

THE RESILIENT KID PODCAST

Season 2 – Episode 17

Advocating For Your Child in School

Hello, and welcome back to the Resilient Kid podcast with me, Ashley Costello, psychotherapist of over 25 years, helping families and kids really be resilient, really get through what is often tough times for both. So today, what are we talking about? The last few episodes we've been talking about neurodiversity in kids and in families and kind of how we spot it, how we support it, help it, things like that.

And so, one of my big jobs is to be an advocate for the children in school and, and kind of almost like an education piece around being an advocate for your child in school. So, I thought it'd be really interesting and really useful. I'm all about being useful. For me to kind of give you top tips of how to advocate for your child in school.

School is a funny thing, isn't it? Because we, if I said to you, do you remember your exams? Now those who sat exams, we remember that dread of the hall at the lining up in silence at the clock ticking or counting down and you know, the dropping of the pencils on the floor and how it makes it all those kinds of things.

And it fills us with that dread, doesn't it? So, we have those kinds of associations with school. We also have, you know, maybe primary or, or secondary senior school where we've been called to the headmaster's office and it might be getting in trouble, things like that. And it's a little bit like us going back into school, trying to advocate for our children and we're walking in as those children that we remember walking into school sometimes.

I've got friends whose kids went to the same primary and same secondary as them. In fact, my family have gone through the same school, same senior school since my nana, like in the sixties, you know, and I've still got family that are in that exact same school. So, it's, it's difficult. It's quite hard I think sometimes to try as much as we love our kids, we often defer to the teachers, defer to the, anybody in school as they're the expert.

And they are absolutely they are and I think teachers and anyone who works in the school is often really amazing and it's a real vocation but that's not everybody I'm not gonna say all teachers are because they're not I know some amazing ones but I also have reports and have personal experience of ones who should never have been in the job, but they are educationally the expert.

What they're not expert in is your kid. And that's why I'm here. That's what I want to talk about today. You are the expert in the child. I always say this to the parents that I work with. I can bring my expertise to the table, but you're the expert with your child. I might ask them questions to get some of that information out, and then be able to support them or help them with strategies and tools and things.

But actually, they're the one who knows their kid more. I can tell them stuff about their behavior and why, why their brain acts in this way and things like that, but they are still the expert with their child. So, I'm going to do this in kind of two halves today. I'm going to do... One bit about advocating in school, how you can get help, things like that.

And then the second bit, I'm going to kind of talk about if your child has any neurodiversity, what that can look like as well. What, how you can advocate for your child or maybe what's on offering in your school for them. Just following on from our neurodiverse couple of podcasts that we've had with the amazing Helen Davies.

Who was great. And also, Michelle, who, who, if you have a child who would really benefit from her book, get it. It is fabulous. It's absolutely fabulous. So, let's kick off. How do we advocate for your child. So, what I would say to you is before you do anything, write down what you need, write down all your thoughts around why you're going in, what is it that you want the school to support you with and really break that down into bullet points because if you go into school, which is very busy place and you say for instance, something like bullying and you say, this is what this, this, this.

And by the way, her coat's been taken and his PE bag is not on his peg or, you know, and social media and this and that they're not going to hear everything. So, what we need to do is. If we have got something, we've got to prioritize that one thing for them or that, that one issue for school because they're a busy place.

That's not to say we can't talk about the other stuff, just not right now. You can do that kind of at a later date when you've built up that relationship with that teacher or that person in school. So, write down your thoughts and then get the bullet points. Talk about the issue. And, and then have your bullet points that will back that up.

School are very evidence based. There's no point in going to school and saying my child's getting bullied if you have got nothing to show them. Because they can't act upon it. And they want to, they want to be able to help you. So that's the first thing I would say, is write down what it is that you want to go with.

Then, I would say, write down what you expect. So, this could be something like if it was if it was primary, junior schools, I would say if it was something along the lines of say they have an issue with learning, they've got barriers to learning. What is it that you expect? Is it that you would like somebody to read with them a little bit more in school and that will help bring them on?

Maybe it's something like, they might have an issue, say, with making friends. Okay, well, can you, can you get somebody to give them, like, a buddy? Is that what you're expecting? If it was a senior high school situation, say it was Bullying, for instance. Okay, well, what, what do you expect to be done because they're not going to give you this kid's name and address and you go around and talk to the parents that just doesn't happen.

But it might be that you want to know what's happened and you want to see what the consequence is. It might be that you want some reparation. So, I'll give you an example. This is an example that I put in my book as well. I had one of my students who had, had a fight with another peer, so same group and there was there was lots of kind of lies around it.

But when it all came out this young boy had picked on a friend of his. And so, he then pushed him against the wall. And that started a fight. Now, what normally happens in those situations is they both get punished CCTV, and let me tell you, in high schools, most schools have got CCTV, the CCTV was checked, both the school, both the kids were reprimanded, and that was that.

However, I stepped in because what I wanted to do, this was a year seven, these were year seven boys. I knew that one of these boys was a traveller. I know his

culture is to come out fighting. Of course, it is, you know because there is a lot of you know, masculinity and being able to defend yourself.

And also, because the traveling community get a lot piled upon them. Of course, they've got to defend their corner. And actually what I. was asking the school to do was do reparation between these two boys, sit down, talk about it, write each other, this is why I felt like this, write each other a letter, sit down and have that conversation, which often does not happen.

It's usually punishment done. But these year seven boys, they're cracking lads. They were absolutely lovely guys. And what I didn't want is for this to be an enemy situation all the way through they just started. It was the first term of year seven. You don't want them to go to year 11 with this hanging over them.

So, I said, actually, what I would like to see is reparation between the boys. And you know what? It's worked. They're now in year nine. They've never had an issue since, which is brilliant, isn't it? You know, and sometimes it just takes somebody else say, this is what I need. So absolutely make it very clear what it is you need.

Or alternatively go, what can you do about it? Pass it back to them. I would like you to do something. What can you do? You know, so that's a really good way of kind of getting them to give you what is possible in school. The next thing I would say to you is speak to someone that you trust. There is no point in going to a teacher that maybe you've had a bit of a running with or a teacher that you don't trust.

You know, particularly in high schools, often the first port of call is always the form teacher. If it is that your child doesn't necessarily bond with the, with the form teacher, then go to the head of year. Yeah, can be the same in primary. It might not be their class teacher. So go to the deputy head.

You know, things like that. You can go to somebody that you trust. That's important. And do not be afraid to ask questions. Ask as many questions as you need to. Because I think quite often, we almost have that white coat syndrome, don't we? They're the experts, so we don't want to ask too many questions.

But actually, this is your child. It is their welfare. They spend, you know, far more time during the week at school than they do with you that are not in bed. So

absolutely ask as many questions as you need to be. The other thing that I would say to you is don't be afraid to show emotion. Obviously, be respectful.

Don't be, you know, don't get to the point where you're so angry you're fizzing and you start shouting. You, you still, you know, you've got to think about being professional because that's the kind of you know, that's what you expect off them. But don't be afraid to show emotion. I've had plenty of parents that have cried in meetings and actually that touches the teacher.

I've had plenty of parents that have got angry, but they've not raised their voice, but you know, they are upset. This has been a really serious issue and that's really, you know, for that parent, it's really heart wrenching. And so, yeah, don't be afraid to show emotion. You know, the teachers and the heads and stuff, they're human too.

So, yeah, don't be afraid. The next thing I would say to you is, ask for extra help. Absolutely, ask for extra help. So, the kind of help that I often ask for is, so in primary and juniors, I ask for ELSA training, which is It's like an emotional literacy course that very, I don't know of any schools that haven't been trained in this.

I mean, it's, it's a lovely program, teaches them about emotional management and stuff. And once the child has been through the program, which is like usually set for just a set amount of weeks, then there's often drop ins for like little top ups, plus they always know they can go to that person. And it just really helps children to manage those big emotions for sure. So, ELSA is a really good one. CEN if you need it. So, if you've got a SENCO worker, which again, all schools have SENCO worker, if you think there's something that they're struggling with, think about what barriers to learning they have.

So, it might not necessarily that they are ADHD or autistic or, you know, on that neurodiverse path, but it could be that they're really struggling at the moment with reading. Okay. Well, how can you help us read? You know, a lot of parents go in, volunteer with reading. Can we get them a little bit of extra reading? Things like that. So don't be afraid to reach SEN workers, the SENCO workers in school and say, you know, I'm, I'm worried about this it feels like they're falling a little bit behind. What can we do?

So be, you know, absolutely ask for help. Often, they have pastoral workers as well in primary that maybe if, you know, the children are going through divorce or

death or things like that, especially if they lose somebody, if it's like a grandparent that's died but, you know, even, and I cannot stress this enough.

If your child is going something through something at home. Whether it's a death of a pet or a grandparent, divorce maybe one of the grandparents is poorly, maybe the mum or dad has been poorly, please, please let your teachers know, let your teachers know, because that child, even though they probably, you know, often they don't seem like they're bothered, doesn't seem like it's really, you know, gone into their, their sphere.

It's, it's not affected them. It will have, it will have affected them. In so much as they may be more sensitive, their behavior might go through the roof. They might have more meltdowns; they might cry more. And that's not because, and they might not be able to verbalize that, but if there's something going on in your household, you can bet your bottom dollar the kids have picked it up.

So, you know, please let your school know if there is stuff going on. And this is not them being nosy, this is them looking out for your child. And that's what I mean by advocate for your child. Try and give them the best start. And that is by keeping school informed of what's going on. In high school, in senior schools, there is things like counsellors, school counsellors, they have pastoral, they, which again is not like counsellor but look after the welfare, wellbeing and also you have SENCO workers as well.

So, you know, there are lots of people, as well as form tutors. Don't be afraid to email in, you know, and you can email in like reception or office and just say, like, this is for the attention of Mr. Taylor, their form tutor, just letting you know today that, you know, Ashley's really struggling and grandpa's not well.

Will you keep your eye on them? And that will then be disseminated across the teachers. And ask specifically for that. Ask specifically for what you need. Say, could you let all the teachers know who are involved with Ashley, please? You know, because it could be you in the middle of maths, they're already on, like, hyper alert.

They're already feeling that under threat because this is going on at home. And then we give them a really tough maths challenge or we ask them to redo their art or something and they melt down and we don't know why. They'll get in trouble.

So, but if they know there's something going on, of course, they'd be more lenient and rightly so.

But they don't, can't do that if we don't advocate for our kids and if they don't know. So, absolutely ask for help and think about any extra help your child might be, need. And I guess, importantly, what I would say is keep speaking up. If your child needs some assistance, so this is another thing that you can ask for help with in high school, is learning mentors.

So, they are a little bit like... Counsellors, as in they can chat, but they'll also see what else they might need. Again, looking at that barriers for learning and assist them and put stuff into place within school. So, for instance, it might be a toilet pass. You know, they might need a toilet pass to give them a breather sometimes if stuff is getting too much for them in class. It could be they give them a learning mentor pass. Are they make regular appointments to have a check in once every week, once every couple of weeks? It might be they give him a pass at PE because there's certain times that that child can't do it and they don't want to keep explaining.

So, you know, things like that. But what I would say to you is. Schools are very, very busy places and like anything, it can be on their list and then suddenly it might drop down. So, the more that you're in touch, the more you develop and, and I would strongly recommend you develop a relationship with either the head of year or their class teacher.

The more you develop that relationship, the more likely they are to follow through and it's not that they don't have the want to. It's just sometimes they don't have the time to and it gets slipped off the list. So, make sure that you follow up with anything. So, anything that you've requested, any help that you've asked, extra help that you've asked for your child, follow up a week or two weeks later and say to them, how is it going?

Has this been put in place in my job, a lot of the stuff that I do with parents is actually advocating for them at school, but I also teach the parents how to do this, you know, but there is times when I will email in and I'll say, can you tell me where we're up to with? Lily, for instance did she get a learning mentor?

Did you check in? Did you also encourage her to go to the drama club? You know, things like that. It's really important that we do that follow up. If you had a project

on at work, you would absolutely have some kind of accountability until that gets over the finish line. So, you know, you ask for accountability and often they just need that little reminder.

Sometimes if it has slipped off the list, if that, you know, your child, because, you know, somebody else has come in with a, with a crisis or whatever, it might've slipped down the list, but it's not that they don't care. It's not that they don't love your kids. They just sometimes need a little reminder and holding them accountable is, is really good way of doing that.

You know, all the professionals that I speak to in schools for the most part, absolutely lovely. I've spoken to a SENCO worker this morning. She was amazing. I said to her, will you send me that form? And I'll have a look at what I see for you. And she was like, oh my God, you're going to help me do this form.

I was like, absolutely. It's part of my job, you know, and I'm kind of now, you know, I'm the first person who said, I'll help you with your job. And she's like, I'm now her best friend. But that also means I'm developing that relationship with her for that young person that I'm seeing. It means that when I need something later down the line, I can go to her and say, can you help me with this?

You know, we've got a referral for a paediatrics. Can you help me? She'll say, yeah, won't she? So, it is develop a relationship, have an open and honest conversation sometimes. We wait for things to build up with our kids. We sometimes dismiss or minimize what's going on for our kids because we don't want to go into school.

We don't want to be there every five minutes, but actually when it builds up to crisis point, we often go in with that anger. Why is this not being picked up before? Why am I telling you about this? And actually, we can both see the signs. So, so the earlier you build that relationship, the quicker you can do not be afraid of asking for appointments outside of parents evening, do not be afraid. So particularly in high schools. So, I don't know about you, but like my child's high school parents evening, which actually is coming up next week, a five minutes appointments, they literally are on zoom and you can see it going for 59, like counting down.

And the minute it gets to, like, as it goes down to like Not 0. 2 seconds. It's gone. That's it. Like you can't say, can I just last year, you know, you've got that time.

And that is it. If you have got an issue, just ask for an appointment, you know, and a lot of, I had an appointment with a head of SENCO. a local high school, the last day of term at five o'clock.

And, you know, absolutely. I'm not advocating that teachers work that late, but there is that element where they want to help, they will put time in their diary to help, you know? So absolutely do not be afraid to ask for appointments outside of either the working day, like school working day and see if they can accommodate, or maybe they'll do it before school.

I've done that before where I've had a call at half past eight, you know, whereas all the kids are coming in and stuff. I've had a quick five-minute chat. I just wanted to check in with you about this. But also, you know, don't be afraid to ask for appointments if you can get in on your lunch hour, things like that, or if you're, if you're lucky enough to be at home and you can get in, or maybe you just do zoom because it's easier and you can, you can grab a, you know, 10 minutes in the working day. So yeah, don't be afraid of, of that. So just to recap on that little bit, please do not make sure that you are clearing what you want.

Write down all your thoughts. Prioritize what it is. Speak to somebody you trust. Ask as many questions as you need. And do not be afraid to show your emotion. Our kids are the most important thing that we look after. Yeah. So, ask for extra help if they need it and keep speaking up. Ask for accountability.

Check in with them, even if it's like, you know, if you have, for instance, if you've got a parent's evening next week, like me check in again before Christmas, is there anything that I need to know as we go into the Christmas holidays, things like that. So, I just want to kind of rounded up on that.

I want to just look quickly at the kind of thing that if you have a child that may be neurodiverse. Are you think they might be what you can do because it's a little bit different similar in some ways but it's a little bit different. So, take everything that I've just said about advocating for your child Yes, absolutely do that.

However, if you think they've got some additional needs then contact your teacher first and foremost then contact the SENCO of your school Again, write down what you're seeing. So, if it is, for instance, that you might think that they might have ADHD, you might have some experience and think, actually, I can see traits in them that I see here.

Write down what you're seeing. Ask them what they're seeing in school, whether it's, you know, ADHD, autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia, it does not matter. Write down what you're seeing and go with the evidence. A bit like I was saying in the bullying issue, if you've got no evidence, you can't do anything about it.

Ask them to observe your child and say, listen, this has kind of come onto my radar. What's your, what, what do you think? What's your opinion? Is there anything you're seeing? And if they say no, say, I'm asking you then, could you report back to me by next week? Ask the, you know. Ask the lunchtime supervisors, ask the teaching assistants.

Ask the teachers, ask the SENCO, observe your child and, and get them to have a look at what you are seeing because it is very different. You know, we know that some of these neurodiverse children will mask often, and then we get the blowout at home when they feel safe and stuff. But actually, when you start to have those conversations around masking things like that, they'll go, oh, well, actually, you know, because I think sometimes, we talk about ADHD as like, you know, the kids have got to turn up with fidget spinners.

No, absolutely not. That's not how it is. And not all kids who've got ADHD are hyperactive, which is why we have ADD. Anyway, you know, it's about looking at them and being able to support them with that. So, so ask to speak to the SENCO. Usually what happens is there is a pathway. Like a send what we call the send pathway.

So those additional needs, there's a pathway that we can look at. And that would be. Something like, and it's mostly like this across the country, about a county banding document. And on that document is what the SENCO use. They have a look at like universal, what would we expect our children to be doing.

They'll look at communication, they'll look at interaction, various different things. And then they would have what kind of support needs to be put in place. And if funding is needed to get that support in place. A lot of the support can already be done. But if there's extra funding that might be needed for one to ones, things like that, or maybe just, you know, a temporary one to one.

So, but again, it's about gathering that evidence. And that's what your SENCO would do for you in your school. People like me also. Wright reports and add in there for that and then a referral, a kind of like a send profile, the additional needs

of the child profile would be then written up and they would so that would be looking at the needs in school. It would also, if we needed funding, it would go towards that. But actually, what it does do is go forward. We can then go forward if necessary. It's not always necessary. I'm not, I'm not one of those psychotherapists who say, oh yeah, you absolutely have to have an assessment because the school will often put support in place without an assessment.

But if you do want to go forward for an assessment, this kind of evidence gathering from parents, from people like me, from a school situation. We'll go towards a paediatric referral and that ped referral means there is a bit of a wait. If you're not going to go private there is a bit of a wait at the moment, just across the country.

But what I would say to you is then they will be able to officially diagnose it for you and then say what support can be in place. Your SENCo's are worth their weight in gold. For the majority of them, and they will be able to say what they can already put in place and if you should go for funding or not, and if you should go for an assessment or not.

I've had chats this week with a SENCO and actually we've had between us a couple of parents where we've gone. Actually, we think, you know, there's definitely some neuro diverse traits here. What do we, you know, what shall we do? And my first question is, what can school put in place? Now, knowing that you and I have both seen these traits for this little person, for this young person, what can school put in place that means we don't have to go for an assessment?

You know, and, and it's not that assessments aren't great. But they're not always necessary. It might be that later on, maybe in senior school, yes, they do need it. But actually, right now, do we need an assessment? And what can, now we've seen this and we've observed these, this evidence, what can we put in place right now?

So that might be, what am I putting in place? So that might be emotional management, might be anger management, it might be friendship issues anxiety. strategies, things like that, what school put in place, what can the teacher do, what can all the teachers involved with that child or that young person put in to support them where they're at right now.

So, there you go. I hope that's been useful. One thing I would add. As well is often look at the unseen people in school as support. So, before I talked to, you know, I've talked about SENCo's, I've talked about ELSA, but also look for family

support worker and look for school nurse. A school nurse in every state school, there is one assigned to that school, doesn't matter if you're high school, primary school, doesn't matter, um, have conversations with them and also a family support worker.

There is usually a family support worker connected to each school as well. These are the unsung heroes and often a wealth of information. So, look for those, you know, as well, and often as parents, we don't know that all these people work at our school, our kid's school, you know, and, and I think you are the expert with your child, but why not reach out for the experts in their field?

And say, what can you help me with? My child is really struggling with A, B and C. How can you help me? Yesterday I had a conversation with a child who is struggling with anxiety and his asthma kicks off. Okay, so let's get the school nursing to talk about that, to talk about what he can do to bring his asthma under control and I'll sort the anxiety.

You saw the asthma. That's your bag. It's not mine, you know, and they were like, oh, yeah, that's a really good idea Causes, you know, but if we don't know that these people exist, we don't know, we only know what we know. You are the expert with your child. Don't forget that. You are doing an amazing job and you know where I am.

Always you can drop me a message at ashley@theresilientkid.co.uk. You can drop me a message under the podcast or under the YouTube video. Or on socials. I'm on Insta and I'm on Facebook. Yeah, I, I was trying to think of this anymore. LinkedIn. But yeah, the best way, the quickest way is email ashley@theresilientkid.co.uk, spelled A-S-H-L-E-Y.

Take care, everyone, it is absolutely a pleasure and a joy to serve the families that I do, and if there's anything that I can do to support you, please let me know. Go out there, be a great advocate for your kid. They deserve it.