What's Really Causing Child Meltdowns? Hidden Stressors & the Stress Cup Transcript

(Transcripts are generated by AI and may contain errors)

The Stress Cup and Hidden Meltdowns

Most of the stress filling your child's nervous system is something you never see. And that's exactly why so many meltdowns confuse parents. Because by the time the explosion happens, the stresses has been building for hours, days or longer.

In the last episode in the stress cup series, I introduced the idea of the Stress Cup. Think of your child's nervous system like a cup. Every stressor adds a little bit to that stress.

Some drops are big, some are tiny, but the brain keeps track of all of them. Something that might be benign to you might really be serious for your kid in their nervous system's response to them, which is even more perplexing for parents.

And eventually, the cup will fill when we keep adding these stressors. When one more stressor lands, the nervous system will overflow. Cups don't have an infinite capacity.

And that can be surprising. I don' think people realize that we think kids don"t experience stress in the same way, and in fact, they really can. We talk about kids being sensitive all the time.

It's really about a nervous sytem being activated. And that overflow that we experience as a meltdown, a freak out, disrespect, whatever you want to call it.

Here's the tricky part about all of this, because these big emotions, many of these things that are filling up our kids' cups are really invisible to parents.

We're not sure where these freak outs and big emotions are coming from, but that's why we're talking about this res cop because kids are carrying a heavy burden.

So our parents and a parent once told me that their son melted down every single night during bedtime.

Cognitive Load and School Demands

They didn't know what was going on. thinking, what's happening in the school day? This was an older kid, and is he being bullied? Like, What's Happening?

And they were convinced that something at that bedtime was the problem. They didn't know what it was, but that's why they came to me. And we walked backward through his day, we saw something different.

His stress cup had been filling all day all week long. And bedtime itself was not the cause of these big blowouts that they used to have in his resistance to going bed.

And it was simply the moment that that cup overflowed. If you only look at the moments your child explodes, you'll almost always miss what's actually filled their stress cup.

That's a real shift for parents, and that's why you're here. Let's talk about all the hidden stressors that fill stress cups. And some of these might be not just for kids, might for you too.

Many of the biggest stressors for kid look like very small to adults, very insignificant, but they're very real. But to the nervous system, they still require regulation energy.

And when enough of them stack up, the brain runs out of capacity. So let's talk about some of the most common hidden stressors, cognitive load. Kids spend much of their time In their day, managing thinking demands, paying attention, following directions, organizing materials, switching between subjects and tasks, remembering instructions.

And for children with developing executive functioning, this takes a tremendous amount of mental effort. Even when they appear to be fine on the outside, their brain may be working double time.

And we certainly know this about our neurodivergent kids. We don't always think about this with our typical kids or high functioning kids, and what I want you to know, this is very real because kids are doing schoolwork that is so outside the developmental norm.

I mean, my kid did a project in eighth grade that I was not required until 11th grade. we live in the same town that i grew up in. Now, it was a private school, but it also a Montessori school like it's supposed to be more chill.

It's crazy what these kids do. Now this is across America. These kids are doing huge projects, lots of things. I don't know if kids getting any smarter because of it.

They seem to awfully tired.

Sensory Overload and Emotional Suppression

Let's talk about sensory overload. So many environments that children spend time in are highly stimulating. Classrooms can be noisy, their lights can bright, they can smell, hallways can be chaotic.

There's background noise that maybe never stops. I mean, I definitely have kids that get sick from mold in an environment from the cleaners and be very reactive.

Fed kids actually had to leave school for even cleanors. So for kids who are sensory sensitive, the nervous system is constantly filtering input and that filtering requires Energy requires capacity and over time sensory input alone can fill a large portion of this rest cup, which is why I mention it all the time.

I'm here. Doing my podcast. It's a video podcast and I have lights on. And you've heard me, if you're listening and I talk about this, these lights are going to disrupt me for 48 hours.

I have a counter plan of all kinds of things that I. Have to do, and it just jacks up my nervous system. These are big lights. but I don't know how they're doing it.

But I'm an adult, and I know that it activates me to the point where it interferes with my sleep. So don' make my stress cup, take some stuff out. Let's talk about another thing that fills kids' cups, and that's emotional suppression.

Children often spend the day holding in their stuff, holding their emotions, hold in in fear, their worries and their overwhelm. And they try not to cry.

They try to not freak out, they get angry and they follow the rules and quote unquote behave appropriately. But suppressing emotions requires a nervous system that's regulating.

Now, these are all healthy ways to do it, but you then have to put something back, take something out of this cup to give kids room because otherwise it's constantly going to be after school restraint collapse.

And the longer a child holds those emotions in, the more energy it takes and eventually the nervous system needs a release. And I also believe this is why a lot of these kids who are holding in the emotions of things develop anxiety, depression, OCD.

You rarely see that doesn't turn on overnight unless you have an infectious trigger or a trauma trigger. That's just

the way it works. Mental health problems don't just develop overnight.

They come in little drops in nervous systems. OK, let's talk about social stress. Ain't no easy navigating friendships.

Social Stress, Transitions, and Performance Pressure

And it's a major demand on the developing brain. Kids are constantly trying to read social cues. They're figuring out who likes them, who doesn't, where they fit in.

And a small social moment that an adult might dismiss can feel enormous to a child. It is really, truly so different out there with exclusion and feeling embarrassed because they have to do all these group projects starting earlier.

Misunderstandings that are happening over text, that's happening with adults. I mean, I try to leave voice messages whenever I can because I want I literally left somebody a voice message the other day and and I didn't do anything offensive, but I just said I Want you to hear my tone because they sent you something they asked me for something to write and i was like I Just want you To hear My tone like it's really okay to correct what I wrote and I will take no offense.

These are people that are new to knowing me." She wrote back, oh my God, I just love you. Because I took the extra minute to be like, please feel free to just edit whatever you want.

I always tell everybody I'm black coffee, no sugar. Don't be rude to me though. Tell it to my straight in a nice way, but don't rude me. You're off my list if you're rude.

all of these moments for all these things, they just add to the stress cup and really the social component is really, I don't think we talk enough about it.

It's a weird place socially for kids. Some kids are navigating and doing well and kudos to them and to kids who put down their phones and actually talk.

But, okay, transitions. Transitions are very, very hard. Children move through dozens and dozens of transitions all day long. Stop this. Don't do that.

Turn over here. Get your paper ready. Pack up. Let's go. We have to go to gym. Line up, move to the next activity. Okay, let's in a group. And each transition requires the brain to shift gears.

For kids with developing executive functioning, which is developing until their mid to late 20s, how about that? And then we decline shortly after. That shift requires effort and performance pressure.

Many kids in all of this stuff, there is such a pressure across all these areas, but academically they feel pressure to do things right. in the academic world, socially, behaviorally.

Even when adults don't intend to, kids often carry internal pressure to perform well. And that pressure quietly activates the nervous system stress. And that doesn't mean, again, I never lower the bar for kids.

This is about regulating and giving kids the capacity to do things maybe they would have never done because the anxiety and the worry and stress and overwhelm truly isn't there.

And, that's something I've had the privilege of helping people with for 30 years. Like, parents will be like, "I didn't even know how much they were holding themselves back." from going down a slide to being in a play to asking more questions in class because they're not afraid of being the smart girl.

I mean, these are real conversations I've had with parents and it's all because we're regulating the nervous system. Love that. So regulation fatigue, self-regulation is not endless, and the brain uses real energy to regulate attention, emotions, behavior, all the things we've talked about.

And when kids spend hours managing those demands, their nervous system becomes fatigued, which means that the stress cup fills faster as the day goes on.

And when you understand these hidden stressors, something shifts. Instead of asking, why did they overreact, you start asking what demands has been placed on their nervous system?

Regulation Fatigue and What to Do Next

What have they been managing all day? And that question reveals that The meltdown, the blowout was simply not the moment the brain ran out of capacity.

It really, it was just the final straw, and that wasn't the only trigger. And there is, that's where we really need to think about when these stressors, where are they happening?

For school, many times that is the big one, quietly filling their all day long. And we're going to be talking next in our series about how school environments impact the nervous system.

Because you want to talk to me about that. So many kids just melt down the moment they get home. Parents are just perplexed by this. I would say that's just one of the most common, common things we are all facing.

And I'm educating you first. We're going to be talking always in this, you know, everything I do is about teaching you to create capacity in your nervous system.

You can't just listen. you've got to take action. And i'm trying to make things as actual and possible. That's what the dysregulated kid book is. About that's, what our regulated child summit is, about that.

What the, dys-regulating kids, but this is the show is And meltdowns are rarely about that one moment. They're really about an accumulation and stress that builds, stress, that stacks, and eventually spills.

And when we start noticing what's filling up your child's stress cup, behavior starts making a whole lot more sense. But here's the tricky part. Not every child stress cups fills for the same reasons, in the way, the capacity.

Some kids are overwhelmed by many, many things and overloaded by executive functioning demands. They might be more fearful. You might accidentally be feeding your child's fear cup because you're a very fearful person and you talk about it.

And some kids are understimulated and they're seeking stimulation and some are dealing with sensory overload. These are all real things that cause chronic nervous system stress.

And that's why guessing doesn't usually work. If you're trying to figure out what is going on with your kid and what will actually fill your child's cup or what is filling your Child's Cup, then you're going to take the Solution Matcher.

It's a short quiz that helps you identify what may be driving your children's dysregulation. So you can focus on the right supports and really guide you to the solution.

And you could take it at drrosanne.com forward slash help. Because once you understand what's filling that cup, you can finally start helping your child empty it.

And I hope you're gaining so much information. You're learning about the nervous system and how regulation first is so important. I would love to hear from you wherever you are listening.

If you listening to this episode, please leave a review. if you were on YouTube and you watching this or you watch this from my email list, drop me a message.

Let me know what's sticking with you, what you want to hear more of, because we really do listen and I appreciate

it. And thanks for all the love. If you don't have anything nice to say, I don' But you are amazing and I love all my moms, my dads, and my caregivers, all you educators out there and therapists and providers and you're doing an amazing job.

And I'm so glad you were here understanding the importance of regulation first. Want more insights and solutions? Well, subscribe to our Disregulation Insider and it will show up in your inbox every week.