



Showing up in relationship

Guest: Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

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Meagen Gibson - [00:00:09]

Welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, co-host of The Relationship Super Conference.

Today I'm speaking with Dr. Tina Payne Bryson, author of *The Bottom Line for Baby* and co-author with Dan Siegel of two *New York Times* bestsellers *The Whole Brain Child* and *No-Drama Discipline*.

She's the founder and Executive Director of The Center for Connection, a multidisciplinary clinical practice in Southern California.

Her latest book, *The Power of Showing Up*, is excellent.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson, thank you for joining me today.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

Thanks so much for having me. I'm so excited to talk about all the ideas.

Meagen Gibson

Let's jump into it.

So we now know more than ever about the factors that contribute to healthy, happy kids. And I love that one of the first things that you make clear in *The Power of Showing Up* is that healthy, happy children do not require perfect parents.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

Thank goodness.

Meagen Gibson

For all of us involved, right.

So what can we do as parents to help our children turn out well?

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

Yeah. So obviously, that's a huge question. And what I love about this attachment science, which is very different from attachment parenting. I'm going to be talking about attachment science. Is that we are really clear, based on decades and decades and decades of cross cultural, longitudinal research that shows that one of the best predictors for how well kids turn out, no matter what we measure

them on, no matter what their adversity is, no matter what their life circumstances are, is that they have secure attachment with at least one person.

Now, obviously, more than one is better. But what do we mean when we say secure attachment?

Well, this is really the answer to your question. What is it we can do to have happy, healthy kids who develop optimally and really become themselves? I'll get back to the secure attachment thing, but here's just a little side story.

So, when Dan and I wrote *The Whole Brain Child*, so we walk through 12 strategies to talk about things we can do to help kids, I think the subtitle is even *12 Revolutionary Strategies To Help Your Kids Be Happy, Healthy, and Fully Themselves*. I mean, it really is, that's like the subtitle.

And then in the conclusion, we basically said, look, all of these things are great strategies or great ways to approach parenting and the most important part is this relational piece and the secure attachment. And our editor was like, you have to take that, because it was a huge section about attachment, she's like, you have to take that out because there's so much in the book already. That's a separate book.

So it was kind of always the book we wanted to write together. And that's really what *The Power of Showing Up* is answering that question. And what do we mean when we say secure attachment? This really is something we can do as parents. It's not just this ethereal idea.

What secure attachment is at its fundamental, and I'm going to go a little science here for a second, at its fundamental level, what attachment is, and it's an inborn instinct for us as mammals. And its purpose is to help us survive, have a better chance of survival. Because as mammals were born pretty immature and if our caregivers don't take care of us, we don't survive.

So, it's this inborn mammalian instinct that gets activated, particularly when we are in distress. Okay. And at its base, its foundation, it really is about, especially during times of distress, someone gets close to us and regulates our emotions and our physiological states.

And by the way, our emotions and feelings and our physiological states are not totally separate. Just as an example, if I'm feeling nervous or afraid, my heart is beating faster, my breathing increases, my body temperature increases. So our physiology and what's happening in our whole nervous system, not just our brain, and our emotions, are very intimately entwined.

So, if you're a bear cub in the forest and you see a predator or you get hurt and you are in distress, the purpose of the attachment system is to communicate to your caregiver. I need you. I have a need here. Your caregiver, in secure attachment, picks up on that need, attunes to what that need is, and shows up and meets it. Sensitively, quickly and really does regulate not only the fear states, but even the physiology. So the bear cubs heart stops beating quite as fast and all of these things, so that's at its base what it's about.

But what does that mean? That's great. That's really interesting. But what does it mean when our kid won't get out of the bathtub? Or what does it mean when our teenager won't communicate with us at all? And what does it mean when we're trying to figure out should we let our baby cry it out at night and all of these things?

And so, that's what Dan and I did in the book is to talk about the how. How do we do this as parents? And if you know any of our work, you know that we love to use things that help us easily remember. So I'm sure you and I will get into this, but we really talk about the four S's. That's really the how of how we help this happen.

But I'll just take one step back and just say one more kind of general. And then I'll follow your lead on where you want to go, is that the attachment science is super hopeful because, like you said, we don't have to be perfect. There's a ton of hope in it. And I hope I'll get to leave that in our conversation.

But it really is about a basic idea. And that is when our children are in need, we show up. And that's the main thing. It really simplifies all the pressure we have on ourselves.

In fact, last night, a high school friend and her family came to visit us last night. I haven't seen them in over a decade, because her daughter is going to college where my oldest is going to be a senior in college. So they wanted to come and learn about the college.

In the conversation, I said at one point, I said, why don't parents just get out of the way? Kids have their paths. Parents just need to get out of the way. And my 21 year old son said, didn't you just write a book about the power of showing up and being there? And I'm like, well, it's both, it's both getting out of their way and it's showing up when they need you, but not when you need to be there.

But it's really simple. It really is about presence. And what I love about it, too, is as we get into this, is that so much of what we think we need to do as parents, we really don't need to do. And it really simplifies what we need to do.

Meagen Gibson - [00:06:56]

I love it. And we're going to touch on, you said a lot there, we're going to touch on all of it because I don't want to miss a beat.

But one of the things that you said that I want to circle back to because this is part of a relationship conference. So people that might be watching this, they could be single, they could be aunts, they could be grandparents, they may have children of their own, or they might not. Or they might be a social worker or a teacher. They might have an occupation where they interact with children.

And one of the most wonderful things that I've seen in my life as well that's reflected in the book is that that one secure person. That these techniques, tools, these things that are important to attachment, can be implemented by anybody that has a relationship with a child. That's obviously one that's consensual that we're supposed to be having with a child.

So that safe, seen, soothed and secure in the book you give so many great examples of specifics around, especially well intentioned parents, because this is not about necessarily, you guys name neglect situations and abuse situations so that people understand what that looks and sounds like, but some of them can be a little bit nefarious. And some really well intentioned parents can just be off the mark when it comes to that safe, seen, soothed and secure.

So I'd love if you went through those four and gave me a couple of examples of what might be off the mark.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

Yeah. Okay. Great, happy to do that. And as I do this, because this is a relationship conference, keep in mind that this isn't just, like you were saying, about a relationship with a child whether you're their parent or not. Our attachment needs, because it's an inborn mammal instinct, these attachment needs we have throughout our lifespan.

So, as I hit on safe, seen, soothed and secure, how I often do a wrap up comment around this is yes, we need to provide these to children, but these are all things we need as well. And these are things all of our relationships need.

I need to feel safe, seen, soothed and secure in my romantic relationship with my husband. I need to feel that from my best friend. I need to provide that to my sister.

And so, this really is a way of being in relationships. My examples are going to be focused more around kids, probably, but I'll see if I can weave in some others. But yeah, it really is throughout the lifespan.

So, safe is what we expect it to be, which is protecting from harm. Like, I've got you. But there are some more things like you were talking about that are a little bit more subtle or things we might not think about that can undermine the other person's sense of safety in us.

One of those things is keeping in mind that remember, this attachment is about being connected and protected. So the person who's supposed to protect you cannot protect you if they are completely out of control and really reactive themselves. Because they're not attending to what's happening in the environment, they are in a really reactive state.

So, if I'm screaming at a customer service representative or I'm in a really intense fight with my husband and my kids are watching or hearing, these are things that can undermine a child's sense of safety.

And I think one helpful way to think about safety is predictability. The brain hates unpredictability, which is why the pandemic in some ways had such, that's one of the reasons it's had such a huge toll on all of this is because the brain interprets unpredictability as potential threat and danger.

So anytime, as someone in a relationship where we become unpredictable, I'm normally patient. I'm normally going to co-regulate with my kid. I'm normally going to listen to my husband when he's telling me there's something he doesn't like about what I've said.

But if I move from a receptive regulated state into a reactive one and I lose the capacity to keep myself regulated, then I'm unpredictable. And so that can really undermine safety.

And just one quick note, because this is a relationship conference, too. There's some really interesting studies that show that babies, even when they're asleep, not consciously paying attention. If they hear adults fighting in the next room, it's just auditory input while they're sleeping, their cortisol levels increase. So we have to know that when we have conflict, if we're not doing it in a respectful, regulated way, it can be incredibly scary for children, particularly young children.

And then what happens for adults is that after the kids go to sleep or whatever, the adults try to work it through, and then hopefully make up, and then things are okay again. But the child never was privy to that restoration and conciliation and healing part. And so they might be holding the stress of that.

So, I think that's a good thing to know is just helping your kids make sense of things. And so to say you heard us yelling last night, and that might have been really scary for you, but we listened and we talked, and you just walk them through that. You're not telling them the issues.

Meagen Gibson - [00:12:12]

The specifics, right.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

But you're helping them make sense of that.

So, here's the good news though, when, not if, we become unpredictable, and when you, hypothetically, no, it's not hypothetical. Yell at your friends.

Meagen Gibson - [00:12:31]

No, it was me this morning, literally this morning, I had a reactivity. And all I can think of was what I think you're going to say, which is repair, right? That's, how do we repair?

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

Yeah. And I think, scream at the kids, throw the dice across the room and get really immature and sarcastic about how fun game night is. Like, those moments, or maybe you've even grabbed your kid's arm and you're like, come here and you're aggressive with their bodies. You're not hurting them, but you're not treating their bodies with respect. All of these moments.

The key is always to repair. And when we do that, and by the way, this can be simple too, basically I yelled, I got so angry, I didn't handle that well. I'm so sorry. I wish I had done that differently. Will you forgive me? Can I have a do over? So, it just can be very simple.

But when we do that repeatedly, if my kids know every time I lose it, and I'm a crazy person and I'm not kind or I'm immature, that's uncomfortable for them. They're like, I don't like that. They might feel scared, or they might feel angry, or they might feel uncomfortable, but they know, because based on previous experiences and the brain wires, what to expect based on repeated experiences, she's going to come make it right. What it does is it actually makes our children relationally resilient because they have to sit in the discomfort of relationships that are messy. Sometimes there is conflict. Sometimes I don't like how you treat me. Sometimes you don't like how I treat you. These are all moments.

And it doesn't mean the relationship is over. It doesn't mean that no one loves each other. It means that we've got repair work to do and that it gets okay again, and we talk about it and we get better.

And sometimes when I say that parents get concerned, does that mean you're giving them messages about staying in dysfunctional relationships? And that's really not an outcome. We get the opposite outcome when kids have secure attachment because they expect other people to keep them safe because we have kept them safe. So that's really a protective factor against unhealthy relationships when we make those repairs. So that's a really important part of safe.

Meagen Gibson

Because if those repairs aren't made, then that's the cycle of behavior where you start to be watchful of people. You're starting to anticipate people's tones or anticipate people's body language. It's indicative, whether you're conscious that you're doing it or not, but looking for patterns of behavior in other people that are going to signal to you that you're not safe or this relationship can't be trusted. It's not a secure relationship.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

That's right. That's right. I can't count on you to keep me safe.

Meagen Gibson

I have a question I'm going to spring on you that I'm not sure, we'll see how it goes, but I have a theory that often, especially when we become parents, a lot of people, and, in fact, somebody I talked to earlier today, we were talking about how you have children, and a lot of what you want to do is like the opposite of aspects of how you were parented. And my theory is that that's really just an under-informed understanding of attachment. And what you're really trying to do is create an attachment you didn't have. But you don't understand your parents' attachment. You don't understand your own attachment.

And so, you're on the right path by trying to do the opposite. But what you don't have is the understanding of the safe, seen, soothed, and I saw this a lot when I taught at University, it was children who had been overprotected in ways that weren't fundamental to their development. They were very protected, and they were very well taken care of. But then their children weren't capable of being independent thinkers in the world and having responsibility for their own actions, right?

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson - [00:16:19]

Yeah. Yeah. So two responses. First is you're totally on the right path. I think if we think about, I'm not gonna parent like my parents or I'm gonna parent just like my parents. Both are reactive positions. All of us are individuals, and our children are individuals, and our families are unique. And so really, the idea of attachment is attunement and tuning into the other and knowing the other and knowing yourself and being able to tune into yourself.

So really, the science says that the number 1 best predictor for how well we're able to provide these four S's and provide secure attachment to our children, to our partners and our friends, is not whether or not we had it, but rather or not that we have reflected on our attachment relational experiences and made sense of them.

And what I mean by that is, and this lays out in terms of the different patterns of attachment, which we probably don't have time to get into today. But instead of running from the past and running from dealing with, oh that was the past, who cares, I'm not going to look at that. Or instead of getting flooded by the past where it intrudes all the time on our experiences, we're really going, okay, my parents didn't show up for me, or there were times I didn't feel safe, or they didn't really get who I was. Or I was left totally on my own if I was having a hard time. And I hated that, and that felt really lonely. Or I had to take care of my parents. And that didn't let me have much of a childhood or whatever it is. And you really make sense of what you didn't have, what you did have, what you needed that was met, what you needed that wasn't.

And in the *Power of Showing Up* we have questions for reflection to help parents do that. And then I also love Dan Siegel's book that he wrote with Mary Hartzell 15/18 years ago that's still really beautiful called *Parenting from the Inside Out*. That really walks you through that process.

So I think it really is about being able to see what you needed that you didn't get, and then providing that to yourself, as opposed to just trying to re-enact things with our kids.

And then one other thing I want to say, Meagen, is that I want to be really clear that when I talk about protecting our kids, that I am not talking about over protecting. Doing things for our children that they can do for themselves, that can get really tricky, too, because your kid can, your 3 year old can put her clothes on, but she just wants you to help her because that feels good and she feels connected. You're not turning her into an adult child if you help her get dressed at 3. That is like she's having a hard time, attune to the need, meet the need. That's totally fine.

But when we are overcompensating over protecting that actually does not help our children feel safe, because what we actually are communicating to them is I don't trust that you can do this. I think you're kind of fragile. I better do this for you. So they don't start being able to feel safe in the world. I think it's really much more of a sense of I've got you.

And sometimes I've got you means this is really hard that you have to email your teacher and tell her the truth about what happened to your book. And I know that's going to be really hard. And I'll sit here with you while you write the email. Instead of me writing the email and saying the dog ate it. That's not helpful to kids.

We can actually push them to do things independently and still provide that showing up feeling of, I've got you, I'm present as you do this hard thing, but not doing everything for them that's hard.

Meagen Gibson - [00:19:51]

I love that. And there was something about the way that you said it in the book, I can't remember the exact phrasing, but it was just like, alongside of them. And this has been something I've been coming to terms with is that, it doesn't matter how great a parent you are, you cannot protect your children from the world. The world will in many aspects chew them up and spit them out over and over and over again. Whether it be in the way that they learn how to be good friends or how they learn how to have romantic relationships, or how they learn how to be a good employee and just citizens of the world, they will encounter difficulty, and it's impossible to shield them from that.

But what you can say is, I imagine how you're feeling. I'm not going to leave you. Let me know how I can best make you feel better. Do you want a solution? Do you just want comfort? What can we do here alongside one another?

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

That's right. Our job is not to protect them from the world. Our job is to walk with them through it. And sometimes we need to step in and protect them from things. But that requires that attunement and tuning into ourselves in that process as well. Like, what is this about for me? I'm feeling really reactive and feeling really rigid about..

My husband and I one time had this disagreement about our kid when he turned 16 about his car. He had been saving up, and we told him we would match whatever he had saved, and what he had saved and what we would match was not enough for him to really get very safe of a car. So I wanted to throw a lot more money at it. And I was so rigid and we had so much conflict. And finally, my husband had the presence to say, what are you feeling about him driving and about this whole process? And I was like, I'm so scared about him driving. And then for me, it was about all these safety features as a way for me to feel in control of really the fear I was feeling.

And so, I think what that parenting moment required first was for me to tune into what my own experience was before I could make a good decision and move forward and do what was right. So I think that's a huge piece of that, too.

Meagen Gibson

The why underneath the legitimate concern.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

Totally.

Meagen Gibson

I'm totally terrified of him being on the road on his own. And these are the things that I can do to literally create a box of protection around him when I can't be there. Yeah, totally understandable.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

And he did buy a crappy truck, and it looks like hell. So I'm glad it was a crappy truck because he's banged into everything.

Meagen Gibson

I'm always so mystified when people buy their kids brand new cars.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson - [00:22:28]

Then you're just going to be upset a lot.

Meagen Gibson

Dented and scratched. Yeah, exactly.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

I'm like, how else have you decorated your car this week?

So we spent a lot of time on 'safe'. Do you want me to hit 'seen'?

Meagen Gibson

I want to hit one more point before we hit 'seen' because it was such a powerful part of the book for me and created so much validation around what I've been doing. And we're not going to get into me here, but over the last probably 5 years, which is that narrative part of it that you touched on briefly.

And walk me through the way that your memories or visceral body biology memory of how you are raised and your attachment style, how it developed, and how that can shift and change literally in the way that your brain is thinking about that by being able to put together that coherent narrative as the two of you called it.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

So this is another really exciting, hopeful message from the science. One is, you don't have to be perfect. You can mess up all the time, just make the repair, and then it's good for your kids. That's a really good hopeful one that I'm just going to repeat so we can all hear it.

Number two is what you just said, and that is that history is not destiny, right? And I mean that in two ways. One way is the way you were parented does not mean that that has to be the way that you parent.

And number two, we can change right now. If you're listening to this and you think, oh, my goodness, I really want to show up differently in my relationship, you can start making that change right now.

And this is because of your question, which is, the way that our brain gets wired for what to expect in relationships is based on repeated experiences. So once we start changing the kinds of experiences we provide, the brain starts changing.

So really, our child's attachment patterns and expectations to us or partners expectations, can change based on new, repeated experiences. And this can happen pretty quickly.

And more importantly, when we start making sense of our own experiences and our own reactivity, then what can happen is that we can start practicing doing it a different way.

So, Dan has this great phrase where he says, "without awareness we don't have choice. With awareness we begin to have choice". As a person, now, let's say I lose it, and I act like a crazy person with my kid. Instead of going into the shame spiral, I really encourage parents instead to become curious. What was that about for me? And when we stay in curiosity, we actually have access to much more brain function, we have access to more prefrontal and more higher order thinking skills.

So I go, okay, what was that about for me that I went crazy when my kid rejected me? When my kid was like, I don't want to talk to you. Why did I get so upset about that? Why did I take that so personally? What was that about for me?

And the answer might be, I haven't peed by myself in 3 years, and I'm starving. And I haven't had a conversation with an adult in so long. And my kid has been pushing my buttons all day, and that's what it's about.

Or I might go, you know what? That's really interesting. Every time she rejects me, that really pushes a button for me, I wonder what that's about?

And then we start to see, as we start becoming curious, we may be able to link it back to a specific memory. Or it may be just more a collection of experiences based on what the relational rhythms were in our family.

I grew up in a family where my mom provided me with secure attachment. My dad provided me with more of a dismissing avoidant attachment. I had an avoidant attachment to him. And so, he was really uncomfortable with hugging. He was really uncomfortable with any kind of vulnerability or emotions. If I would get upset about something, he'd be like, oh, you need to be tougher. If you're going to cry, go to your room, that kind of thing. He just had no bandwidth or tolerance for emotion or vulnerability.

And so, what that means is that I have these repeated experiences where we live on the surface, and we make sure everything's fine and make sure that we're not upsetting dad with too much emotion and all of those things. So that's a part of who I am. That's a part of how my brain got wired.

Now, if I don't know that about myself, I'm going to continue to repeat those patterns. And not that I don't, but I watch for it. I do my work. I go, oh, yeah, I kind of tried to just breeze past that without really checking in on what my kid was feeling. I was like, oh, you're fine. I just dismissed the emotional experience.

And then I catch myself, and then I go, you know what? I told you, you were fine, but I should've asked you how you were. Tell me about what that was like for you?

So, it really is an ongoing process but the more we practice it, the more it becomes natural and automatic for us. Our memories are not just things we remember specifically, like my 10th birthday party at the lake. They are also a collection of unstated things and things, like I said, more the rhythms and the textures and feels of how families do things. And so it's really, really important that we are shining the light of awareness on our own experiences. And when we act in ways as parents that we don't feel good about, those become invitations to do that kind of reflection.

Meagen Gibson - [00:28:08]

I love the way you said all of that. And just to relate it's a little bit, when you identify things that are historical, not necessarily present. So my mother suffered from a lot of chronic illness when I was younger, and she was also an orphan and had an alcoholic father that died when she was very young. Just putting those things, I remember when I first became a parent, it was all of a sudden I had this very kind of backed up on the lens of who she had been as a parent to me. And I hadn't really considered it till then. And then had all of this resentment and anger.

And it wasn't until I pulled back even further and was like, oh, but look at how she was raised and what she's been through. Developing that narrative, taking that wider lens, it helped me create a lot more compassion. And it didn't take away from the ways in which that impacted me and the ways in which I developed my attachment styles and my traumas. Those are all still valid. But my compassion increased 10x through being able to develop that coherent narrative that was fair to both of us, fair to me, and also fair to her.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson - [00:29:23]

I love how you said that so much. Meagen. What you just said is a perfect example of that coherent narrative. It's not running from the past. It's not letting the past become intrusive where you don't know what's happening, but things are just happening to you.

And I think you're exactly right. And I've written about this quite a bit, and I've experienced it personally as well, is that you can say that was really painful for me. I really wish I had had different things from that parent, things that I needed that I didn't get. And I can understand because their brains were wired based on the experiences they had.

And it really in lots of ways, for your mom and for my dad, I could be like, you know what? That was a can't for him, not a won't. It wasn't that he wouldn't love me in the ways that I wanted to be loved, but he just didn't know how. It was a language he didn't speak.

And so that can be really healing to say that wasn't about me. That was really about how their brain was wired, and it can lead us to compassion, and it can lead us to choice, to become the kind of parents we want to be as well.

Meagen Gibson

And that's a really good place to move into 'seen and soothed' as well, because, and I'm skipping ahead a little bit. But I remember very distinctly that in the 'soothed' section of the book, it talks especially about teachers and how just meeting a child at the capability where they are. That we acknowledge that children have learning disabilities or different abilities in learning, but there's also emotional and behavioral abilities, and we really have to assess. Somebody can be an extremely smart child, but emotionally just incapable of handling stress or anxiety or have trouble in their interpersonal relationships. And we know that.

I'm going to just acknowledge a giant thunderstorm just started outside.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

That was awesome.

Meagen Gibson

So if we get any audio hiccups I just want to acknowledge it's thunder everyone. I'm safe.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

Okay, good. We want to make sure we've got the first S checked off.

Meagen Gibson

Exactly.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

Yeah. I mean, for sure. And I've written, that's what *No-Drama Discipline* is all about it. And really, one of the biggest passions of my life work is to rethink how we see kids' behaviors and how we respond to them. And that's a whole other conference. But this idea that behavior is communication and oftentimes, I mean, if a kid has an inappropriate behavior that's one off that often is just childhood and impulsivity control and experimenting with things. But if you have a kid who's consistently a significant behavioral problem, that child is really communicating with their behavior that their nervous systems are not feeling regulated, and that there's something about the way the world is working that is not working for them. It's too hard.

And in those cases, instead of punitive responses, we need to help. We need to chase the 'why' and peel the layers back and stop doing band-aid approaches with stupid behavioral checklists and plans, that just does more harm than good in lots of ways.

Meagen Gibson - [00:32:30]

I was going to say too that, so often parents or teachers are coming to either therapists or specialists trying to fix a behavior, when really what we need to get curious about is what the behavior is telling us about the other aspects of the child's life where they might not feel safe to begin with. That process.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

And that's why I started an interdisciplinary clinical practice. It's not just mental health, but it's other things as well, like occupational therapy and neuropsych assessment and speech and language and all that, so that we really can get to the why.

And I was telling a colleague of mine yesterday I said we ask the wrong questions. What is the diagnosis? Is the wrong question. And what is the behavioral plan? Those are the wrong questions. The first question is, where is the breakdown in this child's capacity to regulate? And how do we put things in place to help this child regulate? And you truly cannot see what a person is capable of until they are regulated.

So when we make diagnoses of kids when they're in these dysregulated states, that is wrong. I almost think it's unethical because we don't know what that child is, we've got to get that kid feeling safe first, and that's why. And there's so much we can do in educational settings and mental health settings and home settings that can really, where we focus on the child's sense of safety. And then once that happens, then we can get a clearer picture of what other support they need and especially what they need from us.

Okay, so 'seen'. Seen, I think, is the hardest one, actually, because what it does is it requires us to look beyond the behavior. I mean, just like what you were talking about, that was a perfect segway. It requires that we look into the mind behind the behavior and what's really happening in terms of the internal landscape and not make so many assumptions.

So, it really is about, the long-term goal of seen is for your child to say, my parents understood who I was. They got who I was. They got me, and they love me for who I was, not who they wanted me to be. And what that means is in the everyday moments when our children are having a hard time in particular, we often do things with good intentions that actually communicate things we don't mean to communicate.

So let me give an example. If my kid is complaining about something, he's like, it's so hot in my bedroom, and I don't want to be in there. I want to stay up. I don't want to go to sleep, and they're coming and complaining. And we respond like some version of this, you know what? You're lucky you even have a bedroom. You're lucky you even have a bed. Some kids sleep on dirt, and so you need to stop fussing and you need to go to sleep. I don't want to hear it.

Now, that's not the worst parental response ever. But here's what I've just communicated to my kid. I've just communicated to my kid the actual phrase, I don't want to hear it. They internalize that. And they're like, okay, they must not want to hear how I'm feeling. And when we respond in ways where our child feels criticized, you're so ungrateful, you're so spoiled, you're so sensitive. You're making such a big deal about this, all of those kinds of things. If they feel criticized, the nervous system says that didn't feel good.

Okay, we're going to link sharing the feelings and what I'm experiencing and talking to my parent, and that not feeling good. So maybe I'm not going to do that as much. So the more we do that over time, really, what we communicate to our kids is I'm not interested in hearing about any of that unless it's

positive or grateful. And that's the exact opposite message we want to give our kids. We want to give them the message that at your worst, I am here. I will listen.

Especially when they're teenagers. We want to make sure we've done enough repeated experiences for them, of saying, I can handle your big feelings.

And so, that doesn't mean we don't ever address behavior. So in this one and in the next one of 'soothe' I'm going to talk a lot about emotional responsiveness and empathy. That does not mean permissiveness. Let me just be clear about that.

Meagen Gibson - [00:36:50]

Actually please make that super clear.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

Yeah. So having good, firm boundaries and expectations that we communicate to our kids, tons of research supporting that, and that actually helps our kids feel safe because they know what to expect.

So, we can say no to behaviors and have really firm boundaries while still saying yes to our child's emotions and experiences.

So, I'll tell another quick example. So, my son wanted to, I surprised him one day, and I was like, it was before school, and I said, hey, I'm gonna pick you up from school, and I'm gonna take you to the movies right after school. And it's one of those discount theaters. We call it the sticky theater, cause it's really gross. It's not well cleaned.

Meagen Gibson

The floor is always sticky.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

Yeah. I was like, I'm gonna take you to the sticky theater. It's like \$2 to get in. Like, it's really whatever. So the snacks are cheap, too. So he's like, he gets super excited. He's probably 8 or 9. And he said, can I get popcorn, too? And I said, no, we're not going to do popcorn because you've had a lot of junk food this weekend, and I'll bring you a healthy snack to eat on the way. But we're not going to get popcorn this time. And he pouts.

So, my automatic instinct is, are you effin kidding me? I'm taking you to the movies, and I'm doing all this for you. And do you know how spoiled you are? So what it does is it activates a fear response in me that I'm raising an indulged spoiled child. So I respond out of my own reactivity.

If I'm practicing 'seen', I, in that moment decide, at first I have to maybe take a breath and be like, okay, I'm gonna do that. And then I'm going to hold in mind my no drama discipline lens, which is behavior is communication. My child just communicated to me that he might need a little bit of skill building around gratitude practices and perspective in the world. So at dinner time, I'm going to address that tonight, and we're gonna start doing gratitude practice every night at dinnertime, I'm gonna work on building that skill.

But right now, in this moment, I'm going to be present to my child's experience. So I say to him, you look so excited when I mentioned the movie, but when I said popcorn, you got really disappointed looking. Is that right? And he nods and he said yes, because last time we went, we got popcorn. And I love movie popcorn so much. And I say, I know it's so good, isn't it? And, yeah, that can be really disappointing when you have an expectation and it doesn't go the way you want it to. I know that's so disappointing. We're not going to get the popcorn today.

So you hear the boundary? I didn't say yes. I still said no to the popcorn but I'm saying yes to thank you for sharing how you felt with me. And you are safe to share with me, and I can handle your feelings. So I'm still holding the boundary, but I'm helping him feel seen or what Dan says feeling felt. Where your internal experience and the way the other person responds is a match.

And when that happens, it helps us also make sense of our story. So we're building our brain's capacity. Now my kid also knows, oh, yeah, that feeling I had and what just happened in my body when I slumped, that is disappointment. And that's because I had an expectation that didn't like, all of that gets logged. So we're really building a lot of resilience around that as well.

So 'seen' is really about tuning into your child's internal experience, even while you're holding the boundary.

Meagen Gibson - [00:40:08]

Absolutely. I love that example, too. And the way that you pointed out specifically, that it's like, you can acknowledge their feelings and at a later time be like, okay, we also need to work on some gratitude. But like, now it's not the moment.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

Right.

Meagen Gibson

We had a similar experience. We were on vacation with family at a family's house, and every day we had something incredible lined up. Like, experiences. They got to go horseback riding, and they got to go fishing in a river. All of these experiences. And then at night, they would have a total fit about not getting dessert or something like that. And we were like, I'm not sure you understand what's happening right now. But it wasn't then it was the next morning. It was like, okay, we've got a lot of fun plans today, but first, we're going to write a list of all the fun things we've already done, and we're grateful to about those.

Our reactivity would be like, oh, you're not grateful for the movie. Then we're not going at all. If you can't have joy in it without popcorn and you're going to write a list of everything.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

Exactly.

Meagen Gibson

It comes from anger instead of teaching.

And what is it? Remind me about what you say about discipline and it's not reactivity?

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

Well, the whole point of discipline is to teach so they build skills.

Meagen Gibson

Thank you. That's what it is. Apparently, I need to tattoo it on my arm or something.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson - [00:41:26]

It's all about teaching and really, it makes it so much easier on us because if the whole point and purpose of discipline is to raise a child who is a self disciplined person, they need a lot of practice, and they need a lot of skill building to get there. So every discipline moment should really be about teaching and building skills. Punishment and even throwing consequences at times are often counterproductive. Most of what we do in the name of discipline can be counterproductive depending on how we do it, because it makes our kids less likely to learn because it shoves them into reactivity, and we're really reactive. So when we're really reactive we're not good teachers, when our kids are really reactive, they're not able to learn.

And so, in the name of discipline, the first thing we might need to do is to soothe our children and get them back into a regulated state so they can actually learn. So timing is everything when it comes to discipline as well. But I think if all of us as parents could just shift our lens, like so much of the time our kids do something, and we're like, what consequence should I give them? Or what do I do to make sure that doesn't happen again? Or what punishment should I throw at them? Or in our worst moments like, what could I do that would be so unpleasant, they would never want to do this again. Like kind of torturing.

Those are the wrong questions. The question is, what is the skill my child needs to learn? And what's the most effective way to help them build that skill over time as development?

Meagen Gibson

Right. You just described my morning.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

If we could just hold in our minds, this is about teaching. It could really transform what we're doing. And then it's better for us, too, because as we help our kids build those skills and practice those skills, if you're an effective disciplinarian, by that I mean teacher, you should actually be disciplining less and less and less over time. You really shouldn't have to be disciplining that much as they get older because you've helped them build the skills. And then you're just more of a consultant or coach.

What's your plan around keeping yourself safe when you are over at that sleepover? Yeah, you're going to that party. You already know all the questions I have around the circumstances. What's your plan for making sure you get home safe? We're doing more sort of coaching, consulting, but we've already laid down a lot of skills.

Meagen Gibson

And that's where I can see sometimes, and I'm not trying to call anybody out on anything, but I have two children. One of them is the typical first born people pleasing type A. And then the second one broke the mold and there are no punishments or consequences that are effective at all. He's the one where I have to learn what is the behavior communicating? What am I trying to teach here? What is the skill he's trying to learn? That is the constant reframe. And the other one obviously deserves that as well. But the moments where I need to remember are fewer and farther in than the younger one.

So he's really been my gateway into this type of analyzation. It's like none of this stuff will affect his behavior. So obviously, the behavior is trying to teach me something that I need to teach him.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

Totally.

So shifting into that third 'soothe', which we have touched on just a little bit there. But I don't know if you want to explicitly talk about soothe.

Yeah, I think 'seen' is really, the reason I say that one's the hardest is because once you really see that your child is really having a hard time and they're really dysregulated, it's much easier to get to 'soothed'.

Here's one of the things that helps me the most around 'soothed'. When my child is physically hurt, it's really easy for me to get to soothing. I'm like, oh, what happened? Come here. Like, oh, and I want to help. And what soothing really is about nurture, comfort, helping those kinds of things.

When our children are in emotional distress, which, by the way, lights up in the brain in the same places when they're in physical distress, it's much harder for us, particularly if it gets expressed with behavioral stuff.

So, if my child's emotional dysregulation or distress comes out as being oppositional, defiant, disrespectful, it's even harder to get to the soothe piece. But that's really what our kids need.

So I'll say, this is one of my mantras is, at their worst that is when they need me the most. And sometimes that looks like behavior stuff. I'm going to address the behavioral stuff. So if my kid says, I hate you, you're so stupid, I can react and be like, you can't talk to me that way and start yelling, but really it's much more effective to say, oh, you're so angry right now. I will listen. This is such a hard moment right now, isn't it? That kind of thing? And you come with soothing.

And so, I often tell the story about a time my 4 year old wouldn't get out of the bathtub. And so, really this is how lots of times as a mom, as a wife, as a clinician, there are lots of times I'm like, I don't know what to do. What do I say? How do I handle this? But the four S's is my North Star. It's always the right answer. It can always guide me. So in this moment, he's throwing a tantrum, he's splashing me, he's yelling at me, he won't get out.

And I'm like, okay, first I'm going to take a deep breath and regulate my own nervous system. So I don't go, you know what? Now you get no bedtime stories, and I start threatening or whatever.

Meagen Gibson - [00:46:49]

Consequences.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

Exactly.

He wouldn't get out of the tub. And so I say, you can get out by yourself, or I will help you out. And he says, I'm not getting out. So as I lift him out, so I'm holding the boundary, I say to him, I do 'seen'. And I say, you're so mad you have to get out of the bathtub. You really wanted to stay in, is that right?

So then I go to soothed. And soothed can be physical comfort. So many of you during the pandemic wanted fuzzy, cozy pants and socks and comfort foods. Physical soothing is a thing. Our nervous systems can feel more settled by that.

So in this case, I wrapped the towel around him and held him close to my body, gave him that sensory input. For some kids, that would be more dysregulating. For my kid, it was regulating. And here's the key about soothing. Two things. One is you don't have to do so much. So soothing is really about your presence and just being there. So as a mom, I'll switch to another quick story.

My kid, same kid, 8 or 9, furious that he had to go to bed. His older brothers were getting to stay up and had friends over. I pulled the books out. We're in the bed. It's time for the snuggle and the reading, and he's flopping like a fish out of water. He's so angry that he has to go to bed. And I start with wanting to say, fine no stories if you're gonna act like this. But I know that's gonna be a lose-lose for both of us, does nothing to build skills.

So I say to him, you're so disappointed you have to go to bed. And it feels really unfair, right? And he's like, it's so unfair and he starts yelling some more and I go, I know it feels so hard. This is so hard. And I'm right here with you while you're feeling, I literally say, I'm right here with you while you're feeling unfair and disappointment and all those big feelings. And I say, let me know when you want me to read, but for now, I'm gonna be here with you. And then I'm just quiet.

And I think I spent so much mental, cognitive, attentional, emotional energy trying to figure out how to solve it, how to fix it, how to stop it, what consequence to throw at it and all of that, and all of that was wasted.

All I needed to do was say something empathetic about what I think he's feeling and say, I'm right here and be present. And what that does is it creates a safe harbor for our children. When they're in the midst of a storm, we become that safe harbor instead of adding to the storm. If we're supposed to be the safe harbor from the storm, we can't be the storm. And, of course when we are, we repair. But in this moment, I'm just, like, I know that's hard.

And so here's the second thing about soothing. When I provide that kind of an experience I communicate things I don't mean to communicate but this is in a positive way, just like the last one is, I can handle your big feelings. You don't have to take care of me. I hope it feels good to you when you share your feelings with me. I trust that you can handle your big feelings. And you have now just had an experience of feeling disappointment and unfairness and making it through. So now you have some resilience. The way we become resilient is by practice dealing with difficult things with enough support.

So me sitting there and saying, I know this is hard. I'm right here with you. Instead of fine, you can stay up or fine I'm not going to read stories to you. Those don't do anything. So really, just walking through that process is really resilience building.

And I'll say one other thing, and that is parents worry when I say, soothe soothe soothe soothe. And it's not that different, our babies cry. We soothe them, right? With patting and singing and rocking. Same thing with our 8 year olds and 13 year olds and 21 year olds. We just do it in different ways. I know, honey, that's really hard. I'm listening. I'm here. That kind of thing.

Parents worry that when I talk about soothing a lot that that makes children more fragile or it makes them too dependent on others to handle themselves. But here's the science. The science is that the way the brain develops the capacity to do something is often through practice. And this is certainly the case around this skill.

When we help our children go from dysregulated states back into regulated states by co-regulating or co-soothing or being present and supporting them in those moments. It's just like when I lift a weight and I do reps. When I do repetitions, my muscles get stronger. When we do that repeatedly over time, our kids' nervous system gets reps for how to go from a dysregulated state into a regulated state so they can learn to do it for themselves.

Meagen Gibson - [00:51:23]

To go with your example, and increase the weight of what they're handling.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

Totally. It widens their window of tolerance. So that's where resilience and mental health and all of that comes in.

And so, really soothing is really about presence. It's really about showing up and saying, you're not alone in this.

And what's so exciting about this, Meagen, is that we don't have to be perfect. But when we repeatedly give our children experiences of feeling safe, seen and soothed enough, then they develop that fourth 'S' of security.

And what security really means or secure attachment really means to me when we talk about that being the best predictor for how well kids turn out, is that their brains have wired to know based on these experiences, that if they have a need, someone's going to see it and show up for them.

And they learn how to show up for themselves. They learn how to keep themselves safe and see and understand themselves and soothe themselves and then provide secure attachment to their future partners and then their children down the road.

So it really is about their brain wiring to know and expect that someone's got them and that they will always have somebody who shows up for them. And I'll say, and here we are getting close to, here we are in the fall, and many people have sent kids off to college.

I have a 21 year old. I have an 18 year old that's getting ready to go off to college for the first time. I also have a 14 year old. And I know from dropping my kid off at college and getting ready to do it again. You know, it's excruciating. It truly is. And there's something about knowing that my kid has had enough repeated experiences that he knows we've got him, no matter what. That he knows that he can show up that way for other kids and to know that he will, to his best ability as a 21 year old with an unfully developed prefrontal cortex, keep himself safe and see and understand himself and soothe himself. And there's great peace in knowing that that secure attachment is the best thing I could have given him, and that I feel like I did that well.

Meagen Gibson - [00:53:39]

Bravo mama.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

And never too late. There's still lots that I'm working on. And there's still ways of learning to get out of his way and trust him more and let him do things. There's all that stuff. And there are certainly times when I go, you know what? I need to make a shift here. I've just realized I'm really blowing it in this area, and I'm going to make a change. And as I continue to practice parenting in that way, it becomes more automatic and easier for me and my kids benefit. So history is not destiny, we can always change.

Meagen Gibson

And I want to acknowledge anybody that might be watching this, that whether they're a parent or not, they might be acknowledging or realizing in the moment that they didn't have that kind of secure relationship with a parent. And I just want to acknowledge them that, my relationship with my parents is great. I would not say it's healed. I would not say they acknowledge any of this stuff, but I can say that I have other relationships with other adults of my parents age that has really filled in those gaps.

Those people have done the work. And those people have, I mean, I didn't realize in my 40s I was going to need a parental figure to just do all of those S's and how much it would light me up and just be like, wow, this feels incredible. I didn't know I needed to feel seen and safe and secure. I mean, it's just remarkable.

And then the other thing I was going to say while you were talking about 'soothed' especially, is that we know when a child has a physical injury, that we're going to soothe them, and that I like to think of the behavioral circumstances as being emotional injuries.

So you wouldn't run up to a kid that skinned their knee and just immediately start spraying hydrogen peroxide, like, scrubbing it clean. That's not step one. Step one is soothe, right? Or step one, I guess, should be, as you guys say, it's pass the helmet. Step one is to soothe the person just, in an emotional outburst as well, like an emotional injury, if you think of it, is that, this behavior is trying to teach me something. They're trying to learn something here. So the first thing I'm going to do is soothe, not spray the hydrogen peroxide.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson - [00:55:56]

Oh, they're so helpful. Well, and keep in mind, too, especially for younger children having a huge emotion like anger, it is a stress response in their nervous system. It can be really overwhelming, very stressful, even frightening.

And so when our kids have, and I'm a huge fan of Mona Delahooke's work and her beautiful book *Beyond Behaviors* that really dives deep into this idea, is that when kids are having really big behaviors, especially when it's an ongoing thing, we should be thinking of that as a stress response. Just like if they had to go through something really difficult, like have a shot or a medical procedure or something like that, these are stress responses.

And again, that goes back to the purpose of these attachment relationships, then that's my job is to help regulate my child's stress and make the stress that they're experiencing tolerable instead of traumatic.

And then, we can come back to this idea that what your child needs most from you is you. Flawed you, imperfect you, sometimes reactive you. And that's the same for our other relationships. What relationships are about are about showing up and being present.

And I think there are so many ways in our world with so many distractions, particularly all of our screens and just how much information is coming at us and all the stuff. I had a conversation with, she was a hospice nurse or not a nurse, a chaplain. And she said, the most important thing I do when I walk into a room with a person who is at the end of their life is to sit down. And I said, why is that the most important thing? I would think it would be something you would say or how you would make them feel. And she said, when I sit down it tells them you are important to me. I have time for you. You matter.

And that had such a profound experience on me. I'm a really fast paced, I would say my mom's like a dove. She's this really calm presence. I'm like a hummingbird. I'm like, I just, I always love multitasking. I have a lot going on. I'm really fast paced. And I have a kid who's not. And so I really had to tune into his rhythm and find my rhythm with him.

And when I heard that from that chaplain, I realized how much of the time my kids would come in and start talking to me and I was not making eye contact. I was still doing other things. And of course, sometimes we need to. But since that time, I've really made an effort. If my kid or my spouse walks in the room, I might say, hang on, I'm right in the middle of something, or I'll be with you in a minute. But whenever I can, I close my computer. I turn my phone upside down. I turn my body to them, and I really try to communicate. You matter to me. You're important. I have time for you.

And I think just those little practices like that was transformative for me to be better, even just at showing up in moments, like making eye contact, listening to someone, but my brain's somewhere else. And so it's a practice I'm really cultivating continually is to really be present, to show up in that moment with my full attention whenever I can.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. I relate to so much of what you said. I used to be a television journalist, and I could be on the phone with someone taking notes while listening to scanners and, like, watching a television show. And all of it was happening, and I was really great at it. And now that I'm a parent I've had to realize

that I'm not great at that anymore. And if I'm in the middle of an email I have to say, just a second. I'm going to finish the sentence and then really divert my attention. Or sometimes I'll just admit to them, I know I was looking at you, but my thoughts were completely somewhere else. Could you start again?

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson - [00:59:53]

You stop listening.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, exactly.

I'll be like, gosh, I'm so sorry. I caught myself. I was still thinking about the thing I was doing before. Can you please start again?

I'm fast paced as well, and sometimes my kids will come up and they'll start a sentence, and they're struggling to find the nouns or the verbs. It's kind of dragging out. And what I realize is that it's not about the thing they're trying to communicate. It's about the attention. It's about my focus on them. So fantastic.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

And by the way, attention also has a bad rep. People are like, oh, she's just trying to get attention or attention seeking behaviors. I hate that because actually attention is if you think about it, if you don't have your parents attention, if you're the bear cub in the wild, if you don't have your parents attention, you're much more likely to have a predator get you. Attention is a basic need. Just like food and water and sleep.

So, when we're like, oh, she's just trying to get your attention. That'd be like, oh, she's just trying to make sure she gets water. We're really skewed on how we think about that, and so we can think about instead of saying attention seeking behaviors, just say connection seeking or whatever. But attention is a good thing. They need our attention. We cannot give it to them every second they want it.

Meagen Gibson

That was the way I was saying it. I wasn't saying it in any kind of negative way.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

I was affirming that for you.

It really is a form of seen. It really is. It's about being seen and seeing that she really needed that time with you. And that's so great you picked up on that and saw that as she needed you literally to give her your attention. And that's a really important thing.

Meagen Gibson

Well, I could spend two more hours talking to you but our time is all up today.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson thank you for being with me.

Where can people find out more about you and your work?

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

So my website is tinabryson.com

Tons of free content on there. Videos and refrigerator sheets which are basically the main points of all the books. All of that is free on my website.

And I'm on all the social media but where I'm posting the most now is on Instagram, and my handle there is [@tinapaynebryson](#).

Meagen Gibson - [01:01:57]

Awesome. Thanks so much for being with us today.

Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

Thank you so much for having me Meagen.