S10E9- The Science of Small Things

It's Mental Health Week, and I want to start by saying something that might surprise you.

This episode is not going to tell you to do more. It's not going to give you a 17-step programme. It's not going to suggest you download an app, a book, a course, or overhaul the way you parent or teach. It's not going to add to the already very long list you feel like you should be doing and aren't quite managing.

In fact, it's going to do the opposite.

Because one of the most important things that research tells us — and we're going to get into the science today properly because it's fascinating and really hopeful — is that the things that most protect children's mental health are not the big things. They're not the grand gestures, the perfectly crafted conversation, or the very expensive interventions.

They're the small things. The ordinary things.

They're things that most of you — parents, educators, the people who love children and show up for them every single day — are already doing without realising it counts.

The problem is, nobody told you it counted.

Nobody handed you the research and said, "That thing you did this morning, that quiet thing, that unremarkable Tuesday morning thing" — or I probably should say Thursday — "that is doing something in your child's brain and body that will stay with them."

So that's what today's about: the science of the small, and why, in a world that keeps telling us we need to do more, the most powerful thing we can offer a child is the simplest thing we can imagine.

If you're new here, I'm Ashley Costello. This is The Resilient Kid Podcast, and this is our Mental Health Week episode.

Why We Got This Wrong

Before we get into what works, I want to spend a moment on why we've been looking in the wrong direction.

Children's mental health is rightly a national conversation right now. The stats are sobering. We are looking at one in six children in England between the ages of five and sixteen who meet the criteria for a probable mental health condition.

That's five children in every classroom of 30.

Referrals to CAMHS — the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service — have increased dramatically in the years since the pandemic. Waiting lists in many areas stretch over a year.

And I want to just add a caveat here. I live up north — very proud northerner. I've got lots of friends and I've done lots of work down south. Up north is one of the reasons, not just because I live here, it's one of the reasons we started our franchise up in the north, because that number — one in six — is actually one in five in the north.

And I'd suggest the one in six isn't a true indication either. I think it's probably lower than that.

So, in response to this crisis, we have understandably, and with the best of intentions, looked for big solutions. We have looked for massive programmes, whole-school approaches — and to be fair, I have a whole-school approach. We look at resilient schools. We earmark schools that need a helping hand.

There are awareness campaigns, workshops, and resources, all of which have value and none of which are wrong.

But somewhere in the search for the big solution, we started to overlook something. Something that the research has been quietly, consistently pointing to for decades.

Something that doesn't require a budget, a referral, or a training day.

Everyday protective factors.

The small, repeated, ordinary interactions between children and the adults who love and care for them that build, brick by brick and day by day, the neurological and emotional architecture of a resilient mind.

If we look at the research on adverse childhood experiences — or ACEs, as we call them — the landmark ACE studies, which we'll come back to, tell us that stress and trauma in childhood have real, measurable effects on the developing brain.

And what the same body of research also tells us — and what gets talked about far less — is that protective relationships have an equal, real, measurable counter-effect.

So every small moment of safety, warmth, being seen and heard — it doesn't just feel good. It does something in the brain, in the body, and in the developing nervous system of a child or teen.

Those moments are available to every single one of us, every single day.

The Science Behind What Small Things Actually Do

Let's really dig deep into the research, because once you understand what's actually happening in a child's brain during these ordinary moments, you'll never look at them the same way again.

Let's start with the stress response.

Every child is born with what neuroscientists call the HPA axis — the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis — which is essentially the brain and body's alarm system.

When a child encounters something threatening, overwhelming, or uncertain, this system activates. Stress hormones are released — primarily cortisol, sometimes adrenaline too — and the body prepares to respond.

This is normal. This is healthy.

We know GCSEs are going on up and down the country. SATs are going on up and down the country. Stress in small doses, with support, builds resilience and helps us focus. It's what researchers call tolerable stress.

But here's the critical part. Here is where the adults in the room become the most important variable in the equation.

Research by Dr Charles Nelson at Harvard's Center on the Developing Child found that when a child experiences stress in the presence of a supportive, responsive adult — an adult who notices, soothes, and co-regulates — the stress response is buffered.

The cortisol spike is blunted, and the nervous system returns to baseline more quickly.

And over time, with repeated experiences of this kind, the child's own stress regulation system becomes stronger, more flexible, and more resilient.

The adult in that room is literally physiologically shaping the child's capacity to handle difficulty.

And you'll hear me say this often: we are wired for hard things.

The adult doesn't have to do anything dramatic. They just have to be there — present, regulated themselves, and noticing.

This is what Harvard Center calls the "serve and return" relationship.

Like a game of tennis, the child sends out a signal — a sound, a look, a behaviour — and the adult returns it, responds, acknowledges.

That back and forth, repeated thousands of times across childhood, builds the neural pathways that underpin emotional regulation, communication, and resilience.

We see this in babies, don't we? When they're first alert just after they're born and they are looking for that serve and return. That's how they learn to speak and communicate.

Thousands of tiny serves and returns are the architecture of a healthy mind.

Now let's bring in the ACE research, because this is where it gets really important.

The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study — one of the largest investigations into childhood trauma ever conducted, involving something like over 17,000 participants — found that experiences of stress, abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction in childhood have profound long-term effects on physical and mental health into adulthood.

This research is often cited in conversations about trauma.

What is cited far less is the equally robust finding about what protects children from those effects.

Dr Nadine Burke Harris — a paediatrician, researcher, and one of the world's leading experts on childhood adversity — puts it simply: the dose of adversity matters, but so does the dose of protection.

A child who has a trusted, consistent adult in their life, who experiences warmth, predictability, and felt safety, is significantly buffered against the long-term effects of adversity — even significant trauma.

The buffering agent is not a programme. It's a person showing up day after day in small, ordinary ways.

And then there's the work of Dr John Gottman, whose research on what he calls emotional coaching has transformed the way we understand the parent-child relationship.

Gottman's studies found that children whose parents acknowledged and validated their emotions, rather than dismissing or minimising them, showed significantly better outcomes across every measure of wellbeing.

That includes emotional regulation, social skills, academic achievement, and physical health markers.

How important is that?

We look at academics all the time, but actually this is more than academics — it's more than physical health.

The intervention was not complex.

It was this: when your child feels something, name it.

Something along the lines of: "You seem really frustrated right now," or "That sounds like it was really disappointing."

You're not fixing, solving, or redirecting. You're just naming. Witnessing. Being present with the feeling rather than rushing past it.

Children whose parents did this consistently were, in Gottman's words, emotionally intelligent.

And emotional intelligence, the research shows, is one of the strongest predictors of long-term mental health and life outcomes that we have.

One sentence, named alongside them, repeated across a childhood.

Small thing. Small thing.

Small Things in Practice

Let's get practical now, because the science is compelling, but I know what you're thinking.

You're thinking, "Fine, but what does that look like on a Wednesday morning when everyone's late, someone can't find their shoe, and the permission slip was due yesterday?"

It looks like this.

The 20-Second Hug

Research by Virginia Satir — family therapist and pioneer in human connection — suggested that we need multiple meaningful touches every day for maintenance, more for growth, and more still for healing.

Physical warmth — a hug, a hand on the shoulder, ruffling somebody's hair — releases oxytocin for both the giver and the receiver.

It literally signals safety to the nervous system.

Twenty seconds is long enough to feel it.

You have 20 seconds, even on a Wednesday morning when someone can't find their shoe.

I have often, when things are starting to get stressy or heated, gone, "Stop. Let's stop, everyone."

And they all look as if to say, "Oh my God, what's happening?"

And I'll go, "I just need a hug."

And they go, "Oh, but—"

"Please, just a hug. Just a quick hug."

And I almost make it like I need it, but I also know they need it in that moment.

It brings us all back down and resets our nervous systems.

On the way out the door, I will often put my hand on my son's shoulder as he's leaving for school and say, "Mate," and I'll keep it there, "have a great day. I'll see you later."

The Transition Check-In

Moments of transition — the school run, the school gate, the moment they come through the door — are neurologically significant.

The brain is shifting states, and these are the moments when a simple, warm acknowledgement lands deepest.

Not, "How was your day?" because that question has a wall built around it for most children.

Something smaller.

“Oh, lovely to see you. I’ve missed you today.”

Eye contact. Presence. Thirty seconds.

You don’t need to interrogate them. You don’t need to ask a question.

We’ve got into a habit of asking kids about their school day. That will come.

Just tell them you missed them. Tell them you love them.

Save the questions for later — when they’re chilled, regulated, when they’ve had a snack, maybe when you’re eating dinner together.

“Anything interesting happen today? Any chat today?”

That’s all it takes.

The Named Feeling

When a child is upset, overwhelmed, or dysregulated, before you problem-solve, correct, or explain why they shouldn’t feel that way, name what you see.

“You seem really overwhelmed right now.”

Or:

“That looks really hard.”

One sentence. That’s all you need.

It tells the child: “Your inner world is real, it’s visible, and it’s not too much for me. I can handle that you’re dysregulated.”

This repeated experience across time is the foundation for emotional regulation.

Rituals Matter

I think sometimes, as parents, after children get out of the toddler stage, we rebel a little bit against the predictable ritual.

Whether it’s bedtime, breakfast, the same song in the car, or a joke that only your family understands — rituals, particularly in families, and I’d go so far as to say in classrooms too, are neurologically soothing because they are predictable.

And predictability is safe.

For a child whose nervous system is always, to some degree, asking, “What’s next?”, the ritual answers that question before it’s asked.

Small. Repeated. Ordinary. Profoundly regulating.

For us, we have breakfast together before the day starts. Not every single day, but probably eight out of ten.

Things like saying goodnight before bed. That hug, kiss goodnight, “Love you, see you tomorrow, see you in the morning.”

They are predictable rituals that help the brain and nervous system feel safe.

The Repair

This is for parents and teachers — because we all get it wrong sometimes.

We know we can mess up, but if we get it right 30% of the time, they’ll still turn out okay.

Research, particularly the work of Ed Tronick on the Still Face Paradigm, shows us that it is not the absence of rupture that builds secure attachment. It is the presence of repair.

Children do not need perfect adults.

They need adults who, when they get it wrong, come back, say sorry, and try again.

The repair is the message.

The relationship is stronger than the hard moment.

“You are safe here even when things go wrong.”

That 70% that we mess up — as long as we repair — it will still be okay.

A Moment From the Work

I want to share something from the work we do at The Resilient Kid, because all of this research is important, but I want you to hear what it looks like in a real family, in a real week, with real pressures.

We were working with a mum — I’m going to call her Sandra — whose son had been struggling significantly.

Anxiety. Can’t get to school. Nights when he couldn’t sleep. Days where he couldn’t leave the house.

Sandra was exhausted.

She had read everything, tried everything, and felt like she was failing at everything.

In one of our sessions, I asked her to tell me about a normal morning.

She described getting up, getting breakfast ready, trying to get her son downstairs — the usual.

She described the negotiation, the rise in anxiety on both sides, trying somehow to get him out the door.

It was recognisable. It was hard.

And then she mentioned something almost as an aside. Something she did every single morning without thinking about it.

While her son was eating breakfast, she sat across from him.

Not on her phone. Not making packed lunches.

Just sat.

Sometimes they'd talk, sometimes they didn't. Sometimes they read something, sometimes they played a game.

But she was there. Present. Across the table every morning without fail.

And I said, "Sandra, do you know what that is?"

She looked at me.

I said, "That is the most protective thing you could be doing. That quiet, ordinary, daily presence is building something in your son's nervous system that no programme, no intervention, no waiting-list appointment can replicate."

And she cried.

Not because she was sad, but because nobody had ever told her that what she was already doing was enough.

That the small things she'd never thought to count were, in fact, everything.

We talk at The Resilient Kid about meeting young people where they're at, but we also meet parents where they're at too.

And so many parents are exhausted, overwhelmed, and convinced they're not doing enough — or that they're failing.

This episode is me telling you: you are doing more than enough.

The small things count.

And science says so.

A Message for Educators

I want to speak directly to educators for a moment, because everything I've said applies to you just as much.

Your version of the small things might look a little different.

You might have 30 young people in a room, and you can't be everything to everyone. I know that.

But here's what research tells us about what a teacher can do that costs nothing and changes everything.

Learn their name. Use it warmly.

Don't be afraid to keep getting them to put name badges on or write a little card with their name on it.

Research consistently shows that being called by name — not as a correction, not as a warning, but warmly in passing — activates a sense of being known and belonging that is neurologically significant.

And it's easy to do.

Notice the quiet ones. The children who present no trouble, don't ask for anything, and yet are still there.

Quiet. Managing. Coping.

A quiet word — "You okay today?" — takes ten seconds, and it can be the only moment in a child's day where an adult looks directly at them and chooses to see them.

Regulate yourself first.

This is the hardest one.

Polyvagal research tells us that nervous systems are contagious.

A regulated adult in the room regulates the whole room, even if there are 30 children.

When you are calm, present, and grounded, children feel it in their bodies before a word is even said.

Your state is the most powerful classroom management tool you have.

And finally: acknowledge the hard stuff without fixing it.

When a child comes in carrying something heavy — and you can often feel it even when they don't say anything — you don't have to fix it.

Just acknowledge it.

"Looks like today is a tough one. I've got you."

And that is enough.

Sometimes, for some children, that is everything.

Final Thoughts

It is Mental Health Week, and every year Mental Health Week asks us to do more, share more, and be more.

And those things matter.

But I want to leave you with this:

The most powerful mental health intervention in a child's life is not waiting on a waiting list. It does not require a referral or a diagnosis. It does not cost money. And it does not require you to be a therapist, a coach, or someone who has read all the right books.

It requires you to be warm, consistent, and present.

To name feelings.

To repair when you get it wrong.

To sit across the breakfast table without your phone.

To say, "Good to see you," and really mean it.

To notice the quiet ones.

To stay regulated when everything in you wants to escalate.

The small things are not the consolation prize when the big things aren't available.

The small things are the thing.

The science has known this for decades.

It's time we all caught up.

You are doing more than enough.

The breakfast table matters.

The school gate matters.

The named feeling matters.

The repair matters.

The 20-second hug matters.

It all matters.

Every ordinary, unremarkable, quietly revolutionary bit of it.

Happy Mental Health Week.

Go home. Do the small things.

But please know they are anything but small.

Thank you for spending this Mental Health Week with The Resilient Kid Podcast.

If this episode resonated, please share it with a parent, educator, colleague — anyone who needs to hear that they are already doing well, and that it counts.

All the research references and further reading are in the show notes.

But before we go, I'd just like to give a little shout-out to Immy.

I met Immy on a corporate job this week, and without going into too much detail, she said to me:

"Do you know, I love listening to your podcast, and I feel like it's changed my life."

And Immy, lots of love to you and yours.

Comments like that make it worthwhile, so thank you.

Thank you.

And thanks to all the listeners out there.

Until next time, please keep doing the small things, because they are everything.