

## Web-Based Radio Show

### **Ethics of Helping Children Overcome Problems of Aggression and Behavior in School Settings**


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Good morning and welcome to our Web-Based Radio Show. Today we are going to focus on problems with aggression and behavior – disruptive behavior and the like – in schools for children at any age. This comes in most often when children get a little bigger and we get into the preteen or teen years because we have, often, teenagers that are bigger than their teachers, and it is a little more frightening if they are “out of control.”

We are going to approach the problem of problems with aggression and behavior from a unique vantage point; from a point of view of the bioethics or the ethics of how we intervene and how we educate children with autistic spectrum disorders. This has been a little, if at all, discussed topic. It raises the question, as a broad heading, and that is the heading for today’s show – the ethics of helping children overcome problems with aggression and behavior in school settings and other settings as well – but it brings up the larger question of what are our ethical responsibilities to children with autistic spectrum disorders and other special needs conditions? We have sort of implied ethical responsibilities when we say we are responsible for educating children – all children – we are responsible for providing the least restrictive environments for children’s education, we are responsible for certain educational standards for all children, including children with special needs. So there is a governing body of principles that says in our society we have certain goals for children who have challenges; some neurological, some physical, and some for other reasons.


But can we systematize our ethical responsibilities in such a way to provide better programs for children with autism and other special needs conditions? I believe we can, and I believe we so far haven’t translated a broad mandate to educate all children, provide least restrictive environments, and give every child an equal opportunity to reach their potential. I don’t think we have actually translated that well for our special needs population.



I would like to begin with outlining some more specific principles or guidelines for children with autism and other special needs that address problems with behavior and aggression but also address them in a broader context of what our goals are for education and intervention with children who have challenges. I think we can describe them in the following manner.

The first principle is, especially when it comes to problems with aggression and problems with behavior, we need to create educational environments and environments in other settings which are tailored to the child's nervous system, which, in other words, address the child's unique individual differences. In this way, we can help children become calm, regulated, attentive, and ready to learn. This may sound self-evident and very, in a sense, simple, but if, for example, we have a child who needs to move around a lot, who is sensory seeking because that is the way their nervous system works, but we have an educational setting that is heavily focused on compliance and sitting in a chair and not moving around while learning, we may have an aide who is constantly holding the child in the chair or wind up even strapping that child to the chair as was recently reported in a New York Times article on how many schools are actually handling behavior problems, and we precipitate – not deliberately or intentionally – but because we are doing what we think we need to do with educators or intervention specialists or helpers, we may actually precipitate aggression and behavior problems because we are trying to have the child do something that runs against their nervous system or we may use heavy duty medications to foster compliance, but that may cloud the child's ability to actually focus and attend and learn. So creating an environment that is tailored to the child's nervous system is not an easy matter and we'll come back to what that really means. But that can help the sensory seeking child who is going to be active, learn with activity. It can help the child who gets overloaded by too much noise learn in a quieter setting. And, it can help a child who learns better through what they see than what they hear understand his or her world and be less confused and therefore perhaps less prone to aggression or behavior problems. So this is a very, very important principle.


The second principle which already fits in with a lot of educational goals is to help each child reach his or her potential or literally redefine their potential for communicating, thinking, and learning, as well as to have relationships with others. After all, these are the goals of education and being able to relate, communicate, think, and learn is critical. How do we literally redefine each child's potential or help a child reach their potential? Well, we have to consider, and we will come back to this one as well, that we can't predict each child's potential from standardized tests, certainly not children with special needs who can't participate in the testing procedure very well, and we don't have good data on the variety of special needs conditions to be very accurate on our



predictions so that is hazardous. If we predict what we know, the fallacy will come true so it requires an attitude of helping each child with an optimal program progress and letting the child progress on a learning curve determine their future. It means keeping an open mind. It means never saying, “Little Johnny (or Susie) will never reach higher than this or that level because they test on an IQ test as a 65 or 72 or 49 or 85. That may be meaningless if they don’t understand the test procedures, if they can’t participate fully in the testing, and the testing may not tap areas where they have more confidence or more capacities. And, it may be too structured to really get at their thinking or their innovativeness or their creativity. So it means taking an open-ended approach. And, it means also where we let the child’s progress in an optimal educational environment and home environment; his or her own learning curve determine their future. After all, that’s what we try to do for everybody.

It also means knowing how to approach the child and having goals that make sense to facilitate the child’s ability to become a thinker and to become a learner and to become a communicator and to become a relater. How do we do that and are we really translating that in terms of the goals of education? And if we do that, will we have children who are less prone to behavior problems and problems with aggression? If we have a child who can relate to others, who can communicate their needs and their feelings, who can negotiate – are they going to be as likely to get into “hot water” particularly as they get older and bigger. My feeling is probably not. That is our second ethical principle – creating environments where each child will determine their own future; will determine what their potential is rather than actually determining it for them, and our job is to create that optimal environment that enables them to climb what we call their developmental ladder.


The third principle is the human as well as the physical setting; the learning relationships that the child has available to them requires individuals – adults – who are trained to work with children with a wide variety of special needs conditions; who are trained to understand how each child is unique; trained to understand how each child learns to communicate and think and relate and learn and master their lessons. This is not a question of one philosophy versus another, approach A versus approach B versus approach C because if the approach is going to be tailored to the individual, we need educators and other adults working with children who are trained in what we talked about before. And we need physical environments that are constructed to enable the children to have the capacity to be calm and regulated and focused and good learners. So this requires a lot of educational training and flexible, creative environments that are going to be very helpful for children.



The fourth principle is what to do when a child is out of control because despite our best efforts, children will, at times, become aggressive or become disregulated. It may be something that happened at home, it may be something that happened on the bus on the way over to school, it may be something for factors that we can't identify. That child will require calming down. How do we avoid throwing fuel on the fire where the child is more aggressive and more out of control and their needs, according to the school, to be strapped to a chair or more aversive techniques used to manage the child to keep them from hurting themselves or from hurting others when a child ends up with bruises and is sent home as that New York Times article reported. Or, are there ways to help that child calm down and settle down? Can we have environments; special places at school and specially trained individuals who are experts at helping the child calm down? When do we bring in the parents to help out? So the fourth principle is having the most enlightened and insightful strategies and trained individuals and environments that help children calm down and self regulate and become quickly re-equilibrated, so to speak, and get back into a learning posture where they are calm and regulated and ready to take on the tasks at hand.

So these are some of the principles I think constitute an ethically derived approach to children with autism and other special needs conditions. All of these principles derive from one common principle: a respect for the individual child and a respect for how their body and how their nervous system and how their mind and brain work. If we start from there, as opposed to starting from a position of “we know how it's supposed to work and we are going to fit it to a preconceived notion” rather than understanding how it works and figuring out with and for that child to try to help that child grow and develop. If we have that as our central organizing notion, all these other principles flow and develop.

Now let's go over each of these principles in a little more detail. The first one we talked about was tailoring the learning environments – actually all of the environments – to the child's nervous system. Now for children with autistic spectrum disorders and other special needs conditions, one of the most important findings of the last 30-40 years has been that each child's nervous system, regardless of similarity of diagnosis, two children with autism for example, may function very, very differently. One child is over reactive to things like touch and different light and different types of sounds like low rumbling sounds or high pitched noises. The other child is under reactive. So the first child needs very calming and soothing sounds and the second child needs lots of energized, not quite loud but energized, compelling sounds to get their attention and help them focus.




Children will move very differently. Some will have balance and coordination difficulties. They need environments that can provide supports that are helpful and have a hard time carrying out instructions that require two or three steps or four steps. They can do one-step actions. Other children are just the opposite. They can carry out, particularly if they see it done, three and four step action plans very easily. They have very different motor planning or sequencing capacities.

Some children are good at comprehending or figuring out what they see. If you show them a picture or show them where something is, they'll find it again very easily. They will size up the environment and make sense of it very quickly. Other children, even though they can see and may not have a visual deficit in the sense that they can make out letters and numbers and shapes and faces have a hard time seeing the big picture. They get over focused on one element in their environment and are not good at what we call visual spatial thinking or big picture thinking. So they get caught up in the trees rather than seeing the whole forest.

Some children have very good memories for what they hear; other children have very weak memories for what they hear. Some children comprehend and actually have pretty good language skills up to a certain level of abstract thinking but they need more practice and challenge and more work. Some children are just the opposite.


So each child is different in how their nervous system works in a functional sense in how they see, hear, move, and experience sensations. So each child, in a sense, requires a different environment to learn in. The sensory seeking child who is active, if you try to have that child sit at a desk for too long, that child is going to get very frustrated and very angry. If you have a poorly-trained assistant or aide or teacher's helper who sees it as their job to keep the child sitting around in circle time or sitting at their desk to try to comply with a certain assignment, we may have the ingredients of a behavior problem or a problem with aggression – one that could be easily prevented by having that child move every few minutes or learn while moving or giving that child more freedom of movement. Now if we have a very rigid standard in school that says all children are going to sit at their desks and learn the following lesson plan that is uniform, that goes against respecting the individual nervous system of the child.

So these are some examples, and we can't go into all the possible examples that we could create at this moment, but these are a few examples of how to create environments that are tailored to each child's nervous system. We have to have physical settings at school and individuals who are trained to be able to carry this out, which is one of the principles further down our list.



The second principle we talked about was helping each child define their potential and redefine it constantly, or learning, or making progress, not having preconceived notions, not setting limits on children. This means something very important. It means not separating children into academic learners versus children who are just going to learn some rules to live by or not separating these kids who are going to learn to read and write and do math from kids who are only going to learn to take a bus or learn to dress and undress. It means helping each and every child progress in their thinking to as high a level of thinking as they can, to be determined by them, not by us in advance. It means helping each child learn to communicate to the highest level they can – again determined by them, not by us. Helping each child not only learn to think and communicate to the highest level they can but also to relate and interact with others to the highest level they can. And most importantly, to learn new information and new concepts and new ideas using their thinking; using their comprehension, not assume they can't learn to think and therefore resort to only rote learning or imitation and carrying out the simplest actions.

Fortunately in the last 20 years or so, we figured out the steps involved in this process of helping each child define their own potential. We have divided the abilities to relate, communicate, think, and learn into a number of steps that can be applied to educational or other settings. It involves creating opportunities for children to learn to be regulated and attentive, to learn to engage with warmth and caring with others, to learn to be two-way communicators, to get into patterns of back-and-forth communication first using gestures like showing and pointing and facial expressions and other physical gestures, and then using words, if possible. If not words, then pictures. But it means getting into a back-and-forth rhythm of communication. It means using this capacity for communication to problem solve together with others in a socially meaningful way, taking a teacher by the hand and showing them what you want if you can't find the words for it or using a combination of words and gestures together. This helps a child feel empowered. It helps the child negotiate. It helps the child feel in control with their bodies. They are much less likely to be aggressive or much less likely to be disregulated or have behavior problems if they can interact and negotiate. It means helping children use ideas whether through picture forms or through typing out words or through speaking if they are capable of learning to speak, and many children are if we give them the right program, to use ideas and communication. It means educational approaches that don't have children sitting at a desk doing just paper and pencil work but spending most of the time communicating with their assistant, their aide, the teachers, or the teaching assistant. If we need better ratios then that means having volunteers coming in to help them. It means learning to use ideas logically to make sense all the time. So it means, whether it is through written form or with pictures or speaking, to have conversations that make sense; encouraging children to both be creative and initiate new ideas. Initially this might




be pretend play even for an older child like an 8 year old, although this sounds like it should be a preschool program, it might be necessary for an 8 year old to make up stories, but then to also be logical – to find out why the car wants to go into the castle or to find out why the child wants to go outside rather than stay in the classroom. Or instead of saying, “No” finding out why and what do you want to do there and then see if the child can do it a little bit later. Having a conversation about this as the child is banging on the door will help that child become a thinker and a logical thinker rather than simply an impulse driven individual who wants to get their way when they want it.

So we need to help children use their ideas and we need to help them use it to understand what they are reading or what they are writing or what they are doing if they are fortunate enough to be able to learn to read and write and to do math. So we have to make sure they are not just memorizing short answers, but they are actually thinking through the material using this capacity for ideas.

We know now that thinking progresses through a number of levels from logical thinking, which is causal, to multi-causal thinking, to a more subtle form of nuanced thinking where children can tell you the degrees to which they like A better than B or the degree to which one author is superior to another author that they are reading, to finally reflective thinking where children can compare their own experiences to the author’s experiences or talk about why they feel one way one day and one way another day. And yes, more children are capable of reflective thinking than we would think about. Usually when a child gets to be a reflective thinker, they can talk about their angry feelings as well as their good feelings communicated through writing or pictures, the aggressive acting out is very, very low. In fact we have found that as children learn to simply even use gestures in a back-and-forth way; to negotiate and communicate, the tendency to go from 0-60 and become impulsive or disregulated or aggressive or have behavior problems is lowered significantly, as is the ability to just relate warmly to others is fostered.

So helping each child progress up their learning ladder, for them to find their potential and to recognize that learning involves relating, communicating, and thinking as well as mastering the academic work of the curriculum, the curriculum needs to encompass communicating, relating, and thinking as well as the traditional math, science, social studies, history, and so forth. Recognizing that fact will help each child define their potential and keep redefining it and become active learners and in the process become less likely to have problems with aggression or behavior control.


In order to create environments – both human environments and the physical environment that are tailored to the child’s nervous system and to help each child really define their potential and become relaters, thinkers, communicators, and learners does



require trained staff and a new way of thinking and the information of the last not only 5-10 years but 20 years. So we have to update educational programs for those who are being trained to work with those with special needs, not just the master teachers, many of whom have already mastered or are teaching these principles, but the teaching assistants and the aides and the volunteers. And we have to redesign many of the physical environments that children are educated in and work closely with parents so we have a common working relationship between educators and parents so the home environment and the school environment, in some respects, are mirroring each other. This is no small undertaking. Schools now, particularly programs for children with autism and other special needs conditions are heavily geared towards compliance and very standardized curriculum which are standardized which are uniform for many different children and are not as sensitive as they need to be to individual differences in the nervous system like I mentioned before such as the child who craves sensation and needs to be on the move versus the child who gets overwhelmed by too much sensation and needs very calm, soothing environments. For the child who is better suited or needs less demanding physical environments to master because they can't plan their actions or get easily confused or overwhelmed in a certain setting versus the child who is gifted at mastering their physical environment because of their motor skills.

So we need to have really redesigned physical environments as well as redesigned training and most importantly is behind all of this and attitude change – an attitude of what the goal of education is for those carrying it out. I talked with many educators who intuitively and based on their own experience understand the principles of respect for individual differences and the ways in which the nervous system functions, and how to understand also how children learn to relate, communicate, think, and learn. But they often feel under the pressure of a county or state or federal mandate that little Johnny or Susie has to master these memory-based facts and has to achieve this degree of compliance. And we have very compliance-oriented educational settings, both physically and in terms of the learning environment and individuals whose training then becomes rote and compliance oriented as opposed to more creative, individual difference based, and thinking based.


So if our overriding principle that we start out with is to respect the individual and respect the uniqueness of the nervous system and respect their capacity to learn and let them define whether there are going to be any limits on that learning, if that becomes our governing and overriding ethical principle, then it follows from that that we have to shift from a compliance “do what I say” approach to an approach that says “let’s work together – we are partners in trying to figure out and work in the ways that will best enable you, Susie (or Johnny or Harold or Sally) to learn and to master the world by



understanding it, negotiating with it, and learning to enjoy it.” This is not an easy task and it will require lots of change in education, but also lots of change in administrative and political philosophy. It means translating the broad mandates for children who have special education needs into a new set of terms and a new set of practical applications. I can’t go into detail today about what the ingredients of these training programs will be, but they’ll need to have not only change in attitude and philosophy and a change in the coursework but I’d like to emphasize the fundamental change in the underlying assumptions in attitudes about children and their potential and also a change in the attitude about lifelong learning. Right now there are programs for children right through high school and sometimes some post high school programs taking children up through age 18 or 20 or 21, but we found children with special needs, their nervous system and their capacity to learn is cooking and growing into their adult years. We have more and more children now in those years. How do we create the learning environments for the young adults and the middle age adults and even the elderly because capacity to learn never stops and these principles have to be applied across the full span or the full course of life. So we have to redefine our educational commitments and our educational goals in those terms as well.

And yes, many of you are asking about the financial considerations that may be considerable. But we are driven by ethical concerns and we are driven by principles, and finances and priorities for those finances come from what we value and what we cherish and what those principles are.


In just a moment, we will talk about what to do once the child is out of control or once the child is already feeling or finding themselves in a situation where they are being aggressive or their behavior is out of control. Sometimes, despite our best efforts even with creative learning environments that are tailored to the child’s nervous system and educational programs that are fostering relating, communicating, and thinking, a child will still get disregulated or aggressive or have behavior problems. Here we need to have a new approach that is focused on not throwing fuel on the fire and helping the child calm down. If we respect each and every child’s nervous system, we will figure out in advance as part of their educational plan and actually have this written down, what the best self-calming techniques are for that child. For some children it will be creating a very soothing environment if the child gets overloaded very easily and just got disregulated by being overloaded. For that same child, being intruded upon, another child may be intrusive and get into their physical space or maybe the lights are too bright or it’s too noisy, or an educator, without intending to, was making a point in a too intrusive fashion rather than a soothing fashion.



So here the individuals working with the child can shift to the “soothing, re-regulating” plan or the plan that helps the child get under control. It may mean helping the child go to a setting where there is less noise in another room. There may be some calming music in the background that the child enjoys; rhythmic activities to music, for example. There may be soothing activities or sensory experiences like going onto a swing or just firm, deep pressure on the back or legs or arms may help the child regulate. Or sometimes just being with the child but just nearby the child – but not trying to do anything physical with the child may help the child re-regulate calmly and quickly, particularly in a setting which is very calming. The idea here is to help the child calm down. Now if the child has crossed the line and hit or pinched or done something that required some sanctions such as a loss of opportunity to play a favorite game, that can come later. You never negotiate the sanctions the same time the child is disregulated. That is like trying to do something in the middle of a hurricane. You wait for the hurricane to calm down. So the first goal is to help the child calm down and not what you’ve done or what you shouldn’t do but more about let’s calm down and let’s see if we can relax. Now for the child who needs activity and movement, it may be a more active approach in a sensory environment to help that child calm down. It may be a walk outside for some children in the playground or in the schoolyard.

If the staff gets into the issue of who is running the show here, the child has to comply with me, this is only feeding into the child and spoiling the child, that sort of all-or-nothing thinking will only get us into more hot water with that child. Again, there should be a plan when we are calm and the child is calm based on the child’s history and the way child’s nervous system functions as to how will be the most calming experience for that child and once the child is out of control, to create that calming experience. Now parents might have to be called in to help at times – the child who is having “a very, very bad day” and is having many bouts of dysregulation and the staff feels that they aren’t able to handle it may need to call parents in to help out and they may have to bring that child home for that day, and if that is the case, that is far superior to using aversive strategies with that child which will only trigger more distrust, dysregulation, anger, and behavior problems in the future.


So we have to have physical environments and human environments that have a game plan for calming each and every child, which will be different and unique to the child. The calming versus the control is the issue. Now on the one hand, we’ll be preventing lots of problems and challenges simply by instituting the new goals and new ethical principles I have been describing. But when the child is out of control, having a preconceived notion of what is going to be calming for that child and being flexible is critical. Now we also may need a special team, for example, for large teenagers with a



very small teacher. Just a physical size difference will understandably make the teacher nervous – I would be with a big teenager, and the child actually may feel nervous too, feeling that there is no one there who can control or help him or her. Having the right physical staff; with male teenagers you may need some aides who are large and gentle – “gentle giants” is what I call them. I remember when I first got into the field and there was a special education school where I was training and they had a man there who was an aide who was a large man and was very gentle and fit the description of a gentle giant, and when he was in the classroom, the children behaved very, very well. When he was out of the classroom, the children misbehaved and were more aggressive with a small and understandably nervous teacher with all of these “potentially aggressive” male children who were in the class. Many of these children were in this class because of problems with aggression and controlling their behavior.

So sometimes just the presence of a large gentle giant, and if a child needs to be helped into a quieter setting, such a gentle giant may be just the right person. The key thing is the gentleness and creating the regulating environment for the child – one that doesn’t throw fuel on the fire. Just to give some more examples, this is the soothing environment for the children who are hyper reactive, the more active opportunity environment for the child who is very sensory seeking and may calm down through movement and action that is calming for the child. For the child who is being aggressive towards people, it may require an environment where the child is not constrained but not given the opportunity to hurt anyone, and where soothing experiences are provided but in a way that won’t throw fuel on the fire. So it may mean keeping your distance from the child and it may mean even giving the child a period of quiet where the child can calm down. But the key is the game plan needs to be created in advance, and the trained staff needs to be in place in advance, and we have to have sufficient staff to help the child when he or she is a little bit out of control. And parents need to be available to be called in.

This also gets into the issue of medication. The goal of medication for children should be a part of their overall biomedical contribution to their developmental challenges. If medication is used just for compliance, just to foster the child’s ability to comply in a demanding environment that is not tailored to the child’s nervous system and is not facilitating relating, engaging, communicating, and learning, and is not helping calm and regulate the child when the child is already out of control, and it is not promoting moving the child up the ladder towards higher and higher levels of their potential. If the medication is not geared to those but instead just compliance, then the medication is not ethically derived for that child. If the child’s medication is essential for the child’s learning, and the child is learning to relate, communicate, and think, and



therefore problem solve and master new settings, then it will help the child be more regulated and calmer and be a learner and be a relater, communicator, and thinker. That is a very different goal for that child.

Well we have covered today a number of topics including our last one, the use of medication. Just to emphasize that point again, medication should be used to facilitate relating, communicating, thinking, and learning and self calming and not compliance or not adhering to programs that are not geared to the child's individual differences or their nervous system. In other words medication should be a part of, if it is needed at all, and for many children – I would say the vast majority it is not needed or indicated – but for those who it is, it is to facilitate the learning process and the child reaching his or her potential. I want to underline not compliance or not environments that are inappropriate for the child. That is a little bit like creating stress and then medicating the person to overcome the stress that has been created.

All too often I have seen children who are in educational settings where unrealistic goals are set for the child to sit, to comply, to learn in a way that is unnatural for that child and not in a way that the child's nervous system is set up to learn and that precipitates aggression and behavior problems, then aversive techniques are used to “control the child,” medication may be brought in which may cloud the child's ability to learn as opposed to help, which some medications can do, that child's ability to learn.

So if we can begin thinking about, as I hope this show starts doing, an ethically derived way of working with children with autistic spectrum disorders and other special needs conditions, and begin debating the ethical principles which should guide such approaches, I have outlined some of these principles today to start our dialog and to start our discussion. I hope this promotes more discussion in the future and the principles we outlined today have to do with creating environments geared to the child's nervous system, creating learning environments and learning relationships that are helping the child become relaters, thinkers, communicators, and learners, creating training programs that help staff – and parents too – work together towards these goals, which are new goals, which require a change in attitude as well as in the techniques and strategies used, and having game plans for each child in advance that will be geared toward self-calming and geared toward helping the child re-equilibrate and get back into a learning posture.

So if we can start with these, we can debate, add, fine tune them, and come up with an ethically derived approach to our work with children with special needs. Thank you very much for joining us today.