



Podcast 37: Wait for Green Before you Go

Episode notes: www.prektechandplay.com/podcast37

Hey Solutionaries, this is Kristie, and in [podcast 37](#), we're going to be talking about the [red zone](#), the green zone, and the blue zone, and what our job is as brain architects, as early care and education professionals, and as parents in those different zones.

But I thought I needed to talk a little bit about what we don't do when it comes to one of our primary jobs. What in the world?

Okay, let me break it down. So one of the things I often say is that, "Hey, whatever practice it is that you are implementing, if it is helping the child stay in the [green zone](#) of [optimal learning](#), if it's widening their window of tolerance, I can't really argue with you." As you know, I go all around the world- we like to say from Cincinnati to Singapore- talking about their early care and education revolution.

So that means that oftentimes people say, "So Kristie, is this good? Is this bad? What's your ideal? What would you do instead? What would be 'perfect'?" And that's oftentimes a really hard answer, even though I have lots of opinions. As you know, it sort of depends on the context. It depends on who the players are. It depends on the children of course. And so that could even mean what my recommendation is for the morning versus the afternoon class, or on Friday versus on Monday, could move around a little bit.

So, I get sort of feeling like I'm pushed against a wall to come up with an answer. And so my sort of short answer is, "Hey, whatever it is, whatever I'm recommending, whatever your district has adopted, whatever Pinterest might be promoting, if that's something that promotes and sustains children's ability to operate in the green zone, then I'm not going to argue with you."

The other day though, as that sort of response was coming out of my mouth, I thought, "Hey, wait, what if people start to think, hmm- if I'm advocating and our district or our state is moving in the direction of more inclusive and less restrictive environments, but yet that environment seems highly chaotic, overly demanding, and overpopulated, to be quite honest. And so for this child's needs, it's overstimulating them or that they just can't work within that space".



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So, we're going to put them in a more restrictive environment or a self-contained classroom. Or I even heard the other day, it's called a centralized classroom, whatever we want to call it. We're thinking about pulling out, pulling over, or pulling aside because we're worried that that by engaging in the practice of putting the child in an inclusive setting, we'll actually remove them from the green zone. I thought, "Wait, wait. That's not what I want either."

Right? You know that I believe so strongly that inclusion and that sense of well-being, and that sense of belonging, is everyone's right. It's not a rite of passage. But what if that inclusive environment is actually keeping the child, or at least our perception is it's keeping the child from staying in the green zone? Then wouldn't we be justified to keep them in a different environment? You kind of get the quandary I'm in?

So again, we're going to dive deep into what is the green zone and how do we keep children in it, and why is that our primary job but before we do that. I thought, "Hmm, I better explain a little bit about this concern I have that people will use that sort of rule or that guide or that litmus test of hmm." If this, let's say the inclusive classroom is the 'this', if it doesn't keep them in the green zone, then I'm justifiable in my decision, or in our team's decision to remove them.

But I want to talk a little bit about why many special educators, myself included, especially in the past, why families...While it might seem logical that we say, "Oh my, this classroom seems far too chaotic, far too demanding." The needs of the child are far too great that we can't meet them in this environment-but look over here in this smaller class size in this more restrictive space. And to be quite honest, the segregated classroom, hmm. I think I can keep them in the green zone".

So, I want to say that despite these 30 plus years of research and laws and thousands and thousands of stories from families and people with identified disabilities, we would say, "Yep. I think a more restrictive environment makes a great deal of sense and I can use Kristie's rule that I'm helping keep the child in the green zone, so therefore, yes, we should do the more restrictive environment."

When in fact, I'm going to say continue to use my guide, my rule if you will, to decide which practices to implement. Sometimes when we remove a child, we pull them out, pull them over, pull them aside, it's because we think that the place they currently are is too chaotic and therefore making them become hyper-aroused or even hypo-aroused. I'm going to argue that oftentimes that removal then does the flip side of chaos, which is rigidity. And so [as Dan Siegel](#) talks about [either side of the river](#), either bank of the river, if you will, one side is chaos. One side is rigidity.



Either one is not helping the child stay in the [zone of optimal learning](#) in the [green zone](#), establishing that [window of tolerance](#), however you want to think about it. And again, this episode will go into more detail about those zones, but for right now I want you to understand that we might remove a child from chaos, but we might plant them in rigidity.

So, these self-contained, these highly structured, these highly predictable environments. While we think we're soothing the nervous system, we actually might be doing the flip side, which is promoting an environment that is highly rigid, which is also not keeping the child in the green zone. So even though it might look better or to us might even feel a little bit better (or safer might be the word), we're actually promoting rigidity, which is also outside the [zone of optimal learning](#).

Second thing I want you to think about is now that we have made the threshold the way back into this more chaotic classroom, or we might have felt that you have high needs. Now, the onus is on the child. Now the child needs to have fewer needs. Now the child needs to have that rite of passage. Now it becomes can the child tolerate this environment before we put them back in?

So, this no longer is a short-term removal. This is not a short-term for right now. We're going to keep you safe, but it becomes a long-term- actually highly predictable- that you will remain self-contained. You will remain secluded. You will remain segregated. And so, it becomes on the child to change, and we've done nothing to actually remedy the situation. So there's at least two problems here.

First of all, it may not have been the inclusive classroom's problem in the first place. Meaning, you look at it and on the cuff you're like, "Hmm, this is pretty chaotic. This is pretty out there. I don't think the child can do it. Or the adults can't meet the child's need." But have we thought about maybe the other thing that's happening in the child's life, so maybe they go to ABA therapy for X number of hours a week.

Maybe they have lots of transitions because of their family's work schedule and they have to go to different childcare providers throughout the day. Maybe the child is not doing well with eating or sleeping, or those kind of consistent routines in other environments. So it's not just the inclusive classroom that's pushing the child over the edge. It's all the other things happening. So if we can look at a 24-hour clock, maybe there's other places we can reduce that we can remedy. And then the inclusive environment becomes more doable because we've reduced in other places.



So instead of automatically thinking, let's pull the child out, over are aside, more secluded, more segregated- can we think of a 24-hour clock and see what's going on?

The second thing is, is that we can think, "Hmm, as a human, how do I help you actually learn to deal with chaos?" And that's not to make things always less chaotic. Meaning, I need to be in the chaos, but I might need a guide on the side. I might need support and scaffolding, I might need practice, but I need someone there with me.

And I don't mean a one-on-one aide. I don't mean a "shadow". I mean responsive peers, responsive adults, even if that's just one person in the environment that can help keep me as the child in a more regulated state. So it's these bi-directional serve and return opportunities. And so you often hear me talk about the [zigzag process](#).

So can adults do things that will simplify, that will make things more concrete, that will make things more preferred, that will make things simpler? So there's lots and lots of things that we can do as a guide on the side in the moment that will help me from flipping my lid, that as my body sort of starts to become hyper or hypo-aroused, I can help as the co-regulator in the environment put the brakes on it.

And so, there's really this dance that needs to happen versus again, let's remove you from the dance floor because this is too much, or you have too high of needs. And so we can think that maybe some of these things that help put the brakes on would be actually helpful for all children or all adults in the environment. So it's not too overwhelming or too individualized.

We can do these sort of class-wide, and they would benefit everyone. So we want to think about two things that we want to think about. The 24-hour clock, and maybe it's not just the inclusive classroom that's pushing the child over the edge, if you will. And then secondly, what can we do as a guide or coach on the side that will help you when you're experiencing this chaos, and that the remedy isn't this very radical (if you will) pull out, pullover, or pull aside.

So that's a little bit longer of an intro than I meant it to be, but I wanted to set the stage for the actual podcast, which is about these zones, the [green zone](#) in particular, and what our job is. But I wanted to make sure that as you were listening to it, that we didn't misunderstand my message and start using this guide or this rule of, well if a practice removes a child from the [green zone](#), then I should stop that practice.



And if that practice is placing them in the inclusive classroom, then logic would say remove them from the inclusive classroom. And so I wanted to clarify that the rule stays in place, that our job is to keep them in the green zone and we want to adopt practices that support the green zone. But that when it comes to placement, there are many other decisions that the team needs to consider- from the 24-hour clock, to our interactions in the moment that will help a child stay in the green zone and stay in the least restrictive environment.

Part 2: Podcast 37

One of the things that we talk about all the time is how to help children learn [self-regulation skills](#), and we also talk about how do we keep them in the Green Zone of optimal learning. Sometimes this is referred to as the window of tolerance. Sometimes again, we talk about it as a Green Zone, but it's this place where the nervous system, the body, the wholeness of the child is in a place kind of physically, mentally, spiritually, emotionally ready to learn. And so sometimes we talk about it just as an optimal place.

Our goal as early educators and our goal as brain architects is to extend that [Green Zone](#) or open that [window of tolerance](#) to be as big as it can be and to allow children to be in that space as much as possible. So, once you understand that that's where teaching and learning takes place, then when something is presenting itself, you can start to decide what should you do.

So, if a child is becoming escalated, or even a child is becoming hypo-aroused, under-aroused, that sort of freeze or faint, that sort of shut down...It could be shame, it could be confusion, it could be boredom, it could be just sort of like, not very interested. There's also this other side of things that doesn't have to be the aggression or the running or the biting or the grabbing or the kicking. Either side of those, the hyper-arousal or the hypo-arousal, either one of those takes the child outside of the [Green Zone](#). And so, when you see that starting to happen, there are definitely things that you can do to recognize what are the stressors that this child is facing? This child's body's nervous system, what's going on both internally and externally that's causing them to leave that optimal zone or that [window of tolerance](#)?

And to the extent that it's possible, you want to [reduce any of the stressors](#) that you have under your control, whether that be sensory processing information, whether that be just something that is a direction or correction or overcrowding of a play area. There's lots and lots of different ways once we start to understand what stressors this child's nervous system is facing.





Now, if we have a child who's nonverbal, if we have a child who's overly escalated or under escalated, they may not be able to contribute much to this sort of process of recognizing what are the stressors. But if they can, and when they can or even while they're just in the [Green Zone](#), part of [teaching self-regulation](#) in terms of attention, regulation, interaction, recall, problem solving...in order to do that, to really build that emotional literacy, we want children to become self-aware that they are becoming hyper-aroused or that they are becoming hypo-aroused.

So again, if you're in that [Green Zone](#), it doesn't mean that it's beautiful, perfect, flawless. It just means that we are able as a human to learn something to gain greater awareness, self-awareness, situational awareness, and we can then start to say, "Ah, there are some stressors and there are things I can do to [reduce those stressors](#). If I can't get there on my own because I'm young or because I have particular disabilities, I certainly need adults there to help guide me through that process, so I don't become too hyper-aroused or too hypo-aroused." So again, it's really important that before we start to problem-solve around what should I do when (and you can fill in the blank with whatever is the when), we really want to make sure, "Is the child in the [Green Zone](#) or not?"

If they're in the [Green Zone](#), our job is really to keep them in the [Green Zone](#) to notice, recognize, identify when they start to escalate or deescalate and might be leaving that [Green Zone](#). So then what can we do to reduce and restore them to that optimal state? And then we're certainly always using our [co-regulation](#) strategies and our strategies for teaching [self-regulation](#), so that while you're in that [Green Zone](#), you can actually learn how to [stop, think, and then act](#). To gain your [emotional literacy](#) vocabulary so that you become self-aware of your emotions and you know what you could do about them that is more socially appropriate and not just a reaction by your nervous system.

Now let's talk about the times where a child becomes hyper-aroused or hypo-aroused. This is really important that we recognize this as a different job description at this point. So our job is no longer to teach children [how to self-regulate](#) because we've gone too far. And it's not that children have the conscious control of which state to be in. The nervous system takes what's the most adaptable response given the current circumstances, its past memory of experiences that are like this, as well as the child's own temperament. And this is what makes it so dynamic from day to day, minute to minute, situation to situation. You might feel like you're [reducing the stressors](#) that are known to cause the child to become hyper or hypo-aroused, but then on another day, those same efforts to [reduce stressors](#) doesn't result in the desired outcome.



So just be clear that once a child is now in the hyper-aroused state or the hypo, and we call that the Red or the Blue Zone, your job is to... It's going to sound like both sides of my mouth because I'm going to ask you to quickly get them back into the [Green Zone](#). And by quickly, I just mean because our goal is to [always find ways back to the green](#), to learn how to get back into the green, and how to stay in the green.

So we don't want to hang out in the red and the blue for long, because we can't be learning stuff there. We're dysregulated. That said, part of the learning process, part of learning how to get myself back into the green from the blue or the red, is to process this really [big emotion](#), this really strong emotion that I'm probably not even aware of that I'm experiencing.

So there's this kind of two things we're doing. We want to offer a lifeline to a child so we're absolutely acting from a place of compassion and we're trying to connect. We're trying to get them curious about us and want to come back into their social exchange with us, but at the same time, we don't want to rush it. We don't want to tell them that they can't feel something or that they don't feel something or that they've got to stop feeling something. And we don't want to do this through a lot of talking and things that are going to require auditory processing, sensory processing, just all that beautiful stuff that's going to happen up in their cortex, in their prefrontal cortex about comprehension, and perspective taking, and empathy. All these things that we want are really offline or inaccessible. So, we want to allow for the processing but also move as quickly as we can given the child's processing back to a regulated state that we can then teach.

Now people get really nervous at this point because they're like, "The child is harming themselves or others, or the child is being disrespectful, or the child is being noncompliant, or the child is ignoring me or refusing, or walking away, and I can't just let them do that. I can't let them think that's an okay thing to do. We have rules, we have rituals, we have routines. Why would I act with compassion at this point? I need to be firm. I need to restate the rule. I need to reinforce only what is the desired behavior. I also am worried about their other children. Are they going to be harmed? Are they going to learn that I'm permissive and that I'm just allowing this child to do whatever they want?"



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And so that's a mindset that you have to sort of get your head wrapped around. That in this moment when this child or even a group of children is reacting from a blue or a red state, that this is not intentional. And even if that feels like it, I want you to think of it as a habit, a bad habit, and a habit that they're going to need your help in breaking. And so, it's nearly impossible for young children, less than 25 years old, to do this without repeated practice, without a guide, without some sort of lifeline of how to get things back online. Then when they're back online, you can go back to the rule, the ritual, the routine that was needed to be repaired, if you will.

Let's just stay here for a minute though, in the [red](#) or the blue, the hyper or the hypo-aroused state. Again, our job is twofold. We want to offer a lifeline because we want to save them if that helps, or we're going to help them break the habit by not letting them stay in that habit for a long time. So if you like the word reinforce, you can use it. Probably here though, it's very confusing for people, but it's like the longer I stay doing that, the more the neural pathway gets stronger and stronger and says, "This is what I want. This is what I need. This is what helps you calm down." And so, hit or grab or scream or whatever it is that my body reacted to, it says, "That's the perfect response." So, we want to quickly "move the child out" so that we're not strengthening that neural pathway or that habit.

But we also want to give the child time to process that [big emotion](#), to recognize it, understand it, and then develop coping strategies of how to regain a more neutral state or a more neutral response. And so we've got to not worry at that moment that we're not teaching them the rule because we aren't, they cannot learn when they're in that hyper or hypo-aroused state. So if we do really think it's important to teach the rule, then that even more important that we get the child back into the [Green Zone](#). And then we can go back to restating, having the natural consequence, reteaching, whatever it is we need to do to help the child learn the skill.

So you really want to think about, "I have two different jobs. I'm either in the [Green Zone](#) with the child and I'm helping them learn [self-regulation](#) skills, how to problem solve, how to have an appropriate response when things don't go their way, how to keep themselves in the [Green Zone](#). But the moment a child moves into or their body moves them into the red or the blue, my job also moves or changes. And now my job is to help process, [co-regulate](#), offer a lifeline." And that's where the compassion, the connection, the wanting to create calm. It's not saying that the behavior is okay, "It's not okay that you hit somebody. It's not okay that you swore at somebody. It's not okay that you ran away from me. But it is okay that you have this [big emotion](#), and I'm going to be here to help you process through it to get back into that zone of optimal learning. And then we can talk about, 'Okay, the next time something happens, what can we do differently?'" But that's this dance that's continual.





You've got to keep the child in the [Green Zone](#) long enough to begin to learn and practice [self-regulation](#). But for many children, they will spend a majority of their time slipping out of the [Green Zone](#) and staying in the red or the blue or a mixture of red and blue, with only small amounts of time in the green. So we have very limited opportunities to teach them [self-regulation](#) skills. That ability to [stop, think, act](#). That attention, regulation, interaction, recall, problem solving. What to do when I get hyper or hypo-aroused. That's all that got to be taught and practiced and modeled and feedback given. But I can only teach that and a child can only learn those skills of [self-regulation](#) when they're in the [Green Zone](#). So it's both.

And it's not that we teach [self-regulation](#) at certain times of the day or as a part of our curriculum that's from a certain section of the routine, it's constant. The only time we're not teaching [self-regulation](#) skills is when a child is in the blue or the red. And in that instance, it could last a breath, it could last half a day, it could last a week. If the child's in the red for any amount of time, our job switches to be in this compassionate, calm coach, if you will, that is trying to connect, trying to get this child to want to be curious and to come back and to see us as a trusted coach and guide that will help them process the [big emotion](#), figure out better solutions than what they're currently doing.

Now, all of that said, this all happens so quickly. There's a lot of fear that other children might get hurt, you might get hurt, the child themselves might get hurt. There might be policies in place, other people might be judging us about how we're dealing with the situation. So these are bigger conversations that we have to have with families, with administrators, with co-teachers, with therapists, so that we all have the same mindset that we're all [recognizing and reducing stressors](#). We're all teaching [self-regulation](#) skills that are developmentally where the child is, and that we understand that when they're into the blue or the red, our job is no longer to teach the rule, the ritual, the routine, but rather it is to offer that lifeline and engage in that processing through [co-regulation](#). And then again, once they're back into the green, we can revisit the rule.

When it comes to what should I do to keep a child safe? This is a little bit harder because depending on your agency, where you live in the world, there may be different guidance lines, policies, or even laws on whether or not you can touch children, whether you can hold them or restrain them. So there are definitely rules that need to be clarified for all the adults. And then there are absolutely suggestions and procedures out there about how to keep other humans safe. Not just children, but adolescents or adults. How to keep them safe without doing things that typically, can be more aggravating or can be a problem in terms of restraint. So that's a very slippery slope.





When they're younger, it's sort of our impulse to move children's bodies even when they're not in the red or the blue. I see a lot of people helping children move around, that don't really have a motor delay, or moving them at a rate that they want them to go if the child's too slow or too fast. So we have this habit with young children because we're bigger than they are and we have to be really careful that we still have the goal of keeping the child, ourselves, and all the other children and the environment safe, but that we don't too quickly get to restraint.

And so again, you need to check with your own agencies and if you don't have a policy, there's absolutely big groups of people that are working on these kinds of recommendations about how to help support children when it gets that escalated.

Our hope is that by simultaneously teaching [self-regulation](#) skills while in the green and [reducing stressors](#) to keep you from going into the red or the blue, that we've diminished the chance of needing to do these more extreme things to keep children safe. But we know that many children can become so overloaded that that sensory process or that sensory overload becomes like a reaction to trauma, and that it can be a very severe reaction on the child's body's part in terms of banging their head on cement or biting or doing self-injurious behavior. So, these are things that we have to sit down as a team and decide not only what is our plan in that moment, especially if it's an escalated moment, but what is our plan to reduce the likelihood of that happening.

And it's not just trying to figure out what the triggers are and keeping from the triggers. We can't keep humans from having [big emotions](#), is how to keep the [big emotion](#) from being not so big so that it ends up in a place where we're worried about safety. Hopefully, the whole first part of this recording helps you think about holistically how we're teaching kids skills so they can regulate and become regulatory on their own. What to do when we see them escalating or deescalating, what to do when we are in the red or the blue, and then definitely it's a really team-by-team decision when it comes to when a child is not physically safe, you're not safe, or other children are not safe. Definitely there needs to be a plan for that and it can't be a one-size-fits-all. So it can't be a schoolwide or agency-wide with zero tolerance policies because we have to take into account the cognitive skills of the child, the language skills of the child, the age of the child, the relationship or non-relationship they have with the adults who are caring for them, and how much time they've spent in the [Green Zone](#) to even learn the rules that they're expected to follow.