S11E1 - The Anxiety I Didn't Know I Was Giving You

I want to start today with something that takes a little bit of courage to say out loud.

It's one of those things you've probably seen on TikTok or Instagram: *the things I'd say to you if I wasn't worried about hurting your feelings.*

Sometimes the thing that is making a child anxious is not school. It's not their friends, their workload, or the state of the world, although all of those things contribute.

Sometimes—and I say this with every ounce of compassion I have—sometimes the thing that's making a child anxious is us, their parents.

Not because we're bad parents. Not because we don't love them. But because anxiety is one of the most contagious things there is.

It moves through families like weather.

It gets into the air, and children breathe it in before anyone has said a single word.

And the hardest part is that, most of the time, we have absolutely no idea we're doing it.

Today, I want to talk to you about what happens when a parent's own unhealed anxiety shows up in their child.

Not to blame. Not to shame. That's not what we do here at The Resilient Kid.

But because the most loving thing I can do for you and the children you're raising is to tell you the truth about what the research shows and what it looks like when a parent decides to do something about it.

This episode is for every parent who's ever sat across from me and said, with tears in their eyes and shock in their voice:

"I think it's me. I think I gave this to them."

It happens more often than you think, and it's never too late to do something about it.

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

I want to tell you about a mum. Let's call her Claire.

Claire came to us because her daughter, Ellie, who was nine years old, bright, imaginative and funny, had started refusing to go to school.

Now, I use the word *refusing* because that's what schools call it.

Anybody who's been in this situation—and speaking from Ellie's point of view and the point of view of so many children—they can't get into school.

They literally can't.

Let's carry on.

It wasn't dramatic at first.

Maybe a stomach ache on a Monday morning.

Tears at the school gate.

Not wanting to leave Mum.

A growing list of worries that seemed to multiply at night.

"What if I get something wrong?"

"What if nobody sits with me at lunch?"

"What if something happens while I'm there?"

"What if...?"

Claire, Mum, had done everything right.

She'd listened.

She'd validated.

She'd spoken to the teacher.

She'd read books.

She'd tried breathing exercises.

She loved Ellie with everything she had.

And she was exhausted, frightened and lost.

When Claire came to see us, she sat down and said:

"I don't understand where this has come from. She's always been a really happy child."

I asked her gently:

"How do you feel on a Monday morning?"

She looked surprised and laughed.

"Honestly? Awful. I've hated Mondays my whole life. Work stress. The week starting. I always feel like something bad is going to happen."

I said:

"And when Ellie comes down for breakfast on a Monday, what does she find?"

Silence.

"She finds me tense, quiet, already in my head."

She didn't say anything else for a moment.

Then, very quietly, came an:

"Oh."

That *oh*.

I've heard it hundreds of times over the years.

It's the sound of something clicking into place.

It's not the sound of blame.

It's the sound of recognition.

And it is, in my experience, the beginning of everything changing.

Because here's what's been happening in Claire and Ellie's home entirely without anyone's awareness or intention.

And let's be clear—there was definitely no intention behind it.

Every Sunday evening, Claire's own anxiety would begin to rise.

Old anxiety.

Deep-rooted anxiety.

Probably connected to her own childhood experiences and those Sunday nights when the week starts creeping in.

Anxiety connected to feeling unsafe.

She'd go quiet.

Her body would tighten.

She'd move through the house in a particular way.

Checking things.

Sighing.

Not quite present.

Already thinking about the week ahead.

Ellie, who loved her mum and was so tuned into her emotional state—as children often are—picked this up.

Not consciously.

Not in words.

But in the way her mum's energy changed.

In the quality of the silence.

In the tightness in Claire's shoulders when she hugged her goodnight.

And Ellie's nervous system, which had spent nine years learning to read her mum's state of mind as a signal, responded exactly as children's nervous systems are designed to do.

"Is something wrong?"

"Is something bad coming?"

"Be alert."

By Monday mornings, Ellie would wake up already activated.

Already scanning for threat.

Fight.

Flight.

Freeze.

Fawn.

Completely on high alert.

Already asking the questions anxiety asks:

"What if something goes wrong?"

"What if I can't cope?"

"What if I'm not safe?"

"My safe place is with Mum."

Claire had not given Ellie her anxiety on purpose.

She hadn't even known it was happening.

But the transmission had been taking place every week in the quiet language of the nervous system for years.

So let's have a look at the research behind why this happens.

What happened between Claire and Ellie is not unusual.

In fact, it's one of the most well-documented phenomena in developmental psychology.

And understanding the science behind it—really understanding it—is the first step towards changing it.

I want you to imagine you're scared of bees.

You're at a family picnic and a bee approaches.

You hear it before you see it, so you're already looking around.

You're already on high alert.

"Where is it?"

"Where is it?"

Then you spot it.

You start flapping.

You jump up.

You make noises.

Maybe you're screaming.

Maybe you're shouting:

"Bee!"

"Be careful!"

Whatever your reaction looks like.

We've all seen it, even if we haven't done it ourselves.

And all the while, you've got a small person watching.

And what they're learning is:

"Bees aren't safe."

That's how anxiety works.

It spreads very easily.

Just like that.

They see our reaction.

They learn that's how they should react.

They learn that bees are something to be afraid of.

So let's start with co-regulation.

We've talked previously about Stephen Porges' Polyvagal Theory—the idea that our nervous systems are constantly recording and reading cues of safety and danger in the environment.

What I want to add today is this:

For young children especially, the most powerful cue in the environment is not a sight, a sound or a situation.

It is the nervous system of their primary caregiver.

Research by Allan Schore—I'll probably say his name wrong, so we'll put it in the show notes as usual; that's Allan with two Ls, S-C-H-O-R-E—one of the world's leading neurobiologists of emotional development, shows that in the early years of life a child's nervous system literally co-regulates with their parents.

The parent's calm becomes the child's calm.

The parent's anxiety becomes the child's anxiety.

It's not a metaphor.

This is neuroscience.

The attunement between a parent and child is so deep, so finely calibrated, that a child can detect a shift in their parent's emotional state before that parent has said a single word or changed a single behaviour.

When I used to work in nurseries in Abu Dhabi, where I was the lead in education, I absolutely loved it.

Shout out to Jane and Miss Annie—we adored those nurseries.

In the baby room, if a baby was crying, I would say:

"Pick them up. Put them on your chest. Breathe deeply. Start to hum."

And you would see that baby calm down within a matter of seconds.

This is co-regulation in practice.

What we're talking about here is exactly that.

Children attune very quickly to our emotional regulation system.

To our nervous system.

Schore calls this *right-brain-to-right-brain communication*.

It happens below the level of conscious awareness.

It's the reason a baby calms when held and escalates when held by an anxious person.

And it doesn't stop at babyhood.

It continues through childhood.

Through adolescence.

It is always happening.

This is why Claire's Sunday evening anxiety was landing in Ellie's body every single week.

There's a lot of research on anxious parenting, and I want to be very careful here because this is an area where it's very easy to tip from information into blame.

That's not what we're doing here.

So what I would suggest is: don't just randomly Google anxious parenting.

You know my thoughts.

There is no such thing as a parenting expert.

I am here to offer help and advice.

I look at the research.

But I will always say that you know your child best.

You are the expert on your child.

So let's have a look at some of the evidence.

There is significant work by Professor Lynne Murray at the University of Reading showing that parental anxiety is one of the strongest predictors of childhood anxiety.

Not because anxious parents are bad parents.

Let me be very clear about that.

They are often extraordinarily attentive, loving and thoughtful parents.

But anxiety, by its nature, changes behaviour in ways that unintentionally communicate danger to a child.

An anxious parent might over-reassure.

They may rush to soothe every worry, which inadvertently signals that the worry was worth worrying about.

They might overprotect.

You've heard of helicopter parenting.

Steering their child away from challenge deprives them of the opportunity to cope, learn and build resilience.

They may model avoidance, staying away from things that feel threatening and teaching a child that avoidance is the appropriate response to anxiety.

None of this is conscious.

None of this is intentional.

All of it is completely understandable.

And all of it can be changed.

I remember a young lad who was probably about ten years old when he came to see me.

We were very lucky because his school had a woodland area.

Instead of sitting in a classroom for our sessions, I would take him out for a walk through the woods.

One day I said:

"Oh my goodness, look at that tree. It's just built for climbing."

He said:

"I've never climbed a tree."

And I replied:

"Really?"

Honestly, I thought he was making it up.

I remember climbing trees as a child.

He was ten years old.

How had he never climbed a tree?

So I asked:

"What do you mean you've never climbed a tree?"

He said:

"Oh no, I'm not allowed."

I asked:

"Why not?"

And he said:

"I might hurt myself."

And yes, he probably might.

But do you know what?

You can climb safely.

You can learn your limits.

You can learn risk.

You can learn challenge.

You can work things out for yourself.

And the next time, you climb a little higher.

Over the next few weeks, we spent time climbing trees.

And honestly, one of the biggest breakthroughs I ever had with that child happened while he was sitting in a tree.

The biggest breakthrough I had with his parents also came because he'd climbed a tree.

I was allowing him to take a risk.

I was allowing him to challenge himself.

I was allowing him to work out his own next steps.

So think about that.

Sometimes, with the very best intentions, we stop our children taking risks.

But they need to take risks.

Because we're not around forever.

The third piece of research I want to bring in is one that gives me a lot of hope.

It comes from a field called intergenerational transmission of trauma.

This is the study of how our own unprocessed experiences get passed down to the next generation.

It's landmark work from one of our favourites, Dr Dan Siegel, and Mary Hartzell in their book *Parenting from the Inside Out*.

I love his work.

And I love the people he collaborates with—people doing meaningful work and making real impacts in their field.

One of the most important findings is this:

It's not what happened to us in childhood that determines how we parent.

It's whether we have made sense of what happened to us.

Parents who had difficult childhoods but had processed those experiences and developed what Siegel calls a *coherent narrative* about their own lives parented just as securely as parents who had easy childhoods.

The difficulty itself was not the problem.

The unexamined difficulty was.

Which means this:

You have to do your own work.

As a parent, getting curious about your own story and making sense of the wounds you may have grown up with isn't just good for you.

It's one of the most powerful things you can do for your child.

As therapists, we have to do our own work.

We have to attend counselling.

We're not allowed to work without addressing our own stuff.

And it's vital.

I see this all the time with parents who find it really difficult to advocate for their children in school.

And I think one reason is that many of us have unresolved issues with school ourselves.

So when we walk into school, instead of going in as the parent advocating for our child, we go in as the student.

The student who was bullied.

The student who had a teacher who told them they weren't good enough.

We walk into school as that child instead of as the fully grown adult.

So how does this connect back to Claire?

Claire's anxiety was old.

It had roots.

And when she started exploring what was happening in her own sessions, everything began to shift.

So what can you do if you recognise yourself in your child's struggle?

There are five things I'd encourage you to think about.

And if you've had your own "oh" moment while listening to this, these are for you.

Number one: get curious, not guilty.

Guilt is a closed door.

Curiosity is an open one.

If you recognise your own anxiety showing up in your child, the question isn't:

"What's wrong with me?"

The question is:

"What happened to me?"

And:

"How has that shaped the way I move through the world?"

That's a question worth sitting with.

And ideally, one worth exploring with support.

But you can also sit with a journal.

You can sit with your phone and leave yourself voice notes.

Just start exploring what that looks like.

I often use a timeline exercise, and it's a really simple one. I do it with about 99% of my clients.

We start at birth and work through significant memories right up to today.

And do you know what?

When you look at that timeline, you start to see the patterns.

You start to see the experiences that shaped you.

Have a look at them and ask yourself what on that timeline might still be influencing the way you walk through the world today.

And if you need support with that, get support.

Being curious about your own development, why you are the way you are, and why you respond in the way that you do is honestly life-changing.

It's absolutely brilliant.

Number two: regulate yourself first. Always.

You cannot co-regulate a child from a dysregulated state.

This applies whether you're a parent or a teacher.

Before you try to calm a child, attend to yourself.

Breathe.

Ground yourself.

Notice your own body.

What signals is it trying to give you?

If your child is melting down, frightened, overwhelmed or screaming, taking those few moments for yourself can make all the difference.

It's one of the most effective things you can do.

You know the old saying:

"You can't pour from an empty cup."

And you can't offer a settled nervous system if you haven't first settled your own.

Number three: watch your reassurance.

This is counterintuitive, I know.

And it's hard.

But research consistently shows that excessive reassurance—telling an anxious child everything will be fine, removing every source of worry—actually increases anxiety over time.

It teaches the child's nervous system that the threat was significant enough to require reassurance.

Instead of trying to reassure, try validating and then gently encouraging.

For example:

"I can see you're worried, and worry feels really uncomfortable. But I know you can handle this."

That's very different from repeatedly telling them everything will be okay.

So validate first.

Then encourage.

Number four: do your own work.

Not because you're broken.

Because you're human.

Humans carry things.

Get support, whether that's therapy, coaching or simply a space where you can explore your own story.

This is not a luxury.

For a parent whose own wounds are showing up in their child, it is part of the treatment.

Number five: tell your child, in an age-appropriate way, that you're working on it too.

This is more powerful than most people realise.

When a parent says:

"I know I get anxious sometimes, but I'm getting help for that,"

several important things happen.

It normalises asking for help.

It reduces the sense that the child is somehow the problem.

And it shows them that adults can be self-aware.

That adults can acknowledge their own struggles.

It's modelling.

And it's powerful.

One of the greatest gifts you can give a child is showing them that it's okay to ask for support.

I've seen this so many times.

I've worked with adults who later bring their own children to see me.

Or they've had therapy with somebody else and say things like:

"Ashley is a bit like my Sarah."

Or:

"Ashley is a bit like my David."

Whatever the name happens to be.

What they're modelling is that getting support is normal.

And helpful.

And that's an incredible gift.

So let's go back to Claire and Ellie.

Claire started having her own sessions.

Not instead of the work we were doing with Ellie, but alongside it.

We often work in what we call a Child 360 approach.

We were holding Ellie in the therapy room, helping her build the emotional language and coping skills she needed.

At the same time, we were holding Claire in a separate space.

Another therapist worked with Claire while I worked with Ellie.

We helped her understand her own anxiety.

Where it had come from.

How it had been silently shaping some of the patterns in their home.

And over several months, a story emerged that Claire had never fully told.

She had grown up in a home where her own mother's anxiety filled every room.

A home where uncertainty was met with catastrophising.

Where the message—never spoken aloud but always present—was that the world was a dangerous place.

That the safest thing to do was stay small.

Stay vigilant.

Stay home.

Claire had grown up.

Left home.

Built a career.

Created a wonderful relationship.

Had a child.

But she'd never gone back and examined any of it.

Because it didn't seem relevant.

Because she told herself she was fine.

Because she was the strong one.

She wasn't like her mum.

And then Ellie started getting stomach aches every Monday morning.

And suddenly it became relevant.

The work wasn't dramatic.

It was slow.

Careful.

Sometimes painful.

But it was the most important work Claire had ever done.

Not just for herself, although it changed her life.

But for Ellie.

Because as Claire's anxiety gradually loosened its grip, the atmosphere in their home began to change.

The Sunday evenings changed.

The quality of the silence changed.

The way Claire carried herself changed.

And Ellie's nervous system—which had spent nine years faithfully reading her mum's emotional state—began to settle.

Gradually.

Gently.

Over time.

By the spring term, Ellie was back in school.

Not without wobbles.

But back.

And one evening, completely out of nowhere, she said:

"You seem different lately. Less worried."

Claire told us this in her next session.

She said it with tears running down her face and the biggest smile we'd seen in months.

"She noticed," she said.

"She actually noticed."

Of course she did.

Ellie had always been noticing.

That was never the problem.

The gift was that now there was something different for her to see.

Let's have a look at the bigger picture here.

There is a phrase I come back to again and again in this work, and it comes from the writer and psychiatrist Mark Wolynn, who has spent decades studying intergenerational trauma.

He says:

"The greatest gift you can give your child is to heal yourself."

That lands differently depending on where you are in your own journey.

For some of you, it will feel like relief.

Permission to prioritise your own healing as an act of love for your child.

For others, it might feel like pressure.

One more thing you should be doing.

One more thing to add to the list.

One more way you might be getting it wrong.

I want to be clear about which of those I intend.

This is not about perfection.

It's not about being a healed, sorted, fully processed parent before you're allowed to show up for your child.

That parent does not exist.

There is no such thing as a perfect parent.

Every single one of us carries something.

Every single one of us has moments where our old stuff walks into the room ahead of us.

What matters is not that the wounds are gone.

What matters is that we're curious about them.

That we're willing to look.

That we're doing the work imperfectly, inconsistently and humanly, alongside the children we love.

What I will say is that even if you've been through therapy, it often removes one layer and then, later down the line, another layer appears.

Because, to use the old saying, it is a journey.

It's something we need to keep noticing and working on.

It's not:

"Oh, job done."

Be aware of that.

But I will also say this:

You will rarely waste time in therapy.

If you've got a good therapist, you'll work on something meaningful.

You'll gain insight.

You'll feel lighter.

And you'll leave with something useful.

Ellie did not need a perfect mother.

She needed a mother who was willing to ask:

"Is this mine?"

"And if it is, what am I going to do about it?"

If you've heard anything in this episode that resonates, if you've had your own:

"Oh... that might be me."

moment, then I want to say something directly to you.

You are not the reason your child is struggling.

You are the reason they're going to be okay.

Because you're here.

You're listening.

You're showing up for your child, even when they don't know you're doing it.

Even if you're walking the dog right now.

Even if you're folding laundry.

Even if you're cleaning the kitchen while listening to this podcast.

You are showing up.

You are the reason they're going to be okay.

You're asking the hardest questions.

The fact that some of your anxiety may have shown up in your child does not make you a bad parent.

Not in any way.

It makes you a human one.

Anxiety doesn't travel through families because parents don't love their children enough.

It travels because love alone isn't always enough to protect us from our own unexamined stories.

What changes things is examination.

Curiosity.

The willingness to sit with your own discomfort.

Whether that's with a therapist.

A trusted friend.

A coach.

Or simply a journal.

That willingness changes things.

The research says so.

Claire and Ellie are proof of it.

You don't have to have everything figured out before you begin.

You just need a willingness to look.

And if you're ready to look, we're here.

Or go and get some support.

Always go on recommendation where you can.

Thank you for being here for this one.

This is one of the most important conversations we have at The Resilient Kid, and I'm grateful that you trusted us with it.

In the next episode, we're going to be talking about the parent who grew up without emotional language, and what it looks like to learn it for the very first time alongside your child.

That conversation is just as important.

Just as human.

Make sure you're subscribed so you don't miss it.

The show notes, research references and further reading are all below.

And if anything in today's episode stirred something in you—for yourself or for your child—please reach out.

We're here.

That's what we're here for.

Until next time, please be kind to yourself.

You're doing better than you know.

Lots of love.