

# Ep #27: Back to School Series: Ask an Autism Expert with Dr. Darren Sush



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Lisa Candra

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You are listening to episode 27 of *The Autism Mom Coach*, Back to School Series: Ask an Autism Expert with Dr. Darren Sush. In this week's episode I am talking to Dr. Darren Sush about ways parents can prepare themselves and their children for the school year. Stay tuned.

Welcome to *The Autism Mom Coach*, a podcast for moms who feel overwhelmed, afraid, and sometimes powerless as they raise their child with Autism. My name is Lisa Candra. I'm a certified life coach, lawyer, and most importantly I'm a full-time single mom to a teenage boy with Autism. In this podcast I'll show you how to transform your relationship with Autism and special needs parenting. You'll learn how to shift away from being a victim of your circumstances to being the hero of the story you get to write. Let's get started.

Hello and welcome to the podcast. This is the final episode of the Back to School Series and it will be my interview with Dr. Darren Sush. Darren is a licensed clinical psychologist and a board certified behavioral analyst with close to 20 years of experience developing and providing services for children and adults diagnosed with Autism spectrum disorder and developmental disabilities. Darren is the Head of Autism and Psychology with Evernorth Behavioral Health, a Cigna Corporation.

And he is a co-author of a book called *A Workbook of Ethical Case Scenarios and Applied Behavioral Analysis*, first and second editions. He is also an adjunct faculty member in the Applied Behavioral Analysis Program at Pepperdine University and an associate professor in ABA analysis and clinical psychology programs at the Chicago School of Professional Psychology where he teaches doctoral and masters courses in ABA and psychology.

Alright, that was a mouthful but let me just say, you are in for a treat. I have had the privilege of working with Darren and hearing him speak on multiple occasions and I always feel so seen by him. Not only does Darren understand Autism, he deeply understands the struggles that parents

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raising children with Autism face as well as the lack of support for parents. This is why prior to this current role he treated parents raising kids with Autism because he saw the profound gap between the need for support and available services.

In addition, Darren understands and respects the role that we the parents play as the experts on our children. This came up towards the end of our interview and honestly, I know that I tell this to you, I know I've even done two episodes about why parents are the experts on their children. But I have to say, it felt really nice to hear this from an Autism expert. This is just one of a few gems that Darren drops throughout this episode so I hope that you enjoy it.

I will leave Darren's social media links in the show notes and if you would like to follow him, please do. And just one more thing, a bit of housekeeping here. This was my first podcast episode interviewing a guest and it shows by how much I talked over Darren at some points. Now, part of this was because I'm kind of used to talking to him and I was so excited by some of the stuff that he was talking that I got a little bit ahead of myself. So, I apologize in advance. Okay, let's get to it.

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Lisa: Welcome to the podcast everyone. I am so glad you are here and I'm delighted to have a special guest with us, my colleague, Dr. Darren Sush. Darren, why don't you introduce yourself to the audience.

Darren: Sure. So first, thank you so much for having me on the podcast, I really appreciate it. It's really great to be able to be a guest. So, like you mentioned, I'm Darren Sush, so am a licensed clinical psychologist. I'm also a BCBA-D which stands for Board Certified Behavioral Analyst with a Doctoral distinction. And yeah, it's really great to be here.

Lisa: Great. And I said colleagues because we both work for the same company. I think you call it Evernorth now, I call it Cigna still.

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Darren: Yeah. I still find myself accidentally calling it Cigna all the time. And sometimes people correct me, sometimes they don't even know what I'm talking about when I say Evernorth. Yeah, but we do work together, we do work together at Evernorth, or Cigna, or whatever way we want to say it on that day.

Lisa: Yeah. And just to add to this that Darren and I are speaking on behalf of ourselves. We're not speaking on behalf of Cigna or Evernorth, just so that that is clear. So anyhow, I run a parent group at Cigna called The Parents of Kids with Different Abilities because we have different connection groups within Cigna that are great for employees. But there was something missing when it came to parents of kids with special needs. And so, when I created this group I soon thereafter I met Darren and he has presented to our group a few times and it's been so well received.

So, I was super excited when he agreed to be here and I'm excited for all of us to learn from him. So, as you all know, during this Back to School Series, I have been focusing on what we the parents can do to prepare ourselves for back to school in terms of our thoughts, and our emotions, and just preparing ourselves for some of the difficulties that we expect our children to have. How can we make decisions ahead of time? How can we mentally rehearse how we want to show up?

And so, I think I've covered that quite a bit. So, for Darren's time here I really want to focus on some of the, but what do I do when my child won't get on the school bus or is refusing to go to school? Or when they come home and they are hell on wheels. Anyhow, so Darren, I know that you have a lot of experience working with children and adults. And start wherever you want but these are some of the questions that I have been getting. I put some feelers out there on my Instagram and Facebook, and these were the questions that folks came back with.

Darren: Yeah. So, I guess maybe give a little bit more about my background and then how I came to the position that I'm in right now. At

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Evernorth, at Cigna, I'm the Head of Autism and Psychology. One of my responsibilities that I do within that role is I review authorization requests when people are looking for applied behavior analysis, ABA treatment services. When providers are making requests to provide those services, my team and myself we review those authorizations.

And within that role I get the opportunity to talk to providers from all over the country and one of the really great things about that is I'm on the West Coast, I'm in California. And yeah, I have an opportunity to directly interact with a lot of colleagues who are local to me. But within this role I get the chance to talk to so many more individuals who are providing [inaudible] services than I ever would have imagined even more so than what you would get if you just went to a conference or if you shared information online.

And one of the nice things about that, even though I'm operating in a reviewer role is I get to talk about different treatment strategies. I get to talk about different opportunities for support and network these different ideas that are still evidence based, still from the research that's been conducted, demonstrated effectiveness, demonstrated usability. But gain all these new perspectives, and insights, and innovations.

And one of the things that you're mentioning that I hear a lot from providers also, especially this time of year as we're gearing up, we're already into the start of the school year is, we're transitioning from summer. This is going to be really hard. Even if you were in an extended school year or ESY, and you really didn't get maybe as much of a break from school as others, it's still different because it's a new teacher, it's a new classroom oftentimes. Or just a new routine that you're trying to get used to.

Lisa: And we know that our kid are like tuning forks for any subtle changes, like big ones, right?

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Darren: Yeah. Everybody's a little bit different and some people handle change a little bit easier, a little bit better than others. But certainly, one of the things that we see a lot for Autistic individuals is that challenge, that difficulty when things aren't as expected, or when you get used to doing things one way and then they switch up. And what is the new school year? A whole bunch of switch ups. It's a whole bunch of switch ups for everybody.

So, for that child who's entering into the school year and maybe it's even as subtle as hey, I have to take a different door to get into school or it's a different hallway to get there because drop off has changed. Or because now I'm in a grade up so I have to go in and travel with different people. And then there's that anticipation change and maybe the stress that comes with oh my gosh, how is my kid going to handle this difference?

For the parents or for the caregivers to say, "Okay, this is going to be different. I hope they're going to be okay. I hope they're going to be okay. I really don't know if they're going to be okay until we get into it." And that stress can emit from people too and can make things a little bit more pressured and a little bit more difficult.

Lisa: Yeah, definitely. I always talk about that sort of co-escalating or co-regulating impact we can have as parents on our children. A couple of things with the anticipatory stress, it's not just them, it's us as well too. And one of the things that I struggle with is knowing intellectually that my son struggles with change but then really understanding it. It's just a different door. What's the big deal? And I'm wondering because I know that you actually work with parents too in your private practice.

What kinds of things do you – I don't know – any tricks or tips on how we as parents can be reminding ourselves that this is a bigger deal than we really understand, almost humbling ourselves to the fact that we don't get it?

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Darren: Yeah. Or giving ourselves a little bit of leeway. So, you're right, before coming over to Cigna and Evernorth, I owned and operated a private practice. And the main focus of that private practice was really providing therapy, providing support to parents of Autistic individuals, parents of individuals with developmental disabilities, or family members, mostly parents though.

And the reason I started that private practice with that focused population was because when I was working with Autistic individuals directly I had the opportunity to be invited into a lot of different homes. Because most services especially at that time were home based. Since that time, I've been in this for a long time, but since that time a lot of different clinics have opened up, school based services have become a lot more popular. But really my start was going directly into the home and providing that one-to-one service in that family's environment.

And I talked to a lot of families and they were like, "We're focused on our kid. We want to make sure that the services are there for our kid, top priority but I can use some help too and I don't know where to go." And very often I heard from families that they were either not seeking support from anybody because just time, resources, availability, it just wasn't there because they were getting pulled into a billion different directions.

Or because when they did try finally carve out some time to go speak to a therapist, or a psychologist, or get some religious support. Those individuals knew what Autism was but not really, they didn't know what Autism is. And the parents were saying, "Yeah, it was great, we had a couple of sessions and it was nice. I felt good that I was doing something but I spent my first three sessions teaching my psychologist what Autism was." And as I was going and getting my training I was like, "Wow, this is an area of need that needs to be out there."

And there were people out there doing it but not enough to me. So that's why when I first started my private practice, that's what I dedicated my time

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to was, it's cheesy, but to be the oxygen mask. They always say on the plane and I've said this a billion times and you've heard it probably a 1,000 more than when I said it is, but the plane, they always say, "Put the oxygen mask on yourself before you put it on your kids." Why do they do that? Not because we don't care about our kids, not because we want that oxygen, we're going to breathe in all that valuable oxygen.

It's because if you pass out, no one's there to take care of anybody else. If you're not taking care of yourself as a parent and you're not meeting your own emotional needs, physical needs, support for yourself, then how are you going to keep churning to be there in a meaningful way for your family? So, at some point when possible, again, this is much easier to say as an armchair expert, to say, "Go do this for yourself. But when possible find those resources to take care of yourself."

And I think that kind of leads back to your question is, what can parents do for themselves when they're finding the stress of the new school year is really building up and they can feel? Even if they're not seeing it in their child, or there's that anticipation, I think this is going to be a problem, it hasn't hit anybody just yet but I'm really worried about what's going to happen in a week from now or two days from now. Or this last week we haven't had any big problems but what happens when it really hits?

First and foremost, I think just give yourself some credit and allowability to have a feeling. So often we say to ourselves, "I shouldn't be upset about that. I shouldn't be anxious about that. I shouldn't be mad about that." And first of all, I can do a whole other talk about the word 'should' and how horrible about the shoulds in life. But what are you doing to yourself when you say something like that to yourself? I shouldn't be upset. Does that stop you from being upset? No.

I shouldn't get mad about something like that. Does that stop you from being mad in and of itself? Probably not. Does it make you feel pretty

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crappy? Yeah, because now not only are you upset but you're upset about something else or you're guilty about something else.

Lisa: Yeah, just like that layering, the second arrow, you already feel bad and now you've layered on shame, or guilt, or some other undesirable emotion.

Darren: Yeah. So maybe you managed to divert the energy to something else but it's still a pretty crappy energy. Yeah, I don't feel nervous anymore but now I feel pretty crappy about myself. Okay, is that better? Not really. Does it lead to any solutions? No, probably not.

Lisa: Yeah. No, totally. That just all so much resonates with me because a few years ago with my son I had the same experience. I went to a couple of therapists and I was talking about meltdowns. And they were like, "Isn't he 12?" I'm like, "Yeah." And a lot of explaining, almost defending Autism. And then it was just, I found that so frustrating. And same too, when people would say, "You have to take care of yourself." "Yeah, that sounds nice, how is that going to happen?"

And it wasn't really until things really fell apart and that build up, building back is when I really learned how important this piece of it is. And then it's so interesting this because that thing that you're putting off, it's actually the missing piece of the puzzle so to speak in terms of what an impact how I'm feeling has, I am the environment.

And so, my ability to be able to coregulate with him and to be able to also make space for his emotions. Because sometimes when I sense his frustration, my son, when I sense his frustration or anxiety, I try to shut it down because it's uncomfortable to me. And just letting him have that is definitely helpful.

Darren: Yeah. One of the things I often hear about and it's so popular now that there's memes about it out there too is of when people say, "Have you ever just tried just not being upset about this? Or just put a good spin on it

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or have a positive attitude.” It’s like, you know what? I never tried that, thanks for the amazingly awesome advice. If it was that easy, would you have been upset in the first place? Would you have felt depressed or anxious in the first place?

Would my entire profession exist if it was just, you can just say, “You know what? I’m going to just feel better.” And that doesn’t mean you can’t make a conscious effort to try to do things to help shift your mindset or do things that you’ve known can be better for yourself. But it’s often not just that simple to just say, “Yeah, I’m going to just stop being upset about that and I’m going to choose happy.” Yeah. No, I’m choosing happy but how do I get to happy?

And you often hear people who are physically sick, “Have you ever just tried not having that broken leg?” “Yeah, I have.” But you still might need a cast. You still might need to walk with some crutches to be more sensitive and protect that leg so it can heal appropriately.

Lisa: It’s so interesting because what you’re describing is having an emotion and then trying to cover it up with a thought you don’t believe and that never works. It doesn’t work.

Darren: Right, because you know you’re lying to yourself, yeah.

Lisa: Exactly. And I will tell my clients this too. If we could think our way out of this, we would have been done with it by now. And what I have found in my own personal work is so much of this is allowing and processing feelings that we don’t want to feel. And then the thought work part of that is not piling on with the catastrophizing thoughts and all those types of thought errors that often fuel the fire of whatever the feeling is.

Darren: Yeah. And one of the things I talk about a lot, especially when I was actively providing therapy. And I talk about seeing the world and I talk about it in terms of depression but probably the same with anxiety and stress. But seeing the world in depression colored glasses. And there’s a

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term, seeing the world with rose colored glasses which I guess is the positive spin. The world is just hunky-dory, everything's amazing. He sees the world with rose colored glasses.

When you're depressed and when you're anxious, we tend to interpret the world in terms of that depression, or that anxiety, or that stress. So, information that we receive kind of gets filtered through that lens. So, if things are going not so great we may attribute that or overgeneralize that everything's going to be really bad or I always mess these things up. And we tend to fall into those kind of what's called cognitive traps or those inaccuracies.

If things are going to happen that we're a little bit nervous about we may catastrophize them. We might say, "This is going to be really bad. I just know it." Well, how do you know it? I just feel like it. And it's really hard to differentiate feeling versus the truth, versus the thought, they all get conglomerated together and then get validated because we then feel even more stressed about it or feel even more sad about it. And we get that spiral.

Lisa: Right. And then sometimes we create that result for ourselves. If we're really stressed about something, the way we show up, how are things going to go? And then I've had this with my clients too where they're like, "I'm trying not to think about the fact that maybe the school would call or something bad would happen. But then it did happen so it was justified." And they create that sort of that neural loop that tells us that, it gets validated for us.

Darren: Or I'm really nervous about the school year getting started, so what do you do? You avoid it. I don't want to get that. I don't want to contact his teacher. I don't want to talk to the IP people. I don't want to get to the resource person but I just feel like they're going to tell me something I don't want to hear. So let me just put this off for another day. One day goes, "Oh

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my gosh, now we only have 10 days until school starts.” And you feel even worse. I’ve got to put it off.

Then finally it’s the day before school, now it’s crunch time. And it’s like, “See, I told you this wasn’t going to work out.” How much did those thoughts contribute to making it come to fruition?

Lisa: Absolutely. So, I want to shift gears a little bit here and just, I know that you can’t – look, we all know, Autism is a spectrum, folks show up very differently. There is no one size fits all. But if you just have some general types of maybe pointers that you would give to parents who are struggling for example with school refusal, there’s tons of anxiety going to school. I don’t want to get out of bed. I don’t want to walk out the door, what do you say?

Darren: Yeah. And thank you for pointing, because you’re right, the information that I give, it’s going to be super-duper general because the people who are listening to this, their school refusal might look different than another person who’s listening to the show. So, there’s probably not a one size fits all suggestion or solution. Just with Autism there’s no one size fits all service, or intervention, or strategy. There might be some things that kind of work for some people and they might also work for others.

But really first and foremost you’re making sure you’re finding what fits for you and kind of maybe not necessarily throwing out what doesn’t fit but finding how to adapt it to make it work for you.

Lisa: That’s such a big thing that I see with my clients is they’ve been given this general roadmap of this is what you’re supposed to do. They start it and it doesn’t feel right for their child but they’re like, “But if I don’t do it the way I was told to do it then it’s not going to work. Then my child’s behind and everything is terrible.” I would like to get your thoughts about that as a professional. You’ve given people advice, maybe they’ve taken some, if not taking it, what your thoughts are about that?

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Darren: Yeah. So, there's one thing I think about a lot which is differentiating the ideal versus the deal. So oftentimes whether it be, what we're going to do on vacation or how the school year's going to go, or the advice that we get of how to help or something. That might be the ideal. Here's my suggestions on what to do or here's what I'm hoping we do when we go on vacation. We're going to have a great time and take all these selfies or whatever it's going to be.

That might not necessarily be what happens or it might not be what's going to happen as you're planning things out. But that doesn't mean that you throw away the entire thing because within that there might be aspects that could work or do sound doable, or are appropriate given you and your circumstance or your family.

Even something as simple as let's say you love to go hiking, you love climbing up mountains and you love breathing that fresh air on the top once you get to the top. Well, if your family aren't really hikers, or even walkers, maybe hiking as a family, that might have been the ideal but that might not necessarily be what happens. Does that mean that you give up on every type of exercise and you're never going to have the opportunity to see those views again? Maybe not.

Maybe you find a place where you can drive up to the top as a family. Is it the same exact thing? No. But could it be enjoyable and really valuable, and can you find a different type of worth in that? Absolutely. And that might be what happens as prepping for school as well and getting ready for the new school year. You might have the suggestions of okay, get started a month ahead of time before school starts and contact all your teachers. And have a plan, and write a map and visit the school 20 times so that there's complete comfort by that first day of school.

It's probably, a lot of people by the time they listen to this, has probably started school already or it's starting tomorrow. And by me saying, "Hey, practice makes perfect and going out and getting used to it, and easing that

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transition, and getting a bedtime back to on the normal of your comfortable schedule.” Me saying this right now can probably – people are starting to feel their chest tighten and be like, “I didn’t do any of that. School starts tomorrow.”

Lisa: I’m already failing.

Darren: I’m already failing so I might as well just be the failure, and I’m a terrible person and I’m a terrible parent, and my kid is doomed. Okay, that was the ideal. So, some parents will be like, “We don’t do any of that stuff and that doesn’t work for us.” But okay, so that didn’t happen, what can you do? Okay, maybe you didn’t take this one suggestion. Okay, you didn’t get the tour of the school ahead of time. Okay, maybe what that does mean though is your first week, you use it as, this is the trial period.

Where before we buy this, we have to buy the subscription, we’re locked in. But we’re going to treat this as a trial period. We’re going to figure out, okay, what works about this new normal and what doesn’t? Last year we woke up at six in order to get everybody going. That seemed to be okay, let’s try that again this year. Maybe we find that’s too late or too early but this first week, this first two weeks we’re going to allow ourselves to plan to figure this out.

And not take the first five days of school don’t go great, take that as I’ve failed and now there goes the rest. Maybe next year we’ll be better. Okay, let’s try for tomorrow instead of next year. Let’s try that for next week instead of next year.

Lisa: Yeah. So, what I’m hearing through these answers is a lot of flexibility and a lot of grace. It’s so interesting because I have noticed one of the common symptoms or presentations of Autism is the rigidity and how much rigidity there is in the prescribing, the treatment plans and then how we as parents get about it’s all or nothing. And so, I’m always trying to talk to my

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parents about creating the way that works for you because you're the person that has to implement it ultimately and your child.

For my kid going somewhere ahead of time, that hasn't historically been a great idea. So, I wouldn't have done that but that's just based on my knowledge of my child.

Darren: You brought up a couple of really good points that I want to touch on is that just like that rigidity or that inflexibility, we can fall into that trap too. Yeah, that's a diagnostic quality or criteria that leads to a diagnosis of Autism, is that inflexibility, that challenge with differences, that whatever we want to call it, insistence on sameness. But parents and treatment providers can fall into that trap too even if they're trying to work on that or assist on that.

And if you work with a behavior analyst you might hear them say something like, "We want to really make sure that we're reinforcing this behavior every single time so that that behavior's going to really be tied into the awesomeness and continue." That sounds pretty rigid to me, doesn't it? Every time he says this you want to be right there with making sure that you're reinforcing it. Wait a minute. So, we need to be pretty rigid on some of the things that we do too but I'm also a real person that needs to get lunches together, and make dinner, and help the other kids in my family too.

So how do I manage if I can't do it exactly the same every single time? And the reason I mention that is because it's important to breathe those opportunities for real life into treatment plans. Would it work better if this ideal was followed? Sure, probably. Is there still opportunity for success if it's not? Yeah, absolutely. So being understandable of your own flexibility is really important, a good example of being flexible. And also, just the one size fits all situation, there's not necessarily going to be a one size fits all.

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Hey, this might be the thing that works for some people but it not works for all. And a great example might be giving notices or warnings before a transition. For some families that I work with, that's a great piece of advice that I give which is saying, "Hey, if they're going to be transitioning from a preferred activity to a non-preferred activity, give them a heads up five minutes before and say, "Hey, five minutes we're going to be doing blah, blah, blah.""

For some individuals that's the worst thing in the world. If you tell them five minutes then that next five minutes is just a fight about having to change. And for some people it's just, "Hey, we're going to stop now." And then they're like, "Cool, yeah, let's stop." So, finding the thing that works for you.

Lisa: That's hilarious because we're always giving – and that means for five minutes plus when I take the thing away, yeah, okay.

Darren: Yeah. So, as you're going for the school year, little things that could be helpful for your child and then but also for you, getting information that you can. If you have people from last year that you worked with before, whether it be a resource person, or resource counsellor, or called something different depending on what sort of school. Maybe there's behavior analyst who works at the school which is kind of your point person. Maybe you have an agency that you work with who comes in and meets you at the school.

Trying to get in touch with them ahead of time if you can, and if you had the opportunity, that's often pretty helpful because at least gets everybody, if not on the same page, or getting a plan of action, at least it gets the feelers out for hey, we have points of contact here. So that if something does come up later on we can address it a little bit quicker versus then having to look through the rolodex if rolodex still exist, I guess you now look through your phone and say, "Who do I call when I need to call somebody?"

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Even if that's all you get out of it then that can still be pretty helpful because it's one less thing to have to think about as you [inaudible]. Preparation is usually helpful. So, if you do have the opportunity to kind of get to the school and check it out, especially for individuals who have difficulty with transitions and flexibility issues, going and trying things, doing trial and error if you have that opportunity to do, that's sometimes pretty nice, going and checking out, hey, this is what the school looks like if you've never seen it before.

Hey, it looks like your old school, doesn't it? Yeah, they have a center courtyard too, really nice. Or their lockers are over here, your last school the lockers were over there but seems pretty easy to get to. So dependent on your child and their preferences or their needs, that might be something that's helpful if you had the opportunity. If you didn't, okay, you didn't. So that just means maybe that first couple of weeks that might be a little bit more of a focus.

Lisa: Right. And then I would think in that situation, I'll say this is more what I do is talking about to the staff about how they can help my son with that transition by slowing that down a little bit for him wherever possible so that he can begin to adjust.

Darren: Yeah, I think that's a really good point of managing expectations. But usually for any kid starting school the first couple days is just a reintroduction. Usually, you're not getting assigned a book report to do day two at school, no matter where you go. So that first day might be hey, what we're learning today, what we're going to be focusing on is just being a student in this school in this situation. And if that's what we get, that's a pretty good success.

Maybe later on we're going to have more assignments, maybe later on we're going to have building expectations but we're going to lower the drawbridge. We're not going to just jump across the moat, we're going to lower the drawbridge.

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Lisa: It's so interesting because this will come out when school's already started. And did you ever watch the show, Atypical?

Darren: Yes, I love that show.

Lisa: Oh my God, loved. How that's how my son discovered he was Autistic, he's like I'm like Sam. He was starting high school and his sister wasn't going to be at the same school. And he says in this narration of it, "Everybody was so worried about the first day. But it turns out it wasn't the first day, it was the ninth day when he had a major meltdown." And I've always found that too. I'm like, "Okay, we've gotten there, everything's good, alright, it's okay."

And then the ninth day comes and boom, and I'm like, "Oh no." And so, I've come after years of doing this to more expect that to happen. For some kids it might be those first few days they're so novel or whatever, it's fine. But that's when it hits them.

Darren: The honeymoon period.

Lisa: Exactly, it's like the honeymoon period. And I think it's so good for parents to understand because I hear the word, "Oh now, we're going backwards, regression", things like that. When this might just be a normal piece of how that adjustment's going. You're expecting it on the first day but here it is two weeks in and how to handle that.

Darren: Right. And the caution with that too is some people can say, "Okay, now I'm just waiting for the next chute to drop." So, things have been going too smooth. This is when your kids are in the other room and it's quiet, you're like, "Something must be going wrong because they're never quiet." But one of those things people say a lot is, "You can only take the day that you're at." You can only do the one thing at a time. And that's true because the only action I'm able to take right now is having this conversation with you because that's what I'm doing.

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I can't change anything that I've done before because it's already happened and I can't do anything that hasn't happened yet because I'm not there yet. So, you can only focus on where you are. But that's only kind of part of the story to be honest because what I'm doing right now, even though this is all I can control wasn't formed by what I've done before. So, you and I had arranged for us to have the conversation. We had to plan this out. We had to schedule it. I had to logon to the system. I had to get my headphone going and all this.

So, where I am right now even though this is all I can control for, I can learn from where I am right now because of what I've done before. I've had previous podcasts that I've done and there's things that I liked that I talked about, there's things that I didn't. So let me try to use that as information for this conversation. So, I'm learning from my past even though I could only control right now, I can't change the mess-ups I've had before. We're going to keep talking so I can't adjust for it.

But there's things that I can do to make that hopefully more successful. I can plan for it. I can do whatever homework I need to do before this. I could try to make sure I'm just pacing myself on how we're talking. So, I can prep for the future even if I can't control it. So even though we can only control the right now, you can still use those other things as information that might be helpful.

Lisa: Yeah. And in terms of using it as information that might be helpful, and just this example that you've given, any time you've spent beating yourself up over something you said that you didn't like or the fact that you didn't prepare enough or whatever. Would not do anything really to help you for this moment. That's just time wasted, confidence eroded.

Darren: Right. Well, that's where we talked about just shifting the thinking is it isn't really the solution but it is information that you can use. So hey, you know what, I didn't like that feeling on the podcast where I didn't feel prepared or the test that I took that I didn't feel prepared. Well, why? I didn't

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really study enough for it. Okay, so do I want to have that feeling again? Probably not. If I just say, “I’m so stupid, I can’t believe I did that, I didn’t know the answers to that, then guess what? I’m going to do the exact same thing next time because I’m going to feel pretty crappy.

But if I say, “Well, what can I do differently? What can I use? I can’t change that. I can’t do anything about what I’ve done before but is there anything I can learn from it that can help me moving forward so I can do my homework, I can study for the test, I can prepare for the podcast or whatever it is?”

Lisa: Yeah. And just thinking in terms of messaging to this audience and I talk about it all the time is there are always things that we can think of that we could have done differently. And while that could be information we often use that to shame and to guilt ourselves. And that’s the case where I like to step in and just there’s no use to that. I remember, I have a family member who was diagnosed with something 30 some years ago and then my son was diagnosed several years ago and things were so different.

And I remember in that moment realizing that 30 years from now I’m going to look at all of the stuff that’s available and think, I wish I had done this, I wish I had known that. And there’s no room for that when you’re living your life. It’s just accepting that you’re going to make certain decisions based on the information that you have now and you can course correct. You can do something different. But spending that time reprimanding yourself and feeling terrible about yourself isn’t helpful to you or to your child.

Darren: Yeah. They say hindsight’s 20/20 for a reason. It’s because it’s so easy to look back and say, “Oh my gosh, why didn’t I do this, that and the other?” But now you know how it turned out so of course you have more insight and more information, what decisions you made that were pretty awesome and what decisions that you made were less than awesome. So, you’re able to beat yourself up for those decisions. But when you’re in the moment, you don’t know. That’s why you’re trying to make a decision.

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Just like you said, you're making a decision based on the context and the information you had available to you at the time. And then you can do your best to think about it for the next time.

Lisa: Yeah. Alright, so I want to get to this without interrupting you any more but if there are just any kind of some brass tacks kind of pointers that you have for parents like when a child comes home and they're melting down, or it's Sunday night and they're in tears, or it's homework time and they're just a mess?

Darren: Yeah. So, one of the things, and if you've worked with a behavior analyst or you're getting any type of ABA services, and this kind of falls into the question of that school refusal or that school worry for the kid in question that you asked about before. The first thing that's often helpful to ask yourself is what's the function of this behavior? And when we say function, essentially what we're meaning is where is this behavior coming from? What is this behavior contributing to?

A partial way down is what is this behavior communicating? What purpose is this behavior serving for this individual? If you're finding that you're getting some crying spells when homework is delivered, or on the Sunday night, leading to the Monday of school, or some tantrums or some refusal. First and foremost, it's good to just identify, what's going on surrounding this behavior? What are the immediate triggers that might bring this on so that I can hopefully maybe even prepare for it?

And what's keeping it going? What's maintaining this as working for the person? Even things that aren't great for somebody can work for them in whatever way. We see that with eating. We see that with anything. So sometimes you can do something that may not be the best of choices and it might not serve you well, but it's serving in the moment enough to keep it going. So, if you're seeing some of these, whether we call them behaviors or some of these instances in your child, might be first just take that step back and act as though you are a sports commentator.

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So, you're watching the scene and usually you have someone who does the color commentary, and someone who does all the facts. So, try to take on kind of both of those roles and say, "Okay, what are we seeing here?" And in the moment may be not the best idea because you might have to just deal with the situation right then and there. But if you have the moment, you have some other time, okay, what's going on here? What led up to this? Have I seen this before? When have we seen this before? What happened beforehand? What happened afterwards?

What might be contributing to this behavior? I often think of behaviors as being on a train track where the behavior itself is the station, the train station. And we have tracks leading up to the station and we have tracks going away from the station. And if I think of the behavior as a station in the middle then I can think about okay, what happened right before this incident happened? What happened right before the tantrum, or the meltdown, or the crying fit, or the yell back and forth? What happened right before that, right before that?

And with that you might start to get some really good insight into whenever we have math, that's really when we start to see this bigger problem. When we have English homework and social science homework, yeah, he doesn't like to do it but I never really get these problems. Or you know what, when we start to get toward Thursday, Thursday is when they hand out the new math assignments, that's really it because this stuff I don't know how to do. What's the new math called? The core curriculum math and all that kind of stuff.

I don't know how to, so I'm not going to be any good help with any of that. But that's when I really start to see my kid just look at the page and just freeze. And then that's when I start to say, "Hey, time to do your homework. Hey, come on, we've got to get this done." And then it escalates from there. So, if you're looking at it with that kind of context, what's going on, on those train tracks, you can do some pretty nice detective work to figure out, okay,

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when are these situations more likely to happen? And maybe even when are they less likely to happen?

What things have I done before without even realizing it that's been super helpful? Maybe you've noticed that when there's more math on like you said, hey, I notice you have math, do you want to do social science first and then math? Or hey, if you give me five seconds after I'm done cooking dinner you and I could do math together, what do you think?

And I remember thinking about it now that those times when I didn't do that and I just said, "Do your homework." Then oh, oh, we spent 30 minutes just talking about homework and fighting about it versus we would have been done in five seconds. So, are there things that could contribute or things that could be helpful? And then the after train track, after the station are what happened after this behavior happened? Any kind of hindsight is 20/20, and they started fighting me on it, they started screaming, there was a tantrum, there was a meltdown.

Well, we ended up not doing homework that night, or I ended up just doing it for them. Or we did it but it was a really horrible experience of fighting back and forth. And with that you might start to learn a little bit about is there anything where they could be maintaining that behavior, or feeding it, if you will? And that doesn't mean that you have to be hardnosed and say, "They didn't have to do their homework so that means every single time now, no matter what, even if they're screaming, they're going to do their homework."

What that might mean is hey, this is serving a purpose, can I get that purpose served in another way that's happier, healthier, easier for everybody involved?

Lisa: Yeah, that's so interesting because one of the things that I recognize with my son during some meltdowns is he'll get escalated about something and then maybe he yells. I try to stay calm but I yell too. And then I feel

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bad, the aftereffect of that is we're snuggling. And so, he's getting that co-regulation piece and I'm like, "Huh, is this what he wanted or needed?" This is the way he went about it. Because that is usually the aftereffect of any time I yell.

And it is interesting because he's very verbal and he's very much almost like a watcher of himself. So, he'll say to me, "I like it when you get mad because then I know I have your attention." And I'm like, "Oh, okay." So, then I'm like, "Why would you want attention like that?" And attention's attention kind of a thing.

Darren: Yeah. Any attention is good attention, just ask some celebrities. But the thing is too, again, going back to giving ourselves grace and allowance is in those moments it's hard to see the forest through the trees. It's hard to be like, "I'm just mad you're just not doing your homework." And I'm escalated too and I have 40 other things to do. You might have to give yourself some allowance that even though this is something that's happened a bunch of times and you 'should' going back to that should know better.

You're a human being as well but if you use it all as information, if you kind of look at the train tracks and try to say, okay, what did I learn from this? This isn't ideal, but how can I make this the deal for future. You can say, hey, again, I don't want to be prescriptive for your situation because this might not really work. But, okay, that attention, or getting the attention, or getting the snuggles and the cuddles from mum, seems to be the end result. Can we change the alphabet around?

Is there any way of getting that to happen ahead of time or getting that to happen as a result of maybe the stuff we should be doing like, okay, five problems and then hug breaks, or a lot of attention ahead of time so it's like the cup is a little bit more full. And that could happen for the school.

Lisa: As opposed to just do it.

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Darren: Right, but again, that's the thing, it's super easy for me to say right now, I'm not at the thick of it. I'm just sitting here with no pressure and I'm sure, just when people say, "Do as I say, not as I do." The reason that happens, because it's so much easier to say it than to do it. But how do we then start to enact some of our own advice that we would give to others for ourselves. And sometimes that means legit scheduling it. I know that when homework time comes around, I get really anxious about it because I just want to finish this stinking homework.

And this means that dinner's going to be late or this means going to bed is going to be later, or I know in the morning we're going to have the fight again about getting dressed and putting these shoes on, but these have to be the school shoes, or we have to get in the car on time. All those things, so use them as information. Use them as resources in your own ammo. Not necessarily easy to do for sure and not a problem solved but at least it helps to get towards that a little bit easier.

Lisa: I think that's such a great piece of advice because I think what happens is we see what's happening, we think it shouldn't be happening and we resist it and we're upset about it but it's like clockwork at the same time. And so, to your point, using that as information really helps. So that piece was the noticing the function of the behavior. So yeah, I think that's something that asking the why, what purpose is this serving? Any other little tidbits that you want to throw out there? I know that anything that you would offer would be so appreciated.

Darren: Yeah. So, I think as you're getting ready for school, we're all kind of planning the transition. We're getting things going as best we can. But there's a couple of things that could be helpful to think about. And you and I have [inaudible] about these before but some ways of remembering it that might make it a little bit easier. So, one of the things I think of is a different type of fret. So, fret being F-R-E-T. So, F standing for familiarize, R standing for routine, E standing for establish and T standing for tour.

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As you're gearing up for the school, as you're getting ready for the new school, or even if you're already into it, as much as you can try to familiarize yourself and help your child to be familiar with the expectations. What are the new things? When is, if there's phys. ed every day but it's a different day from before, what's the day that you need to know when they have to have the better shoes on or their running shoes on.

If there's a different schedule, like there's A days and B days, just familiarizing yourself with those different expectations as early as you can or as you're going through and this transition is underway. That's super helpful for you as a parent and also helpful for your child because then those expectations can become a little bit more, we're speaking of routine. So, our routine, getting into that routine, what about your routine last year and the previous year worked out really well?

What about your routine kind of you realized just was like fluff, wasn't really serving a purpose. Was it helpful that when you were getting ready for school, picking out clothes the night before? Hey, that was one less thing to do in the morning. So great, same thing, was it helpful that if you wanted your child to pick out their clothes and then instead of saying, "Go look in your closet and pick something out, was it more helpful to say, "Here's two options that I think are actually okay for you to wear with that?"

So, it's getting that routine now that you're a little bit more comfortable with what the schedule is, figuring out what worked, crossing out what didn't and just leaving open opportunity for maybe some changes is pretty helpful. Establish that sense of security for yourself, establish that sense of allowance for yourself. Get in touch with the people that you need to get in touch with, make those contacts.

And then T for tour, like I mentioned, if you're able to get to the school and check things out, then great. If not maybe at some point during the school year you'll have the opportunity.

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Lisa: Yeah. And I think that's even – I actually found that after my son's school year started, me having an idea of what it looked like, who was sitting where and that kind of thing, that was actually really helpful too because I could integrate that into our conversation at home. Some kids are non-verbal, they can't tell you, maybe they can't verbalize it. But even for ones who are they're like, "It's fine, it's okay." And so sometimes, "I know you sit next to X, did she do anything funny", or whatever. I've always found that as helpful in just trying to dig some stuff out of my kid about what's going on?

Darren: Even parent teacher nights and things like that are really great because it gives you a little bit of insight into the environment where things are. But you're right, a lot of the kids that the parents who are listening to this, they might not be verbal or able to vocalize what's going on in the school. Or they just might be limited in giving those details.

So, if there is a way, whether asking the teacher to give you the lay of the land, or going in and checking it out, that might be helpful because maybe, hey, I'm not getting anything sent home to me. I'm not getting the homework binder or anything along those lines. If you go in and see us, yeah, because the homework binders are kept over here. And the book bags are kept over there. And for every other kid they might be just picking it up because that's the instruction by the teacher.

But for my kid that's two steps and two steps aren't going to happen right just yet. So, is there a way, is this teacher okay with saying, "Can the homework folder be kept next to the book bags? Or can you do a check at the end of the day? Or is there something that could be established that hooks this up a little bit more?" That you might not get that unless you have the opportunity to see it or you're saying, "Hey, I'm noticing this is a problem, I've got to imagine my kids will be getting some homework. What's going on here?"

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Lisa: Right, yeah, that's a good one. Yeah, I've always found that, putting those little pieces of the puzzle together of understanding why things are happening. And when my son was younger and pre-verbal we always had a communication book. And that was also so helpful at home because just trying to understand what I can expect, why is he so dysregulated today? Okay, his teacher wasn't there or his favorite aide was sick, or anything. But just knowing that piece of information, it made the afternoon a lot different because I had context.

Darren: Yeah. And that's such an important thing that you bring up is learning from last year, both one way or the other. So, you found when you had that communication book, and it was actually filled out, that not only did that make the rest of the evening a lot more smooth, but probably helped set up the next day and the days after that at school.

So that might be something, especially as we're getting into the new school year for parents to say, "You know what? This was important. It might not have been the key but I at least liked it and I felt it was helpful. Let me make sure that when I'm having conversations with the resource person or with the teacher, or aide, or the one-to-one, whoever it is, that's something that they know is priority." Because it might not be the same person as last year. So, this was something that helped last year, let's do it again this year.

Or you know what? That communication book stunk last year. All I got running home was, how did they do? Good, smiley face. Not good, frowny face. Bad was nothing. So, either let's abandon this or let's get better at it. So, it gives you that information for the next year.

Lisa: Yeah. And I think it's such a benefit to the school because we are the best problem solvers when it comes to our children. We know them the best. And yeah, I think that has always been a really helpful piece of the puzzle for me is having that communication.

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Darren: Yeah, that's a good point is thinking about expertise. I have letters after my name, and I had to go to school to get them and stuff like that. So, I like to think I'm good at what I do and I know my stuff. But I don't know your kid. I don't know your kid or your kid. So, I might have insight on behaviors, and function or behaviors, and how to build certain skills, and how to target behaviors for reduction. And that might be my area of expertise but you are the expert in your kid because they're yours.

So, the information that you have should be shared because then we can combine ours to be one super power. We can combine your knowledge of your child and what you've learned by being their parent and the care that you have with the school that I went to, or the experience that I've had maybe with similar kids or circumstances that have been kind of similar.

Lisa: No, I completely agree, I actually did an episode about you're the expert. And it's funny as parents, when I would think of an expert, I do, I think of somebody who went to school, who has education and expertise. But that's not the only place that expertise comes from. And we have the most knowledge and on the spot training of our children. And just to the point is experts, professionals all play a role but for the parents not to discount the role that they play. I don't know, I'm just mom. Why are they asking me? Because you're the expert.

Darren: Totally.

Lisa: Alright, Darren, I can't thank you enough for taking the time to join me and to share all of your knowledge. It's so much appreciated. Before we go, are there any last things that you'd want to leave with?

Darren: Yeah. So first, again, I thank you so much for having me on today. I appreciate it. It's always great to chat with you and it's always nice, especially in something like this, it's so cool to be able to talk to you about these things. And just for everybody kind of listening in, one of the things that I guess the focus of our conversation is transitioning to the school year

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and getting prepped for the school year. But if you're listening to this, and you haven't started school yet or you're listening to this and you're already six months in, there's still opportunity.

The window doesn't close because those six months are a lot of real good information that you can use for the next six months or tomorrow, or for next year if you're feeling a little overwhelmed with it. So don't feel like you've missed the boat. Don't feel like the window's closed. You're still growing and there's still lots of opportunity for you to help yourself and for you to help your kid out.

Lisa: Wow. You just opened up a whole other window right there with that one because I love that you said the window doesn't close. And I think that's so much that I hear from my clients of that ever present fear of I have to do as much as I can, as much as possible before they turn five. And the window is closing. And so, we could do a whole other episode on that. But what I just generally say to that is neuroplasticity is for life and our kids might not get something on the same timeframe as the what to expect milestones but that doesn't mean they're not going to get there.

Darren: Right, exactly.

Lisa: Alright, thank you again so much for your time.

Darren: Thank you.

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Thank you everyone for listening to this week's episode. I hope you got as much out of this discussion as I did. If you want to follow Darren on social media go to the show notes and you can find the links there. And also, if you are liking this podcast and you're finding it valuable, please take the time to write a review. Thanks so much and I will talk to you next week.

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