

Episode 78a - Dr. Shanker

Speaker: [00:00:00] Welcome to the Peaceful Parenting Podcast. I'm your host, Sarah Rosenzweig, mom of three young people, Peaceful Parenting Coach, and your cheerleader and guide on all things parenting. Each week, we'll cover the tools, strategies, and support you need to end the yelling and power struggles, and encourage your kids to listen and cooperate so that you can enjoy your family time.

Speaker: I'm happy to say we have a great relationship with our three kids. The teen years have been easy and joyful. Not because we're special unicorns, but because my kids were raised with peaceful parenting. I've also helped so many parents just like you stop struggling and enjoy their kids again. I'm excited to be here with you today and bring you the insight and information you need to make your parenting journey a little more peaceful.

Speaker: Let's dive into this week's conversation.

Hey, all welcome back to another episode of the peaceful parenting podcast this month for the month of August, we are re releasing some of our favorite episodes and we're actually doing two a week for you. I was just going to do one a week, but then when I sat down to look at my favorites, it was so hard to choose.

[00:01:00] Today's episode is an interview with Dr. Stuart Shanker. Some of you may remember him from the summit that I did in the fall, the flourish with your complex child summit. He's a fabulous human and also such a champion of children and a wealth of information about children and behavior.

And when that behavior is challenging. So let's dive in.

sarah: Today's episode is a guest expert interview with Dr. Stuart Schanker. This was a really great conversation. What a wonderful man and so knowledgeable. He is a researcher, so we geeked out a little bit on the science of behind peaceful parenting and why we are doing this thing that we're doing and why science supports what we're doing is super cool.

sarah: I had actually a giant lightning bolt while we were talking a big aha of my career so far and how I understand the work that we're doing. It was really interesting. So I hope that you stick around. This was a long one. I promised

you that it [00:02:00] was worth it. What a super conversation. And I also highly recommend his book called Self Reg.

sarah: He's written a bunch of books. This was the one that was focused, that's focused on parenting and self reg, which you will hear a lot about in this conversation. He gets really nicely specific with examples too. So I think you're going to love it. Dr. Stuart Schenker is the author of the Self Reg Trilogy, the one that I mentioned to you is the one about parenting and it's called Self Reg, How to Help Your Child and You Break the Stress Cycle and Successfully Engage with Life.

sarah: It's a fantastic book and he also is the founder of the Merit Center. It's a self reg learning and information center for parents, educators, and the leaders of today and the leaders of tomorrow. The goal of Self Reg Global is to provide parents and educators around the world with the tools needed to raise healthy and vibrant children and to provide adults and seniors with a powerful method for enhancing their own well being.

sarah: In this challenging world in which we're living, Self Reg inspires what is most desperately needed, [00:03:00] a profound sense of hope for the future. Just a quick couple of things before we get started. I just wanted to share a review from Caroline. She says, I've done a lot of searching for parenting ideas that could change my children's behavior.

sarah: Sarah Rosensweet's ideas and suggestions are by far the most helpful I have found. She really brings the focus on improving the relationship with your children instead of controlling them, treating them with empathy and kindness and radical love. I don't know if you can hear me smiling. Her messages have changed my life.

sarah: She has helped me improve all the relationships in my life, not just with my kids. Highly recommend Sarah Rosen sweet and all her workshops, podcasts, programs, and articles. Ah, Caroline, thank you so much. It really makes my day to hear reviews like that. If the podcast has been important in your life, please consider supporting us at patreon.

sarah: com slash peaceful parenting. And that way we can continue to bring you the podcast ad free. We put a lot of time and energy and money into producing the podcast every week, [00:04:00] and I would love to have your support. Again, that's patreon. com forward slash peaceful parenting. All right, let's get to the podcast episode. I love this conversation with Dr. Schenker, and I hope you will, too. Hi, Dr. Schenker. Welcome to the podcast.

Dr. Shanker: Good morning, Sarah.

sarah: I have just finished reading your book, Self Reg, and that's what I want to focus on today. I love it so much. It's going to be one of the top books that I recommend to the parents that I work with.

sarah: And I just wanted to ask you, I'm in agreement with you on your idea that misbehavior is stressed behavior. And I also know that's a really It's unusual for people to recognize that. That's not like the common idea in our culture about children and their behavior. How did you come about to study this in your work, and how did you come to realize that?

Dr. Shanker: So let me tell you right at the outset. I went carefully through your web, your website. And I love everything you're saying, and I think you're [00:05:00] bang on. And fortunately, we have some neuroscience to back up everything you've been telling parents. So the answer to your question is really the neuroscience part.

Dr. Shanker: I was taught by a new generation of neuroscientists. Like most great revolutions, what made it possible was the discovery of new technologies that allowed us to look below the surface of the brain to see what's going on in the deeper parts, what's called the limbic system. And below that something called the midbrain.

Dr. Shanker: And this was revolutionary for us. And it meant that we had to start rethinking all of the sort of, biases or assumptions that we've made throughout time, really for the last couple thousand years. Because It told us that an awful lot of the behaviors that [00:06:00] we were seeing in young children or in teenagers that maybe we find frustrating or even irritating because we think that the child is deliberately misbehaving.

Dr. Shanker: What we discovered was, in fact, these are what are called stress behaviors. These are behaviors caused by these subcortical processes. And quite often, the child isn't actually aware. of what they're doing, certainly not intending to misbehave. There's something else going on. And so that raised a huge question for us.

Dr. Shanker: How do we change our parenting guidelines? And the answer to that can be found on your website. The answer to that can be found in everything that you are training and teaching parents to do.

sarah: Yeah, what we say in peaceful parenting is they're not giving us a hard [00:07:00] time, they're having a hard time.

Dr. Shanker: That's great.

sarah: And I'm so glad that neuroscience backs up what I feel in my heart.

Dr. Shanker: Yeah, and now what's important is really to get your message out there and to explain to parents that this isn't just a feel good story. What it's about is we want our kids to have The best life that they can. And we know that our kids are suffering now, all ages.

Dr. Shanker: This has been a very tough couple of years. We measure that in various ways, but the short answer is we're seeing an awful lot of kids now struggling with anxiety, a lack of motivation, and maybe behavior issues. What that tells us. is that these kids are under an enormous amount of stress. And you and I can talk about that in a couple seconds, what we mean when we say [00:08:00] that.

Dr. Shanker: But it's not just the kids. Parents are also under enormous loads of stress. In fact, I've done this my entire life, and I've never seen parents and children as stressed as they are at the moment. So it's essential. That we get this message out there to as many people as possible and that's my greatest hope.

Dr. Shanker: My hope is that people will tell their friends, tell whoever they see is struggling with their kids to go on to your website, see what you're saying, change attitudes, and it's happening by the way. It's happening very quickly.

sarah: I, my oldest son is 21 and when I was practicing this kind of parenting when he was small, it was super fringy.

sarah: And it's becoming a lot more common now, which is, makes me really happy to see.

Dr. Shanker: Yeah, me too.

sarah: Yeah. So one thing that we hear a lot when kids are misbehaving, which we know is stressed behavior, is parents say, calm down, [00:09:00] stop it, et cetera, which, they want their kids to have more. Self control.

sarah: And I learned from your book that you differentiate between self control and self regulation. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

Dr. Shanker: Okay, so your definition or your explanation of self control is perfect, and I don't really need to add anything to that. Self regulation refers to how we manage stress.

Dr. Shanker: And that's the original definition, and it's the key to this distinction. And the reason is the following. When a child is overstressed, so when the systems deep inside the brain have been triggered to deal with all the stress, a couple of very interesting things happen. One is what you just mentioned, the stress behaviors.

Dr. Shanker: So the child maybe becomes very impulsive or has poor frustration [00:10:00] tolerance or gets angry easily or whatever. So when these systems deep in the brain are triggered, they cause those behaviors. And they shut down the parts of the brain in the prefrontal cortex. And that's this part up here. It's the part of the brain that subserves self control.

Dr. Shanker: That subserves listening. So what's happening when the child is overstressed is their ability to process what you're saying is out the window. They don't actually hear you. They can't do any of those things. They can't control their impulses. They can't control their behavior because the system that they need for that, which is called the medial prefrontal cortex, has been blunted.

Dr. Shanker: And that's why self [00:11:00] regulation is so important. What we want to do is we want to turn off the stress response, turn off these systems that have been triggered, so that the child can listen, so that the child can, inhibit. But now a very interesting thing happens. When you can.

Dr. Shanker: Get the child back to what's called balance homeostatic balance when the child turns off the stress alarms. The impulses go away. The shouting, the anger, whatever it is, these are a function. They're a product of the stress system. So what we're doing here is two things. What we're doing is by turning off the stress system.

Dr. Shanker: We're allowing the child to get back to calm. And then what we find is where they can hear us, where they can listen, where they can understand what we're saying, but then what we find is [00:12:00] they can calm themselves. The impulses simply wither. Does that, is that?

sarah: Yeah. Yeah. And what we talk about in peaceful parenting is that, the thinking brain, the prefrontal cortex goes offline when kids are upset or excited.

sarah: I'd like to point out too the birthday party, the excitement of the birthday party, and the kids can't calm themselves down because they're just so excited about their birthday party. They're thinking going, it's just gone out the window. And, one thing that you stress so much in your book is the importance of caregiver's calm presence or, co regulation is how I talk about it, but that I think you call it the interbrain.

sarah: And so maybe if you could talk about that a little bit, actually before we go there, Let's just talk about those stressors because I think a lot of parents listening might be thinking what kind of stress are they talking about? What are those stressors that, that children, young people, that we experience?

sarah: I know you have different, five different, I think five different categories of stressors that you talk about in your book. Maybe you could share what those [00:13:00] stressors are with us. Was I right that it's five?

Dr. Shanker: Yes.

sarah: Yes.

Dr. Shanker: Five domains. Okay, so let's start off with the very basic question. What is stress?

Dr. Shanker: And so for a scientist, the definition of stress is anything that requires the brain to burn energy in order to stay in balance. And so that's how our brain works. Our brain is like a thermostat and it's constantly burning energy to deal with all of these sensations or stimuli that make us burn energy.

Dr. Shanker: The classic example that the scientist who discovered all this, his example, the guy called Walter Cannon, his example was cold weather. Cold weather is in fact a stress. Why? Because the body has to maintain an internal, an average internal temperature of 37 degrees. And so what [00:14:00] happens when it's cold outside is the brain triggers all kinds of reactions so that we stay warm.

Dr. Shanker: So we shiver or teeth chatter, all of these are, we don't control them. We don't choose to do them. They are reactions that generate heat so that our brain stays nice and toasty at 37 degrees. So that's really important because

what it tells us is that a fetus inside the womb really doesn't, it's not that it's a stress free environment, but there's not many stresses.

Dr. Shanker: It's a stress reduced environment. But the second a baby is born, wham, it is hit by all kinds of stresses. Light is the big one for a newborn. Light, cold temperature noise, all of these are stresses in the sense that it causes the baby [00:15:00] to burn energy. But a child only has so much energy. The energy we're looking at is something called glucose.

Dr. Shanker: And so they're burning glucose to keep their systems running smoothly, to keep their body temperature at 37 degrees. And What we did, so we ran a clinic that was primarily for children on the spectrum, and we started studying all the stresses that they have. And kids on the, now I have a child on the spectrum, and I can tell you that they are quite sensitive to stresses and easily overstressed.

Dr. Shanker: So we started tabulating. All of the stresses that we could, and we got in touch with scientists around the world, and eventually we came up with close to 700 different stresses. You gave a very interesting example two seconds ago, the stress of the birthday party. That is, in fact, a stress. It's a nice stress.

Dr. Shanker: It's a happy stress. But [00:16:00] it's still a stress. It's requiring the brain to burn energy. That's why parents have so much, so often find that after the party, their kid is a mess. What's happened is they've used up all their glucose. Happy stress, but still stress. So here we were, we had hundreds and hundreds of these stresses and it just wasn't, it was too much to tell parents maybe your kids got, stress number 623.

Dr. Shanker: So we had to figure out what was the way we could make this manageable for parents. And so we did what psychologists call a factor analysis. And we came up with five basic groups of stress and. Those five groups essentially captured every item that was on our stress inventory. So we have the physical stresses, and those are things like I just mentioned.

Dr. Shanker: Noise, crowds, too much light, not enough light. Then the next one are [00:17:00] emotional stresses. So let's take a very simple example. Children get scared, and what happens when you get scared? is your heart starts to beat faster, your breathing goes up. All of these are reactions to the fear that burn energy.

Dr. Shanker: So again, so we have emotion stresses that make the brain increase its burning rate. And your example, again, it's correct. It can be a

negative emotion, like fear, or it can be a positive emotion, like being really excited. Both of those emotions burn energy. The next group are what are called Cognitive stresses.

Dr. Shanker: Now this is a difficult issue. So I'll just give you the real simple explanation. A cognitive stress, a great example would be math. Math is a cognitive stress for pretty much all kids. [00:18:00] Although many kids, some kids love it. I have one kid that loved the stress of math and the other one that would run 10 miles to get away from it.

Dr. Shanker: The reason is when we solve a problem. Our whole body tenses up. And so if you watch your child when they're saw, when they're studying or when they're working on homework, you'll see that they're very tense. And so what we refer to thinking or problem solving is a whole body phenomenon. And that means they're burning a lot of energy.

Dr. Shanker: Now you made a great remark at the outset about, it was the point that, Some kids are working too hard. Now, what we know is that in the area, let's say of math, some kids are born with what we call deficits, where maybe they process mathematical information numbers a little slower than others.

Dr. Shanker: [00:19:00] They'll still learn math. They can still become a math whiz, but you know, we have to be a little, we have to develop it a little slower. It's like in tennis. Some people just pick up a racket and they can and they're, hitting aces, but with other kids it takes a little bit of time before they get that coordination.

Dr. Shanker: So these are cognitive stresses. And what we want to do is if our child is let's say resisting doing their homework. We want to see that as not an oppositional behavior which for us means nothing, but instead it's a stress behavior. It's a sign that they're burning too much energy. The next domain is social stress and that's an easy one.

Dr. Shanker: Kids are under constant social stress. It starts very young, and kids are constantly competing with each other for dominance, social status to be accepted, to be popular. And then finally, there's a domain that we call pro social [00:20:00] stress. And this is tough on a kid. We don't want Children to lie. We want them to be truthful.

Dr. Shanker: We want them to be honest. And so maybe they You know, they have an impulse to telephib or to see what they can get away with. Take something that's not theirs. And so it's very stressful for them to learn, how to

be, how to have values in life to guide yourself by them. So we look at those five domains and what we find is the following.

Dr. Shanker: When we have a kid. That's overstressed, clearly overstressed. So they're crying or they're shouting. What we have found is It's never just one domain. It's never just, so maybe what we think is, I've got a kid in school and some and somebody said something mean, so it's got to be a social stress or an emotional stress.

Dr. Shanker: But what we find is it's always [00:21:00] all five. And for example, if my child is under a lot of physical stress, the first domain, so they're tired or it or the classroom is overcrowded or there's too much noise for them and they're sensitive to noise. It lowers their threshold for how they deal with the emotional stress.

Dr. Shanker: So I'll give you a great example of this. I'm very sensitive to noise and I'm very sensitive to crowds. When I'm tired, I can't stand going to a restaurant. It just overwhelms me. But when I feel good, when I'm rested, I actually love going to a restaurant. Then it's a positive stress. So what we do is we use the five domains To help parents become stress detectives, we know that there's this distinction [00:22:00] between misbehavior, which is behavior that's intentional, and stress behaviors that are caused.

Dr. Shanker: If I suspect that it's stress behavior, now I'm going to become a stress detective, and I'm going to figure out what are the stresses looking always at all five domains.

sarah: So when you say that looking at the difference between misbehavior and stress behavior, how can parents tell? And also, do you really think there is much intentional misbehavior on the part of children?

Dr. Shanker: That's a fabulous question. Okay. Let me start with the second question. No, I don't. So it turns. I don't either.

sarah: I think kids want to be good. And that's what we always come back to that. They really do want to be good.

Dr. Shanker: I do too. And, they get. Maybe they get bullied by, I'll give you an example.

Dr. Shanker: So I told you I had a son on the spectrum and he was bullied so much growing up a little bit by other kids. [00:23:00] But a lot by teachers and

coaches and they thought he was misbehaving, but he wasn't, he has autism. And so these are stress behaviors. And when you are gentle with him, you get totally different child, a happy kid.

Dr. Shanker: And one who really, as you just said, he wants to please, he wants to be happy. He wants you to be happy. So now the first question. How can parents tell? And it turns out look, there are going to be times when kids misbehave. They're going to test what they can get away with. Maybe they did something that they know they shouldn't have done and now they're going to try to cover their tracks, whatever.

Dr. Shanker: Okay, so that's a part of growing up. Again, you had this line on your website which is perfect. Even when they've done something intentionally that they know they shouldn't, we want to treat it with love and compassion. We want to [00:24:00] explain why, this doesn't serve anybody and especially not you.

Dr. Shanker: But how can I tell when it's stress behavior? And if Sarah and Stuart are right and most of the problems we're seeing are stress behaviors, how do I know? It turns out that there are dead giveaways for when it's stress behavior. You just have to learn what they are. So we talk in the book, so we'll talk about things like skin color or what's going on with their eyes, pupil dilation, but there's a real easy one.

Dr. Shanker: When it's stress behavior, the child's voice dies. And in fact, every parent knows, without being in the room, when my kid is overstressed, I can hear it in their voice. And physiologically what happens is the stress changes. changes the pitch. So their voice goes up a little, their speech becomes a little disjointed and even what they say, we don't pay much attention to what a child's [00:25:00] saying, the words, we're really listening to their limbic system, which is saying, believe it or not, I need you.

Dr. Shanker: Now, let me finish this. Okay, sir. Now, you said something before that's huge, because how we respond instantly turn off that, that stress alarm. Okay, so think back to when they were a baby and the baby starts to cry. So you didn't lecture your baby. You didn't shout at your baby. Instead, your voice naturally drops.

Dr. Shanker: Your tone drops, you become very soothing with your voice. Now we know, I'm going to just do a little bit of science here. And we know something, this is a recent discovery and it's fascinating. Listening, hearing is

actually a form of touch. So what's happening is [00:26:00] sound waves are caressing the child's Eardrum and when it's a soothing touch.

Dr. Shanker: So imagine now when your child, your young child's upset and you stroke them. What you're doing is you are releasing a neurochemical called oxytocin, which turns off the stress response. It turns off the neurochemical, the neurons that are agitated. Oxytocin is this wonderful gift, and we can stimulate oxytocin in our child.

Dr. Shanker: By stroking them, by hugging them, by gently soothing them with our voice. So when it's, when we think it's stress behavior, I have two more things to say and then I'll come up. So when we think it's stress behavior, what we do is we calm them if they're older with our voice or give them a hug if they need it.

Dr. Shanker: Get the oxytocin into them. But to do that, [00:27:00] I have to be calm. I can't fake a calm voice. And one of the greatest benefits of distinguishing between misbehavior and stress behavior is what we find over and over with the families we work with is once you see it, stress behavior, you calm right down yourself.

Dr. Shanker: Now your voice is calm. naturally becomes calm or your touch naturally becomes soothing. And so it's a wonderful example. You called it, you referred to it as co regulation. We use that term as well. The point of the interbrain and parents have to read the book to understand it is nature designed us. that two things that are fascinating here.

Dr. Shanker: One, when we do this, when we soften our voice, soften our eyes, soften our touch, it gives the child oxytocin, which turns off their stress response. And because the interbrain works in two directions, it works back and [00:28:00] forth. When my child calms down, I, as a parent, get a shot of oxytocin. I calm down. So it's this wonderful mechanism where the reason why we need to have peaceful parenting, everybody benefits.

Dr. Shanker: The parent benefits, the child benefits.

sarah: I love that. And I think, that's when I teach parents, when I teach self regulation, because that's the first principle of peaceful parenting, is that we need to be able to calm ourselves so that we can respond to our children when they're having a hard time.

sarah: I teach that it's, that's part of the mindset shift. That's the mindset shift is what enables us to regulate ourselves is to recognize that they're not giving us a hard time. They're having a hard time and that they really do. They're doing the best they can. Those are our two big catch phrases, right?

sarah: They're doing the best they can. And I love that there's this physical thing that happens between the parent and the child that really just reinforces that being the calm or being a calm anchor for the child. [00:29:00] So we've been talking about it. Sort of situational birthday parties or the loud classroom or whatever where we have to be that stress detective And I also, got from your book that it's also a kind of across the board becoming a stress detective about your child.

sarah: What are some tips that you have for parents to get to know their child's nervous system and to be able to help their child reduce the stressors? Because I know that's the third part of self regulation is reducing the stressors. What are some ideas that you can leave with us about that?

Dr. Shanker: Okay, so Sarah just said Step three.

Dr. Shanker: So let me just quickly tell you the five steps. Thank you. So the first step is reframing behavior. Is it misbehavior? Is it stress behavior? The second step is identifying the stresses, figuring out what are the stresses, and that's when you become a stress detective. The third one, which we'll come back to in a second, is reducing the stress.[00:30:00]

Dr. Shanker: The fourth step is to get into calmness. A child can't calm while they're overstressed. So what we want to do is we want to reduce the stresses so that the child's mind as well as body are in that quiet state. We want the child to learn what that quiet state feels like. We want parents to be aware that we are seeing a generation of children that really don't know what calmness is.

Dr. Shanker: is. And there's all kinds of games or products or media, social media, whatever, that keep them going, that give them a little bit of a, another neurohormone called dopamine. Give them a shot at that when they really need to be quiet. Can I

sarah: just interject one second to highlight that point? Because I found that really interesting about your book.

sarah: And in that, point four, finding the calm is [00:31:00] that there's a difference between actually being calm and a child being externally still and

quiet, for example, when they're playing a video game. And I found that super important to think about as a parent, like just because they're not. Bugging you are or running around.

sarah: It doesn't mean that they're actually calm and that some kids what I learned from your book is that some kids never actually experience calm. Can you just talk about that quickly before you get to the fifth step?

Dr. Shanker: Okay, so you were right to interrupt me there. It's a very important point. So we distinguish between being calm and being quiet when a child is calm.

Dr. Shanker: And so what we would do is that our, at our clinic, we had a neural lab and we have a bathing cap that goes on the kid's head and we can see what's going on inside their brain. And what's really interesting is that when a child is calm, the brainwaves [00:32:00] are nice and slow, nice slow waves, and you can feel it just looking at it.

Dr. Shanker: When a child is agitated, the waves are like that. Sharp, fast, high amplitude. Now, what has happened to a lot of kids is either they are trained to, to sit there, be quiet. But underneath the skin, if you peer below the hood, what you find is they are in a lot of what's called cortical arousal. And that means their brain is going, their breathing is high, their heart is high.

Dr. Shanker: In other words, They're burning a lot of glucose. The stress is burning a lot of glucose. Now, they may not show it, and this is a different topic, and it's an important one, but I can have a kid that's glued to, say, a computer game, [00:33:00] and when we looked at their brain while they were playing, they're not making a noise, they're absolutely still, but what's happened is their brain is in a very high state of arousal.

Dr. Shanker: All parents have to ask themselves is the following. Okay my kid's overstressed and I thought maybe the best thing to do is to let him, her, go on the computer for a couple hours. How was your child when you turned it off? Were they nice and calm? Were they sweet? Were they compliant? Did they want to help out?

Dr. Shanker: Or did you have a nightmare trying to turn off the damn game? And the reason is because they've been overstressed. Thanks for watching! the entire time. So what we have to figure out is what are the kinds of things that help my child truly calm their brain down, calm what's going on, calm their heart down.

Dr. Shanker: That's step four, getting into that calm state, [00:34:00] which in today's world is tough because there's an awful lot of things that are stressing them out, COVID, whatever. And then the fifth step is what's called restoration. Restoration is huge for a kid. Now, restoration means there's a technical term. And so what we want is, there's a cost to all this stress.

Dr. Shanker: It wears down our cells. It wears down our immune system. It wears down our digestion. So restoration, we want to build all those things back up. But there's another huge point, and I want to focus on this one because it's the most important one for you, for the work you're doing. I mentioned all this stress that kids are under.

Dr. Shanker: And so what we're looking for in self reg, which is our method, what we're looking for is One of the best ways of dealing with stress, people talk about, maybe it's, [00:35:00] maybe some kids like yoga or exercise, or my older son, it was hockey, whatever it is that helps them get calm. But what's the number one, what's, how did nature design us so that kids can turn off the stress response?

sarah: Can I take a stab at it? Connection?

Dr. Shanker: Yes. Yes. That's the number one. I saw that by the way on your site. You have that graphic and you had connection was yeah, so that's the interbrain again. So why? Why is the interbrain? Why are we? Why is connection so important? Because what the kid needs when they're overstressed is what I've talked about.

Dr. Shanker: They need oxytocin. And they need something called endogenous opioids. That's what they get from us. That's what they get from. That's what they get from just talking to us calmly or being with us being held, being soothed. So [00:36:00] the fifth step, this restoration, it's huge because what we find when children are overstressed.

Dr. Shanker: They don't come to us. They don't want, they don't want to be held. They don't want us to, they don't want us to talk at all, to soothe them, especially if they're teenagers. So what we're restoring is the interbreeding. What we're restoring is the connection. And what we find is, okay you got a 21 year old, I saw a picture of your kids, the kids are older, right?

Dr. Shanker: Two teen, three teens? Okay. 21, 18,

sarah: and 15.

Dr. Shanker: I thought they were teens.

sarah: That's an old picture.

Dr. Shanker: But they're beautiful kids. So here's the point. The point is, in order to get to that fifth step, where they reconnect with us. Where they want that soothing presence. And by the way, there is never an [00:37:00] age where this can be bypassed.

Dr. Shanker: It's all including when we're dealing with her, with our parents, with the elderly, we always need this.

sarah: Or with our partners. Everything we're talking about is just human. It's just human relationships, right?

Dr. Shanker: Love it. And so now to come back to the very first thing you said, we've now got neuroscience to tell us why this wisdom is in fact so important.

Dr. Shanker: But what we found with self reg is you can't just do it. You can't just say to a kid or a partner or a parent that's really agitated, you need to calm down. We have to go through the steps. We have to identify the stresses. Reduce the stress load. And so maybe what we're going to do to reduce the stress load for a kid is, turn off the lights.

Dr. Shanker: Reduce the stimuli. For every kid, as you made me laugh before, how does a parent do this? You do it by trial and error. Figuring out what the stresses are and how to [00:38:00] reduce them. But we've discovered one basic rule in all this. The little buggers change on you all the time. What worked last week may not work today.

Dr. Shanker: And so it's this constant learning presence. However, we know when it's working. Their voice changes, their looks change, their need to be with us changes. It's not like we're groping around in the dark here. The kid's telling us, Through their responses, yeah, it's like when, when I massaged my kids when they were little guys, yeah, that's the spot.

Dr. Shanker: That's the same thing with any kind of emotional connection.

sarah: And our goal here, I just want to zoom out a bit. Our goal here is that we're putting ourselves out of a job and that we're teaching kids, we're teaching kids how to do this for themselves as they grow up, right?

Dr. Shanker: That's great. So one of the things that we tell parents is the goal here is The emphasis is on self in self rank and the idea here is that in order to, [00:39:00] you're always going to have stresses in life.

Dr. Shanker: The stresses, look at the last three years, who would have predicted this? Stresses come at us, huge stresses where we least expect it. And so what we want our children to develop are these ability, this ability to deal with stress. In a way, and I'll introduce one last distinction here. We distinguish between maladaptive ways of self regulating and healthy or beneficial ways of self regulating.

Dr. Shanker: So what's a maladaptive way? I'll give you a great example. When I came to Canada in 1984, I was, I'd come from Oxford and this is a very different world and I found at York University, very stressful. And I discovered, very soon after coming here, Nielsen's Butter Brickle Ice Cream. And what I found was one little teaspoon, Butter [00:40:00] Brickle, just before going to bed, was incredibly soothing.

Dr. Shanker: Unfortunately, and now we know, I know the, I can explain all the neurobiology here, but basically you're giving yourself a couple of neurohormones that feel good. One of them is dopamine, the other one is opioids. Unfortunately, these wear off. And so within a very short time, I had to eat An entire tub of Butter Brickle Ice Cream to get the same effect.

Dr. Shanker: Unfortunately, that had some pretty bad side effects. For the first time in my life, I put on an awful lot of weight. And then further consequences. This was not a good way to deal with my stress. And so I had to learn, and I did, healthier ways. And so I learned meditation, etc. With kids today, There are two problems that parents are faced with.

Dr. Shanker: One is the very high levels of stress. So COVID is one aspect, or global warming, or our stress, [00:41:00] or the politics. But the other aspect is kids are drawn to maladaptive ways of dealing with their stress. We have all these businesses that are designed to capitalize on the quick fix. And so the kid, let's say, plays some stupid game.

Dr. Shanker: They're called premium games to hook the kid. And there's never any consummation. What that means is the kids giving themselves a dopamine shot just by playing the game and the games have been designed to give a dopamine shot. Unfortunately, that's very expensive because it uses a lot of glucose.

Dr. Shanker: It's a stress. So what we find if we've got, if your kids are overstressed, what we're finding is a large part of the problem is the way they're managing their stress. We come back to self regulation. Are they managing their stress by avoidance? Are they managing it by [00:42:00] some way of getting a dopamine fix?

Dr. Shanker: Or are they managing it in a healthy way? Are they coming to talk to us about, say, an emotional stress? Are they coming just to be with us? Are they doing music or art or, there are healthy ways of dealing with stress. It's a problem for parents and it's a problem because our kids are being just everywhere you turn.

Dr. Shanker: There are ways of giving them a dopamine shot. That is not a, that's what we call a maladaptive way of dealing with stress.

sarah: And those maladaptive ways keep depleting their resources. You talk about glucose, I talk about resources, but the more you get the downward spiral, right?

Dr. Shanker: Exactly right.

sarah: Yeah. So I, before I let you go, I have a couple of questions that I'm dying to ask you that just came up while I was reading your book. Can you speak a little bit to, and first of all of that was so fantastic and it's going to be so helpful for parents to have that [00:43:00] framework for looking at the stressors and becoming stress detectives.

sarah: And as I was reading your book, I was thinking a lot about temperament. And I was wondering if you could speak a little bit to, because what I teach is that there are some kids who are just more spirited than other kids. But then when I was reading your book, I started thinking, what if they're, what if spirited is just stressed?

sarah: And can you speak a little bit to that?

Dr. Shanker: Okay temperament is one of these ideas that go back to the 19th century. It actually goes way, way back. But in the 19th century, they had this idea that, you're born with the same temperament as, your great uncle Joe. Some kids are born shy, some kids are born whatever.

Dr. Shanker: And neuro physiologists started to look very carefully at temperament and stress. And what they found is that some kids are born, let's

say, very sensitive to smell. Okay, so I have, my son is very [00:44:00] sensitive to smell. And in fact, so sensitive, my older boy, that if someone was wearing perfume, this is very stressful for him and it could make him agitated or whatever.

Dr. Shanker: When a baby is born, some babies are born much more sensitive in some areas. and much less sensitive, hyposensitive in other areas. And the discovery that physiologists made was, I'm going to try to explain this really slow really concisely. There's another part of this balance system. You have a stress, you burn glucose, and then you have another system, that recovers.

Dr. Shanker: And so this, the burning part is called the sympathetic nervous system. The recovery part, the restoring part is called the parasympathetic. And these have to be balanced each other. But when a baby has too much stress, [00:45:00] the parasympathetic, the recovery can't keep up, can't bring them back to baseline. And so they invented a technique to tell us Is this baby overstressed?

Dr. Shanker: And it's a very complicated way, but it's a very powerful. It was a game changer. What the discovery was that children that are classified as, say, difficult, a difficult baby. Are in fact an overstressed baby if we can lower the stress on the baby. How do you lower stress on a baby? Maybe the baby's overstressed by, by the mobile.

Dr. Shanker: I had to, with my, I wrote about this in the book. My older boy was overstressed by a mobile. It was too much movement for him, and the solution was very simple. Get rid of the mobile.

sarah: Yeah.

Dr. Shanker: Okay. So what. They discovered was the baby that had [00:46:00] been classified as having a difficult temperament was in fact overstressed because of their nervous system.

Dr. Shanker: If we can reduce The stress is on the baby. They go from difficult to easy baby. Okay. Now, the second part of the question was what about the spirited kid? A lot of children are hyposensitive. Okay, so what does that mean? It means that maybe their sense of their own body. Their own, we have different internal senses that scientists look at.

Dr. Shanker: So we look at the kinesthetic, the proprioceptive, and the vestibular. Maybe they need an awful lot of activity in order to get balance, in

order to feel safe within their body. And so what we find with the spirited kid, is that what they are doing is self [00:47:00] regulating through activity. Self regulating. So here, what we want to do is go for it.

Dr. Shanker: This is wonderful. The child, and so what we find is little guys are actually already self regulating. Way before they can speak. And so we want to pick up from them and we want to find out. And so our team of therapists, what they would do with spirited kids is to help them reach calm. Maybe what they would do is use more physical games, like a tunnel or whatever, a ball to, because what the child, what every child is looking for.

Dr. Shanker: What every baby infant toddler is looking for is calmness. They want to be calm. And so as parents, we're picking up from their temperament, what we call temperament, we're picking up what this baby needs. This baby needs a little less stimulation. This baby needs [00:48:00] a little more stimulation in order to get

sarah: balance.

sarah: I feel like I just had a giant lightning bolt while you were talking that what I understand as temperament is really the the body and then brain and the nervous systems attempts to get the input that they need, whether it's less or more.

Dr. Shanker: That's terrific. That's I'm just like,

sarah: Oh my God,

Dr. Shanker: That's a real good lightning bolt.

sarah: That's so interesting. I'm gonna, I think you just, I think you just changed the path of my thinking about all of this. But that, I, I have, cause I have, one of my kids was, my oldest was super calm. And my second was super spirited. And, I think today my, My oldest, he needs more downtime.

sarah: He needs more alone time. He's more quiet. My, my middle is what are we doing? What's next? It's just they're adult personalities, right? They're adults. Okay. My final question for you, actually, second to last is the, you've said in your book that you've seen an uptick in kids with [00:49:00] sensory issues.

sarah: Do you have an idea of why that is?

Dr. Shanker: Too much stress. And yeah, it's too much stress. And so now what we're looking at is, one of the things that parents have to learn is an awful lot of the stress that's hitting a kid is hidden stresses. So for example, pollution is a hidden stress, and we know that.

Dr. Shanker: There's a very interesting study that came out about two years ago. Background noise, is a hidden stress on little guys. So for example, if you live in an area where there's a lot of traffic, I'll give you a great example of this. So I mentioned my older boy has, is on the spectrum and he was very sensitive to traffic noise.

Dr. Shanker: And we lived on a very busy street in the mornings, lot of traffic. So what we need, he was having an awful lot of trouble falling asleep. Now in my [00:50:00] case, what we ended up doing, I was telling Sarah at the beginning, before we came on, we ended up moving to an island about 165 kilometers east of Toronto.

Dr. Shanker: And I would do the commute to my lab. But what we found was that in this quiet environment, my son instantly would fall asleep when we put him down at night. And so the sleep problems were a sign that his nervous system was being overstressed. Now, that's not an option for very many parents.

Dr. Shanker: And so we start to look in, okay, so what are the other ways that I can, if I suspect, if my kid is having trouble, staying asleep or falling asleep or eating. And I know that these are stress behaviors and I do to lower the stress. And so maybe what we do is, we buy foam to quieten the room or put in a thick carpet, or maybe we get a heavy blanket, all these techniques that we can use.[00:51:00]

Dr. Shanker: The important point is don't get angry. Don't get irritated. Don't get frustrated. Okay. It's just your little guy is telling you that their nervous system is overloaded. And so now what we're going to do is we're going to, we're going to reduce that stress load. Now what happens when we do? Let me close by telling you my big, my own big lightning bolt.

Dr. Shanker: So I've done this a long time, and I've seen, I don't know, tens of thousands of children around the world. And I have never once seen a bad kid. There isn't such a thing. And so what I wholeheartedly

sarah: agree.

Dr. Shanker: Okay, so what we're going to do is, by figuring out the stresses, you start to see a child differently.

Dr. Shanker: See a child differently, and you actually do get a different kid. A happy kid, a kid that's, going to find their way in life, know like your older boy when he needs, downtime and [00:52:00] then like your middle boy when they need a little bit of jazz. That's what we want them to do. And that's the path that, that what we have found is there is never a point in the lifespan where you can't start this with your kid.

Dr. Shanker: Or with yourself. And that's, for me, that's what gives me the greatest hope in all the work we do.

sarah: Thank you. My actual final question is, one I ask all of my guests, which is, if you could go back in time to your younger parent self, what advice would you give yourself?

Dr. Shanker: That's great. Read my books.

sarah: That's impossible though.

sarah: You hadn't read and I haven't written them yet.

Dr. Shanker: I'm hesitating because it's a tough question. Maybe the biggest advice I would have given my younger self, Be easy on yourself. Be kind to yourself. I can think of so many occasions when I screwed up. And the [00:53:00] big lesson I learned was just say I'm sorry.

sarah: Yeah, I love that. That's a beautiful line to close on. Thank you so much, Dr. Shanker. I really appreciate your time today. And I know this interview is going to really help a lot of parents. So thank you so much.

Dr. Shanker: Keep it up. Sarah, thanks

Speaker 2: Thanks for listening to this week's episode. I hope you found this conversation insightful and exactly what you needed in this moment. Be sure to subscribe to the show on your favorite podcast platform and leave us a rating and review on Apple Podcasts. Remember that I'm rooting for you. I see you out there showing up for your kids and doing the best you can.

Speaker 2: Sending hugs over the airwaves today. Hang in there. You've got this.