



Podcast 48: Rewards, Punishment, and Praise

Episode notes: <http://www.prekteachandplay.com/podcast48>

Announcer: Welcome to the Pre-K Teach & Play podcast, where solutionaries are reclaiming children's right to learn through play, reimagining inclusive classrooms, and revolutionizing early care and education. Here's your host, Dr. Kristie Pretti-Frontczak.

Kristie: Hey everyone. This is Dr. Kristie Pretti-Frontczak, and this is [episode number 48](#) of the Pre K Teach and Play podcast. Today I have, wow, the most amazing guests. I know I say that every time, but seriously, these three women, these three amazing scholars and thinkers and teachers have been on my podcast before and the universe just allowed everything to align that I had them all in one place all at one time. Today, we have the most amazing [Dr. Shauna Tominey](#), [Alyssa Blask Campbell](#), and [Laura Fish](#). The reason I brought them all together was to talk about three big topics. We try to do it justice. I know we won't go deeply enough for some of you, but I hope that you will find that their wisdom around the topics of when, and when not to praise the use of rewards, and this little thing called punishment. Those are three humongous issues that we grapple with.

Kristie: So, I couldn't think of a better way to take it on than to have Shauna, and Alyssa, and Laura all talk about what those words mean to them, and how they teach, and help support parents, and teachers, and others who are building children's brains. Think about and work through the nuances of this idea of praise, rewards, and punishment. Quick backstory, Alyssa had done a [podcast episode](#) with [Alfie Kohn](#). The link to it will be in the show notes and I highly recommend that you listen to it, not because it's easy listen to, but because it will definitely get you thinking about your own thoughts around the use of praise, rewards and punishment.

Kristie: So, Alyssa did this amazing thing where she went back after her conversation with Alfie and did another layer of introspection, reflection, and teaching to help us think through the difficulties. That got me thinking like, wow, we really haven't spent enough time even talking about what do we mean about the word "praise"? What are synonyms with the word? What does it mean and look like in group care? What does it look like from the intersect of race and ability and gender and class and language and spirituality and religion and all of these things? So, I sat them down and we tried really hard to go in a really structured way, so that each of these amazing scholars, thinkers, writers, bloggers, podcasters, speakers could talk about what they meant by the word, and then where their teachings overlapped, and built upon one another.

Kristie: Then, we took practical scenarios from the real world, from where you all live and work every day, and we tried to say, but what do we do in that moment? Where can we find a different path forward? What can we let go of because it's no longer serving us, what can we do? Because wow, we're really rocking it, we should just keep doing it. And then, where do we really inspire to do differently? I hope that you find that by the time we close this episode, and we talk a little bit about our hope. Shauna, unfortunately, had to get off a little bit early cause we just kept talking. But, you'll hear the hope that Alyssa and Laura have for our work with building young children's brain, and I hope that you were able to take tons of practical things, and put them into your work every day, so that you can help all children thrive, not only in school but in life. Let's have a listen.

Kristie: So, the lightning rounds, we'll cover three big terms. The first will be praise, the second will be rewards, and after that there will be punishment. We're going to just go around and have each of my amazing guests in just a few minutes, like two minutes, three minutes, four minutes each, say what they think of how they define or conceptualize the word, and even just their work around it, how they teach others about it, how they move through this world around it. Laura, we're going to start with you. The floor is yours to talk about what does the word praise mean to you and in your work?

Laura: Well, praise for me, I've had a relationship with praise for quite a while, and we're going to be looking at praise, rewards and punishment, and all three of them for me have something in common. For me, they're attempts to teach children to either repeat the good behavior, or stop the bad behavior, to put it in concrete terms. Each one comes with certain side effects in my opinion. So, praise can lead to dependency on these external reinforcers, and praise has been shown to be ineffective in the long-term. So, I'm really trying in my work to help people update their software is what I call it, meaning their perspective, their beliefs, so they can shift from these more traditional strategies such as praise that have been shown to have their limitations toward what I call 21st century thinking and teaching.

Laura: This teaching with the brain in mind is all about cultivating awareness. How can I, instead of using something like praise as a motivator, how can I shift my perspective to, I'm trying to cultivate both my awareness as the adult and the child casting the spotlight of attention onto what is, either what went well, in the case of praise, or what didn't go so well. So, fine tuning our awareness skills, so we can look intra personally inside and interpersonally. So to that, and I use the strategy called positive, descriptive acknowledgement, or PDA. That comes from the work that I did with the [Teaching Pyramid](#) with WestEd, [PDA](#) and PDA plus. And what that is, is simply describing children's positive actions allowed just like capturing it like a camera without the value, judgments or labels that are inherent to praise. It also includes taking away that I notice, I see.

Laura: Because the risk with that, the possibility with that is that the child's awareness, or attention becomes focused on you, the adult, and not him or herself. So, PDA can sound like you're sharing the toys, or you're taking turns, or looks like you're using your walking feet. And then, PDA plus is three categories. One is you add on a character trait.

You're using your walking feet, you are being safe, or you add on an emotion, a potential emotion. So, you're sharing the toys, looks like you're excited to share. The third is encouraging children to cast the spotlight of their attention onto the impact of their behavior. So, it's that shared gaze of, it looks like you're sharing the toys, now Alyssa can color too. That's what I've been shifting away from praise towards positive descriptive acknowledgement because it aligns more readily with my value of cultivating awareness in children.

Kristie: Very, very helpful. Okay. I think what we'll do is after we go this round, I'm just thinking that we'll do a couple of scenarios. Those were really helpful exemplars. So, after all three of you have talked a little bit, we can talk about some common scenarios. I even was using ones that I found myself saying when I was in the classroom last week, that just came out. And so then, what do I do? All right, so Alyssa, let's hear your thoughts about this word called praise.

Alyssa: I think that it's a loaded one. I also agree, so in creating the set method, [collaborative emotion processing method](#), the basis of all of it for us is mindfulness is at the center, and then we have five components that stem from that, but it's really building mindfulness of our biases, mindfulness of our own regulation. Mindfulness, for me, is always at the core of everything just building, which for me is synonymous really with what you were saying there, Laura, awareness and just building this awareness and becoming mindful of like, first, as the adult, "what's my goal here in using whatever words I'm going to use? What am I trying to achieve in doing this"? When I'm working with teachers, that's really been my foundation for whether we're talking about praise, rewards, punishment. First, I want you to identify before we go into what the practices are like, what's your goal?

Alyssa: Are you trying to get them to leave this classroom and go to the playground? What's your goal here? Like an obedient child that's going to walk in line? It's okay to say yes to that. Maybe sometimes, you're like, "yeah that is my goal today". I'm in survival mode, right? That's okay too, but first, we have to identify like, "what is the goal that you're getting at here"? Because then, we can I think work backwards from that and say, all right then what are you using to get to that goal? I think for a lot of us, that praise has become something that is driving us to that end goal. Whether it's, ooh, "did you notice me"? And it is really a cornerstone in our system a lot of the times. I was working in a childcare center doing consulting recently and you walked by, there was this bulletin board of all the teachers, and it was highlighting kind of things that they had each done with their faces attached to it and whatever.

Alyssa: I was like, "Oh, that's so interesting". It was, in my mind, praise for these kinds of things that they'd done. At what point does it become acknowledgement of versus praise? Because we want more of those kinds of things. I think, for me, it can be murky. In my interview with Alfie Kohn that we talked about when he kept doing this voice that made my skin crawl, but he would say like, "Good job," and I'm like, "Ooh, that does make my skin crawl". Again, "what's your goal here? What has good job accomplished"? But wow, that was so thoughtful of you to hold that door when she was walking in behind you. For



me, also it could be praise, or could fall under that umbrella of praise, but has a different end result. So, I'm working at a goal and then coming back from that.

Alyssa: I think also, we touched for a second on cultural differences and norms, and I think that this is one thing to consider is like when we're looking culturally as a whole, maybe your end goal here is an obedient child, and maybe we'll talk more about that, but what I really want to know is what's your end goal. In some cultures, that's going to vary.

Kristie: Alyssa, would you say like goal and intention ...

Alyssa: They're not interchangeable for me.

Kristie: Okay. That's what I wanted to know.

Alyssa: No, I think our end goal is like what we're trying to achieve. I just gave a workshop to parents and was like, "When you think of your child as an adult, what does that look like for you? What is your dream here"? And they're like, "I want happy kids", is usually what I hear. Then, we get to dive into that, which is a whole other can of worms, but the intention might not be to have an obedient child. The intention might be to work collaboratively with this kid and find common ground to get out the door, or it might be that we're working towards a school of an obedient child.

Kristie: All right, so Shauna, your thoughts and your teachings around praise.

Shauna: Thank you so much! I loved hearing both what Laura had to share as well as Alyssa. It really helped me think about what to share in this moment as well, and it made me think back to just how much I value that we're each taking time to think about what does praise mean? How are we coming at this in terms of the way we're defining this? Because so often from that educator and parenting perspective as well, when folks hear the word praise, or see a headline about to praise, or not to praise, what they're thinking about, or putting praise into is more this general idea of just positive, or kind words with our children, or the children in our lives, and that's not always how, when we come at it from an educator's perspective, or a researcher perspective, that's not always the way that it's being defined.

Shauna: So, I love that, Laura, you stepped back and thought about this in terms of positive, descriptive acknowledgement, and that links so closely, in my mind, to what Alyssa said around mindfulness. What is it that we're noticing with those kind words? So, treating our children, the children in our lives from a kind and positive perspective, what is it that we're noticing? What is it we're giving attention to? Those are the kinds of things that I think about when I think about this idea of praise versus encouragement versus mindfulness, and thinking about, "Really, it does come down to that end goal". What do we want to give attention to? There's been a lot of debate about praise versus encouragement. Are we praising the child themselves? "You're so smart. You're so great. You're such an artist. You're such an athlete", versus that idea of a growth mindset of really encouraging the effort.

- Shauna: You spent a lot of time on that. You've worked very hard on that. I saw you spend half an hour working on this so carefully and making changes along the way. Wow, that took a lot of patience! So, when I think about praise, or where we might want to head as a field around praise, encouragement, mindfulness. I love that we're going more in that direction of not saying, well, we either use positive and kind words and that's praise, or it's not, versus this idea of there are a lot of different ways we can use kind words to talk with children to help them and to help us reach those goals.
- Kristie: Yeah. So, we'll call this a rebuttal phase. I don't know. I'm making this up. Now, because Shauna does, she was smart going third because she could sort of connect dots. So, Laura or Alyssa, what dots did that make for you all?
- Alyssa: When I was listening to it, the first thing that pops into my head when you were talking was this idea of like, self-love. I haven't yet made the connection as to that full thing, but I was like, "Oh man, how do we foster this self-love?" and figuring, like, "What does bring me joy, what do I personally feel proud of" regardless of what somebody else might be proud of, for me, or in me, or about me? And really, how to foster that as we're breaking down these terms.
- Shauna: Well, and that brings it back to what Laura was saying about not making it so much about the adult. So, how do we use our words in kind and positive ways to help children identify what it is they feel proud of. I love that!
- Laura: Yeah, you've got it. That's what I love about the PDA and the PDA plus. It's been really challenging working with it because it's very natural for us to say, "I saw you", or "I notice you were" and I'm not saying that's bad, but I'm saying it's kind of superfluous, it's kind of extra, because of course, you noticed it, or you saw it because you're saying it. The risk with that is it becomes about us. The child, who is wired to tune in to their adults is like, "Oh, what is my adult saying" versus me just coming in and saying looks like you or Jacob, you are Liam, you, and really just pretending to be a camera.
- Laura: Again, when we talk about cross-culturally, we want children to have their interior landscape mirrored back to them. We want, instead of saying, "I and me" and from my perspective as a white female saying, "Well, I see and I notice, I'm just going to simply give to the child, a mirror," and look at yourself. Look at yourself. We talk about mirrors and windows for children. Do I see my world, my experience mirrored back to me, or I'm always seeing a window through which I have to look through? So, that's tied to issues of race and ethnicity and bias and things. That's what I love about this too, is taking away and just simply say that the ... my perspective, and simply saying to the child, this is what's happening. This is the camera. Then sometimes, if you say to a child, "You took turns on the bike, you look really proud". They'll say, "I'm not proud. I'm happy." "Oh, you're happy. Looks like you're happy. You shared the bike. You took turns on the bike."
- Laura: In terms of what we're talking about, Alyssa said with a self-love, absolutely, and the broader category is insight. Awareness and insight. So, we're really focused a lot of times on teaching children empathy. That's a great thing, but [Dan Siegel](#) talks about

insight and empathy creates [mindsight](#), and that's part of the mindfulness practice, is in this awareness that I'm talking about.

Alyssa: I don't know that we can ever fully pull ourselves out of what we notice cause I think all of us, what we notice in a situation, or what might stand out to us, even if we are like sportscasting, saying what we see without the words I notice, I think for us as the adult in a situation like building mindfulness of our own biases is going to be huge in being able to even identify different things. Maybe, we noticed this sharing part and so that we talk about the bike sharing, but perhaps someone was feeling nervous about somebody taking that bike from them, so they just gave it up. I think our lens in which we end up sportscasting is always going to have a bias. You know what I mean? I think for me like that's one thing that is sticking with me as we're talking about not using the words I noticed, or that that's what I saw. Yeah, it takes us out of it, and also we think it's important for us to be mindful as we move forward, that we're always noticing things from our bias.

Laura: Absolutely. That's what I meant by you can take out I notice because it's clear you're noticing. The fact that you're using words that convey packets of energy and information means you noticed. I'm not against noticing. I want teachers to notice. So, this awareness is also for the..., or the parents or the caregivers, is also awareness, your own as the adult, but it's taking out that explicitness that it came from you and put the focus more on the child, because you're right. I want people to notice and I want them to cultivate a relationship with noticing. It's just skipping over that part where it's the, "I notice, I see". I like how you ... I am proud of you. Not that you can never say I'm proud of you, but there's a saying I like to say, that praise is like sugar and PDA's like vegetables.

Laura: Praise feels good and we all like it and just like sugar, but there's really not that much nutritive value in it. Whereas PDA is more of a vegetable quality that it might not be so exciting upfront, but over time it can help grow and cultivate the mind and the brain in the context of relationships.

Alyssa: Absolutely.

Shauna: Well, and I think it gives rise, then to those questions too, that you are drawing all of that toward Alyssa around, are we doing this in an equitable way for all of the children in our care? Who are we noticing, when, in what way? and are doing that in the same way for children regardless of their gender, or their race, or other implicit biases that we may not be aware of in ourselves? How does that shape who we're paying attention to in what contexts and when?

Kristie: This is one of those points where my growth is going to show as being novice, but I was reading a post this morning about how the emphasis in whiteness on individuals is part of the white dominant context. You see me trying to get the right words here. I'm setting that up to bring a little bit of closure to what you all were alluding to in terms of what we do notice in individual children, but also this notion of singling out, or



individualizing, could that have a negative side, but then my real question is, "Where do you all stand with broad comments about the group"? So, giving praise or kind words, but you use your own definitions to explain. But when you hear people say, "I see everyone's cleaning up or everyone looks ready to learn," or maybe worse yet, "I see Laura is ready to learn," as goal to get Alyssa and Shauna to buck up and pay attention.

Kristie: There's kind of three questions, at least in there, but what about when I say things that are just sort of to everyone, or anyone who might be listening/when I call out an individual child as a model. Pros, cons, do's and don'ts. Who wants to go first?

Alyssa: Well, I got, like, a fire inside me.

Kristie: All right, go Alyssa.

Alyssa: With the last one where like, "I am a human and my whole life, this is who I am". If you were to be like, "Oh, Laura is ready to learn". I would do absolutely everything in my power to not do what Laura is doing, and remember, end goal is to get me to just do what she's doing. I'd rather you said like, "Oh hey, is there something that you need to calm your body to come over to circle? I see that you're still moving a lot. It looks like you're not ready to come sit. Is there something that you need?" Would you much rather be asked than be like, try and tricked into something still as an adult human.

Alyssa: When you said that it was like, "Whoosh, cortisol!". Yikes. So, I have obviously strong feelings about that. I think I don't see the benefit of identifying what is happening with somebody else's body in an effort to get another child near that. It's really hard for me to make sense of. Instead, I want to turn to the child who isn't really ready and figure out what's going on. "Hey bud, looks like you're having a hard time coming over. Is something going on? I want to check in. How are you feeling? What's going on?" Maybe, they need to move their body in some capacity. Maybe, something happened while they were playing that they're carrying with them and they're not ready to go over here. So, I want to check in for sure. In terms of the blanket statement, honestly, I feel like we live in a world where these are going to happen all of the time or a lot of the time.

Alyssa: I feel like, in general, even just like in common workspaces, as adults, there's a lot of praise that happens across the board I think. I think, societally, we live in very much a punishment reward system in a lot of ways, and praise is a part of it. I don't think it's something that's going to totally go away. I don't think it causes irreparable damage. I just don't think it's super effective. That make sense?

Kristie: Yes. Perfectly helpful. All right, who else is ready? If people could see this, they would see you all like, ready just to go, "is it my turn"? Because I got to tell you something.

Shauna: To your point as well as I think you gave such a great example of yourself in pointing out how individual children respond differently. For some children, hearing words that points something out about who they are, or what they did, that as a moment where they stand up taller and straighter and someone else next to them looks at them and

says, "I want to do that too", and that gets them to jump up in line. But for others, that's not. For still others, they may be growing up in homes, or cultures where being prideful is a shameful thing to be, or it goes against their family culture. So, looking at these blanket statements, or one size fits all statements, put some children in a position where they feel like, "Oh great, I'm doing really well today" versus others where "I don't belong", or "I'm not being seen", or "She's saying this, but I don't feel like it's me".

Kristie: Laura, you want to ...

Laura: Oh yes, I got so into it. I forgot I was part of the podcast. This podcast is good. I'm enjoying it.

Kristie: If we ... in your sauna, we know we're in trouble.

Laura: I'm in a sauna. The thing for me, I love everything everybody is saying. Then, what kept going through my mind was the quote, comparison is the thief of happiness. I think in my work with adults, as a therapist, I'm really working with that a lot, and so, comparison makes my skin crawl too, like, "Oh, I like how Laura is sitting to try to get Alyssa or Shauna to do it". And I'm like that. I don't teach praise. What I do want to promote is interconnectedness. It's at a sense of inter connection. So, how can we do that in ways that feel appropriate? Again, with all of this, with the PDA, the PDA plus, with encouragement affirmation, of course, we're going to look how we do it. It changes depending on who we're with. Just as Shauna was mentioning, it's not a blanket fits all, but looking for a way to promote that interdependency.

Laura: That's the only time I could see trying to do kind of the group thing, but not in a way to manipulate them to get them to do something, more in, "Wow, it looks like you guys are all working really hard to put away your toys!". We've got super teamwork going on here, or just something about where it's that shared again. The shared gaze of looking around going, "Oh, I'm doing it, but so are you. We're all doing it! We're all working together!". Again, being careful. Being careful, being cautious with that because some children too, don't want to be, they're more of that introvert temperament, might not like that type of group stuff. Again, we have these tools and we have to use them mindfully, but I like the idea of diminishing comparison and promoting interconnectedness, which takes a lot of skill.

Kristie: A lot of skill. Yeah. Okay, because there are three topics, I'm going to go to the second one, but if we have time, we'll come back to more about praise. Okay? But we're going to do another lightning round and if you guys are okay with the same order, or you want to change? Same?

Laura: Sure.

Kristie: All right, so what we'll do now is we're going to move to this word rewards, knowing that each time there may be something that you carry over from the first one because there's some relationship as you started as off, Laura, in your comments. But let's talk



again a couple, two, three minutes. What do you classify as rewards? What synonyms do you use and what in your teachings do you have to say about the use of rewards?

Laura: For me, I really pull in this thread of awareness. So, sitting with adults, parents, caregivers, teachers, and really talking about, like Alyssa said with the goal, "What's your goal?". When you're rewarding and thinking about what we're trying to activate. A lot of times people are trying to activate is just the ability for children to notice, reflect, and repeat whatever that was that they thought deserved a reward. If we could take out that extrinsic reward like food, or a sticker, or whatever the extrinsic reward is, and instead teach the internal process, what would that be like? I know we live in a world with extrinsic rewards. I go to my job and I get a paycheck. So, it's not saying that it's all bad, but what we're really going after is really sculpting the neuronal processes that promote the ability to take in the good.

Laura: **Rick Hanson** talks about, we have Velcro for the bad and Teflon for the good, and the way to counter that is to try to create the positive neuroplasticity. That comes from literally practicing taking in the good. Again, one of the greatest labs I have for how to work with children is working with the adults that I do in my private practice and watching how I have to really start at basics of getting them to take in the good. So, as Rick Hanson says, we waste good moments. We rush past the good and focus on the bad. So, I want them to really stop and pause and what he calls HEAL, have, enrich, absorb, and linger in the positive, so we can move from a state to a trait. That's learning. So, the reward is often so ephemeral and it's often not really linked that it doesn't have its effect.

Laura: My nephew got this little bracelet the other day while he was at camp and when he came home he said, "I got this bracelet," and I said, "What's it for?" And he said, "For being respectful." I said, "What did you do?" And he said, "I have no idea." Instead of, in those moments taking in, in whatever capacity, and I have ideas, but we're just talking generally now, in whatever capacity to take in the good, to have it, enrich it, work with it, keep it in your mind's eye for long enough for it to be installed as an experience that has lasting impact. That's what I'm interested in.

Alyssa: Laura, I'm here for all of that. I do struggle a little bit with the idea of punishment, reward because we live in the system and so, I do have this battle internally, where I'm like, "Oh, if I was in sales and I worked really hard and got these sales and then, I got this commission bonus, that is how that's structured, and I'm working for that and I'm excited when I get that". What it comes back to for me is making sure the reward, whenever they exist, is not necessarily the end goal but as a part of the process. I was thinking of coaches of mine. I grew up as an athlete and I never went into a basketball season saying like, "Great, we're going to win every game or I'm going to have the highest number of points I can shoot to save my life."

Alyssa: But for me, it was like, "Oh, what am I going to be working on in this?". The reward, for me, was when I could get that drill down really well, or build that new skill along the way. It wasn't necessarily winning the game, or having the most points. It was about the



process of skill building. When I think of the best coaches for me, which I found more of positive rewards in my life in coaching than from teachers to be honest, and in this, someone stuck out to me where he was right there where it was like rewards along the way for the process. I just remember wrapping up this one practice and I was bummed about a mistake I just kept making, and he was like, "All right, let's look at the system, and what can we tweak here?"

Alyssa: He just turned, and he was like, "I'm not disappointed in you." I was like, "Well, I don't get to ..." There were, like special things you could do if you did certain, like parts of the drill. And I'm like, "I don't get to do this." He was like, "No, you didn't reach that, but you can work on doing that tomorrow. Let's look at the system as a whole." He wasn't focused on the end reward. He wanted me to fine tune the process. Actually, just last week at therapy, I said to my therapist like, "I just never want to make the same mistake twice." I don't mind making mistakes throughout my life. I don't want to repeat the same mistakes over and over." I think it has come from this place of process for me, that I want to be able to fine tune things and rewards have been a part of that for me, but it's not always the end goal. Does that make sense?

Laura: Yes.

Kristie: I'm going to come back to something on that. I'll let Shauna go and then we're going to come back to that, Alyssa. Shauna, do you have synonyms for this? Do you have examples of what is what, what are rewards? I can't get my grammar right, but you go.

Shauna: Okay. Rather than bringing in synonyms around rewards, I think I'd like to link back around that idea of process. Also, both from what Alyssa was saying, but also from what Laura was saying about keeping the positive in your mind's eye, and how do we think about not just the extrinsic rewards? Because so often, when we think of a reward, we're thinking about money, stickers, food and physical, tangible things. Rather than thinking about what are those intrinsic rewards, we get from that process along the way. As you were pointing out, Laura, from Rick Hanson's work, so often, we don't focus on the positive. The positive things, they're not putting us in danger. They're not the things that our brain needs to hold on to, to save us when that situation comes up again, for us to be in heightened awareness of. They're the kinds of things that, well, all's going well, so it's just like Teflon.

Shauna: It's there. We don't need to hold onto it to be thinking about it, to be watching for it to happen again. But how do we use that knowledge of, if we linger on those positive things, if we really think about the process and celebrate the process along the way, can that be the reward? Can we shift what the reward is for our children and for in terms of it's not the extrinsic, what we're adding from the outside, that sometimes have nothing to do with the process. Having a piece of candy, or a sticker may have nothing to do with sticking with that task. Sticking, I see the pun there with the sticker, unintentional. But it might not have something to do with that actual task that we did, or something we accomplished, or something we work so hard on, and if instead, we sit with that and talk

about what that felt like, and what that feels like now, and how we might use that again, can that be the reward that we're teaching our children and ourselves?

Shauna: That was something that I often think about in terms of, "How do we shift what we think of as a reward" and then going back to a word that you used earlier, Laura, interconnectedness, having those pleasant or positive experiences to gather where we feel connected. We feel like we're able to share. We feel like we're able to ... you look someone in a way that makes us feel good. Is that a reward in itself too?

Kristie: I'm going to play devil's advocate, or at least present a real life challenge for this, piggybacking onto an expanding what you guys just heard each other say. I know we have a lot of listeners who are trained in behavioral learning practices, myself included. We have many people who have spent a lifetime achieving to get a [BCBA](#) even, or other rewards having expertise in and around behavioral learning principles. Let's take a common scenario, and I also want to overlay this with, not all children as we know are easy to connect with. Not all children are verbal, have the cognitive capacity to make the connection between cause and effect on and on. Let's take that kind of reality that so many of our revolutionary members are in, and you have a little child who needs to transition from preschool classroom to the bus.

Kristie: This is high stakes because the bus has to leave and there's no other way to get the child home other than the bus. I just want to make it a really specific scenario. This is a little child who has trouble on all levels with sensory. So, knowing where they're going is a problem, knowing what they've just been doing for the last two and a half hours is trouble. We've got a pot that's ready to boil. So, a teacher says to her behavioral team, I'm really struggling getting this kid in his gear and to the bus all the way from the classroom through the hallway to the bus with our gear. That's the scenario. Somebody on the team, or the district said, "Here's a strategy teacher. I want you to take and break up some crackers, or have some mini M&M'S, or have something small, and each time they are making the repeated progress towards the bus, I want you to reinforce it with a morsel." I know there's a big question, that immediately of a next step, what could we do?

Alyssa: What's the goal? Is the goal to have a kid who needs this to get from point A to point B in the long-term? At what point is this something that we would say like it's no longer age appropriate? Often here, and I'm working in elementary, they've aged out of this practice. What plan in place would we have then, if at some point this kid's not going to be offered this as a way to move from point A to point B? This is me starting at the goal. So, if our goal is like no, he knows how to independently put on his stuff and get to the bus, then my next steps are going to be different. That make sense?

Kristie: Hmm.

Alyssa: That's my first question is, "What's the end goal here?". Not just the immediate, yeah, we need this kid on the bus today. What's the end goal here? From a sensory perspective, my work is heavily rooted in sensory systems. We cannot talk about



emotional development without sensory systems and so, I would want to look at what supports do we have throughout the day to help him maintain regulation? So, we're not trying to backtrack at the end of the day with a dysregulated child. How are we maintaining regulation throughout the day? And then, what visual aid supports can we implement that can help get him through the steps he needs to get through at the end of the day. It's a lot of transitions for a kiddo at the end of the day. What visual aid supports, or even buddy system? I had a three year old who really struggled with organizational skills, you see sensory regulation, and his best girl pal in the classroom was amazing.

Alyssa: She would get herself ready and then, she would come like play this game back and forth, that they really started to implement together. And then we were just like, "Yeah, go for it." She would help him get his stuff together at the end of the day. Is there some sort of internal buddy system that could be supportive? Really, I'd be focusing on sensory regulation and visual aids would be my go-to.

Kristie: Okay.

Laura: Okay, I'll jump in. So, I agree. I love that, the sensory is really important. I was thinking as you were saying it too, Kristie, I've had this exact scenario, so many times actually being in this field for so long has really brought, is this additional understanding of the brain, and then thinking, we know that the brain scans for signs of welcome and signs of warning. All brains, all ages, right out of, even in utero, it's believed. So, scanning for signs of welcome and signs of warnings. So, I would sit down with the adults and really think about, "What could be welcoming about this process. What could we think of?". Of course, it doesn't start with when it's time to get on the bus. Just as Alyssa said, it's throughout the entire day, including all the sensory stuff.

Laura: What is going to signify to this child this is a welcome transition? So, trying to see it from his or her perspective, and I think that's what the intention is with the M&M'S, or the gummies, or the crackers. The child is soothed by food and so that can move them along through that transition. I would like to get away from that. I have strong feelings about our relationship with food and our relationship with food as a motivator, and it can definitely be problematic. So, I really want to be careful with that and look for something else that might be a motivator. But just the main goal is to keep that child feeling seen through safe and secure as they're making that transition. I do not have a strategy because I don't know what child you're talking about, so it has to be individualized for that child, but what are the signs of welcome that could ease that child transition and also for the adult to keep them feeling seen and satisfied too and secure.

Laura: Because it's scary for the adult and there's that time crunch and all the pressure is on the adult that I have so much compassion for. So, everybody coming at it from that, ... like what can create that emotional and physical safety in that moment for them?

Kristie: Shauna.



Shauna: I think that's so important in terms of thinking about the adults as well, because jumping to that reward, or jumping to a punishment is sometimes the strategy, or the process that's going to have the quickest result in the moment. That's why when we're exhausted, when we don't know what else to do, pulling out those M&M'S to just get through this moment, feels like it's going to be. When we think about the difference, as you said Alyssa, with goals, is it the immediate goal? Are we in danger right now? Are we in a situation where we absolutely need to move a child from point A to point B? That has to be our goal. There is a time component. There is potentially even a danger component. This has to happen right now. When we're in more of a crisis mode, or more of a ... we just have to get through this moment.

Shauna: Sometimes, we might make a choice that we have to make rather than the one that's really thinking about the long-term goal of, okay, what does this child need in terms of support? Is there potential for growth and learning? Then, stepping back and saying, even if I can't put that into this moment right now, how do I move outside of this emotionally charged moment, or this crisis moment, or this time crunch moment where I can't think anything except just get from here to there to how do we build these moments of growth and learning and support outside of those moments, so that we can then bring it back into this moment?

Kristie: Shauna is going to have to jump off, and I know I need not keep you guys, so I'm going to quickly get her to define punishment and then, Shauna, you'll step out as you need to and then, we'll get some closure to the whole thing. Our third word is this word called punishment. This time we're going to start with you Shauna and you can tell us what you think about that word, how you teach about that word, what comes up for you, and then we'll go to Alyssa and then, to Laura and then, we'll talk about a scenario. So, punishment.

Shauna: Sure. So, with punishments, there are a couple of different definitions with punishments. There's sort of the more traditional psychological side of punishment that actually has to do with adding something negative to a child's environment like a spanking, but oftentimes we think about punishment now as taking things away from children as well, even though that can also be called negative reinforcement or have other terms. Punishment has been linked so often to the shame, to this feeling that we're potentially instilling in children around, "there's something wrong with you" rather than there's an area for you to grow, or learn, or be supported. If we're looking more at a mindfulness approach to talking about a child's behavior, or their emotions, or a growth mindset approach to that.

Shauna: Moving more to the punishment side, something we see is taking children out of learning opportunities, or pulling them away from a group, or not letting them go out to recess when we know that sometimes, those children who maybe are struggling, or learning about how to use their bodies in a really effective way, how to be a learner, how to be a good friend, need that just as much or even more than other children who are around them. One of the things that I struggle with as I think about punishment and how we respond to children sometimes, in those challenging moments is so often when



a child is struggling, let's say with self-regulation, with emotion regulation, with not being able to manage their bodies, their feelings, their voices.

Shauna: So, often what we do is we resort to isolating them, pulling them out of a group, telling other children to stay away from them, or don't be around them when they're like that, don't talk to them when they're like that, rather than saying, this is one of our classmates, or this was one of our friends and he or she or they are struggling, or they're learning and we can move towards them rather than away from them to help them in those situations. So, I really struggle with seeing punishment being used as a way of removing children from situations that are ultimately helping them practice the skills that they need.

Kristie: Alyssa.

Alyssa: I think punishment is often about control and asserting our dominance in a situation, or if we feel a loss of control and as the adult are trying to regain it. Maybe, if somebody is hurting somebody else's body and we want ... I think there can be an assertion coming from a place of fear. What I often see confused here is boundary setting and holding and punishment. Especially in my work with parents who are like, "Well, I don't want to have to do this. I don't want to have to put them in the car seat and buckle them". Yeah, nobody wants to do that, and it's your job to keep them safe. If you give them an option of you can climb into your car seat, or I can put you into your car seat and they know the time limit in which they have to make that decision and all that, they have all the information and they choose not to do it, then you're enforcing that boundary.

Alyssa: I think it's different in the same way that if I choose to speed, there's a chance I could get a ticket. I could choose not to speed and maybe not get a ticket, especially as a white female. That's where I want to be mindful as we talk about punishments and what I often see is this confusion between setting and holding a boundary where everyone has all the information here versus a punishment for someone that for me is often from a place of fear and control. Yeah, I like that you pointed out shame. I think it plays a huge role in punishment. I think the shame part is linked to this assertion for control. That, if you are feeling shame, then I might feel dominant in my position.

Kristie: Laura.

Laura: Totally agree. It goes back to the signs of our nervous system scanning for signs of welcome and warning. Adults feel, when there's challenging behavior, their warning bells go off. And so, no shame or blame on the adult either. It's no wonder, no wonder our nervous systems are on overload and so traditionally what we do, all we know is punishment. The great thing about 21st century teaching is we know much more about the brain and mind in the context of relationships, and we don't have to just punish. We have options. It's just bringing these options to adults and helping them update their software. So, instead of punishing, we teach.

Laura: When things go wrong, we want them to strengthen the awareness again of what happens, so children, so they may engage in reflection with adults and possibly repair, if needed. But if we punish, we risk activating that downstairs brain, or what Rick Hanson refers to as the red and the blue zones where learning and awareness are shut down. So, if we focus on creating awareness, we use approaches such as, "I don't know the steps to problem solving or conflict resolution". We have a framework. "Whoa, what happened? How do you feel? Yeah, oh yeah. What solutions can we try"? So, it doesn't go that fast, but those are some of the steps leaning in, attuning to the child in the moment to offer that co-regulation, that open receptive place that we need to be in, which is hard to say like, "Okay, what happened? How do you feel?" And really leaning in to help cultivate their awareness.

Laura: We create the shared gaze around the issue and then, we come up with a plan for how to teach them how they can grow. That may include repair. Not saying, I'm sorry, but feeling compassion, feeling insight, feeling empathy for yourself too, not others. I work with a lot of children who do self-harming behaviors when they do something, "bad." I also want them to be able to make that repair with themselves and not have the internal narrative that I hear sometimes, "I'm just a bad boy, I'm just stupid." We really want to keep our gaze on how can we step into a place where there's been challenging behavior, and instead of punish, use it as a teachable opportunity. But teachable can also be loaded. Because people think, well, I'm teaching him, I'm putting him in timeout, and that's not what we're talking about. We're talking about teaching from a place of awareness, which is mindfulness.

Laura: Awareness to me is paying attention to what is with openness and receptivity, which is the same definition I use for mindfulness. It's this place of coming from the brain perspective of we don't want to send more information into that child's brain, that signals warning, warning, warning, danger. So it starts with us getting into that balanced place and then promoting that and then, through co-regulation attuned interaction to try to teach rather than punish.

Alyssa: I love that so much and I love that you brought up the co-regulation, and I think this is where we under-serve teachers. Lauren and I co-created the collaborative emotion processing method because we felt like this was what was lacking for us as teachers. It's five components, and one is adult-child interactions, the other four are about us. It's about our own biases, awareness, and regulation, and, self-care, and like what are those four things look like in your everyday life so, that you are able to bring awareness to what you're feeling, what you're bringing to the table, what your biases are in this situation, and across the board. Your ability to regulate, even just understanding our own sensory systems and like, "What helps me feel calm"?

Alyssa: I've asked so many adults and they don't know that answer. I think like we have, as you were saying, like 21st century teaching, we've got to take a step back and look at what did we grew up with? What tools don't we have yet that we need support in building so we can co-regulate? How do we advocate for our own self-care as a teacher? What can



that practice look like in reality? I think that those components have to come into this in order for us to be regulated humans in the classroom in order to co-regulate.

Laura: For sure. It is the parallel process and I am really committed to that currently when I'm asked to come and do some speaking engagements. I'm really trying to advocate for getting these skills for the teachers and really looking at, we're trying to ask them to teach emotional intelligence and yet, they've never had practice, or opportunity and developing it for themselves. I cannot go and teach a physics class girls. There's no way. I never took physics, I don't know anything about physics. So now, we're asking people to teach these things and it's like, well, it was never taught to us. We got by, we're okay. We developed coping mechanisms, not really coping strategies, Alyssa, right? But again, no shame and blame.

Laura: The shame thing **Brené Brown** talks about guilt is, "I did something bad" shame is, "I am bad" and that is what drives me. I don't want anyone, adult, child, anywhere feeling I am bad. It's just looking at ... and not even the bad, I don't even use that. It's like, "What happens? How do I feel"? So, we don't even have to label it as bad or good. I'm not avoiding that. I'm not afraid of that, but I'm not anchored to that. So, my goal is to develop the child, not manage the classroom. With the practices that we're all talking about, we're talking about child development, not classroom management. The hidden secret in that is, the spoiler alert is your classroom will be managed, if you help develop the child. But it starts with us really engaging in ongoing self-understanding and self-development. Self-Growth.

Alyssa: Yeah.

Kristie: Let's let Shauna get her closing statement in and then, we'll go to the two of you.

Shauna: So, much of what you were sharing. I was like, "Oh yes, yes and yes". More of that. From both of you, one of the words that came out from both of you is co-regulation and this applies so much to the child level as well as the adult level and the interaction in between. I think too often we have language that we use around self regulation, but that's the goal. You need to learn how to self regulate. That implies in itself, even with that language that the end goal is for you to be on your own, whereas shifting that language to the importance of co-regulation. We need to be able to manage ourselves in those moments, but we should always be relying on co-regulation with each other.

Shauna: We always need other people to help us work through challenges, or to grow, to learn, to problem solve and applying that to children in classrooms in the relationship with each other in the relationships with the adults in their lives, and then flipping it back, Alyssa, something you said, and Laura you is well, made me think about just that even for educators feeling like you're in this on your own, you've got to figure this out for yourself so that you can teach it rather than ... process and we're in it together. That co-regulation word and that piece as being foundational to all this.

Alyssa: Regulation tickles my fancy, but I think when we are saying just self-regulation, when we're talking about self regulation, we're literally just ignoring the science of neuro and neurons, that you are going to co-regulate in some capacity. It might be that you're now spiking cortisol because they're spiking cortisol. Either way, you're going to fire off each other here, you're going to near each other. This is where I think self regulation is key. It's not the child's job to get calm for you. It's your job to get calm for them.

Laura: If I could piggyback on that, the self regulation to me, the first part of that word, self, engenders insight. Again, going back to the insight, how can I regulate if I don't have my internal landscape? If I don't have the mechanisms in my brain, the neural pathways to look inward interpersonally, so self-regulation includes co-regulation. Insight and empathy equals mindsight, equals your foundation for social emotional skills. It's not everything. Self-regulation includes the co-regulation, but it starts with ... we definitely want, it doesn't start with because we are co-regulating ongoing, but we want to make sure we don't overdo, we overlook the self part. I hear in classrooms all the time. You guys do too. "Look how you made Shauna feel. Look how you made Alyssa feel". First of all, we don't make anyone feel anything.

Laura: Then, second of all, what about how I felt? So, if I hit Shauna over the head to get the red truck and all I want to focus on, all you tell me to focus on is how she feels, you've totally missed the teaching opportunity. Not on purpose, no shame or blame, but you've missed the chance of like, "Hey, what happened for me in that moment"? Oh, I know. I was frustrated because I couldn't get the red truck and she had it. Oh, so next time I'm frustrated I can do this. And yes, Shauna also gets to weigh in and say, "That really hurt me. I feel really frustrated. Now, I'm scared of you". So, it's both at its insight and empathy.

Alyssa: Yeah, and I think it comes back to trusting kids and intention, like here's that word intention for me. They're like trusting that their intention is good and that it isn't malicious. So, if somebody is hurting somebody else, what's going on for you? When I'm going to triage that situation, I'm not always going to the child who got hit. The child who hit might need me more in that moment. And when we talk about self reg, first step, we say that you cannot have self reg without self-awareness. That self-awareness comes first before all of it, before empathy, before social awareness, self-awareness is the cornerstone of starting your emotional development journey.

Kristie: What I'd like you to do is think about what is one thing you would wish for people, your dream for them, what you're hopeful about, what tip. It could just be super practical like just try this, but just leave those who have joined us, and are listening with one key takeaway. Something that if you strip it all down, like where you sort of started to lead us there, Alyssa, but without this you can't have that.

Alyssa: This is actually so fresh in my mind right now because we're creating this certification program for childcare centers and doing all these trainings. It's all these video trainings like guiding teachers through, how do you do this work? And we just did the like outline for where do you start? So, it's very fresh right here. We start with not doing anything



different, just noticing. So, paying attention to like, we consider it part of reflective practice, but it can be during the day. We ask you to do it once a day at the end of your day, looking back at where we called the wheels came off the bus. Where did you feel dysregulated? Where did you feel the classroom felt chaotic, or you didn't feel like you were working together with your co-teacher? Where did the wheels come off the bus with you today, or for you today?

Alyssa: And just starting to pay attention to those. Before we're doing anything, we've got to be aware. This again, the awareness is key. So, building awareness there, just paying attention to those things. We have like a guide that walks you through, what really to pay attention to, including like then taking you into potential biases here. What social programming might exist for you within this. I have a training that's all about really diving into your childhood, your upbringing, your cultural norms, and just getting to know them because what is normal, for us, what are our cultural norms are things we often don't examine because they feel just normal to us. Getting to know those a bit, especially in a classroom setting where you're going to have a bunch of kids who will have different levels of normal and you're all commingling.

Alyssa: And so, it can bring up a lot that is just automatic for you that you might not be aware of yet. So really, just starting from this place of awareness for your participating in reflective practice, not with the goal yet of changing anything. Just getting to know yourself and your habits and your patterns, so that you can look at this as a whole and then, you can really start to get insight into where can things be tweaked, or what should I be mindful of when I'm going into X, Y, and Z situation? I gave this example of I'm a sexual assault survivor, and I started to notice in my toddler classroom that when there was a group of kiddos all hanging out and like rough and tumble scenarios. If it was all girls, I was fine with it and I was relaxed. If there was a boy over there, I was on edge and I had to start to notice this pattern in myself, so that I could learn to regulate it and be able to respond with intention. But I couldn't regulate it until I was aware of my pattern.

Kristie: Very powerful. Okay. Laura?

Laura: Message of hope. I love that. Hope activates an open, receptive state of mind. My succinct message of hope is, it's never too late. It's never too late for the child. It's never too late for the adults. We know about neuroplasticity. We know a behavior can change. I had two 80 year olds in my office not too long ago, and the wife looked at the husband and said, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks." And I said, "You know what? In fact, you can." It is harder later. It's easier earlier, but it's never easy. It's such a process, but the message is, it's never too late. This noticing that Alyssa is speaking of, that awareness piece is very complex. So, self-reflection is really difficult because we're in our movie. It's hard to see our movie and we have our lenses and our biases.

Laura: What I find very important is giving teachers an opportunity to meet with an attuned other, a coach, a peer, even just themselves and looking, especially using videotape, to try to start to overcome some of that being in the movie. So, I videotape teachers and

then, I meet with the entire team and I pulled them all out and we look at, is part of our reflective practice, we look at the movie. It's interesting in a one minute clip, everybody sees something different. That's where I get some of my evidence that self-reflection is very difficult because we're in the movie, but when you're sitting with attuned others that you trust, you can start to reflect upon some of what's there, what you missed, what you saw, what you might hope and intend for the future.

Laura: And it's just an ongoing process, but the foundation of that is knowing that it's ongoing. We've never arrived. You never gain insight and you're done. It's an ongoing process. You never gain empathy and you're done. It's never done. You're just always working to cultivate that, and grow that, and just being okay with that, which is hard for so many people. So, find who you can sit with and meet with to go through this process and then, how you can enter into it with a sense of like, this is ongoing and it's okay. That doesn't mean I'm falling behind. It means I'm on the journey.

Kristie: Perfect. Beautiful. See, I say perfect, beautiful. And then like, "Dang, I just praised her". I don't know what to say.

Laura: Praise is like sugar. It's okay. I do a little bit of sugar. Yeah, I'm going to go have some broccoli after this. Yes.

Kristie: A few quick things as we wrap up this episode. First, a note of gratitude to my guests for their wisdom, generosity and willingness to support the early care and education revolution so deeply. Second, do you know about my [ECE Solutionary membership program](#)? It's a special membership library, chock-full of hundreds of searchable resources and tools that you can have in hand at the click of a button. Visit prektechandplay.com/ece-membership to learn more and become a member today. Lastly, if you were inspired by this episode, if something affirmed your beliefs, or perhaps you discovered a practical tool you can put into practice to help all children thrive in school and in life, then I invite you to share the episode on whatever app you're using.

Kristie: Share with someone you feel would benefit, or someone who would be inspired by today's conversation, someone who it will make a difference for, then be sure to subscribe so you can stay connected. With so much gratitude for all that you do fellow revolutionaries, until next time!

Announcer: *Be sure to visit prektechandplay.com for more resources, tips, and tools for early educators.*

