Why Smart Kids Freeze, Avoid Homework and Fall Apart at School Transcript

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Why Homework Feels Like a Battle

Your child is bright, they get the material, the content. So why is homework a war zone? Why can't they just start a task, stay with it, even finish it?

When they want to, and when it's preferred area of interest, then they can. We're so quick. to blame effort, laziness, or even call kids ADHD or neurodivergent.

But what if the real problem is a stress nervous system that keeps shutting down executive functioning? misunderstanding, school struggles, they get framed differently.

They get frame as clinical issues, as motivation problems, maybe a willpower problem, of course as I said, an attention problem. But learning, attention, organization, and follow through all sit on top of one foundation, not anything else, okay?

And that's a regulated nervous system. That's why my work regulation first is so important. That is why this parenting playbook that's laid out for you that is accessible.

It's easy to integrate into your everyday life. The dysregulated kid is important, but if the brain doesn't feel safe, And you're understanding what that means, right?

That's from polyvagal theory in that our nervous system is determining what's safe. So if it's stressed, if its in a chronic stress loop from all these things that we talk about all the time, sensory processing, annoying other kids, the work being too hard, having a WWE match with their siblings.

that's going to shut down what? Your executive functioning. And we're going talk about that, but it can't do its job no matter how smart your kid is. Once it goes into an activation, fight, flight, freeze, fawn in a sympathetic dominant state, you know what I'm going tell you?

You're frontal lobes go offline. I mean, so many people come to me and they're like, I have ADHD and again, they don't meet the clinical criteria. Wasn't there.

It wasn't.

Regulation First: Stress and Executive Functioning

There it came after compounded periods of stressors. So I really am yelling this from a rooftop because guess what? The treatments are different. The path is different, the level of support is.

And regulating your nervous system is not that freaking hard. You just got to do it. That's what the book's all about. that it's not your child can't use the strategies or what if it is really about what state they're in.

And we're going to dive into that. So let's talk about executive functioning so that we can understand the biology and stop blaming and also stop chasing down rabbit holes.

So many of you do chase down a rabbit hole. Executive functioning lives here, right in this prefrontal cortex. And it's what allows kids and adults, what are some of the basic things that we need for executive functioning?

Starting tasks, staying focused, planning and organizing, managing time, holding information in your mind temporarily, that's called working memory, while you're doing something else.

Staying flexible and regulated. That is the breaking system job manager all in one. Here's the part that most people don't know about executive functioning and the prefrontal cortex is that first thing to go offline under stress.

It's very surprising to people. They just don't understand. As soon as there's a stressor, real or imagined, that brain is going to say, hmm, I'm going offline.

Survival is always going win over thinking. Got it? So when your kid's brain is in survival mode, in activation, it's going to go offline. What does stress do to executive functioning?

When stress builds, what happens physiologically? Cortisol, adrenaline rises. The amygdala takes over. That's your emotional brain. So it is going Danger first, thinking later.

Blood flow shifts from the prefrontal cortex and then suddenly the kid can't get started, can remember instructions, cannot organize. Maybe they were organized, maybe they never were.

They can shift into problem solving mode. And that is very alarming to parents because we think, what's wrong with them? Is there something clinically wrong?

Are they developmentally stuck? And problem solving is critical. And guess what? Your kids can learn to problem solve. You got to what regulate? First, here's why this gets misunderstood because on the outside, it looks like laziness, disorganization, lack of motivation.

But in the inside, It feels like I'm already behind. I don't know where to start. Why try if I am just going to fail? And it's not defiance. It's an executive functioning brain.

it is that part of the brain shutting down under stress because that's what it designed to do. So you stop thinking and you take action against But as you're starting to really understand, this is a matter of stress cups being full.

So you can't skill build in a brain that's in survival mode. What did I tell you before? It's like trying to teach somebody swimming when they're drowning.

You can't, you can put a kid on a bike and say, here's the hill, go down. That's not gonna go well. Your gonna lucky if your kid survives. Regulation restores access.

It also restures capacity. So remember, we are building with regulation. We're creating capacity in the nervous system to tolerate stress, not avoid it, stop, rescuing your freaking kids, people.

This is a big reason why. And I get it, you're rescinding your kids because they're dysregulated and distressed. So let's regulate first. Let's walk them through problem solving, all those things so that they can learn to tolerate stress and be capable.

COM brings that thinking brain back online. When executive functioning finally works, then we can see different behaviors. So how does over and under stimulated behavior show up in school?

How Stress Disrupts Learning and School Performance

Because we as parents need to know this, we, as professionals need So when the nervous system is overloaded or under-activated, executive functioning again is that first thing to collapse.

So in school, this often looks like, again, they can't start work even when they understand it. They freeze when given multi-step directions. They forget assignments, materials, instruction, and they melt down over small mistakes or feedback, or they don't always melt down.

Sometimes they'll avoid things or hide from tasks, frequently going to the bathroom, you know, being out. There's lots of creative ways a nervous system will avoid tasks.

You might see them rushing through again or avoiding it entirely. And they may look distracted, unmotivated, and they could do well on one part of a task.

Maybe they do on tests, maybe they well in home projects, but they can't manage daily work or vice versa. Right? And, they need that constant prompting just to stay engaged.

These are effort problems. What they are is a stress regulation problem interfering with that job manager, that executive functioning who is in charge.

So school struggles really don't mean your kid can't learn. They mean their brain can organize, initiate or sustain effort under stress and stress. And what we perceive as stress is so different from person to person.

You know, I always share with you, my sense of stress, is different than other people. And it served me well, but it also means that I have to be very careful because I don't perceive stress in the same way.

I Have a much higher tolerance, But it doesn't mean it Doesn't show up in my body and for me means I get physical illness. So I am constantly working throughout the day, multiple ways to regulate myself.

You know I would love to see comms, dysregulation protocol in all the schools. It's coming. I'm moving towards certifying organizations and schools, and these are simple, accessible things.

They don't have to be that hard. But we have move away from dysregation and towards regulation to stop this mental health crisis. And you can't coach a brain in red alert.

and it's not going to be better at planning. You can't build organization on top of overwhelm. you can fix a nervous system problem with more charts or nagging or consequences because that's why so many executive functioning strategies, attention strategies fail in real life.

They're dropped on of an already dysregulated nervous system, a already full cup, and regulation first is the key. So then your executive functioning strategies start working.

Before any strategy, the question is what? What state is my child's nervous Are they already activated? What degree? Can you put a number on it? I always like to have numbers.

Are in red, fight, flight or freeze? Cause then that's the wrong time to approach them. are they in yellow that they can co-regulate with you and you can move them to the green state?

Because learning occurs in the yellow to green. Obviously we want everybody in green all the time. It's not real world, but we have to move away from trying to teach our kids in their red zone.

move to co-regulating in yellow, then the green starts to happen. That's where the learning happens. So that's when you see the consistency of learning, the consistently of executive functioning and execution.

Because executive function really is about seeing what the end result is and being able to execute it. Now, not all kids can do tasks independently. As a mom of two kids, I had a kid with like unbelievable executive functioning came out in a way that he's just so observant.

He's a severe dyslexic and kind of has a hypersensitivity to the environment and picks up things and really provides himself. Like today he said to me, mom, because he avoids the group projects, he is in high school.

And he says, here's my plan. Those kids in my group don't want to do the work. So I'm going to suggest to the teacher that he give us, let's say 20 minutes to work on our group project.

And if these kids don' That's good executive function.

Nervous-System-Friendly Strategies for Executive Functioning

He's thought it through. he's very polite. So please know he is much softer than I am, but he, he dealing with a problem with these kids that don't want to do their, their assignment.

And I love him because he like, I'll be damned if I'm going to. Do this whole assignment? So that's a real world issue of what happened. What do we wanna do, right?

How do get things? So let's talk about executive functioning, nervous system friendly strategies. So here, number one, start with the end in mind. That's how we teach kids.

Show them what it looks like, visualize it, gesture it. Get them to see it and this is why it works biologically. The brain loves image and structure.

Visualizing that end state, what is it doing? It's lowering uncertainty. I don't know what you're talking about. We assume our kids are bright and they understand what we're taking about don t assume and that uncertainty creates more stress and we lower it.

more doable. So here's how to use it. Before you start homework or a project, you're going to pause and ask, what will this look like when it's done? You don't ask 100 million questions.

You want to create a constancy of asking questions Where will you be sitting? Will you at your desk? Where you'll be finished? What will it look like?

You actually want to get them to see themselves in that picture frame doing the task with it done. This is magical, people. And I don't care if your kid's 19 in college, this all can be done, okay?

And, I set the example constantly at home by talking out loud. It's called metacognition. So, for younger kids, you wanna draw it or show a simple picture.

for teens and college kids, have them picture it. The file turned in, the email sent, clean backpack, whatever the heck it is. And so when the brain can see the finish line, The nervous system relaxes and starts feeling less threatened and certainly your kid has to feel capable and confident.

It's just a magical thing. For those of us that have executive functioning, we see and end results. Other people don't. This is why we are a get stuff done kind of people, because we always see what it looks like.

But for everybody else, this is a skill that is learned. You are not born with it. The more regulated you are, the more capable you Number two, you're going to activate the muscle memory first.

You want to get them, if you can, actually role playing, gesturing to some degree. Okay. And this is why it works because movement and repetition light up the motor and sensory circuits and it helps prime the brain for learning retention engagement.

It's like telling the We've done this before and we know how. For reading, have them trace the title with their finger. Flip through pages first. Uh, for writing, quick little warm up, you know, a sentence, do air, write it in the sky.

That's why Orton Gillingham for Dyslexics worked so much. You know for math, do one very easy problem they've already know before tackling the harder ones.

You also can take some if your kids younger right you could in math you know toss a ball while you're doing things they already now so for younger kids you can do a lot of things with movement and learning.

So once the body and brain have a simple, I can do this action, the nervous system shifts out of threat, that sympathetic dominant mode and into motion and motion kinesthetic learning, by the way, is the number one way

our neurodivergent kids learn.

That is language they need information in. So all of our little neurodiversion kids, which are everywhere, including in the Hodge household, this is how they learn best.

So let's let do that. Let's stop telling them things. And they're like, what would you say? Let get them moving. OK, number three, we're going to map out the steps.

And only after the brain is calmer. I'm a huge fan of showing kids the steps and this is why it works. When stress is lower, again, the prefrontal cortex can finally sequence, plan and prioritize.

So breaking tasks into micro steps reduces perceived threat, overwhelm that many of our kids feel when it's like, making a mountain out of a molehill is a statement that is common with our dysregulated kids because they feel that.

It's real for them. So you're going to sit with them, co-regulation first, and you are going ask what's the very first step you need to do here. Then you say what comes after that.

And again, kids might be, you've heard me say this before, they might a little begrudging. Might not be too happy. You might see Bruce Banner trying to turn into the hole.

But repetition works. And let me tell you, from my own child that I helped see this through, who was just regulated to hundreds and thousands of other kids, this works, consistency people helps.

So let's talk about some examples, some ways to really get this going. Open your laptop, find the assignment, and highlight the keywords. Start with question one.

For older kids, you can use three-part framework like start, middle, finish. or today, this week, before the due date. Keeping a frame and a structure, I also really love mind maps.

Anybody who works from the one-to-one knows I'm always, always going to give you a mind map. So a mine map, if you can visualize a center, bubble that's an oval with lines coming out to other bubbles.

That's a simple mind map as it gets. And you could do it for any task. So how to unload the dishwasher to how, to start this re reading assignment, breaking it down in a visual way, the steps, putting it there is so helpful.

You're not doing the work for them. Showing them how the scaffold and this leads itself to outlines and all these other things. I do it constantly, do with my kids all the time.

Mapping steps turns a mountain into a small hill. That's what it does. And your child's nervous system can climb hills. What I see over and over in smart kids is that when we regulate first and then we help them see the end, we helped them feel successful in their everyday life, their body, they're muscle memory.

We're helping them to map those steps And it makes such a difference because you're going to see the less avoidance, you are going see shorter, shorter homework battles.

You're gonna see that they often get stuff done and you like, oh, did you, do you do this?

Helping Resistant Kids and Supporting Regulation at Home

I see this with my own kid. I'm like did, Oh, Did you get started? And they're like I already did it, right? Unless I can't do less kind of these, more, confidence in themselves, more self-respect and knowing who they are, which is so important in today's very scary world.

We need our kids to have self love and confidence and being successful at things, not in the way you think of, but

just in daily life is really what changes things.

So don't think my kid is disorganized by choice. Think their stress brain keeps dropping. them into this dysregulated state. And that's a huge difference.

So if you're looking for more support, right, what you need and the path you are going to take and you haven't taken our solution match, you can go to DrRoseanne.com and forward slash help.

It helps you figure out what your child's nervous system needs. and which path that could support your child's executive functioning. You're just going to answer a few questions and it's going point you in the right direction.

If you don't have our executive function toolkit, it is actually amazing and really can help you. When you come, you make this investment and in time, switching from yelling and nagging to working on regulating the nervous system, you're going to help your child be more attentive, more capable.

You're gonna create that capacity for the executive functioning to start coming online. But please know that executive function does not start with a pill.

Executive functioning are skills. So we have to calm things down. We have. To teach the skills. It is never too late to teach. The skills, even for parents, by the way, because a lot of times it runs in families and I have a.

Lot of parents that will say, I'm the one who has a hard time executive functioning, so I don't need to. Teach them you can replicate these same steps in your everyday life.

You do not have to keep searching for the answer. You are the answers and it's shifting how you're doing things. And that is a big, huge deal. Lots of kids refuse help.

Every day in this limited amount of time as Dr. Rowe is retiring in 2026, have lots of questions about refusing help. And I have lot of one to one conversations with people whose kids are refusing helps.

So number one, let's just honor this that they have not gotten the right help and they are like you want me to do something else. and they don't want to have failure, they want do one more thing that isn't gonna work.

This is what kids tell me, this is the reality, the truth. And they might not feel heard and understood. Maybe it's from the provider, maybe it is from home.

They are sad because these things aren't working. So let's honor that and talk about that. But the reason why your things are not working is you are. I mean, I want to use the F word.

You are freaking put it in your effort not in regulating the nervous system. you're wasting your time, people. Like I'm going to I am leaving clinical practice so I can shout regulation first from the rooftops.

Nothing is going to work for you until you regulate. It's the way it is. You can Google all you want. Oh, Dr. Rowe, I'm going follow this unqualified health coach and it could be an AI head.

I want to go to another doctor. No. Regulate your freaking nervous system, people. Your own first. Get it together because I'm a pants mom. Did mom a dyslexic?

I've been there. No shame in it. You can't live in the dysregulation. Then help your child regulate. So then your kid who's resistant, what's next? First of all, they're going to be more regulated.

They're gonna have access to executive functioning. they are going be able to communicate with you, at least some of the time, not always depending on their age, and you're beable to have conversations about this, number one.

And then we can help them get those strategies and things. Nothing sticks. If you're not regulating, this is why these kids are resistant. So a lot of times I have these magical way with kids.

I speak their language. They would eat me alive if I didn't. And especially because my cases are just like this question. The kids might be nine years old.

It may be 37 year old and everywhere. between. I've even had five-year-olds be resistant to treatment because they're sick and tired of it. The dysregulation that you feel in your own nervous system That's awful.

So then these are kids. This is a lot of these kids, sometimes this is all they've ever known. And this isn't because of bad parenting. Most of the time, most of my parents are doing a great job.

They're just trying to figure this out. There are the dog chasing its tail. We got to regulate, then we layer in the treatments, and then layer the components.

when a regulated person isn't just more reasonable, they have the capacity for those things. It doesn't matter what your next, well, it does matter, what you're next step is, but it doesn' on the individual level.

Yes, It matters what's your step. I mean, therapy is important. The whole therapy world is sometimes very upsetting to me and antiquated. And very judgmental of things that they perceive are not 100% NIH study, okay?

We have to look at research. I don't talk about anything that doesn't have some kind of research, but we are moving to a constant level of dysregulation in our society, and this is horrible for our children.

And I can't even imagine going to school and having to be prepared every day for a shooter. Like, what are we doing? And we are creating those as a society, those shooters.

Nobody wants to talk about that. That is the case. And so when we know better, we can do better. Focus your efforts on regulating first, then you worry about the supplements and all that, and I know you say, oh, will the supplement help?

I mean, Roseanne, you got your magnesium. Yes. But we don't want to create another friction point. Use tools and strategies and things that they would participate.

Free things, breath work, walking, exercise, whatever, binaural beat, music. Then I have my calm PMF. What are the tools that you could layer in on a subconscious level?

Because there are a lot of them and you have to be co-regulated. Do not expect your child to regulate if you are not mostly regulated 80% of the time when you're interacting with your trial.

That gives you 22 out of 10 interactions to not be perfect. But if your living in a dysregulated state, You got to put your oxygen mask on. If my system is dysregulated, is that going to affect the flare?

The answer is 100% yes. Many of my kids who are really struggling with treatment of any kind, my OCD, depression, and my PANS kids, it's because the parents have not done their own work or they're in such a state of worry, which again, I've been there.

But we have the capacity to regulate. You have to take the effort. you have stop researching programs and things to do and you just have integrated into your life.

And you can, you want you to believe that you cant. So belief is a big part of this. Know that regulating your nervous system, regulating first is the key.

It's absolutely the key. And again, everybody can do it. If you want more support, go to drrosanne.com forward slash help. That's our solution matcher and it will guide you to solutions that can help your child.

So you got this people, you really do. Want more insights and solutions? Well, subscribe to our dysregulation insider and It will show up in your inbox every week.