



## **Podcast 49:** How to Stay Calm in the Chaos

Episode notes: <http://www.prekteachandplay.com/podcast49>

*Announcer 1: 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.*

*Announcer 2: In today's special episode, Podcast 49, Kristie Pretti-Frontczak talks with her longtime collaborator, Barb Avila. For the next 45 minutes or so, you'll hear helpful hints about how students and caregivers can stay regulated during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The first voice you'll hear is Barb Avila, who's based in Portland, Oregon:*

**Barb:** It's interesting because the pandemic, I've worked with families through the whole thing, right? And just watching, people came out with a whole bunch of enthusiasm to do school at home and feeling like they could do it. And then we kind of got into summer where it was kind of people riding it okay, it seemed, and then we got into fall and starting into winter, and people are really getting low. I mean, it's hard right now. And people are feeling the effects of being closed in with people who have different personalities and different temperaments, different attachment styles, all of that, that we talk about, and then autism on top of it and trying to figure out. So I think this is a great question of how do we help people stay regulated and engaged during this pandemic?

**Kristie:** And the word calm always comes up? How do we stay calm? You and I talk about calm in the chaos, we say be calm during the middle of the storm, which is so easy to read in a book or listen to on a podcast, but in that moment when you, yourself, are having trouble processing and coping with all that's going on, it's really hard. And if one more person tells me to take a deep breath, I don't know, I get really resistant and obstinate when people tell me to breathe or breathe deeply. It's just hard to breathe on demand. And so what I'd love you to do is, let's go straight to the storm and just kind of walk us through. I know it's not linear and it's hard to think in steps when your lid is flipped, but let's just talk about when there is this storm, what can a parent or caregiver do to really kind of maybe make it not so stormy, or make the storm more manageable? And then we'll talk a bit more about how we bring calm, okay?

**Barb:** Yeah, I guess the first thing that I want to say is that storms happen. That even in the-

**Kristie:** Pandemic or no pandemic, right?

Barb: Pandemic or no pandemic, ideal family or a different family, whatever, storms happen for ourselves and for our kids, right? And so what we're talking about when a storm is when somebody gets so agitated, or sometimes it seems like it's out of nowhere, and may get aggressive, either verbally or physically, to themselves or to others. And so this is kind of the worst of the worst is what we're talking about. And it does happen. And so just letting families know that it's common and it's okay.

Kristie: And Barb, I appreciate you, let's do the other side of the storm too, which I think part of this fatigue is causing many of us, autism aside, which is the withdraw, the depression, the unmotivated, and I don't mean that, like, "Oh, just pull yourself up by your bootstraps and get motivated about something," but just that sort of, we talk about it being in the blue zone. So when we talk about this notion of weathering the storm, you're exactly right that very hyper aroused state where we've got aggression maybe, or swearing, or just a great deal of concern for even the physical safety, but we've also got that place where you're hypo aroused. Could you just say something about that for a second?

Barb: Yeah, so sometimes, I mean, everybody is so different, so at the peak of the storm, that might look like somebody completely retreating to something that they feel comfort in. So with older kids, sometimes that's screen time, video games, that kind of stuff. For little ones with autism, that may be really rigid behaviors of getting hyper focused on something. So that's kind of what I think of... But along those lines, I think we're all experiencing a bit of boredom is part of it. And we tend to think of stress as being too much of something, but it also can be to being underwhelmed and we've talked in the past of this zone of proximal development that we all have where kids can have challenging behaviors or get in that storm because they're overwhelmed, but they also can be in that storm because they're underwhelmed, which either one can look like shutdown or aggression or-

Kristie: Any number of things.

Barb: Yeah.

Kristie: Okay. So I think sometimes we use the storm analogy that people might miss the hypo aroused, the underwhelmed. It might look like compliance, it might look like... Sometimes Stuart Shanker talks about this too, it's about like, you mentioned kids playing on screen time or video games, that being still and still using your eyes and so forth, is a stressor on your body. So you can think, "Okay, the reward is you get some time on the phone," and then after you play the game, I take the phone away, and the kid actually is worse off, or appears to be more dysregulated. And indeed, they are because they have used up different forms of energy in their body during that playing the game.

Kristie: So even though they looked quiet and soothed and content, their body was actually working really hard for different stressors, and so then they can come out of that play or



that interaction, and then families are like, "Why did I give it to them?" Because now it's worse off when I take it away. And it's not even the taking away, it's actually the amount of stress that it took to play the game, whether that's a cognitive stressor, or biological stressor, or social stressor. So anyway, okay, so we got a storm, hyper and hypo arousal, and you pick whichever you want to play it out. But if I think kind of linearly, what are my steps? How do I remain calm? How do I calm the storm? What do I do during that storm?

Barb: Yeah, so I'm going to go through just four basic things to do. The first one is obviously, get safe. So whether that is moving the child away from other children, or from any danger, it depends. So if you have a child who's flopping to the floor, you're going to move away sharp objects or furniture, right?

Kristie: Right.

Barb: And get yourself safe. I mean, those are really the basics, first and foremost. And then the second is get visually non-threatening. So most kids on the autism spectrum struggle with auditory processing, processing what you say. And so this is a time to go silent and make your body demonstrate that you are not a threat. So sometimes that means, like I said, going silent, but then slowing down, maybe sitting down, because that will calm your own system and the child's system. Softening your face, staying alert, being in observation mode, but being open in that moment. So safe, then get visually non-threatening, and then the next is to observe the child's body language for if they're in pain, need medical attention, I don't want to go past that too quickly.

Barb: Sometimes kids will be more agitated because they have a tooth that's bothering them, or you find that they're, especially kids who maybe can't communicate with you verbally, they're going to communicate through their behavior that something's wrong. And so allowing yourself to be in that moment of, "Is there any medical attention that this child needs?" Then you can go into making a bid for connection. And so you've gotten safe, you've gotten quiet, you've gotten non-threatening, this is then when you can make a bid for connection. And what that may look like is putting a hand out, but not grabbing the child, not moving them, not trying to say anything, it may just be a very subtle, small bid for connection. Could be a touch if your child is open to touch. If that is reciprocated, the child takes your hand or the child smiles at you, or whatever, you know that you're good. You're moving back on to that blue train, as we talk about, right?

Barb: So they're getting back on track. And that could be all it takes is, I see you in this moment, we're connecting in this moment, you borrow my regulation just for a second, and we're good. Most kids, that's not going to be the case. Most kids are going to fight you a little bit at first, whether they're fighting you aggressively or if they're fighting you by withdrawing and not responding, back to that hyper versus hypo arousal. And so if it's not reciprocated, you can back off for a moment. You offer the bid, it's either not reciprocated, or no response, you then wait for a moment, stay silent, give processing time, most kids on the autism spectrum need more processing time than other kids. And



you try again, potentially, in maybe a smaller way. So if you had given a bid that may have been overwhelming, and so the child wasn't able to accept it, you may then offer a easier something. So if the child's playing with something, you may just simply put your hand on the ground next to what they're playing with. So you're not a threat, you're just offering a bid of, "Hey, I'm here."

Barb: And then you keep just doing that until you gain a back and forth engagement, that even if it's tiny, the whole idea is that you're trying to offer your regulation to this child so that they can co regulate and be able to regulate their own system. That's from a developmental perspective, and neurological perspective, they may need to borrow your regulation. And through that back and forth mutual exchange is how that happens.

Kristie: Let's break down a couple of things, because I think even with the word regulation, or in particular self-regulation, and then we'll talk about co regulation, a lot of people think that that means self-control. And so we know, from especially the work of Stuart Shanker, that it's the ability to manage energy intention. So we want people to understand that there's a lot of things that get a body out of regulation, when we talk about being dysregulated, it could be that there is something that smells bad, okay?

Barb: Mm-hmm.

Kristie: So think about a time when something just smelled bad, and you're like, "Oh, what's that smell?" That is a part of your body trying to get back into regulation of where it feels like it's not offensive to have that smell, or..

Barb: Yeah, it's your body signaling danger and assimilating to that, either making that decision to go into kind of fight, flight or freeze, or can I assimilate this into where I am and regulate?

Kristie: Right, that'll pass or I can open a window, or, "Oh, that's just because somebody's cooking something." Versus, "Oh, there is something that's really a threat to me. I'm allergic to that," or that's you, know, a fire. Okay. So your body's doing a lot of work, and that's just one piece of information. So, when we think about making a bid, we have to understand that kids may see that as another threat, right?

Barb: Yes, the bid. Yeah.

Kristie: Our hand, or our comment or our gesture, even if it's a smile, from their perspective, may signal retreat, pushback, right?

Barb: Yes. And it depends on the child, how much they have experienced that when they're calm will help them in that moment experience it.

Kristie: So if they've experienced my smile or my touch when they are regulated, then when they're dysregulated, their memory of it is more like, "This is a safe thing."



Barb: Exactly.

Kristie: Okay. Because I think sometimes people think that this is a conscious thought process, versus its autopilot of the nervous system using past experiences, the present moment, and just my neural makeup, my temperament. And it's using all of that to decide. So you might say, "Oh, Christina doesn't smell too bad." And I'm like, "Oh, no, this is the worst smell ever." And it triggers a memory, and I'm in danger, and I'm off the deep end. And you're like, "It's nothing." Because we're both wired differently from our experiences, right?

Barb: Yeah, but the interesting thing about that is that we're also... There's some research going on in interpersonal neurobiology of how also that affects each of us. And so, if that were to happen when we were both in the room, we would both be tempted. I'd be tempted to go, "Ooh, what's the danger?" You'd be tempted to go, "Wait, why isn't she upset about it?" Right?

Kristie: Yeah.

Barb: And so we'd be sharing a little bit of that, even if we were both experiencing it differently.

Kristie: So it would be a great thing if the parent or the caregiver can stay more regulated, then, that's what you mean by borrow, so then the child might be like, "Huh, you don't look concerned. Or you're moving at a pace that suggests this is all good, maybe I will take your hand," versus, "This is danger," and slap it.

Barb: Exactly. Yes, there are lots of research studies around like the cliff experiment, if you've ever heard of that, and where kids look back at their caregivers to determine safety and things like that. But that's a developmental piece that kids on spectrum may not have solid yet and-

Kristie: They may not look to the caregiver and or know how to read what their caregiver means.

Barb: Yes.

Kristie: And then if the caregiver isn't consistent, because you made a couple things, like you said, let's see if I can go back to what you said because it was really important, that it was not just... You said get visually non-threatening, so you may feel non-threatening to yourself, you may think I'm not screaming at the kid, but everything else coming out of your body is saying to the kid, "This is still a threat," or if you're conflicting-

Barb: Absolutely.



Kristie: ... your face is saying one thing, but your body and tone are saying another, the kid's getting, could you say mixed messages?

Barb: Yes.

Kristie: And maybe doesn't look to you as a source of good evidence that I'm safe. They may just kind of rely on their own self.

Barb: Yes, what we're finding in the autism realm is that children developing autism may not be able to prioritize the information that's coming in. And so it just feels chaotic and overwhelming, rather than being able to say, "Oh, that's safe." Because that requires a bit of prioritizing information-

Kristie: Like, who is it coming from? How was it delivered? What did I experience from the last time I trusted that?

Barb: Yes.

Kristie: Okay. And so if it all seems equally important or unimportant- [crosstalk 00:16:52]

Barb: It may just be a shut down. I'm just going to shut it all down. Yes.

Barb: And that's why kind of... Yeah, and bringing down the overall dynamics of not being threatening visually, of not talking, waiting it out, giving processing time, is going to bring that child's hyper arousal or hypo arousal back into a workable state, where then that's when you offer the bid, and that you can give them that, I'm using a few analogies, you've used the lifeline in that moment, things like that, right?

Kristie: So one last thing before we go outside these four steps. So let's just recap the four steps for a minute. I think it's always important, because you're one of the only ones that ever say about the medical, so I'll come back to that. But that notion of getting saved, sometimes people think, "Oh, we've got to remove them, or I have to ignore them." So for me, the first and second step are bit in hand in hand, they kind of happen in the moment together, that while I'm making sure you're safe, I'm also making sure that I'm slowing down, even though I want to move quickly. It's like a series of paradoxes, right?

Barb: Right.

Kristie: I want to quickly make sure you're safe, but I don't want to move at a speed that suggests there's more danger. And then when we talk about going silent, some people may have heard about planned ignoring, and they think I have to ignore this behavior. So maybe just say something a little bit about why those first two steps are so important, and that we don't mean ignoring.



Barb: Yeah, I actually agree with you that the first three steps are actually on... like, I'm imagining being in the moment myself, is that I'm working on grounding myself as I'm looking around for danger, as I'm also observing the child for safety, but then also for medical support, and thinking about, is my body demonstrating to this child that I am not a threat?

Kristie: All while trying not to be hyper or hypo aroused yourself by the situation?

Barb: Yes.

Kristie: So, so hard.

Barb: It is hard, but we talk a lot about, especially you, talk about how important the mindset is. And you're right, that that is so hard, and if you are immediately triggered, "Not this again. Oh, my gosh," you then cannot get safe, get visually non-threatening, and observe your child to the level that is, right? And so that is the importance of assuming that, and I'm kind of jumping into some of the other steps that we were talking about, but assuming that children will rise to your expectations if they can, and sometimes if they don't, they can't, it's a-

Kristie: Not a won't.

Barb: It's not a won't. It's a can't, and they need support from us, and they need to borrow our regulation.

Kristie: So let's talk a little bit about co-regulation, because people talk more and more about it, which you and I are both glad about, but I still am not sure that it's really super clear for us as caregivers or parents. I don't even think from an interpersonal neurobiological perspective, we understand how much we co-regulate our friends.

Barb: Yeah.

Kristie: You know?

Barb: Definitely. Yeah. I was just reading an article actually about active communication, I think that was what it was called. Some of the early, like, trying to define it better, right?

Kristie: Right.

Barb: And we tend to kind of be more binary in our trying to describe things, and so we say, "Oh, well, the adult does something, then the child does something. And then the adult does something, then the child does something." Well, it's not quite that and that's turn taking, right? But it isn't that simple, because there's this contingent piece, and it's a dance that changes. And even Alan Fogel who coined the term of co-regulation, but I'm finding roots back in the '70s, but he coined it in the '90s, of co-regulation is this living,



breathing thing, right? Because you start with one, and it changes over time. What you think about with talking with friends, like we're doing right now, you start with one thing, but it grows, and it changes and you don't know quite what to expect. And that's the beauty of it. That's what brings people together. And that's what co-regulates people, right? And builds attachment and all those other things.

Kristie: So we think about it, like when you're saying first, my turn, then your turn, that's too linear and too narrow. I was also thinking, like when Stuart Shanker talks about the Triune Brain, suddenly people either think, "Oh, you're either in your upstairs brain, or you're in the middle area of the limbic regions, or you're in your basement brain." And when you really look at the Triune Brain, it's not like one is working and one isn't. They're all getting signals, and they're all bouncing information. It's when one takes over or starts to decide for the rest that we're in trouble. It's not like I've completely left my upstairs brain and gone to the basement. I'm still in the house, and I'm just maybe... So that dynamic is also, that wasn't a very good segue from what you said, but it is, it's that dance. And it's that relational, I think for you and I, it's that transactional. Growing up in Eugene, when we would talk about transactional theory, it was that idea that each move then impacts the next move, but we don't move in one step at a time.

Barb: Right. It's contingent.

Kristie: Even talking, you can't see Barb, but she's nodding her head or she's doing something with her hands, and that's signaling to my brain that, "Oh, that's making sense or that she's ready to take her turn." It's not like I just do mine, and then you do yours.

Barb: Yeah. And I think that's just such a good point that I think that with co-regulation, it's so essential for building relationships and for our regulation, and that it is more complex that it requires those nonverbal in addition to the verbal. And for whatever reason, in the autism world, I was just writing about this, we focus on word development and compliance. And those are downstream from what we're talking about that is needed for co-regulation, you can't be behavioral compliant in addition to being curious still, which is important for learning unless you're regulated. We've got to start with the regulation piece.

Kristie: Yeah. And or it's got to come together. I'm not going to be able to demonstrate my words or my compliance if I'm dysregulated. And it's not like it has to come first where we go, "Oh, we wait till you're completely regulated." Well, no, you're going to be 85 and still struggling. We spend our lives trying to become regulated, and that's why we have to look at our relationships. That's why we have to look at what are we doing in terms of our own self care, because it's a continual process for a human to find ways to stay regulated. During the pandemic, we've had to rethink, what are our stressors and what do I need to remain regulated that we may not have needed a year ago? It's different.

Kristie: So when you were talking about co-regulation, I want to pull on two other words that maybe you could help us, it's mutual and it's contingent, I think those are really often

missed as well. The mutual strikes me when you talked about if I make a bid and it's not accepted, that's a form of mutual but I want you to speak a little bit about it. And then contingent for me is this idea that it goes back and forth, but talk a little bit about mutual and contingent.

Barb: Well-

Kristie: ... how they make sense in your mind or your work with kids with autism.

Barb: Yeah, so mutual, I guess, I think of that...each person is coming to the engagement maybe willingly.

Kristie: And when you think willingly, do you think consciously? Or do you think even at a subconscious level, that it's like my body is saying, "This is good, this is safe"?

Barb: Yeah

Kristie: "This is helpful." Or-

Barb: So even offering that, I would love for the listeners to even do this with somebody, don't tell them first, but anybody in your household or whatever, offer your hand to them, and stand close, offer your hand, and without them thinking about it, they're going to put their hand in your hand. It's not super conscious. It's not like, "Oh, okay, I'm going to put my hand." It's a bid for connection. It's a, "Oh, I'm wired this way to connect with you. So yes, what's up?" So that's what we're trying to engage in those moments that a child has "flipped their lid" or whatever, right? Is just to tap into that innate need for all of us to connect, autism or not. Okay?

Kristie: Mm-hmm.

Barb: So, yes, so mutual engagement means coming from that person, in my mind, and I have to go back to research and really think about how Fogel and others define mutual engagement. But from my reading, that's how I interpret it. And then the contingent part is, what we were just talking about a little bit ago, is that how you respond is based on what the other person put out there. So you can't pre-plan what you're going to do and just do it, you have to have it be contingent, you have to be thinking about what the person is doing to then create your response. And then vice versa.

Barb: So yes, it becomes this feedback system, rather than just I do something, you do something. And it drives me nuts that people have in their plans of care or education, to have turn taking and think they've gotten taken care of because that contingency piece can be lost in turn taking. Somebody takes their turn, and then they look away, and they're not paying attention until somebody says, "Your turn." And then they take their turn. It's not contingent at all on what the other person has done...so the mutual is

taken out of it, the contingency is taken out of it. Turn taking just becomes a very flat interaction, if you can call it that.

Kristie: Right. And that's... it's not a friendship, it's not-

Barb: No.

Kristie: ...merely a social exchange at that point.

Barb: No.

Kristie: Yeah. Okay. So let's go back to, or let's bring it home with the idea of the mindset, but let's think about what are some tips that we can give caregivers to be able to be in a mindset where they can bring their calm, they can think of these steps, because it's even hard to remember what are the steps. This is a bad example, because it's about a dog, but people can relate, if anybody else has a pandemic puppy, you know that was not a good choice. Okay? And so, you got this pandemic puppy that sounded so great back in March, and now you're like, "What was I thinking?"

Kristie: So we have a dog trainer, and I love her, because it's all about my relationship with my dog. It's not about compliance. It's not about power. It's not about treats and rewards. Okay? So even my beliefs about that have trickled down to my dog, and she gives me steps, and we repeat them, and she coaches me through them, and I write them down. And then she sends me a video of them, and she puts it in a Google Drive document. In the moment, when I am tired, I am in a rush, I'm thinking about other things, those steps fall out of my brain faster than anything. I feel like I have amnesia, I can't remember. All I can do is be frustrated that I know there are steps. So I can only imagine if this is the eighth meltdown this morning with your child, how in the world are you supposed to stay calm and bring peace to this?

Barb: Well, I like that example because, let's say the opposite, say you do try and, "What are those steps? I should be remembering those steps. What are those steps? Where are they? I think I wrote them down somewhere here. Let me find them. Let me... Okay." And you're just going to stay in this heightened state of panic yourself, right? But imagine the same situation if you said to yourself, "They don't mean to be doing this. They're not doing this to me. This isn't about me. They need my help." That changes your-

Kristie: Maybe I won't do it in the right order, but..right now...

Barb: Yeah. I mean, it's just like CPR. Right? They say a lot of people can't remember in the moment exactly how many or what to do, so they give you the song to do, right? The, oh, and I'm blanking on the song.

Kristie: Because I didn't even know there was a song.



Barb: Oh, you didn't?

Kristie: No.

Barb: Oh, yeah. Oh, it's funny, too. Oh, I'm blanking. Anyway, but it's going to come to me in a second because it's funny... in my head. But anyway, the same idea is that it's okay, because anything that you do in that moment is going to be helpful if you have the basics, and so-

Kristie: So that's a good point, Barb. So anything you do in that moment is good, as long as you've got the basics. So for us, the basics would be, are you safe?

Barb: Yep.

Kristie: Am I trying to get connected to you? Am I playing detective and why now? Am I thinking about how I can go silent and be calm? That's what we mean by the basics.

Barb: Yep.

Kristie: Okay.

Barb: Yeah.

Kristie: All right. So let's say though-

Barb: I have to say that every family, when I say to go silent, that's their number one that they go to. I can't believe how much it helps.

Kristie: And that's all you have to remember. So I don't remember the steps, maybe I just remember, just be quiet for a second. Okay, so we sometimes can't even say approach silently, because Barb, and I want folks to know, we still want you to make connection, whether that's proximity or physical connection, or energy connection, but some way that human needs to borrow your regulation, you have to be around to get it borrowed.

Barb: Yes. So definitely not ignoring, which I've heard you want to highlight too, but yeah, so going... I don't remember what I was going to say.

Kristie: Oh, yeah. Approaching silently or going quiet is really one of core basics.

Barb: Thank you. Yes. So the other thing is that, I just want to make sure that we don't say go silent and do something at the same time, because going silent and waiting is extremely powerful, because of that processing time delay.

Kristie: Good point. Good point.



Barb: Most kids, especially for social information, we're finding in infant studies, have a delay in their ability to shift their attention. And so if we're just bombarding them, whether it's verbal or not, the first thing we can do is of course go silent, that's going to help. But if we keep doing something to them, that also isn't going to be helpful, so-

Kristie: There's no visual input.

Barb: Yeah. So if we need time to think and ground ourselves, it's actually a gift to them, so-

Kristie: Just remember that, that if I go quiet, I think sometimes we want to fix it right away, we want it to diminish, because we know it's going to escalate or whatever we're afraid of. So if we can just remember some of the basics are, just catch your breath, maybe catch your breath, instead of breathe, maybe that won't feel like breathing on demand, I won't be as annoyed. But give yourself a moment to catch your breath.

Barb: Yeah, I think finding a word or a phrase or a song that works for you is most important because for me, grounding is what works for me, because I really try and bring my body solid into the ground. That's just what works for me-

Kristie: Got you.

Barb: ... so that I feel like I'm not teetering, you know?

Kristie: Yeah.

Barb: From a lot of levels. But for somebody else, it might be catch your breath, somebody else, it might be the song, "Slow down, you move too fast." There's lots of other things that people use. So I think that the importance is find something for yourself in that moment-

Kristie: Perfect.

Barb: ...that is going to be your care plan.

Kristie: What else can we do as a care plan to make sure that we have the heartset and the mindset to implement this skill set?

Barb: Yeah. You'll hear in lots of different realms that there are the importance of taking care of yourself so that you can take care of somebody else. In this setting, it is absolutely completely true as well. So a couple-

Kristie: You're the caregiver, either you're the only one or you're the one, sometimes kids, like even with my dog, it's me, not Mike, that can get the co-regulation. So you're always the one on call, not to overuse it, but you're the first responder. When can you just take off?



Barb: Yeah, so I have couples that I work with or co-caregivers and that they've developed over the pandemic, you can't just leave necessarily, and there's no place to go right now, so that makes it really hard. And so yes, of course, going for a walk or something like that if you can have somebody else with your kid or kids is going to be helpful. But even that isn't sometimes possible if you're a single mom, or a single dad, but finding four hours a week. That's just kind of this number that has worked for a couple families, four hours that you work out with somebody else in your life, that you are off the clock, you get to be focused inwardly on whatever you need. It could be staring at a wall, it could be reading a book, it could be going for a walk, but you don't even have to plan it ahead. I think it gets stressful when we say, "Oh, I'm going to go for a walk every week." Then it gets stressful. But if you just have this four-hour period of time or two hours, or even one hour, if that's all you can get, but go for four. Four-hour period of time to do whatever you need to do for you, that seems to have been helpful during this pandemic, because-

Kristie: I love that idea of a week versus a day, because who even sleeps anymore four hours a day, but the idea that I've got this in the bank is the way I was thinking of it, and I've got credit in the bank, and it's mutually agreed upon by my neighbors, or my parents or my older child, whomever we can get it from. I think also it could be if your child does sleep, and you can get us a moment, try not to then, I don't know how that's possible, but to use that time maybe to renew yourself for even 10 minutes, versus now they're going to sleep for an hour, so I've got to get all my work done, all the housework done. I don't know, I'm preaching more than practicing, I'm admitting that, but just get creative. Okay?

Barb: Yeah.

Kristie: So we're aiming for about four hours a week that you get to use when you want, that does something for you. Okay, what else can we try?

Barb: Well, the other thing is, I think that we get caught up into thinking, especially during the pandemic, "Oh, my gosh, this is either," we're not doing anything, and this is dragging on that we're not doing any intervention, that we're not doing anything, and that can become stressful, right? Or the other extreme, "Oh, my gosh, this is an opportunity, I should be..." And all this guilt comes in, like, "I should be doing this, I should be doing this, I should be doing this." And so I've had a lot of families who find it really helpful that just to begin the day, starting with just one or two things they're going to do that day, or even that week, of targeting, rather than trying to target 50 things, just one or two.

Barb: So just today, what's my intention today. And if there is a caregiver in the house, it's also very helpful to communicate that with one another, because then you can back yourselves up with it. So say it is limiting screen time today, to what we've agreed on of that we're going to have no screens during dinner time or something like that. That then if you set that intention with somebody else, then they'll back you up too during the day.



And that helps too, with us being in the moment, having our calm, our regulation if we know that somebody-

Kristie: There are a lot of different therapies or a lot of different outcomes that you're working on, or even a lot of different classes your child is engaged in, however you want to think of that, you're inviting this to say, "You can't do everything every day." And we also don't want to do nothing till the pandemic's over because whatever, right? We got to still find something. So try to, in the morning, figure out for that day, what maybe makes sense and prioritize or pick what you're most excited about or what feels right. Things like that?

Barb: Absolutely. Yeah.

Kristie: Okay.

Barb: What seems most salient today? And I'm always somebody who's trying to find the goal beneath the goal, and so it may be a very specific skill, using a fork today. But it also could be, today, I'm going to just introduce new challenges in ways, where that's your intention versus just the fork. But either way is fine.

Kristie: Yep. And some days you might do both, and some days you might do neither.

Barb: Exactly.

Kristie: Okay. All right. What else? One more?

Barb: Well, I think just what we have... Talking about kind of setting the stage for success of grounding yourself and having the mindset is important, but I think just two other things of how to support your... So that's supporting you to be at your best, supporting your child to be at their best. Is it all right if I say-

Kristie: Yeah, for sure.

Barb: Yeah. So making sure that in your home, you have the boundaries, or the rules or whatever, clearly stated, and that's usually visual. And when I say boundaries, so those could be household rules. So I mentioned screen time. But it also could be that you only eat at the table rather than wandering around, it could be whatever it is, but decide on just a few and then make those really clear and visual as much as you can, because kids do well when they have boundaries. We think that's not true, because kids will bounce up against them and fight them sometimes, but it actually makes them feel more secure to know that limit. So get clear on your limits, your boundaries and then communicate those with your family.

Kristie: Yeah, so it's like, I'll use my dog analogy again because that's all I have, sometimes we think we don't want to put him in his pen, which is like the size of a living room, because

then he'll be in his pen and he won't be happy. But he gets in there and boom, he's asleep. Because it's not the whole house and it's safer and it's predictable, but I needed the permission. So my amazing dog trainer, Abby, says, "I want him in his pen two hours a day," I'm like, "Two hours a day?" But now I look at his homework, I'm like, "He's supposed to be in there," versus, "Oh, I put them in there." So if you have to play those games with yourselves, then that's fine. Barb said we have to have some boundaries, we have to have some limits. I'm not being a bad parent, I'm not making them sad, whatever we do to ourselves, right?

Barb: Well, and the two words that you used of safety and predictability, that's exactly what it does for people on spectrum and kids in general, all of us, right? Is that if we don't have... I mean, which the pandemic is causing us to-

Kristie: Yeah.

Barb: ... that unpredictableness and that kind of vastness that is stressful. And so putting boundaries on that, and that can look a lot of different ways, like the household rules, like I was talking about, but it also can be having a calendar up and just saying when is family night? When are we going to have music night? Kind of getting some regularity can be helpful, depends on your child, but having some sort of-

Kristie: ...food for breakfast, like, let's plan that.

Barb: Yeah, having some sort of outline. I had a counselor a long time ago who talked about boundaries that breathe.

Kristie: Yes, I love that phrase.

Barb: I love it too. So it's the same thing, I'm not talking about making any family extremely structured, because that's not family life, that's not real life, that's not quality life. But having some, so it's this basic outline to then be able to work from is going to be helpful for all kids. Then the next thing to help kids or children be at their best is giving choices frequently and liberally. We forget to give kids choices, we just want them to comply and get through the day or whatever. But simple things like, "Which T-shirt do you want to wear today?" Can make a huge difference in having a child feel that, what's called personal agency, or control over their own lives, which is so natural and so positive. We want kids to have that so that they can make decisions for themselves as they go forward in life. And so celebrating those when we can, and I have a friend who used to say give choices within non choices. So we're going to go to the car, what do you want to carry, this or this? Isn't a choice about we're going to the car, it just gives them a choice as to what they can have control over.

Kristie: I love that you use the word liberally, anywhere, if you spend your day thinking about where can I offer choices, that and going silent during the middle of a storm, I think will be game changers, if you get nothing out of this conversation, if you get those two



things, is like, "Where can I just sprinkle choices?" The choice is really important for several reasons, which Barb's already alluding to, my friend, Julie Causton, when we talk about inclusion, and really inclusion is just having a sense of belonging and being a part of something, that we always say that choice is the friend of inclusion. And so when we don't have choices, then we're excluding, we're saying what you can't have or you can't do or what you can't be or where you can't try. And what we always want to do is think about, what is the positive side of this? What is the "I can" in this situation? It doesn't mean that you're running the roost, it doesn't mean that the world is your oyster per se, there are still these boundaries that breathe. So I think helping people think about choices in a really broad sense can have such power.

Barb: Yeah, and the other way I think about it is that we want kids, children to have drive and motivation and be troublemakers in the world. And so we need to kind of redirect that energy if we see it. I've always said it's easier to redirect a fire than to light a fire under somebody. Right?

Kristie: Yeah. Right.

Barb: Anyway, so I always think of it as if you have a really "controlling kid", which I know we don't love that wording, but you have a child who's saying no to everything or slopping to the floor for everything or fighting everything, that is energy that can be redirected through giving choices of one that can, because it is a normal part of human development to want that, again, personal agency. And if we don't give it to them, they're going to take it in ways that are not appropriate.

Kristie: Yeah, they'd become maladaptive, essentially.

Barb: Yeah. Exactly.

Kristie: We usually think about, "Oh, it's not socially appropriate, or it's not appropriate for that setting." But it's really not adaptive for that human system, and it's a pathway or a habit, if you will, that by six, six and a half, may become so ingrained that even redirecting it becomes a life's work. And so we really want to think early on, how do we create adaptive ways to funnel and channel that energy versus those maladaptive ways that the body will find?

Barb: Yeah, and that's where giving-

Kristie: Whether that's lying on the floor, right?

Barb: Yeah. I mean, that's where giving kids jobs in classes is so helpful. That's you're giving choices, those kinds of things are so... I mean, that's why they work.

Kristie: And Barb, I think you taught me this once, too. It's like, if you're going to offer choices, you have to accept the choice.



Barb: Yep.

Kristie: Sometimes I don't want either of what you've presented me, so sometimes it can't just be do you want this or that? Maybe there needs to be three things. Or maybe there's... Julie always says, there's always an ABC and a D. And the kid maybe comes up with the D, and he had to be a little bit willing, maybe not a little bit, a lot of it willing to allow for some of those option Ds.

Barb: Yes. Absolutely. Yeah. And not to overcomplicate things, but sometimes if we ask just what would you like to do? That's too much.

Kristie: Too much.

Barb: But then what you just said is sometimes giving two choices is not enough and-

Kristie: The binary is rarely, think of it as true or false. How many times have you taken a quiz, it was something that was true or false, and you're like, "Well, it's true under these and it's false if you mean that." You can't really commit, or you know those personality things you do on Facebook? Like, "Are you like this or are you like that?" You're like, "Well, I'm kind of, it depends. At home, I'm like this. And at work, I'm like that," because we really don't live in a binary, we live in this multiplicity, in this complexity. So we don't have to make it hyper complex, like, "What would you like in the world today, Barb?" But if there's an ABC and an option for a D, that's not bad. Most humans can work within that, especially if you're a safe harbor and you know that sometimes D is not going to be a choice, because today, we can't. It's pouring rain, so it's not an option, but you trust enough to know that maybe tomorrow, D is an option.

Barb: And I should say that just a shameless plug for my [Sun Diagram](#) to make that process visual, of being able to help someone understand what their choices are in a given situation, or when they're feeling a certain way, things like that, that's available on my website, and-

Kristie: I'll link to it, Barb, because it is one of my favorite things, and we could spend another hour explaining it, but you've already got videos and handouts and downloads. It's called the [Sun Diagram](#), and we'll make sure everyone has a link to it, so that they can understand how you present choices to other humans, even yourself. So if you're looking at how might I refuel? How might I do some self care? How might I bring calm to my family? You might even want to make your own sun diagram. So there's a little bit of homework for everyone to check out the sun diagram. All right, so Barb, any last comments as we wrap up? Any key takeaways that you would just say, "Okay," if you listened to all of this, what's the one thing you hope someone remembers?

Barb: What I liked that we were talking about earlier of just the importance of taking a moment when you are triggered, or whatever the word that people like in that moment that a behavior is happening, to find something for yourself that grounds you or sets you



in the right mindset to support and not to worry as much about the specific steps, but if you can get yourself in that kind of state of mind, that alone can be extremely helpful. But the other thing that we started with is that everybody is struggling during the pandemic, and so now and always, it is common for at least a few people in the household to be having moments that aren't the most fun. But it's also how we learn how to regulate through co-regulation, it's how we learn how to manage interactions with people when it doesn't go as planned. So there are also opportunities for learning.

Kristie: Always the positive optimist. Yes, there are always opportunities for learning. We'll leave it on that note. Thank you, Barb.

Barb: Yeah.

