



Lunch and Learn

My Kids Been Ghosted

TRANSCRIPT



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Introduction

Moriah Bracken, CATCH, Moderator ([00:00](#)):

Good afternoon. My name is Moriah Bracken and I'm a volunteer here at CATCH. I will be moderating today's Lunch and Learn about a topic that came highly requested by you all. Before I introduce today's speaker, I want to quickly mention that we are reserving the second half of today for q and a. Please don't be shy and put any and all of your questions in the chat as you think of them, and we'll get to as many as we can before the hour is up. And now I'm honored to introduce you to today's speaker, Dr. Ashley Leja. She's a clinical psychologist and a state certified school psychologist. Ashley worked as a therapist in a K through eight therapeutic day school before transitioning into private practice at the Chicago Neurodevelopmental Center in Northfield. In her current role, Ashley works with children, adolescents, young adults and caregivers with a variety of concerns by helping them explore their values and learn strategies to engage more fully in meaningful life activities. And now let's hand things over to Dr. Ashley Leja.

Dr. Ashley Leja, Clinical Psychologist, Chicago Neurodevelopmental Center ([01:14](#)):

Thanks so much Moriah. I am really thrilled to be here. I appreciate the opportunity to get to talk about this really tough but also important topic. I work with a lot of families and individuals around a range of problems and this is something that really often comes up in my individual work with kids. I'm really thrilled to get the opportunity to talk about it from the parent support perspective today.



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Presentation

Understanding Social Exclusion – Why It’s a Tough but Important Topic

(01:42): We'll jump right in. There's a lot I want to share. I think the fortunate and unfortunate thing about this topic is that there's really no one right thing to say or do when our kids are struggling socially or have been left out by their peers. My hope today is actually to present a skills model called DNA-V that can help us show up as the supportive parents we want to be when our kids are struggling. I'll talk about each of the skills within this model and how we can use them as parents to be supportive. Then we'll put it all together at the end with a bit of a problem solving model before I get into some resources and then any questions that might come up during the presentation today. Part of what I aim to do is actually give everyone a little bit of experience with some of these skills today. I'd recommend grabbing a sheet of paper, something to write with just you can make the most out of these activities that we go through today.

DNAV Model Overview – A Parent’s Guide to Supporting Kids

As an intro point, a little background on the DNA-V model. This is a concept that was developed by doctors Louise Hayes and Joseph Ciarrochi as a way to present concepts from acceptance and commitment therapy to adolescents in a way that was more accessible to them. Since then, it has sparked a lot of offshoot work to branch the model out to work with younger kids as well as adults. I'm going to use it today as a guide for us to talk about the ways that we can approach our kids when they're really dealing with any number of setbacks, including any sort of exclusion or social struggles with their peers.



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Values Exercise: Whom Do you Look Up To? – Identifying Your Parenting

Compass

We're going to get started on the values part, start at the end of the model because we can really be thinking about values like a compass to use to direct the other DNA-V skills that we can engage in. We always want to be thinking about using these DNA-V skills in service of what we value. It's really important for us as parents to be mindful of what our values are and what our values are for our families so that we can be choosing actions in our parenting and in our lives that are in alignment with those values in service of those things. We're going to start today with a little bit of a values exercise. You can grab your sheet of paper and something to write with and we're going to start by exploring our own values by thinking about a person in life that we look up to. I'd like everybody to take a moment to bring someone to mind who you really look up to. This person could be a parent as well, but they don't necessarily have to be. If you can't think of someone personally in life that you know, you could think about a historical figure or a character from a book or a movie. Just anybody that you feel like you look up to.

(04:48): As you bring that person to mind, I'd like you to reflect on what it is about them that you respect and admire. Maybe jot down a couple of the qualities that come to mind. Think about what they're like as a person and if they're a parent, what are they like as a parent? How do they treat other people? And again, if they're a parent, how do they treat their children? As you're writing some of those things down, I want you to think about are these qualities that you would like to bring into your own parenting? Are these things that you'd like to adopt when you're approaching your own kids when they're struggling?

(05:45): Here are a few values that may come to mind when you're thinking about your parenting. This is by no means an exhaustive list. I'm sure everyone can think of many more things that they value as parents. And the great thing about our values is that once we choose them, they're ours to use and



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adopt anytime that we need them. I think we often get stuck thinking that the only thing that reflects our values is what we do, all the choices that we make. But really we often get caught up, or I'll call it hooked by difficult thoughts and feelings that pull us away from acting in line with our values. There may be things here that you reflected on or that you see on this list that you feel like you value, but when you think about it, you might say, I don't really do a lot in line with those values.

That doesn't actually mean that you don't value them. It probably just means there are some difficult thoughts and feelings that come up that hook you and pull you away. Even if there are some values here that you really want to adopt, when you think about approaching your kid when they're struggling socially or with any challenge, just because you maybe haven't used it or used it as much as you want doesn't mean that you can't start. And my hope is that some of the skills that we'll be talking about with the rest of our DNA-V can help support you in acting in line with some of these values as the parent that you want to be.

Unhooking Negative Thoughts – Helping Kids Process Rejection

(07:08): Thinking big picture about what you can do around values, I think the first thing is to get clear on your values and keep them in mind when you're approaching how you support your kid. Thinking about what you would be doing more of or less of if you were acting in line with these values that matter to you. Talk with your kids about what you value as a family. When you're asking your kids to do something, or when you're doing something altogether, it can be really helpful to make it explicit, the point, the why behind it, tying that to what you value. We can really do a lot to help our kids connect their thoughts, feelings and actions to their values. In the case of your child being left out or excluded by their peers, saying something like, I see how sad you are that you're being left out of this group chat or that you weren't invited to this birthday party.



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It really shows how much you care about your friends. What we're really doing there is helping our kids make the connection between emotions being a source of information about what we care about and what we value. 'Because if you think about it, if we don't really care about something, it probably doesn't bring up a big emotional reaction to us. We can gently point that out to our kid that the reason you're feeling this is because it matters to you. I think this is a difficult but important thing to do with our kids, is making the connection too that sometimes acting in line with our values does not lead to a preferred outcome. You may have a child who has a group of friends that are maybe engaging in some gossip over a group chat, or doing some things that are not very nice to another peer.

If your kid doesn't want any part of that because of what they value and how they want to show up as a friend, it could lead to them being kicked out of that group chat or ignored for a time being by that group of friends. We can acknowledge to our kids how difficult that is and how unfair that is. And the reality that sometimes acting in line with our values, doing what's important to us can cause us to drift from other people who maybe don't share the same values or who don't act on those values in the same way. The more that we can have a good sense of our own values and help our kids connect their values to the choices that they make in their lives we can help them start to center their decision making, maybe even about how they want to handle being left out by peers, around those values to help them move forward.

[\(09:49\)](#): Now we'll take a shift into the advisor skill. Really the advisor is just a metaphor for our own self-talk. I sometimes think about the advisor as being sort of like an overly helpful friend that has a lot of great advice at times. Its intentions are always good, but sometimes it maybe goes a little bit overboard and does a little bit too much. The advisor often kicks into high alert when it perceives any sort of danger. This is what I'm talking about where sometimes we get hooked by thoughts that pull us away from our values. When our advisor kicks into high gear, we may start catastrophizing things that are going on with our kids or the emotions that they're having. That pulls us away from being able to show up like the parent we might want to be in that moment.



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Of course the same thing can happen to our kids especially around peer struggles. They can get caught up in negative and unhelpful thinking about what's happening with their friends or what they should do next or what the future holds. That can lead them to be impulsive and reactive to their thoughts instead of taking that more measured, thoughtful approach that's actually in line with their values and the kind of person they want to be. Sometimes when I see this coming up in practice with kids, I'll hear about kids being ignored for a period of time and then spamming group chats with other kids, or maybe they have another group of friends that there's some really viable relationships there, but they get really caught up on what's going on with another peer group and then withdraw from those perfectly good relationships over here.

Naming the Story Exercise – Changing How We React to Thoughts

(11:33): This is often happening outside of our awareness, like the experience of maybe reading the page of a book and then not really remembering what you read because you were thinking about something else. Or hopefully I'm not alone in this driving to work and then suddenly being like, oh, I'm here already because I was lost in thought. Our job with the advisor is really to bring our thinking into greater awareness so that we're really making thoughtful decisions about how we're responding instead of doing some of that autopilot reacting to our thoughts. We're going to give this a try here in another activity. I want to put out there that we can actually start thinking about all of our thoughts, positive or negative, as if they're a story that our advisor is telling us.

And I don't mean to say that to trivialize our thoughts or say that we should disregard them all, write them all off. It's really about just being able to notice that all of our thoughts are a collection of words, much like a story is. I'd like everybody to get into a little bit of a head space where you're imagining that your child has been dropped by their friend group. Maybe this has really happened in some of your families or it's something that you're worried about or has happened to other kids. I want you to pretend



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if it hasn't happened that this is happening to your child. They've been dropped by their friend group and they're really upset.

As you're imagining that situation, I'd like you to start writing down some of the thoughts that are popping into your head. Tune into your advisor and notice what it's starting to say. When you think about your child being excluded, give everyone a couple moments to get some thoughts down or if this has happened to your child in the past, you might even be able to tap into some thoughts you had at that time. Maybe if you could get a couple thoughts down, maybe three, four, I want you to start reading them and notice how you feel when you let yourself get really hooked by them and get really caught up in them. What I mean by that is you're reading them and you're really believing in them. Let yourself get caught up and just notice what that feels like and start to notice what you think might happen or what you might do if you let those thoughts dictate your actions.

(14:23): What might you do if you believed in these thoughts, bought into these thoughts? Now what we want to try to do is almost create a story title for these thoughts. If my child has been kicked out of their peer group, I might have thoughts like they're never going to recover from this. Or what if they don't make new friends? They're going to be lonely, right? I might decide that that is the forever lonely story that my advisor is feeding me. I'd like you to look at your collection of thoughts and see if you can come up with a story title and then beneath them on your paper write aha, bring a little humor to it. Here's the fill in the blank story. Thanks advisor. I already know this one. What we're really trying to do here again, is make this process of our thinking really visible so we can get a little bit of distance from it.

I'd like you to read over your thoughts again and then when you shift into naming them as a story, I'd like you to notice what happens. What is your relationship like with those thoughts now, right? And whatever happens is fine, just notice is it possible that these words feel a little less heavy now, right? Or maybe a little less powerful, like when you can almost step back and observe them, do they have a little less bite to them? That's really our goal here. It's not to change these thoughts or to get rid of them, it's just to notice these are just thoughts that I'm having and I have a decision about whether or not I'm



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going to go down the path that they would lead me or whether there's something else I want to do. We're just creating a little bit of a pause for ourselves to make a decision about whether these thoughts are going to help us do something in line with our values and how we want to support our child or if they're actually going to pull us away from that.

(16:26): Thinking about what you can do to use your advisor, I think first and foremost we want to get good at noticing our own advisors and always ask ourselves the question of whether or not what it's telling us is helpful or unhelpful in terms of our values. Of course, if it's helpful we should use that advice. The advisor can be very helpful. But if it's unhelpful, if it's giving us some content that's going to make us act in a way that we don't really want to act as a parent in the way that we don't really want to support our child, we should try to do this unhooking. We can name the story or even just adding the phrase "I'm having the thought that" in front of a statement can be really impactful. My thought that they'll never recover from this becomes "I'm having the thought that they'll never recover from this".

It gets me a little bit of distance that I'm not bought into what the advisor is saying. We can start to use advisor language with our children too. If you have a kid that you think would really take to this concept, you could explain it to them or even just talking about their brain or their mind and the thoughts that they're having can be helpful to get them a little bit of distance from what they're thinking. Things like you're thinking you won't be able to make new friends, that's a pretty heavy thought, can be enough to just loosen the grip of the advisor a little bit. Depending on your kid, you might be able to go the extra step of helping you right now? Are these thoughts useful in deciding what you want to do next?

We can normalize the advisor for our kids, too. Again, its whole job is to protect us. Telling our child it makes sense that you are trying to do all this problem solving. It makes sense that your advisor, your mind is predicting all of these things that can go wrong. It's trying to help you problem solve. That's not a bad thing. We just need to be able to judge whether or not it's really useful. Then I always like to put out there as a disclaimer that it can be really easy to get caught up in a debate with our child about whether or not what they're thinking is true or false. I often have the urge to do that in sessions, be like, no, that's



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not really what's going on here. But I think sometimes it often backfires on us because it can come across as invalidating, like we don't trust our kid to know what they're thinking. We just want to focus the discussion around whether or not these thoughts are helpful or unhelpful. Not try to debate whether or not they're true or false.

We're going to take a little shift now into the noticer space, which is a metaphor for our ability to be mindful, to pay attention to what's going on inside of us and outside of us right here in the present moment. I often think about the noticer as being like a pause button to buy us a little bit of time. It's a good space to shift into if we're really sure what to do next and how to be helpful to our child. We can always pause and notice what's going on for us and what's happening around us. I think noticing is really, really important in parenting because our kids' difficult emotions and struggles, especially with peers, can bring up some really painful emotions for us too. You know, if our kid has been dropped by their friend group, we are probably going to experience some anger about the situation or sadness or anxiety for them.

Dropping Anchor: Managing Emotional Reactions – A Mindfulness Strategy (ACE)

[\(19:52\)](#): But we really need to be careful to be noticing what our own emotions are in the situation and which emotions are our kids'. One way we can do that is through a strategy called dropping anchor. It's probably one of my favorite noticer strategies. You can think about using it really much in the way that a boat uses an anchor when it's in harbor. We drop an anchor in a boat and even if a storm rolls through the boat stays steady. The anchor does nothing to try to control the storm. It's only aim is to keep the boat there. That's our goal with dropping anchor, too. We're not trying to control our emotions or our kids' emotions in these difficult situations. We're just trying to keep ourselves steady and present so that we're able to make those choices that are in line with our values.

[\(20:38\)](#): We can remember the steps of dropping anchor using the acronym ACE. I'm just going to take a quick moment to guide us through a cycle of ACE. If you're using this in real life, you might need to go



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through it a couple times. That's fine, that's expected. We're just going to run through a quick one here so that everyone can get a little bit of a taste for what dropping anchor is like. To get started, I'd encourage everyone to get as comfortable as they can wherever you're seated. You can make the choice to close your eyes or just fix your gaze on a spot. You can focus and just start taking a couple deep breaths and notice what it feels like to be breathing in and out. Notice the air flowing in and out of your lungs.

Now I'd like you to start by acknowledging any thoughts and feelings that are coming up for you at this moment. You might be having thoughts about what you're doing after the presentation, what you need to make for dinner later. Notice any feelings or sensations that are coming up as well. Notice any points of tension or relaxation in your body. As you're noticing and acknowledging all these thoughts and feelings, I'd like you to start to connect with your body in some way. This could look like just shifting your position in your chair, maybe straighten up a little bit. You push your feet into the floor, perhaps stretch and notice how there are thoughts and feelings here and you are in control of your body and how you move it.

Then as you're still moving a little bit, I'd like you to start to expand your awareness outwards and notice the things that are going on around you. Notice some of the things that you can see in the room. Notice what you can hear, what you can feel, maybe the chair underneath your body, clothing on your body. Notice how there are thoughts and feelings showing up. There's a body around them and there's a whole world that you can choose to engage with. Anytime we're experiencing difficult thoughts and feelings, we can take these steps to acknowledge that they're present while simultaneously being in control of our body and being able to pay attention to what's going on around us. This is a really great pause when we're feeling hooked to get us back present and grounded. Again, we're not controlling those thoughts and feelings, but we're really thoughtfully deciding how we're going to respond to them and what our next actions are going to be.



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How Parents Can Support Kids Without Overreacting

(23:28): To be starting to use the notice or skill in everyday life and in supporting your child, I think first and foremost we want to be able to notice and name our own emotions and recognize how they may be different from our child's. We also want to notice urges that we might have, right? Like if we have the urge to jump in and problem solve when our child is bringing peer problems to us, we really want to be able to slow down and give ourselves and our child the opportunity to explore all options moving forward. I think there's really a few key reasons why it's really important to be noticing our own emotions. The first is that it's possible that we might actually have a stronger emotional reaction to the situation than our child. Especially if we have our own histories of being left out by peers, that could bring up some really difficult memories and emotions for us.

We need to be able to notice which are ours and what our child is really feeling about the situation because kids always, always have more context than we do. Even though your child may be upset if they're being left out by their peers or have been kicked out of a friend group, it's possible that they were already drifting from that group a bit. It's possible that those kids were engaging in things that your child really wasn't okay with. And even though they're upset about the situation, there may be a part of them that's okay with it or maybe even thankful even though they're having the intense emotional reaction. We need to remember kids always know more than we do about these situations. We also need to be open to the possibility that our child did something to contribute to the situation.

That there is something that they did that really rubbed these other kids the wrong way. Even though they may not be handling it in the right way or in a way that is most helpful that our kid could play a part here and it's possible that our reaction could make things worse for our child. That's why we really need to pause and slow down and decide what comes next. Dropping anchor is a great way to do that and I always recommend practicing it outside of times where you really need it. Sort of developing that muscle memory for pausing and dropping anchor when you're having tough emotions or are hooked by



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thoughts. Then we can promote this in our child too, doing a lot of observing and validating what they're feeling, asking them to notice what they are feeling.

(25:56): And I think a really great way to do this is by using something called supportive statements where we're marrying validation of their emotion with confidence in their ability to handle this. Something like, of course you feel sad, losing friends is really, really hard and I know that you're going to be able to get through this. We're expressing to our kids that we get it and we have so much confidence that they're going to be able to move through this and move forward because it's really important that we're able to model that we can be present for and not be alarmed by our kids' emotions. If we can show them that their difficult emotions don't alarm us, it in turn shows them that they don't need to be alarmed by their intense emotions. Because if we come in with a lot of urgency and a desire to fix what our kid is feeling and change what they're feeling, it sends the message that emotions are not okay, they are a problem, we need to change them instead of presenting them as like the passing states that they really are.

We can do this too by being open and modeling acceptance of our own emotions outside of times that our kids come to us with struggles. When we are experiencing anger or sadness or worry, we can talk about that and show our kids how we're dealing with it. Things like, man my heart is racing right now. I'm feeling nervous about a presentation I have to give today. Maybe I need to drop, anchor and grab a glass of water, right? We're showing our kids, I'm noticing that I feel this and it's not an emergency, it's something that I can manage and choose what to do next.

And then finally for our last skill we're going to talk about the discover, which is really the part of us that acts in the world. The part of us that tests things out and sees how they go makes mistake, tries again, learns from trial and error. This is how we really experience our life. You think about it like we can't climb a mountain using the advisor. It's not climbing a mountain to just stand at the bottom and think about it. Same with the noticer, right? If I'm at the bottom of that mountain just thinking about how nervous I'm feeling inside, how my legs are shaking, that's also not the same thing. I have to actually move my hands



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and feet to get myself to the top to say that I've climbed that mountain. One way that we can use our discover in a way that's really helpful is through this idea of assessing workability.

When we try out things, how do they go and do they work based on our values? I like everyone to bring to mind a time that their child told them that friends left them out. This can range from "my friends forgot to invite me to kickball at recess", to "I have been completely dropped by my friend group". Any peer problem in there is fine to bring to mind. I want you to think about what you did when your child brought that situation to you. What did you actually do?

[\(29:04\)](#): Then how did it go? What happened next? What did your child do? Then ask yourself if that action was in line with your values. Did what you do actually reflect the supportive parent that you want to be when your child brings you peer problems or any sort of issue? This is where I'll say too, we often think that things only work if we get the exact outcome that we want, but in reality we might not be able to control that. All we can do really in any issue with our kids is choose actions and how we want to be supportive that are in line with our values. We might need to unhook or drop anchor first to make that feel more possible. When we think about peer problems with our child or being dropped by a friend group, we can't base our workability assessment on parents in terms of whether or not we helped our kid get their friends back or make new friends right away.

That is outside of our control. As much as I'm sure we'd all love to, we can't make people be friends with our kid. Instead we need to be focusing on showing up as the parent that we want to be when our kid is struggling? Are we doing things that are enhancing our relationship with our child because we don't even have a hope of getting to problem solving with our kid if they're open to it, unless they're coming to us with problems in the first place. I think it's always worth considering are we doing things that keep these lines of communication open so that I have a shot at helping my kid and giving some advice that they might really need?

For Discover, I'd encourage everyone to look at the ways that they've interacted with their children in the past when they've brought them peer problems or really any problems. Think about whether I act in a



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way that was in line with my values and did it help enhance my relationship with my child? If you have jumped right into problem solving in the past when your kid has brought you a problem, did that go well? Were they open to that or did they shut down and withdraw from that? If a child has come to you venting a little bit about their friend group and you've participated in that to some extent and then two days later they make up, how did that go? How did that affect your relationship with your child around that particular peer or group of peers?

Workability Assessment – Learning From Past Parenting Responses

[\(31:41\)](#): We want to be promoting this language with our child too. Asking them questions about what they think they could do in the situation or even pointing out a little bit of workability to them, right? The last time this happened, you did x, did that work? Are there other things you could try? Getting them to see that they have a lot of options and they don't need to maybe be so reactive to their advisor, those thoughts that are coming up for them. I think it's really important to allow our kids room to have their own ideas about how they want to move forward. We really don't want to rob our kids of the ability to choose and determine their own actions because the more that they see that they can make decisions, hopefully in line with values about what they want to do with peers and the person they want to be, the more confidence they're going to build in their ability to handle any number of setbacks going forward.

I think it can be really useful to ask kids if they actually want our help. Sometimes kids come to us venting and having a really large emotional reaction to something that's happened and they actually have a pretty clear picture about how they want to handle it. Then if we just jump in with our own ideas and problem solving, it'd be very off-putting. I'm sure we've all had the experience of just wanting to vent and get that emotion out, but knowing what we need to do next. Ask your kid if they want some help moving through this situation. They may have it under control and just want emotional support from you. But then if they do want that help, we can help them think about ways to repair relationships



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if that's necessary or think about options for new clubs or activities where they can make new friends. But we really need to be sure that they are open to that and that's what they're coming to us for first. Now we'll put it all together here. Hopefully you saw as I was talking here, the whole idea is to be able to use this model flexibly. We want to be shifting between these different skills. If we ever find that one is not being useful for us, if we're getting really hooked by the advisor, we can shift into being a noticer. Dropping or taking that pause if we've done some noticing. We have a good handle on what we're feeling and are grounded, we want to shift into discover and go into some action. We'll talk about using these things to help with problem solving and I'm going to come at it from the angle of like our problem being that we need to be supportive of our child. 'Because again, that's the only thing we have control over. But if you have a kid that's open to working on problem solving with you, this is the type of model that you could help them work through as well to figure out how they want to move forward with peer problems.

[\(34:27\)](#): I'm first going to define my problem, which like I said, for the example we're going to walk through is like, I need to support my child now that their friends are excluding them. I first want to start by thinking through the DNA-V of what typically happens when my child typically brings a problem to me. What do I normally do, think, feel, and what are my values here? I do like a little bit of an overview of how these skills show up and then I'm going to shift into noticer. That's a good first step. Take a few deep breaths, maybe drop anchor. And we don't want to rush this step. We want to make sure that we're approaching our problem solving from that really grounded place before we start shifting into discover and brainstorming ideas for the actions we could take. And you know, we don't want to let our advisor judge them just yet.

Really just think about any possible action that you could take to be helpful to your child. Right now. You might think about reaching out to teachers or other adults at the school to see if they have insight. You might think about just letting your child totally handle it on their own and just being there for emotional support as needed. Just think about any possible thing that you could do and then use your advisor to



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judge the possible advantages and disadvantages of those decisions. And I think this is a really good step for getting into the choosing action part. 'Because we want to choose that action that we feel like has a lot of those advantages and then really make it explicit to ourselves when we're choosing the action, why we're doing it. Make those values visible to us. You know? If I decide to go with the action of I'm going to be here for emotional support as my child needs it, but they are going to decide how they're going to approach their friends or approach new friends, I'm going to think about how I'm relating to that, relating to my value of being supportive, but also fostering independence in my child.

(36:24): Then I want to notice what might result. Is it going to be hard for me to carry out this action? Are there going to be difficult thoughts and feelings that come up? Am I willing to have those thoughts and feelings because it relates to my values? If I choose to let my child handle this on their own, just be there for emotional support, that's going to bring up a lot of anxiety for me. I need to be clear on why I am doing it. Then I'm willing to have that anxiety to let my child make this choice. Then I'm going to anticipate any problems that might come up and how I can minimize those barriers. If I know that I might have the urge to problem solve with my kid or to give my own input and advice, I might decide that I'm going to drop anchor instead take some deep breaths and refocus on validating my child and expressing confidence in them.

Now just to wrap here a couple resources in case anybody's interested in doing a little more learning around DNA-V. The first is a [website](#) by Louise Hayes that has a lot of really awesome resources related to DNA-V. There are a lot of things on there that are more for practitioners and therapists, but there are some great family resources on there. She has some really awesome DNA-V tip sheets that families can download and use with some strategies and ideas on how to implement and use DNA-V in the home. Then a couple books that I really love are here as well. [What Makes You Stronger](#) is the DNA-V adaptation for adults. If anyone is interested in exploring this more from the perspective as an adult in your own life, that's a really great resource. Then [Your Life Your Way](#) is an awesome workbook that I often use with kids, mostly teenagers in my therapy practice that outlines all the DNA-V skills and then at



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the end has some really great applications. They talk about bullying and peer problems, there's anxiety, depression, online life, and it talks about putting all those DNA-V skills together to tackle some of those challenges that come up for kids.

Q&A

What If My Kid Won't Talk About It? – Tips for Opening Up Communication

Moriah Bracken ([38:43](#)):

Yes. Thank you so much, Ashley. I think that's helpful to bring up how, you know, as parents it's really hard to see your kid struggle and you just want to jump in and fix it. And that taking some of these steps to reflect on ourselves and what we're bringing to the situation is a helpful pause. We do have some questions from the audience and someone asked, **what do you suggest if your child may not be necessarily opening up to you or they're feeling really down and you can tell something's going on, or maybe they used to have plans every weekend and that has paused, but they're not really sharing. How would you approach that situation where, you know, something's up. But it's not as explicitly shared from your kid?**

Dr. Ashley Leja ([39:44](#)):

Right? Yeah. Like your spidey senses are tingling. Absolutely. I think that's a really great, great question. I think about the other adults in your child's life because I think sometimes kids don't feel comfortable for whatever reason bringing things to us as parents. But there are other people, other adults that may be trusted in their lives, teachers, coaches you know, if you are involved in a religious organization, like there may be other people that your child is talking to. Because I think we often, again, get hooked by the thought, like something's going on and nobody knows about it, nobody can help them. That may not



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be true. I think being able to pause and think about where are some other sources of support in my child's life, and maybe even checking in with them to see if they've noticed any changes in your child.

Does the coach notice that your child seems a little bit more down lately? Checking in with teachers, are they noticing anything shifting at school? I think you can do a little bit of background information there to see if there really is something going on that we need to be looking into? I think too, reflecting on the discover portion here in assessing workability and things that we've tried in the past, as hard as it can be, I think it's really important for us as parents to be able to take that look at whether we may have done something to shut down lines of communication inadvertently, right? We come in real hot with our kids about what's going on, and that can be really off-putting for some kids.

We might need to think about if we actually need to take a little bit of a step back and do some things to maybe repair some of that with our kid. Just making sure that we're visible too. I think sometimes kids have this notion that we are very busy people because we are. That we may not have time. Maybe we don't seem like we're around as much because we're working, there are other things going on. Being really thoughtful too about making yourself visible and around at home in case your child does want to come to you with something. Yeah, I think that's where I would start. Then of course, if you notice across the board many adults are having concerns about your child and it seems like there's something going on there, that might be a point where it's worth exploring. Do we need to get some outside help? Is there a social worker at school or some outside therapy if your child's open to it. That could be helpful and exploring what's going on.

When to Involve the School – Deciding If More Support is Needed

Moriah Bracken ([42:29](#)):

Do you have a suggestion of what point if things are happening at school, how much work we do at home and at what point do we reach out to school? Or maybe this is turning into something bigger than what we can handle alone at home?



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Dr. Ashley Leja ([42:49](#)):

I think it really depends on your child and their openness to receiving some help to some extent. I'd say if it's been a week, a couple weeks and you've just noticed that like persistent down mood or you are really concerned that something's off your child has seemed off or down for a week, a couple weeks, I would be reaching out to school then to get that. I wouldn't necessarily jump to like, oh, they need to be seeing a therapist right away, but I would be asking those questions of other adults and activities that they're involved in to see is this a across the board issue or not?

Moriah Bracken ([43:39](#)):

I think that's really helpful. I know it sounds like there is a lot of reflection and for parents to look inward before just jumping to fix it. And that can be really, really hard at the moment. How do you suggest practicing some of these reflections, this model and how do we in the moment when our emotions are maybe high keeping all of these things in mind. Where do we start if we want to implement some of these strategies?

Dr. Ashley Leja ([44:22](#)):

Absolutely. I think that's such a great question. I wish more kids asked me that question, how do I practice this all the time? Well, I think really you can do a lot of what we did today, right? Like bringing to mind situations that elicit some of these emotions in us that we actually get the practice of doing outside of, we'll call it a real situation happening, right? Imagining something that brings up some anxiety for you about your child, imagining something that brings up anger, letting yourself feel those emotions and then dropping anger, right? Or taking some deep breaths, trying to breathe through them, brainstorming thoughts that you're going to have about situations with your kid, whether they're about your child directly or about yourself as a parent and practicing that unhooking. I often recommend with clients that I see, doing that naming the story activity where we write down a few of those thoughts, we name the



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story, and then I ask them to carry that piece of paper around with them in their pocket and once a day pull it out, let themselves get hooked and then name the story to do that unhooking.

You're building it into a little bit of a daily routine of practicing with hooking and dropping anchor. That when the situation hits, you can a little bit fall back on that muscle memory because you've been practicing it. I think over time you start to notice, especially with the unhooking with thoughts, you do get to a point where you're like, oh yeah, I already, I know this one. Like, thanks advisor, I got it. It almost becomes like old news and it feels a little bit less intense because we've done that practice.

Navigating Your Own Feelings as a Parent – Handling Friendships with Other Parents

Moriah Bracken ([46:13](#)):

That's really helpful. What do you suggest as we talk about, as the parent, our own feelings? If our child is connected to peers and maybe we're friends with those parents or we're you know, family friends and we see each other outside of just the peer, what our kid is going through that peer social group, how do we navigate our feelings and the problem solving, not just for our child, but maybe for ourselves with our own friends?

Dr. Ashley Leja ([46:53](#)):

Absolutely. I think that's a really tricky one. I wish I had a really excellent answer, but the truth of it, it's just hard. I think one thing that we need to do as parents is just be conscious that it's always the possibility that if we become friends with the parents of our kids' friends, that this might happen. I think sometimes the sting might be lessened a little bit if you have a preexisting friendship with someone, it was also friends and now you have kids that are friends. I think that feels a little bit different because you have that friendship, but just always keep in mind that if you are starting a friendship with another set of parents, another group of parents, that this is always a possibility because kids grow, they change. We



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don't know that they're going to keep the same peer groups, they're probably not going to. But we just need to know that that's on the table. And I think, in an ideal situation we could get ahead of it, talking about, hey, if our kids have problems, how do we want to handle it? Right?

Around how you would want to approach that situation with another parent. I think though, and this is like a little bit of a deviation, but related, I think we often have the urge to call the other parent or parents that are involved

I don't think I've ever seen it go well, because yeah, you think about it like, we all have the instinct to protect our own child and if we call another parent, they might have no knowledge of what's going on. Almost like at best they can offer zero information or help, at worst it becomes really ugly and each of us is defending our own child and we never really know how another parent is going to handle these situations. We don't know if they're then going to talk to their child about it,

Their child could talk about it to peers. Then again, we've inadvertently gotten ourselves in a situation where we've made it worse for our kid by acting. I think there's no great answer aside from knowing that it's always a possibility that this is going to happen and we need to be really careful again about not responding in a way that could actually make things harder or worse for our child.

How to Prepare Your Child for Returning to School

Moriah Bracken ([49:30](#)):

Yeah. with that also I think you gave many great suggestions and many helpful tips of what to do at home, how to check ourselves as parents to ensure that we're creating a safe space for our child to share. Having them be comfortable with the discomfort of what peer conflicts can bring and maybe making home a safe space. And what do you suggest though as parents? What can we do to prepare our kids when they're back in the lion's den or maybe go back to school and now they're faced with the exclusion of not playing with their same friends at recess, not being allowed to sit at the same lunch table. What can we do to support them when they're out of our care?



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Dr. Ashley Leja (50:31):

Yeah, absolutely. I do think something that can be helpful, and again, you'd have to think about your child and think about the players involved at school. Even though I don't recommend generally reaching out to other parents, I do think it can be helpful to reach out to school staff from the standpoint of seeing if they have any more insight or information about what's going on, but also seeing if they may be able to foster some other relationships. Some teachers can be really great about being thoughtful about seat placement and group work and partner work and your child's teachers might be able to help provide some insight and guidance on some other kids that may also be in the market for a new friend. That could be a good fit for the child.

I think the school can be a really good resource in that as a behind the scenes thing. Then again, if your child is open to working with you on some problem solving, talking with them about when are those tough times of the day going to be and how do you want to handle it? Right? Getting their ideas at lunchtime you can say, it doesn't sound like you sit with these kids anymore, who are some other kids you could sit with? Right? What else could you do during your lunch period? Trying to do that, brainstorming with them. Ideally putting the ball in their court for what feels most important to you again, like sneaky values, right? Like what matters most to you and what are some actions that you can take to help you get there?

What If My Child Played a Role in the Conflict? – Teaching Accountability

Moriah Bracken (52:20):

Thank you so much. And we have time for about one more question. I know you brought up it could be uncomfortable and really hard, but there is a chance that our own child has a role in the conflict. If it comes out that yeah, maybe our kid did do something or made a mistake that they regret that led to some of this peer conflict or exclusion, how involved should we as the parents be in helping them to repair that mistake? And then what happens if peers just seem to not be able to let that mistake go?



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Dr. Ashley Leja (53:04):

Yeah, yeah. Which is possible right? Back to the things we can control and the things that we can't. And I think that is actually a really good thing to bring up with your child. Yes, you may have some regrets here, you made a mistake. How can you own that? Right? And again, we'll bring values in. Do you want to be the kind of person who owns their mistakes and takes responsibility for them even though it's hard? Is that important to you? Is that important to us as a family? And then how do you want to try to make this right? It totally depends on the situation for what making it right and that attempt looks like. But trying to work with them on how you want to handle this?

And then pointing out, you could do all the right things here in trying to repair this and it does not work out. Okay. That idea of even with our values doesn't always lead to a preferred outcome. You could be really proud of how you try to make this repair and those kids not let it go. That doesn't mean that you didn't show up as a good person here, right? You're still a good person who made a mistake and it might not pan out the way you want. If that's the case, what's our next move? Right? Then again, we go back to like, who are some other kids that you could hang out with? Do you want me to contact school and see, you know, if your teacher has ideas for who to sit with? But I think that's a hard but really important lesson in that sometimes we do what's right. We try to make that repair and those people aren't ready to move on.

Conclusion

Moriah Bracken (54:46):

Well, thank you so much. I feel like I could talk to you about this for hours. There are many helpful nuggets and what I really appreciate is there are many takeaways, whether it be those supportive statements or catching ourselves with the hook, which I loved you know, being able to catch our own emotions or how to anchor ourselves maybe before going into some of those tough conversations. I really appreciate that you gave us all some really nice takeaways of how to handle when our kid comes



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home feeling really upset. Thank you so much. Thank you Dr. Leia, and we hope to see you at our next event.