Transcript

The Resilient Kid Podcast

Season 8 – Episode 5

The art of drama with Leanne Johnson

Ashley - The Resilient Kid: Hello and welcome back to the Resilient Kid Podcast. I am joined by the lovely Leanne and we're gonna talk about drama, the whole thing. So good morning, Leanne. How are you?

Leanne: I am Great. Thank you so much, Ashley I'm Leanne Johnson. I am the director of The Drama Center. And at The Drama Center, we specialize in public speaking and acting for kids and for adults. We launched in 2017 with a class of 20-30 kids and now The Drama Center is franchised across the UK.

We run classes in London and Essex. We run classes in Dubai. We run classes in a few countries over the Middle East. And our goal is to, in a nurturing way, encourage confidence and resilience and fun in our young people.

Ashley - The Resilient Kid: That Is amazing. And actually that's how you and I met, isn't it? I think we both got to a point in our businesses where we were helping young people and adults in both of our sectors. And actually we got to a point where we couldn't do it all alone. What's the next step?

How do we reach more kids? and here at the Resilient Kids, I bang on about reaching a million kids. And how do you do that on your own? And franchising is a really good way because if you get coaches or teachers that join and they align with your kind of values, then of course you can reach more.

So what's that been like to bring kind of new people in and how easy is it for them to align with the same kind of values of really boosting kids' confidence and stuff?

Leanne: I am not going to lie it has been a struggle I'm a person that has

a really clear vision of what I want. And so when I started bringing other people on board, it was a bit of a struggle for me to let go. The teachers in The Drama Center are amazing and their standard is just as high as mine, but I did struggle to sort of delegate.

I'm not a very good delegator, but I've worked a lot on that over the last couple of years People that work with us, I don't particularly want them to be qualified teachers. I mean, if they are, that's fantastic and that's great, but I want them to be passionate about performing arts.

I want them to love working with kids because obviously that's really important and some people don't know that they're good at talking with kids. I have a lot of teachers come on board saying, I wanna work with you, but I dunno how to talk to kids. And I say to them, you talk to

them like they're grownups, but obviously, you know, like they are human beings and you make them feel valued.

But there's, you know, there's not much difference in that. I think that how we find people is, I don't know. I think the universe sends people that align with my ethos and how I want to be a nurturing, safe space for people to be creative and be confident.

Ashley - The Resilient Kid: Yeah, a hundred percent. And I feel your pain around kind of handing over the reins a little bit. My coaches have gone to do lessons this week. We were Just talked about before we hit record in a holiday club. Now Helen Wilson is really lovely around here and she has, like Helen's Hub she does lots of holiday clubs.

She said, I'd love for the kids to understand more about the brain. Is that something that you can do? And I was like, a hundred percent. And I actually said, you know, you go and do it. It's really important that you do it. Of course, we've taught them how to do it and they had a great time. And actually it meant I could work on the business and, and do other things.

So. Yeah, I feel your pain. It is hard to let go of those reigns. But I guess one of the things that you've just said that I thought that was really interesting is about how do we talk to kids and you know. I think my youngest client is four, my oldest client is 84. But you know, all of them in between a lot of their kids and teens, they just wanna be heard, don't they?

They wanna be heard, they wanna be seen. They want to know that you are interested in them. And I had a young teen client yesterday and I said, tell me the difference between primary and secondary for you And they said. In primary, the teacher knew everything about me. They knew that I had a dog, a sister, a brother, a this and that.

What was interesting in high school, nobody cares. Nobody wants to know, and I guess you and your drama teachers have got a really lovely. Snapshot into what their life looks like because you can see their confidence builds. You're part of building that confidence and that, you know, being able to speak out in public, but also the way they act, the way they interact, gives you a snapshot into who they are.

Leanne: It's funny you say that. The wording you used is interesting. I was asked by a school in East London to create a program to help their students

essentially, and public speaking is something I'm passionate about, and I know that so many people are frightened of it, especially adults.

More adults are scared of public speaking, I think, than kids. And so this school asked me To create a program which we named See Me Now - Hear Me Now. and about you talking about kids be heard, they wanna be seen, they wanna feel important that they have important things to say. so we devised this group.

we sort of beta tested it with this specific school. Huge, huge school, five form entry. So there's like 600 kids at this primary school So we've been running it now for two years and some of the best feedback I get from the kids. They come up to me afterwards and they said, Leanne, thank you so much for doing this.

Not only has it been really fun, but the other day I went to a restaurant and I was able to ask the waiter what I wanted myself, and I've never been able to do that before. And it's just, it's giving them the confidence and the self-belief, which is so important. and you, you don't feel heard, do you?

Especially when you are a kid. you constantly told to be quiet and told to do this and that, and play by the rules, but we want to actually create a generation of people that have thoughts and feelings and wanna respond to the world around them. So that's what we are doing. We're giving them a voice and we're saying. your voice will be heard. You just need to sort of have that confidence in yourself. So that's a massively important thing that I'm really passionate about and we're spreading that everywhere. So I teach lots of schools this program, it's brilliant.

Ashley - The Resilient Kid: Yeah. And that is so important. Like, you know, I think it's, it's one thing to say they want to be seen and Be heard, but it's another thing for them to have the confidence to speak up sometimes. And you know, I am, I'm a big believer in teaching kids' boundaries and I talk a lot to parents around, it's really important that you put these boundaries in.

I said, and this is for two reasons. One, because I have teens say, but they just don't care. And I'll say, what do you mean? Of course they care. And they're, you know, and that's like your natural response. And they go, because I don't have to be in at a certain time. so in their mind, then they don't care enough.

And I'm like, wow, that's quite powerful that if we don't put boundaries in because we are, you know, we are trying to be nice or we're trying to be a friend with our kids, they, they kind of interpret that is we don't care enough. So that's the one thing. But the other thing is as well, and I say to parents is that putting boundaries in is setting up those boundaries for when they

have their boundaries pushed. So as parents, as carers, as teachers and educators, if we say no and they push and we go, no, and then they push again and we go, okay. Yes. Then we've set that pattern in their brain that when somebody comes to them and they say, you know, do you want to try drugs? You know, they're pushing the sex boundary or anything like that.

Peer pressure. In their head, their pattern is no, no, yes. And actually, if we can set those boundaries, then they will hold them much harder with friends, which is brilliant. But having that voice to hold that boundary is Such a powerful skill for them to learn. And I don't think they learn that in school.

Don't get me wrong, you know, lots of drama departments in schools, particular high schools are really, really good. They put on amazing productions. However, I don't feel like the kids can always be themselves in school, whereas, having my son who goes to drama outside of school, he has a different type of friend.

Do you find that in your work with young people that they make, different friends, but also, they can be a little bit more themselves.

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Leanne: I'll tell you a story of something that happened a few years ago and I think it shows how important drama clubs are for young people, especially, you know, being away from their family. So firstly we have a lot of parents asking if they can stay and watch the lessons, which I say, no, you can't.

'cause your child will react and act completely differently in your presence. and obviously it's a safeguarding thing. I need to make sure that all the people in the building, I know who they are and everything. So that's number one. So they leave. And then my feedback about how their child responds to classes is so different to how they, they say, oh, they're, they're full of anxiety.

They're very shy and said they have interacted beautifully in these classes. And you know, I don't wanna unpick the anxiety of parents because I'm a parent myself and I have lots of anxiety, but I just think. Just letting them have that independence and finding their own space and finding their own group of friends is really important. The second thing is that drama clubs where people are creative and accepting and allow you to experiment and find out who you are as a person are so important. I cannot tell you the amount of students have had come to me and say, Leanne, I am transitioning and I would like you to call me by this name in class. And this is the first place that I have come out in. and I said, that's amazing. That's fine. If that's what you feel that you are, that's brilliant. And thank you for sharing that important life moment with us. And I'm so pleased that you feel so comfortable and so at home. And so sort of loved in this space that you can do that. And I think they're gonna remember that forever. And some people say drama's really frivolous drama's, just mucking about, drama's Mickey Mouse subjects. Drama is like communication, how you communicate with people for your whole life. I always say it should be sort of rebranded drama, something else like communication skills, speaking skills how you read people's body language, how you actually navigate the world around us.

That's what I think it should be rebranded to.

Ashley - The Resilient Kid: That's amazing. It's funny actually because you telling that story and particularly at this time, you know, where things are really difficult for any trans people, but particularly young trans people. So for them to have a safe space. And safe being the operative word is amazing. A little story of mine, and I have said this before on the podcast, so my youngest, I feel really odd saying youngest.

He's six foot, like one, but the youngest he is in year 10. He has danced since being very tiny. And somebody at school had mentioned to the drama teacher. he never told his friends really, that he did dance. That's where he started.

And then he did ballet, modern, tap, street dance, you name it, he's done it. I had to tell the primary that he needed some time off for a certain show or something, and she said, oh, I didn't know he danced. And I said, yeah, that's because he doesn't tell anyone. You know, I felt really sad that he hadn't told anybody because we were obviously proud.

It was something he really loved. He got into high school, carried on the dancing and the drama teacher found out and said, I'd really love you to come and do some acting. He did, a couple of

shows and he is now in year 10 where a lot of the boys are very buff because they're all going to the gym and things like that.

And this year he got the lead part in Shrek, and it was paid tickets. You know, it was like seven-pound, 10 pound a ticket, whatever. So obviously some of our family went and there was a group of six boys right in the middle of the audience. Who were his mates and they cheered him from the minute he stepped out in his big green outfit to the minute he left the stage.

And at one point they did get a little bit rowdy because they were just shouting for him. And the teacher went like, calm it down But you know, at the end they came over to us and go, wasn't he brilliant? You must be so proud. You know, we are so proud. Can we have your picture, Finn? And you know, it was just amazing to see that, but without

his tribe at his acting class who have given the confidence to go listen this is what I want to do. I don't care that I'm in a completely covered in green paint and got a big belly and these weird ears, you know, for a part, but without the confidence and the people. And I always feel like when he went to drama club outside of school, that was completely separate, that was actually in another town.

He met a tribe that accepted him for who he was and. Yes. Can he play football? Yes. Does he like it? No. He does it to keep him with his school friends, but there, they just accepted him, whatever his interest was, you know? And that gave him the confidence to, in what is a tricky year, I think for some people to go, I am gonna go for the lead part.

And his mates went good on you and supported him, you know? And I think he would never have come out and told them, and it's nothing in comparison to say a young trans person, but to go, this is who I am. And I think drama really gives them that. And I almost, when you are on about rebranding, I was thinking, oh, I wonder what it could be.

And I almost, there's a lovely lady who is a guest on the podcast and it's coming up with another guest soon called Sarah Vogel. And she says about, you know, communication skills are, I'm going to, this is how we do business. And I actually wonder if like, drama should be something along the lines of how you do business with me class.

Do you know what I mean? So that they are confident they can speak in public, put those boundaries in, stuff like that. Yeah. That I just think what you do and what you hold for those kids, but also the skills. Tell us a little bit more about, you've talked about public speaking. What other skills do they do

they learn, Leanne?

Leanne: One of the big ones is reading people's body language and being able to walk into a room. And read the mood, the emotion being emitted from someone non-verbally, which is a really important skill to have. And I think unfortunately for various reasons, our younger generation aren't as good as maybe we were. And I think it's because a lot of the time, so for example, we're talking now, we're not really using like real eye contact. And we can't really. Sort of read body language as effectively because we are virtual, but in real life, I think because

young people are spending such a long-time using technology. Those sorts of micro expressions that you might pick up and go, oh, the mood's shifted in here. I think we are losing that ability, so it is really important to instill in them, can you read any tension in this person's body? Maybe they are upset before they explode into tears. Can we try and help this person? By picking up these really small micro expressions in them. Conflict resolution is a huge one. In drama we can't have a whole group of leaders saying, this is the right idea. We need to have some give and take.

We need a solution that benefits the group rather than one person. So when we doing drama games exercises, when we're doing improvisation, so coming up with stuff on the spot, which is a really important skill as well, we're thinking how can we resolve this conflict in a really mature way? And that's something that drama will teach you all the time. And, you know, as a transferable skill to be able to have conflict resolution. I mean, I think some MPs should be doing drama just to help them, you know, and voice is really important. I'm obsessed with voice. When I'm not running The Drama Center, I'm still a professional actor in a little capacity, and I do lots of voiceovers and the power of voice, the power to change how you feel, to sell you something. We hear voice, overs all the time to look after your voice, to be able to have a powerful voice, to be able to modulate what you mean. And the intensity of things is really important. So we work a lot on voice, articulation skills. Really passionate about not changing people's accents where they're from is really important and it's ingrained in them as a person. And I think drama schools a few years ago would say, let's eradicate that regional accent and make you speak in an RP voice. I think that's dying out now that trend. But to have articulation skills so that people can understand you in a clear way, is really important as well. So their skills that we're teaching, we're teaching stage craft.

So when you walk on stage, how can you be the best version of yourself as an actor, we're teaching screen acting as well. What are the differences? we are projecting to an audience that's live. when you are on camera, we need to sort of bring those expressions down and maybe just be, rather than act.

So they're all loads of skills that we teach. I've missed, probably loads out, but yeah.

Ashley - The Resilient Kid: That was amazing. And you know, I think conflict resolution for me is huge skill that we miss at school. we don't teach that. I'm sure the drama teachers do their best, but it isn't something that we specifically teach. And I think COVID has had a lot to do with that.

You know, I find when we look at the usual year groups, so going from reception to year one, anybody who was in reception haven't got the same social skills because they've not been able to go from parallel play to interacting. 'cause they've just missed that gap. You know, if they were in say, year six and they're going into year seven, they haven't got the transition skills.

Year nine for me is a very particular, every year nine across the board should be taught conflict resolution because it's where they're starting the hormones have kicked in the pull away from old friends, make new friends and find out who they are a little bit. So yeah, even university students have missed that.

And I think stuff that you are saying is so needed in schools and, for me, I feel like we put a lot of emphasis on leaders and leadership skills, but actually what's really important is the team and a really good leader will turn to another team member and go, this is your bag. You are really good at this.

You drive this bit. It isn't the one who always makes the decisions. You know, if we look at the Apprentice, there's always somebody fighting to be the leader and usually the ones who get through it, not the ones who have made all the decisions per se, but the ones who have recognized the strengths in others.

So I think being able to resolve a conflict skillfully is, is fantastic. Absolutely fantastic. Leanne, tell us what's, what's kind of next for The Drama Center? It's fabulous to hear that you're in the Middle East. We used to live in Abu Dhabi, so you know, that's lovely and I've got lots of friends in Dubai and, and over there.

So tell me what's, what's kind of next for The Drama Center?

Leanne: So we are focusing on franchising, giving people the opportunity to come on board and us to train you and support you, and then you can run your own drama center essentially. We've got an amazing franchisee. She's my first franchisee on board. She has only been running for a couple of months. She's already making profit, which is fantastic. And to continue to grow and try and positively affect young people's lives as much as we can. We are doing a new program, which is called Standup SpeakUp Girls, and it's trying to target if we have, for example, peer reviews from schools and they say to us, these year five and year six girls have stopped being verbal in classes and we need to find out why and we need to help them with that. So this is a new program that we are rolling out across schools across the UK really, lots of exciting things in the pipeline, just trying to benefit people as much as possible and franchising we have found is gonna do that for us.

We are going to be able to have really strong leaders across the UK and we are going to be able to enable lots of young people to be confident and still be a kid and have fun. That's what we want.

Ashley - The Resilient Kid: Yeah, a hundred percent. I think sometimes when we talk about these heavy you know, adult topics and skills that they're learning is we forget that actually drama is really good fun. And, I feel like once you're a drama baby, I'd say drama baby. But once you are into drama, once you start going to classes, they are one of the

extracurricular that doesn't seem to drop off. Like I feel like if you start at a drama club, only when you get too old for it do you stop going because you, you know, you find your tribe, you have good fun. And I just think it's, yeah, it's a really lovely, safe, nurturing space to work out who you are a little bit as well.

For sure. Brilliant. So I always ask, I've started asking this question. To all my podcast guests, and I actually have not given Leanne the heads up about this. But what advice would you give your younger self if you were to meet around the street?

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Leanne: The advice I would give to my younger self is What other people think of you is none of my business. It's none of my business, what they're thinking in their brains. Because so much of my younger self was so worried about how I was coming across, whether people like me or not, and that's not to say. I would be callously, you know, going around not caring what people thought, but just people's jealousies are usually bound up, and their negative feelings is usually because they see you doing something that they maybe want to do. So I would say Leanne. What other people think of you is none of your business.

You carry on achieving those things that you want to achieve. That's what I would say.

Ashley - The Resilient Kid: Leanne, is there anything else that you would like to say to parents or educators, carers who are listening to this? To encourage either themselves to get involved with, you know, drama or encourage kids and teens that they know. what would you say to them?

Leanne: I say try. If you want to start drama, that's fantastic. Don't think of drama as just being, you know, singing and dancing and acting. You know, we just focus on acting and public speaking. We don't do singing and we don't do dance. I would say, you know, see what's out there. Trial classes there should, you know, every company that's out there should offer a trial. So you can see if that's something that fits You know, there's so much you can get out of it. We teach adults and we teach kids, and it's never too late to start something to improve your life, to improve your quality of life, and to improve your skills. We've got people in their sixties, seventies that are doing examinations to get qualifications in acting and. it's just improving their quality of life. They finish work, they come home, and then they get to come into this amazing space with, you know, 10, 15 people that are really like-minded and have fun as well. I think we need to focus on, you know, it's important that our kids get these skills, but also don't neglect yourself as a grownup.

You know, there's loads of things that we can do.

Ashley - The Resilient Kid: Yeah, a hundred percent. Leanne, thank you so much for today. I've really enjoyed our conversation. I clicked straight away with you because I just thought, you know, you aligned to what I believe in. You're there to try and really help.

In fact, I think there was us two and I've forgotten who else was on our course with us. Carrie, was it Carrie? Yeah, Carrie. And we all working towards helping young people and I thought, how lovely that we all came at the same time. There was only three of us on the course, and actually we could have been from any discipline, you know, some people do dog first aid and things like that, but we all came and we were all there to make young lives

better, richer and more fun hopefully. And yeah. So I really appreciate you coming on the podcast today. Thank you so much for joining us. honestly, it's been an absolute pleasure.

Leanne: Thanks so much, Ashley.

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People say all the time, push yourself out of your comfort zone. Sometimes that's appropriate, but sometimes actually you just need to get comfortable and then widen your circle of sort of ability and self-belief.

So I think you know, a step forward is a step forward. It doesn't have to be a massive leap forward. And so if that's you joining a public speaking class or an acting class, you might not realize it, but actually it's not only really good for your soul 'cause you're doing something that's creative and you are meeting people that are amazing. But if you look back in six months' time, you actually realize the skills that you've learned, that you didn't realize. Because we lose the ability to play, don't we, when we're grownups. But actually play is one of the best ways to learn things. So be more creative. Do a creative class, what have you got to lose?

Because you can sign up and then if it doesn't work for you, you can try something else.