

68 - Supporting Children's Well-Being Through Occupational Therapy

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Purpose: The purpose of the transcripts is to provide readers and listeners with a written version of each episode of the UAGC Center for Early Childhood Education's Early Childhood Chatter Podcast so they can follow along with the audio content. www.uagc.edu/ece-center/chatter-podcast

Audience: Current Active & Enrolled Students

Episode Transcript

Host Dr. Shipley: Hello everyone and welcome to Early Childhood Chatter with Dr. Shipley and Dr. Heald. We will upload a new episode every other week on Wednesdays.

Host Dr. Heald: Twice a month, we will come to you with a 10-minute professional development inspiration that you can quickly listen to for new ideas to use today. Don't forget to subscribe to this podcast to get notifications about future episodes.

Today, we are so lucky to have two guests with us that we are very excited about. Our first guest, Nan Arkwright, is a pediatric occupational therapist supporting mental health for kids.

Such an important topic. She educates families to look beyond their child's behaviors, by connecting them, to understand the underlying needs and lagging skills, or lagging skills, and to support them, so that they feel better prepared to handle the hard things.

And we also have Joe Bowman with us.

He is an illustrator, and multimedia artist who uses his many skills and experiences to support mental health messages through captivating illustrations. He's worked at DreamWorks and is now creating full-time on the book series and NFTs, and I hope he tells us more about what NFTs are.

So, Joe and Nan, welcome so much.

We are excited to have you here with us today.

Nan Arkwright Speaker: We're excited as well. We love talking about this topic.

Joe Bowman Speaker: Good morning. Thank you.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: I know you're here to talk to us about self-regulation, which is so important today. We know that children are having problems with it.

Teachers are struggling teaching it. So, I want you to give me a little bit of background on what you want our audience to know.

Nan Arkwright Speaker: So, one of the main things that I try to help families learn about, is recognizing four parts when they see a child upset about something.

And the first part, usually the children need the guidance of an adult in learning how to do this, and it's not just spontaneous on their part. But I'm trying to get them to recognize in their own body, first of all, that there's a feeling. Most of the kids that I work with talk about something in their head, and they actually will point to a specific place in their head where they can feel the upset, the anger, whatever it is that is happening in the moment.

And then I want them to realize that there's help. So, a grown-up can help them. Again, initially, a child needs a grown-up to notice that they can't see what's happening in the child's head, of course, but they can see a change in the child's behavior, that they can then come to the child to provide the support and let the child share what they're upset about.

And the parent can give the words that let the child know that they're being heard and that they understand that there's something that's upsetting them.

And just like when a parent goes to a child who's fallen and needs a Band-Aid because they're bleeding, it's the same kind of, oh, tell me what's happening, let me help you with that, kind of response on the part of the adult. And then the parent or the teacher, whoever the caretaker is, wants to try to help move from that place, of being upset to a place of more calm, where the feelings get a little bit smaller.

So, finding the just right language that helps kids calm. And often that means fewer words, actually, but words that show emotional generosity, and help the child feel like they are safe in that moment. And when the child then feels that, either in that moment or later, the caretaker can then talk with the child about, if it's something that happened with another peer in a school setting, the teacher could help the child, connect with the other child and collaboratively solve that problem.

But it's only if the child has gone through those other three steps that they then really feel available to be able to problem solve. And in my experience, it's actually the kids who have the best solutions, in that situation, not really the adults. And it really builds the child's ability to problem solve, which is what we really have a big goal in being able to regulate, knowing that I can figure out what to do about this. this.

I may have feelings and the feelings will pass, and I'll be able to solve this. So, it's building that confidence for the child to know what to do in situations like that or similar situations.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Nan, that's such a great piece for us to understand, and just getting the initial concept of self-regulation, and what that might look in the early childhood classroom.

Joe, on the flip side of that, I bet you have some sort of way to connect this to the images and the illustrations. Can you just tell us a little bit about how that connection occurs?

Joe Bowman Speaker: Sure. Well, I feel that Nan and I have a very unique working relationship.

It's just the way that we were able to connect and start working on this project with Nan. And it's, I don't know, I think it's more of being a dad and being a teacher that I've been able to work with so many different age groups from TK all the way to eighth grade.

And I've seen so many different examples of how kids relate to one another, and it's my job as a teacher kind of building their self-esteem and telling them they can do it and working with the ones that feel like they can't.

And since I'm a computer teacher, seeing how I want to make sure that they're empowered. And so, in working with the kids, I think I was able to translate what they're feeling into graphics and working with Nan's story. And it was a kind of like, I want to say symbiotic relationship here.

So, I've been able to visualize what Nan was trying to get across in the story, and we kind of developed the story together. Like how we are going to segue from real life to imaginary life back to real life and be able to relate the message in a way that was entertaining. And our book is kind of a different kind of children's book, it's more comic book style.

You know, we've gotten really good response and good reviews, and I feel like we've kind of hit, you know, hit the mark here with what we're doing.

Nan Arkwright Speaker: And I think one of the pages in the book when you're talking about how does he capture that with his illustrations, this feeling of the being seen and heard, and felt by the adult and soothed, is he has a page in the book that's just perfect for showing how that works, and enabling the child to do his own problem in his imagination.

And so it's really, we try to give tools for the parents also, on how they can learn to help support the child to get to that place where they can learn to do the problem solving, with the help, of course, but also a lot on their own, because they do have a lot of tools, even the very youngest children.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: So, Nan, that was my next question, is what are those tools that we can give caregivers and teachers and families? What did you talk about in your book, so they can help their children?

Nan Arkwright Speaker: I think one of the things that I see is very hard for many of the families I work is, work with is, to sit with the child's feelings, and their own feelings because a lot of times the parents I'm working with, are thinking so many things in their own head, and feeling uncomfortable about their own abilities and and feeling lost themselves about how to help their child. So, if a lot of times adults feel like if I can just get through this, the quicker, the better, because it's easier, but it's not teaching the child.

Talking about so if parents can be comfortable holding those feelings with alongside the child, then that helps the child understand like feelings are OK and we can handle the feelings.

And I'm right here beside you, to help you with that. I can help create safety for you by my presence. And I'm meeting you where you are at the emotional level, not at the problem-solving level, not at the level where you can hear what you should have been doing, or what you shouldn't have been doing, or any kind of explanations.

The child, when they're upset, is not available. The brain simply can't process that information. So, it's really just slowing things down, quietening things, simplifying things, so that the child can respond in like, with his or her own body to be able to take some deep breaths, and reset and be ready to move on, and think of what to do in response to the challenges.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Yeah, everything you said just really helps me to understand where educators place is in supporting this. I know together you two, Nan as the author and correct me if I'm wrong, Joe is the illustrator, have worked really hard on writing a book and creating these NFTs. Can you just talk about the conversations that that you kind of broach in your book? And how children's mental health is really an aspect of this that you wanted to tell the world about?

Nan Arkwright Speaker: So, the main themes in the book, there are a lot of different themes that maybe some people reading the book might not.

So, I've put in parent power packs, I call them, which explains more about the book, that will help families or educators know how to understand what's embedded in the story, that maybe is not obvious. And some of the topics that are actually there, that adults can talk with children about is collaborative problem solving, which is kind of what I've been talking about.

But also, like self-esteem. So, what we added into the book, was the idea that the boy can think about his future self, being a child who can actually do hard things. Even though it's uncomfortable, even though it's not your first choice, even though you don't really want to, even though somebody else doesn't have to do it.

It's the idea that together we can find a way to work this out and to help the child think there's promise for tomorrow that you'll be able to do this. And would you like to be able to see yourself as a child who can do that? So, in the story and what I do with my clients as well, and what I ask parents to do when I'm working with them, is to retell the story of what happened, framing it in a way that is encouraging to the child. So, yes, the child is learning.

The child did something that was unexpected and can be framed as this is a learning opportunity. And let's figure out what we learned from this situation, and what we can do next time. Either the parts that work, let's repeat that, and the parts that didn't work, let's figure out what we could do instead.

And that's where the problem-solving by the child comes in, so great because they know what they can and cannot do. And if I make a suggestion, mostly they're not interested in my ideas unless they really, really don't know. And sometimes kids offer ideas, and I tweak the ideas a little bit to make it actually workable.

But even if kids say, well, I only want it my way, in their words, that I want to do, I just want to play instead of cleaning my room, for example, I just want to do that. I just have to do a little more supporting to help them know that this is a collaborative effort. That we're trying to do to get so that the adult feels that the need that they have, for teaching a child a value or whatever it is, and for the child to learn to take that step forward, and stretch a little bit to be able to do what's expected. And the first step is always the hardest.

And then after that, you've got something to talk about. Like, remember last time, when this happened, you were able to do it, weren't you? And then I think, what do you think? Can you do it again? So, it's a lot of collaboration and it's a lot of connection to which is a really strong message.

I try to help kids and families understand and, which is important, of course, with teachers as well, any caretakers to know that a child, if they feel connected because you've heard them and felt them and seen them and soothed them, that's a connection.

Now they're much more able and likely to work together to try to figure out what can we do next in a way that's positive, in a way that's growing their brains. And also, we've included topics of mindset in the book and self-regulation, flexibility and lots more topics. But those are the ones that I think are really key to what makes a difference for kids at school or at home.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: I love this. So, before we go to some takeaways for our listeners, what is the title of your book?

Nan Arkwright Speaker: **Mission Control, A Big Feelings Adventure**.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Oh, I love it.

I love it. Where can people find your book?

Nan Arkwright Speaker: At Amazon.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: OK, perfect.

So, with all the sessions, Joe and Nan, you can both jump in. What are three takeaways for your listeners, that you want them to remember as they shut off their podcast today?

Nan Arkwright Speaker: I believe that all the children I work with, and that teachers work with, want to do what's expected and they need guidance. They don't know.

They haven't been on the earth very long to know how to do things. And for some kids, it is easier than others. And for those that it's harder for, they need support, and sometimes they need support again and again.

And what I usually do is, if a child is not able to do what I'm asking them to do, I do something to make it possible for them to be able to approach my expectation by providing additional support.

So, it might be simplifying things. It might be taking a break.

It might be helping them side by side. Oh, let's do it together. But I think that when they feel like there's something that can make the hard thing easier or more fun, they're much more willing to do it.

And if somebody is going to be doing it with them, and they don't feel all alone about it, that's one thing I think that's important to take away. And then I think that if we do think about meeting the child where they are emotionally, or academically or behaviorally and working step by step toward the goal, the child can't just take a giant leap and be there. That it's like a ladder, take one step at a time and move forward.

And then I think also children can problem solve. That's what we've kind of talked about before. But it really, we can't mix the emotions with the emotional part of the brain, with the thinking part of the brain.

They can't work simultaneously. The emotional part of the brain has to be calmed first, so that the thinking part of the brain can actually problem solve. And it can be hard to go through those steps, and it can be hard to wait.

And when it when that process happens, it works really well. And do you have any more ideas to for take homes?

Joe Bowan Speaker: I mean, as far as a good takeaway, this statistic, you know, it really kind of sticks with me, as far as like with the kids that I've worked with and even older. And what it is, is that at least as many as one in six U.S. children ages 6 through 17 has a treatable mental health disorder, such as depression, anxiety problems, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

So, I'm a perfect example. This weekend, I was with my cousin's 8-year-old daughter, and she had heard that we did a book. And we just went through the first couple of pages, and she said, "that's what I did with my mom and having a temper tantrum". And so, we talked about it and just knowing that our story, and my graphics, and what we're putting out there in the world, for people to look at is that there's something that's going to resonate with someone.

And if we can, with what we're doing is going to help either a child reading the book, or a parent reading it to their child, that to me is just such a it's just great to me.

I just feel like we're just we're doing our job.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Yeah, Joe and Nan, you are you really have inspired me, and I know that we end with a challenge, and I'm going to I'm going to give the challenge today to our listeners.

Listeners, we really want you to share something that you listened to from this very inspirational podcast with three people.

And we want you to ask them to share with three people, because this message about the awareness of children's mental health, is so important and showing children that their emotional well-being, is truly essential to their healthy development needs to be shared. So, listeners of this podcast, please go ahead and take and share three things that you learned today.

Joe and Nan, thank you so much for your time today. We will see you all in two weeks again. Thank you for being here.

Nan Arkwright Speaker: It was our pleasure. Thank you so much.

Joe Bowman Speaker: Thank you.