



Transcript- Episode 76

"They're Too Distractible"... Is NOT a Reason for Pull-Out

Okay, Podcast Episode 76.

Wait, what is it? Oh, it's about distractibility. And it's about when distractibility becomes a rationale for pull-out. Thank goodness none of us are distractible, Kristie.

Thank goodness. I mean, what? Wait, what? I was doing something else. Exactly.

So you're sitting in an IEP meeting, and someone says this: "The student is really distractible in the general education classroom, and so they would benefit from instruction in a resource room." Do you see how quickly that happened? From, whew, look at that little tiny deficit called distractibility, to let's remove them.

And this happens a lot, where distractibility is the stated reason to remove a student from a classroom. Distractibility becomes essentially a placement decision. Here's the truth.

No, no, no, no, no. It's a support issue. It's an instruction issue. It's an environment issue.

But in this episode, we want to focus on a couple of things: what to say when distractibility is used as the reason for pull-out, and what we do in general education to support those quote-unquote "distractible learners," as if they're a subsection of the larger group.

So I got distracted by my own thoughts, to be honest. Because I was like, wait, as I was listening to you, and I really was listening, I was like, Julie, do you mean the student's distracting other people, or the student is distracted by other things, whatever, right? And I was like, oh, she means the student is distracted by what's happening in the general classroom. But then my brain went, oh, you know what? People also say this when the kid is distracting, which we won't go there.

But I was thinking that was interesting, that it's both ways. Yeah. Right.

You did. You got distracted by your own thought, and it's true. It's both ways. Most of the time it's usually said about a student, we'll say a student with a mild learning disability, and they need to work on specific phonics skills.

And they think we need to do that in a small room. A small room. Right. As if the size of the room matters. Right. They need to do it with, you know, this particular teacher.

It has to be down the hall because then they can learn the thing. Well, research has told us, friends, that is not true. The research has told us that pull-out instruction hasn't worked for decades, and yet we continue to think of it as the solution.

So when someone says distractibility, I also—sorry, I distracted myself—but I also often think about related service providers. Yeah. Related service providers use distractibility all the time to say, “I could not possibly do speech and language in a general education classroom because the child is so distractible.”

That is probably true if you're planning to do the speech and language lesson that you would have done in a small group or a resource room. Instead, you have to embed those goals right in the context of inclusive education. Which is like another whole podcast about embedding specially designed instruction and our related services.

But again, speaking of outdated practices, the whole idea is that we teach kids things they need to access, participate, and make progress—not just identify skills a kid doesn't have and then do those in discrete training trials. That's right. I mean, that's in theory.

You know, I think our podcast is a lesson in distractibility. Like, you and I distract each other with our own thoughts. Whenever Julie says something, it makes me think about like 800 other things.

I think that's a form of distractibility. Because we really do have a script. I mean, like right now I was noticing that I've just been watching you and I haven't looked at the script.

Well, Kristie, I think you're saying something really important. And not to say that we aren't distractible or highly distractible humans. It's the human brain.

And so what we do too often is make these sweeping generalizations about kids with disabilities and say things like, “They're highly distractible.” When in reality, name a student who isn't. Now, I might not fall to the floor because I'm distracted. I might fake playing

school better, but I'm certainly not learning.

And so we've got to really tease these out. What we want folks to do is think about how you respond to that global truth that people say, like, yeah, I get it. This kid's distractible. It makes sense. Or this environment is too distracting.

Yes. And what that calls us to do is say, well, how do you support a student who's distractible? Is this separate learning environment non-distracting? And to get up in the middle of something you're doing and be pulled out is incredibly disruptive. So let's not pretend it isn't.

We're really looking at the truth behind all of these ideas. So Kristie, let's talk about the handout that we have for folks. It's kind of to share what to say when distractibility becomes the rationale for pull-out. Good point.

Okay. So the download for this episode is at [inclusiveschooling.com/download76](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download76), and it is a six-page handout that walks you through, like we always try, the context, the situation, and then where to start to reframe or take action. There are several elements that we'll walk you through with some of our highlighted best ideas. Yeah.

I'm kind of jumping down to page three because I was distracted by it. And it's called "The Well-Documented Problems With Pull-Out." This just describes the problems with pull-out instruction. Skills don't generalize reliably. Pull-out classes lose instructional time. Expectations are often changed or lowered in a segregated classroom. It increases adult dependence. There's a social and emotional cost to leaving. There are context-bound improvements.

This one's really specific, but it says, in a quieter setting, students may appear more regulated. But if the behavior returns in the general education classroom, it tells us something important: the supports are not yet embedded where the kid needs them. Right.

So actually, stay on that one for a second. Because I know when you were talking earlier, I made myself a note because I was trying to stay on topic.

I was like, you know, we always define inclusion, and we kept saying, oh gosh, we've got to change it to say we can't ever just use the word inclusion by itself. We have to say inclusion with supports, because otherwise people think, oh, we're not doing anything to support this kid. If we're including them, we're just placing them there.

So that number six on the handout made me think about it. If you're still being distracted, or you're still distracting others, or your distractibility distracts others, then the supports

aren't yet embedded where the student actually needs them. That's what we mean by inclusion.

That's right. That's right. So it's inclusion with support. We're not just saying put them in and suck it up. You got it. This kid struggles with distractibility. We're saying we're going to support you so that you can be more focused.

The seventh one is that system convenience is mistaken for student need, which is that pull-out is often easier for adults. And that is convenient to the adults, not to the student. Pull-out weakens instructional membership. So when you're leaving in and out of a classroom all day long, your membership is less. We've studied that.

We've studied it with students and who they understand is in the group. And it just goes on and on to say that pull-out instruction is not the best solution to distractibility. But there are plenty of inclusive solutions to distractibility.

And when you're thinking about taking action, when you're thinking about, like you said, what do I say at that IEP meeting? I do think you could pull this handout out and say, okay, friends, let's talk about it. What's really going on here? Again, it's not to say, hey team, I'm more enlightened than you all are, but to bring it up for discussion and say, okay, we're all recognizing that the student would benefit from fill in the blank.

So let's talk about if our placement decision then becomes a self-contained or resource or a Tier 2 or life skills or an autism, whatever kind of place. Do we recognize the documented problems with that type of pull-out? I would even argue, Julie and I often say pull-out, pull-over, pull-aside. We mean pull into the hallway or pull over to a special desk where we work on IEP goals.

Those problems that Julie just walked through, those 10 documented problems, aren't just for the classroom down the hall. They are anytime we do that, even if it's in the same physical space, which is, let's say, the pre-K classroom or the 10th grade history classroom.

So I would say this handout would be a discussion starter at an IEP meeting, saying, do we understand the pros and cons? Just like if your doctor is going to put you on a new supplement or new prescription, they're going to say, what's the risk-benefit?

So if everybody's like, oh, they benefit so much from pull-out, have we talked about the risk? And I'm going to guarantee that that is not a part of the conversation. So it's not so much a sentence script as it is a risk-benefit analysis at the IEP meeting.

Well, Kristie, I love that you teed this up because what I want to do is share some scripts. I'll just share them auditorily. So if you're taking notes, you might grab them, but these are scripts you might say to really make this conversation a risk-benefit analysis. And these will all be in the transcript, friends. So grab that.

Yep. Okay, good. Julie.

Okay. So here we go. You're at the IEP meeting and you might say, "Before we talk about removing the student, can we talk about what supports might help them stay engaged?"

Pause for a second. What if I don't ever go to an IEP meeting, or I'm thinking about a kid who's not even on an IEP? Can I use these scripts? Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely.

So this is just to say to anyone who's like, distractibility equals removal, right? That's how their brain works. So my co-teacher could be saying, "I think you need to take this." Like, you're a general education teacher. I'm a special education teacher. We're co-teaching, and you're like, "Kristie, you need to take this kid out in the hallway during the ELA lesson because they're so distracted by..."

And I could say, "Hey, before we talk about removing the student, can we talk about what supports would help them stay engaged in the ELA lesson?" I like that. Okay.

The next one: "If distractibility is a concern, what strategies could we try in the general education setting first?" I got goosebumps on that one. Yeah.

The third one: "What environmental supports might help reduce distractions?" Because what we do with this question, which I love, is instead of starting to think about what room should we put this kid in, who should take them there, and how long should they be gone, we go, oh, our task is to think about environmental supports that are going to help reduce distractions.

Julie, let me pause for a second because I'm going to tell people that in the show notes for Episode 76, I'll link to other places where we talk about what Julie and I call stressors. It's really this third idea: the environmental supports that might reduce distractions stem from recognizing and reducing stressors.

And I just wanted to say again that the show notes will have a link to the transcript as well as the download. So just make sure that you check out all those resources.

Okay, keep going. These are so good. Well, Kristie, because we're just talking about distractibility, I'm going to throw in one more thing. I think we also want to put all of our resources about Stay Put Supports. Oh, okay. Got it.

So we have all these resources called Stay Put Supports, and it's to give people those environmental supports to put in place so that kids don't need to leave.

And I would say also on the handout for this episode, which is at [inclusiveschooling.com/download76](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download76), keep in mind, friends, that many times our handouts have embedded hyperlinks. On number 10 of the handout, there is one about classroom supports, and that's the Supplemental Aids, Supports, and Services handout.

Nice. Nice. Okay.

I'm just kind of sharing scripts that you can say, the ways that you can talk about this concept of decoupling distractibility and removal, right? You're decoupling these things.

So this one, I love, Kristie, because it asks people to do a risk-benefit analysis: "How will moving the student to another room address the distractibility?" Ah, right. You're just kind of playing dumb and going, real quick question.

How does moving them address distractibility? Because we know it doesn't. It doesn't teach people to be in distracting environments. It removes them and teaches them to receive separate instruction in separate places.

The fifth idea that we have for you is: "Is the issue distractibility, or is the issue that the instruction isn't accessible yet?" Because I can work on accessibility of instruction all day long, and then we're going to see a kid who looks a lot less distractible.

So these kinds of questions slow down the conversation. They slow down the rush to removal, and they move the team back toward problem-solving.

So let's think about a couple of things people can try. I love the idea of the 10 things to be discussion points, the harm, how we've considered it. I love these scripts that will be in the transcript.

What can I try out tomorrow if I'm going to do nothing else, but I want to? I've got a student who I'm concerned about, and maybe we're in a referral process or they just have so many behaviors that are challenging. They keep going on breaks. What can I do right away?

So you want to think globally, and then specifically. Globally, you want to think about increasing engagement so that it's not, what's wrong with this kid? It's not, why are they so distractible? It's just, how do we increase their engagement?

Is it more interactive instruction? Is it partner learning? Is it hands-on activities? Is it adding choices in class and tasks? Or do we think about the task itself? Sometimes the task itself is the barrier. Do we need to chunk the assignment? Do we need to build in smaller steps? Do we need to use guided notes, visual supports, shorter work intervals?

Do we need to add structure? Because students who struggle with attention often benefit from predictable routines. So could we provide structure so that the student can hold onto the task—a visual schedule, a clear expectation, a checklist, step-by-step instructions?

Could we build in movement? Because a lot of times we regulate our attention through movement. We, meaning me—the more I can move, the more I can focus. And so many students are the same. The more movement I can have, the more I can focus.

So movement breaks, flexible seating, standing options, transitions between tasks—all those kinds of things are ways that we could better support engagement and make it less about the distractibility of the student.

Well, Julie, again, people might want to grab the transcript because you gave a lot of ideas kind of rapid-fire, which is good and fine. But what I was taking away from that is the recurring themes of what we talk about. When we do good instruction, when we mean all means all, when we quote-unquote normalize supports in place, everyone just benefits. Everyone can then gain access, gain participation, and make the progress that we desire.

So many of these things can start with a student who is distractible in mind, can start with a student who qualifies for special education, but really these are just the core principles of Universal Design for Learning, or are at the heart of even something like PBIS, where we're looking at high-quality—sorry, high-quality is redundant, but you know what I mean—good instruction. Yeah. Right.

So much of this is addressed with varying the instruction instead of thinking that there's something wrong with the student.

I just want to close today by saying, when we say a student is too distractible for the classroom, we've already skipped the most important question. Because distractibility isn't placement.

It's just information. Information that says the student might need more support, more structure, more engagement, different supports.

And moving the student removes the distraction for the adults in the room, perhaps, but it doesn't solve the problem for the student. So the next time distractibility comes up as the reason for pull-out, pause the conversation and ask a question like, "What would it take for this student to succeed right here?"

It's really all about building classrooms where more students can belong and learn together.

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

In this episode, Julie and Kristie challenge a common leap in schools: a student is described as "too distractible," and suddenly the conversation shifts to removing them from the general education classroom. They unpack why distractibility is information—not placement—and how teams can slow down the rush to pull-out by looking first at instruction, environment, engagement, and supports.

Key Takeaways

- Distractibility is not a placement decision. It is information that tells us a student may need different or additional support.
- A quieter or smaller room may make a student look more regulated in the moment, but that does not mean the skill or regulation will generalize back to the classroom.
- Pull-out can cost students instructional time, membership, access to peers, and opportunities to learn in the context where the support is actually needed.
- Before changing placement, teams can ask what environmental, instructional, or engagement supports could be tried in the general education setting first.
- Many supports that help a student who is easily distracted—movement, visual supports, predictable routines, choice, shorter work intervals, and more interactive instruction—make classrooms better for everyone.

Answering a Common Question

Transcript - Episode 76:
"They're Too Distractible"... Is NOT a Reason for Pull-Out
<https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/inclusion-podcast>

What can I say when distractibility is being used as a reason for pull-out?

Try slowing the conversation down with questions like:

- “Before we talk about removing the student, can we talk about what supports might help them stay engaged?”
- “If distractibility is a concern, what strategies could we try in the general education setting first?”
- “What environmental supports might help reduce distractions?”
- “How will moving the student to another room address the distractibility?”
- “Is the issue distractibility, or is the issue that the instruction isn’t accessible yet?”

These questions shift the team from “Where should this student go?” back to “What would it take for this student to succeed right here?”

Episode Download / Handout

When “Distractible” Becomes the Rationale for Pull-Out

This six-page resource helps teams examine the risks of pull-out, reframe distractibility as a support and access issue, and use practical questions to keep IEP and problem-solving conversations focused on what the student needs to participate and learn.

You’ll find:

- well-documented problems with pull-out instruction;
- questions and scripts you can use when removal is being proposed;
- ways to think about distractibility through the environment, instruction, and engagement; and
- inclusive supports to try before changing where a student learns.

👉 Get the handout at: [inclusiveschooling.com/download76](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download76)

Practical Moves to Try

- Increase engagement with more interactive instruction, partner learning, hands-on activities, and meaningful choices.
- Reduce task barriers by chunking assignments, using guided notes or visuals, and shortening work intervals when needed.
- Add predictable structure with visual schedules, checklists, clear expectations, and step-by-step directions.

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- Build movement into learning through standing options, flexible seating, movement breaks, and transitions between tasks.
- Look for the environmental stressor or access barrier before assuming the student needs a different placement.

Additional Resources

Recognizing and Reducing Stressors: Tools for Teachers and Administrators: A practical companion for looking beyond the student and identifying environmental, instructional, social, and other stressors that may be contributing to what looks like distractibility or challenging behavior.

The Stay-Put Toolbox: A collection of classroom supports designed to help students stay, participate, and receive the support they need without routinely being pulled aside, sent out, or moved to another space.

Inclusion Podcast Episode 70- When “Doing Nothing” Is Actually Doing Something: Reframing Engagement: This episode challenges narrow definitions of engagement and helps educators look more carefully at what participation can look like before deciding that a student is checked out, off task, or unable to learn in the classroom.

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