S10E10- The Moment They Let Me In

I want to start today with something I've been sitting with for a little while.

In all the years I've been doing this work — sitting with young people and their families, walking into schools, being in the rooms where real conversations happen — there's one thing that comes up more than any technique, any model, or any framework.

And it's this:

People heal when they feel safe enough to be honest.

When they feel safe enough to be honest because someone has shown them, consistently and over time, that they're not going anywhere.

At The Resilient Kid, we talk a lot about two things that sit at the absolute core of everything we do.

The first is this: we meet young people where they're at. Not where we need them to be, not where the curriculum says they should be, or where their parents are hoping they'll get to, but where they actually are — right now, in this moment.

We start there.

The second is what we call the 360 Wrap, because a young person does not exist in isolation. They exist within family dynamics, within the schoolyard, within a community.

And if we're only working with one part of that picture, we're only ever getting part of the way there.

Real change — lasting change — happens when everyone around that young person is working together. When the same language is being spoken at home, in the therapy room, and in the classroom, so nobody is pulling in a different direction.

But today I want to talk about something that sits underneath all of that. Something that has to come before the 360 can work, before the family sessions, before the school liaison, before the therapeutic work can do what we need it to do.

And that's trust.

What it actually takes to build trust with a young person who has every reason not to give it, and what it costs them to try. What it means for them — and for us — when they finally let us in.

I'm Ashley Costello, and this is The Resilient Kid Podcast.

Mia's Story

I'm going to tell you about a young person, and I'm going to call that young person Mia.

Mia was 15 when she came to us — and I want to say that carefully: when she came to us.

Because the truth is that Mia had been coming to people for years. She just hadn't arrived yet, and you'll see what I mean by that.

By the time she walked through our door, Mia had been seen by four different services in three years.

A school counsellor who left at the end of term and wasn't replaced.

A CAMHS referral that resulted in an assessment, a waitlist, and then a discharge when she missed an appointment — appointments she missed because nobody made sure she had a way to get there.

A voluntary sector worker who was brilliant with her for six months but lost funding and had to close her caseload.

A social worker — well-meaning, stretched beyond what any human being should be stretched to — who changed three times in 18 months.

Four services. Three years. Not one consistent face.

What do you think that does to a young person?

And I want you to really sit with that question, because it doesn't just leave them without support. It teaches them something.

It teaches them that adults come and go.

That the moment you start to trust someone — let them see a little bit of you, a little bit of what's actually going on — they leave, or they get replaced, or the funding runs out, or the service changes.

So by the time Mia arrived with us, she'd learned — not consciously, but in her bones — that the sensible thing to do was not to bother. Not to invest.

To give enough to satisfy the referral and tick boxes, to avoid follow-up concerns, but not actually let anybody in.

Because letting people in had only ever led to one place:

Goodbye.

Mia was polite.

That's the first thing I noticed.

Extremely, carefully, deliberately polite.

She answered questions. She made eye contact at the right moments. She said the right things about how she was doing.

Not too good, because that would close the case.

But not too bad, because that would escalate things and bring in people she didn't know and didn't want.

Mia had become an expert in managing the adults around her.

She knew exactly how much to give. She'd probably calibrated it over those three years and four services to a precise, careful level.

Enough to keep things moving.

Not enough to risk anything real.

I watched her do this in our first three sessions.

And I didn't try to break through.

Because "breaking through" — that's not our job.

The job, especially with a young person who has learned that walls are the only thing keeping them safe, is to sit alongside the wall.

To sit with your back against it, not rattling it, not forcing it — just quietly letting them know:

You're still here, whether they let you in or not.

We met every week.

I kept showing up.

She kept being polite.

And I kept thinking:

Somewhere underneath all that very careful management is a 15-year-old girl who is exhausted from holding it all together herself.

And she'll tell me when she's ready.

My job is to still be there when that happens.

And then came one session, about two months in — eight sessions.

I suggested we go for a walk.

Why the Walk Mattered

Before I tell you about the walk, I want to explain why.

Because what I was doing with Mia — the decision to take it outside, to put a hot chocolate in her hand and walk alongside her rather than sit across from her — is backed by a growing and fascinating body of research.

Let's start with what happens in the brain when a young person is in a state of guardedness.

When we feel unsafe — and for Mia, a therapy room with a notepad, a chair, and an adult asking questions had become a cue for guardedness — our nervous system activates the threat response.

Fight. Flight. Freeze. Fawn.

Nothing dramatic necessarily. No full-blown panic.

But a low-level alertness that keeps part of the brain scanning for danger. Scanning for the moment this person shows their true colours. Scanning for the exit.

When part of the brain is doing that, it's not available for the kind of reflective, emotionally honest conversation therapy asks of us.

Therapy is a brave thing to do.

And I often tell clients it is both a blessing and a curse because it really helps, but once you have seen, you can't unsee.

You cannot access vulnerability when your nervous system thinks you might need to protect yourself.

This is what Stephen Porges describes in Polyvagal Theory — something I mentioned last week during Mental Health Week and have probably mentioned before.

The idea that our nervous system is constantly reading cues for safety and danger in our environment, and that the state we're in physiologically determines what we are capable of emotionally.

You cannot think your way into feeling safe.

Safety has to be felt in the body first.

So here's where the walk comes in.

Research into walk-and-talk therapy, movement, and therapeutic connection shows something really compelling.

When we walk alongside someone rather than sitting across from them, several things happen simultaneously.

The face-to-face element — which for a guarded young person can feel like being watched, assessed, or read — is removed.

Side-by-side is a fundamentally different relational position.

It is the position of accompaniment, not examination.

If you're at home and want to have a conversation with your kids, play Lego. Get the colouring out.

If it's a teen, get them in the car and take them for a drive.

It's amazing the difference it makes.

The movement itself — the act of walking — regulates the nervous system.

It activates bilateral stimulation in the body, left-right-left-right, which has been shown to reduce emotional arousal and increase access to reflective thinking.

It's not an accident when people say they think more clearly when they walk.

And being outside — away from the room, the chair, the tissues, the furniture of therapy or school — disrupts the cue.

The young person's brain, which has learned to perform in that setting, doesn't quite know what mode to be in.

And in that gap, sometimes something real slips through.

Trust Is Built in Small Moments

I want to bring in Brené Brown here because her work on trust is some of the most important and practically useful research we have when it comes to understanding what was happening with Mia.

Brown spent years researching trust — what it is, how it's built, and crucially, why it's so hard to rebuild once broken.

And what she found challenges the way most of us think about it.

We tend to think of trust as a big thing — a grand gesture or a defining moment where someone proves themselves.

But Brené Brown's research tells us something different.

Trust is built in the smallest of moments.

Not the dramatic ones.

The quiet ones.

She created a framework called the BRAVING Inventory, which breaks trust down into seven elements.

And when I look at that list, I see exactly what Mia needed — and exactly what so many young people who have passed from service to service have never consistently received.

B — Boundaries

Do you respect my boundaries? Do you say no when you need to? Do you honour mine?

Boundaries help young people feel safe.

R — Reliability

Do you do what you say you're going to do when you say you're going to do it?

Not once. Consistently over time.

I give appointments directly to the young people. They know when they are. I try to keep the same time.

And do you know what else I do?

I turn up every single session.

A — Accountability

When you make a mistake, do you own it? Do you apologise and make it right without making your mistake someone else's problem to manage?

V — Vault

Do you keep what I share confidential? Do you treat my story as mine?

I — Integrity

Do you choose courage over comfort? Do you practice your values rather than just professing them?

This is the walking the talk.

N — Non-Judgment

Can I tell you how I feel without being judged for it?

This is paramount for young people.

G — Generosity

Do you extend the most generous interpretation to my intentions, my words, my actions?

Because we know teens often get a hard rap. People like to assume the worst.

Can we instead give them the benefit of the doubt?

Now, quick caveat — Mia is a composite. She represents themes and experiences I see repeatedly across many young people.

So the “vault” part of confidentiality is real. We absolutely keep that.

But think about Mia.

Think about what three years and four services taught her about trust.

Reliability broken by funding cuts and staff changes.

Integrity damaged by systems that disappeared.

Non-judgment impossible when you feel like a case number.

Every single element of trust had been repeatedly undermined — not by bad people, but by a broken system.

And this is what we were rebuilding on that walk.

Not dramatically.

Not all at once.

One element at a time.

Hot chocolate in hand. Big coats on. Wrapped against the cold.

Starting with reliability:

I am here.

Same time.

Same face.

Same commitment.

The Walk

Mary Ainsworth’s foundational work in attachment theory tells us that secure attachment is built through repeated experiences of a caregiver or trusted adult being present, responsive, and consistent.

For young people like Mia, whose experiences of adults have been anything but consistent, the therapeutic relationship has to become reparative attachment work.

Safe bases are not built in one session.

They are built in the accumulation of small moments.

The same face week after week.

Remembered details.

A walk on a grey morning.

Hot chocolate going cold in a paper cup.

Consistency is the language of safety.

And safety is the door to healing.

So how do we build trust with a young person who has every reason not to trust?

Here are five things I've learned — often the hard way.

1. Don't Take the Wall Personally

It's not about you.

I say this constantly. I should probably get T-shirts printed.

That wall was built long before you arrived.

Your job is not to knock it down.

Your job is to be boringly safe until the young person decides, in their own time, that maybe they don't need it quite so high around you.

2. Match Their Energy

If they come in flat, don't overwhelm them with performance energy trying to lift them.

Sit flat with them.

Meet them where they're at.

3. Do Things Side by Side

A walk changes everything.

Colouring changes everything.

I once accidentally left colouring pencils out after a younger client before a 17-year-old came in.

I picked up a gold pencil and said, "Look at this one — it's lovely."

That teen sat down and coloured with me for the whole session.

And it became one of the best sessions we ever had.

4. Name the Pattern Without Blame

Sometimes you can gently say:

“I know you’ve had people leave before. I know that happened.”

Not dramatically. Not making yourself the hero.

Just naming it.

And then proving, week after week, that you’re still there.

5. Let Small Moments Be Enough

Not every session feels profound.

Trust the accumulation.

The walk with the hot chocolate looked like nothing.

But it was everything.

Back to Mia

So, back to the walk.

It was a Monday morning. Grey sky. That very British grey that isn’t quite rain and isn’t quite not rain.

Mia came in, sat down, and I could feel immediately that we were in one of those sessions where nothing was going to happen in the conventional sense.

She was there physically, but somewhere else mentally.

Instead of pushing through, I said:

“Do you want to get out of here for a bit? We could go for a walk. I’ll get us a hot chocolate.”

She looked at me suspiciously.

“Are we allowed?”

“This is your session,” I said. “We can do whatever works.”

So we walked.

No agenda. No carefully planned question.

We talked about shops, TV shows, random things.

Then about 15 minutes in, eyes on the pavement, hot chocolate in both hands, Mia said:

“The last person I saw before you… she was really good. I was just starting to…”

And she stopped.

“She had to stop because the money ran out. She sent me a letter. I didn’t reply because… what’s the point?”

I didn’t fill the silence.

After a moment she asked:

“Does that happen here?”

The money running out.

And I said:

“Honestly, I can’t promise you nothing will ever change. What I can promise is that if anything changes, you’ll be the first to know, we’ll figure it out together, and I won’t send a letter.”

She nodded.

Kept walking.

And very quietly said:

“Okay.”

One word.

But I knew what it meant.

It meant:

I’m going to try.

I’m going to risk this one more time.

The Bigger Problem

Mia’s story is not unusual.

And I want to say that very clearly because it matters.

Being passed from service to service, investing in relationships only to lose them through funding cuts, waiting lists, and staff changes — for many young people, this is the norm.

Research by the Children’s Commissioner for England found that a significant proportion of young people experience at least one break in mental health provision before stable support.

Personally, I suspect the number is much higher.

Every break teaches something.

Don’t bother trusting.

CAMHS waiting lists stretch for months, sometimes 18 months.

Voluntary sector services — often the most relational and flexible — are chronically underfunded.

The cost is not abstract.

It is measured in young people who learn, before they are even old enough to vote, that the systems designed to help them are not reliable.

At The Resilient Kid, our 360 approach is partly clinical and partly moral.

When we wrap around a child or teen — family, school, therapy, all together — we are saying:

We are not a service that passes you on.

We are a relationship that holds you.

Because relationships do not have discharge criteria.

When Mia asked:

“Does the money run out here?”

That was not a practical question.

It was:

“Are you going to leave me too?”

And every young person is asking that question somehow.

Some say it out loud.

Most ask it in the way they sit, the way they answer, the way they hold the hot chocolate with both hands while staring at the pavement.

Our job is to hear it every single time.

Final Thoughts

I’ve been thinking about how to close this episode, and I keep coming back to the same thing.

Trust is not given.

It is earned.

Slowly. Quietly. Through the accumulation of ordinary moments.

A walk.

A hot chocolate.

A consistent face at a consistent time in a world that has been anything but consistent.

Think about trust like a jar of marbles.

Every time we show up, remember a name, keep a promise — we put a marble in the jar.

For young people who have been failed by systems, the act of trusting again is profound courage.

We should never take it lightly.

Every single time a young person lets us in, they are doing something brave.

That deserves our most honest, most consistent, most human selves.

Not our most clinical selves.

Our most human selves.

Go for the walk.

Get the hot chocolate.

Sit alongside rather than across.

If you're a teacher, bring a snack.

If you're a parent, get out in the fresh air.

Stay when it gets hard.

Listen and listen again.

Repair when you get it wrong.

And when they ask, in whatever way they ask:

"Are you going to leave me too?"

Tell them the truth.

And then prove it.

Because that's the job.

And it is the most important job there is.

Thank you so much for being here for this one.

This episode sits very close to my heart, and I hope it's given you something useful — whether you're a professional, a parent, or someone who has been that young person with the wall up and the hot chocolate in both hands.

If this resonated, please share it with your team.

And if you'd like to find out more about the way we work at The Resilient Kid — how we wrap around young people 360, meet them where they're at, support schools, families, and young people together — everything is in the show notes and on our website.

We'd love to welcome new coaches because we are desperately needed.

Until next time, keep showing up.

Keep staying safe.

It matters more than you know.