone who's not on the IEP team. Yeah.

Okay. So let's talk about whole group breaks because you were saying like, hey, I look around the class and I see maybe not at the same escalation level, but there's quite a bit of dysregulation fixing to happen. So what would be some strategies or what would be some options of whole group breaks? Yeah.

I'll just do a few and there are just so many, but for example, everybody go on a talk walk. So you stay connected to the content. Let's imagine you're talking about

skip counting by different numbers, skip counting by three, skip counting by seven, doesn't really matter, skip counting by 270 billion.

Essentially, you're asking kids to be in a partnership, go on a walk outside, skip count by a number of their choosing and see how high they can get, what number they're going to get to. And so they're still doing content, they're outside, they're moving, they're engaged with another peer and it is a break of sorts. Also, what I love about a talk walk is kids are going to get off topic and they're going to have a little bit of relational discussion like, oh my gosh, it's chicken nuggets today for lunch.

I hate those, right? We're having little relational conversations, which is good for the human brain to take a break in those ways. So everybody gets movement, everybody gets to talk to someone, everyone gets a little conversational break and then they're still engaged in the content. That's funny that you said about relational conversations because one of my deepest memories of grade school was like, you know, we sat alphabetically.

Did you guys have to sit alphabetically? No. We sat in rows and alphabetically and my best friend, Wendy Bennett, was a B and I was Kristie Pretti, so I was a P, so we never sat by each other. I always just wanted to send like a mental message to my teacher that said, hey, I just need to tell my something to my friend about recess.

Like, I just need 30 seconds to tell it. I mean, that's why we passed notes back in the day, because we just had something to say, but then I could get right back to reading, but I needed just 30 seconds, but they never gave us a break to just be like, hey, are you having hot lunch or cold lunch today? You know?

That's right. That's right.

Like, hey, are you psyched that it's chocolate mousse day? You know? Yeah. And then I'm back, right? Right. Anyway, so back to whole group, though, before we wrap up this episode, Julie, sometimes there's a downside.

Do you remember that classroom we were in and everybody had to take a quote unquote brain break during the lesson and they had to jump up and do jumping jacks? Yes. And it was like some kids felt like it was middle school and it was very awkward. Yeah.

And so it's like, let's talk a little bit about, like, choices and access points. I'm thinking also like a walk and talk for a student who's like, you know, a stander versus their wheelchair versus something. It often takes quite a bit of time to change the position of a student, so they stay fixed there for longer than maybe we want.

So anyway, I have like ideas about that. But so what Kristie is getting at is you're going to want to build in choice of break, meaning whole class. Love it.

I love a whole class break. Do it whenever it feels right. Do it when kids request it.

In fact, there was a second grade class that I loved where the kids could request a dance break and the teacher had to agree to three dance breaks a day and the

length was set and kids could dance in any way they wanted, including bop their heads, right? They could literally listen to music and just bop their heads at their desk if that was their jam. And other kids were doing full on interpretive dance to the music and it was amazing. My point is this.

Give options of what it might look like or give options of breaks. You could say simply, we're going to take five minutes. You can rest your head on your desk.

You can run around this room or you can get a drink of water. But whatever is going to work for your system right now, do that. So we're asking kids to actually regulate, check in with themselves.

What do they actually need? And not just saying all kids will do better once we do jumping jacks because that's not the truth. Yeah. And we gave one example the other day we were working with a leadership team and we just talked about what Julie was saying about choices that if you have station teaching or if you have a co-teacher, you can think about variety of options as well.

So that if people do want to take a walk and talk, there can be an adult that goes with them, but some can stay in the classroom and that we can have a station set up to allow for those different options that learning and the instruction continues without big chunks of time to make the transition. But you also mentioned, Julie, during that time that you have to teach kids how to do these things. So we don't just all of a sudden go, okay, friends, go on a walk and talk.

And we can expect everybody just to know how to do that, what to do, how to make it productive is part of the instruction. And I want to say a talk and walk can be done with kindergartners. I've seen it done well with high school students and both are equally challenging in different ways.

And so what we want you to know is all of this is possible, but yeah, of course it takes people teaching this stuff. And I want to add one of my other favorite things is a break menu where you create with the students, what kinds of breaks would feel good for their bodies, for their souls, for their systems. And then you can be always adding to that break menu where there are appropriate things.

And then of course, not appropriate things that you would expect kids to do during that break time. And all of it, the appropriate things are allowed. All right, Julie, let's wrap up this episode and remind folks that they can get the Stay Put toolbox that has the 40 ways to help kids regulate.

Because again, that's often why we're thinking about taking breaks is we're actually thinking about the regulatory state of kids, which is wonderful. But how can we do that in the classroom? And we don't mean we send the kid to a quiet area or we make a kid do something that is still by us on our terms, but it's to stay in the situation to learn how to regulate. And that's at inclusiveschooling.com/download63.

And what else just to wrap up? Yeah, just to wrap up, I want folks to know that there are tools that can help with regulation and those tools are portable and should be brought to kids in the classroom. And it takes some creativity. So some takeaways I just want to end with are leaving doesn't mean regulation, actually.

And inclusion is built in the moment, not in the hallway. And this Stay Put toolbox are really going to be full of lots of ideas. And I would suggest that you take the Stay Put toolbox and add to it because I'm imagining you have many, many more ideas.

But remember that every moment is a chance to build inclusion right where you are. And let's try to do this without sending them out the door.

SHOW NOTES

Key Takeaways

- Breaks aren't the problem — **how and why we use them is**.
- When adults decide for students to leave the classroom, **we may unintentionally reduce access, learning, and belonging**.
- Frequent out-of-class breaks can create a pattern where students learn that relief only comes from leaving, **instead of building regulation skills in the classroom**.
- Regulation skills are **hardest to generalize when they're taught somewhere else** and expected to magically transfer back to the classroom.
- Inclusion isn't built in hallways or sensory rooms — **it's built in the moment, in the classroom, with the right supports**.
- **Staying put with support protects a student's access** to peers, instruction, and the least restrictive environment.

Episode Download

The Stay-Put Toolbox: 40 Ways to Regulate Without Leaving the Room

This practical download offers **40 concrete, classroom-ready strategies** to help students regulate without being removed from instruction, peers, or learning environments.

Inside the toolbox, you'll find ideas organized across:

- Movement and sensory input
- Social and emotional anchors
- Focus and refocus tools

- Classroom routines and environmental supports
- Whole-class regulation strategies

Why download it?

This tool helps teams move away from default “take a break” practices and toward **portable, inclusive regulation supports that work right where learning happens.** It’s ideal for classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, and school leaders who want to reduce removals while still honoring students’ nervous systems.

👉 Download at inclusiveschooling.com/download63

Practical Tips

- **Pause before pulling a student out.** Ask: Can we support regulation right here instead of sending them out?
- **Teach regulation in the environment where it’s needed.** Skills learned outside the room don’t always transfer back in.
- **Replace exit with options.** Offer tools like movement, fidgets, headphones, or quiet tasks without changing location.
- **Normalize regulation supports for everyone.** When tools are available to all students, stigma disappears.
- **Use whole-class regulation strategically.** Walk-and-talks, movement with content, or flexible break choices support many nervous systems at once.
- **Offer choice during breaks.** Not all students regulate the same way — some need movement, others need stillness.
- **Teach break routines explicitly.** Don’t assume students know how to use breaks productively — model and practice them.
- **Track time out of class honestly.** Small breaks add up quickly and can significantly reduce instructional access.
- **Remember the goal isn’t compliance — it’s capacity.** Staying with support builds long-term regulation skills.

Additional Resources

Inclusion Podcast Episode 31- Understanding LRE and its Role in Supporting All Learners: This episode unpacks the concept of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and its essential role in fostering truly inclusive classrooms, emphasizing that students with disabilities should be educated alongside their non-disabled peers whenever possible. Through real stories and practical strategies, the hosts explore how schools can thoughtfully use supports and services before considering more restrictive placements, reframing challenging behaviors as opportunities for growth rather than exclusion. Listeners will come away with actionable insights for implementing LRE principles in their own educational settings and a free checklist of supplementary aids to support all learners.

Least Restrictive Environment Family Resource Guide: This *Family Toolkit Resource Guide* from Early CHOICES equips families of young children with disabilities to understand and advocate for inclusion in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) within early childhood education settings. It bundles practical resources — from inclusion brochures and on-demand learning modules to checklists and federal guidance — with QR links and explanations to make navigating the system easier. The guide highlights the benefits of inclusive settings for all children, offers tools to prepare for IEP meetings, and clarifies families' rights under federal law to support meaningful inclusion.

Access Points for Common Activities: This handout offers practical guidance on creating multiple **access points** in everyday classroom activities so that all learners — including those with diverse abilities — can meaningfully engage with content, peers, and expectations. It highlights ways educators can differentiate instruction and embed supports into common activities rather than relying on separate adaptations, helping make inclusion real and actionable. The resource aligns with the broader Inclusive Schooling philosophy of equity and universal design for learning, showing how flexible entry points into learning tasks support participation and success for every student. By focusing on access rather than segregation, this tool helps shift instructional planning toward inclusion-driven practice.

101 Ways to Incorporate Choice in Learning: This free download offers educators **101 concrete strategies** for embedding meaningful choice and voice into everyday learning experiences, empowering students to take ownership of their education and engage more deeply with content and peers. By providing a wide array of options for how students access, process, and express learning, the resource supports differentiated instruction and honors diverse strengths, interests, and needs in inclusive classrooms. It underscores how choice enhances motivation, independence, creativity, and a sense of belonging for all learners. Overall, this guide helps teachers move beyond one-size-fits-all instruction toward more personalized, equitable practices that benefit the full range of students.

Why are we Still Segregating Students?: The short video highlights ongoing inequities in educational placement for students with disabilities, questioning why many are still separated from their peers despite inclusive education mandates. It emphasizes the moral and legal responsibility of schools to provide equitable learning opportunities in general education settings whenever appropriate. This message directly relates to the principle of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), which requires that students with disabilities be educated

alongside their nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate, promoting inclusion over segregation.
