S9E5- The Hidden Emotional Labour of School Staff (And Why It's Breaking You)

Hello and welcome back to The Resilient Kid Podcast. I'm really sorry that we skipped last week. As you can probably hear, my throat is not a hundred percent — but here we are nevertheless.

Today's episode is for those adults who work with children and go home absolutely spent. Not because the day was particularly dramatic, but because it was relentless.

If you've ever got into your car after work and thought, "Why am I so exhausted? Why can't I switch my brain off?" — then this episode is for you.

Because what's draining you isn't just workload. It isn't just paperwork. And can I just say — it is not because you're not resilient enough. It's something less visible and far more exhausting.

It's emotional labor.

I'm Ashley Costello, psychotherapist here at The Resilient Kid. We go into schools all the time delivering CPD and training, so we see you. We see the hard work that you do.

What Is Emotional Labor in Schools?

When we talk about emotional labor, we're talking about the invisible work of managing children's emotions — not just your own, but everyone else's around you in school.

That might look like:

• Staying calm when a child is dysregulated.

• Softening your tone when you are really stressed.

• Absorbing children's fear, anger, sadness — even rejection.

• Being the safe adult when children feel unsafe.

• Regulating multiple nervous systems before you even get to your own.

And here's the thing — most school staff don't do this once or twice a day. They do it constantly. Every lesson. Every transition. Every behaviour incident. Every child who walks in carrying something heavy from home.

It's rarely acknowledged because it's seen as part of the job. But your nervous system doesn't see it that way.

If nothing else today, know this: we see you. We hear you.

Why Does It Leave You So Depleted?

If you were working in an office, you might come home tired. Your brain might be buzzing. But you wouldn't necessarily be emotionally exhausted.

So what's happening in your body?

When you support a dysregulated child, your nervous system goes into co-regulation mode. You slow your breathing. You soften your voice. You stay steady even when things feel chaotic.

That is skilled work. Highly skilled work. And yes — you don't get paid enough for it.

When you do that all day long without a chance to reset, your body doesn't get a break.

So by the time you get home, you might feel:

• Flat or numb.

• Snappy with the people around you.

• Unable to talk.

• Desperate to scroll, eat, sleep — anything to shut down.

That, my friend, is emotional exhaustion.

It's why so many brilliant, compassionate school professionals say, "I love the children, but I don't know how much longer I can do this."

A Personal Share

I'll share something with you.

There was a point in my own work when I realised I wasn't just busy-tired. I was emotionally exhausted.

I hold space for beautiful children and teens. I regulate whole rooms when I'm delivering. I can say exactly the right thing in the moment — but at the end of the day, I didn't have enough left for me, or for my kids.

What's hardest isn't the workload. It's carrying everyone else's feelings while having no space to process your own.

I remember thinking: If this is what being good at work looks like, why does it hurt?

Because it did.

That was when I understood burnout. Burnout isn't always about doing too much. Sometimes it's about caring deeply in systems that don't protect the adults.

Why the Best Staff Are Most at Risk

Let's be honest — we've all seen colleagues who don't emotionally invest. They go in, do the job, and go home.

I delivered CPD recently in a beautiful school, and I said this:

If this job is too hard and you don't care about the children, you need to leave.

Because it's hard enough when you care.

The people most at risk of burnout are the best ones.

• The ones who notice the quiet child.

• The ones who stay calm when others escalate.

• The ones who understand behaviour as communication.

• The ones who carry families emotionally, not just academically.

Burnout doesn't mean you're weak. It means you are emotionally available all day. Highly attuned. Deeply present.

You are doing high-level specialist work inside a system that rarely slows down.

That mismatch is exhausting.

An Identity Shift

If you're nodding along right now, that tells me something about you.

You understand children at a nervous system level. You know how to co-regulate. You create emotional safety without even trying.

Those aren't soft skills. They are specialist skills.

The world needs more of you.

But they don't have to come at the cost of your wellbeing.

You don't need to toughen up. And you don't need to burn out to prove your dedication.

We can do this differently.

How Do We Stay Caring Without Losing Ourselves?

1. Separate Empathy from Absorbing

You can care without carrying it all day.

Empathy says: "I see this is hard for you."

Absorbing says: “I’m taking this home with me.”

Ask yourself: Is this mine, or is this theirs?

This isn’t cold. It’s professional compassion.

2. Close the Emotional Loop

After supporting a dysregulated child, pause.

Take a breath. Drop your shoulders. Mentally log: That’s done.

If you can take five minutes with a brew, do it. If you can step outside, do it.

Your nervous system needs closure too.

3. Use Predictability

Predictability protects you as well as children.

“First this, then that.” “I’ll come back in two minutes.” “What’s happening next?”

Less firefighting later means less emotional load for you.

4. Build One Low-Demand Moment Into Your Day

Not a spa day. Not a bubble bath.

One moment where you are not regulating someone else.

Silence. Sky. A tree. A window. A brew.

Proof of safety for your nervous system.

5. Name the Load

Unspoken emotional labor drains more than acknowledged emotional labor.

“That was a lot.” “It’s no wonder I’m tired.”

This isn’t negativity. It’s self-validation.

6. Create a Transition Ritual

Your brain needs a signal that you’re switching roles.

Examples:

• Change your shoes.

• Wash your hands and run cool water over your wrists.

• Take three deep breaths before turning the car on.

• Touch the door handle and say in your head: “Thank you for today. I’m leaving it here.”

These small rituals tell your nervous system: I am safe. I am switching roles.

Presence Doesn’t Mean Perfection

You don’t have to fix everything. You don’t have to carry everything. You don’t have to be relentlessly calm.

Sometimes presence is saying: I’m here. I care. And I’ve done enough today.

Children don’t need limitless adults. They need regulated human beings.

A Final Word

If you’re thinking, I do all of this instinctively — I just don’t get looked after in return , that tells me something important.

You already have the skills children desperately need.

The next step isn’t giving more. It’s protecting yourself while you give.

I highly respect the work you do in schools. I see it. I hear it. And it is emotionally exhausting work.

Thank you for doing it.

Well done.

If this episode might help a friend — a TA, a teacher, someone in school — please share it with them.

If you’d like to come on the podcast and tell us what it’s really like to be in school, drop us a message. DM or email me at Ashley@TheResilientKid.co.uk.

Take care everyone. Sending lots of love from my family to yours.

Bye for now.